

**Rhonda V. Wilcox**

**Joss Whedon's Translation of  
Shakespeare's *Much Ado About  
Nothing*: Historical Double Consciousness, Reflections,  
and Frames**



[1] If I had had to guess, a few years ago, what Shakespeare play Joss Whedon would film, I do think I might have guessed *Much Ado About Nothing*. The very fact that I might spend time pondering such a question at all, of course, shows that I am an admirer of Whedon, and, like many of his admirers, I know that he had, for years, invited cast members of his TV series to his home for Shakespeare readings—something a few folks among the wider public have come to know more recently. I am also an English professor who teaches Shakespeare, and for many decades I have been a fan of *Much Ado's* witty, verbally dueling romantic duo Beatrice and Benedick (starting, I think, at least as early as Sam Waterston and Kathleen Widdoes' Beatrice and Benedick in the 1973 television production). Whedon filmed his version in 2011. When writing the introduction for *Reading Joss Whedon*, which I coedited with Tanya Cochran, Cynthea Masson, and David Lavery, I outlined some of the major reasons I saw his choice to do Shakespeare—and, in particular, this Shakespeare—as appropriate: The wit of the language; the note of human darkness and violence in the narrative that threads through the comedy; and the direct acknowledgment of gender issues are all qualities that Whedon himself has since said he found appealing (Montagne; Orr). Whedon's film has some of the most heavily slapstick Shakespeare to be found on screen, yet it also invites some of the subtlest reactions as well. Whedon is known for expecting attention from his audience, and this production is no exception. Whedon's incarnation of *Much Ado* involves two different kinds of translation: the translation from past to present, and the translation from play to film. I want to discuss, first, the question of how Whedon's modern setting of the 400-year-old play works; and second, I want to discuss the way he makes use of filmic techniques to convey themes Shakespeare places directly in the dialogue of the play, some of which Whedon has chosen to leave out (as does, I think, every major movie version of a Shakespeare play except

Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*). Whedon's use of silence and speech; of framing, photographs, masks, reflections, mirrors, and memories—all of these relate to an idea of human deception versus communication that inhabits the whole of the film and the play. But before considering the translation from play to film, let us contemplate the translation from past to present.

[2] To begin, I will offer a plot summary. Given that the play premiered in 1598 or '99, none of these details should qualify as spoilers. As Samuel Crowe says, there are "two plots of *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John's scheme to drive Claudio and Hero apart, and Don Pedro's to bring Beatrice and Benedick together" (190). The play is set in the home of the wealthy Leonato, the father of the young woman named Hero and the uncle of the slightly older Beatrice. As the play begins, we learn that the even more powerful Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, is coming for an extended visit after a successful military action. He brings with him his younger allies and friends, Claudio and the slightly older Benedick—as well as Don Pedro's brother Don John, with whom he has been in conflict until just before the play starts—and Don John's own entourage. Noted Shakespearean C. L. Barber refers to *Much Ado* as one of the festive comedies: Don Pedro's visit is meant to be a vacation, a time of freedom not unlike the filming of *Much Ado* was for Whedon after the almost military strategies required to make *The Avengers*. (He did make the movie over twelve days of shooting during his supposed vacation time after principal filming of *The Avengers* was completed, and before final editing [Montagne].)

[3] During this festival time, the *Much Ado* characters replace fighting with courtship. For two of them, it is hard to tell the difference. Leonato refers to the "merry war" between Beatrice and Benedick (1.1.57). As Beatrice tells us in the first scene of the second act, she and Benedick have had a relationship in the past (whether brief or long, the play leaves unstated); now the two of them spar verbally every time they meet—as all the other characters know. Technically, Beatrice and Benedick are not the lovers of the main plot—that would be the ingénues, Hero and Claudio—but for centuries audiences have known better. (King Charles I, in the seventeenth century, famously crossed out the play's title in his copy and wrote in "Beatrice and Benedick" [Barton 361].) As Whedon himself and many critics have noted, Beatrice and Benedick are the progenitors of many a modern romantic comedy couple, perhaps most notably those of the 1930s screwball comedies (Montagne). In any case, there are two pairs of lovers involved in two kinds of deception. The young Claudio decides he wants to marry Hero, the boss's daughter

of an associated firm, Leonato's. Claudio's own boss, Don Pedro, has a malcontent for a brother—Don John, who detests the upstart Claudio and plots to ruin the marriage plans by convincing everyone that Hero is a slut.

[4] Before this unpleasant development ripens, while the friends are enjoying a long house party, Don Pedro gets Leonato, Claudio, and Hero to agree to trick the warring Beatrice and Benedick into avowing love for each other in spite of the fact that both declare themselves to be, in Whedon's words, "confirmed bachelors" (Montagne; cf. Branagh xi). Thus (again) the two brothers, Don Pedro and Don John, both practice deception and manipulation, one for benevolent and one for malevolent purposes. Don Pedro and company accomplish the uniting of Beatrice and Benedick by a very simple deception—by staging a conversation for each of them, in which their friends discuss the fact that the other is actually in love, but would never confess it. The wicked Don John stages an off-stage encounter between one of his men and Hero's maid, in Hero's clothes, to convince Claudio that Hero has been unfaithful on the night before her wedding. Interestingly, it is the pain of Hero's public rejection by Claudio that brings Beatrice and Benedick, in their shared sympathy for Hero, to confess their feelings for each other.—Beatrice, in fact, is so furious that Claudio has publicly shamed her cousin Hero at her wedding that Beatrice wants to kill Claudio—and insists that since, as a woman, she cannot challenge Claudio to a duel of honor, then Benedick should do it in her place, if he really loves her. After initial resistance, Benedick agrees.

