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Narrative holes and the cinema

My subject in this essay is playtexts and in films of those playtexts. Drama offers the storyteller a simple choice about how to communicate each element of the story to the audience: show it, or have a character describe it. Often in drama narration is used because an event cannot be shown, but occasionally telling is used when showing is perfectly possible and Shakespeare uses this device self-consciously to draw attention to the medium rather than the message of his story. Shakespeare appears then interested in ekphrasis, which the Oxford Classical Dictionary calls "an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary" (Hornblower & Spawforth 1996) but which is commonly used in the more precise sense summarized by Grant F. Scott as "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (Scott 1991, 301).

In Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing there is an important hole in the narrative which has been placed there by the dramatist. The moment when Claudio and Don Pedro witness a sign of Hero's infidelity is only anticipated and recalled in the play, not shown. First Don John promises "Go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered" (III.ii.102-3) and in the next scene Borachio brags how he brought Margaret into the deception: "She leans me out at her mistress' chamber window, bids me a thousand times good night" (III.iii.140-2). Between III.ii and III.iii the deception takes place without being shown to the audience. It certainly would have been possible for Shakespeare's stage to represent Borachio entering or leaving the bedchamber, so we should consider why Shakespeare chose instead to use dialogue referring to these actions. The point seems to be that these are actions which would precede and follow the event--the putative sex between Hero and Borachio--and which are taken for the event itself. Whether entering or leaving Hero's bedchamber, Claudio and Don Pedro are sure to infer from Borachio's presence that Hero is sexually active. The audience are distanced from the sexual act by a double frame: first the corollaries which precede and follow the implied act and second the ekphrastic narrative promise and recollection of those corollaries. Kenneth Branagh chose to show the audience the deception scene in his film of Much Ado About Nothing (Branagh 1993) and he broke III.ii after Don John says "I know not that [Claudio means to marry] when he knows what I know" to cut to an interior shot of excited kissing between Borachio and Margaret, although from behind Imelda Staunton playing Margaret might easily be mistaken for Kate Beckinsale playing Hero. The next shot shows Don John, Claudio, and Don Pedro entering the garden and is followed by one showing Borachio and Margaret having sex on the balcony of Hero's bedchamber. Putting perhaps too fine a point on it--and surely risking alienation of his unwitting assistant in this deception--Borachio moans "Hero, Hero" in his sexual ecstasy. Returning to the dialogue of III.ii

more or less where we left it, Don John states what appears obvious: "The lady is disloyal".

Branagh's realization of the absent deception scene replaced Shakespeare's double framing device with the putative act itself since Don John brings Claudio and Don Pedro into the orchard at precisely the moment when no inference is needed to condemn Hero. As with Othello's misreading of the evidence against Desdemona, the inability of Don Pedro and Claudio to distinguish circumstantial evidence from matters bearing on the fact is an index of their gullibility. Branagh's interpolated scene diminishes this gullibility and increases Don John's skill at presenting a convincing deception. Horace Howard Furness pointed out that in Shakespeare's narrative Don Pedro later says that Borachio has "Confessed the vile encounters they have had / A thousand times in secret" (IV.i.94-5), and that this lie should "mitigat[e] our condemnation of Claudio's conduct" (Shakespeare 1899, III.iii.142n). In the theatre the proposed deception sounds implausible and Shakespeare's doubled 'befores' and 'afters', which pointedly draw attention to the absent 'during', highlight the essential difference between circumstantial evidence and proof. Furness, like Branagh, excused Claudio and Don Pedro a little too readily. Perhaps to counterbalance this simplification of the play, Branagh introduced ambiguity by showing only the back of Borachio's sexual partner, allowing the audience to wonder, at least momentarily, whether Hero is guilty of the accusation.

In his film of King Lear Peter Brook interpolated a scene concerning the nature of damning evidence which, like Branagh's balcony-sex scene in Much Ado About Nothing, raises the possibility that the cinema audience may experience a deception for themselves while watching others being taken in by it (Brook 1971). Edmond's plan to alienate Gloucester from Edgar begins with a promise, rather like Don John's, that incontrovertible evidence can be presented. This is quotation 3 on your handout:

EDMOND If your honour judge it meet, I will place you where you shall hear us confer of this, and by an auricular assurance have your satisfaction, and that without any further delay than this very evening. (The Tragedy of King Lear I.ii.91-4)

