

‘A Romantic Musical Comedy’ for the Fin-de-Siecle: Branagh’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*

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Kenneth Branagh’s fourth Shakespeare film, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, was released in 2000. It did not receive good reviews on the whole, with many film critics, keen to show off their high-cultural credibility, complaining about the heavy cuts to the Shakespearean text and/or the amateurishness of the film’s use of 1930s Hollywood genres, in particular the song-and-dance routine as an intrinsic part of the narrative. Given that a Shakespeare play of 3000+ lines takes over three hours to perform, the complaint about cuts seems to be based in irrational purism; I discuss below the history of shortened and rewritten Shakespearean drama in the theatre. The issue of cinematic style is one that academic literary critics have taken up, as they continue to chart and analyse the modern history of Shakespeare on celluloid. This essay will argue that Branagh’s film can be usefully read through the prism of postmodernist aesthetic theory—in particular, ideas of pastiche or parody and belatedness, and a particular energy that can arise from the work of actors in this mode. That is, I will suggest that Branagh operates with a knowingness about the genre of cinema, particularly that of romantic comedy and musicals, that is the very opposite of simplistically nostalgic—and that assumes both actors and audience are willing to take an aesthetic journey that is unconventional by modern standards.¹

¹ By way of comparison, two other films that operate with a similar aesthetic assumption and had similarly ambivalent critical receptions are Woody Allen’s *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), and Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). Linda Hutcheon remarks on ‘the reductive [critical] belief that any recall of the past must, by definition, be sentimental nostalgia or antiquarianism’ (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988) p. 19), which is characteristic of the dominant Jamesonian school of thought

Linda Hutcheon, in her influential *A Poetics of Postmodernism*,² argues that postmodernism in its various aesthetic manifestations counters the conservatism of grand narratives (including ideas about art's function): it 'suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present' (19). 'Parody', according to Hutcheon, is not ridicule but 'repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity. (26) ... The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced, as [Frederic] Jameson would like to believe: it is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning' (24). Essentially, in an argument that I would like to offer in this essay, postmodernist art is egalitarian, privileging neither the past nor the present, but honouring the work of artists who put their energy into

a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe (19).

One or two film critics seem to have instinctively understood Branagh's project in these terms:

The most fascinating thing about the movie is its combination of styles... *Love's Labour's Lost* is unabashedly old-fashioned, and it's going to lose points with some for not advancing the art of cinema. But I believe that it earns points for bringing back styles that many filmmakers seem to have forgotten ever existed.³

The overall effect is knowing and joyful at the same time, aided by perfs [sic] from the whole cast that are free of pretentiousness and have a superior stock-company glee.⁴

about postmodernist artworks. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 1991).

² Hutcheon, *ibid.*

³ Review, Jeffrey M. Anderson, combustiblecelluloid.com, May 2000.

⁴ Review, Derek Elley, *Variety*, 15 February 2000.

Much of the film, with its song-and-dance routines to the music of Gershwin, Berlin, Kern, and Porter, is a homage to the 1930s films featuring the superb dancing duo Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Branagh also drew on the Marx Brothers and other 1930s film comics for a style of pacy dialogue and farcical physicality, particularly for the play's lower-class 'clowns'. Jeffery M. Anderson, who clearly knows his film history, points out that

Branagh also takes into account the dreamlike facades and brilliant Technicolor usage of filmmakers like Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (*The Red Shoes*), Vincente Minnelli (*Meet Me in St. Louis*), and Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly (*Singin' in the Rain*).⁵

This is an informed aesthetic judgement, and it serves as a compliment to Branagh, making, as it does, comparisons with the greatest of the 1930s-50s Hollywood directors of romantic fantasy musicals. The influence of Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly's own homage to pre-war musicals in the 1952 film *Singin' in the Rain* is a good example of Branagh's conscious entry into a metacinematic style, since that film's comic plot turns on the coming of the 'talkies' in the late twenties, yet Kelly is a 'post-Astaire' dancer. In Branagh's film the dances for the men often reflect choreographer Stuart Hopp's admiration for the more overtly sexy style of Gene Kelly. Branagh's deliberate use of studio sets—only four for most of the film: library, quadrangle, riverside and garden—also clearly evokes the work of these film-makers. Realism, or some notion of historical accuracy, is far from his aim.