[5] The whole play could easily totter towards tragedy except for Shakespeare's clown characters, the night watchmen Dogberry and Verges and their associates, who overhear Don John's men describing the trick about Hero's unfaithfulness. Just as Don Pedro and Don John are foils for each other, so too the linguistic wit of Beatrice and Benedick is set off by the linguistic ineptitude of the clowns Dogberry and Verges; they are so vague and confusing that their report delays the truth from reaching the others till after the wedding, where Claudio furiously denounces Hero. When her own father turns on her, Hero faints—and the priest at the wedding, after the other guests leave, recommends that the family pretend she is dead, hoping to sway the public's sympathy while the family tries to work out the truth. During this interval Benedick, who has been looked on as something of a joker, presents his very serious dueling challenge to Claudio and tells Don Pedro he must quit his company—in effect, forsaking all of his soldier buddies to ally himself with Beatrice. The clownish night watchmen do make the truth known in

time to prevent any dueling. The horrified Claudio, who thinks Hero has dropped dead, offers to make any recompense he can, and Leonato tells him he has a spare niece that he wants Claudio to marry (not Beatrice, but someone who looks a lot like Hero, he says). Of course, behind the bridal veil will be the genuine Hero; and after some last-minute gulps and stumbles, the two pairs of lovers finally unite. The play ends, as all Shakespeare plays originally did, with a dance.

[6] Like Director Michael Almereyda, with his 2000 Ethan Hawke *Hamlet*, and Baz Luhrmann, with his 1996 Leonardo di Caprio + Clair Danes *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, Joss Whedon decided to set his *Much Ado About Nothing* in modern times using American actors. As Whedon says, "part of the glory of *Much Ado* is how modern it is" (Orr). And as Dara Stevens says in *Slate*, "Right there in Act 1, Scene 1, [Beatrice, played by Amy Acker, and Benedick, played by Alexis Denisof] fall into what the audience recognizes as screwball dialogue, 400 years *avant la lettre*. They can't stand each other, so they must be destined for love." Naturally, Whedon wants his audience to be able to connect with the text. I want to discuss two seemingly contradictory elements of the modernization: both the ways Whedon smoothes the temporal transition, and the way some parts could still jar—and how I think both of these, the smoothness and the jarring, can work to good effect.

[7] There is a moment, late in the film, which drew audible laughter from seven of eight Atlanta audiences I observed, and which definitely was *not* meant for humor in the original Shakespeare. In the second and last wedding scene, when Claudio has come to make recompense by marrying Leonato's supposedly unknown 'niece,' Whedon has him pause between two lines of guests (far fewer are present for this second wedding). One of them is an African-American woman who has appeared repeatedly in the film, starting with Act 1, scene 1, as one member of the business team on holiday at Leonato's. When at the second wedding Leonato asks if Claudio is indeed determined to marry the mysterious niece, Claudio declares, with the African-American woman at a ninety degree angle to him and centered on screen, "I'll hold my mind, were she an Ethiopie" (5.4.38). The grimace on Benedick's face at this moment confirms the audience's response to Claudio's cluelessness (and it must be acknowledged that Claudio is clueless in *many* ways).<sup>1</sup> Here is a joke that is Whedon's, not Shakespeare's, and it is the result of the film's updating. But surely most of us are happy that this line could no longer be delivered seriously in the way that it was for Shakespeare's audience.

[8] This moment made me think of W. E. B. Du Bois's term "double consciousness," which he used to describe African-Americans' simultaneously holding in mind the view of them by racist whites and their own consciousness of self (8-9). I certainly do not mean to claim any kind of exact equivalence, but I think that in the film there is a kind of historical double consciousness that applies to race and, much more notably, gender. I would also like to ask that we consider the concept of cognitive dissonance, a term used in both psychology and science fiction, among other places—a term that refers to the difficulty of holding in mind two contradictory concepts at once. And as many of you may recall, F. Scott Fitzgerald regarded the "ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function" as "the test of a first-rate intelligence" (69).

[9] When an audience enters the theater to see a film of a Shakespeare play, they are well aware that they will be dealing with a text that is several centuries old. As soon as Whedon's first images hit the screen, it is clear that this setting is modern, and it soon becomes apparent that the film is set in America, and so the audience is already aware that some mental bridging will be required. Coleridge would remind us that there is, for good art, a willing suspension of disbelief. Furthermore, Whedon did some of that suspension-bridging for us by means of (among other things) cuts of wording and the reassignment of lines from one character to another; there are only a couple of words in the script that he himself inserted. But he has, for example, deleted the character of Leonato's older brother Antonio and silently transformed him to Leonato's business aide.<sup>2</sup> Modern audiences might have thought it a bit unusual for the older brother to live with Leonato, but as Whedon says, the aide clearly shows that "Leonato is an important man because he always has this other guy with him" (Orr). I have never heard a peep from critics or audience members about the fact that the characters mention "Lords" and "Princes" in what is plainly Southern California; we know it's Shakespeare, and we don't blink. The fact that men in suits and ties refer to having just finished a military action had one critic complaining (Sneed), but as Richard Gess says, it's easy enough to imagine them as NSA types or (as Ensley F. Guffey has suggested) Blackwater executives.

