Men in Leather: Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing* and Romantic Comedy

by Celestino Deleyto

Much Ado about Nothing *revisits Shakespearean comedy in order to explore the sexual discourse of contemporary romantic comedy, highlighting both cultural changes in gender relationships and the threat of homosexuality.*

Recent writing on romantic comedy has taken the view that the genre has died, been reborn, and reached a peak of popularity in the course of the last fifteen to twenty years. Reacting to Brian Henderson's well-known article on the "agony" of contemporary romantic comedy, Bruce Babington and Peter Evans, for example, affirm the ongoing validity of the genre's basic discourse of celebration of heterosexual love, even while they acknowledge that it has undergone important transformations because it "involves specifics that are in a state of flux in advanced Western cultures."[1] Referring to comedy in general, Andrew Horton likewise notes the consistent popularity of Hollywood comedies in the late eighties,[2] while Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik not only speak of a "current revival of romantic comedies"[3] but have more specifically distinguished between the "nervous romances" of the late seventies and early eighties—romantic comedies whose uncertainties about the continuing applicability of the genre's conventions often express themselves in a fragmentary narrative form—and the "new romances" that emerged in the mideighties and were characterized by a return to the old-fashioned values of traditional heterosexual romance.[4] More recently, Kathleen Rowe has used *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison, 1987) as an illustration of the lasting validity of comedy as a narrative genre, in part, she states, "because it speaks to powerful needs to believe in the utopian possibilities condensed on the image of the couple."[5] With the exception of Henderson, all these writers share the belief that romantic comedy can and will survive by adapting to changing historical circumstances and that this will not necessarily entail much modification in its basic form and ideology.

Any attempt to historicize the romantic comedy of the eighties and nineties must, consequently, address the ways in which the "specifics" mentioned by these authors have influenced the genre's basic structure, while at the same time acknowledging its powerful tendency to hold cultural transformations in place.[6] The

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films do not openly lend themselves to an analysis of the impact of social change in them. Rather, they privilege the eternal, unchanging nature of romantic love and tend to gloss over those aspects from the surrounding culture which threaten to deconstruct their underlying sexual ideology. According to Babington and Evans, the most relevant social changes that have affected the genre recently are the growing divorce rate, single parenting, feminism, gay rights, and the "rise of the working woman," all of which they see as the outcome of the "post-feminist, gay revolutions."[7] Compulsory heterosexuality and the subjugation of women seem to be, then, the two central ideological tenets of classical romantic comedy[8] and also those which have come under greatest pressure in contemporary films. Yet, in my view, the effects of this pressure are rather uneven: whereas the problematics of the foregrounding of female desire and the creation of a female space—what Rowe calls "women on top"[9]—have apparently become a primary concern of most recent Hollywood romantic comedies, the existence of alternative sexualities has remained significantly underdeveloped in them.[10] In other words, it seems that, while the genre has gradually adapted to reflect changes in gender relationships, it is proving to be much slower and less flexible to incorporate homoerotic desire. This unbalanced situation is, to a great extent, reproduced in the literature on the subject. While evidently aware of the compulsion to heterosexuality in the genre, neither Neale and Krutnik nor Rowe investigate the films' possible anxieties over this issue. Babington and Evans's analysis does partly focus on two films whose subject is precisely this anxiety (*Tootsie* and *Victor/Victoria*), but for them the basic tension in contemporary examples of the genre remains that between a "cultural differentiation of the sexes based upon the passivity and subordination of women" and a "mutual delight in differences that are not necessarily hierarchical."[11]

Hence, even at this early stage, Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing* (1992) can be seen as an interesting case study for several reasons. First, as a contemporary adaptation of a Shakespearean comedy, the film is an ideal space for the exploration of the changes undergone by the genre in the last four centuries. In historical terms, *Much Ado* occupies an uneasy position, both bearing witness to the birth of modern romantic comedy and standing side by side with the most recent manifestations of the genre. It is precisely this ambiguous position that renders the film an illuminating example of the state of the genre in the nineties. Secondly, *Much Ado* continues a general trend in Shakespearean romantic comedy in that it overtly hinges on Beatrice, the female protagonist, as the main point of identification for the audience, especially in her "merry war" with Benedick. Third, the plot of *Much Ado* also allows Branagh to deal at length with the threat that homoerotic desire may pose to the central heterosexual romance. In other words, by adapting this particular play, Branagh is able to tap into the two elements whose presence/absence defines the contemporary stage of development of the genre. The film is, therefore, a special case within the genre because it almost brings into the open what other romantic comedies—both classical and contemporary—for the most part keep well hidden: the pressure of homoerotic desire on a generic and social structure based on heterosexuality.