However, Branagh is seen as the maker (and star) of such popular and relatively straightforward period-set Shakespeare films as *Henry V*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Hamlet*. But the general public did not flock to see a Shakespeare play that many had never heard of (and that also sounded somewhat eccentric), so the DVD of *Love's Labour's Lost* languishes on the art-house shelves. Nonetheless, after ten years it may be time to reconsider Branagh's film and the work it does towards his oft-stated aim of making Shakespeare's plays available to general audiences.

Branagh cut approximately 75% of Shakespeare's notoriously wordy text, and substituted ten song-and-dance routines replicating the style of the

⁵ Anderson, Review, combustiblecelluloid.com.

early golden age of Hollywood. These artistic choices are, in fact, consistent with the tradition of reinventing Shakespeare to suit the age (and its technology) that has obtained since the re-opening of the English theatres in the 1660s. Nahum Tate's famous preface to his re-written *King Lear* (1681) speaks of the play as 'a Heap of Jewels, unstrung and unpolisht', which it was his task to 'make fit'. Shakespeare's comedies, in particular, were rewritten sometimes to the point of unrecognisability, though *Love's Labour's Lost* had little currency either in its original form or cannibalised for 'new' comedies. Swingeing cuts to the text of plays were standard, along with rewrites to language considered 'barbarous'. Perhaps most strikingly, songs were added in profusion—some stolen from other plays, some newly-written for the play, some just insertions of contemporary popular pieces. The fact that every theatre after about 1720 had a resident band meant that music featured largely in every production, as interludes, underlay, solos, or big chorus numbers. If we ignore the twentieth century's drive towards textual purism⁶ both on stage and in the study, it is clear that in 'musicalising' the play, Branagh is doing nothing new or radical in his film, but rather reviving a tradition of popular Shakespeare that uses the most up-to-date entertainment media.

Branagh is an experienced film-maker, not only of Shakespeare adaptations, and his interest in the possibilities (and history) of the medium is well attested by his earlier work (*Dead Again*, 1991, *A Midwinter's Tale*, 1995). He is also a highly accomplished stage actor, whose craft effortlessly covers the spectrum from tragedy to comedy. He knows how *Love's Labour's Lost* should work, having performed in several stage productions of it. What then are the specific characteristics and demands of Shakespearean comedy that must be translated into cinematic terms, whatever visual style is used?⁷ (We know what generally doesn't work: the

⁶ Russell Jackson, the film's academic consultant, comments: 'If we insist on making Shakespeare films with the mainstream, popular cinema, and hope that a wide general audience will enjoy and approve of them, compromises are necessary that effectively ignore the more sophisticated interpretations of the works themselves, or that some will see as leading to reactionary and unadventurous movies... [J]ournalists ... invoke a kind of 'purist,' a guardian of the sacred text, hardly to be found in modern academia. 'Filming Shakespeare's Comedies: Reflections on *Love's Labour's Lost*' in *Shakespearean Performance: New Studies*, ed. Frank Occhiogrosso (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), p. 63.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of Shakespearean comedy, see my *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), ch. 1.

dreary full-text 'historically costumed' performances of the BBC /Time-Life *Complete Shakespeare* of the 1980s.)