[10] The historical double consciousness or cognitive dissonance becomes more strained when issues of gender arise (which, I will note, happily suggests that there have been significant changes in this area since Shakespeare's day). I want to focus on three illustrations of these historical dissonances and comment on how I

think they work in the film, before moving on to the second section of this essay, about a different kind of communication in the film.

[11] The first of the three major historical dissonances (as I see it) is Claudio's secondhand courtship of Hero, which is conducted for him by his boss, Don Pedro. Scholars have noted that the two courtships in the play are clearly meant as foils: Claudio and Hero's relationship is very traditional, and Beatrice and Benedick's is very unconventional for their time (see Barton 362-63). Thus we hear Claudio ask if Hero is Leonato's only heir (a perfectly normal consideration of her financial status), and he accepts Don Pedro's offer to speak to Hero and Leonato for him, to arrange the marriage. Claudio mentions having liked Hero earlier, but he does not take it upon himself to speak directly to her. This *can* be interpreted as not only traditional but lacking in feeling. However, Shakespeare's words allow Claudio to be represented as naïve and shy when speaking to women, and most productions present him this way. Furthermore, Whedon adds a dose of alcohol to almost every scene of his *Much Ado*, and it is presented as affecting the action. As Whedon has said, "there's certain things in this movie that just don't make sense unless the characters are super drunk" ("Joss Whedon and Cast"). You will recall that Don Pedro, Claudio's boss, is the one who arranges for Beatrice and Benedick to recognize their feelings for each other; he is also the boss that speaks to Hero for Claudio. Actor Reed Diamond's guitar-slinging, past-his-prime Don Pedro seems to be vicariously enjoying all the youthful coupling in the story; in fact, at one point he drunkenly proposes to Beatrice himself; and it is one of the most poignant moments in the film when we see him, the wistful older bachelor, left alone at the end and trying valiantly not to look sad.

[12] In the Act 1 scene with Claudio, wine glass in hand, Don Pedro speaks of how he'll woo Hero for Claudio, and the look of slightly alarmed confusion on actor Fran Kranz's face, as Claudio, helps us to bridge that historical divide. What are you going to tell your tipsy but extremely powerful boss who's trying to do you a favor? Of course, most of us can think of some ways even the shy Claudio could have gotten around this problem, but as Kenneth Branagh says in his own book on *Much Ado*, "a strong suspension of disbelief is necessary when it comes to the plot of *Much Ado*" (xii). Claudio's insecurity and gullibility make it possible for the cruel Don John to briefly convince Claudio that Don Pedro has gone after Hero for himself. Furthermore, this incident foreshadows Claudio's gullibility about Hero's unfaithfulness. But for now, let me say that Reed Diamond and Fran Kranz's acting,

as directed by Whedon, goes some way towards making palatable the idea that Claudio would accept his boss's kind-hearted but self-important method of "helping" the romance.

[13] The biggest problem of historical dissonance comes in the issue of Hero's virginity as reason for breaking off the arranged but desired marriage. Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* (84) and Dara Stevens of *Slate*, among others, have complained of the problem. Stevens, for one, notes that the silent scene Whedon added to begin the film, showing that Beatrice and Benedick have slept together (Whedon's version of the earlier relationship that Shakespeare has Beatrice mention)—this scene is "hard to square" with the scene of Claudio's rejection of Hero at the altar. Again, I think that both the historical bridging and the dissonance are worth noting. Shakespeare has Don John tell Claudio, before the wedding, that "the lady is disloyal"—an appropriate term for unfaithfulness; and as Whedon explains, "the first time I saw a production of the play, I didn't really understand the whole idea that she had to be a virgin; I understood that she had to not be sleeping with someone else the night before her wedding. Which, you know, I still believe, in modern times" (Orr). I think this interpretation works very well until the wedding scene itself, with the public shaming of Hero, which moves from talking about her unfaithfulness to very publicly talking about her virginity (or supposed lack thereof). Even here, Whedon has inserted a visual sign for those with sharp eyes (or for those who, like me, have seen the film eight times): in the scene when Hero is dressing for the wedding with cousin Beatrice and her maid and friend Margaret, Hero is wearing a very large ring in the shape of a cross. In the scene when a night-time candle-lit elegy is sung to the supposedly dead Hero and she looks on unseen, the sparkling cross on her finger is even more visible. (Those who know *Firefly* well will recall that there is a similarly subtle use of a cross in the pilot of that series.) Whedon thus gives the audience the opportunity to imagine that Hero, despite her wealth and convivial drinking, comes from a family which is traditional in terms of sexual mores.