For the Shakespearean critic Richard A. Levin, the key to the action of *Much Ado* is the recognition that "the time to marry has arrived in Messina."[12] Yet, instead of producing harmony, the immediate prospect of socialization through heterosexual monogamy seems to bring to the surface all the sexual tensions that have remained muted during the war. With the exception of Beatrice's initial hostility to men, it is mostly the young men that present the fiercest opposition to marriage. In fact, the film could be described as the story of a group of men who are confronted with the social reality of marriage and who are only half-heartedly reconciled to an immediate future of stable monogamy, because such a prospect will entail the abandonment of the company of men and the intense state of male bonding favored by the war. In the rest of this essay, I propose a reading of Branagh's *Much Ado* as a film of the nineties and, more specifically, as a culturally prestigious arena in which contemporary questions of sexual politics and gender ideology are explored. My analysis will first focus on the specific terms of the relationship between optimistic heterosexual romance and gender tensions in the film. After a brief account of the play's discourse on heterosexuality—a discourse which is still understandable at the end of the twentieth century—I will concentrate on three different but interrelated aspects of the film: Balthasar's song, the precredit and credit sequences, and, finally, the treatment of the male characters, especially Don Pedro (Denzel Washington) and Don John (Keanu Reeves). In order to explore the film's delineation of heterosexual relationships and the threats to romance posed by these two characters I will draw, among others, on Susan Lurie's work on pornography and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's on homosocial desire.[13] Starting from very different theoretical positions, both authors coincide in positing the male fear of woman and the threat she poses as the founding mechanism of patriarchal culture. The proud group of men in leather who dominate the first few minutes of *Much Ado* soon starts crumbling under the influence of the "female space" of Messina. The culturally ingrained male fear of women is used and reversed by the film in order to produce a happy ending which, while acceptable to contemporary audiences, ensures the continuity of the genre's traditional structure. It is this process of adaptation to both the laws of the genre and contemporary society that I try to map in the following pages.[14]

Although Benedick ultimately proves to be the most compromising of the male characters and ripe for a heterosexual union in which an egalitarian relationship between the sexes may at least be envisaged, it is precisely through him that the play articulates the patriarchal view that falling in love affects manliness and turns men into effeminate posers. What is ironic about his famous soliloquy in scene 2.3 of the play is that it comes immediately before Don Pedro's plot to get Benedick and Beatrice to fall in love with each other, and, consequently, immediately before Benedick starts behaving in the exact manner he so vehemently criticizes. 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. There follows a list of the qualities that an eligible woman should have

in order to "convert" Benedick. These are, of course, the very qualities that Beatrice possesses, and the spectator is aware that with this hypothetical enumeration he is really describing her and anticipating their future compatibility. This kind of double play, which both glorifies and parodies heterosexual harmony, partakes of Shakespeare's ambivalent attitude toward the tradition of courtly love, a tradition that had, by the 1590s, become clichéd in English literature but which served, at the same time, as the culturally prestigious basis for the new Protestant concept of marriage based on love.[15] Despite the parodic attitude that this and other texts of the same period show toward the medieval conventions, "true love" cannot be imagined and, therefore, represented without reference to them.

However, while the relationship between Claudio and Hero provides the clearest example in the play of a love according to courtly conventions, the ideal heterosexual relationship, that between Beatrice and Benedick, incorporates yet another ingredient: gender confrontation. This element of Shakespeare's romantic comedies has best been discussed by Stephen Greenblatt through the concepts of heat and chafing.[16] Starting from a discussion of Elizabethan medical theories of sexuality, which explained sex and reproduction as a matter of erotic heat (the literal increase of bodily temperature produced by friction as a precondition for the proper functioning of the sexual organs), Greenblatt contends that, since erotic heat could not be directly represented on the Elizabethan stage, Shakespeare took advantage of the common knowledge that erotic heat was no different from other kinds of heat in the human body and substituted verbal wit for it: the linguistic sparring between lovers which produced the necessary dramatic friction to metaphorically represent the erotic friction on which sexuality was based. Greenblatt's theory explains the nature of the linguistic competition between Benedick and Beatrice: linguistic tension is at the very basis of the representation of love and compatibility between the two characters. On the other hand, while medical science has since then proved that the concepts of heat and friction are inaccurate to describe the functioning of the human sexual organs, the dramatic friction that, for Greenblatt, is in the Elizabethan era a consequence of the putting into discourse of these medical concepts is still understandable in the twentieth century as part of the codified structure of heterosexual relationships in comic fiction.[17] In other words, the medical grounds of the convention may have disappeared, but the convention itself still works in our day, defining the representation of sexual relationships in cultural texts as a problematic tension between friction and harmony. For a late-twentieth-century film like *Much Ado,* the continuing applicability of this convention has the added advantage of highlighting Beatrice's "feminist" awareness of the unfairness of male behavior in patriarchy, while at the same time explaining her readiness to "submit" to a stable relationship with a man: she exposes Benedick's shortcomings and dismissive attitude toward women as sexist, but, through her verbal "abuse," the play simultaneously manages to convey her attraction toward him. To put this in other words, linguistic friction is the film's way of dramatizing the conflict between Beatrice's wish to be independent from men and her desire for Benedick, a conflict which is, for Rowe, at the basis of the contra-

dictions experienced by heterosexual women in patriarchy.[18] It also renders more credible Benedick's change from apparent resentment of women to the willing and joyful acceptance of a monogamous engagement with the most threatening specimen of the opposite sex.

