

# Dreaming of Orientalism in Kenneth Branagh's *As You Like It*

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## Abstract

Kenneth Branagh's choice of Meiji-era Japan for Shakespeare's pastoral comedy inspires some visually pleasing imagery and tableaux in his film version of *As You Like It*, but the mingling of Asian cultures and marginalizing of Asian actors makes the film racially problematic and, ultimately, Eurocentric.

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*As You Like It* (2006). Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Shakespeare Association of America Annual Convention, San Diego. April 7, 2007. Performed by Bryce Dallas Howard (Rosalind), Romola Garai (Celia), David Oyelowo (Orlando), Brian Blessed (Duke Senior/Duke Frederick), Adrian Lester (Oliver), Kevin Kline (Jaques), Alfred Molina (Touchstone), Janet McTeer (Audrey), Alex Wyndham (Silvius), Jade Jefferies (Phoebe), Richard Briers (Adam), and Jimmy Yuill (Corin).

Viewers of Kenneth Branagh's most recent Shakespearean film, *As You Like It*, may well ask, along with the film's textual adviser Russell Jackson, "Why Japan?" (Jackson 2007). The unusual choice of Meiji-era Japan as the setting for Shakespeare's pastoral comedy creates a plethora of troubling images and meanings in Branagh's film. On the one hand, the setting allows him to craft lovely, picturesque tableaux, as in the opening scene, where Duke Senior, Rosalind, Celia, and various courtiers watch a kabuki performance, and the closing scene, where the brides wear ornately

embroidered silken kimonos to the wedding ceremony, which takes place amid brightly colored streamers and floating blossoms. On the other hand, the film largely marginalizes Asian bodies, constructing a vision of both court and forest where, despite the setting, nearly all the major players are white. The non-white characters who do appear are often exoticized or silenced. Although Branagh appears to be working to create a positive, multi-cultural, multi-racial version of the play (particularly since Orlando and Oliver are played by black actors), a kind of inadvertent racism, compounded by particular choices in casting and characterization, emerges in the film's dynamics.

There is no denying that the film's Japanese setting creates some aesthetically pleasing imagery. The opening credits make liberal use of Japanese watercolors as backdrops, and Orlando's tree-hung poems about Rosalind are written in graceful calligraphy. The Duke's forest abode is a zen-like haven that includes a feng shui meditation garden. Amiens (Patrick Doyle) sings "Under the Greenwood Tree" in this idyllic space, while Jaques sits cross-legged in the center of a circle and demands reverently, "More, more, I prithee, more" (*As You Like It*, 2.5.9).<sup>1</sup> The Duke is often seen meditating, his lords practice tai chi, and Jaques advocates a vegetarian diet. Their brotherhood includes two Asian musicians, who accompany Amiens on flute and strings. Even the wild-haired and often volatile Touchstone is affected by his surroundings: in an ironic moment, he too is discovered performing tai chi.

Branagh blends aspects of various Asian cultures in his film (feng shui and tai chi are Chinese), indicating an orientalist fetishization of the setting rather than an interest in cultural specificity. This is apparently intentional; the text that appears at the beginning of the film characterizes it as "a dream of Japan," indicating its imaginary otherworldliness. There is also a strong sense of theatricality throughout: The same titles proclaim "all the world's a stage," projected onto a silken curtain that draws back to reveal a kabuki performer. A different set of titles informs the audience that nineteenth century British colonial opportunists in Japan formed insular, "private mini-empires," thus creating a context in which Shakespeare's characters might operate. This prologue — at once abstract and historical, unreal and real — does not, however, mitigate the discomfort produced by the scenes involving actual Asian characters. In the scenes with the improbably named Charles (Nobuyuki Takano), a sumo wrestler who fights with Orlando, his voice is literally co-opted by a white character. Dennis (Gerard Horan), a servant of Oliver's who has only a few lines in Shakespeare's text, speaks all of Charles's lines in the film. The reason for Charles's silence is unclear, since he obviously understands English, as indicated by his curt nods in response to Oliver's warnings about Orlando. The pronouncement of Le Beau (Richard Clifford) that signals Charles's defeat — "He cannot speak, my lord" — aptly describes Charles's situation both before

and after the wrestling match (1.2.214). He becomes instead merely a mountain of flesh, and the audience (both on- and off-screen) is invited to gaze at his exoticized body as he stares impassively at Oliver and warms up in front of the wrestling spectators.

Perhaps even more troubling than the silent, inscrutable Asian stereotype embodied by Charles is the diminutive, simple-minded, grinning Asian stereotype presented by William (Paul Chan). His first encounter with Audrey (a former servant at the court who escapes after Duke Frederick's coup) does not appear in the play and is thus non-verbal. He surprises her while she is sleeping in the forest, and offers her shelter, smiling hugely and bowing repeatedly while she looks at him in apprehension. His claim on Audrey, a busty blonde who stands a full head taller than he, is made to seem both ridiculous and easily overcome by Touchstone. It is significant that William, like Charles, is shown to be ill-equipped to deal with the linguistic stylings of his rival. Touchstone laughs uproariously at his claim to "have a pretty wit," (5.1.29), and then uses violence to subdue William, twisting his fingers and forcing him to his knees, while Audrey looks on admiringly, clearly impressed by Touchstone's strength, bravado, and elaborate threats. The feminized William, unable to fight back either physically or verbally, runs away.