[14] Nonetheless, the public castigation of Hero at the wedding is difficult to accept if we want an exact translation into modern Western culture. We no longer, thankfully, see a woman's loss of virginity as the equivalent of death; and the idea that a woman has lost her honor is no longer restricted to the idea of losing her sexual purity (at least not for most of us in this area of the world). But audiences who know this is Shakespeare know that our times are different. In fact, this moment of the film can help us, in some corner of our minds, take pleasure in the

fact that times are different. I think that for some members of the audience a very complex response is happening here. On the one hand, we are making use of all Whedon's help to equate the events to the modern; on the other hand, we perceive the dissonance in a way that forwards one of Whedon's major themes, his awareness of gender inequality. The term "historical double consciousness" might cover what is going on here; cognitive dissonance does not, to me, quite work. Thinking of the musical metaphor of the word "dissonance," I considered, then rejected, the term "cognitive harmony"; but I think—again following the musical metaphor—that the term "cognitive counterpoint" might cover what is happening in the film at this point. Whedon's use of the "were she an Ethiopie" line later in the film is certainly a purposeful example of what I would call cognitive counterpoint or historical double consciousness. Whether or not the scene works for all viewers in this way, I would not presume to declare; but for some of us, it does.

[15] Before moving to the third major illustration, I want to mention a sort of subset to Hero's wedding story that I have not seen any current critics comment on, part of the pretense for the second wedding. Claudio is supposed to marry, sight unseen, a cousin of Hero's. Most of us know that there are societies which still engage in arranged marriages, but they presumably do not populate Southern California (at least not in large numbers). Even if Claudio is making the marriage to atone for Hero's death, what about the anonymous young woman he is supposed to be marrying? She just hops to it because Uncle Leo says so? Not even Tony Soprano would expect such obedience. But by this point in the story, most of us are so invested in the happy ending that Claudio's failure to consider the nonexistent substitute bride causes little more than a flicker.

[16] What to me is the third major historical dissonance or counterpoint does not come in the Hero-Claudio plot per se but comes when the Beatrice and Benedick plot intersects the Hero and Claudio one. After the public shaming of Hero, Benedick significantly does not leave with his male buddies but instead stays with Beatrice and her cousin, seeing how distressed both are, and calming Leonato (see Everett 67 on the importance of this choice). Immediately after this scene of true loyalty to Hero on Beatrice's part, Benedick confesses his love to Beatrice. When he asks her if there is anything in the world he can do for her, she says those famous words "Kill Claudio" (4.1.288). I had the good fortune to be in the same audience in which some viewers were not familiar with the story, and so I got to hear them gasp aloud at that line. In this scene, Beatrice expresses her fury at the restrictions of gender that

keep her from confronting Claudio: "O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace" (4.1.304-05). Shakespeare has his Beatrice quite directly confront the gender restrictions of her time; and David Edelstein of *Fresh Air*, Amy Nicholson of *The Village Voice*, Christopher Orr of *The Atlantic*, and others note that Beatrice is a "Whedonesque heroine" (Orr). "It's one of the most important things that Shakespeare ever wrote," Whedon says (Orr). I have written my agreement elsewhere ("Much Ado About Whedon").

[17] Her anger is righteous, but her demand that Benedick kill Claudio is shocking. Unless the audience recognizes the historical idea that Hero's loss of reputation is nearly the equivalent of death, the scene may leave a flavor of Barbara Stanwyck from *Double Indemnity* (1944)—or maybe I should be thinking of gang warfare? In Shakespeare's time, the challenge for the sake of the lady's honor would show Benedick's firm commitment to his love of Beatrice; he has moved past witty words. However, part of my mind is horrified that Beatrice would not just briefly wish for Claudio's death, but also follow up on the progress of the challenge later; and part of my mind is troubled that she would not try to act on some kind of vengeance herself. For me, this is another place in the story where cognitive counterpoint must come into play: I connect to the emotions of the Elizabethan/modern characters, and at the same time I am mercifully conscious of the difference in the gender rules of their world and ours. When Steven Moffat of *Doctor Who* fame modernized *Sherlock Holmes* with Benedict Cumberbatch, he said, "In a way it allows you to see the original stories the way the original reader would have read them—as exciting, cutting edge, contemporary stories, as opposed to these relics they've become" ("Unlocking Sherlock" featurette).<sup>3</sup> For many of us, Joss Whedon has accomplished that with his translation of Shakespeare to the present;<sup>4</sup> but I think the few instances of historical cognitive counterpoint can, for some viewers, add meaning to the text.

[18] The other translation I want to explore is that from play to film. As I said earlier, I want to talk about silence and speech; and I want to talk about framing, photographs, masks, reflections, mirrors, and memories—and some of the ways these work with the theme of deception or communication.

