

# Setting *As You Like It*: Shakespearean Appropriation for the Cable Television Market

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## Abstract

Continuing his trend of Shakespearean adaptation, Kenneth Branagh and his Shakespeare Film Company recently released a new interpretation of *As You Like It* through HBO and BBC films. Although the film was released to theaters in Italy on 1 September, 2006, it went straight to television in the United States; HBO first aired the film on 21 August, 2007. With stage and screen veterans Brian Blessed, Kevin Kline, and Alfred Molina, RSC star David Oyelowo, RADA graduate Adrian Lester, and talented newcomers Bryce Dallas Howard (daughter of director Ron Howard) and Romola Garai, Branagh's film is generally well acted; indeed, Howard was nominated for a Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Mini-Series or a Motion Picture Made for Television, and Kline won a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Television Movie or Miniseries. Set in nineteenth-century Japan, the film is also visually gorgeous; that setting, however, is also what makes this production awkward and ultimately unsatisfying.

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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).

Mocking the craze for transporting Shakespeare's plays to exotic times and places, the witty online magazine *The Onion* previewed a hypothetical production of *The Merchant of Venice*: "In an innovative, tradition-defying rethinking of one of the greatest comedies in the English language, Morristown Community Players director Kevin Hiles announced Monday his bold intention to set his theater's production of William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in sixteenth-century Venice." The writer relates his tongue-in-cheek, imagined interview with Director Hiles:

I know when most people hear *The Merchant of Venice*, they think 1960s Las Vegas, a high-powered Manhattan stock brokerage, or an 18th-century Georgia slave plantation, but I think it's high time to shake things up a bit," Hiles said. "The great thing about Shakespeare is that the themes in his plays are so universal that they can be adapted to just about any time and place."

According to Hiles, everything in the production will be adapted to the unconventional setting. Swords will replace guns, ducats will be used instead of the American dollar or Japanese yen, and costumes, such as Shylock's customary pinstripe suit, general's uniform, or nudity, will be replaced by garb of the kind worn by Jewish moneylenders of the Italian Renaissance. ("Unconventional Director" 2007)

Of course, Michael Radford did set his 2004 film version of *The Merchant of Venice* in sixteenth-century Venice, drawing his audience's attention to the historical reality of early modern anti-Semitism as he recreated Venice's Jewish ghetto. The so-called new historicism in Shakespeare studies over the past two decades has influenced directors to look more closely at the political and daily realities of the era in which the works were produced. As this *Onion* article suggests, however, Shakespeare's plays have, on many occasions, been adapted both on film and on stage to historical eras and locales originally unintended by their first performers; these adapted productions have been most successful when their newly-envisioned settings have served to emphasize and illuminate important themes within the plays and/or to bring a new awareness to events closer to our collective cultural memory. Richard Loncraine, for one, set his 1995 film adaptation of *Richard III*, starring Ian McKellen, in Europe during World War II. In this case, although H. R. Coursen complains that we are not able to make our own inferences — "everything is done for us" (Coursen 2001, 210) — it is clear in Loncraine's film that the psychologically ill, morally crippled, and yet darkly charismatic Richard is to be compared to a dictator such as Adolf Hitler.

Around the same time that Loncraine and McKellen were updating *Richard* for the screen, Steven Berkoff was playing an ultra-modern Coriolanus on the London stage, decked out in black

leather with his head shaven. When Berkoff originally directed this play in New York in 1988 with Christopher Walken playing the lead, Frank Rich noted how Berkoff's interpretation reflected political disenchantment in the United States after that year's presidential election, calling the play "Shakespeare's corrosive view of Roman democracy in the 5th century B.C." and claiming that "*Coriolanus* is a tragedy in which the political process proves every bit as chaotic and poisonous as war" (Rich 1988). In this production, Berkoff's modernist sense of the diffusion of identity updated Shakespeare's cynicism about human nature to our own time. As Rich describes it, in this production "[t]he Roman plebeians are black-shirted rabble, virtually indistinguishable from their enemy. . . . The people's tribunes . . . are conniving, street-corner gangsters in pin stripes, while the generals . . . are steely bureaucrats." Rich concludes that "the exact place and time of this *Coriolanus* remain vague," but "it's the intellectual point that's firm" (Rich 1988).