There is a tradition of comedy writing in English, stretching back to just before Shakespeare, that is largely dependent on witty wordplay, generally in quick banter between two speakers. Sexual innuendo is often to the fore, as well as an almost dadaist enjoyment of the absurdity of language in sound and sense. Shakespeare brought this form to its first real flowering, in comedies such as *As You Like It* and *Much Ado about Nothing* (both plays also made into films by Branagh). Clowns—either professional jesters or lower-class 'bumpkins'—take a similar pleasure in words, and share a facility for banter, as well as, of course, the ancient traditions of physical comedy. As for the play's plot, it is generally optimistic: with this light-hearted attitude to life, things will turn out all right, however dark they may occasionally appear. The chief male and female wits will eventually admit their attraction to each other, and weddings will be foreshadowed in the final scene. This is a genre of drama that allows an extraordinary freedom for women's speech and action: a recognition of female intelligence, sexual drive, and desire for equality within conventional society. After Shakespeare this model was imitated successfully by writers of the Restoration and the eighteenth century, by Gilbert and Sullivan and Oscar Wilde in the late nineteenth century, and by George Bernard Shaw, Noel Coward and others in the twentieth century. Arguably the witty banter of the Astaire and Rogers films of the 1930s, or the Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant films of the same period,⁸ is consciously part of this tradition. Branagh has no need to apologise for his instinct that *Love's Labour's Lost* would work using the stylised conventions of such films.

Frequently, song and dance will feature in such plays and films as moments that encapsulate complex issues of courtship and love. From Shakespeare onwards, a formal dance has functioned as a sign of sexual attraction and potential partnering (Shakespeare often uses the joke of a masked dance to deliciously confuse early flirtations). Songs, when not a pensive soliloquy, will often be dance-like, perhaps almost nonsensical in their joyous combination of words and music (compare 'Singin' in the Rain' with any 'Hey nonny nonny' from Shakespeare, for example 'It was a lover and his lass' from *As You Like It*). That is, in comedies song and

⁸ E.g. *The Philadelphia Story*, *The Awful Truth*, *Bringing Up Baby*. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Harvard University Press, 1981). These films are also known as 'screwball comedies'.

dance do a lot of work that might otherwise need to be done by talking, whether in dialogue or soliloquy; dramaturgically, they change the pace and refresh the audience's attention.

In casting the film, Branagh has stressed that he was looking for 'actors who could sing', rather than 'singers who can act.'⁹ The language of Shakespeare was to be spoken naturalistically,¹⁰ and the songs were to be 'imbued with the characters' singing them. In the short, intense rehearsal period he set up a 'musical comedy boot camp': each actor had singing lessons, and there were daily dance rehearsals right through the shoot. The results are creditable to all concerned; they echo, incidentally, Hollywood studio practice from the 1930s to the 1950s (think of Marilyn Monroe's performances in *Some Like it Hot* or *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*). Each actor's different basic talents are exploited to the full—Adrian Lester's dance abilities give him an Astaire-like solo, Natascha McElhone's smooth and stylish mezzo-soprano brings class to the verses of several songs. What we can infer from the details of this process is that this is a film with high artistic aims that demanded massive commitment and hard work from its cast and crew. Criticisms—and there are many among both academic and popular critics—that the singing and dancing are incompetent, constitute an insult to the professionalism of all concerned, and are based, I suspect, in an unthinking snobbery that privileges the original over its postmodern reappropriation. These actors-singers-dancers give highly competent and indeed charming performances in *their own* late twentieth-century styles.

Within a stylistic frame, then, that marries the aesthetically unfamiliar and historically distant with contemporary performance, Branagh re-tells an old story—the romantic comedy. The plot, that is, has its own generic consistency, and the director's job is to ensure that its rhythm and drive proceed seamlessly. However, in *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare

⁹ 'Kenneth Branagh: *Love's Labour's Lost*—An Interview by Jeffrey M. Anderson' combustibilecelluloid.com, 2000, provides an illuminating account of Branagh's process in making the film.

