

# The Lionesses and Olive Trees of Meiji-Era Japan: A Consideration of Kenneth Branagh's *As You Like It*

Scott Hollifield, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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## Abstract

In his film of *As You Like It*, Kenneth Branagh sets the action in Meiji-era Japan, incongruously situating Shakespeare's representation of feudal power struggles in a time and place noted for its relegation of feudal power struggles to the past. In this way, Branagh reduces Shakespeare's meaningful anachronism to incoherence and in the process, empties his chosen setting of historical and cultural significance.

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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).

Perhaps taking a cue from his visually "textual" take on *Hamlet* (1996), with its book-lined inner rooms, amalgam of cinematic genres, and performative self-reflexivity, Kenneth Branagh's extra-textual front matter to *As You Like It* is determined to justify the film's setting on multiple levels. Let it not be said that Branagh neglects to establish the rules of his adaptation up front. A text prologue — which also attempts to justify the film's setting on physical and thematic levels —

explains the encroachment of would-be European economic imperialists on Meiji-era Japan. These opening cards dissolve gently into an unruffled curtain. Syllable by syllable, a haiku appears: "A dream of Japan / Love and nature in disguise / All the world's a stage" (*As You Like It* 2006, 1: "Banished"). The tenuous nature of the film's setting, the play's key themes of romance and self-awareness waiting to be plucked from the green world, and Shakespeare's text itself are all too neatly incorporated into a unique Japanese form. The film represents its European-ideas-inscribed-on-Eastern-paper strategy with Jaques' writing desk, Touchstone's origami, and Orlando's *kanji*-rendered love manuscripts, a concept that finds further reciprocity in the film's ubiquitous *ukiyo-e* paintings and *shoji* door panels tumbled down and tossed aside like so many pages of play-text in the wordless, action movie opening. Though it effectively suggests a pseudo-Japanese, all-the-world's-a-stage setting before filmic conventions necessarily intrude, Branagh's production demonstrates progressively less interest in showing us its "dream of Japan," even in presenting itself as particularly Japanese.

Regardless of one's feelings about Branagh's film of *Hamlet*, it is difficult to argue that his situating of medieval Elsinore in a Blenheim palace populated with Victorianisms is less than unified. The film provides no textual prologue beyond its title, engraved on the plinth of a dramatically significant monument, and need do nothing more than afford a consistent backdrop for its famously "uncut" text. The setting, incongruous as it may seem at the outset — abetted as it is by frequent intrusions by non-Shakespearean actors — is visually consistent and often enhances textual themes when not providing visual analogues for the text itself. With *As You Like It*, by contrast, Branagh sets the feudal power struggle of the source-text in a place and time noted for its relegation of feudal power struggles to the past.<sup>1</sup> From the outset, Branagh converts Shakespeare's penchant for meaningful anachronism into incongruity. Having opened Japan to Europe and the West with an eye toward modernizing his country, the Meiji Emperor Mutsuhito was content to contain and regulate the Western presence and influence in Japan. There were certainly independent factions — the *Shinsengumi* are one example — who fought Western incursion by persecuting Japanese who did business with Europeans, though it is difficult to imagine in a realistic context such an outnumbered group of outsiders turning on their own countrymen.

Keen perhaps on staging a classic Shakespearean fraternal conflict once and for all, Branagh opens with an armed coup. Ostensibly following Shakespeare's lead, Duke Frederick sports an Eastern-assimilated attitude to match his samurai warlord's armor. Using Japanese soldiers to usurp the family's isolated Eastern enclave from Duke Senior, his unassimilated brother, Frederick violently reclaims East from West. From this point forward, the film not only reorders scenes to

turn comedic elements somber and, later, somber elements comedic, but also creates disjunctions by situating lines from other scenes wherever they might fit, seemingly in an effort to hit all the notes without accounting for the play-text in full. Rather than creating a unified, consistent take on the source material, this editorial strategy reduces key romances, relationships, and class contrasts while emphasizing the virtual disappearance of characters such as Duke Frederick and Oliver from the narrative until they regain dramatic necessity. Shakespeare, too, considered them incidental to the development of Duke Senior and Orlando, but his text and characters remain aware of the threat these characters represent, even in their stage absence.

Irreconcilable ambiguities permeate *As You Like It's* "dream of Japan" and severely impede its frequent movements toward the promised intercultural verisimilitude. Those most threatened by *As You Like It's* antagonists forget their courtly fears or replace them with utter ignorance of the pseudo-Japanese world beyond the court. The travelers — Rosalind as Ganymede, Celia as Aliena and Touchstone at his most maladroit — encounter a Buddhist ascetic in the forest. As if a family of imperialists sufficiently well-established in their chosen territory to suffer a bloody coup on its behalf might be unaware of native custom, the trio perform an awkward, fearful obeisance. Could the saffron-robed monk — the very same master to whom Frederick pledges himself and whom Jaques seeks out at play's end — be an agent of the usurper poised to do them harm? Do they fear they might subvert unwritten Buddhist protocols? The faintest awareness of Buddhism renders the first option as unlikely as Rosalind's masculinity and the second of no concern to the European Christian or offense to the Buddhist. In this extra-textual moment of dumbshow, either eventuality upsets the cultural balance suggested in the film's prologue and contradicts the high degree of assimilation demonstrated by Duke Senior in his tribute at a Buddhist shrine at the edge of the forest. By his very inscrutability, the ascetic may well represent the core of Branagh's adaptive vision; like the forest of Arden, such a silent spiritual guide exists to be discovered, illuminate possible paths, and foster reflexive self-discovery. If Branagh's Eastern-tinged illumination of Shakespeare's text were able to reconcile its attempts at thematic symmetry with its heavily-cut script, its reductions and substitutions might coexist in a more organic, less disjunctive fashion.