It is easy to hear in "auricular assurance" an echo of Othello's "Give me the ocular proof" (III.iii.365) with which it shares this theme of damning evidence. With Gloucester hooked, Edmond makes effectively the same promise to Edgar, quotation 4 on your handout: "I will fitly bring you to hear my lord speak" (I.ii.157-8). Both of these promised eavesdroppings are absent from the play--which is why I noticed them--but Brook interpolated an opportunity for Gloucester to overhear Edgar damning himself by reading the letter written by Edmond. The letter, you will remember, is a fake communication from Edgar to Edmond enjoining the illegitimate son to plot with the legitimate son against their father, and it was written by Edmond to discredit Edgar. In the play Edmond lets his father see the letter which ends (and this is quotation 5 on your handout) "If our father would sleep till I waked him, you should enjoy half his revenue for ever and live the beloved of your brother, Edgar" (I.ii.53-6). In the theatre Gloucester generally reads this aloud and is appalled by its contents, but Brook instead had Edmond encourage Edgar to read the letter aloud while his father eavesdrops. Gloucester hears Edgar's speech not as the recitation but as spontaneous dialogue. Here is the moment in the film. As you see, Brook, like Branagh, invented a scene which puts the audience in the middle of the deception in order to experience it at first hand. And, as with Much Ado About Nothing, the difference between first-hand

and second-hand evidence is crucial to the play. Brook might be criticized for improbably making Edmond take an unnecessary risk concerning Edgar's enunciation. For if Edgar paraphrased the signing off as "live the beloved of your brother, signed Edgar" the entire scheme would unravel. However, we should note that Iago took a risk as great as this concerning Cassio's explanation of the handkerchief, and Brook's invented scene is true to the spirit of Edmond's daring wickedness.

What both these cinematic moments offer is an overhearing or an overseeing which the dramatic text promises but, most pointedly, fails to deliver. I do not want to answer just yet whether it is a good thing or a bad thing that the cinema fills in a hole in Shakespeare's text, but I do want you to remember that this is what the films do. The common theme with these absences is deception of one character by another, but very occasionally Shakespeare deceives the audience too. Usually the audience enjoy a privileged position from which the misunderstandings of the characters can be measured against a notional narrative truth, but in The Comedy of Errors the audience learn the identity of the Abbess only when it is revealed to the onstage characters at V.i.346. At the other end of Shakespeare's career, Paulina's revelation that Hermione is alive at the end of The Winter's Tale is a similar surprise for the audience. Shakespeare rarely misled his audience but Philip C. McGuire made a powerful case for thinking that the supposed ascent of the Dover cliff by Gloucester and Edgar in King Lear is another example (McGuire 1994, 87-90) since, on the non-realistic Elizabethan stage, the audience have no reason to doubt Edgar's assertion that they are indeed making the difficult climb. The entire first scene of The Tempest is clearly a deception since the audience have no reason to suppose that the storm is an illusion created by Ariel. As Peter Holland pointed out, theatre and film directors who show Prospero and/or Ariel in a manipulative capacity in the first scene are spoiling Shakespeare's intentional misleading of his audience (Holland 1995, 224). In Derek Jarman's film of The Tempest Prospero is seen sleeping and fitfully dreaming while the storm takes place and there is a strong sense that the storm is a manifestation of the power of his imagination, or a force released from his id (Jarman 1979). This reading of the scene manages both to spoil the deception and to turn the arch manipulator of others' perceptions into a passive receiver of images, for when dreaming we are subjected to those personal mental processes which are least under our control. In Peter Greenaway's adaptation, Prospero's Books (Greenaway 1991), the protracted storm lasts into I.ii and troubles Miranda's sleep, and in Forbidden Planet the dark side of Morbius's (Prospero's) creative power is manifested in a Caliban-like figure who ("this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine") is repeatedly referred to as a monster from his creator's id (Wilcox 1956). The storm scene is unnecessary in Forbidden Planet since the astronauts are under orders to visit the isolated home of Morbius and his daughter, but it survives in an oddly attenuated form: an awkward moment of muted collective panic when the navigator mismanages the deceleration from lightspeed. Intellectual hubris forms the major theme of the film and, in an allusion to the mythical Greek Icarus, the navigator's error brings the spaceship too close to the sun.

In Forbidden Planet, as in Jarman's film, the arch-creator is subject to forces of which he is unaware. It is commonplace to parallel Prospero's case with Shakespeare's, and literary theory since Freud has supported the idea that much of what goes on in literary and dramatic works is beyond the conscious control of the author who, in extreme post-structuralist theory, disappears altogether. The origin of this indeterminacy seems to be linguistic and in particular Ferdinand de Saussure's

ideas about the arbitrariness of language. The major task in cinematic adaptation is the substitution of a single cogent visual image for a collection of lines in the play, but in my two examples by Branagh and Brook the directors have gone further and filled in a hole. Greenaway's treatment of the storm, indeed of the entire text, puts him at the opposite end of the spectrum by investing Prospero with complete authorial-narratorial control as he visibly directs the action and ventriloquizes all the parts. Theatre practitioners are apt to assert, with considerably justice, that printed playtexts stand at one remove from the real object of interest to Shakespeare: the moment of performance itself. Greenaway's extensive imagery of books and papers, and his presentation of The Tempest as a story being narrated in its moment of composition, emphasize a sometimes forgotten primordial textuality which scholars and practitioners of theatre and film are apt to forget: plays and films first take shape as scripts and storyboards. While admitting that there are problems with Greenaway's insistence that the written word is primary, I think we have to accept that Shakespeare was interested in ekphrasis, in words which stand for images, and that this pulls in the opposite direction to cinema which is interested in images which stand for words. Shakespeare's interest in the difference between witnessing an event first hand and hearing of it by report, puts him somewhere between a dramatist and an author.

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