"Good lord, for alliance": Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing*

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Mots clés: Shakespeare, *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien*, Whedon, réseaux sociaux, Branagh, surveillance, photographe

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The latest major entry in recent screen Shakespeare, Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* poses an immediate conundrum for the critic: how best to contextualize the film? Should we situate Whedon's *Much Ado* in the history of Hollywood screen comedy and view it as a welcome return to the roots of the recently neglected romcom genre (Hornaday, 2013a)? For many reviewers, the film's black-and-white photography and tart repartee seemed irresistibly to evoke memories of classic screwball comedy. In his glowing review for the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott suggests that Whedon's *Much Ado* "recalls the classic romantic sparring of the studio era" (Scott, 2013); Amy Acker's performance as Beatrice reminds Philip French of *The Observer* of screwball performances by Katherine Hepburn, Myrna Loy and Carole Lombard, and Alexis Denisof compares to Cary Grant and Clark Gable. Whedon himself may have set this sort of comparison in motion by identifying Billy Wilder and Preston Sturges as influences, though these are screwball directors associated with rather darker-themed versions of the genre. Alternatively, should we take a fan-oriented approach and situate this *Much Ado* within the quirky canon of its cult auteur Joss Whedon, what has come to be known as the "Whedonverse"? This interpretive strategy is supported by the fact that Whedon tends to work with many of the same actors across his many projects, a practice that actively invites cross-referencing.[1] Might the romantic reconciliation between Beatrice and Benedick in

[1] Whedon also favors certain themes (strong female characters, group camaraderie, the vulnerability of love to tragic chance, the trials of adolescence and young adulthood) and techniques (twists upon established pop genres, witty banter, ensemble casts, sudden shifts in tone from comic to tragic, a penchant for unexpectedly killing off main characters, and an ironic but not cynical self-consciousness). The Whedon canon has provoked an impressive body of scholarship: see, for examples, Wilcox, Kaveney, Wilcox and Lavery, Kowalski and Kreider, and Mills, Morehead and Parker. *Whedonology* offers a fairly complete overview of the state of "Whedon studies."

Much Ado be seen as a redemption of the tragically broken relationship between Fred and Wesley on the series *Angel*, particularly since both sets of lovers are played by the same actors?[2] Might we read the dollhouse next to Benedick as he speaks of his commitment to bachelorhood as a sly reference to Whedon's short-lived *Dollhouse*, a series about false identities? Yet one more possibility is the tried-and-true performance criticism gambit of situating Whedon's film within the performance history of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and especially in relationship to Kenneth Branagh's 1994 film adaptation. The challenge here is that Whedon claims explicitly not to have attended to that performance history and to have avoided direct reference to Branagh's version (though he acknowledges having studied the film); what's more, the origins of the film in amateur rather than professional performance would seem to complicate such an interpretive approach. In what follows, I want to place Whedon's *Much Ado* in the more general context of recent mainstream screen adaptation of Shakespeare, in order to assess its relationship to the dominant adaptational style of the past two decades, what we might dub the "Branagh style." My primary interest is not in comparing Whedon's *Much Ado* to Branagh's approach to the same material, valuable though such a comparison might be. Rather, by examining the relationship between the circumstances of the film's production and Whedon's approach to Shakespeare's play, I want to trace how Whedon's *Much Ado* recalibrates the ideological aim of "the Branagh style," and in the process reconsiders the recent cultural project of adapting Shakespeare to the mass-market screen.

As I've argued elsewhere (Lanier, 2002), Branagh's adaptational approach might best be understood as a coordinated aesthetic and ideological program of cinematic "popularization." At the level of form, the "Branagh style" aims to purge Shakespeare of its associations with both the theater and art film by embracing the conventions of contemporary cinematic realism.[3] Shakespeare is reshaped to accommodate the conventions of modern film genres: Branagh recasts *Henry V* as a coming-of-age action picture, *Much Ado* as a Tuscan holiday romcom, *Hamlet* as a melodrama with moments of Hammer horror, *Love's Labour's Lost* as an old-fashioned Hollywood musical, *As You Like It* as a generic mélange spiced up with the iconography of ninja films. With the notable exception of *Henry V*, Branagh has preferred to set his

[2] Whedon himself entertains this possibility on his DVD commentary, though he claims to have recognized this only well after the fact, after several viewings of the film at festivals.
[3] For a general discussion of screen Shakespeare and the cinematic realist mode see Jorgens, 1998, 19-21.

productions in eras "distant enough to allow the language to work without the clash of period anachronisms" (Branagh, 1993, xiv) but not so distant as to seem historically remote. His productions fall comfortably, in other words, within the conventions of heritage cinema. To accord with contemporary cinematic practice, Branagh tends to quicken the pace of action and heighten the emotional volatility of the characters. Shakespearean language poses perhaps the greatest challenge for modern filmgoers, and so Branagh prefers a conversational rather than formal speaking style, a delivery that emphasizes "spontaneity, freshness and naturalism" and avoids "artificial 'Shakespeare voices'" (Branagh, 1993, x). Branagh also often deploys an illustrative approach in long speeches or thorny passages, so that the camera shows us (or flashes back to) what is being talked about and the soundtrack firmly establishes the emotional tenor of the scene. Branagh's preference for the closeup allows for an intimate delivery of passages that might otherwise seem to demand an orational approach; the long, unbroken steadicam shots on which Branagh has increasingly relied allow long sequences of dialogue to be included without seeming static, and they have the added advantage of preserving the integrity of the actors' performances. All these techniques resituate Shakespeare within a contemporary realist cinematic aesthetic and so minimize the gap between Shakespeare as theater and the expectations of mainstream filmgoers.

