The bedchamber as contested space: *Much Ado About Nothing* in film and social media

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In William Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, Borachio and Don John seek to disrupt the impending marriage between Hero and Claudio with a complicated plot. Borachio, confident of the waiting gentlewoman Margaret’s affection toward him, is equally confident that “at any unseasonable instant of the night”, he can “appoint her to look out at her lady’s chamber.” As Borachio fine-tunes the plan, he proposes that the lords will see him at Hero’s “chamber window, hear me call Margaret ‘Hero’” and her call him Claudio. Don John’s subsequent proposal to Claudio and Benedick pushes further the promise for ocular as well as aural proof: “Go but with me tonight, you shall see her chamber window entered, even the night before her wedding day.” The implication, of course, is that not just the window, but Hero’s body has been entered. The evidence is unclear, however, for although Don John promises Claudio the sight of Hero’s chamber being entered, what he confesses to Dogberry and Verges is simply a farewell at the window: “[K]now that I have tonight wooed Margaret, the Lady Hero’s gentlewoman, by the name of Hero. She leans me out at her mistress’ chamber window, bids me a thousand times goodnight.” The competing accounts of what did or did not transpire there make Hero’s bedchamber a contested space.

The early modern bedchamber, in life and literature

In early modern households, whether large or small, in England or Italy, domestic space was malleable. According to Sandra Cavallo and Tessa Storey, in Italian aristocratic households, bedchambers often were moved according to the seasons, for maximum warmth or coolness.5

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1 *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.2.16–18 (emphasis added). All references to Shakespeare’s plays are from *Shakespeare’s Plays* from Folger Digital Texts, ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, Folger Shakespeare Library, www.folgerdigitaltexts.org (accessed on 17 December 2017).

2 *Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.2.33 ff.

3 *Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.2.15–106 (emphasis added).

4 *Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.3.144–8 (emphasis added).

At times, sleeping arrangements were even more fluid as visitors, both permanent and temporary, descended on aristocratic households. Furthermore, the bedroom was a multi-use structure: a place not only to sleep, but also to eat, work, and entertain visitors. The most historically resonant detail in Hero’s case is the question of whether Beatrice had been Hero’s “bedfellow” on the night in question. Renaissance people regularly slept with trusted friends or counselors of the same sex, a practice to which Shakespeare refers in both Othello and Henry V. The presence of a bedfellow would have been particularly helpful to Hero’s defence.

The context for Borachio’s putative seduction of Hero resonates less strongly with Renaissance material conditions than with some literary genres, ranging from the medieval fabliau to popular ballads. We need look no further than Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Miller’s Tale for a failed seduction that takes place at a chamber window. The young wife Allison, in bed with her husband, addresses her adulterous and importunate suitor Absalom by placing a particular part of her anatomy outside the window, which leads hapless Absalom to suffer first, an unsavoury kiss and then, the after-effects of his rival’s flatulence. Ballads also can feature prominently the chamber window as a pathway to seduction. To give a Shakespearean example, one of the songs that Ophelia sings in Hamlet is a ballad detailing a seduction that occurs on the eve of St Valentine’s Day. The female narrator sings:

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day,
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window
To be your Valentine.⁸

In the ballad, the young man “rose and donned his clothes”, opened the door, and “[l]et in the maid, that out a maid / Never departed more.”⁹ There is a comparable situation in All’s Well That Ends Well, when Bertram, fleeing his lawfully wedded wife Helena, seeks to seduce Diana, a virtuous but poor Florentine gentlewoman. Having arranged beforehand a bed-switch that will return Bertram to his wife, Diana gives him instructions for their proposed encounter:

When midnight comes, knock at my chamber window.
I’ll order take my mother shall not hear.
Now will I charge you in the band of truth,
When you have conquered my yet maiden bed,
Remain there but an hour, nor speak to me.¹⁰

Here, as in Borachio’s narrative from Much Ado, a knock at the window leads imaginatively through the door to the occupant’s bed.