Patrick Stewart looks a lot like the bald, leather-clad Berkoff in previews of Rupert Goold's *Macbeth*, which debuted in the summer of 2007 at the Chichester Festival in the UK, received critical and commercial success in London's West End, and appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February 2008. Described on the BAM website as a "harrowing study of the seductive nature of power," this production is "[s]et in an industrial chamber that is equally military hospital ward, kitchen, torture chamber, and abattoir." According to this preview, "Goold's eerily modern *Macbeth* rings with the echoes of Stalinist terror. Macbeth is a decorated and loyal war hero, but loyalty only goes so far when greatness and history beckon and murder is only a matter of military coups and secret assassinations" (Brooklyn Academy of Music 2008). Michael Coveney links the production to world events within living memory: "When Stewart delivers the 'Tomorrow' dirge to his wife's corpse stretched out on a trolley, it really is like watching the end of an era in, say, Romania or the former Yugoslavia. As a political thriller, this *Macbeth* combines all the elements of the corrupt tyranny envisaged by George Orwell and expressed again in the great recent movie *The Lives of Others*" (Coveney 2007).

On a very different note, Michael Hoffman set his 1999 film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in not Athens, but late nineteenth-century Tuscany, with the opening defense that "Necklines are high. Parents are rigid. Marriage is seldom a matter of love" (Hoffman 1999). Certainly, the Victorian social code supported a patriarchal policing of young people's sexuality much like that which Egeus attempts in the play. But *A Midsummer Night's Dream* does not have a fully-developed sense of setting to begin with, outside its poetic allusions to tales from Greek mythology; it could work in many contexts. In this case, Tuscany is appropriate merely for its sensual beauty.

I would argue that, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and other comedies such as *The Winter's Tale*, *As You Like It* is a play that, despite its repeated references to the "forest of Arden," is not particularly specific about its setting, except that part of it takes place in the city, the corrupt center of "civilization," and the other part unfolds in the country, where characters escape limitations, find themselves, and find love (consider, for example, the decision of the Oxford Shakespeare to place the play in the French forest of "Ardennes"). So one might think that Branagh could, with little difficulty, transport this text from the indeterminate court of Duke Frederick and the forest of Arden or Ardennes in a non-specific time period (besides some references to early modern doublets and hose) to a mini-empire and a forest in nineteenth-century Japan. Even though Branagh's adaptation is visually stunning, with its cherry blossoms, kimonos, and Zen rock garden, it lacks a rationale for its specific setting, and this is where the production falls most short.

While Branagh's *As You Like It* is ostensibly set in a realistic, historical Japan, Asian actors play only the shepherd Silvius, the shepherdess Phoebe, the "country youth" William, Charles the wrestler, and unnamed country folk. The pretext provided in the opening of the film explains this demographic:

In the latter part of the 19th Century, Japan opened up for trade with the West. Merchant adventurers arrived from all over the world, many of them English. Some traded in silk and rice and lived in enclaves around the "treaty ports." They brought their families and their followers and created private mini-empires where they tried to embrace this extraordinary culture, its beauties and its dangers. (Branagh 2006)

While this premise might at first seem intriguing, offering new insights into an old plot, it proves ultimately to be both forced and flimsy.

Branagh begins his production by depicting an event to which the text of *As You Like It* only alludes, namely the overthrow of Duke Senior by his brother Duke Frederick. In act I, scene 2 of the play, Rosalind laments that prior to the play's action, her father Duke Senior had been banished from the court. Branagh's film opens, however, with a violent ambush in which the evil Duke, decked out in Samurai warrior gear, leads a band of stealthy ninjas to interrupt Duke Senior and his guests, who are in the midst of enjoying a Kabuki theater performance. This innovation seems contrived, but Branagh explains some of his reasoning in an interview with HBO:

I began with the prospect of bringing the palace coup — the overthrow of Duke Senior by his so-called evil brother, Duke Frederick — right at the front of the story — something that's impossible to do in the theater in the same way. So that in the cinema we would start

that way and continue all the way through so that the story could have underneath it what the play also contains, which is a sense of danger. (Home Box Office 2007)

Branagh continues to explain his overall choice of setting:

I wanted to put it in a potentially violent place, but also in a place that addressed the other themes within the play, which are the notion of romantic love — boy meets girl. I wanted that to happen in a place that would be romantic in the way that Shakespeare comedies seem to require. And the play also talks about the tension, if you like, between town and country, between busy lives in the city and the desire to be simple in the outside world.