¹⁰ Branagh's naturalistic style in speaking Shakespeare is well characterised by Geoffrey O'Brien: 'a more pointed, even jabbing style, a tendency to deflate sonority in favour of exact meaning, while at the same time giving the meter of the verse a musician's respect.' Samuel Crowl, 'Flamboyant realist: Kenneth Branagh', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, Russell Jackson, ed., 2nd edn, 2007, pp. 226-242 (p. 232), quoting O'Brien in *New York Review of Books*, 6 February 1997.

undermined audience expectations of the genre by refusing to allow his lovers to agree to marry at the end of the play: their courtship is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger with news of the King of France's death. As Berowne says, 'This doth not end like an old play: / Jack hath not Jill ...' (Act 5, sc. 2, 842-3). This generic disruption is a gift to the postmodernist director: it gives Branagh, as it were, permission to make his own stylistic interruptions to the text—of which one is the song-and-dance routines, and the other is the half-joke, half-desperate 'newsreels' that serve the dual function of summarising chunks of the plot and warning us that the Second World War is about to begin, and that the dance-floor will give way to the battlefield.

In pursuing an analysis of what the song-and-dance and newsreel sequences bring to the film, it is worth first of all considering the evidence offered by the scenes which were filmed, then deleted from the final cut. They are usefully included on the DVD, and Branagh's Director's Commentary¹¹ stresses that he loved these scenes and the work done by the actors in them, but he recognised that they compromised the rhythm of the twenty-first-century film that he was making. The deleted scenes all come from late in the play, where the film has clearly built up its own momentum and is heading towards a *dénouement* which melds the sixteenth-century play with twentieth-century history—which includes, properly and inevitably, the history of that quintessential twentieth-century form, cinema.

1. Act 4, sc. 3, 205-280, with internal cuts.¹² This is the verbose conclusion to the 'library scene', in which Berowne overhears his fellow scholars expatiating on their loves, by reading 'sonnets' they have written to them. In the film these sonnets are replaced by the lines of the Gershwin's song 'I've got a crush on you'; the discussion following Berowne's outing as the fourth of the men in love is clearly unnecessary repetition of material already crystal clear. However, the film's visual joke of the watching stuffed bear (perhaps readable as a symbol of lust—it finally falls over on top of the collapsed men) comes across as unsubtle and unnecessary,

¹¹ All comments attributed to Branagh which are not otherwise referenced are quotations or summaries from the Director's Commentary on the DVD (Pathé, P8987DVD).

¹² All references to the text of *Love's Labour's Lost* are to the Cambridge Shakespeare edition, William C. Carroll, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

though stylistically it echoes many moments in 1930s films where self-confident young men are brought low by inanimate objects.

2. Act 5, sc.1, 1-125, with internal cuts. This is the most striking loss to the film as Shakespearean performance. Using all the play's six 'clowns' or comic lower-class characters, the original scene (as written and filmed) constitutes a demonstration of the 'great feast of languages' (as Moth wittily defines it in line 31), that is, the joy of playing with words, particularly the pedantic self-indulgence of parallelisms (eg. 75-6, Holofernes: 'liable, congruent, and measurable ... The word is well culled, choice, sweet, and apt'). There follows the discussion of the Pageant of the Nine Worthies that the clowns will put on to honour the Princess that evening. Although the theme of language is not emphasised in the film, Geraldine McEwan's performance, in particular, of Holofernia's lines is an exemplar of how to make even Shakespeare's most obscure verbal jokes work brilliantly. Timothy Spall's absurd Spanish courtier is not far behind her in sheer *joie de mots*. Presumably the major reason for the scene's omission is that the Pageant of the Nine Worthies is finally only glimpsed in the 'newsreel' rather than fully performed (see below, the fifth deleted scene).