It is a truism that productions of early modern drama in visual media can show much more than did Shakespeare’s stages. It comes as no surprise, then, that contemporary filmmakers and their social media descendants have dwelt at length on the interior of Hero’s chamber. Contemporary appropriations of Much Ado generally maintain the basic

⁷ Much Ado About Nothing, 4.1.156–8.
⁸ Hamlet, 4.5.52–4.
⁹ Hamlet, 4.5.59–60.
¹⁰ All’s Well That Ends Well, 4.2.65–9 (emphasis added).
infrastructure of window, bed, and sometimes door, but visualise in lavish detail the interior of Hero’s bedchamber and offer, through extra-diegetic scenes, different versions of what allegedly transpired there. In so doing, they complicate the underlying narratological pattern for female seduction established in the play and so offer new – at times insightful, at times incoherent – accounts of the crucial scene at the heart of Hero’s shaming, death, and the play’s shaky recuperation of a happy marital ending.

Kenneth Branagh and the art of surveillance

_Much Ado About Nothing_, as critics have discussed, is a play about “noting”, with early modern pronunciation making the elision between these two words, noting and nothing, possible. As has been discussed at length, what Dorothy C. Hockey calls _Much Ado’s_ comedy of “mis-noting” derives from the importance of disguise and deliberate deception in the dynamics of spectatorship.11 Surveillance and eavesdropping are not limited to the gulling scenes, however; they are pervasive practices in Messina.12 The first incident occurs when Borachio brings Don John news of the Prince’s intention to wed Claudio to Hero. In order to overhear Pedro and Claudio’s conversation, Borachio disguises himself as a perfumer, a specific household functionary:

Being entertained for a perfumer, as I was smoking a musty room, comes me the Prince and Claudio, hand in hand, in sad conference. I whipped me behind the arras, and there heard it agreed upon that the Prince should woo Hero for himself, and having obtained her, give her to Count Claudio.13

Borachio uses his strategy and hiding place successfully, as he hears and understands Don Pedro’s intentions correctly. Slightly earlier, by contrast, Antonio had mis-reported to Leonato that Don Pedro was going to woo Hero for himself, on the word of a servant whom he reports to be a “good sharp fellow”:

The Prince and Count Claudio, walking in a thick-pleached alley in mine orchard, were thus much overheard by a man of mine: the Prince discovered to Claudio that he loved my niece your daughter and meant to acknowledge it this night in a dance, and if he found her accordant, he meant to take the present time by the top and instantly break with you of it.14

_Itching_, the weaving together of live and dead branches, makes a densely-woven hedge. Maurice Hunt suggests that “the density of the foliage warps or muffles Don Pedro’s speech; the forward movement of those spied upon may also play a role.”15 In either case, mis-noting is not limited to staged deceptions, but rather, is a common consequence in a society governed by surveillance.

Kenneth Branagh, with his well-known penchant for literalisation, attempts to compensate for the slipperiness of social signifying in his representation of the feigned seduction by revealing the “truth” of Hero’s innocence while simultaneously rendering

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13 _Much Ado About Nothing_, 1.3.56–62.
14 _Much Ado About Nothing_, 1.2.18; 1.2.9–16.
Claudio’s misprision understandable. Through manipulations of the camera, the film’s agent of surveillance, he tries to represent at once the perspective of Claudio and a superior point of view conferred by the camera on film viewers. The fabliau/ballad model for seduction depends on the window being reasonably accessible to the beloved at ground level who knocks. This is certainly true of the window in Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, which repeatedly is referred to as low. Branagh, in contrast, films the encounter between Margaret and Borachio largely at a distance and from far below. The Shakespearean text provides support for such a choice. For the elevated window as trope, we might look instead to classical myth. Alison Findlay suggests that “when Margaret plays at being Hero at her mistress’s chamber window, she is also play-acting as the classical heroine in her tower” – Hero, who in Marlowe’s version, awaits her lover in an inaccessible tower or “turret” but leaves the door open to give her lover easy access. The song that repentant Claudio sings to Hero’s “bones” after her faked death begins: “Pardon, goddess of the night, / Those that slew thy *virgin knight.*” Hero, restored to her classical identity as Diana’s “virgin knight”, is rehabilitated as the inaccessible virgin in the tower.