[19] In the fall of 2012, I taught *Much Ado* to a class full of English majors, and the first thing I did, before I assigned them any reading, was to have them turn to Act 2, Scene 1. After Benedick has stalked out, announcing that he "cannot

endure My Lady Tongue" (2.1.259-60), Don Pedro tells Beatrice, "come, you have lost the heart of Signor Benedick" (2.1.261-62), and she replies, "Indeed, my lord, he lent it me awhile, and I gave him use for it—a double heart of his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me with false dice; therefore your grace may well say I have lost it" (2.1.263-66). When I asked the students what this passage meant, all of them confirmed that Beatrice and Benedick had had a prior relationship. Then I let them start reading the play. I could not have been more delighted when Whedon also chose to have his audience confront this backstory first. Just as Branagh did with his *Hamlet*, with the romantic encounters between Hamlet and Ophelia, Whedon chose to show audiences a wordless visual of Beatrice and Benedick's backstory. The very first scene of Whedon's film, before the title, shows us what appears to be the morning after a one-night stand. We see the man's and woman's clothes crumpled together on the floor with empty bottles nearby. We see the man's bare feet—a repeated Whedon trope which serves to remind us of the physicality of the human (often in a sexual context). Having dressed (shoes and all), he sits in a chair, seemingly trying to decide what to do. The woman still lies in the bed, the sheet over her, turned away from him; we can see her open eyes, but he cannot. And as he stops by the door and looks toward her, she closes her eyes, perhaps to avoid forcing him to speak with her. He leaves (he has taken his shoes off once more, apparently to avoid waking her), and she opens her eyes again. A single, lonely note of music plays, as if to express *their* loneliness.<sup>5</sup>

[20] And while speaking of notes, this might be as good a place as any to comment on the Elizabethan pun of Shakespeare's title. Some viewers may know that the word "nothing" would have been recognized as a reference to women's genitals; in fact, some may remember Hamlet's cruel teasing of Ophelia about "nothing" being a fair thing to lie between maids' legs. In other words, *Much Ado About Nothing* also means, to put it politely, *Much Ado About Sex*. Probably fewer would be aware that Elizabethans might pronounce the word N-O-T-H-I-N-G as "not(h)ing"—so that the play is also all about noting—not just musical notes, but also noting in the sense of observing, even spying on, each other (Holland 366). For the rest of the play, Beatrice and Benedick are always noting each other, always remarking on each other.

[21] But for now, please note this: Beatrice and Benedick are two of the most famously verbal characters in the history of literature. Even people who have never read or seen *Much Ado* are familiar with the names of the witty Beatrice and

Benedick. But consider Whedon's brilliance here: in choosing to add a scene which is not in the play, Whedon makes it a *wordless* scene. And that very wordlessness communicates with excruciating clarity the difficulty of becoming genuinely intimate. With beautiful irony and psychological appropriateness, the famously loquacious Beatrice and Benedick *do not speak* in the first scene. Branagh, explains that in his *Much Ado*, he and Emma Thompson (Beatrice) "both wanted to suggest former lovers who had been genuinely hurt by their first encounter" (xi), and Whedon reports that Amy Acker and Alexis Denisof "wanted to play the vulnerability of two people who had opened themselves up to something, but were not ready for it, ran away from it, and then blamed each other" (Orr).<sup>6</sup>

[22] In this opening, wordless scene, Benedick is also beardless. In the next scene, he has a full beard, suggesting that some time has passed; and he and Beatrice are in full sparring mode. The beard, to me, suggests one of the masks that so many of the characters wear in this play—for Benedick, a mask of toughness with Beatrice—a kind of defensive armor. (Benedick also turns the beard into a sign of contempt for Claudio's naiveté when he calls him "Lord Lackbeard" in the challenge scene [5.1.187]). We move from that wordless scene, suggesting their uncertainty, to the whipcrack control of their barbed verbal interplay, which to me suggests how tightly they are each holding on to their emotions, as well as their words. But neither of them can stop talking about each other, and their friends are observant enough to notice. In the scene before Don Pedro conceives his plan to bring Beatrice and Benedick together, Benedick has emphatically declared that he would *never* marry Beatrice. (Who asked him?)

[23] Once Benedick overhears the gentlemen say (for his benefit) that Beatrice loves him, and Beatrice in the next scene overhears the ladies say that Benedick loves her, a curious transformation occurs to communicate their feelings. Their exquisitely controlled verbal language gives way to uncontrolled body language. Their wild pratfalls convey their underlying emotions, too powerful to be held decorously in place. Amy Acker and Alexis Denisof are fortunately skilled at both the enunciation of the dancing dialogue and the enactment of the physical comedy. In the two so-called "gulling" scenes, when Beatrice and Benedick hear of the other's love, eight out of eight audiences burst into delighted laughter. Whedon has noted that Benedick's gulling scene is so effective that Beatrice's scene is sometimes treated as an afterthought, but he wanted to work against that tendency (Montagne). Few will forget Amy Acker's tumble down the stairs when she hears the

ladies say that Benedick loves her. Beatrice literally falls for Benedick. And as Ursula and Hero comment on Beatrice's pride in her own daunting wit, she hits her head, appropriately enough. Benedick, too, literally falls for Beatrice, and later, with his calisthenics, he puts on a mating display for her that any baboon would envy. It is because we know these two proud, intelligent people to be normally so controlled that this wild body language is so hilarious and communicates so much.