At the level of ideology, Branagh has often spoken about his desire to create in his Shakespeare film productions a "company feeling," the sort of camaraderie typical of theatrical productions, a quality that the performance of Shakespeare, so he suggests, is especially capable of creating. *In the Bleak Midwinter* (1996), Branagh's chronicle of a village *Hamlet* production, offers his clearest articulation of this ideal, but the value placed on small-scale community is a hallmark in most of his Shakespeare films. It forms the backbone of his *Henry V*, which chronicles the formation of a "band of brothers" from fractious individuals, and it is an especially important touchstone in his films of Shakespearean comedies, *Much Ado*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and *As You Like It*, where the utopian quality of communal amity is firmly established in the final reel. Branagh likes to celebrate this quality of intimate community with a culminating montage or virtuosic single shot in which most of the principal cast appear (and, implicitly, the ensemble of actors is taking its final bow): the battlefield aftermath shot of *Henry V*, the dances at the end of *Much Ado* and *As*

You Like It, the V-Day celebrations in *Love's Labour's Lost*. His *Hamlet* lacks this communal shot, an indication of its status as tragedy. Instead, the court community, flawed though it may be, is replaced by Fortinbras's grey-clad, anonymous soldiers who burst through the windows, violating the palace's insularity and destroying the old monarchial order.

Branagh pursues this "company feeling" not only at the level of representation within the films but at the level of production as well. After *Henry V*, Branagh's practice has been to mix established film stars with British theatrical actors who've long been associated with his productions. Besides being a savvy marketing ploy, this practice aims at creating an acting ensemble for his Shakespeare films that transcends divisions between stage and screen, British and non-British, high and pop culture, an ensemble that models the kind of intimate community the performance of Shakespeare is able to catalyze. In his accounts of the making of his Shakespeare films, Branagh often stresses how crucial it was that the tight-knit community within the Shakespearean fiction reflect the camaraderie of the acting ensemble. Accordingly, he highlights the sense of shared ordeal in the *Henry V* shoot and the communal joy of living together in Tuscany during the *Much Ado* shoot, and the DVD for his *Love's Labour's Lost* features scenes from the "musical boot camp" that preceded filming. The "Branagh style" thus involves a characteristic double perspective on the viewer's part: perception of the ties of small-scale community between characters in the fiction, and perception of the communal bonds of the acting ensemble as it does Shakespeare. In both cases, Shakespeare is the vehicle for creating the element of camaraderie that has within Branagh's films a privileged ideological status. And that camaraderie is intended to extend out to the relationship between Branagh's film Shakespeare and the audience, for emphasizing the communal bonds Shakespeare can create counteracts assumptions about Shakespeare as a bearer of cultural hierarchy, assumptions that block his reception as popular culture.[4] Branagh's conception of the kind of community feeling Shakespeare screen performances can project was attractive to a number of Shakespearean filmmakers from the mid-90s afterward. Elements of the Branagh

[4.] This is not to argue that Branagh's utopian conception of small-scale community is above criticism, only that it has been a significant element in the appeal of his screen Shakespeare. Without doubt, Branagh's communitarian idealism sits rather uneasily with his own growing stardom and status as a directorial *auteur*. Moreover, there is a nostalgic strain in his Shakespeare films, a longing for an earlier era and a focus on affective bonds rather than politics, that glosses over the realities of forming and maintaining small communities.

adaptational style and ethos can be found in films as diverse as Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995), Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004), and even Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996). And the Branagh ethos has spawned dissenters as well: Kristin Levring's Dogme 95 *The King is Alive* (2000) savagely critiques Branagh's "company ideal," for it chronicles how a group of tourists stranded in the desert fall upon performing Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a way to build solidarity and survive. Their descent into cruelty and chaos suggests that the power of the Shakespearean text may not be to catalyze community but rather to unleash primal emotions that tear community apart.

At first glance, many formal elements of Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* seem generally of a piece with the "Branagh style." Though Whedon resituates the action to a contemporary Los Angeles suburb, he treats the setting in a conventionally realist style, unlike, say, the hyperreal Los Angeles of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1995) or media-saturated New York of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). Like Branagh, Whedon privileges the closeup, and instead of Branagh's steadicam, he uses a three-camera setup (standard for live TV) of handheld RED digital cameras to preserve the integrity of the actors' performances within scenes. Like Branagh, Whedon remains substantially faithful to Shakespeare's text and sequencing of events, trimmed down though they may be, and he aims for a predominantly conversational style of delivery. Though Whedon's fidelity to Shakespeare's language leads to a few anachronisms (the appearance of guns, for example, when the text mentions only swords) and unexplained plot points (from what military action have Don Pedro, Benedick and Claudio come, dressed as they are in business suits?), those details do not substantially compromise the sense of cinematic realism, at least once the audience acclimatizes to the gap between the language and the setting.