Competing accounts of the encounter in *Much Ado* emphasise as well the restrictions on sight and hearing that spying from a distance entails. In an influential study of gender and rank in *Much Ado*, Jean Howard writes that Don John’s trick depends on assumptions about women that the other men in the play share: “women are universally prone to deception and impersonation.” Thus, the men are conditioned to “see” Hero as unfaithful: “Don Pedro and Claudio believe the deception at Hero’s window, not only because they trust the testimony of their eyes, but also because what Don John tells them has the truth of stereotype as well.”

While Howard’s point that vision is conditioned by belief is well-taken, Borachio’s recounting to Conrad of the seduction figures the onlookers’ distance from what they observe, both vertically and longitudinally, and the contingencies of physical manipulation as impediments to proper interpretation. Frustrated by the disjointed story he is telling to Conrade, Borachio corrects his narrative course and continues: “I should first tell thee how the Prince, Claudio, and my master, planted and placed and possessed by my master Don John, saw afar off in the orchard this amiable encounter.” “Planted, placed, and possessed”: this tricolon indicates that Don John plays on his victims’ preconceptions (he “possesses” their ready imaginations), but also “places” them physically where he wishes and so “plants” them, suggesting at once that the men are physically manoeuvred into place by Don John but also ready, given the context, to spy on

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16 Although it ranges far beyond the scope of this essay, see Peter Brown’s meticulous account of the window in Chaucer’s “Shot Wyndowe” (*Miller’s Tale*, i.3.358 and 3695): An Open and Shut Case?” *Medium Ævum*, 69.1 (2000), pp. 96–103.
18 *Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.2.12–13 (emphasis added).
21 *Much Ado About Nothing*, 3.3.149–52.
Based on Borachio’s account, we infer as well that the two villains work through the rhetorical power of John’s “oaths” and Borachio’s “confirmations”, noisy ejaculations that are not only persuasive but could literally drown out the staged dialogue in which Borachio calls Margaret by Hero’s name.

In Branagh’s rendering of the unseen seduction in “real time”, Borachio and Don John are not present as stagehands and commentators. Unlike in some of the productions discussed here, Branagh is not interested in getting inside Hero’s bedchamber on the fatal night. Instead, the camera zooms in on Margaret and Borachio standing on the balcony, recording “what happens” through close-ups of their bodies and focusing on faces to guide the viewer’s affective response. Rather than follow the literary pattern of movement from window to door and finally the bed, we are transported immediately to the balcony, perceiving Borachio undress and kiss Margaret through a medium shot (figure 1). The camera then draws back, so that we see the lovers, now from a distance, grapple with one another on the balcony (figure 2).

Figure 1. Medium shot of Margaret and Borachio embracing, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1993.