[24] So: from silence, to sparring speech, to revelatory body language. Benedick shaves off his beard again, opening himself to emotion. In the succeeding scenes we move to heated words and kisses, as we see that both Beatrice and Benedick are people for whom honor and loyalty matter a great deal. After the Hero and Claudio plot is resolved, when it is time for Benedick to speak up and wed Beatrice, we see him briefly backslide; the witty wordsmith is once more reduced to awkwardness. In speaking to the priest, he has to take two tries to get the word "marriage" out; and in calling for Beatrice to publicly join him, he and she stand before their assembled friends for several long, uncomfortable moments before he can manage to ask, "Do not you love me?"—thus forcing her to be the one to declare herself first (5.4.74). The two almost spark away from each other, but fortunately another form of communication comes into play: Claudio and Hero sneak upstairs, where they have found love sonnets that Beatrice and Benedick have written to each other. When Claudio and Hero drop the sonnets down, Beatrice and Benedick physically tussle as they try to grab the poems—and that moment returns us to the exuberant slapstick that reveals their emotions. The two slide to the ground together in a smiling embrace of each other's unrevealed, silent words.

[25] But my favorite moment of communication comes at the very end of the film. Benedick has insisted that they all have a dance, and the upbeat music and cheerfully loose movements of all the celebrants, even the priest, show the happy freedom of this dance. But the dance melody fades into quiet, non-diegetic music as we focus in on Beatrice and Benedick in the foreground. As in the opening scene of the movie, they are wordless; but this is the wordlessness of perfect communication. Where before they had avoided each other's glance, now they look deeply into each other's eyes, and the expressions on the actors' faces show Beatrice and Benedick's joy. As the screen cuts to black, one perfect musical note crowns the moment, transformed from the note of sadness we heard at the start. Scholars sometimes complain of the fact that the extraordinarily verbal Beatrice is silenced after the kiss of the final wedding scene.<sup>7</sup> But Whedon, in adding the two reflecting silent scenes—

one at the beginning of the film, one at the end—has left Beatrice and Benedick truly speaking to each other at last. As Shakespeare says, “Silence is the perfectest herald of joy” (2.1.289). And as Whedon says, “When we stop talking, we start communicating” (“Hush” commentary).

[26] The two silent scenes that Whedon added, reflecting each other at the beginning and end of the film, bring me to another set of reflections. In my last section, I want to briefly discuss the way Whedon translated one of Shakespeare’s verbal motifs into a visual one for the film. Whedon uses many repeating visual motifs; if you recall, for instance, the shot of Hero’s wedding bouquet dropped on the ground after the first, failed wedding, you may realize that images of flowers—the arranging of them, and the discarding of them—pervade the film. Of course the poets have long connected flowers with love—in their beauty, their blossoming, and their ephemerality. In Beatrice and Benedick’s first speaking scene, Whedon has Beatrice arranging flowers; Benedick takes one from her, and she snatches it back. No need for lengthy analysis of that symbolism. There are more such flower images to be found. There is also the beard motif which I have already spoken about, and which is connected with the motif of masks; recall the scene of the initial revels, the big party. Furthermore, as David Edelstein says, “Almost everyone dons a mask to test someone’s loyalty”—and for other purposes as well—masks both literal and metaphoric.

[27] But in the remainder of this essay, I want to focus on a bit of Shakespeare-to-Whedon translation. And this particular topic relates to that idea of communication again. Shakespeare scholar Peter Holland highlights a scene early in the play that is frequently omitted from productions. In it, Leonato’s older brother Antonio (who does not appear in Whedon’s film) reports to Leonato that a servant has overheard Don Pedro and Claudio talking, and that Prince Don Pedro will be asking for Hero’s hand in marriage. Of course, this servant has a mistaken understanding of the scene in which Don Pedro offers to speak to Hero on Claudio’s behalf—a conversation which the evil Don John’s follower overhears and reports more accurately. The scene adds to the confusion of the play’s plot, so it is easy to understand why directors leave it out. But as Holland says, it is part of the theme of reportage and inaccurate communication. As Holland observes, the audience sees the actual conversation, and then Shakespeare gives us two different, variant reports on it—reminding us of how easily communication can fail (366). These acts are part of the “noting” of the play’s title, a pattern which is also carried out through Beatrice

and Benedick's overhearing of the conversations staged for their benefit, the scene of masked revelry in which the disguised Benedick gets an earful from Beatrice about himself, and more. The little moments of theater within the play keep coming, as Shakespearean Jean E. Howard points out.

[28] These stagings and reportings and overhearings form an auditory pattern which Whedon translates into a visual one truly appropriate for film, with photographs, masks, reflections, mirrors, memories, and framing. The movie subtly reminds us that our perceptions are just that—not absolute truth, but various views of the truth.

[29] Early in the story, for example, the film comes to a complete stop for a moment when Don Pedro arrives at Leonato's home and a still photographer takes a picture of them. The movie *becomes* a still for a second, and we see that the encounter of these two business moguls is a news event; the grip-and-grin shot of the two suited men shaking hands is of the genre created for publicity releases. One element of the photography motif is the division between the public photos and the private, our public faces and our private feelings. The publicity photographer is also the wedding photographer, and there she takes her position in an event somewhere between public and private. (When Claudio denounces Hero at the wedding, the private painfully emerges into the public.) In contrast to wedding photographs, there are framed candid photos in all the characters' bedrooms, signifying their genuine relationships with each other—for example, a laughing snapshot of the two cousins, Hero and Beatrice, in Hero's room. It is one of these candid photos that Benedick holds and gazes at after he has realized he wants to marry Beatrice. Perhaps one of the most delightfully unnerving moments in the film comes when, over midway through, the still photographer turns her camera point-blank at us, the audience. We should realize that we participate in these attempts to grasp reality, these attempts to perceive—and that others are perceiving us. For audience members who sit through and attend to the credits of the movie, Whedon gives another little level of play: the person who acts the part of the photographer in the movie is actually the still photographer for the movie. Relish the metatextual, and check those reality credits at the door.