Of more interest than Whedon's formal strategies, however, are the ideological dimensions of his *Much Ado*. His approach to the play intensifies the concern with small-scale community that is so characteristic of Branagh's Shakespeare films. He treats *Much Ado* as one long boozy party among old friends that is marred by Benedick and Beatrice's bickering and Claudio and Don Pedro's despicable treatment of Hero at the wedding. Once Claudio has made sufficient amends, the party cranks up again, with the verbal tension between Benedick and Beatrice transmuted into

romantic love and silence. Liquor is the lubricant and principle symbol of social amity in the film, at least until the final scenes. The house party among friends as model of small-scale community is a central motif in this adaptation, so central in fact that the tagline on posters for the film was "Shakespeare knows how to throw a party." Whedon's emphasis on the party rather than on the marriages *per se* (far more the focus of Branagh's version) suggests a subtle but important shift in his conception of the fundamental social unit. Whereas Branagh places marriages and family bonds at the heart of his small-scale community (especially in his comedies), Whedon instead emphasizes the circle of friends, which he portrays as something of a substitute for or extension of traditional family. Fatherly roles, for example, are played down. Whedon casts the relatively young Clark Gregg in the role of Leonato the patriarch, and repeatedly in the opening scenes Leonato teases Hero, acting far more like an older brother or male pal than her father. The role of the second patriarch Antonio is eliminated entirely, as is Leonato and Antonio's confrontation of Claudio and Don Pedro in 5.1. The familial relationship between Hero and Beatrice too seems muted, for they come off as BFFs rather than cousins. These relatively subtle changes allow Whedon to treat this gathering as an extended substitute "family" of friends without a traditional patriarchal family at its core.

Whedon's *Much Ado* also actively courts the kind of double perspective that I've suggested is typical of Branagh's Shakespeare films. The cast is comprised principally of regulars from previous Whedon projects, so although the actors may not be film stars *per se*, they are familiar to fans of Whedon's work and thus "stars" within the Whedonverse. The effect is to heighten fans' awareness that they are watching not only a drama of Shakespeare's characters but also the drama of Whedon regulars performing Shakespearean roles. This double perspective is heightened even further by the story of the film's genesis, a story that featured prominently in the film's marketing and that was repeated in reviews and the director's DVD commentary. The production had its beginnings in a series of private Shakespeare readings organized by Whedon for actors and friends in his inner circle, started during season five of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2000). These staged readings were held at his Santa Monica home, then newly designed by Whedon's wife Kai Cole, who even created a small backyard amphitheater to accommodate them. These readings were conducted for the private entertainment of Whedon and his friends, out of an amateur's love for

Shakespeare separate from professional ambitions. By all accounts these fondly-remembered gatherings were as much parties as performances. Whedon recalls being particularly taken by the performances of Denisof and Acker as Benedick and Beatrice in one such backyard reading of *Much Ado*, and at some point he voiced to his wife a desire someday to film the play. Years later in 2012, when Whedon was stressed out after completing principal photography for his blockbuster *The Avengers*, his wife suggested that instead of a Venetian holiday he use the short hiatus to film his backyard *Much Ado*. He financed the venture himself and used a cast of Whedon regulars, including Denisof and Acker. The enterprise was intended to be a combination of homecoming party for Whedon, Shakespeare reading and shoestring-budget film production. In fact, Amy Acker reports that she thought "we were gonna just be sitting there reading the play and he was gonna film it, maybe with his iPhone. I had no idea until the first day when I showed up on set, and I was like, 'Oh, you mean a *real movie*'" (Gara). Filming took place over twelve days at the Whedon home. The backyard amphitheater ended up being the setting for the abortive wedding scene between Claudio and Hero.

This origin tale serves to intensify a central feature of the Branagh ethos: here is a Shakespeare film which directly connects the circumstances of its production with celebration of the sort of small-scale community that Shakespearean performance is capable of generating. A number of elements encourage our sense that the film hovers between a film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* and the record of a party among Whedon's intimates. The predominately handheld camerawork lends a documentary quality to the film, conveying the sense that we are watching the record of a live social event, both in the fictional world of Messina and in the real world. Functioning in the same way is our awareness that the set is Whedon's *real* home, very minimally transformed into the site of a fictional wedding by ubiquitous and obviously symbolic bouquets of flowers. Though it may carry some visual associations with classic Hollywood glamour, the black-and-white photography (adopted, so says Whedon, because it minimizes problems of lighting and color matching) also evokes the documentary tradition, particularly when combined with the film's camerawork.[5] Viewed as a quasi-documentary chronicling the fun of producing

[5] The black-and-white photography might just as easily signal a kinship with indie filmmaking of the eighties and early nineties, as in Woody Allen's *Zelig* (1983), Francis Ford Coppola's *Rumblefish* (1983), Jim Jarmusch's

this Shakespeare performance, the film offers the viewer a vicarious experience of the conviviality of Whedon's inner circle. This sense of "public intimacy" (Roach, 2005, 15-17), the creation of desire, seeming availability and identification between the onscreen demi-monde and the spectator-fan, is crucial to the film's effect. The DVD's extras only enhance this quality. The cast commentary track primarily conveys the cast's delight in reliving the communal spirit of the film's production rather than any useful information about the performances. The clips from the cast's bus trip to the SWSX Film Festival also offer little insight into the film, but they do convey how the production forged a tight communal bond that lasted well beyond filming. The homemade Vine videos–a staple of Twitter culture–echo the "do-it-yourself" aesthetic of *Much Ado*, and they hint at the relationship between "company feeling," the phenomenon of "friending," and the contemporary compulsion to share one's close relationships with others via photos and videos, an issue to which I will return presently.

