

Rosalind in Jeans: Christine Edzard's Film Version of *As You Like It*

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Nowadays, when Shakespearean film adaptations are enjoying a moment of immense popularity at the box office, students of Shakespeare on screen may compare three very different productions of *As You Like It* available on the video market.¹ The first version, directed by Paul Czinner in 1936, stars a very young Laurence Olivier in the role of Orlando and is set in an elaborate stage forest with real animals. Described by one critic as “the model of what any school production might hope to achieve” (McKernan and Terris 1994: 38), the film suffers from a heavy dependence on late Victorian styles of stage performance which are incompatible with the requirements of the film medium. The second version, one of the first-season plays in the BBC Television Shakespeare series, was shot in Glamis Castle in 1978 and presents the characters struggling their way through in a real wood and brushing away flies while they speak. Television’s demand for realism is clearly at odds with the spirit of the play and the harsh tone of most of its reviews indicates that the critics’ initial hopes concerning the BBC project were shattered from the very start (Jorgens 1979; Kimbrough 1979; Bulman 1988). The third screen version, which will be the subject of the present paper, was directed by British film director Christine Edzard in 1992 and, unlike other recent Shakespearean adaptations such as Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (1990) or Branagh’s *Much Ado about Nothing* (1993), had a very restricted distribution and, apart from a few Shakespeare festivals, has not been commercially released in the United States.

Quickly dismissed by an infuriated reviewer as “the *ugliest* production of the play imaginable” (Errigo 1992: 38; her emphasis), Edzard’s film does not locate Arden in an intemporal landscape; instead, her version is deliberately set in contemporary London, which allows her to elaborate a parable on the condition of *post-Thatcherite Britain*. The court scenes have been shot in the foyer of a government building or, rather, a financial corporation in the heart of the City. Its bare walls and long corridors reflect luxury, sophistication and corruption, whereas impressive classical-style columns become emblems of the connection among cultural prestige, ruthless moneymaking and power. Orlando will lean on one of these columns while he is telling his misfortunes to Adam and, later, in the confrontation with Oliver, his brother will do the same when imposing his authority on him. The echoes of distant footsteps and mobile phones are the only sounds which we are allowed to hear in this empty world. Likewise, a lavish cocktail party constitutes the background to the initial scenes at court and also serves as a poignant counterpoint to the frugal, scanty meal shared by those living in the forest.

Arden, the metaphor for what Northrop Frye called “the green world” (182-183), is here transferred to an urban wasteland in Rotherhithe, a district on the south bank of the river Thames close to Docklands, one of the poorest London areas in the past and now a fashionable place for the yuppies of the eighties. The Arden we see in the film is a portion of muddy and barren land enclosed by the river and the walls of dilapidated warehouses, soon to be engulfed by menacing-looking construction cranes looming in the horizon. Birds have flown away and the sounds that we associate with this place are not idyllic: incessant traffic, electric drills and the noise of planes, the latter a familiar experience to those who have watched a performance in the recent Globe Playhouse, not

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very far from the actual location of the film. Instead of the mirth that we sense in Shakespeare's play, its inhabitants are deprived people and social dropouts such as the ones we come across every night when, after enjoying a comfortable seat at the National Theatre, we rush towards a parking place or Waterloo Underground Station. All references to Robin Hood and the idea of a *Merrie Olde England* are omitted in Edzard's adaptation; indeed, as John Carey has remarked, "setting it amidst modern dereliction, [the director] is faithful to [Touchstone's] disillusionment" (12). Critics such as H. R. Coursen have strongly objected to the identification of Arden with a building site in London (31) but we must bear in mind that Edzard's social metaphor develops C. L. Barber's assertion that Arden "is a region defined by an attitude of liberty from ordinary limitations" (223). In fact, one of the strengths of her film is the contrast between Shakespeare's language and the reality it depicts. Thus, for instance, when Duke Senior utters the line "Come, shall we go and kill us venison?" (II.1.21),² the camera shows us a tramp cutting slices of ham wrapped up in a polyethylene preservation bag, a recurrent motif in the film. The banquet prepared for Duke Senior and his exiled court in II.7 is set out on a plank and cardboard boxes, and we can clearly see that it merely consists of Kellogg's Cornflakes and Rice Krispies. In the same scene, the sword that Orlando hides (II.7.119) turns out to be a pocketknife. The enraged critic certainly missed the point when she complained that the film slipped "into pure Monty Python territory when a vagrant is required to drag along a lone ewe on a lead so that he can be safely addressed as 'Shepherd'" (Errigo 1992: 38); instead, the uprooted trees and the surrounding desolation imply that the other sheep have either escaped or died because of the bulldozers. Christine Edzard has previously directed television adaptations of *Little Dorrit* (1987) and *The Fool* (1990), based on Henry Mayhew's works, and her nightmarish modern version of Arden has strong reminiscences of the Victorian debate on the Two Nations.