This approach therefore reinforces the feasibility of a thematic structure in which conflict not only leads to final reconciliation but is an integral part of the sexual compatibility produced by that reconciliation. Having said this, it is however also possible to reverse Greenblatt's theory: in a play like *Much Ado,* successful sexual relationships are invariably based on ideological and linguistic tensions between the sexes that cast a permanent shadow on the feasibility of those relationships. Since reconciliation is a universal comic convention, to say that the film ends in reconciliation is not to say anything specific about the text itself. We must, therefore, analyze the specific terms in which that reconciliation takes place. On the other hand, Benedick's flexibility and readiness to compromise is not totally shared by his "buddies." While his apparent resentment of women may be considered as "only" one ingredient of his future acceptance of their difference, the attitudes of the other three male characters cannot easily be contained by this reading. The viewer must accept the final reconciliation between Claudio and Hero as a contribution to the generalized image of social harmony characteristic of Shakespeare's comedies, no matter how problematic this reconciliation may look nowadays, but no effort needs to be made in the cases of Don Pedro and Don John, who are, for apparently different reasons, simply excluded from the final heterosexual pairing celebrated by the song and dance. To put it briefly, a reading of the film must explain the exact terms of the negotiation that leads to heterosexual reconciliation in the case of Benedick and Beatrice and the reasons why Don Pedro and Don John are excluded from it (reasons which, in my view, should also lead to Claudio's exclusion and certainly to Hero's rejection of him).

For Barbara Everett, what distinguishes *Much Ado* from other Shakespearean comedies is its insistence on the radical difference in outlook and behavior between men and women and the fact that it is the women's world that dominates in the play.[19] An element that may undercut this dominance, however, is Balthasar's song, one of the most problematic aspects of the staging of the play.[20] Benedick's comparison of his singing to a dog's howling and the servant's acknowledgment of his own limitations as a singer have often been sufficient evidence to turn the song into parody and burlesque in performance.[21] Zitner argues that Balthasar's limited ability as a singer may be the key to solving the problem of the contradictory message contained in the lyrics. For him, the message, delivered through the assertion that "men were deceivers ever" and, simultaneously, that women ought to leave lamentation over male infidelity and sing songs of flirtation (Zitner's interpretation of the phrase "hey nonny nonny") can only be explained as male self-serving counsel: "that women reconcile themselves to playing in an unfair game; even [while] blandly own[ing] up to male unfairness."[22] The emotional power of this misogynistic message would then be undercut by Balthasar's exaggeratedly poor rendering, thus invalidating the "truth" of its content.

This is clearly not the option taken in Branagh's film. In this case, Balthasar (Patrick Doyle) sings the song beautifully, and Branagh's histrionic but effective performance of Benedick's reaction contributes to the general impression that male pomp and self-importance ought to be abandoned before a balanced heterosexual relationship may be established. But the song is not rescued from parody and burlesque solely by Balthasar's performance. The same song is used for the final dance and celebration, which again sanctions its validity as part of the dominant discourse of the text. But, even more crucially, it is appropriated by Beatrice and used for the opening of the film. It is to this opening scene—Beatrice's performance of the song and the arrival of Don Pedro's men in Messina—that I want to turn my attention now.

Adrienne L. McLean has recently argued that musical numbers in nonmusical films tend to be dismissed as passages in which nothing important happens, yet they may provide one of the few places in classical Hollywood cinema "in which women do not necessarily always play only to male desire."[23] Elsewhere in her essay, McLean applies Rick Altman's contention that the musical reverses the "normal" image/sound hierarchy of classical cinema: in the musical number, image becomes subordinated to sound.[24] Although the critic is referring to classical Hollywood films, her words accurately describe the narrative function of Beatrice's rendering of "Hey nonny nonny." The film opens with the lyrics of the song gradually appearing on a black screen while Emma Thompson's voice is heard reciting them to the background melody which will again accompany the song on two more occasions during the film (first by Balthasar, and then by everybody at the end). The film's use of the written lyrics can be understood as prompting the spectator to sing, or at least recite, along and thus identify with the content of what is being said and with the speaking voice. Even before the importance of the message sinks in, the film is, therefore, demanding total identification with Beatrice from the spectator. After the end of the first stanza, the black screen is first replaced by a painting of the Italian villa, which idealizes the space of the recitation, and then, through a leisurely panning frame movement, followed by a view of Leonato's household as they sit on the grass in a "carelessly arranged" manner listening to Beatrice's words. Her face is then framed for the first time, in close-up, as her recitation of the song's second stanza finishes. This shot, therefore, establishes the space of Leonato's household as dominated by Beatrice and by the words she recites, bringing the film closer to Everett's reading of the play. But what exactly do these words mean?