In the introduction to his screenplay for *Much Ado* Whedon reveals that the readings from which the film sprang were a means for reviving the creative pleasures of his youth. They had their ultimate origin, he claims, with "my mother." A director of summer stock, Whedon's mother organized staged readings at Thanksgiving during Whedon's childhood, and he recalls with special fondness his playing of Hal to his stepfather's Falstaff in a domestic performance of *I Henry IV* (Whedon, 10, 13). For Whedon, staged readings are deeply intertwined with memories of the non-patriarchal "family" dynamic of his youth; it is revealing that what Whedon recalls most strongly is the surrogate father-son relationship between Falstaff and Hal. The Shakespeare readings at Whedon's home, then, were fundamentally about (re)creating a sense of quasi-familial fellowship among his friends. Indeed, in interviews Whedon has referred to his inner circle of actors as "family" (see, for example, Gara) and their bond as one of "love."[6] No wonder that the delights of intimate community and the trauma of its violation should figure so strongly in Whedon's interpretation.

The film's origin story and its various paratexts also affiliate it with the tradition of amateur domestic performance (Dobson, 2011, 22-61) and one of that tradition's

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Stranger than Paradise (1984) and *Down by Law* (1986), Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have it* (1986), Aki Kaurismäki's *Hamlet liikemaailmassa* (1987), and Kevin Smith's *Clerks* (1994).

[6] In his interview with Gara, Whedon stresses his attention to "the dynamic that everybody was gonna have with each other and with me. When you're looking for an ensemble, you're looking for how will they mesh as a group outside of the workplace in such a way that it'll affect the workplace."

modern forms, the staged reading (Love, 2004). Both of these practices are forms of non-professional, "artisanal" Shakespeare. They are motivated more by a love of Shakespeare (the root of "amateur" is "love") than a concern for profit or wider audience, and they aim at creating a communal experience among the actors (often the primary audience) rather than crafting a polished product.[7] As Dobson observes, amateur performance allows Shakespeare to become intertwined in "a particular network of acquaintances," a particular place, a particular time in people's lives (Dobson, 2001, 216). This could not be farther from Whedon's experience on *The Avengers*, an industrially-produced, mass-market Hollywood mega-blockbuster designed to be a commercial franchise (which it ended up being). It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Whedon's Shakespeare film was a means to strike a strategic distance from mass-market Hollywood's artistic imperatives. *Much Ado* allowed Whedon to return to an "artisanal," indie form of filmmaking, a practice that stands apart from the demands of commerce[8] and values the creative freedom of a small community of artists. In this dynamic Shakespeare connotes artistic quality and creative integrity. Despite the fact that Shakespeare also worked in a commercial entertainment industry, his association with theater in a cinematic age aligns him with "hand-crafted" rather than industrial modes of production. In short, in the film's origin tale Shakespeare serves as the very antithesis of mass-market media culture. At work here are a series of familiar oppositions: work / leisure; pop art / high culture; film / theater; professional / amateur; art as big business / art as therapy or "pure play"; mass-market audience / coterie audience.

What change is wrought, then, when one of Whedon's Shakespeare readings, with its quasi-familial, artisanal, and therapeutic associations, is adapted to a film format intended for a wider public? Is it indeed possible for Whedon to use the camera to "to capture the electricity that is created between these characters, without having that

[7] Of course, this distinction between amateur and professional performance is muddied considerably by the fact that Whedon's home readings of Shakespeare were performed largely by professional actors, albeit not professional stage performers. (Alexis Denisof is an interesting exception, for he worked for a while with the RSC after graduating from RADA.) The key issue here, however, is that the readings were driven by a shared delight in performing rather than by a desire to create a professional-standard final product. This is not to disparage the performances, but by their very nature, staged readings are provisional and ephemeral, opportunities for creative experimentation not to be seen by outsiders.

[8] To an interviewer's suggestion that *Much Ado* served as an "antidote to the Hollywood system that had confounded him for so long," Whedon offers an ambivalent response. He observes "that's a perfectly valid statement," but goes on to note that the simple assumption that "there is the evil machine and then there is art" in Hollywood is finally untenable, for reasons he never expands upon. "I didn't just do *Much Ado* as a 'f*** you,'" he stresses; rather "it was just a joyful extension of what I was already doing" (Blakely, 2013). The word "joyful" in the final clause bears some close scrutiny in the context of this discussion.

actual proximity [to live actors]" (Whedon, 2013, 14)? Does the medium compromise the message? Whedon is not unaware of the problem, and interestingly enough, he reads the issue back onto Shakespeare's *Much Ado.* In Whedon's version, there are two threats to the conviviality of Leonato's perpetual party. One is men's attitudes toward women, particularly in the area of sexuality. Whedon opens the film with a flashback that explains, more explicitly than Shakespeare ever does, what Beatrice means when she speaks of losing Benedick's heart: "he lent it me a while, and I gave him use for it, a double heart for his single one. Marry, once before he won it of me, with false dice" (2.1.255-7). What we see is the aftermath of a fling between the two, fueled, we learn in a later flashback, by liquor. The morning after, Benedick, faced with the responsibility of having to cultivate an actual relationship with Beatrice, leaves Beatrice alone without uttering a word (See Plate 1).

