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# "I Look'd Upon Her with a Soldier's Eye": The Normalization of Surveillance Culture in Whedon's *Much Ado*

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[1] 1599 was a difficult year in England. Robert Devereux II, the Earl of Essex, led seventeen thousand English troops to engage in a conflict known (in England) as the Irish Rebellion. The resources required for such a task placed a heavy toll on the English people. Men, many of whom were responsible for generating a family's income, were drafted to fight. Resources, such as horses, were requisitioned for the war, which placed a strain upon England's primarily agricultural economy. The decade had already seen multiple years of famine resulting from crop failure, and now, because of the war, food prices rocketed, and many found that they were unable to sustain their livelihood. Vagrancy and crime rose and there was a general unease throughout the country.

[2] Theatre at the time, as in most times of conflict and social unrest, primarily served to distract the audience from present privations. It served the function, to borrow Fredric Jameson's famous phrase, of "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (79). It did so through two kinds of story: the war story and the fantasy. Shakespeare, accordingly, wrote, and his company performed, both types of play. One of his "war" type plays was *Henry V,* which depicts a successful English campaign in France. In the context of the time, *Henry V* can reasonably be read as a dialogue on the toll of war but, more overtly, an exercise in propaganda. The prologue in the quarto version of the play even goes so far as to make direct reference to the conflict in Ireland and predicts a glorious victory:

> As, by a lower but by loving likelihood,
> Were now the general of our gracious Empress
> (As in good time he may) from Ireland coming,
> Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,

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How many would the peaceful city quit
To welcome him! (5.1.29-34)

The play, as Andrew Murphy notes, ends with a wholly fanciful but nonetheless compelling "grand gesture of unity," with England, Ireland, and France united under one (English) monarch (219). In addition to war stories, this era also saw a large number of plays which were purely escapist. Fairy tales or light-hearted comedies provided a welcome anesthetic from present hardships by presenting worlds where the war is either far away or entirely absent. Within this tradition, Shakespeare penned, and his company gave, a charming comedy (what C. L. Barber calls a "festive" play) featuring a series of ultimately harmless misunderstandings among a leisured class of aristocrats: *Much Ado About Nothing*.

[3] There are limits to the inferences one can draw from time periods separated not only by chronology but by ideology, but I wish to note at this preliminary stage that in 2012, Joss Whedon made two films. The first, *Marvel's The Avengers,* depicts a group of superheroes, working alongside a fantasy version of the American military complex, who successfully and gloriously defend Earth from an alien invasion. Like *Henry V, The Avengers* draws upon a previous conflict to justify and predict the triumphant outcome of a current one. Specifically, *The Avengers* uses a rhetoric which symbolically connects the "just war" imagery of World War II with that of the ongoing War on Terror fought both overseas and on United States soil (see Nadkarni). The second film was a charming comedy featuring a series of ultimately harmless misunderstandings—namely, *Much Ado About Nothing.*

[4] It is dangerous to infer too much from this kind of historical coincidence. Attempts to establish meaningful parallels between Shakespeare and Whedon require us to overlook many of the ideological and material conditions which separate the two. Shakespeare, to our knowledge, never left England. His interactions with anyone of color were likely extremely limited if they occurred at all. He died before electric lighting, before women's rights, before the combustion engine, before the Holocaust, before Newtonian physics, before germ theory, before copyright law, before non-belief in God was ideologically conceivable, and in a time when absolute monarchy was the assumed system of governance. If Ben Jonson's famous assertion that Shakespeare was not of an age but for all time seems to hold today, it is only because each age and

culture finds its values, whatever those values may be, confirmed in Shakespeare.[1]