This is not, as in the play, a man suggesting that women should put up with men's infidelities and keep on inviting male misogynistic behavior but a woman ironically suggesting that women reject that behavior and advising them not to take men too seriously and not to shed one single tear over them. The "hey nonny nonny," whose original meaning is not clear anyway, appears here to be turned by the film's contemporary discourse into a song of celebration of a female space, a space initially occupied by the women and the men of Leonato's household. The song, therefore, cannot be taken ironically, as Zitner suggests in the case of the

play, but at face value, as defining a position, within patriarchy, in which the basic injustice of patriarchal society is understood and in which women resist the humiliation stemming from that injustice.[25]

The harmony of this female space is inevitably disrupted by the news of the imminent return of Don Pedro and his company of men. Beatrice's recitation, therefore, adds an interesting nuance to the play's opening. Whereas in Shakespeare the emphasis is, from the beginning, on Don Pedro's arrival and his men's exploits, in the film this arrival is presented both as a disruption of the female space with which the spectator is unequivocally asked to identify and as a slightly ridiculous event through the focus on the messenger's embarrassed replies to Beatrice's minimizing of Benedick's warring exploits. Shortly afterward, as the credits appear, the company of men are shown covering the last stretch of their journey, a moment which is visually presented through the point of view of Beatrice and her friends.

Being a comedy, *Much Ado* pays less attention to male performance in war than to Beatrice's biting comments about Benedick's cowardice. Yet the experience of war does seem to underscore some of the male characters' actions and attitudes in Messina. For these men, the memory of war produces an experience of loss and a state of regressive bliss characterized by male bonding and total absence of women. In a recent analysis of Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Tania Modleski has argued that "an important objective of war is to subjugate femininity and keep it at a distance."[26] This male fear of women in patriarchal societies has been persuasively analyzed by Susan Lurie in a feminist revision of the Freudian theory of castration, in which she argues that, in the course of their psychosexual development, male subjects gradually replace their longing for union with the mother with a fear of dissolution and loss of individuality through this union. A similar form of this terror is experienced in adult life every time the male subject has a sexual encounter with another woman. The threat of castration, accordingly, does not come from the father, as Freud had argued, but from the mother, who is not perceived by the boy as a "penisless man" but as the possessor of a terrible power that is capable of castrating him.[27] This fear of women is a product of acculturation, the consequence of a patriarchal society that represses female sexuality, precisely by associating it with hostile, destructive drives, drives which do not respond to the reality of women but belong exclusively in men's minds. For Klaus Theweleit, the violence of war is a consequence of this same fear of dissolution through union with the woman. It is this fear that throws men into homosocial bonding.[28] Male homosocial desire, the term coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, describes precisely the cultural process whereby latent homoerotic desire is combined with apparent homophobia in a hegemony of male virility whose ultimate objective is the abjection of woman and the threat she poses.

The presence of this masculine hegemony in recent popular films has been analyzed, among others, by Cynthia J. Fuchs, who finds that the threat posed by women to the male bond becomes the unspoken structuring principle of many of these films, in which an "all-male unit transcending race and class distinctions" is finally triumphant.[29] Fuchs's analysis centers mostly on action adventure films and

is not immediately transferable to romantic comedies, in which, as I suggest in the introduction to this essay, the male bond, because of its latent homoerotic dimensions, is not usually so visible. In *Much Ado,* by contrast, the all-male unit is prominent but in a period of crisis, and it consequently becomes the main object of attack in Beatrice's song. As some critics have pointed out, however important male bonding is in the play, the film nevertheless turns this male-to-male allegiance into a much more central element of its ideological structure, one that simultaneously problematizes and highlights its heterosexual romance.[30]

The crisis of the male group, however, is not immediately obvious as they arrive in Messina on their return from the war. Celebratory military music forms the auditory background to a set of slow-motion shots of the riders as the credits are displayed on the screen. A shot of Don Pedro's flag is followed by a shot of horses' legs in full gallop and then an individual medium shot of Don Pedro, followed by similar shots of another five men: Claudio (Robert Sean Leonard) and Benedick, two lords, Don John, Don Pedro's bastard brother, and Borachio (Gerard Horan) and Conrad (Richard Clifford), two common soldiers, friends of Don John's. As in Fuchs's description, in this panoramic tableau there is no class or racial distinction. On the contrary, the picture presents an apparently idyllic male company, whose power and friendship are then emphasized by a final long shot, still in slow motion, framing the six men in a horizontal composition, riding together, with no hierarchical differentiation between them. Shots of the men arriving in Leonato's house are then crosscut with shots of the people in the house, mostly the women, both groups rushing to their meeting in an atmosphere of exhilaration, completing a rousing credit sequence which sets the mood for the rest of the film. In fact, it could be argued that the flutter, excitement, and even sexual euphoria shown by both men and women at this point underscore the truth value of Beatrice's ditty, as discussed earlier, and produce a spectatorial distance from her words of caution to women, prompting female spectators to surrender to male supremacy.