I found that all of those desires — to explore more explicitly in cinema themes that were in the play — were answered for me by the idea of taking it away from the conventional English glades, and go to Japan where in the second half of the 19th Century— from about 1850 to 1900, roughly speaking — there was a moment where Japan was trying to become an industrial nation from an agricultural one. (Home Box Office 2007)

There is a sense of danger from the beginning of the play, as Duke Senior banishes Rosalind, and Celia decides to follow her. The women feel the need to disguise themselves for, as Rosalind notes, "Alas, what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far! / Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (*As You Like It*, 1.3.104-106).<sup>1</sup> There is also a second brotherly rivalry going on between Oliver and Orlando; the jealous Oliver wants his younger brother dead, telling Charles the wrestler, "I had as lief thou didst break his neck as his finger" (1.1.135-36). It is also true that, once the characters are out in the country, the play revolves around considerations of romantic love. The wooing scenes would seem to require an idyllic pastoral setting, but why Japan? Japan is indeed a visually beautiful country, and it could be an appropriate locale for love in the countryside. But, ironically, while Branagh was trying to get away from the "traditional English glades," he filmed this production not in the far East, but in London and West Sussex, England — the land from which most of its actors hail.

As for thematic concerns, it would be difficult to argue that this play has any connection to industrialization (a post-Shakespearean phenomenon), or to commerce, as does *The Merchant of Venice*; accordingly, Branagh makes no references to industry or trade within the film. *As You Like It* is also not a play about colonization, cultural clashes, or cultural exploitation (a case many have made for *The Tempest*). If the director's intent were to examine the play's apparent themes of loyalty, the folly of romantic love, power conflicts between blood relations, forgiveness, and

redemption through the lens of Japanese culture and values (in the vein of Akira Kurosawa), then it would have been appropriate to cast Japanese actors in the leading roles, for a start. This endeavor simply seems like a good excuse for Branagh to get his troop of Western actors into an exotic locale.

It is a nice touch that Duke Frederick (played by Brian Blessed, who doubles as a very sympathetic Duke Senior) finds a kind of Buddhist enlightenment in the end of the play, sitting in meditation in the forest with courtier/truth-seeker Jaques, as the others dance about, celebrating the quadruple wedding that resolves the action of this comedy. For most of the production, however, Branagh's chosen setting seems merely an excuse for novelty, including Duke Frederick's Samurai warrior suit and his band of ninjas; Orlando's wrestling with, and unrealistically defeating, a sumo wrestler who is twice his size; and Orlando's love notes to Rosalind, written in huge Japanese characters on long white scrolls that hang on the trees of the forest, billowing in the nighttime breezes. This is all very visually appealing and catchy, but it seems as though Branagh has chosen this setting merely because it is something that has not been done before.

Why does the world need another Shakespearean film if it offers no freshly illuminating vision of the kind, say, that Cartelli and Rowe describe in *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen*? And why feature it on the Home Box Office network and not in cinemas? This is Branagh's first film to go straight to television. Although his *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), and *Hamlet* (1996) met with critical acclaim, Branagh's 2000 musical version of *Love's Labour's Lost* flopped at the box office. Consequently, his option with Intermedia Films, which financed *Love's Labour's* and was slated to finance and distribute two more Shakespearean adaptations (*Macbeth* and *As You Like It*), expired. In time, however, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, "An unlikely saviour arrived in the form of the adventurous American cable television network HBO, for whom Branagh had won an Emmy as Heydrich in the award-winning *Conspiracy*. The network wanted him to star as Franklin D. Roosevelt in its television film *Warm Springs*, and to his delight agreed to finance *As You Like It*" ("Branagh Returns" 2005). This film, produced in conjunction with BBC Films, received a Golden Globe nomination and a Screen Actors Guild nomination in the "Made-for-TV" category, and has generally been reviewed in favorable terms.