[5] If my argument were simply that *The Avengers* is to Whedon's *Much Ado* as *Henry V* is to Shakespeare's, it would be shallow, unsatisfying, and easily refuted. What I propose instead is that Whedon's *Much Ado* is not, in fact, disengaged from contemporary political discourse. I seek instead to ask how Whedon's *Much Ado,* a film made in a time when coalition soldiers continue to fight and die and come home physically and emotionally damaged from operations overseas, and when the fact of large-scale surveillance and data collection is becoming increasingly and disturbingly apparent, represents war from both afar and at home. Through the course of my analysis I seek to show two things: first, that through costume and casting choices Whedon offers a direct link between *Much Ado* and the Whedon-produced TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* thereby intimating a hawkish neo-colonial political stance and a gesture of support for increasing U.S. militarization. Second, I seek to demonstrate that through its presentation of surveillance, Whedon's *Much Ado* pre-empts and normalizes modern discourse on privacy and national security.

### "Few of any sort, and none of name"

[6] *Much Ado About Nothing* has been set in many periods, from Elizabethan dress (of course), to civil-war era Mexico, and India during the late period of the British Empire. Whedon's setting for the film is not simply modern day, but a specific stylistic palette which is suggestive of the themes and tone which he wished to evoke. Specifically, as I seek to demonstrate below, Whedon's *Much Ado* uses a stylistic palette which evokes *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and is thus imbricated with narratives of just war, the necessary violation of territorial boundaries, and the need for increases in national security.

[7] One element which runs across almost all versions of *Much Ado* is a distant war. Robert Smallwood, for example, describes the opening of a version by the Renaissance Theatre Company set during the nineteenth century which "presented Leonato's family sitting on a sunny terrace [. . .] the relationships we saw were of cooperation and mutuality—Beatrice helping Leonato with a jigsaw puzzle, Margaret and Hero winding wool together—a community at peace with itself, in contented interdependence" (141-142). This is not a community upon

which war places a heavy burden and, indeed, the same scene in Whedon's *Much Ado* opens a busy but pleasant kitchen in which food and drink is being prepared, thereby foregrounding the opulence of the society presented.

[8] The core of male characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* are soldiers, the fact of which underwrites the strong homosocial bonding which runs throughout the play and legitimises, if not excuses, Don John's jealousy. The fact of their being soldiers is apparent, but the realities of war in which they are engaged (referred to simply as "the wars") are not. No characters discuss troop movements or new development. No one speculates as to when the war might come to an end. Indeed, after the first scene no one makes any reference to any specific events which occurred on the battlefield. Word that Don Pedro's forces have been victorious and have suffered few casualties is staged as a point of interest rather than a cause of relief. Beatrice immediately jokes that she will eat as many men as Benedict has killed, implying, of course, that he has not killed anyone. War, in this sense, is nothing dangerous or damaging. It is simply an occupation in which the men of the play are engaged.

[9] Whedon asserts, in the interview which opens the published screenplay, that the fact of several characters being soldiers is often underplayed: "I think Claudio very often gets played as kind of wet. And I'm like, 'Ah, this is a decorated soldier. He's a tough guy'" (22). Accordingly, Whedon presents the characters as soldiers through two methods: first through the presence of firearms, and, secondly, through casting. As Richard S. Albright (building on arguments on Whedonian intertextuality put forward by Jeffrey Bussolini) argues, Whedon's staging of *Much Ado* makes use of actors' previous roles within the Whedonverse (Hautsch, McGee, and Nadkarni 28). We learn of the activities of the main male characters by way of a report handed to Clark Gregg, who also plays Agent Phil Coulson in *The Avengers* film and the TV spin-off *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* The connection is further reinforced by the fact that Gregg's dress and performance do little to differentiate one character from the other (indeed, I suspect, and Albright and Bussolini might agree, that this is a deliberate strategy in terms of creating a unified Whedon signature).