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See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, definition 4e for plant, v. *trans*: “To station (a person); esp. (colloq.) to post or infiltrate (a person) surreptitiously, usually as a spy or agent.” The earliest use recorded by the *OED*, however, is 1693. More common in the period is definition 3a, “To instil (an idea or feeling) in the mind, heart, etc.; to introduce, cause to spring up and grow (a quality, emotion, belief, etc.).” In early modern English, the sense of being planted physically (standing immovably, as if spying) is balanced against the idea of indoctrination (planting ideas in the mind of another).
Next, it shifts focus altogether to record straight on and in close-up the male onlookers’ reactions: the upturned face and anguished expression of Claudio, framed by those of his stunned and chagrined friends (figure 3). We are absorbed into Claudio’s perspective and share his affect. Finally, the camera returns to the level of the balcony, where we come face-to-face with Borachio – clearly recognisable through the close-up of his face and audible in his moans of “Hero, Hero ...” – as he mounts Margaret with exaggerated thrusts of his hips. Significantly, we never see the woman’s face, making the whole scene a “face-off” between men, villain and victim (figure 4). Men alone determine the significance of this scene.
Branagh’s film goes to great lengths to excuse Claudio’s misprision. At the same time, the film works hard to confirm Hero’s innocence. We are never admitted into the chamber where Borachio and Margaret do their vile deeds, but we do know where, and in what company, Hero sleeps. For we have seen Hero’s bedroom at the very opening of the film. As Don Pedro and his men crest the hill on horseback and the excited women of Messina scramble to prepare for their arrival, we see a large, dormitory-style room with multiple beds; not only could Hero and Beatrice be bedfellows, but the whole group, young and old women alike, apparently bed down together amid white sheets and gauzy curtains, reminiscent of the curtained four-posters of the time. This scene of festive celebration, in which the whole household cleans and prepares the house for the imminent guests, stresses the integrated and innocent nature of feminine society in Messina, a culture that men will soon disrupt and nearly destroy. A young woman, chastely clothed in a white nightdress, leaps across the row of beds while a wrinkled elder, betraying an age-inappropriate expanse of leg, romps behind her (figure 5).
Having established the female communal bedchamber as a safe space of innocence mixed with sexiness, Branagh takes us back there at the conclusion of the seduction scene, as the image of Borachio smirking fades into a shot of Hero, sleeping peacefully alone in her curtained white bed. Although again, it is impossible to place this bed within the domestic interior of Leonato’s household, as shown at the outset of the film, white curtains and bed linen link this bedroom to the happy dormitory of the play’s opening to assure us of Hero’s virginal isolation on this, her wedding night (figure 6). Regardless of whether or not Hero slept with Beatrice on that fateful night, the sanctity of the virginal bedroom remains undisturbed even as masculine jealousy is excused.

Figure 6. Hero’s innocent sleep on the eve of her wedding.

Women’s bedrooms in Joss Whedon’s Much Ado About Nothing

The bedchamber is even more central to the Joss Whedon adaptation of Much Ado About Nothing, which famously was shot in the filmmaker’s own Los Angeles home. In this film, the various upstairs bedrooms paradoxically present themselves as unmediated reality (what you might expect to find in an affluent Los Angeles home) but simultaneously saturated with symbolic significance (in Hero’s case, as emblematic of her character).

Within the structure “co-owned” by Whedon and Shakespeare’s Leonato, the spacious kitchen is the centre of social activity. Here occur the marriage negotiations between Don Pedro and Leonato; here also occurs the gulling of Beatrice, who conceals herself under cabinets as she overhears Margaret and Hero rehearse the tale of Benedick’s love for her. The masquerade party, Hero’s shaming, and her eventual marriage to Claudio all take place
outdoors, in the garden amphitheatre that Whedon’s wife, architect Kai Cole, designed to host his amateur Shakespeare readings with friends. Most scenes related to the plot against Hero, however, take place within the multiple bedrooms of Whedon’s home. Borachio reports the news of Claudio’s impending marriage to Hero to Don John while the latter is engaged in a sexual dalliance with Conrad (a woman, in this version). Borachio barges in during an embarrassingly intimate moment, but Conrad allows John to continue caressing her under the covers as Borachio delivers his news. The viewer’s own position in this scene, spying on both plot and sexual tryst from a skylight above the bedroom, implicates her in the scene’s general sleaziness (figures 7 and 8).


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Figure 8. The viewer as spy, overhearing Borachio’s news.

More interestingly, from an iconographic viewpoint, is another bedroom, to which Benedick and Claudio are assigned for the duration of the house party. This can only be the childhood bedroom of Hero, and presumably also of Beatrice, furnished as it is with tiny twin beds, frilly lampshades, and other remnants of girlhood. There is Shakespearean precedent for using a woman’s bedroom as an emblem of her character in *Cymbeline*, where villainous Iachimo emerges from a trunk in the sleeping Imogen’s bedchamber, “noting” down details of the “fretted” ceiling, sculpted chimney depicting “chaste Dian bathing”, and statues of “winking Cupids” that function as andirons. This personalised, allegorical bedchamber, with its various decorations, identifies Imogen as the chaste Venus of marital desire, a perfect combination of sensual appeal and innocence whose vulnerability threatens her with metamorphosis into the violated Philomel, the subject of Imogen’s bedtime reading in her copy of Ovid.25

Whedon’s bedchamber has a slightly different status, functioning simultaneously as a material setting and as a metaphor of its mistress’s character. While every inch of Imogen’s bedroom is to be read as emblematic of her moral nature, in many ways the articles in this contemporary bedroom are introduced casually; the detritus of Hero’s youth, from teddy bears to stickers on the wall, are captured off-centre in brief glimpses by the camera, as an accidental effect of filming the plot. At times, however, the material setting takes on symbolic significance.