Plate 1. The opening shot of the film–aftermath of Benedick and Beatrice's fling.

Pretending to sleep so she too doesn't have to speak, Beatrice registers the pain of being abandoned and her concern about awkwardness to come.[9] Their separation is

[9] Whedon had explored this dynamic before in his series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, in the relationship between Buffy and the vampire Angel. Before Buffy and Angel sleep together in season 2, their relationship is loving. After they sleep together in the episode "Surprise," however, Angel loses his soul and becomes increasingly demonic, brutish and violent, so much so that the threat of rape and death comes to hang over their relationship. See Larbalestier, 2001, 202-4. Larbalestier concludes that "Sex, romantic love, whatever–in the *Buffy*verse it is friendships that are key" (*Ibid.*, 218). In *Much Ado* Whedon seems interested in exploring how the volatility of erotic romance, a volatility created by men, might be reconciled with the communal bonds of friendship.

musically accented by two jarring, well-separated soundings of the same tone, played before the main theme kicks in.[10]

The block here is Benedick's preening male ego, evident from his very first exchange with Beatrice where he steals a flower from Beatrice's bouquet as he trades barbs with her, and more comically manifest in his penchant for "heroic" poses and the hypermasculine exercising he engages in when encountering Beatrice in Whedon's rendition of 2.3. Benedick fears public humiliation were he to acknowledge his attachment to Beatrice, and so he hides behind misogynist wit. By contrast, in looks and asides Beatrice repeatedly reveals her private pain at being abandoned. Her tart wit toward Benedick–in her first scene with Leonato and Hero, she eats a citrus slice–is a defense mechanism angrily aimed at his mask of egotism. Benedick and Beatrice's erotic history leads to a tangle of male pride and female vulnerability that blocks their potential relationship. It also disturbs the amity of the circle of friends, as becomes clear when Benedick, pricked by Beatrice's mocking of him at the party, lashes out at her with his "Lady Tongue" remark and, judging from Beatrice's silent response, reopens old wounds. Whedon images this emotional knot in terms of a gnarly tree root, glimpsed immediately after the opening "morning after" sequence. Standing behind this tangled root, literally and figuratively, is a figure for the kind of social "noting" Benedick most fears–a security man passing on his report to others (See Plate 2).

[10] At the very end of the film, the unity of Beatrice and Benedick is figured in a single note, sounded in a ringing, less jarring fashion. This note is the last music of the film before the credits roll.

Plate 2. The "arboreal tangle" as image of tangled male-female relationships.

Indeed, throughout the film Whedon associates blocked male-female relationships with the visual motif of the "arboreal tangle." A canopy of tree branches overhangs the neighborhood in the opening credits, foreshadowing trouble to come. Images of tangled branches appear in the establishing shot before the wedding scene and yet again in the background when Claudio accuses Hero of only seeming to be "as Dian in her orb" (4.1.56) in front of the guests.

Shabby male behavior toward women is not confined to Benedick. It comes into clearest focus in the first party scene, where predatory male sexual behavior is on full display. Leonato's Aide seems to treat the household's female servants as there for his sexual taking: at the party he hits on Margaret, and he snogs and feels up Ursula in the kitchen the morning after. Likewise, an anonymous party guest paws Beatrice as she mocks Benedick, and we see a couple sneaking out the back gate of the garden for a tryst, perhaps to repeat Benedick and Beatrice's experience. Ogling two fetching women on trapeze provides the evening's entertainment (See Plate 3).

Plate 3. Voyeurism at the garden party.

Even the dance between Don John and Conrade (a woman in this production) is watched by a strange man in a Kabuki mask, as if he might cut in at any moment were he given the opportunity. Little wonder, then, that Claudio would find credible Don John's claim that he has heard Don Pedro "swear his affection" for Hero and "would marry her tonight" (2.1.153-5), for the party seems an occasion for men to prey on women sexually. More generally, this highlights the sexual double-standard that shapes so many of the male-female relationships in the play: women are fine as sexual playthings, but when it is time to commit to them after the hook-up, the men abandon and/or chastise them. Like Iago with Othello, Don John is quite adept at exploiting Claudio's insecurity about female sexuality. For Claudio, the issue is less about his personal honor than it is about his callow overidealization of his bride-to-be. The emotional climax of the wedding scene for Claudio comes when he speaks of Hero's lost virginity, a speech filled with overwrought anguish, not wounded male pride:

> O Hero! What a Hero hadst thou been
> If half thy outward graces had been placed
> About thy thoughts and counsels of thy heart! (4.1.100-2)

Whedon retains Shakespeare's multiple references to "Hero" speaking with a man at her chamber window, the only "crime" the men directly witness in Shakespeare's text. However, in Whedon's version what we and Claudio actually see in flashback is the silhouette in Hero's window of a man and woman having sex. That is to say, in Whedon's adaptation Hero's "crime" is not merely a verbal indiscretion magnified into something more through Borachio's false report, but rather Hero's very capacity to be a sexual creature.

