

Kenneth Branagh's *As You Like It*: Plural Conflicts on- and off-screen

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1. Introduction

Kenneth Branagh's latest Shakespearean film, *As You Like It* (2006), has not so far encountered much critical interest. Even the 'Community' site of HBO Films is poor of comments (there are actually only two: one extolling the director for putting «his whole soul into his movies», the other lamenting the unavoidable cuts to the play text, up to the basic question «where is the rest of Rosalind?»¹). A third and more critical comment showing some of the inconsistencies of the movie can be read via a link. The critics' silence may be attributable on the one side to the film's process of physical and cultural *dépaysement* (with the action taking place in late nineteenth-century Japan), and on the other to Branagh's tendency to choose a 'worldwide Shakespeare' stance (in the casting, for example, where Orlando and Oliver are two black actors). Besides that, since *As You Like It* as a 'romantic comedy' hides conflict underneath the cover of a love story with an 'and they all lived happily ever after' ending, what strikes spectators is the violence surfacing in the film (from the very beginning when Duke Senior is usurped after a Ninja warriors' attack).

My contribution will try and analyse how the contrasts built by Shakespeare inside the play (the most visible one being the fight between Orlando and the Usurper's wrestler) are rendered in the film, so as to make the latter conflictual with the average expectations of a Shakespeare-educated audience².

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¹ See HBO Films at <http://boards.hbo.com/topic/Hbo-Films-Archives/Like/700011940> (accessed 28/05/2009).

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1.1 *Branagh's As You Like It*

After a century of Shakespeare films, nobody thinks now that it is illicit to put a classic play on to the screen, neither does anybody regret that a play be necessarily cut for the cinema. We are now accustomed to accepting and appreciating sundry and various directorial and actorial operations on the Bard's works. And, furthermore, Shakespeare films are more and more judged as cinematic productions, not simply as 'unsuccessful performances', as they were often in the past. Even if, of course, the correspondence between a play and its rendition on screen is always an evaluative criterion, at least to label the product as a 'rewriting', an 'adaptation' etc.

Beginning from the beginning: Branagh's film opens with the credits of Lionsgate, HBO Films, BBC Films and the Shakespeare Film Company. To all this follows, on a silky backdrop, a haiku – «A dream of Japan / Love and nature in disguise / All the world's a stage» – which condenses the (at least pretended) location, two fundamental themes and the most celebrated words of the play in its seventeen syllables. The second part of the haiku is very ambiguous, since the meaning of «nature in disguise» (unless it is limited to the Rosalind/Ganymede basic disguise) does not seem to belong to Shakespeare's play, if we take it literally. Perhaps the phrase indirectly winks at the spectators, stimulating them to recognize that the location chosen for the Japanese Forest of Arden is a fake, it being actually Wakehurst Place in Sussex. After the haiku, on a black screen there appears the following wording:

In the latter part of the nineteenth 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...

In this way, the audience are informed that the action will take place in the Far East, in a vague late nineteenth century, probably near the sea, among English people who in that period transferred their own culture to their new homes, at the same time absorbing the «beauty» and «dangers» of the Orient, and construing miniature copies of the British Empire. Before the real beginning, therefore, the audience are offered both some enigmatic words partly meaningful to the Shakespeare-educated, and such historical information as to anchor the action to real time and place. Even if, however, the words «A dream of Japan» may perhaps jeopardise the whole historical construction, by triggering a reality/dreaming dialectic process.

The relationship history/film is visually confirmed when, soon afterwards, a scene of kabuki theatre develops, with the focus on the enjoying spectators inside a large and lantern-lit Japanese-like room, alternating with dark and threatening events outside, till the place is invaded by black warriors, the lord of the house is dispossessed and is seen roaming among trees together with other men, and paying reverence to a man sitting under one of the trees (possibly an Oriental monk). At this point the action stops and the screen is occupied by the words «A Shakespeare Film Company Production», «*As You Like It*», and «by William Shakespeare», on three subsequent paper sheets decorated with flowers in Japanese style. Only after all this do the audience see two girls lying on the floor, in friendly and doleful talk.

This description shows that so far the story proper as Shakespearean audiences all over the world know has not begun yet, thus warranting on the one side the film's fidelity to the playtext (the play narrative starts afterwards), and on the other hinting at the addition of the attack to the lord's palace as an event prior to everything else in the play itself, where the usurpation is only referred to as an offstage event.