While Benedick strenuously promotes bachelorhood to the smitten Claudio during this first crucial scene in the girls' bedchamber – “Is’t come to this? In faith, hath not the world one man but he will wear his cap with suspicion? Shall I never see a bachelor of threescore again?” – we see, next to the chair on which he sits, a dollhouse (figure 9). As the camera zooms in on Benedick's face, there comes into focus a pair of Barbie dolls, blond and brunette, sitting side-by-side on a sofa (figure 10).

Figures 9 and 10. Benedick with dollhouse and Barbie dolls.

Is this, as Douglas Lanier suggests, a sly reference to “Whedon’s short-lived [series] Dollhouse?”27 Or are we to infer that Beatrice and Hero are nothing more than Barbie dolls – plastic playthings – to these men? According to Susan Stewart, the miniature dollhouse is like a “locket or the secret recesses of the heart: center within center, within within within. The dollhouse is a materialized secret; what we look for is the dollhouse within the dollhouse and its promise of an infinitely profound interiority.”28 In Whedon’s film, however, this promised access to “profound interiority” never materialises. The girls’ sanctuary is tainted from the start by voyeurism and scopophilia. As Claudio, at the start of the scene, enthuses that Hero is “the sweetest lady that ever / I looked on”,29 the camera pans down from the top floor to record Hero (figure 11) and her muffled conversation with Beatrice. The scene ends, furthermore, with Benedick and Claudio wrestling on the beds, asserting their masculine bond within this shrine to childhood (figure 12). They literally “take over” the feminine space.

Figure 11. Hero, filmed from her childhood bedroom.

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27 Lanier, “‘Good lord, for alliance.’”
28 Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984, p. 61.
29 Much Ado About Nothing, 1.1.184–5; see Spierry’s discussion of this scene, pp. 23–4.
Borachio and John conceive their plot in a bedroom that is positioned symbolically between innocent girlhood – a Raggedy Ann doll is tossed on the bed – and mature female friendship, as symbolised by a photo of the adult Hero and Beatrice upon which Borachio gazes as he talks (figure 13). Finally, the revelation of Hero’s supposed perfidy unfolds back in Hero’s childhood bedroom, where Claudio and Benedick are camped out. When the others enter, Benedick is lying on a twin bed mooning over a photograph, perhaps the one seen before in Borachio’s hands. He is framed by a ladder-full of stuffed animals (figure 14). As the camera pans out at the end of the scene, the film shows us that Don Pedro and Claudio are now trapped within the room as they are in their false impressions; the men, no longer interlopers or even masters of the girls’ bedroom, are just the latest victims of antifeminist slander and a culture that fetishises female childhood innocence (figure 15).
Figure 13. Borachio gazes on photograph of the adult Hero and Beatrice.

Figure 14. Benedick contemplating Beatrice's picture in the childhood bedroom.
The climactic bedroom scene, in which Margaret, dressed as Hero, grapples with Borachio, takes place in an adult woman’s bedroom. As we follow Borachio, under cover of night, to Hero’s bedchamber, we see clothes strewn on the bed, and in the background, a vanity or makeup table with what looks like a champagne bottle on it (figure 16). Margaret dresses herself and prims for the encounter (figure 17). But it is Borachio himself who brings from outside the dress he has selected for her, which will later become Hero’s ill-fated wedding gown; as masculine stage-master, he controls the bedchamber from the very start (figure 18). That this highly feminised space, which Borachio enters through the window, is the site of a completed sexual encounter is indicated by the close-up shot of Margaret’s skirt, hitched up over her thighs (figure 19). That the encounter is creepy is confirmed by the previous shot of the apprehensive look on her face.
Figure 17. Margaret prepares for her romantic encounter, in her own clothing.