3. Act 5, sc. 2, 1-79, with internal cuts, follows in the text immediately on the previously deleted passage. It's a charming scene in which the four girls laugh about the gifts sent to them by their lovers—a scene that might have come straight out of *Sex and the City*. There is a virtuoso 'performance' from Natascha McElhone as Rosaline (winning applause from her friends); some delightfully naturalistic speeches from Alicia Silverstone's Princess—including the thematically central line (unfortunately cut) 'We are wise girls to mock our lovers so' (58); and a somewhat confusing, though beautifully played, moment of sadness from Emily Mortimer's Katherine, who remembers the death of her sister from love, 'the boy Cupid' being to blame. This scene develops further the characters and friendship of the girls, and its omission leaves the film a little poorer. The remainder of the scene, which is filmed in a cut version, does pick up on the mood here created, though losing any reference to Katherine's melancholy.

4. Act 5, sc.2, 157-240, with internal cuts: the 'Muscovite' scene. On film, this is not actually funny, despite Rosaline's ditzy Brooklyn accent and the King's Groucho-esque waggling of his fake eyebrows. It goes on too long, and offers too much of the same joke (this is also often the case when the scene is played on the stage). The replacement discussed below, featuring a raunchy dance in masks and underwear, is a more convincing modern embodiment of sexual teasing and confusion.

5. Act 5, sc. 2, 568-690, with internal cuts, shows the Pageant of the Nine Worthies until it is brought to an abrupt end by the dispute between Pompey and Costard. This classic moment (also to be found in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), when the clowns perform their version of high classical theatre for the gentry, is deleted in favour of a summary on the newsreel, with glimpses of the performers. Perhaps Branagh considered this scene too 'theatrical', but cutting it entirely means that the audience misses out on the last appearances of the lower-class folk, whose performances create not only laughter but also several moments of poignancy. Costard (Nathan Lane) as Pompey the Great has a touching moment when he admits 'I made a little fault in "Great"' (550), and, smiled at by the Princess, produces a bunch of paper flowers from his sleeve. Richard Briers's Nathaniel is stricken by stagefright; he is 'a little o'erparted', as Costard explains, though he charitably adds that 'he is a marvellous good neighbour, faith, and a very good bowler'. Holofernia, playing Judas Maccabeus in a mask, is cruelly teased by the King's friends, and she rebukes them with dignity: 'This is not generous, not gentle, not humble' (614). Don Armado, as Hector, is subject to the same treatment, and points out, quietly and without bombast, 'The sweet war-man is dead and rotten. Sweet chucks, beat not the bones of the buried. When he breathed, he was a man' (644-5). Like Katherine's memory of her sister's death earlier in the scene, this moment foreshadows the arrival of Marcade with the announcement of the King of France's death—and the subsequent outbreak, in the film, of World War Two.

With these late deletions of over-wordy or stagey scenes the film moves ever more definitely into a familiar genre: that of the mid-twentieth century's romantic dramas about love under the reality of a world at war, with lives disrupted and put on hold. Stage directors putting on Shakespeare's play of *Love's Labour's Lost* have often set it in the shadow

of the First World War, as the long Edwardian afternoon of the privileged classes gives way to the reality of the trenches. Trevor Nunn's production of 2003 (London, National Theatre) showed the whole play as a flashback in the mind of the wounded Berowne. One of the functions of Branagh's 'newsreels' with their somewhat frenetic 'cheeky chappie' voice-over (Branagh himself), is to place the film's narrative very definitely in the period of anxiety and confusion just before World War Two, when one of the tasks of the always upbeat newsreel was to put the best face on things, and offer amusing human interest stories to offset the increasingly disturbing political news. Samuel Crowl points out that 1930s screwball comedy and musicals had a similar function in providing fantasy to a Depression-era world, and that

[b]y beginning his film on September 1, 1939, as Hitler was rolling into Poland, Branagh provides both a motivation for and critique of the King of Navarre's decision to retreat into his academy... trying to avoid the unavoidable: entanglement with the wider world ... Branagh's film complicates the issue by adding war to woman as part of the world's call.¹³

