Much Ado About Obscenity

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In 1927, the French film director Abel Gance (1889-1981), quoted by Walter Benjamin in his well-known essay *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (1936, p. 221-2), affirmed: "Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films . . . all legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religions, and the very religions . . . await their exposed resurrection, and the heroes crowd each other at the gate."

Taking Gances's words as an invitation, I want to explore the episode *Much Ado About Nothing* broadcasted in 2005, under Brian Percival's direction, as part of the BBC project *Shakespeare Retold*. I am particularly interested in the way Brian Percival, in his role of director, handled the lewd innuendos, metaphors, allusions and puns found in the Shakespearean text in his adaptation to be viewed at spectators' homes, in many instances, in a family setting. How subtly or straightforwardly did the BBC adaptation deal with lewdness and irony, five centuries after the staging of the Shakespearean play?

My curiosity stems from difficulties that arise when one attempts to adapt or translate lewd language to be viewed in more restricted environments. In addition, the concept of obscenity varies greatly and acquires extreme volatility and variability not only between the late sixteenth century and the current days, but also between cultures. What is considered obscene in one culture may not hold true elsewhere. "In what refers to literature […] the borderline between the licit and the illicit has always been blurry. Depending on the places and the time, the label

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"obscene" attached to previous productions may not hold true in other times and places" (Maingueneau 2010, p.14). In other words, various terms labeled as offensive in a particular time and place are no longer considered as such in other times and places. On the other hand, a term or phrase that now seems extremely subtle with reference to obscene images could easily be understood as morally transgressing for an audience in the sixteenth century. For those reasons, "not all allegations of indecency can be so firmly proved or disproved. Bawdy […] is an infinite region, and between the demonstrably decent and the demonstrably indecent lies much that is neither" (Colman 1974, p.15).

Therefore, when carrying out his/her task of adapting a literary text into a filmic one, a film director is ultimately a careful reader and will reflect his/her own culture and time. Such careful reading demands from the one who is adapting Shakespearean texts the awareness that sixteenth-century England was the stage for major transformations derived largely from the maritime expansion process, and that these transformations extended to the English language. Thus, taking advantage of the stimulus generated by the context, William Shakespeare innovates and enriches the vocabulary of his comedies, manipulating words and expressions with remarkable polyphonic creativity in the various speeches of his gallery of characters. The creative use of language by means of puns, allusions, metaphors, metonymy entails the creation of lustful games embedded in contexts that enable the audience or the reader to build the references of a transgressive sexual order. Depending on the situation, the tone of the scene, the character who speaks, and to whom that speech is directed, a given term will be identified as obscene. Without considering the particular conditions in which the expression is stated, neither a film director, nor a literary translator can take for granted that a given word will always be obscene. For instance, in some contexts "to die" means to pass away. In others, when delivered by a different character, in a particular circumstance, it may allude to orgasm. Similarly, in the comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, a pun built by Benedick will hardly be less subtle than others built by Don Pedro.

When adapting a Shakespearean play, a director must also bear in mind that by playing with the themes and words, Shakespeare wanted to

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subtly please extremely diverse audiences composed of about three thousand people, who in the Elizabethan London, watched almost two hundred plays each season, and demanded thematic and aesthetic variety. In the theatrical space, rich and poor, nobles and commoners, men and women seeking enchantment and fun, were anxious for their expectations to be fulfilled. Of every eight Londoners, one went to the theatre between two and three times a week, not necessarily to "see plays", but to "hear" them, as they would say then. Therefore, the life of the play was entrusted to the language, following Frank Kermode's reflection (Kermode 2006, p.16).

Thus, the culture of going to the theater to hear the plays developed in the public of those days the ability to decode the many word games that could build obscenity based on homophony (Kiernan 2006) and polyphony. After all, in their daily lives, people, apart from the environments of nobility and aristocracy, made use of lewd, crude and less refined language to conceal or reflect the hardships of life at the time —unemployment, hunger, violence, disease, and the dirt of a fetid London.

> People spoke a language that was full of figures of speech – bawdy, colourful, or just plain gross — to describe or disguise the cruel facts of life: poverty, the plague, venereal disease, a high infant mortality rate, slow painful death, the brutal violence in my forms that was everywhere around them. (Kiernan 2006, p.13)

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, for instance, Mistress Ford demands that the servants John and Robert take the basket on their shoulders "[...] and carry it among the whitsters in Datchet Mead, and there empty it in the muddy ditch by the Thames' side" (Act III , Scene iii). And as there was not what we now know as special effects, the audience was also used to sharpening their eyes and ears in order to interpret gestures, mimes and speeches of the actors, who also recreated in extraordinary ways, invisible and unknown places and worlds.