Closer attention, however, will show that the men's power and strong unity are, in fact, textually undercut by three stylistic elements: the credits, the music, and the clothing. As the sequence of shots reaches its first climax and the men are seen together for the first time, they raise one arm and shout in unison, reinforcing their teamlike unity. At the same time, however, the background music turns into a fully orchestrated repetition of the "hey nonny nonny" melody as the title of the film—*Much Ado About Nothing*—is superimposed on the image. The music suggests that these warriors are entering a space where the budding romantic proceedings will have to take place on the terms proposed by Beatrice, totally opposed to this all-too-obvious display of machismo. At the same time, the title neatly suggests that military victories and men's subsequent sense of self-importance are . . . much ado about nothing. Finally, close attention to the six riders will reveal that although their white jackets are almost exactly alike, a slight contrast is established between the horsemen on the right and on the left of Don Pedro through the blue and black linings of the men's jackets.[31] Suspicion is then confirmed at the end of the sequence, as the men walk in to meet Leonato and the others: it now appears

that the riders' trousers are not all the same. This added detail definitely divides the men into three subgroups: Don John, Borachio, and Conrad, situated on the left-hand side of Don Pedro, wear black leather trousers. Claudio, Benedick, and the messenger (who has now joined the other men), on the right-hand side, wear blue flannel trousers. Don Pedro, who occupies the vortex of a now undeniably hierarchical composition, wears blue leather trousers, that is, halfway between the two groups.

I want to argue that the leather trousers of the two brothers and Don John's underlings are, through their contemporary connotations of homoerotic desire, a powerful, if not always obvious, symbol of the film's construction of male bonding as the most formidable opponent of heterosexual union, conversely depicted, as indicated before, as taking place in a feminized space.[32] The main difference between *Much Ado* and the contemporary "buddy" films analyzed by Fuchs and others is that, while in the latter strong male bonding is generally compatible with heterosexual love, in Branagh's film it excludes heterosexuality. On the other hand, the film's celebratory support of heterosexual relationships, even its endorsement of the power of the female space, is enforced through an underlying streak of homophobia. At this point Sedgwick's term "homosociality" proves to be very useful, for it introduces the possibility of distinguishing male bonding in patriarchal societies from homoerotic desire, even though both are ultimately related. As Chris Holmlund has argued recently in a study of another group of contemporary "buddy" films, the risk of looking for homoeroticism in heterosexual male genre films "increases astronomically . . . if, as critics, we fail to notice or downplay the films' homophobia."[33] *Much Ado* appears to be aware of all these distinctions and risks, yet it cannot separate its conscious critique of patriarchal male bonding from a more ambivalent but, at times, very powerful homophobia. Through the symbol of the leather trousers, for example, homoerotic desire and male bonding are collapsed into one single concept.

Another "problem" often encountered by critics in Shakespeare's *Much Ado* is the indeterminacy of the nature of Don John's evil. While there is a consensus that the character's villainy is due to his being an illegitimate child, his bastardy is not explicitly mentioned until scene 4.1, after his appearance at the wedding. Even at this point, it remains unexplained and, as a reason for his evil acts, unsatisfactory. His villainy is described by Leggatt as generalized and conventional, with the only apparent function of furthering the plot.[34] Several rather mystifying utterances by Don John to Conrad in scene 1.3—"I cannot hide what I am" (1.3.12–13), or, later on, "let me be that I am, and seek not to alter me" (1.3.34–35)—could be explained as an acknowledgment of the influence of his "unnatural birth" on his character.[35] Yet while this explanation would have been perfectly understandable in the sixteenth century, it makes little sense nowadays.

Since the film belongs to a culture in which bastardy is no longer considered as an inexcusable source of evil, an interesting shift takes place in this scene. The dialogue with Conrad takes place at night, in a small room suffused in the intense yellowish-reddish light of the fire, while Conrad gives his master a massage. Don

John, still wearing his black leather trousers (like Conrad and Borachio, who later comes into the room), is naked from the waist up, the intimate relationship with his friend unequivocally seeking to position the spectator in terms of homoerotic desire.[36] In this context one cannot but associate the homoerotic mise-en-scène with Don John's ambiguous words, which define him as different in the exclusivity of his all-male space. The abstract nature of the dialogue and the ambiguity of the terms used to define Don John combine with the visual rendering of the scene to reframe his difference as sexual difference.