For this "crime," Claudio cruelly shames and abandons Hero, his action made all the more brutal by its public nature. Staged in front of partygoers from the night before, arrayed in Whedon's backyard amphitheater like an audience for a play, Claudio's rejection of Hero destroys not just their relationship but also the community itself. The Aide shoos the shocked crowd away when Don Pedro publically accuses Hero of being a "common stale" (4.1.64). The men's treatment of minor women characters is no better. Margaret ends up being degradingly abused in her loveless rendezvous with Borachio; he seems to dress her up in Hero's wedding dress in part because he himself has an unspoken thing for Hero. Margaret's slowly dawning recognition that Borachio wants her only for sex lends pathos to her situation as a powerless servingwoman hit on by powerful men. Whedon develops that element further in Margaret's rather melancholy scene with Benedick (5.2.1-25), where she sees through Benedick's effort to charm Beatrice with verse, laments her servile status "below stairs" and longs for control over masculine "swords" (5.2.10, 18). Conrade, in the midst of a torrid affair with Don John, would seem to be immune from the double standard that plagues other women, for she seems simply not to care what others think. She is annoyed but not embarrassed when Borachio barges in on her and Don John *in flagrante dilecto*, and she allows herself to be manually pleasured while Don John hatches his plot against Claudio and Hero's marriage. Her surprise is thus all the more painful when she is told that Don John has flown Messina and unceremoniously dumped her, and thereafter her demeanor remains bitter and angry, in sharp contrast with Borachio's genuine remorse. Even unrepentant bad girls are not exempt from male abandonment.

It is significant, then, that Whedon moves "Sigh no more" from Benedick's orchard scene to the film's first party scene, making it the gathering's sexy, wistful theme song. The lines "Men are deceivers ever; / One foot in sea, and one on shore"

(2.3.61-2) announce the evening's subtext and the troubling dynamic that runs throughout male-female relationships in the film. In light of this, it is perhaps tempting to read the women trapeze artists at the party allegorically, as figures for women's navigation of the world of men–an agile, potentially dangerous high-wire dance conducted before an audience of voyeurs. More to the point, the song's address to the "ladies" as a group points to the developing solidarity between women that springs from their shared experience of male mistreatment, a solidarity we see briefly between the two women trapeze artists and more fully in the developing relationship between Beatrice and Hero. When at the party Don Pedro whisks Hero away to woo her on Claudio's behalf, the camera lingers on Beatrice. Her face expresses both joy at Hero's good fortune and concern about her inexperienced cousin's first entry into the potentially painful world of adult romance. When Hero is betrayed at her wedding, Beatrice, siding with her wronged cousin, threatens at one point to strike Claudio. Later on she bursts into full feminist rage on behalf of Hero when she commands Benedick to "kill Claudio" (4.1.288) and roars in righteous frustration "O, that I were a man!" (4.1.302). The film's most potent image of female bonding comes during the funeral procession scene. As mourners led by Claudio carry votary candles down the hillside, we see Hero watching from above, more melancholy than forgiving. She is soon joined by Beatrice in a comforting embrace–a lingering closeup of two women humiliated by the men they care for (See Plate 4).

Plate 4. Women's solidarity in the face of male mistreatment.

This solidarity between women appears yet again as Hero prepares for her second wedding. When Leonato speaks of Margaret's culpability in the accusation against his daughter, Hero embraces her protectively, recognizing her maidservant too has been victimized. As Whedon shapes the film's arc, it is Benedick's response to Beatrice's feminist rage in 4.1 that marks his crucial moment of development. He chooses to ally himself with women's solidarity with each other and drop at least for the moment all his masculine posturing.

Feeding Benedick and Claudio's concern about male vulnerability is a second threat to small-scale community in Whedon's film, the culture of "noting." Their concern about being the objects of the group's eye is exacerbated by the very proximity of close friends. Many reviewers have observed that Whedon's house is a crucial component in his *Much Ado*, an upper middle-class social space that enables "unconstrained hospitality"; in it, class differences are minimized and a casual ethos reigns–"anyone could drink out of those wine glasses or eat off those plates" (Greenblatt, 2013, 50). Whedon's approach to photographing the house establishes it as a space that maximizes opportunities for watching one another or eavesdropping. The comically small bedroom that Benedick and Claudio must share establishes early on that the partygoers will be living in close quarters. Particularly in establishing shots for scenes, Whedon favors photographing through windows or grates, in open doorways or alcoves, traversing connecting hallways or stairways, all of which emphasizes the house's appealingly open layout but also the ease with which private interactions can unwittingly become public. Noteworthy too are the number of shots that feature mirrors, that is, shots in which an image of a character is doubled or reversed for others to see. Though this home may be a space conducive to conviviality and amity, it allows for, indeed encourages "noting." That sort of intrusive "noting" is also extended to the cinematic spectator: the very first shot of the film, of Benedick putting on his trousers after his tryst with Beatrice, is photographed as if by a camera left surreptitiously on a table aimed at the bed, an angle rife with creepy voyeuristic connotations.