As Branagh remarks, the newsreel's job, although a plot 'shorthand', is to 'underpin the emotional undercurrents of the film' (and indeed of the play, despite its surface 'silliness') with the threat of separation and death. He also provides the information that the newsreels were added very late in the editing process, after several previews revealed that audiences were not clear about how seriously to take the 1930s 'screwball' courtships. Contrast and context are here used cleverly to acknowledge the fin-de-siècle's belatedness—this film made in 1999 *cannot* be viewed with the innocent eyes of those audiences who first watched the 1930s screwball comedies (just as *The Merchant of Venice* can never be produced or studied now without awareness of the Holocaust).

Branagh's other major stylistic intervention was his cutting of so much of the text's witty but often verbose dialogue in favour of song and dance routines from 1920s-30s Hollywood cinema and theatre. The film's songs are by the geniuses of twentieth-century American song, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter. They express a mood, an attitude to love (and life) that sees love as that 'moment' to be grasped,

¹³ Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* (Ohio UP, 2003), p. 43.

with wit, *joie de vivre*, and occasional gentle melancholy (not unlike the songs that occur in Shakespeare's plays, *Twelfth Night* for example: 'Then come kiss me sweet and twenty/Youth's a stuff will not endure'). In the second part of this essay I will examine these unique and strongly characterised additions to Shakespeare's play, asking what work they do in terms of engaging a late-twentieth-century audience with the story and with Branagh's postmodernist interpretation of the genre of 'romantic musical comedy'.¹⁴

In his Director's Commentary on the DVD of the film Branagh points out that the first song, when it begins in the library during the men's signing-up to the vow, produced reactions of either shock or delight in test audiences. It is Desmond Carter and George Gershwin's 'I'd rather Charleston',¹⁵ and Branagh gives the song a rationale: in the preceding speech, the King has used the word 'intellects' (1.1.71) in his argument to persuade Berowne to agree to the ascetic restraints. The song's first lines, sung by the King, are:

I've seen for days that you've got
Some ways that must be checked.
In you I never can detect
The slightest signs of intellect.

¹⁴ This subtitle, as Branagh says in his Director's Commentary, was a deliberate ploy to alert the audience to something different from the standard modern film.

¹⁵ 'I'd Rather Charleston' is from the London show *Lady Be Good* (1926, George Gershwin / Desmond Carter), performed first by Fred and Adele Astaire. The first verse continues:

[FRED:]
You're mad on dances, think of the chances you neglect
You never seem inclined to use your mind
And it's quite plain to see
That I'm the brains of the family.
Take a lesson from me
[ADELE:]
I'd rather Charleston ...

'It seemed the right kind of song for the King to sing to Berowne,' says Branagh. Berowne's response is a jaunty yet suave dance towards the camera, singing 'I'd rather Charleston'. The other three men immediately join in, demonstrating in the energetic choreography of their dance the pleasure that they have in their youth and fitness, their readiness for life's challenges.



The dance was filmed in one continuous shot, with the camera moving round the room to keep the full-length body of the dancers always in shot; Branagh aspired to do this for almost all the dance numbers as a stylistic homage to the inimitable Astaire and Rogers films. It also works as a demonstration of the modern actors' real skills.

The second dance sequence is to the song (sung by the girls) 'I won't dance', a Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein II number from the Astaire and Rogers film *Roberta* (1935). It takes off, naturally, from the opening dialogue between Berowne and Rosaline: 'Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?' (Act 2, sc.1, 113-4). Rosaline's response to his somewhat puppyish pickup line is to sing 'I won't dance, don't ask me', which all the girls join in. The moment actually anticipates a line from Rosaline much later in the play, spoken to the supposed Muscovites,

Since you are strangers, and come here by chance,
We'll not be nice. Take hands. We will not dance.
(Act 5, sc. 2, 218-9)

The function of these moments is exactly the same: teasingly, the girls, while elegantly flaunting their physical charm and grace, refuse to be seen as easy pushovers for the men who pursue them ineffectually. In particular, to refuse to dance is symbolically to delay (or refuse to recognise) the

courtship mode. These girls are, as they later sing, 'Fancy free'—or would like to be seen so. With delightful irony, Branagh ensures that this is a fully-choreographed sequence for all eight characters—the wooers and the wooed in separate lines, thus confirming for the audience what the previous sequence of close-ups at the meeting of the four couples has already set up: irresistible physical attraction.



