

“Wesley and Fred Went to Heaven and They Got This!”: Fred, Wesley, Mal, Simon, Topher, Dominic, Andrew, and Agent Phil do the Bard at Joss’s House: The Whedon Coterie, the Fans, and *Much Ado*

Richard S. Albright

Although film audiences are typically at least sub-consciously aware of the actors’ prior roles, Joss Whedon’s *Much Ado About Nothing* seems to especially call attention to the primary universe and multiple secondary ones. We know that Whedon loves Shakespeare and regularly has his actors over to his house for weekend readings and performances. *Much Ado* invites us into one of these weekend readings. We are also uncommonly aware of these actors as regular fixtures of the Whedonverses, some of them having played more than one role. For example, Amy Acker played both Winifred (“Fred”) Burkle in *Angel* and later Dr. Claire Saunders (and the Active named Whiskey) in *Dollhouse*. Nathan Fillion was both Malcolm Reynolds in *Firefly* and *Serenity* and Caleb in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Part of the appeal of this film is the way that it invites us to peer through multiple lenses: the Shakespeare text, with which we may be familiar; other theatrical or cinematic versions of *Much Ado*, such as the 1993 Kenneth Branagh version; and the other roles played by these actors in other Whedonverses. Thus, we view *Much Ado*’s Benedick, for example, as if Wesley Wyndam-Price is playing the Shakespearean character, rather than Alexis Denisof. Whedon addressed this issue himself in an interview, when he said, “It was a couple of months ago, screening it, I suddenly went, ‘Oh, my God! Wesley and Fred went to Heaven and they got this! They’re suddenly kissing and neither of them is dying! This is delightful!’” (*Much Ado About Nothing: A Film by Joss Whedon* 20). This paper will explore audience perception of actors’ prior acting roles in general and the unique “delight” that informs the fan experience of this film.