Although transgressions were confined to the linguistic universe and the body language, these were quite distant from pornography, which requires explicit exhibition of sexual activities then inconceivable in the Elizabethan stage. Thus, the habit of frequently attending the theater, and to

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sharpen the eyes and the ears, stimulated the audiences' wit, ensuring a remarkable ability to identify and decode characters' insinuations and indirect speeches. And being Shakespeare the "subtlest as well as strongest writer, he expressed his views on love and passion and sex, with a power and pertinence unrivalled by other great general writers and with a picturesqueness unapproached by the professional amorist writers." (Partridge 2001, p.5)

I want now to shift the familiarity with the theatrical space to the familiarity of the spectator with the TV environment, in order to focus on the rereading of *Much Ado about Nothing* in Percival's adaptation for the BBC series *Shakespeare Retold*, particularly regarding the playing with words, which gives rise to lewd language.

In the case of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the title of the play itself opens up a possibility for situations of *double entendre* so typical of the play as a whole, simply by contrasting the words *nothing* and *noting*, which in Shakespeare's days were homophones. Taken literally, the title of the play refers to an excessive fuss made of something, which is not important, which is "nothing", particularly in the case of false claims such as Hero's infidelity, a fact that is preserved in the film adaptation. The preservation of the title of the play in the TV adaptation allows us to go back to the existing homophony in the English Renaissance between the words "nothing" and "noting", particularly because a great part of the action both in the original play and in the TV adaptation lies on the interest in other people's lives, critique of others, and overhearing, in other words, both are substantially based upon "noting". Perhaps due to being a contemporary rereading, I could not find any association in the television adaptation with the slang "nothing" used in Elizabethan days for "vagina" (WILLIAMS, 1997, p.219), to imply that a woman has "nothing" between her legs. As in the Shakespearean play, the film does bring into the scene strong and determined women, who are able to overcome difficulties with dignity and pride.

That fact becomes quite ironical, for it was precisely the subtle lewd play with words, which stands out from the title of this comedy, that sparked my curiosity to observe the use of the transgressing lexicon to refer to language plays around cuckoldry, female infidelity, and women's physical

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anatomy in the BBC adaptation *Much Ado About Nothing*. Therefore, my interest here is mainly to present the ways through which the film deals with lewd language.

In this adaptation, the spectator comes across a TV news-broadcasting studio, located in the Wessex region, England, where the discordant Benedick Taylor and Beatrice Evans are the anchors, Hero the weathergirl, and Claudio is Claude, the sports commentator. Leonato, Governor of Messina, is adapted into Leonard, the program director; Don John becomes Don, visual effects manager, whose anger after being sacked due to incompetence triggers the breaking up of Hero and Claude, his rival. Margaret and Ursula, the waiting-gentlewomen attending on Hero, become stage-hands in the adaptation, and Dogberry becomes Mr. Berry, the hilarious security officer of the TV building who, assisted by a "boy", will reveal Don's deceptive plot.

The adaptation preserves some of the characteristics of a Shakespearean comedy, such as the multiple plots — Don's plot to separate Hero and Claude on one hand *versus* the attempts of other characters to bring Beatrice and Benedick together. It also erases some characters, such as Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon; Antonio, Leonato's brother; Balthazar, a servant to Don Pedro; Borachio and Conrade; the Headborough Verges; Friar Francis, and the Sexton. The adaptation preserves another feature of a Shakespearean comedy, that of characters' disguising, which we can clearly see at a party held at Leonard's house to which Beatrice comes dressed as Elizabeth I, and Benedick as a crusade knight. On the other hand, the adaptation adds lines as well as scenes, some of which have a clear intention to keep a dialogue with William Shakespeare, such as Beatrice dressed as Elizabeth I at Leonard's party, and the reading of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, intended to be read by Benedick at the occasion of Hero's wedding; the adaptation also eliminates some scenes, such as Hero's death, and her subsequent marriage to Claudio.

Lewdness as it is the case in the Shakespearean text remains subtle in this adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and when it does occur it is either wrapped in a joke, body language, or by means of an allusion.

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Right on the first scenes of the film we find both Beatrice Evans and Benedick Taylor — in separate houses — excitedly getting ready for a supposed amorous encounter. We are led to believe that both are off to a romantic weekend together that will start with a fancy dinner at an expensive hotel restaurant. In these scenes of anticipation, we see Benedick stretching the waistline of his trousers to spray deodorant in the front part of his underpants, thus confirming he is off to some sexual fun.

It so happens that Benedick never shows up, and Beatrice is left at the dinner table alone. A disappointed audience sees the waiter approaching, and saying quite humbly, as he handles her a bottle of wine: "The gentleman said to tell you: no hard feelings."