2. *The intended target*

Branagh's decision to shoot the usurpation fits in very well with the necessity of film making to use images instead of many words, and to privilege the visual. But this 'prologue' to the rest of the action is exactly one of the points in the film where the «dream of Japan» is most deeply 'dreamt', as it were, which creates one of the director's most debatable choices. Hand in hand with this goes the following wrestling game between Orlando and a bulky Sumo wrestler. The original Sumo ceremony is represented correctly, but soon later the two fighters are briefly shot while slapping each other's flesh (with the accompanying sound track) according to the Harite technique, and after a few seconds the game ends with Orlando's improbable victory and the Japanese lying on the floor.

One first question arises, then: for what spectators was this film started? Since Lionsgate and HBO are American organizations especially interested in TV programmes while BBC and the Shakespeare Film Company are British, the whole operation could be called an 'interatlantic' enterprise, catering – generally speaking – for the whole English-speaking world. The fact that Hollywood is not directly involved (*As You Like It* was originally made for HBO Films and shown in the United States only on HBO channels), does not mean that the American film industry is not engrained in the making of this film.

Branagh ‘the popularizer’ as he has been called ³, a term often applied in the past to Franco Zeffirelli, has succeeded in mixing both the American love of lush costumes and settings, and the British care for Shakespearean language and dialogue (which have been preserved in spite of the predictable cuts due to the length of the text) ⁴. The cast itself comes from both Atlantic sides, with black actors playing Orlando and Oliver (David Oyelowo and Adrian Lester, respectively) but born and educated in the United Kingdom, British ‘old friends’ of Branagh’s such as Brian Blessed doubling the two dukes and Richard Briars in the role of old Adam, a famous actor such as Alfred Molina (Touchstone), the young – but rising star – Romola Garai (Celia) on the British side, and American celebrities like Kevin Kline (Jacques) and Bryce Dallas Howard (Rosalind) on the Hollywoodian one. As results from this list, no relevant role is given to Japanese (or at least Far Eastern) actors, thus limiting (and impairing, actually) the impact of the by Branagh proclaimed choice of Japan as the place of the action. Only marginal roles (plus walkers-on) are performed by Far Eastern actors: the initial kabuki geisha (Takuya Shimada), Charles the (non speaking) Sumo wrestler (Nobuyuki Takano), and William (Paul Chan). The choice of this latter in the role of William, however, raised the following objection from Christopher Tookey, the «Daily Mail» commentator: «Another Japanese gets to play William, which makes the taunting of him by Touchstone [...] unpleasantly racist instead of funny» ⁵.

Summing up, it can be said that the film intends to appeal both to British and American audiences, a bit more – perhaps – to the latter, given the specific operations the director has made on the text, the setting in Japan being the most crucial one for European audiences. But I don’t think it can be a great hit for Oriental spectators, just because its process of ‘Orientalization’ remains a showy move in which Japan is soon forgotten, even as a dream. In other words, Branagh’s work has nothing to do with Kurosawa’s cinematic translations of Shakespeare’s plays; neither does it reflect the contemporary trend of Asian theatrical Shakespeare ⁶. As for European continental spectators (the film was released in Italian

³ See, among others, David Wiegand, *Kenneth Branagh sets Shakespeare’s As You Like It in Japan*, «San Francisco Chronicle», 21 August 2007, at <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/08/21/DD3SRKNKV.DTL>. (accessed 04/07/2009).

⁴ With *As You Like It*, contrary to his *Hamlet* (1996), Branagh has not attempted an integral cinematic translation of the play.

⁵ Christopher Tookey, *As YOU like it, Mr. Branagh, but certainly not me*, «Daily Mail» 21 September 2007, at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-483175/As-YOU-like-Mr-Branagh-certainly-me.html#>, (accessed 27/06/2009).

⁶ See <http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/> (accessed 30/09/2009).

cinemas a few weeks after its USA première, on 1 September 2007), one has only to surmise different levels of an international audience's expectations. On the one side 'innocent' spectators (but who is like that completely nowadays?), and on the other 'Shakespeare-educated' ones, of course with various and sundry reactions, especially considering that *As You Like It* (like *Love's Labour's Lost*, Branagh's previous, and unsuccessful, Shakespeare film) is a comedy, and not a tragedy. The spectators' involvement in comic or tragic stories is a powerful element in reception, tragedy appearing more contemporary in its 'universal' topics than comedy, which is more strictly linked to the society it represents⁷.