Presuming that the details are deliberate, Branagh and his production team have conjured a number of successful visual analogues for Shakespearean comedy. From the opening haiku superimposed on a curtain, the curtain is drawn, equating the *onnagata* of *kabuki* with the boy actors of early modern theater as well as with the transvestitism inherent to *As You Like It's* central romantic plot. Perhaps more significantly, Branagh's choices reveal the vast differences of purpose and performative modes between the theatrical traditions he invokes. The drawn curtain manifests as a visual motif throughout the film, which is suggested by a camera that repeatedly tilts from

the treetops of Arden to the scene in progress. Oddly opposing this preoccupation with cinematic staginess, the film handles monologues through long lenses drifting through the foliage from left to right, shots identically constructed whether Duke Senior, Jaques, or Rosalind is philosophizing. This has the intriguing effect of visually contextualizing speaker and the spoken text within the Ardenesque environment that makes such self-aware monologizing possible, but the similarity of each tracking movement to the next forces the eye to wander around the frame in search of meaningful detail or the mind to wander away from the film. These repetitions suggest a number of possible readings, ranging from the film's desire to present the play's ideas as a context-free continuity, to the less generous notion that Branagh and Director of Photography Roger Lanser found every path a dead end in the pseudo-Japanese Forest of Arden. Editor Neil Farrell achieves bridges between acts through brief montages of the natural world, seemingly inspired by a similar imagistic technique in the films of Yasujiro Ozu.<sup>2</sup> While in essence these moments function as thematic recaps, prefiguring what is yet to come within the context of what has gone before, they lose coherence when the filmmakers deviate from their stated purpose: With no textual or cinematic foundation whatsoever, one transitional montage places a thoughtful Duke Senior in the foreground — back against a tree as his converted brother will appear in the closing sequence — while his entourage performs the decidedly un-Japanese *tai chi chuan* behind him.

Where Shakespeare's text differentiates Rosalind and Orlando from the other, comically stereotypical romantic pairings, Branagh's adaptation emphasizes a physical sameness arrived at through emotional and spiritual change. Ultimately, his reading suggests a Shakespearean text rooted in the notion that lovers, necessarily operating within the generic limits of lovers' continuity, are inherently the same or interchangeable. The film also, sometimes inadvertently, supports such a reading. Bryce Dallas Howard's Rosalind and Romola Garai's Celia effectively demonstrate complementary difference throughout their shared screen time, yet look as disconcertingly alike when attired for marriage as Brian Blessed's estranged brothers resemble each other. When Jaques brightens after his encounter with the fool Touchstone — who, curiously, also practices Chinese *tai chi* — Kevin Kline's hair stands erect upon his head in seeming imitation of Alfred Molina's. While David Oyelowo and Adrian Lester could not look less like brothers — which synchronizes with Oliver's assessment of the hatred he bears Orlando — the appearance of middle brother Jaques renders the de Boys trio somehow identical. Curiously in this final sequence, when the film's technical aspects should be entrenched enough for even the most passive viewer to sort out these multiple filial and romantic pairings, the editing seems rushed or simply out of sync with the film that preceded it. This final incongruity suggests that Branagh's *As You Like It*, in spite of its May

Day resolution, would rather not sort everything out, preferring the general ambiguity of doubled characters over the specific natures of their new, improved romantic identities.

A staging or cinematic adaptation that refuses fully to embrace its source text, even when it must by necessity excise 50% or more of it, reduces the end-product to appropriation or homage. Akira Kurosawa, rather than translating the Shakespearean text that defines *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, imported the concepts of *Macbeth* (*Kumonosujô*) and *Lear* (*Ran*) into Japanese mytho-history. Taking this approach to adaptation, Kurosawa retained a greater degree of Shakespeare's essence than did Kenneth Branagh's transplantation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to late nineteenth-century Japan. This is not to say that Shakespearean text refuses successful adaptation into other periods, mindsets, or media; Branagh himself has, by this point, arguably made a more significant overall contribution to cinematic Shakespeare than Laurence Olivier. But the text of *As You Like It*, firmly rooted in late-medieval romance, Spenserian pastoral, and Shakespeare's well-worn-by-1598 conception of stage comedy, with its many inherent dislocations and anachronisms, repeatedly proves itself incongruous with the setting of his film.

### Notes

1. For further insight to Meiji-era views of the West and Western representations of Meiji Japan, please see "Suggestions for Further Reading," below.
2. *Banshun* (*Late Spring* 1949) and *Ukigusa* (*Floating Weeds* 1959) offer excellent examples of Ozu's concise, evocative montage style in their early frames. Incidentally, a key theme of *Banshun* is the struggle of a daughter's love for her father against her own desire for autonomy, while *Ukigusa* observes the misadventures of a traveling theatrical troupe.

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