[30] The question of what is real and what is mental reflection is also raised through literal mirrors and reflections in the film. Before the big party scene, as Hero, her father, and her cousin chat together, Leonato is shown trying on masks

and looking at himself in a mirror held up by his aide. Leonato is a man in a mask in a reflection—appropriately enough for such a power player; and the presence of the aide reminds us of his position. Right after Claudio and Don Pedro celebrate their having induced Benedick to court Beatrice, Claudio backs into a doorway where the troublemaker Don John ominously stands. His shadow falling in one direction and his face reflected in the glass of a picture, John seems to loom toward Claudio and Don Pedro. As Hero dresses for the wedding with her cousin Beatrice and her maids/friends Margaret and Ursula, we see Hero and the young women other than Beatrice reflected in the mirror as they prepare for the wedding. Only after they tease Beatrice about Benedick does she join them in checking her reflection, join them in the mirror shot—and thus also join them in their cheerful view of this social event. After the debacle of the first wedding, Whedon shows a large mirror reflecting Beatrice, sitting alone in tears; Benedick finds her and joins her in the reflection; then the camera follows the two of them into reality together as he declares his love and she at last confesses hers.

[31] These mirrors serve to frame perception, but there are other instances of framing as well. In this film which he shot in his home, Whedon often framed his characters in windows and doors. Surely anyone who has seen the film will remember the views of Benedick through the windows as he reacts to Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio's staged conversation on Beatrice's love for him. Somehow seeing him tumble about outside as we look through the window frame makes it funnier. He seems like a performer in a movie inside the movie. And the civilized behavior of the men standing within the house contrasts with the wild man outside. Shortly after Beatrice has heard Ursula and Hero say that Benedick loves Beatrice, Whedon doubly frames Beatrice: she stands in a doorway looking to the outdoors—as if looking to the place Benedick has just been—but we also see her glowing face through the framing wood and glass of a door, accentuating the moment as one worth memorializing, as a photograph would (which, of course, it is). When she says, as she stands there, that she believes Benedick is worthy, she says she "believe[s] it better than reportingly"—in other words, she feels she knows the real Benedick, not just the report or framed picture of him. The two lovers are also framed in a large window as they confess their love—but they move out of this framing separately, in two different directions, for this is also the scene in which Beatrice insists on and Benedick agrees to the duel. A noteworthy framing in this film comes later, in the famous and charming scene in which Benedick asks Beatrice for which of his bad

qualities she fell in love with him, and she asks for which of her *good* qualities he first suffered love for her. Whedon moves the shot inside from outdoors on their balcony so that we are looking through the French doors/windows at the couple. As they tease each other, they are on opposite sides of the divider in the framing window. But after Benedick has quietly asked, with genuine concern, about first Hero and then Beatrice herself, they move so that the two of them are together, in the same side of the frame. The framing of the two of them together comes when Benedick says to her, "Serve God, love me, and *mend*" (5.2.87). The frame shows us that they are mending indeed.

[32] Whedon thus uses a wide variety of translation techniques so that Shakespeare's own words can speak. Whedon's translation of the past to the present—his choice to modernize the setting—allows us to more easily enter Beatrice and Benedick's world, while at the same time involving us in cognitive counterpoint that highlights some of the social issues. In this area, we grapple with some temporal difficulties. But his translation of the play to the film, it seems to me, involves one moment of aesthetic pleasure after another—in the acting, the music, and the photography. Whedon has said that after he finishes directing the second *Avengers* movie, he is considering creating a ballet (Temple). I doubt it not. I hope for a dance of joy. And after *Much Ado About Nothing*, I think it is likely that, whatever he creates next, more people may realize that they should be noting Whedon, with much ado.<sup>8</sup>

### Works Cited

- Barber, C. L. *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and its Relation to Social Custom*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1959. Print.
- Barton, Anne. "Much Ado About Nothing." In Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 361-65. Print.
- Branagh, Kenneth, dir., adapt. *Hamlet*. Perf. Branagh, Kate Winslet, Derek Jacobi. Castle Rock, 1996. Warner Home Video, 2007. DVD.
- , dir., adapt. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Perf. Branagh, Emma Thompson, Denzel Washington. Renaissance Films / Samuel Goldwyn, 1993. MGM Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.