[10] When the soldiers do arrive, they do not wear the duffle bags and fatigues one might associate with a soldier returning from war, but matching suits. We quickly realize that they are also carrying guns

in under-arm holsters, which suggest that these suits are, in fact, their uniform. The conflict in which they have been embroiled, therefore, I wish to propose, is stylistically divorced from modern U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and more directly suggestive of the outfits worn by male characters in *Agents of S.H.I.EL.D.*

[11] The evocation of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* is suggestive of the political stance of the film. Within *The Avengers* and its wider film franchise, Samira Nadkarni asserts, we encounter the rhetoric (found throughout post-9/11 discourse) of the 'just war' which ties modern coalition military operations with World War II. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* goes some way to problematizing this rhetoric by showing that S.H.I.E.L.D. itself has been compromised by Hydra, a Nazi operation. Nonetheless:

> Despite a growing internal critique of the militarism evident in American foreign policy [. . .] there remains an underlying justification in which the continued need for this militarization, and indeed, the devotion of further resources to this militarization, is evident. In this manner, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and its associated MCU [Marvel Comics Universe] movie franchise manage to both critique and disavow the totalitarian policies that underlie this militarized state, while insisting on the need for a continued and increased military presence. (Nadkarni 2)

This pro-militarization stance leads to the valorization of actions which Nadkarni persuasively reads as problematic, particularly with regard to race. One such issue is the casual violation of national boundaries. These territorial violations are present in the series as a necessary evil because, as always, world security is at stake. For Nadkarni, this represents a hawkish and neo-colonial ethic that is entirely relevant to modern politics:

> The growing media furor over nationalism and immigration in the aftermath of the so called "War on Terrorism" has seen women's rights heavily curtailed and People of Color persecuted beyond the pre-existing social and systemic biases already evident, turning each of them into a localized version of a threat on home soil. (Nadkarni 3)

This theme is played out within the series, with the characters Chan Ho Yin ("Scorch"), who is Chinese, and Michael Peterson (Deathlok), who is African American, as individuals who are forced into a slave narrative and whose liberation is only brought about through the actions of a white savior. Nadkarni does not explicitly link this narrative to the rhetoric of liberation which has served as justification for many acts of U.S. military intervention overseas, but I believe that such a connection is eminently reasonable.

[12] The political rhetoric of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* haunts *Much Ado*—a film in which only one non-white actor repeatedly appears (and, at one point, is subject to an indirect racial slur). The other signs of non-white identities appear only in the masked ball in which the characters participate. At this party, characters perform other ethnic identities. Benedict wears a niqab (a type of headdress worn by Muslim women). In the commentary for the film, Whedon notes that the fact that Benedick actor Alexis Denisof was sometimes with and sometimes without a beard meant that the producers wanted a costume to cover Denisof's face in this scene for continuity, there were many ways in which his face could have been covered, however, and so the choice remains conspicuous. Another character dons a kabuki mask. In the series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, the eponymous protagonists readily indulge in neo-colonialist territorial violations. In *Much Ado,* this territorial appropriation is replayed through the insouciant appropriation of non-white signs.

[13] The evocation of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* also suggests an ethical stance of "by whatever means necessary"—that the preservation of world security is foremost and, therefore, extreme measures such as acts of territorial violation, are ugly but justified. This hawkish political stance extends beyond the questions of America as the self-appointed world law-enforcer and turns inward to consider ethical questions around internal surveillance.

## "My lord, I am for you, though it cost me ten nights' watching"

[14] Upon entering the house, the soldiers undergo a process of both emotional and physical disarming, suggesting that, unlike the world outside, this is a safe space. As Claudio unpacks, he removes his gun and places it in a bag. Benedict, similarly, swaps his pistol for an extravagant hat. The ensuing wrestling and horseplay between Claudio and Benedict enacts the violence to which they have been exposed outside the house in a softened, non-dangerous manner.

[15] One way in which the characters do resemble many active duty and returning veterans is that they immediately begin to drink.