Perhaps, as a result of this, Shakespeare's comedies «have been less attractive to film makers than his tragedies and histories»⁸, and therefore directors should be aware that «To film a Shakespearean comedy is to know that one's production, despite its high-culture imprimatur, will never be designated 'great', that it will never be taken seriously»⁹. However, Branagh's successful cinematic version of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) must be kept in mind (or is it just the exception to the rule?), in order not to generalize too much the 'privilege' of tragedies over comedies when being adapted for the screen.

3. *The conflicts in the play*

In spite of its romantic story, *As You Like It* contains more than one conflict. Its very incipit construes the opposition between Orlando and Oliver, two of the three De Boys brothers, which will result in Orlando's later fights first with Oliver himself, and then with Charles, Duke Frederick's wrestler, to end with Orlando's flight to the Forest of Arden. It is soon after the first troublesome encounter of the two brothers that we get to know that the court is a new one, due to the usurpation of an older brother (Duke Senior) by his younger one (Duke Frederick). The play

⁷ See Umberto Eco, *Il comico e la regola*, «Alfabeta» III, n. 21, febbraio 1981, pp. 5-6 (tr. *The Comic and the Rule*, in ID., *Travels in Hyperreality*, New York, Harcourt Brace 1986, pp. 269-278).

⁸ Russell Jackson, *Shakespeare's Comedies on Film*, in Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells, eds., *Shakespeare and the Moving Image. The Plays on Film and Television*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1994, pp. 99-120, p. 99.

⁹ Katherine Eggert, *Sure can sing and dance: Minstrelsy, the star system and the post-postcoloniality of Kenneth Branagh's Love's Labour's Lost and Trevor Nunn's Twelfth Night*, in Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose, eds., *Shakespeare, the Movie II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*, London, Routledge 2003, pp. 72-88, p. 85.

text, therefore, opens with family and political troubles, in any case with problems concerning two couples of brothers. Even if all this is solved by the spirit of comedy as a genre at the end of the play with Orlando and Oliver reconciled and Duke Frederick converted to religious life, thus giving the crown back to his elder brother, primogeniture, succession and inheritance are at issue here. Violence, then, is inscribed in the text at its very beginning.

3.1 *The case of Orlando*

In his dealing with the problem of primogeniture in the comedy, Louis Adrian Montrose maintains that

the tense situation which begins *As You Like It* was a familiar and controversial fact of Elizabethan social life. [...] In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, primogeniture was more widely and rigorously practiced in England – by the gentry and lesser landowners, as well as by the aristocracy – than anywhere else in Europe.¹⁰

This situation gave rise to a «literature of protest by and for younger sons» whose language is «vehement» in claiming younger brothers' rights, as Joan Thirsk notices¹¹. A common source of both Montrose and Thirsk is *The State of England Anno Dom. 1600*, i.e. something written at about the composition date of *As You Like It* by Thomas Wilson, himself a 'younger son'. Wilson's resentment is explicit when he declares that «my elder brother forsooth must be my master», even if younger brethren show to be «my master elder brother's masters, or at least their betters in honour and reputation»¹². Thirsk sums up the issue by saying that – like the words 'stepmother' and 'mother-in-law', which remind listeners of stereotypically popular images –

younger son meant an angry young man, bearing more than his share of injustice and resentment, deprived of means by his father and elder brother, often

¹⁰ Louis Adrian Montrose, 'The Place of a Brother' in *As You Like It: Social Process and Comic Form*, «Shakespeare Quarterly», 32:1, 1981, pp. 28-54, p. 31.

¹¹ Joan Thirsk, *Younger Sons in the Seventeenth Century*, in Id., *The Rural Economy of England. Collected Essays*, London, Hambledon Continuum 1984, pp. 335-358, p. 336.