- . *Much Ado About Nothing by William Shakespeare: Screenplay, Introduction, and Notice on the Making of the Movie*. New York: Norton, 1993. Print.
- Crowe, Samuel. *Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide*. New York: Norton, 2008. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- Edelstein, David. "Whedon's Touch Finds a Match with 'Much Ado.'" *Fresh Air*. Radio. NPR, 14 June 2013. Web. 16 June 2013.
- Everett, Barbara. "Much Ado About Nothing: The Unsociable Comedy." *Much Ado About Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew*. Ed. Marion Wynne-Davies. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001. 51-68. Print. New Casebooks.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "The Crack-Up." 1931. *The Crack-Up*. Ed. Edmund Wilson. New York: New Directions, 1993. Print.
- Gay, Penny. "Much Ado About Nothing: A Kind of Merry War." *Much Ado About Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew*. Ed. Marion Wynne-Davies. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001. 69-102. Print. New Casebooks.
- Gess, Richard. Personal Communication. 25 June 2013.
- Guffey, Ensley. *Joss in June* Conference discussion. Cleveland Community College. Shelby, NC. 29 June 2013.
- Holland, Peter. "Much Ado About Nothing Introduction." In Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing. The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin, 2002. 365-69. Print.
- Howard, Jean E. "Antitheatricality Staged: The Workings of Ideology in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Much Ado About Nothing and The Taming of the Shrew*. Ed. Marion Wynne-Davies. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001. 103-122. Print. New Casebooks.
- Lane, Anthony. "House Parties: 'This Is the End' and 'Much Ado About Nothing.'" *The New Yorker* 24 June 2013: 84-85. Print.
- Moffat, Steven. "Unlocking Sherlock" featurette. *Sherlock*. Season One. Perf. Benedict Cumberbatch, Martin Freeman. BBC, 2010. Warner Home Video, 2010. DVD.

- Montagne, Renee. "Joss Whedon's 'Much Ado.'" *Morning Edition*. Radio. NPR, 6 June 2013. *Monkey See: Pop-Culture News and Analysis from NPR*. NPR. Web. 18 June 2013.
- Nicholson, Amy. "Shakespeare, Comic Books—for Joss Whedon, It's All the Same Thing." *The Village Voice* 29 May 2013. Web. 14 June 2013.
- Orr, Christopher. "Joss Whedon on the 'No Brainer' of Modernizing *Much Ado About Nothing*." *The Atlantic* 7 June 2013. Web. 14 June 2013.
- Scott, A. O. "Arguing Their Way into Love." *The New York Times* 6 June 2013:Weekend Arts 1+. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Much Ado About Nothing*. *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller. New York: Penguin, 2002. 371-400. Print.
- Sneed, Tierney. "How the Whedonverse Does Shakespeare." *US News and World Report* 21 June 2013. Web. 16 June 2013.
- Stevens, Dara. "Much Ado About Nothing: As Bracingly Effervescent as Picnic Champagne." *Slate* 6 June 2013. Web. 11 June 2013.
- Temple, Emily. "Joss Whedon Praises Shakespeare's Female Characters, Wants to Make a Ballet About a Library." *Flavorwire* 31 May 2013. Web. 22 July 2013.
- Whedon, Joss. "'Hush' Commentary." *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Chosen Collection*. Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.---, dir., adapt. *Much Ado About Nothing*. Perf. Amy Acker, Alexis Denisof, Nathan Fillion. Bellwether / Lionsgate, 2013. Film.
- . "Without Further Ado: An Interview with Joss Whedon." *Much Ado About Nothing: A Film by Joss Whedon*. London: Titan, 2013. 13-32. Print.
- , et al. "Joss Whedon and Cast at the World Premiere of *Much Ado About Nothing*." *Nik at Nite*. Nikki Stafford. 9 Sept. 2012. Web. 24 Mar. 2014.
- Wilcox, Rhonda V. "Much Ado About Whedon." *Reading Joss Whedon*. Ed. Rhonda V. Wilcox et al. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2014, forthcoming. Print.

---

**Notes**

---

<sup>1</sup> In the question and answer session after the Brooklyn premiere, Whedon compared Claudio's behavior to that of the character Michael Scott of the television series *The Office* (presumably for this audience he referenced the performance of Steve Carell in the U. S. series, 2005-2013). My thanks to Mary Ellen Iatropoulos for calling this comparison to my attention. In the introductory material for the screenplay published later in 2013, Whedon states that Malika Williams, who plays the woman, noted the Michael Scott connection just before he was about to suggest it to her ("Without" 29).

<sup>2</sup> Whedon says the aide was "Frankensteined out of two messengers and a trace of [the singer] Balthazar" (Orr). He has also noted the choice to omit the older brother ("Without" 18).

<sup>3</sup> The *Sherlock* series was created by Moffatt and Mark Gatiss, who plays Mycroft Holmes.

<sup>4</sup> "Bracingly modern," A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* calls it (Weekend Arts 1).

<sup>5</sup> Another separate musical note plays as the scene shifts. My thanks to David Kociemba for this observation.

<sup>6</sup> Penny Gay argues that Judi Dench originated this interpretation insofar as Beatrice's character is concerned (90).

<sup>7</sup> See Gay's commentary on Beatrice's final silence, when her mouth is shut by a kiss (70). Gay's discussion includes a positive perspective, noting that Beatrice herself has in parallel earlier suggested that Hero shut Claudio's mouth with a kiss.

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Tamara Wilson for her advice on Shakespeare research and to Dale Koontz and Ensley Guffey for inviting me to present the keynote address of which this essay is in the main comprised (at Joss in June, Cleveland Community College, Shelby NC, 29 June 2013).