The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence reports that roughly one in eight troops returning from Afghanistan and Iraq were referred for counselling for alcohol problems (NCADD). Alcohol features heavily in Whedon's *Much Ado.* Indeed, in the very first shot, empty bottles are in the foreground, and in what follows, there are few scenes in which no one either takes a drink or is seen with a glass in hand. Problematically, however, the presence of alcohol does not seek to link military life with alcoholism, but contributes to a general sense of revelry which runs throughout the film. Indeed, when characters are perturbed, it often manifests in an unwillingness to imbibe alcohol. When Beatrice is overwhelmed with anger at Claudio's treatment of Hero, the screenplay includes the direction "[s]he moves to the bar, shakily trying to pour a whiskey, which she does not drink" (Whedon 156).

[16] The willingness of the characters to first materially disarm and then emotionally disarm by entering into a party atmosphere contributes to the sense that the world of *Much Ado* is a fundamentally safe place—that any danger has been safely externalized. A further factor which reassures us of their safety is the fact that the watchmen are constantly present. Even before we even hear any dialogue in the film, the screenplay features the following direction: "from behind one tree steps a WATCHMAN, a sort of detective, speaking into the com in his sleeve. Another appears from behind another tree several yards away in a similar grey suit" (Whedon 51). The people within this house are safe, it seems, because they are observed. The very presence of these watchmen suggests that, somewhere beyond (or, as transpires, within) the walls of this estate, there is something from which those within need to be protected.

[17] The theme of surveillance is in no way new to *Much Ado About Nothing.* The title of the play includes an often-cited pun—"nothing" is a homophone for "noting" (see Whedon, 17 or, for a more detailed explanation, see Emma Smith's lecture, the Internet Shakespeare Editions webpage, or Rhonda Wilcox's essay). Nothing in the play occurs without being seen (or noted) by another character. Characters constantly comment upon one another's behavior. The "much ado" which constitutes the engine of the play is founded upon Claudio and Don Pedro's mistaken belief that they have seen Hero in the act of copulation, and the secondary plot of Beatrice and Benedict is set into motion by each character's overhearing conversations which

are, without their knowledge, designed to be overheard. The resolution of the play, which diverts it from tragedy to comedy, arises because the first and second watchmen overhear Don John's followers Conrade and Borachio discussing the successful execution of their plan. At the end of the story, the sonnets which Beatrice and Benedict wrote of each other are made public and displayed as proof of their mutual affection. In stage versions of the play (and perhaps in film versions as well, although without the same immediacy) we, the ever-watching audience are partially complicit in the voyeurism which drives the action.

[18] Whedon's *Much Ado* builds this constant noting into the cinematography of the film. In the silent "morning after" scene which begins the film, Benedict's departure is noted by Beatrice without his knowledge. When Claudio and Benedict first discuss Hero, they glance backward briefly, noting the maid's proximity. Later, before Don John first speaks with Conrade, the screenplay gives the direction "[h]e moves off the bed, looking up out the French door: to see an agent standing guard on the stairs above" (Whedon 68). The angles by which the two are then shot, from between the slats of the stairs, for example, or through the glass of a closed door, suggests that we, the audience, are spying on them. Later in the film, Don John learns of Claudio and Hero's engagement through a grate in the wall. When, near the end, Don John is arrested, we observe this via a "TMZ-style [a celebrity news site] long-lens photo of Don John being shackled" (Whedon 183). Nothing in this film, it appears, occurs without being not only noted but, in the majority of cases, recorded.

[19] The fact that the characters are under constant surveillance is manifest in the figure of the photographer, who appears throughout the film. The photographer appears to document the arrival of Don Pedro and his men and the weddings which occur during the film. In one iconic moment, the photographer checks her camera and then turns it on us, the audience, making it clear that we, too, fall within her purview (see Wilcox paras. 27-30).