A 'cheeky chappie'-commentated newsreel is used to introduce the play's comic characters, with their 'old-fashioned, knockabout slapstick humour', as Branagh characterises it. In the case of Nathan Lane as Costard, Branagh acknowledges this comic genius of contemporary Broadway, who is almost uncannily able to channel pre-War vaudevillians, as well as film clowns—most notably Groucho Marx, including Groucho's characteristic fast New York speech patterns; and Curly from the Three Stooges, whose finger-snapping hand moves were a specialty. Katherine Eggert perceptively comments on Lane's vaudeville persona: 'a Jewish performer himself, he plays Costard as borrowing various shticks from such great ethnic vaudevillians as Groucho Marx (the voice), Milton Berle (the plaid sport coat and the unabashed randiness), and Señor Wences (the Spanish-accented hand puppet)'¹⁶.

¹⁶ 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 *Shakespeare the Movie II*, Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose, eds. (Routledge, 2003), p. 82. 'Senor Wences, a popular performer on the Ed Sullivan show from the 1950s onwards, was known for his speed, skill, and grace as a ventriloquist. His stable of characters included Johnny, a childlike face drawn on Wences' hand, which he would place atop an otherwise headless doll and with whom Wences conversed while switching his voices between Johnny's falsetto and his own voice at amazing speed.' (Wikipedia, 'Senor Wences'.) I am unconvinced by the Milton Berle identification—Lane's performance of his 1930s vaudevillian



Among the clowns is the comic Spanish knight, Don Adriano de Armado, the 'braggart' figure from commedia dell'arte and a favourite Shakespearean comic butt. The casual xenophobia both of Shakespeare and of the films of the thirties—Armado looks and sounds different, so he must be a fool—is well countered by Timothy Spall's knowingly over-the-top performance of the Cole Porter classic 'I get a kick out of you', in the various rich-man's fantasy scenarios that the song wittily suggests, along with its underlying pathos.¹⁷ It concludes, as Branagh points out, with a genuinely touching declaration of love from Armado to Jaquenetta.

By this stage the film's genre and plot are clearly established—'a romantic musical comedy based on Shakespeare', and that means, as Branagh explains, 'there comes a natural point at which the next song needs to emerge'. The 'Esther Williams tribute' number, Irving Berlin's

seems generic rather than specific (see also the comment by Branagh about Lane's clown persona quoted below).

¹⁷ Sung by the character Reno in Porter's *Anything Goes* (1934). Branagh points out that not many people are familiar with the verse before the famous chorus kicks in, but it is entirely appropriate for the displaced and poverty-stricken proud Spaniard:

My story is much too sad to be told,
 But practically ev'rything leaves me totally cold
 The only exception I know is the case
 When I'm out on a quiet spree
 Fighting vainly the old ennui
 And I suddenly turn and see
 Your fabulous face.

I get no kick from champagne....

'No Strings (I'm fancy free)'¹⁸ performed by the girls (and their doubles in the synchronised swimming sequence) is perhaps not such a natural transition, and in the Director's Commentary Branagh is a little defensive about the song's inclusion. Arguably it has the same rather unsubtle role as those passages in the text's Act 4, sc. 1 where the girls comment on the upper-class pastime of hunting, with all the sexual innuendoes that it has accumulated in Renaissance culture. Branagh's substitution of the girls' 'jolly hockey sticks health and beauty routine' (we also see them practising archery and cricket) is perhaps a way of signalling the delight in physicality and sexuality that Shakespeare gives his female characters in the hunting scene.