¹² Thomas Wilson, *The State of England Anno Dom. 1600*, ed. F. J. Fisher, Camden Miscellany, XVI, London, Camden Society 1936, p. 24. Wilson's work, included in the State Papers in the Public Record Office, remained in manuscript form till 1936.

hanging around his elder brother's house as a servant, completely dependent on his grace and favour.¹³

Thirsk inscribes Orlando's complaints against Oliver in Shakespeare's contemporary 'literature of protest'¹⁴ and Montrose adds that «Shakespeare's audience may have responded with some intensity to Orlando's indictment of the 'courtesy of nations' [I.i.45-46]»¹⁵. Beginning the play, Orlando laments:

As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion
 bequeathed me by will but poor a thousand crowns,
 and, as thou say'st, charged my brother, on his blessing,
 to breed me well; and there begins my sadness.
 My brother Jaques he keeps at school, and
 report speaks goldenly of his profit. For my part, he keeps
 me rustically at home, or, to speak more properly,
 stays me here at home unkept; for call you that
 keeping for a gentleman of my birth that differs
 not from the stalling of an ox? His horses are bred
 better; for, besides that they are fair with their feeding,
 they are taught their manage, and to that end
 riders dearly hir'd; but I, his brother, gain nothing
 under him but growth; for the which his animals on
 his dunghills are as much bound to him as I.
 Besides this nothing that he so plentifully gives me,
 the something that nature gave me his countenance
 seems to take from me. He lets me feed with his
 hinds, bars me the place of a brother, and as much
 as in him lies, mines my gentility with my education.
 This is it, Adam, that grieves me; and the spirit
 of my father, which I think is within me, begins to
 mutiny against this servitude. I will no longer endure
 it, though yet I know no wise remedy how to
 avoid it. (I.i.1-25)¹⁶

The sibling conflict introduced as incipit – through which the playwright informs the audience of a certain state of affairs – may appear badly constructed, since all the speakers do know well how things are. Orlan-

¹³ Thirsk, *Younger Sons...*, p. 338.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

¹⁵ Montrose, 'The Place of a Brother'..., p. 32.

¹⁶ The play is quoted from William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Agnes Latham, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Methuen 1975. Passages in prose also reproduce this edition.

do speaks first to old Adam, his faithful servant, and then to his elder brother, telling a story that both his interlocutors already know, a narrative that has – at this level – a very low quality of tellability. Notwithstanding that, evidently the topic was of so high cultural relevance in contemporary society as to induce the author to leave it as it stands, instead of contriving a more lively dramatic situation such as a story told to an unknowing third part as a piece of new information¹⁷.

In a performance, this incipit might cause problems, but a good company and an efficacious production can turn a drawback into an advantage. John Bowe, who was Orlando in the RSC 1980 season, relates that

Opening a play is always difficult. [...] Orlando's speech takes on the form of a prologue. We [the director was Terry Hands] decided it was to this that Rosalind refers at the end of the play: 'It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue; but it is no more unhandsome [than] to see the lord the prologue.' So Terry put Adam down-centre on an upturned bucket and I delivered the exposition through him to the audience. In rehearsals and early performances this was delivered at breakneck speed. [...] The play starts at a climactic point in Orlando's life, a fine vehicle for gripping an audience; hence the fast, pressured delivery.¹⁸

In Bowe's words, though, there remains an echo of the problematic incipit of the play: a prologue proper is never delivered – at least in Shakespearean plays – by two characters (here Adam and Orlando, the former practically silent while the latter speaks for 25 lines!). There is either 'Mr' Prologue (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry VIII*, *Troilus and Cressida*), or Chorus (*Henry V*), or Rumour (*2 Henry IV*), or Gower (*Pericles*), otherwise two or more characters meet and talk together. It is true, as Bowe affirms, that Orlando is at a decisive moment in his life, but I think that – although taking this for granted – Shakespeare's choice of starting his play with a *dramatis persona* practically telling his interlocutor what the latter already knows is due to the highly historical value of what is said, i.e. a piece of 'literature of protest' on the side of younger brothers.

¹⁷ In order to confer tellability to a speech, Shakespeare often introduces two characters one of whom lacks the information known to the other. In this way, the audience is informed indirectly, while information is exchanged on the internal axis of theatrical communication (see Roberta Mullini, *Il problema della tellability in alcuni incipit shakespeariani*, in AA.VV., *Interazione, dialogo, convenzioni: il caso del testo drammatico*, Bologna, CLUEB 1983, pp. 167-172). For the concept of 'tellability' see William Labov, *Language in the Inner City*, University Park, University of Pennsylvania Press 1972, and William Labov and David Fanshel, *Therapeutic Discourse*, New York, Academic Press 1977.