[20] In this sense, Whedon's *Much Ado* might be stylistically connected with the 2009 BBC version of *Hamlet* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which includes frequent cuts to CCTV footage of the scene taking place. This grainy assertion of the fact that the characters are under constant watch belies the apparent opulence and comfort of the court. These cameras are, at times, cleverly woven into

the production. Hamlet only gives his speech which begins “Ay, so. God b’wi ye—Now I am alone” (2.2.559), for example, after breaking a security camera.

[21] We can easily point here to the idea of the panopticon—a system of prison design which allows guards full visual access to every cell at all times, later used by Foucault as a metaphor for a disciplinary society or an organizational structure. At the present time, however, we hardly need a metaphor to understand the idea of surveillance culture, because it has become a key part of public discourse. Both Whedon’s *Much Ado* and the 2009 RSC *Hamlet* seem to foreshadow the events of June 2013 when Edward Snowden leaked National Security Agency files, including details of numerous global surveillance programs. The NSA leak has sparked a debate around questions of privacy. Even before the NSA leak, there already existed a debate concerning the right to privacy versus national security. The PATRIOT Act of February 2002 which, in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, authorized the prolonged detention of immigrants and allowed law enforcement agencies to search a home or business without the owner’s permission or knowledge, has been seen by many as an affront to the right to privacy.

[22] The 2009 RSC version of *Hamlet* and Whedon’s *Much Ado* appear to fall on opposite sides of this debate. In *Hamlet*, the presence of CCTV cameras is disturbing and invasive. We understand Hamlet’s apparent madness because he is aware that he is perpetually being watched. It is clear, too, that Hamlet is being watched because Claudius fears him (and with good reason). Surveillance, in this performance, is a symptom of a government which lives in fear of its citizens. It is a form of control.

[23] In *Much Ado,* conversely, the constant policing of public space, like the invasion of foreign territory, is presented as eminently necessary. Indeed, characters seem to be entirely complicit in their being observed. Leonato and Don Pedro, for example, pose readily and easily in the presence of the photographer, and one has the sense that they are accustomed to having their image captured. It is only those characters who are malevolent who are (or who need to be) concerned by the surveillance measures to which they are subjected. All of the characters in the play are observed, but it is only Don John who checks himself at the sight of the watchmen. Indeed, it is ultimately the act of surveillance which foils the main plot—if the characters did not

continually monitor one another's words, then Borachio's deception would never have been uncovered, and Beatrice and Benedict would never have been convinced of one another's love. The play's moral message, therefore, resembles that of many after the NSA leak: "if you are not guilty then you have nothing to fear." Indeed, the plot seems to suggest a need for even more efficient systems of surveillance—if the police were only more competent, the misunderstanding would have been averted before it had achieved any effect.

[24] The use of Shakespeare is significant in terms of the ideology of the film in that the valorization and celebration of Shakespeare can be construed as a gesture of support for the state. To understand this argument, we must begin with its reverse; to appropriate, parody, or disrupt the Shakespearian text, at least within certain Anglophone contexts, can be understood as a politically subversive act. Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier summarize one philosophical and artistic position taken with respect to Shakespeare as follows: "the major author is a despotic ego, the man of the state, the king, the ruling 'majority.' To disrupt the work of the major author is, therefore, to disrupt the basis of the state and its rulers" ( 6). Shakespeare, and the valorization of Shakespeare is, in large part, a product of British imperialism, which has been perpetuated through mass education. Shakespeare has come to represent the highest in cultural capital (at least, in the domains of theatre and literature). As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins argue, "[t]he Shakespeare 'industry'—as it impacts on the educational systems, the critical discourses, and the theatrical culture of a society—often operates in ways that sustain ideas, values, and even epistemologies" (19). Shakespeare, therefore, can be a proxy for the state, and to refuse to handle Shakespeare delicately is an act of iconoclasm.

