

“Give Us the Swords”: Whedon’s Feminism in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado*

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Joss Whedon has long been known as a feminist (though his feminism has been contested; see Schultz in *Reading Joss Whedon*). He has also been known as a Shakespearean. The two interests combine productively in his film of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado about Nothing*. As I have noted elsewhere, the character of Beatrice, long thought to be a model (with her partner Benedick) for romantic comedy, directly expresses her frustration with the gender-restricted roles of her times; and Whedon’s modernization of the setting serves to highlight the issue. He also, however, humanizes and strengthens the character by having the acting of Amy Acker (Beatrice) match that of Alexis Denisof (Benedick) in terms of physical comedy (in particular in the weighting of the gulling scenes). His direction, indeed, favors the strength of the Beatrice character throughout. He highlights the theme of “noting” (at which Beatrice is in some ways so good, in other ways so bad) by using a silent female observer, the photographer character. Furthermore, he manages to make that most quiet of Shakespearean heroines, Hero, exhibit a certain degree of gumption by his casting and direction of Jillian Morgese. The quotation in my title comes from the waiting gentlewoman Margaret, played by one of Whedon’s favorite actors, Ashley Johnson. Her conversation with Benedick plays with the idea of sexual and gender roles, and in fact is in a scene frequently omitted from filmed versions of the play. Her role and these quoted words are among many elements that highlight the feminism that Whedon teases out of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado*.