¹⁸ John Bowe, *Orlando in As You Like It*, in Philip Brockbank, ed., *Players of Shakespeare 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1985, pp. 67-76, p. 69.

3.2 *The wrestling episode*

During the Cotswold 'Olimpick' Games¹⁹, which started sometime between 1604 and 1612, wrestling was one of the main features: according to the frontispiece image of *Annalia Dubrensia* (1636), various sports were practiced on Dover's Hill (Gloucestershire) during the Games, among them hare hunting, sword fighting, tumbling, dancing, javelin throwing and wrestling²⁰. At least a little detail in the frontispiece shows two men embracing in a not too friendly way. This testifies to the popularity of this rural game, which goes back in time well before the seventeenth century, particularly in Cornwall and Devon. Wrestling is not specifically mentioned, though, in James I's so called *Book of Sports* (1617, reissued by Charles I in 1633), which referred only to games and sports allowed on Sundays and other religious feasts. What the king permitted his subjects to practice consisted of

any lawful recreacion, such as Pyping dansinge, either men or women archerie for men leapinge valtinge, or any other such harmeles recreation & the women to have leave to Carrie rushes to ye Church for the decoring of it accordinge to their ould Custome but withal we doe heare accounte still as prohibited as unlawfull games to be used upon sondaies onelie, as beare & Bull beatinge enterludes & bowlinge [...] ²¹

Very probably wrestling was an «other such harmeles recreation», not even worth mentioning by the king, given its high social acceptability.

There are two fight episodes in *As You Like It*: first the informal punching between Orlando and Oliver in I.i.52-78, and later the more controlled one between Orlando and Charles in I.ii.200, where the original Folio SD reads «*Wrastle*». These two are the only cases of physical violence represented in the comedy, in which spectators see men fighting. In the former episode, Oliver and Orlando talk while struggling, in the latter the event is only commented upon by Rosalind, who shows the first moment of her falling in love with the younger brother, and is concluded by Duke Frederick himself, who – having previously defined the rules of

¹⁹ The Cotswold Games, cancelled by Cromwell's Commonwealth, started again during the Restoration and, with on and offs, they still continue (in 2009 their main feature – the shin kicking as a transformation of general wrestling – took place on 29 May, and in 2010 the games were scheduled on 4 June; at <http://www.olimpickgames.co.uk/>, accessed 21/03/2010).

²⁰ See *Annalia Dubrensia*, London, Printed by Robert Raworth for Mathewe Walbancke 1636 (repr. as *Cotswold Games. Annalia Dubrensia*, ed. E. R. Vyvyan, London, Tabard 1970).

²¹ Quoted in David George, ed., *Lancashire*, Records of Early English Drama, Toronto, University of Toronto Press 1991, p. 230.

the combat according to which «You shall try but one fall» (I.ii.192) – now proclaims its end, after Charles's discomfiture.

Violence among human beings, therefore, remains mainly in the background: it emerges in Frederick's words when the Duke shows his dislike of Orlando soon after the fight, when he exiles Rosalind his niece (I.iii), and when he has Oliver pushed out of the palace ordering him to go in search of Orlando (III.i). As already mentioned, the usurper's violent intentions towards the end of the comedy end up in his conversion and the reinstatement of his brother, according to the youngest De Boys brother's words (V.iv.150-164).

3.3 *The case of the Dukes*

In the play there is another couple of struggling siblings: one, Duke Frederick, is now in power, while the other, simply called «Duke Senior», lives in the Forest of Arden after being usurped by his younger brother. When the comedy starts, all this has already happened offstage and in previous times. Asked by Oliver «What's the new news at the new court?», Charles answers:

There's no news at the court, sir, but the old news.
That is, the old Duke is banished by his younger
brother the new Duke, and three or four loving
lords have put themselves into voluntary exile
with him, whose lands and revenues enrich the
new Duke, therefore he gives them good leave to
wander. (I.i.98-104)

Here a younger brother has gained power over the elder one, but not legally, on the contrary by way of violence and usurpation.