[25] We should be careful about taking this reading too far – the BBC version of *Hamlet* in 2009 simultaneously celebrated Shakespeare while offering an oblique criticism of the state (England has more CCTV cameras per person than any other nation). *Hamlet* was banned from performance in Stalin's Russia, and Shakespeare has come to represent not conservativism, but individuality in China. Having established the limits of such an argument, however, one might argue that if an iconoclastic approach to Shakespeare seeks to disrupt and challenge the state, then a canonical performance can be read as a vote

for literary orthodoxy, high culture, and a stance of political conservatism.

[26] The question thus resolves as follows: to find the political heart of Whedon's *Much Ado,* we must establish whether he approaches Shakespeare with reverence or, as Mal asserts in *Firefly,* aims to misbehave. The "misbehave" argument has some legitimacy; as Rhonda Wilcox argues, Whedon's *Much Ado* offers a double-voiced commentary on the Elizabethan racial world-view in the cinematography of the "ethiope" line (par.14). She contends "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" (par. 14). I would propose, however, that Whedon's stance on Shakespeare is largely celebratory.[2] Consider, for example, Whedon's motives for approaching Shakespeare:

> Shakespeare's plays have been a passion of mine since I was old enough to have passions. Not terribly original, but blame the Bard for that. These stories, verses, words . . . they're indelible. There's a distance from the norm – 400 years will do that, plus the conventions of the form – that makes the plays work as pure poetry, as a lost language, as music. (Whedon 9-10)

Whedon's treatment of Shakespeare, I wish to propose, is therefore largely conservative. He leaves the essential humor, themes, and shape of the play intact. His staging of the play seeks, broadly, to provide a platform for Shakespeare's language rather than to disrupt or challenge the author. If one came to the cinema to watch Shakespeare, one would not be disappointed.

[27] To connect this thread of the argument to that proposed above, I wish to assert that within Whedon's *Much Ado*, the in-text normalization of surveillance culture works in concert with his celebration of Shakespeare as a proxy for the state and his evocation of *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD.* and, therefore, a pro-militarization stance. Collectively, these factors suggest a hawkish stance in the debate over the ethics of information-gathering and increased militarization.

[28] One might, of course, counter that, although the necessity of surveillance culture ultimately prevails within the text, Whedon also shows ways in which characters within the play subvert the surveillance culture to which they belong. Indeed, Don John's plot relies upon the fact that the characters are being observed. For me, this alone is

insufficient to suggest that the film as a whole represents a critique of surveillance culture—after all, "noting" is the means through which Don John's plot comes undone. Such a reading suggests a radical departure from the anti-authoritarian ethic of *Firefly* and *Serenity*, in which Captain Mal and his crew spend their time trying to outrun the long arm of the Alliance, and, at the end of *Serenity*, enact a Snowden-esque release of information detailing the activities of the state. I can offer little to reconcile these two narrative ethics. For those of us who empathized with the ethics of *Firefly, Much Ado* appears to be a radical—and baffling—reversal of Whedon's politics.

## Conclusion

[29] In this essay, I hope to have shown that Whedon's *Much Ado,* through its depiction of what resemble S.H.I.E.L.D. agents on their downtime, enjoying the happy, safe, well-policed (and almost entirely white) world they have secured, ultimately seeks to legitimize both neo-colonialist military interventions and the reduction of personal privacy through mass-surveillance systems.

[30] Whedon's *Much Ado* was released in 2012 and the first season of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* finished screening in May 2014. *Much Ado* came before the NSA leak. Both also came before the release of CIA reports in December 2014, which detailed the horrendous (and ineffective) acts of torture to which individuals in Afghanistan were subject by CIA operatives. One cannot help but wonder if the ideological compass of either would have been different in light of these events.

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[1] For the importance of the contextualization of Shakespeare regarding the historic and the modern, see, e.g., Gillespie and Rhodes, Prescott, and Howard.

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[2] Cf. J. Douglas Rabb and J. Michael Richardson, who "argue that [Whedon] has more in common with the *early* modern Shakespeare than with . . . modern theories of ethics" (8).