In the next scene we find Beatrice, three years later, at a news-broadcasting studio, as the anchor of the news program she shares with Fleming, a character who only shows up at the beginning of the film. Fleming is a middle-aged man, who throws inconvenient sexist remarks to Beatrice such as "I'm salivating at the thought of going somewhere with you over the weekend", after she brings news on a cheese festival in the neighborhood, or "I just don't like the thought of an attractive, sensual woman in the prime of her life sitting alone night after night." Beatrice harshly rejects Fleming's remarks by saying—"if you ever touch any part of my body, with any part of your body either on air or off, or even in your imagination, then I swear I'm…" The rest of the threat is inaudibly whispered to his ear, and is followed by Beatrice's emphatic conclusion: "Is that clear?" We are led to conclude that she might have made a lewd and harsh comment so as to put an end to Fleming's sexist remarks and harassment.

Sometime later, Leonard, the station manager, carefully informs Beatrice of Fleming's redundancy, and adds she will be joined by a replacement—Benedick Taylor. After some reluctance, she ends up agreeing with having the new partner, and as a result the audience will be presented with a tug of war between the two characters, just as in the Shakespearean text.

As the new pair is getting ready to start the show, Ursula, one of the stage-hands, gets physically very close to Benedick, in a provocative

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movement of her body, in order to fix his tie, and gets his comment with a flavor of an innuendo: "Tug harder if you want."

In this atmosphere of longtime colleagues who were coming back to work together, a new couple is joined: Hero, the weathergirl and Leonard's daughter, and Claude, the sports commentator, fall in love, and soon invite everybody for a costume party at Leonard's, under the excuse of welcoming the new team of professionals. This scene builds a clear dialogue with Act II of the Shakespearean text, when Leonato holds a masked ball to celebrate the end of the war, while the engagement of Claudio and Hero is arranged, and Don Pedro's brother, the bitter Don John, seeks a way to spoil the general joy and happiness. It is at this gathering that, in the BBC version, Beatrice comes dressed as Queen Elizabeth I, Ursula and Margaret come as sexy cats, and the romantic couple Hero and Claude announces their engagement, under the jealous eyes of a bitter and petty Don who comes dressed as the Joker in the Batman film. On the occasion, refusing to accept the couple's happiness, Don starts plotting to make Claude believe Hero has cheated on him. From then on, Don will be closely watched by Mr. Berry, the over-responsible and over-careful warden, who requires from all TV employees the daily presentation of their IDs, regardless of their position or the number of years they have been working at the building.

Back to the studio, the women organize a hen night before Hero's wedding. At the nightclub they comment about Benedick's positive features in a clear intention to attract Beatrice's interest: ". . . a bit dirty," says one with some enthusiasm; "I like the way he stares at your breast, when he's talking to you," says the other. Those comments seem to adapt more subtly the lewd dialogue between Hero and Margaret sometime before Hero's wedding ceremony, in Act III, scene iv (Shakespeare 1988):

> Hero: My heart is exceeding heavy.
>
> Margaret: 'Twill be heavier soon by the weight of a man.
>
> Hero: Fie upon thee! Art thou not ashamed?
>
> Margaret: Of what lady? Of speaking honourably? […] (Honour = female chastity; pun on the element 'on' (honour) = lying, in sexual intercourse)

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Meanwhile, all tricks based on hearsay, or should I say, on noting at the studio and at the nightclub have been used in order to bring Benedick and Beatrice together, leading both to turn totally puzzled by the recent revealing fact that one is in love with the other. Flabbergasted, Beatrice finds an excuse to talk to Benedick in his dressing room at the TV studio. As he opens the door, she says in a baffled tone: "You're driving me crazy." To that, Benedick replies cunningly: "Well, if you could just wait until I put my trousers on…"

The weekend of Hero and Claude's wedding comes, under an atmosphere of joy and enthusiasm, when all friends gather in a hotel the night before the ceremony. Here, we find the couple Benedick and Beatrice, who are placed at adjoining rooms, and take their time to rehearse Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, which Benedick plans to read as best man at the wedding. Beatrice, the maid of honour, knows the poem well, and as he reads the lines, she anticipates and interprets each one of them, turning the scene into a confession of love.

> Let me not to the marriage of true minds
> Admit impediments. Love is not love
> Which alters when it alteration finds,
> Or bends with the remover to remove.
> O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
> That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
> It is the star to every wand'ring bark,
> Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
> Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
> Within his bending sickle's compass come;
> Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
> But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
> If this be error and upon me prov'd,
> I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.
> (Shakespeare 1988)

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The rehearsal of the reading ends up revealing an adult couple, that acts like two insecure adolescents, who are clearly fond of each other.