As You Like It is a play concerned with themes of theatricality, performance and role-playing. The opening sequence of the film shows Edward Fox in the character of Jaques delivering the famous speech on the Seven Ages of Man (II.7.139-166) in a great hall profusely decorated with mirrors. Initially he appears through a window, captured by the camera in a medium shot that expresses his isolation and detachment "from the society he both shuns and seeks" (Crowl 1993: 41). The fact that Rosalind will be first presented in a similar shot on the edge of a window establishes a close connection between these two characters that will be explored throughout the film. As he moves around, his figure is reflected on the mirrors, window panes and shiny surfaces of the hall, while we also catch occasional glimpses of his shadow, thus creating different perspectives that underline the theme of relativity. Moreover, all court characters seem to be imprisoned in a golden cage and the multiplicity of their images on the mirrors reminds us of the well-known sequence in Orson Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947).

Wolfgang Iser has coherently argued that the prevailing perception of *As You Like It* is the double and that speech acts symbolize the conflicts of doubles foretelling the failure of usurpation in the political sphere through the domination of the implied and unspoken over the articulated. Apart from the mirrors, the dialectic court/country, old/young, male/female, evil/good and reality/fantasy is greatly enhanced by the use of doubling in Edzard's film: Andrew Tiernan, well-known for his performance of Gaveston in Derek Jarman's *Edward II* (1991), plays Orlando and Oliver (in fact, when the latter arrives in Arden, his dirty clothes and dishevelled hair make him hardly distinguishable from his brother); Don Henderson the two Dukes; Roger Hammond is both sophisticated Le Beau and simple Corin, and the scene where the affected courtier winks at the astonished shepherd constitutes one of the very few visual jokes in this otherwise serious version of the play. When we reach II.7 in the film Jaques will repeat the Seven Ages speech again; the presence of the homeless members of the exiled court and the entrance of Adam, not at the end of the passage, but as Jaques is about to describe the last stage of life, increase the poignancy of their plight and justify Edzard's decision to cut Duke Senior's lines on the golden past (II.7.120-123).

The use of disguise is also connected with this process of doubling in the film. Not only do Rosalind's new clothes —jeans, a hooded sweatshirt jacket and a black stocking cap, so typical of many adolescents, both male and female, nowadays— help her to develop her personality, but also

² All references are to the Arden edition of the play, edited by Agnes Latham.

her attire closely resembles Orlando's. One critic has pointed out that, "in order to suggest the androgynous dimension of the characterization of Rosalind, Shakespeare provides within the play three special audiences for her playing: Celia, Orlando, and Phebe" (Kimbrough 1982: 23). Edzard's Rosalind, however, is given a further androgynous dimension by repeatedly having the camera frame her from behind in long shots, which makes it rather difficult for the spectator to differentiate them until we hear their voices. Besides, the director cuts much of the dialogue in situations involving several characters and prefers to concentrate on the moments when Rosalind addresses only one person, that is, Orlando, Celia, Jaques and Phebe, the camera excluding Silvius from the frame while Rosalind/Ganymede speaks to her.

The sense of friendship and intimacy between Rosalind and Celia is also emphasized in the film. This is not really a new element, since recent performances have tended to stress that point, especially in the 1985 Royal Shakespeare Company production in modern dress, directed by Adrian Noble and starring Juliet Stevenson as Rosalind and Fiona Shaw as Celia. Nevertheless, a very physical closeness is elaborated by Edzard in the scene when both friends decide to escape to Arden: the camera shows them lying together on a sofa and slowly approaches until we see one of the very rare closeups of the film (the others are mostly associated with Rosalind and Orlando). Likewise, the scenes involving Rosalind and Celia on their own are usually filmed inside a hut in medium shots, whereas other characters in Arden are always framed in full or even very long shots that reinforce their sense of isolation, like figures stranded in a sea of concrete. Those moments of personal intimacy between Celia and Rosalind also allow the latter to get out of her disguise occasionally in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of Vanessa Redgrave's famous performance in that role back in 1961³ and, at the same time, the spectators are reminded of the notions of role-playing and theatricality in the play.