The Home Box Office network has in recent years fostered an image of itself as a purveyor of respectable entertainment, offering offbeat, urbane, and intelligent television series ranging from *Deadwood* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* to *Sex in the City* and *Rome* — another joint BBC-HBO venture. HBO has sponsored documentaries on contemporary issues, including *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib* and Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, about Hurricane Katrina. It has also worked with the BBC on other productions that feature notable British actors, including the comedy series *Extras*, co-written, co-directed by, and starring Ricky Gervais (of *The*

*Office* fame); this show also featured appearances by such British A-list actors and impresarios as Ian McKellen, Kate Winslett, Patrick Stewart, and David Bowie. The HBO-BBC mystery thriller *Five Days* starred David Oyelowo and Janet McTeer, both featured in Branagh's *As You Like It* (as Orlando and Audrey). In 2006, HBO also produced and aired the historical drama miniseries *Elizabeth*, starring Helen Mirren and Jeremy Irons. A Shakespeare production, made in association with BBC Films and the famed Brit Kenneth Branagh, would seem to add to HBO's cultural clout; after all, the works — and simply the idea — of "Shakespeare" are used worldwide as a measure of what can properly be called "culture."

From Stratford-upon-Avon to Hollywood, "bardolatry" has been used as a cultural and a capitalist tool. As John Drakakis writes, "The deification of the man Shakespeare proceeds hand-in-hand with the valorization of 'culture,' thus masking the ideological practice of production and re-production of Shakespearean texts as agencies of authority and subjection" (Drakakis 1988, 25). The fact that Branagh calls his production company The Shakespeare Film Company in itself insinuates a claim of cultural authority, almost as if Branagh is the only director making Shakespearean films — or as if, were Shakespeare alive today, he would be working with Branagh.

To give Branagh credit, he did much to popularize Shakespeare during the 1990s — but this popularity came at a price. Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe note that, while "Branagh surely played a crucial role in bringing Shakespeare into the circuit of Cineplex and art-house alike," his films are essentially conservative, "rooted in realist and heritage conventions" (Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 16), and they accuse him of "opportunistic concessions to blockbuster film conventions and celebrity casting" (19). Branagh's catering to mainstream sensibilities and corporate interests (the latter informing the former) is a double-edged sword: While one may want to foster the appreciation of Shakespeare's works, one must also question the form in which these works and the culture of "Shakespeare" are being disseminated. Douglas Lanier describes the strain of films from the "age of Branagh" in the 1990s as "Shakescorp *Noir*," describing that period as one "in which classics that were long understood by Hollywood as 'box office poison' were systematically assimilated to the dominant visual modes, genres, and market niches of the Hollywood marketplace . . . [and] assimilated to the interests of global corporations" (discussed by Cartelli and Rowe 15).

Taking Lanier's assertions into consideration, Cartelli and Rowe consider the pros and cons of such adaptation:

Probably few would quarrel in the abstract with the idea that it is a good thing to maximize the circulation of Shakespeare's plays in any form, particularly at a moment in history when classical musical concerts play to aging and rapidly diminishing audiences, and when classic artworks have to rely on the marketing and promotion of blockbuster exhibitions

at major museums to sustain their cultural capital. But just as the marketing of catalogues, posters, and postcards, illustrated t-shirts and coffee mugs, often migrates beyond the gift-shop to the entrances of exhibition galleries themselves — not only altering the way we see and respond to art but transforming the art-object itself into merchandise — so too may the filmic reconstitution of a Shakespeare play alter and commodify our terms of engagement with it. (Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 15)

Once an artist works in collusion with the dominant economic forces that shape a culture, he or she becomes complicit with the forces that seek to inform and uphold the status quo. While Branagh's directorial efforts have certainly helped to put Shakespeare's works into wider cultural circulation, they have done little to re-envision or put these plays into question. This is certainly the case with his *As You Like It*.

Because of HBO's efforts, cable television subscribers can feel good (since they pay a hefty monthly sum for cable service and then pay a bit more on top of that for HBO), to know there are legitimately "cultural" programs to be viewed in their homes, even if these shows do not ultimately offer much depth. Many HBO programs have garnered critical accolades, and it would seem that Branagh's *As You Like It* — with a great script (they don't get much better), talented celebrity actors, and rich visual images — should be a hit. With his contrived premise, however, Branagh has — in the words of Douglas Lanier — negated "art's capacity for critique and opposition, offering [his] audience only the illusion of enlightenment and diversity while in fact compelling conformity to a social and aesthetic status quo" (cited by Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 15). This film may be enjoyable and it may feel like "culture," but only until one gets below its shiny surface.

### Notes

1. All references to *As You Like It* are to the Penguin single-play edition, edited by Ralph M. Sargent (1987).



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