The only main characters who are visually troped as Japanese are Silvius and Phoebe. Both have long, straight black hair and wear more "native" dress than the other inhabitants of the forest, most of whom wear rustic Western nineteenth century clothing. (Both Silvius and Phoebe nonetheless speak with impeccable English accents.) In this context, Rosalind's condemnation of Phoebe's appearance, focusing on her "inky brows," "black silk hair," and "bugle eyeballs," feels racist, particularly since the actress playing Phoebe appears to be at least part-Asian (3.5.51-52). All the other women are light-haired and fair-skinned, setting Phoebe apart as the undesirable non-white Other.

The casting of Brian Blessed as both Duke Senior and Duke Frederick reinforces the dichotomy between East and West in ways that associate qualities such as savagery with the Orient and civilization with the Occident. Duke Senior appropriates certain elements of Asian culture, such as the kabuki performance at the court and the meditative practices in the forest. Yet he is consistently coded as Western in his dress, particularly after leaving the court. Duke Frederick, on the other hand, is always dressed as a samurai warrior, surrounded by faceless, frightening servants in armor, and is unremittingly violent in his behavior, particularly to Rosalind and Oliver. The textual prologue to the film notes that the English émigrés to Japan "tried to embrace this extraordinary culture, its beauties and its dangers." The artistic side of Japanese culture is enjoyed by Duke Senior without fundamentally altering his essential Englishness, and the violent aspects of the culture are absorbed and embodied by Duke Frederick. The film thus perpetuates the ideology

of Orientalism as described by Edward Said, in which the exoticized Orient becomes the "other" to the Western "self": "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 1978). The dichotomies of Self/Other, West/East, civilized/savage are physically embodied by the two Dukes in Branagh's film. The crises of identity experienced by both men are articulated through opposing aspects of Japanese culture (the "beautiful" and "dangerous"); yet ultimately the film tells us little about that culture or its people, nor does it break out of a stereotypically stratified vision of what "Japan" actually is.

As with his 1993 film version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, which cast Denzel Washington as Don Pedro, Branagh uses black actors seemingly as a gesture toward color-blind casting. The actors playing the three sons of Sir Roland de Boys are the only black characters in the film; yet their blackness is supposed to be unremarkable, much as Washington's was in the earlier film. While Branagh's continued fetishization of non-white bodies is tempered, to a certain extent, by the very strong and nuanced performances by David Oyelowo and Adrian Lester as Orlando and Oliver, respectively, their bodies, like those of the minor Asian players, are exoticized, particularly Orlando's in the wrestling scene. He appears in minimal sumo garb, and the camera presents numerous shots of his muscles and the sweat glistening on his skin. (There is even a hint that the white, English Le Beau admires his physical prowess, through Clifford's suggestive reading of the line, "Hereafter, in a better world than this, / I shall desire more love and knowledge of you" [1.2.285-86]).

The inter-racial marriages of Rosalind and Orlando and Celia and Oliver, along with the joyous celebration involving most of the forest's inhabitants at the end of the film, indicate that perhaps Branagh intended a more inclusive, liberal message than the reading I have offered here. Indeed, this interpretation is voiced by a commenter on the Internet Movie Database website, who writes: "Set in a lush, beautiful forest in an imaginary old Japan, populated by people of all races, this version is an innovative and modern one rather than a conventional and classical one — and it works" (Sarastro7 2006). There are some aspects of the film that support this reading. For example, there are some indications that the dichotomy between self and other begins to break down by the end of the film, in which we see that Duke Senior's new court is more open, less hierarchical, and multi-racial. The stark contrast between Senior and Frederick is also lessened by the latter's spiritual conversion, and we see him meditating in the forest, in a pose formerly occupied by Senior. Yet by casting the same actor as both Dukes, the film creates the impression that the savage Oriental Duke is a kind of "surrogate . . . underground self" (in Said's words [Said 1978]) who must ultimately become like his brother — Western and civilized — in order to be redeemed.

In the "From Page to Screen" feature on the DVD version of *As You Like It*, Branagh says that he invented the Japanese setting and added the prologue showing the usurpation of Duke Senior by Frederick as "a strong way to start the film in cinematic terms." He implies that he wanted to take advantage of the medium of film by exploring a milieu that would not have been possible in a theatrical production of the play. Certainly, the "dream of Japan" offers Branagh plenty of opportunities for lovely settings and costumes and for creating (in his words) a "fantastic life-learning holiday" for the characters. Using an Asian setting, however, should also have reminded him that raced bodies "speak" in performance, even if he tries to silence them, make them funny, or make them part of the background (as a crowd of festively dressed Japanese people are during the wedding scene, in which grinning children appreciatively gaze at the lovely white Rosalind and Celia). The film has many strong performances — particularly from Bryce Dallas Howard as Rosalind and Kevin Kline as Jaques — and it does a good job of delving into the darker side of Shakespeare's text, especially in its focus on the violence inherent in many of the play's relationships. With these merits, Branagh's *As You Like It* would have more than held up in a less racially problematic setting.

### Notes

1. All references to *As You Like It* as to the Folger Shakespeare Library edition, edited by Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine (2004).

## References

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