

Representation of
race in kenneth
branagh's adaptation
of shakespeare's "as
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ 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...” (On-screen text)

Branagh uses 19th century Japan to envision a culturally diverse Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, where the feudal lords of the medieval France of the play are now lords of mini-empires created by English colonizers in Japan. These lords are not originally of noble blood but are rich, opportunistic merchants who have reinvented themselves as royalty. Away from the European societal norms, this reinvention facilitates the possibility of not only a black lord but also his match with a white Duke’s daughter. While the period, place, and races have been changed, Branagh retains the original Shakespearean language. Although by the end of the eighteenth century slavery was abolished in France, blacks were still seen as an inferior race. But just as the forest is outside the conventions of the court, a colonial outpost in Japan also has different conventional parameters and cultural hierarchies than the aristocracy of France. There is thus much cultural and racial flexibility in the movie. As stated by the opening on-screen text, we see that the European colonizers have quasi-adapted Japanese culture. But even in the first scene, when they are watching a kabuki performance and the military coup is being staged, Oliver is standing away from the other white characters who are sitting in a group. There is a hint of exclusion or an imaginary boundary which he can’t seem to cross.

For their part, the Japanese characters are given very marginal roles in the film and have problematic characterizations. Charles, who is a sumo wrestler instead of a boxer in the movie, basically sits silent in his conversation with Orlando; all his lines are spoken by a white man. Phoebe is featherheaded and superficial. She embodies Nietzsche's idea of women, that is, "When thou goest to a woman, take thy whip!" She cruelly rejects Silvius but falls in love with Rosalind's criticism, which itself also becomes an issue. Though she uses the same lines as in the play, the features described as ugly are "inky brows, black hair" — characteristic Asian features. Hence, the entire scene almost verges on racism.

Almost as though reflecting these racial constructs, Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* discusses how non-Europeans are treated as Other to show white supremacy and civility. William is portrayed as a simple-minded Japanese peasant who is a silent spectator, ridiculed and physically abused by Touchstone until he runs away. Touchstone here asserts his manliness and right to Audrey not only by using wit but by actually using physical violence. The white court fool, who is of a lower hierarchy among the European colonizers, asserts his superiority in comparison to an Asian character. Duke Frederick, the antagonist, like his samurai soldiers has black Samurai hair and wears black samurai clothes. But when he converts and becomes civilized, his appearance become Europeanized. The movie even uses elements of Chinese culture like feng shui meditation garden and characters performing tai chi to represent, or misrepresent, Japanese culture. Branagh has fallen in the trap of creating an Orientalist image by blurring cultural

differences and nuances in the process. This Eurocentric attitude leads to a very stereotypical and superficial depiction of Japan.

There is currently some debate on whether this cross-cultural adaptation is a success. On the one hand, Trevor Johnston notes that “ Branagh’s fifth foray into celluloid Shakespeare brings us this rather stodgy version of the Bard’s wise comedy of old Japan. Shakespeare, of course, didn’t set it in the Far East, but Branagh’s conceit is that a Japan in transition with the arrival of foreign traders makes an ideal background for a story reliant on transformation and disguise.” However, Heather Boerner asserts that “ Branagh’s idea to move the play from England to Japan is brilliant and adds a new layer of interest. Plus — ninjas and sumo wrestlers. What could be better? The antic second half, full of Three’s Company-style mistaken identities, quick banter, and a very happy ending will satisfy the romantics in the audience.”

The film is a unique postcolonial rewriting of a vital text in Eurocentric Canon. Agree with his choices or not, Branagh purposefully contextualizes *As You Like It* in the socio-political sphere of 19th Century Japan. But the racial relationships are neither suitably developed nor aptly explored. Though the film does, like the other movies of Branagh, try to show an inclusive inter-racial world, it drastically falls short in its uninformed approach to the culture it is trying to depict.