Moreover, the villain's grim and surly general mood helps create an oppositional space to that of heterosexual celebration in Messina, a space characterized by strict exclusion of women and by alternative male specularization. The pleasures offered by this specularized all-male world are striking—the men's spectacular arrival at the beginning, Don John's exhibitionist poses and the massaging scene—but inevitably short-lived. In a society bent on marriage and strictly heterosexual exchange of energy, male bonding is doomed to failure, as the outcome of his two plots against Claudio proves. For Don John, Claudio is "that young start-up [who] hath all the glory of my overthrow" (1.3.63–64). Don John's "overthrow," another ambiguous and unexplained event in the play, is presented by the film as jealousy of the growing favors of Don Pedro toward Claudio at Don John's expense. On the other hand, Don John's hostility against Claudio can be interpreted as his disgust at the young nobleman's readiness to comply with the social rules in Messina and his willingness to abandon the men's company. Don John's bitterness can, therefore, be reread, in the new context offered by the film, as his disappointment and resentment at the sight of the dissolution of the company of men, some of whose members appear, in varying degrees, to have made up their minds to succumb to the socialized pleasures of marriage and abandon the dream paradise of male bonding. It may be proof of the sexual confusion of our times that, in identifying the narrative's evil as an excess of male bonding, the film falls into the characterization of its main villain in terms of homoeroticism. This characterization reaches its climax in the scene when Don John concludes that "it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain" (1.3.29–30), framed in medium shot, arms outstretched, the firelight emphasizing the beauty of his desirable body. At this point, any distinction between homoerotic desire and villainy has totally disappeared.[37]

For his part, Don Pedro's position encapsulates all the difficulties of the role of the intermediary in a world in which heteroerotic desire and male bonding are mutually exclusive spaces. He is both the men's leader and the creator of the plots that finally get the two young couples together. Yet his intervention on both occasions suggests that he is not happy with his lot. His plan to woo Hero in Claudio's name in the play is a rather unnecessary gesture, which may already suggest that he is uncomfortable in his role as go-between and would like to woo for himself.[38] The film underlines this possibility by including a long shot in which he kisses Hero's hands with a genuinely felt intensity which betrays his own desire. Later on, still in the same scene, his proposal of marriage to Beatrice, which she rejects, is

again supplemented in the film by a shot of Don Pedro looking at Beatrice, as she walks away, with an expression of longing and sadness on his face. The rendering of this scene also seems to suggest the importance of the casting of Denzel Washington in the part of Don Pedro. Beatrice's rejection and Don Pedro's sad expression suggest that the invisible barrier between them may not be so invisible after all, and the difference between them becomes not only one of class and sexual orientation but also a difference of race. Since Don Pedro does not need to be black in terms of realism (people from Aragón are not and have never been, as a general rule, black), it must be inferred that Washington's casting is, like Reeves's, a way of reinforcing the character's difference. It seems obvious that the film could not have used, with the same effect, Washington or any other black actor (British or American) to play the parts of Benedick or Claudio. The link established between homosexuality and blackness becomes a powerful symbol of the lingering "otherness" of both conditions in our culture.[39]

At the end of the film, when Don John has been arrested and brought back to Don Pedro's presence, the looks that the two brothers exchange are not so much looks of rivalry and hostility as of recognition. In spite of their differences, they are brought together by their mutual "difference." Don Pedro seems to acknowledge the presence of Don John in himself, and when Benedick advises him to get married, it is obvious to the spectator that marriage is not such a straightforward proposition for the prince as his friend seems to think, both for sexual and racial reasons. The previous shot showing the prince at the vortex of the hierarchical arrangement can now be seen as a metaphorical representation of Don Pedro's predicament: his position at the apex suggests a tension between male bonding and heterosexual love. All of these details define Don Pedro's difference from the people in Messina, including Benedick and Claudio. Aware as a ruler of the limitations of male bonding and the necessity of stable heterosexual relationships for the model of society which he defends, he himself finds it impossible to be part of that society, much as he would like to be. Levin, writing about the play, argues that his dialogue with Beatrice suggests that they are not suitable life companions because an invisible but powerful line separates them. This line, Levin continues, may be the line that separates heterosexual from homosexual, although "such terminology is too coarse for Shakespeare's delicate and perhaps evasive portrayal."[40] Why this terminology should be too coarse for an author who wrote a whole series of sonnets about homoerotic desire is difficult to understand. In any case, the film's reading of the male space in Messina as a space of aggressive bonding and strict exclusion of women and its characterization of Don Pedro as longing for but incapable of sexual relationships with women once again recontextualizes the tensions of the story within a scenario of homosocial desire. The "otherness" and undesirability of this scenario is intensified by Don Pedro's skin color, a contemporary manifestation of the line that, according to Levin, separates this character from Beatrice.

From the perspective of the film's dominant discourse, Don Pedro's predicament brings into the open what Western cultural texts have generally attempted to hide for many centuries: the contradictions of a patriarchal discourse that has tried

to harmonize male bonding with the centrality of stable heterosexual relationships. In many Western narratives the solution has been to subordinate the hero's erotic relationship with the heroine to his homosocial links with other men. Occasionally, such narratives as stories of *amour fou* and others have ignored men's relationships with other men and threatened through the male protagonist's total involvement with the female character the precarious balance necessary for the perpetuation of patriarchal structures. Branagh's film makes the most of the ambiguities and gaps already present in Shakespeare's play and advances a very different proposition: male bonding is, in the film's ideological discourse, the main obstacle to heterosexual relationships, which, in the egalitarian climate in which the film was produced, can only be successful if they take place within the female space of Messina and on the terms dictated by Beatrice. The prominence of Beatrice's song throughout the film and, specifically, its dominance over and infiltration of the male celebratory discourse of the first scene, together with Benedick's acceptance of Beatrice's conditions, suggest the ideological incompatibility between male bonding and marriage. The discourse of male bonding, on the other hand, is specularized by means of the ideologically significant collapsing of homosociality and homoerotic desire: the pleasures offered by this discourse are, in the scenes analyzed above, clearly homoerotic ones, yet they are ephemeral insofar as the film constantly asks the spectator to reject a discourse which is embodied, it must not be forgotten, in the narrative's unrepentant villain, Don John. In other words, the film's project of apparent rejection of male bonding and critique of women's subordination in patriarchy cannot be separated from its latent homophobia. In Branagh's new paradise, fear of women has been displaced on to—or, perhaps, hidden under—fear of homosexuals.