Nevertheless it is a case where primogeniture is again at stake, if not youth, together with succession. This is exactly what makes the difference, though, since the issue passes from family affairs to political ones, from a closed family circle to the 'body politic' where the legal sovereign has been dethroned by a usurper, no matter whether younger or older. It is clear from the beginning that the writer's – and his audience's – sympathy goes with Orlando *vs.* Oliver (that is, younger against elder brother), but with Senior *vs.* Frederick (elder, then, against younger brother). Author and audience are on the side of the maltreated. Even if «Frederick actualizes the destructive consequences of younger brothers' deprivation and discontent, in the family and in society at large»²², he has achieved power

²² Montrose, *The Place of a Brother*..., p. 42.

by illegal and subversive means, through a process unacceptable in late Tudor England, especially during Queen Elizabeth's last years (one mustn't forget that the first seeds of the Essex rebellion were in 1599, when probably the play was composed). Of course things in Elizabeth's court were quite different from what happens between Duke Senior and his brother, nor had the queen any direct relative to suspect of high treason, but the problem of the succession was in the air and usurpation with it. Shakespeare's and the Chamberlain's Men's possible involvement in the rebellion proper (1601) when *Richard II* was performed in support of the Earl of Essex was still ahead and unforeseeable in 1599, when, though, the succession theme was already being debated.

In any case the spirit of comedy presides over the events and generic rules are in charge: family bonds are reaffirmed and any sign of struggle eliminated by Orlando and Oliver's reconciliation, while the wound of 'civil war' (the usurpation) is healed by Duke Frederick's religious conversion. As Montrose states, «*As You Like It* creates and resolves conflicts»²³.

4. *The conflicts on- and off-screen*

As already shown in the introductory paragraphs, Branagh's *As You Like It* does not eliminate the conflicts of the play; in fact, it marks them even more than they are in the play text. The trouble between the older siblings is brought on screen, as a prologue to the whole action and, given the localization of the events in Japan, the director has invented the Ninja warriors' attack on Duke Senior's palace. Apparently there is no blood spilt and everything resolves in some of the Duke's subjects being pushed and pulled around and, of course, in the Duke himself being exiled. The violence of the action, though, is well visible: the warriors are dressed in black armours, with menacing helmets which cover their faces almost completely; Duke Frederick the usurper is shot in low-angle so as to enlarge his figure and stress his threatening gait; the paper walls of the Japanese house are thrust down by the powerful intrusion of the soldiers. The two dukes are shown in reverse shot (one domineering, the other incredulous of what is happening). This technique, which Branagh will often use afterwards in the film especially for the dialogues between Orlando and Ganymede/Rosalind, is here a necessity because of Brian Blessed's doubling of both characters involved in the attack. Perhaps the words at the very beginning of the film, according to which the English settlers in late nineteenth-century Japan «embrace[d] this extraordinary culture, its

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

beauties and its dangers...», refer exactly to this sort of danger, i.e. one's house being invaded by Ninja warriors, evidently part and parcel of the «mini-empires» of the new-comers. But was it really so, or was it necessary to dress the attackers in such violent costumes when all members of the household (except some maids in kimonos and the Sumo 'équipe') wear western clothes? In an interview published in the HBO Films site Branagh justifies this choice of his explaining that, since he wanted to bring «the palace coup [...] right at the front of the story» – something, he adds, «That's impossible to do in the theatre in the same way» (?) – he decided for «a potentially violent place» (Japan, evidently. But was it?) which could let the spectators perceive the «sense of danger» contained in the play²⁴. But any other place would have been equally fit for the task, and Japan appears a superimposed layer, almost completely forgotten during the rest of the film, but for the scanty Far Eastern faces here and there in Arden as well and, prominently, for Orlando's love letters which become large banners written in Japanese ideographs. Branagh's Arden – but for an architectural red structure reminding the onlooker of Oriental temples, shown three time in the 'forest' – might be anywhere (and actually is in Sussex).

The conflict between Orlando and Oliver culminates in the film in the arson of Orlando's hovel. This episode originates from Adam's lines in II.iii.22-24 (but omitted from the film):

[...] this night he [Oliver] means
To burn the lodging where you use to lie,
And you within it.