Figure 18. Borachio gives Margaret Hero’s dress to wear.
Whedon’s film, however much it makes Borachio into the dramatic mastermind behind the faked seduction, also traps the viewer, as it has Claudio and Don Pedro, within its complex economy of slander, this time through the bedchamber’s contested status as material place and index of character. While the film viewer may be inclined to excuse both Claudio and Hero based on the filmic evidence, there is a trap latent in the way in which the Whedon film treads a delicate path between realism and metaphor. For, having insisted on the setting’s intractable materiality, Whedon’s *Much Ado* tempers the viewer into allegorising that same space. After the supposed seduction, as Hero is preparing for her wedding, we are finally invited into the bedchamber, where we see Hero put on her wedding gown against an extravagant backdrop of multiple dresses and shoes (figure 20). What are we to make of this detail? Is Hero a spoiled rich girl? A shallow socialite? The film tempts us, if only briefly, to conclude that Hero is, in the end, nothing more than a Barbie doll with an impressive wardrobe. Whedon’s focus on the details of women’s bedrooms prevents him from achieving the strict moral calculus of Branagh’s film, which excuses Claudio even as it confirms Hero’s innocence. With his commitment to *cinema réalité*, Whedon leaves the significance of Hero’s contested bedchamber up for grabs.
Rehabilitating the girl's bedroom in *Much Ado* spinoffs on social media

The literary paradigms of seduction that govern film renditions of Shakespeare's *Much Ado* cease to have authority in teen web spinoffs of the play. In Whedon's film, the girls' bedroom was a relic of a pre-sexual past, one whose integrity is compromised early and often in the film. In a surprising twist, a pair of recent teen video blogs – the New Zealand web television epic *Nothing Much to Do* (2014) and a mini-web series from the United States, *SHAKES* (2014–16) – rehabilitate Hero's bedchamber as a scene of safety and female agency. There is no tangible evidence that these two products of youth media culture are aware of one another or of the Whedon film, but both show the influence of girl culture on film and television. As Angela Keam has argued, the teen bedroom that figures strongly in the cult television series *My So-Called Life* (1994–95) (figure 21) carries over into Claire Danes's next role as Juliet in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) (figures 22 and 23).\(^30\)

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More generally in social media, the bedroom also seems to be a place of choice for many teenage bloggers.

The brainchild of four New Zealand teens who call themselves the Candle Wasters, Nothing Much to Do was recorded and broadcast on social media over the space of about a year. Punning on the uneventful nature of teen life, the series begins with the premise that Beatrice has moved to Auckland to live with her favourite cousin Hero; Hero’s parents are also away for an extended period of time, leaving the young people in charge of the house and to their own devices. Once this premise is established, Nothing Much to Do cleaves pretty closely to the Shakespearean storyline. John and “Robby Borachio” plot against Hero; the collective of friends conspire to bring Beatrice and Benedick together; and the series concludes with the reformed, romantic Benedick bringing together Pedro, an “all around nice guy”, and Balthasar, the group’s principal musician. Dogberry and Verges also have expanded roles.

Like many producers in their chosen genre. Beatrice and Hero blog from Hero’s bedroom. They face the camera while seated side-by-side at a desk, with the bed and the room’s copious decorations visible in the background (figure 23).

Figure 23. Hero and Beatrice blogging in Hero’s bedroom, in Nothing Much to Do, 2014.