As a romantic comedy of the nineties, then, *Much Ado* signals the incompatibility between the genre and its initial scenario of men in leather. Like other recent examples of the genre, the film manages to promote its heroine as a "woman on top," responding in this way to social changes by establishing a more egalitarian climate in the battle of the sexes. Yet, homoerotic desire (and, in a less obvious way, interracial relationships) must, for the time being, remain outside the genre as its "repressed other." Further, the film presents its homoerotic and female spaces as incompatible and opposed to one another. It is, in cultural terms, as if the inclusion of one space actually reinforces the exclusion of the other. However, by dramatizing the impossibility of homoerotic desire in Messina rather than simply hiding it, the film becomes a particularly telling case of the underlying sexual ideology of romantic comedy and, if only indirectly, offers a possibility of change in the future evolution of the genre. In any case, the continuing success of such "new romances" as *French Kiss* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1995), *Nine Months* (Chris Columbus, 1995), or *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995) shows that this possibility remains, for the time being, largely unexplored within the Hollywood industry.[41]

Notes

I would like to thank Anita La Cruz, Chantal Cornut-Gentille, Peter Evans, Constanza del Río, and the journal's anonymous readers for their suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (summer 1978): 11–23; Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Affairs to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 268–69.
2. Andrew S. Horton, ed., *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2.
3. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 171–72.
4. Frank Krutnik, "The Faint Aroma of Performing Seals: The 'Nervous Romance' and the Comedy of the Sexes," *Velvet Light Trap*, no. 26 (1990): 62–70; Steve Neale, "The Big Romance or Something Wild?: Romantic Comedy Today," *Screen* 33, no. 3 (fall 1992): 287.
5. Kathleen Rowe, "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender: Theorizing the Genres of Laughter," in Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, eds., *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (New York and London: Routledge 1995), 56.
6. Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, 171; the recent interest in history in film studies has provided the main impetus for Karnick and Jenkins's *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, an attempt to correct the ahistorical tendency in earlier approaches to comedy; however, Rowe's conclusion on *Moonstruck*, quoted above, attests to the difficulties inherent in such a project, especially in the case of romantic comedy.
7. Babington and Evans, *Affairs to Remember*, 268, 297.
8. See also Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, 145, 154; Rowe, "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender," 45, 47.
9. Rowe, "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender," 49.
10. Growing female independence is, for Rowe, the central issue of *Moonstruck*, but many of the most successful Hollywood romantic comedies of the eighties and nineties also deal with threats to patriarchal subjection of women. See, for example, *Something Wild* (Jonathan Demme, 1985), *Peggy Sue Got Married* (Francis Coppola, 1986) *Broadcast News* (James L. Brooks, 1987), *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988), *The Accidental Tourist* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1988), *Green Card* (Peter Weir, 1990), or *Alice* (Woody Allen, 1990). Homosexuality as the "repressed other" of romantic comedy, by contrast, is practically absent in recent Hollywood. Some exceptions are *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982), *Victor/Victoria* (Blake Edwards, 1982), and *Switch* (Blake Edwards, 1991).
11. Babington and Evans, *Affairs to Remember*, 269.
12. Richard A. Levin, *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Content* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), 93.
13. Susan Lurie, "Pornography and the Dread of Women: The Male Sexual Dilemma," in Laura Lederer, ed., *Take Back the Night* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), 159–73; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
14. Since this is an analysis of the film as a romantic comedy, the most carnivalesque aspects of the story, especially the parts played by the comic characters, are not explored here. Yet the casting of star Michael Keaton as Dogberry in itself suggests the importance that the part of the action dominated by this character has in the overall structure of the film. Although I later suggest that Dogberry's Watch act is a comic foil for the male group of the romantic action, there are, no doubt, other dimensions to these characters and the type of comedy they embody that fall outside the scope of this paper.
15. On sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant discourses on love and marriage, see Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).
16. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 88–89.
17. The "displacement of physical sexuality into language" is, for Neale and Krutnik, also a characteristic of the screwball comedies of the 1930s. For these authors, who do not

specifically refer to linguistic confrontations, this displacement is a reflection of the way in which courtship and seduction are carried out in real life (Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy,* 162). Friction between romantic partners in the cinema is also mentioned by Molly Haskell in *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (London: New English Library, 1975), 127 and expanded on by Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy,* 140.