There is no fire in the play and these words are left to the theatrical audience's memory. Branagh, instead, has chosen to show the actual arson, with Oliver leading four torch bearers (dressed of course in black, given the easy distribution of the colour code between the 'goodies' and the 'baddies') to his brother's lodge and ordering the burning, which is shown at its start and later as an explosion of flames. The sequence alternates with Rosalind's banishment, so as to stress the parallel of Orlando's and the girl's destiny. In this case, material violence (the arson) – being visualized – adds to the initial general idea of more violence to come in the course of the story, whereas – following the comic reversal of the play – the subsequent filmic episode opens with a bright and sunny view of the Forest of Arden, thus contrasting the gloomy night of the fire.

Perhaps the most striking divergence from what we might expect is

²⁴ See HBO Films at <http://www.hbo.com/films/asyoulikeit/interviews/index.html> (accessed 21/05/2009).

the use of a Sumo wrestler in the fight with Orlando. In my opinion, what is clashing is not so much the presence of a typical exponent of Japanese culture, but the development of the game. The disproportion between the two wrestlers is at the basis of the Shakespeare play as well and it is also true that the play says nothing about the length of the fighting. Nevertheless the discrepancy between the Branagh wrestlers is so wide and the fighting so funny in its shortness, that laughter is provoked rather than admiration for Orlando's ability. In the 1936 filmic version of the play directed by Paul Czinner, a quite young Laurence Olivier takes about two minutes to overthrow Charles, while the crowd around shouts and shows participation in the fighting. Another, more recent example than the Olivier film is the 1978 BBC production, directed by Basil Coleman: in it the wrestling lasts 1'34", whereas in Branagh's film everything is over after 25 seconds, preceded by a couple of minutes occupied by the formal gestures of a Sumo ceremony. This shows that Branagh seems to have been compelled to shorten 'his' game just because of the disproportion of the two fighters, and that this aspect, too, can be counted among the 'dangers' of Japan (for the film itself).

Towards the end of the play, Shakespeare, using an old classical and biblical topos²⁵, places a lioness in the Forest of Arden. It is this animal that is described on the point of attacking sleeping Oliver in search of Orlando and causing Orlando's wounds, according to Oliver's own words. Shakespeare, therefore, does not show the animal, but inserts it only in Oliver's telling. Not because the lioness is just an imaginary threat, but – very probably – because of the performance difficulties of having a credible beast on the stage. (Especially after his own parody of the lion in the Athenian mechanicals' performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, composed just a few years before *As You Like It*). But, as Branagh states, cinema can do things «That's impossible to do in the theatre in the same way» and shows a lioness, or at least some resembling simulacrum-cum-roars. At this point one is justified in wondering where the historical verisimilitude and accuracy presupposed at the beginning of the film about it being located in late nineteenth-century Japan has gone. Perhaps a tiger might have been more appropriate, or things might have been left as they are in Shakespeare, i.e. only narrated and not shown.

In this article I have chosen not to comment on the performances of the various protagonists, who – as always happens – have been either

²⁵ See Ernst Robert Curtius, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, Bern, A. Francke Verlag 1948, ch. X (tr. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York, Harper Row 1953).

highly praised or painfully destroyed. A series of spectators' responses to the film, many of them positive, can be read at <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0450972/#comment> (accessed 27/06/2009). In the end, I do not dislike the film, but I have to forget Japan (the final wedding dance shows the return of the exiled to the Japanese 'court', the brides wearing kimonos) and all Branagh's pretensions about 'dreaming' of Japan. Knowing the play helps and at the same time might prevent one from having a positive reaction to the film: a Shakespeare 'expert' might accept that Rosalind, once Ganymede, just fastens her exuberant red hair inside a small cap and puts on a pair of breeches for her complete disguise; a 'naïve' spectator might wonder why Orlando does not recognize her. The former, besides, might consider as positive the multiethnicity of the cast; the latter might respond critically to this choice (or the other way round). I would like to conclude, with Andrea Gronvall, that «Branagh's creative decisions» remain «puzzling»²⁶, often conflicting with the reactions of the film's spectators.

To a Western-Shakespearean dream of Japan I would have preferred an Asian-Japanese dream of Shakespeare.

²⁶ Andrea Gronvall, *Wrong Turn: Kenneth Branagh loses his way with As You Like It*, «Chicago Reader», 17 August 2007, at <http://www.chicagoreader.com/features/stories/moviereviews/2007/070817/> (accessed 27/06/2009).