As we have previously considered, one important aspect of Edzard's adaptation is her decision to set the action of the play, not in a vaguely historical period, but in contemporary society. Modern dress productions are now widely accepted in stage performance but, in the case of Shakespeare on screen, they are rather exceptional. Apart from a few Shakespearean derivatives or "offshoots" (i.e., *Joe Macbeth*, Paul Mazursky's *Tempest* or *My Own Private Idaho*), the prevailing approach to filmed Shakespeare is what Jack Jorgens has termed "the realistic mode" (1991: 8-9), based on historical recreations and usually associated with Zeffirelli's films or Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing*. Together with the very recent version of *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), Christine Edzard's adaptation of *As You Like It* certainly constitutes one case in point since it presents the usual disadvantages of this mode of filming. One of the possible problems is that the social parable as well as the setting in a very specific location greatly diminish the poetry and our sense of illusion. As Russell Jackson has rightly remarked, "[p]aradoxically, this film uses more of the text of its play and captures less of its spirit than other more radically adapted versions of the comedies" (1994: 102), which may validate the conviction that the most successful experiments in translating Shakespeare onto images on a screen are those which have taken extreme liberties with the original script. There are several moments of wordiness in the film that may distract the spectator from what is actually happening (Touchstone's long speeches in Act V are a good example). Instead of the wrestling match, Edzard prefers to focus on the reaction of the members of the court, but the brevity of that shot cannot justify Orlando's heavy panting. Perhaps the weakest scene in the whole film is the moment when Oliver arrives in Arden and tells Rosalind and Celia that Orlando has been wounded by a lioness (IV.3.98-156). Not only do we hear that long passage in its entirety but we are also shown a redundant flashback narrating that same story and, even worse, the snake and the lioness are miraculously converted into two petty thieves.

There are also some funny innovations, but they are somewhat disconnected. First of all, we may rest assured that Rosalind, Celia and Touchstone will not remain in Arden for long when we see the huge suitcases they carry as well as a few plastic bags containing articles bought at Laura Ashley and

³ Cf. the words of praise from one contemporary review: "But when the sun shines, it shines full —most of all in those fleeting moments when Miss Redgrave escapes from her boy's disguise, snatches off her cap so that her hair tumbles like a flock of goldfinches into sunshine" (Lambert 1988: 238-239).

Liberty's. An instance that is particularly related in the film to contemporary popular culture is the scene when Orlando decides to write his love poems to Rosalind on the tree barks (III.2), but, since there are no trees in this modern version of Arden, he literally decorates the walls of the building site with colourful graffiti in her honour. Audrey becomes a snack van vendor and Phebe is transformed into a very present-day type of female adolescent wearing tights and specially fond of eating fish and chips. In fact, her letter to Ganymede is written on the oily piece of paper used to wrap up that food.

The mock-marriage scene between Rosalind/Ganymede and Orlando in IV.1 introduces a new, if somewhat pedestrian, visual metaphor in the film that will be fully articulated in its last sequence. The wedding takes place inside one of the polyethylene tents where the tramps lie huddled and that material will be progressively related to the spirit of the "forest". More than a physical location, we realize that Arden is a state of mind when, in the final multiple-wedding scene, as if by magic, all the exiles find themselves back in the great hall we have previously associated with the court. However, the impressive columns and huge mirrors are now covered with the transparent plastic used in the building site to provide shelter from the rain and the cold wind. Rosalind and Celia will also wear the same material in their wedding dresses in order to show to what extent the Arden experience has changed and developed their personalities. Unfortunately, that scene provides a very flat ending for the film since we only catch an ephemeral glimpse of the marriage of Rosalind and Orlando before we see the credits. The Hymen episode is omitted as there is no place for supernatural or divine intervention in such a contemporary situation. Jaques' parting words to the newlyweds are also consequently discarded and Rosalind's epilogue, so effective in most productions, is left out, mainly because Edzard feels that present-day audiences, used to conventions of naturalistic presentation, need not be reminded that women were played by boy actors in the Elizabethan period.⁴ However, Rosalind's resourcefulness and presence of mind never abandon her in the film, not even after her meeting with her father and her wedding ceremony. In the mock-marriage it is she, to Orlando's surprise, who kisses him, and in the real one, when she tells her future husband "To you I give myself, for I am yours" (V.4.116), she fondly knocks him on his shoulder as if to make him aware of the role she has played. In the same way, one of the most incredible events of the play according to modern taste, the Duke's sudden religious conversion, is subtly dealt with by Edzard. Following a very frequent trend in contemporary cinema, the film does not properly end when we read the credits. Instead, a few scenes are interspersed among them and the reference to his conversion is included here. By the time we hear the tale from Jaques de Boys (V.4.150-165), most spectators will have certainly left the cinema and missed that unexpected episode. Thus, Edzard is faithful to the romantic element in the play while maintaining a sense of political pragmatism more in line with everyday reality. Another dark moment, Jaques' self-imposed exclusion from the general sense of festivity as he walks alone on the river bank, is reserved for the last shot of the film.

Christine Edzard's adaptation of *As You Like It* develops some fundamental issues of the condition of post-Thatcherite Britain, certainly at the expense of the comic elements of the play. Mainly addressed to the youngest members of an urban culture who face unemployment and a very uncertain future, its quick disappearance from commercial cinemas exemplifies the implicit problems of transferring Shakespeare to a new social context without editing or altering his language. One critic observed that, "like Phebe, [the film] is perhaps not for all markets" (Crowl 1993: 41), but I am sure that, given the growing impetus of Shakespeare on screen lately, a few years will suffice to view Edzard's version of the play from a critical perspective.

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⁴ In his edition of the play, Alan Brissenden notes that, in modern productions, the line "If I were a woman" (V.4.214-215) is often changed to "If I were among you" (228).

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