The characters of Whedon's *Much Ado*–particularly the men–are quite sensitive to the dangers "noting" might pose. This fact is subtly established as early as Don Pedro's arrival. Having exited his limo, he spies Don John and Conrade in handcuffs out in public where they might be seen. Quickly sensing the potential for scandal he nods discreetly to Verges to remove their restraints. Part of Benedick's reluctance to pursue a relationship with Beatrice after their tryst is his awareness of the uncontrolled circulation of information among his friends (one significance of the film's opening shot) and thus heightened potential for his humiliation. As a space of compromised privacy, the house works to intensify the fear of social stigma, a fear to which the men respond especially badly. What restrains the darker effects of "noting" and allows the plot to resolve comically is, paradoxically, the group's ability to harness

the power of "noting." With Benedick and Beatrice, the group stages conversations they know will be overheard, thereby moving the two beyond their fears of humiliation toward marriage and reestablishing the amity of the household. Even so, one senses for Benedick fears about social pressure persist after he overhears the conversation between Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio. As he muses about the prospect of marrying Beatrice, he bounds into the amphitheater in the garden, a site associated with marriage and with being under the gaze of others. When Benedick finally brings himself to declare "I will be horribly in love with her" (2.3.226-7), his words come back to him as an echo, an indicator of the capacity of the private to become troublingly, uncontrollably public. The echo prompts Benedick to launch into a defense of his behavior, delivered in lawyerly style to the empty amphitheater, that is, to the imagined gaze of his absent friends. Successful though Don Pedro's strategy of tricking Benedick and Beatrice might be, Whedon seems far more willing than Branagh is to acknowledge the troubling qualities of small-scale sociability–the compromise of privacy, the penchant for rumor, the fear of humiliation at the hands of others, the power of manipulation by the group. This may explain why Whedon characterizes his *Much Ado* as a "noir comedy."

Interestingly, Whedon complicates the issue of "noting" by adding an additional element to this dynamic. That element is the presence of a camera, wielded by the added character of the photographer who documents the goings-on in the Whedon / Leonato household. The photographer is omnipresent at this gathering of friends, often at work at the corner of the frame–she is at both parties and particularly prominent at both weddings. Notably, she first appears on the word "trouble" in Leonato's line "trouble being gone, comfort should remain" (1.1.95-6) as she documents the warm handshake welcome of Don Pedro by Leonato. We immediately see the resultant still as if it were being instantly made public, a personal snapshot turned instantaneously into a newsphoto (See Plate 5).

Plate 5: The photographer.

At the wedding, she serves at first as the wedding photographer, but as the ceremony goes sour she keeps on snapping pictures, taking on the role of paparazza as she documents the scandalous proceedings. The ease and speed with which her role shifts from benign to threatening suggests much about the ambivalent power of photography, and public media more generally, in small-scale social dynamics. A snapshot can fortify friendships by memorializing them, but it can just as easily record (or even manufacture) humiliating images and set them in the public eye. *Much Ado* includes surprisingly little reference to digital technology given its contemporary setting–Leonato uses an iPhone and an iPod, but that's it. Nevertheless, through the photographer Whedon registers how social media, with their compulsion to make public one's social network, only heightens the potential for humiliation. In the age of Facebook, with its drive to conduct friendships in public and share details of one's relationships, every personal snapshot has the potential to become a newsphoto. Discussing the photographer in the wedding scene in his DVD commentary, Whedon observes, "What I love about this is, oh, we want everything because, you know, we are beautiful and famous and wonderful, when everything's recorded we're not wonderful. All of a sudden that becomes an issue. It's about that culture which now is every culture, of American culture. Yeah, it's creepy." Because the public intimacy which social media and celebrity culture demand can so unpredictably morph into

something destructive, Whedon seems to suggest, contemporary small-scale communities have become all the more fragile, vulnerable to "ocular proof," misprision, mistrust, and magnified concerns about public image. And Whedon takes pains to implicate the viewer in this social dynamic. In Whedon's establishing montage before the wedding, the photographer catches the viewer's eye, "noting" us "noting" her, and she raises her camera to take our picture. Later, during the second marriage scene in a point of view shot the photographer trains her camera on Claudio as he walks forward, but the camera is pointed toward us as well, interpellating us in the position of Claudio, the misreading viewer.[11] We may be standing outside looking in, situated as cinematic voyeurs watching a private group of friends, but that particular scophilic dynamic, these shots suggest, can be reversed in an instant.

The nature of public intimacy that Whedon explores in the fictional world of his *Much Ado* also extends to the very act of his filming it. Interestingly enough, the photographer was played by Elsa Guillet-Chapuis, a real photographer hired to do candid shots for the film and Whedon's homecoming party (some of those shots appear in the published screenplay). Those "real" candids certainly contribute to the film's appeal for Whedon fans. They, like the tales of Whedon's public readings, offer the *frisson* of being ushered behind the scenes and given access to Whedon's inner circle, in his own home no less. But those candids also are, like the film itself, curiously poised between private and public documents–how candid or posed are they? What sort of public intimacy do such photographic records really offer us? Without doubt, the character of the photographer stands in for Whedon the director, the one who makes the private public through a visual medium. What the photographer registers in the wedding scene, then, seems to be Whedon's recognition that the film medium is inescapably an instrument of "noting." That is to say, Whedon acknowledges, in ways that Branagh does not, that the act of filming risks compromising the special sort of communal feeling that he, like Branagh, feels Shakespearean performance can uniquely provide. However, Whedon's acknowledgment of that risk is complicated. By emphasizing the voyeuristic nature of the cinematic experience, Whedon certainly implicates the viewer and the cinematic