As in the Shakespearean dramatic text, on the occasion of the ceremony, Claude publicly disgraces Hero under accusations of her being an unfaithful slut, an attitude which is a result of Don's plotting against the lovers.

Little does Don know though that he has been followed closely by Mr. Berry, who publicly reveals the villain's lies and tricks. Mr. Berry's incriminating information collected through the filming of the video cameras, and through his careful watch of people in the building, is revealed to everyone who is under the shocking experience of the frustrated wedding ceremony.

Because the film shifts the play to our contemporaneity, it discards Hero's death, and her subsequent marriage to Claudio. In this BBC adaptation, Hero the once sweet weathergirl turns into an opinionated woman who does not accept Claude's excuses, and apologies for having disrespected her in church. In a scene where she shows herself as an empowered woman, she coldly hears him informing her he is leaving his job, and moving to London. Eventually, they seem to have repaired their friendship, as we can see from the way they look at each other at Beatrice and Benedick's wedding, to which they are respectively best man and maid of honour.

Although Hero refuses to consider marrying Claude, the end of the film is left ambiguous in terms of both her future, and Claude's.

To make a long story short, the BBC adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* is certainly marked by an accentuated use of wit that generates humor, but I would not say that it maintains the lewdness of wordplays and innuendos one finds in the Shakespearean text. In general, I would say the film tends to follow a polyphonic creativity, and to preserve courteous decorum, perhaps due to being a TV show to be enjoyed at family settings.

I did not intend to build a critique of the BBC's adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a work of art (in the sense of applying value to it), nor do I expect other viewers to respond to the TV rereading the same way I did. With that in mind, I prefer to close this article with one of Barbara Herrnstein

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Smith's clever remarks by saying that "if poetic value is not like true love, it may be a little bit like true lust" (Smith 1979, p.12).

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Abstract

The Shakespearean comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-9) was written at a time when the codes of rudeness, obscenity and indecency were socially less stringent. In the sixteenth century England, some tolerance prevailed towards the obscene language, here understood as the transgressing lexicon to refer to sexuality inserted by the playwright in his production by means of innuendos, metaphors, allusions and puns. Nevertheless, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the attempts to moralize the plays for the sake of decorum and rectitude, obscenity was eliminated from the Shakespearean work, which had then become canonical. After all, it was argued that the use of lower forms of language had been due to the playwright's desire to please less refined audiences. If on one hand that sort of action prevented Shakespeare's work from being completely excluded from school textbooks and family shelves, on the other, it led those who translate and adapt his works to ignore expressions with which Shakespeare built his lewd comical images. This article explores the choices for adapting the lewd play with words in the BBC adaptation *Much Ado About Nothing*, an episode broadcasted in 2005, under Brian Percival's direction, as part of the project *Shakespeare Retold*. I am particularly interested in the way Percival, in his role of director, handled the lewd innuendos, metaphors, allusions and puns found in the Shakespearean text in his rereading to be viewed at spectators' homes, in many instances, in a family setting.

Key-words: Lewd language; William Shakespeare; Translation; *Much Ado about Nothing*

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Resumo

A comédia shakespeariana *Muito barulho por nada* (1598-9) foi escrita em uma época em que os códigos de lascívia, obscenidade e indecência eram socialmente menos rigorosos. Na Inglaterra do século XVI, prevalecia certa tolerância em relação à linguagem obscena, aqui entendida como aquela que é veiculada por meio de um léxico transgressor, para se referir à sexualidade inserida pelo dramaturgo em sua produção, por meio de insinuações, metáforas, alusões e trocadilhos. Nos séculos XVIII e XIX, no entanto, com as tentativas de moralizar as peças em nome do decoro e da boa educação, a obscenidade foi eliminada da produção shakespeariana, que então tornara-se canônica. Afinal, argumentava-se que o uso de formas inferiores de linguagem se devia ao desejo do dramaturgo de agradar a públicos menos refinados. Se por um lado esse tipo de ação impediu que a obra de Shakespeare fosse completamente excluída dos livros escolares e estantes das casas de família, por outro, levou aqueles que traduzem e adaptam suas obras a ignorar expressões com as quais Shakespeare construiu suas imagens cômicas chulas. Este artigo explora as opções de adaptação do jogo obsceno de palavras na adaptação da BBC, *Much Ado About Nothing*, episódio transmitido em 2005, sob a direção de Brian Percival, como parte do projeto *Shakespeare Retold*. Estou particularmente interessada na maneira como Percival, na condição de diretor, lidou com as insinuações, metáforas, alusões e trocadilhos obscenos encontrados no texto de Shakespeare, em sua releitura feita para ser assistida no espaço doméstico, em muitos casos, um ambiente familiar.

Palavras-chave: Linguagem chula; William Shakespeare; Tradução; *Muito barulho por nada*

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