18. Rowe, "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender," 54.
19. In William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing,* ed. Sheldon P. Zitner (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 76.
20. These are the words of the song:

    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 bright 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.

21. See, for example, Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love* (London: Methuen, 1974), 173, and Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing,* 45.
22. Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing,* 204–5.
23. Adrienne L. McLean, "'It's Only That I Do What I Love and Love What I Do': *Film Noir* and the Musical Woman," *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 1 (fall 1993): 3.
24. Ibid., 5.
25. It is in this context that the "truth" value of Benedick's assertion in the final scene, when he says to Don Pedro that "man is a giddy thing," should be understood, for it has by then become clear that the frank acknowledgment of male infidelity and unfairness to women is the necessary condition for men to be admitted to the comic space of Messina.
26. Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a "Postfeminist" Age* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 62.
27. Lurie, "Pornography," 161–68.
28. In Modleski, *Feminism without Women,* 62–63.
29. Cynthia J. Fuchs, "The Buddy Politic," in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 194; Fuchs analyzes, among others, *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987), *Lethal Weapon 2* (Richard Donner, 1989), *The Rookie* (Clint Eastwood, 1991), and *Heart Condition* (James D. Parriott, 1990).
30. Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love,* 169–70; Levin, *Love and Society,* 91–98; and Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing,* 29–30.
31. I am indebted to Anita La Cruz for first pointing out to me the superimposition of the film's title over the display and celebration of male power and to Chantal Cornut-Gentille for noticing details of the riders' jackets. Leslie Felperin Sharman refers to the title as

punning with the word nothing ("no thing" being a common Shakespearean play on virginity and women's "lack" of a penis) in "*Much Ado about Nothing,*" *Sight and Sound* 3, no. 9 (September 1993): 50–51, but the sexual reference is less than clear in Shakespeare's play and would most certainly be lost nowadays anyway. Zitner goes through all the possible connotations of the title but settles for none of them and finally links it with Shakespeare's other "throwaway titles"—*As You Like It, All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure,* and *Twelfth Night,* more particularly, its subtitle, *As You Will*—as a probable fashion of the time to counteract excessively spectacular and explanatory titles (Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing,* 14–15). Be that as it may, the film takes advantage of the indeterminacy of the title of the original and manages this unexpected ironic connection, very much in keeping with its foregrounding of male bonding.

32. Dogberry and his Watch constitute the comic foil of this powerful company of men. The stupidity of the comic company and their constant self-deconstruction represent another avenue of criticism of male bonding, through parody. For example, when Dogberry and his men question the villains after they have arrested them, the film's mise-en-scène presents both groups as distorted mirror images of one another.
33. Chris Holmlund, "Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade: The 'Mature' Stallone and the Stallone Clone," in Cohan and Hark, *Screening the Male,* 225.
34. Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Comedy of Love,* 156.
35. The lines from the play have been taken from the Zitner edition quoted above.
36. This positioning of the spectator is clearly intensified by the casting of Keanu Reeves as Don John, an actor who "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.
37. Unlike Benedick's, Claudio's transition from the war to Messina is more problematic than his hasty engagement to Hero may suggest. At the truncated wedding ceremony, he encapsulates all of Don John's resentment of women in his public humiliation of and physical violence against Hero. This attitude makes the young bride's forthright willingness to give herself to him in the final wedding ceremony the least palatable aspect of the film's version of the play to modern audiences.
38. Levin, *Love and Society,* 95–96.
39. Race is another area in which contemporary romantic comedy is resistant to change. The recent popularity of comic African American stars such as Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, and Whoopi Goldberg should not blind us to the reality of Hollywood's resistance to make race visible in heterosexual romances. Denzel Washington may be, in fact, one of the first African American actors whose star persona makes him eligible for romantic parts, but his casting as Don Pedro in *Much Ado* attests to the difficulty of such an operation. *The Pelican Brief* (Alan J. Pakula, 1993) is another example, although not a comedy, in which the relationship between a law student (Julia Roberts) and an investigative journalist (Washington) would have most likely ended in romance had it not been for Washington's racial otherness. As it is, all we get is his longing look in close-up as Roberts walks away in the film's final scene. This look reminds us of the one described above when Beatrice refuses to marry Don Pedro and encapsulates Washington's contradictory position as a romantic lead of the nineties. Whoopi Goldberg has also been recently involved in romantic comedies such as *Made in America* (Richard Benjamin, 1993) or *Corrina, Corrina* (Jessie Nelson, 1994), but the analysis of her parts in these films falls outside the scope of this paper.
40. Levin, *Love and Society,* 98.
41. On the other hand, the relative success of non-Hollywood films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (Ang Lee, 1992), *Go Fish* (Rose Troche, 1993), or *Gauzon Maudit* (Josiane Balasko, 1995) proves the growing compatibility, within the present sociocultural context, between a certain normalization in the representation of male and female sexuality and the conventions and structures of romantic comedy.