Benedick, who has no room of his own in the house, blogs from an empty bathtub. Don John’s accusations against Hero, as in Whedon’s film, unfold in a bedroom – this time, the masculine-panelled room belonging to Leo, figured here as Hero’s brother. Reminiscent of the Whedon film but more opaque from a symbolic perspective, the room is filled with memorabilia (figure 24). We see as well the boys wrestling within this bedroom – a reference, perhaps accidental, back to the Whedon film (figure 25).
In *Nothing Much to Do*, Hero’s bedroom is a subject of special interest. In the second Q&A with their internet audience hosted by the cousins, when asked what would be her ideal bedroom, Hero responds, “pretty much what I have now, except more fairy lights.” There is even a special episode, “Sci-fi Room Tour | Nothing Much To Do,” that begins with Beatrice reading in bed and lecturing on *Frankenstein*, then moves into a panoramic survey of the objects in Hero’s room, ranging from a nested Russian doll, miniature classic car, and old windup watches on the desk to a survey of her books, posters of Benedict Cumberbatch on the wall (even though he is supposed to be Beatrice’s celebrity crush), and the aforementioned fairy lights (figures 26, 27, and 28).
Figure 26. Bric-a-brac on Hero’s desk.

Figure 27. Assorted decorations on the wall of Hero’s bedroom.
Where Whedon’s film invites the viewer to allegorise props – for instance, the dollhouse in the child’s bedroom as emblem for gender relations in Messina – the copious objects of Hero’s bedroom in *Nothing Much to Do* resist literary interpretation. They offer, in the end, nothing more than simple proof of Hero’s humanity, her lived history as a girl and young woman. In this instance, the girl herself wins the contest to control the bedroom’s significance.

My final example, *SHAKES*, also from 2014, is a mashup of three plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Ben, newly returned to town to take up his position as a reporter for the *Globe*, a traditional news newspaper, resumes his feud with Bea, who did not go to journalism school, but has founded a news blog of her own. For the first half of the series, the “merry war”\(^{31}\) between them takes centre stage. At Juliet’s birthday party, the moment in the *Much Ado* plot where the slut-shaming of Hero should take place, we get instead a truncated version of *Hamlet*’s closet scene, and the plot takes off in a different direction. Within the video blog’s imaginative landscape, Ophelia’s bedroom is the place where all three heroines gather to chat and bond; it is unambiguously a female space and a safe place, radiating childish innocence through wall decorations and the presence of a stuffed elephant. In one scene, Juliet reads *Macbeth* upside-down, just as Beatrice, of *Nothing Much to Do*, reads and rhapsodises about *Frankenstein* from Hero’s bed (figure 29). (The *Macbeth* is the Yale “Annotated Shakespeare” edition, but obviously the scholarly text is “over Juliet’s head”).

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\(^{31}\) *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.1.60.
In another reference to the Shakespearean source play, the receptionist at Ben’s place of work is reading Norrie Epstein’s *Friendly Shakespeare*. The series plays on the characters’ alienation from “classical” Shakespeare, but once the *Hamlet* plot takes over, this strain of reference to Shakespeare is abandoned. *SHAKES*, in fact, combines a sentimental take on the resilience of young people that underscores their superiority to Shakespeare’s fictional characters. What, in the end, can we say about the bedchambers of *Much Ado About Nothing* spinoffs in the age of film and new media? Most simply, these highly visual media allow creators to imagine fully the absent bedroom and the “un-scenes” that are staged there. The bedchamber of Hero becomes almost a character in its own right, a prime symbol of female innocence and solidarity in the face of male control. In teen video blogs, the contest to define the female bedroom is eventually decided in favour of the girls, who shape its material appearance and in doing so, resist masculine efforts to penetrate and define that separate sphere. More specifically, the girl’s bedroom becomes both the venue for and symbol of a healthy social alternative to high falutin’ Shakespearean language, teenage sexuality, and mediated relationships in general. It is a place of (a specifically feminine) community, friendship, and productive talk. Thus, while Branagh, as he so often does, literalises the bedchamber and shows us specifically what did (and did not) happen there, the *Much Ado* appropriations that follow Whedon’s film of the play pick up on and sharpen the theme that he and Shakespeare share: that the medium is not the message, but rather an impediment to “real” communication. Recent versions of *Much Ado* hammer home a moral articulated by Beatrice at the conclusion of *Nothing Much to Do*: “face-to-face-communication is always best”; Hero’s bedroom, refashioned in the girl’s own chosen image, is the place where such honest, private communication becomes possible.
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