[11] The primal scene of viewing in Whedon's *Much Ado* is the shot / reverse shot sequence in which Claudio sees what he thinks is Hero having sex. We first see Claudio in extreme closeup, lit as if he were watching a screen in the dark; we then see "Hero" and her lover in silhouette in a barred window framed by curtains, looking very much like figures on a movie screen. Are we meant to recall the unsettlingly metacinematic, voyeuristic qualities of this sequence as the camera is pointed in our face in the second wedding?

medium in a larger culture of "noting." And yet at the same time, in an ever-receding promise of intimacy the film's various paratexts–the tales of the film's genesis, the candid pictures, the Vine videos of the bus ride to SWSX, the raucous cast commentary track on the DVD–seek to restore what the act of filming would like to offer but cannot quite provide: the experience of Shakespearean "company feeling." Whedon certainly does not give up on the utopian promise of "company feeling," and his *Much Ado* comes closer to capturing it than have Branagh's films, but he is more aware than many other mainstream Shakespearean filmmakers of the last two decades of the full challenge posed by the cultural politics of the "Branagh style."

In a review of Whedon's film, Stephen Greenblatt has argued that *Much Ado* allows its audience to see–and to be "cheerfully complicit" in–"the immense social pressure... that brings young men and women to the altar"; he goes on to observe that "the genius of Shakespeare allows us to feel a touch of disappointment that it should be so" (Greenblatt, 2013, 51). Perhaps so. It's notable, however, that the final scene of Whedon's film differs markedly from Greenblatt's account of the relationship between marriage and social pressure in the play. In the case of Benedick and Beatrice, Whedon pointedly sets the drive toward marriage *against* the ethos of the social group, an ethos he has shown to be both deeply appealing and potentially oppressive. In the final scene, the house party cranks up again, but this time without the predatory male behavior that marred the earlier garden party. There is no liquor in sight. For all the joyous dancing, the group seems to have sobered up as a result of what has proceeded. Visually at least, we see a full reconciliation between Hero and Claudio, and between Leonato and Margaret, and even Don Pedro and Friar Francis take a turn on the dance floor. That is, what we see at long last is the establishment of an ideal social community in the form of a party of family and friends now apparently purged of its uglier misogynistic aspects. Notably, the photographer is still present, wandering unthreateningly and far less prominently through the group, documenting its sociability. The one photo we see her take is of Hero and Claudio in embrace, a picture that promises to counterpoise her earlier photos of Claudio's cruelty at the wedding. This scene is also, we should not fail to notice, the cast party for the film, so that the scene also serves as a celebration of the communal feeling this sort of indie Shakespearean performance has created.

What is most striking about this final scene, then, is that Whedon positions Benedick and Beatrice apart from the dancing household, in their own separate world of romantic reverie marked off by its own plaintive music cues, not noticed by the photographer (See Plate 6).

Plate 6. Benedick and Beatrice in the film's final shot at the party.

For these two, marriage is not so much a capitulation to social pressure as a rapturous release from it, the creation of a social space all their own within that of the larger community. This space of marital freedom is ambiguously situated vis-a-vis the dancing crowd–their shared erotic moment is both public and private, amidst the partygoers but available only to the viewer. In this moment, too, we return to the silence between Benedick and Beatrice with which the film began, only now that silence expresses the intensity of their bond and their newfound freedom from fear of social sanction. This moment articulates a possibility of public intimacy free from the pressure of "noting," one which Whedon allows the viewer, apart from the group and the photographer, to witness. When earlier the two couples declare their intentions to marry, Don Pedro moves quickly and pensively back to drink, as if he were about to resume the flawed modes of sociability on display in the garden party. Benedick's response, "get thee a wife, get thee a wife," the last line of the film, is less an indication of some ubiquitous pressure to mate, than it is an indication that Benedick

has come to recognize that marriage constitutes release from the more oppressive aspects of social bonding. He simply seeks to extend that alternative to his party-going friend. Without a doubt, Whedon's approach to the final scenes has something of the quality of a "Hollywood ending," but his seemingly conventional endorsement of marriage needs to be set against his darker-hued portrayal of small-group dynamics in Messina and early twenty-first century America.

I am not arguing here that Joss Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* constitutes a detailed response to Branagh's 1993 *Much Ado* film adaptation. In interviews Whedon indicated he familiarized himself with Branagh's version, but he also stressed that he pointedly avoided specific reference to it. Rather, Whedon's *Much Ado* addresses the ideological ideal that gave the "Branagh style" its enormous appeal, the capacity for Shakespeare in performance to generate a "company feeling" among actors and between performers and spectators. Whedon reconsiders that utopian conception of Shakespearean community in light of the realities of social affiliation in the twenty-first century. Following on Branagh's conception of "company feeling," Whedon intensifies the appeal of the kind of intimate small-scale community Shakespeare might create, while at the same time acknowledging the less-than-utopian qualities that trouble such communities–their complicity with gender double-standards and the anxieties about being "noted" and mocked they tend to feed. Whedon also acknowledges the complicating element of the film medium itself, at once a means for fortifying and sharing a sense of intimate community and at the same time a force that magnifies the pathological qualities of a modern culture of "noting." Considered within the history of recent screen adaptation of Shakespeare, Whedon's film evinces a maturing of the cultural politics of mass-market Shakespeare on film. It recalibrates an ideal that has driven much Shakespeare film adaptation for a generation without entirely abandoning that ideal, and it examines anew the relationship between Shakespearean performance and the cinematic medium.

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