The next musical interlude is based on the melancholic lyrical 'The way you look tonight', by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields, sung, quite unexpectedly but beautifully, by Geraldine McEwan as the Principal of the Navarre Royal School of Philosophy. Supposedly reading Armado's letter to Jaquenetta, she sings the song to Sir Nathaniel the curate (Richard Briers), to whom she clearly has a passionate attachment. There is certainly something of a bond between Holofernes and Nathaniel in the original text; they share a fetish for Latinate vocabulary which almost becomes a private language between them. Branagh flirted with the idea of making them an elderly gay couple (but rejected the 'cliché'). Geraldine McEwan's performance in the film, as Holofernia, makes the most of the song's underlying tenderness. As Branagh says, the moment complements the focus elsewhere on young love, and shows that the 'silliness' that love lets us all in for is no respecter of age. All the clowns here present (Dull, Jaquenetta, Costard) join in what Branagh calls a 'comic ballet', and Crowl 'a sweetly daft dance'¹⁹ which shows the underlying emotion linking these people—an admission rarely made by the 1930s films, but quite properly in the late twentieth century: that the 'servants' have feelings.

The play's famous 'overhearing scene' (Act 4, sc. 3), a farcical or 'pantomimic' scene (a wonderful opportunity for physical comedy) in which each of the men is overheard by first Berowne then the others (all in hiding) as they read their self-penned sonnets declaring their love, is brilliantly translated into a shared version of George and Ira Gershwin's 'I've got a crush on you'. Branagh explains that the language is 'dense and

¹⁸ From the Astaire and Rogers film *Top Hat* (1935): its light-hearted lyrics conclude with 'I'm fancy free and free for anything fancy.' Words and music by Irving Berlin.

¹⁹ Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, p. 45.

elaborate' in the play here—and one might add, the aristocratic convention of written 'sonnets' to a mistress is long out of fashion, but the sentiment remains the same. The song becomes an opportunity for Adrian Lester, the best of the male actor-dancers, to perform a tribute to Fred Astaire's similar scene in *Shall We Dance*. When Berowne himself is 'rumbled' as being also in love, it is he who signals the men's change of tactic with the speech 'Have at you then, affection's men at arms.' Branagh accompanies the opening lines with a slow tap dance, emphasising the iambic pentameter, and then moves into the naturalistic performance of Shakespearean verse which is a characteristic of this production. At the end of the speech (Act 3, sc. 2, 314), on the word 'heaven', Branagh explains that the character is transformed by the power of the words to the point where 'He's gotta sing'. He segues seamlessly into the opening of Irving Berlin's 'Cheek to Cheek': 'Heaven, I'm in heaven, and my heart beats so that I can hardly speak...' At this point the conventions of the Hollywood dream sequence take over: the men float to the domed ceiling of the library as they join in the song, then the girls are seen outside in flowing choreography and gowns that echo Ginger Rogers's extraordinarily erotic dance with Astaire to this number in *Top Hat* (1935). Finally all the couples are together (the men having magically changed into top hat and tails) and the advantages of the anamorphic wide-screen format chosen for the film are most satisfyingly displayed, as not one couple but four, in imagery of full length and width, dance out their idealised romantic feelings. The song, as Branagh says, has 'an ecstatic and life-affirming quality', first created in the 1935 film and wonderfully acknowledged here by the eight dancing actors of *Love's Labour's Lost*.



It is, of course, a sexual fantasy, just as the following number is. The decision to have the masked girls, in *Cabaret*-style underwear, dance with the singlet-clad boys, offered an opportunity to draw out the (largely

inaccessible) sexual imagery and punning in the original text and show it in a way that offers a 'fantasy of what they'd like to do if they weren't all being so polite and guarded.' The dance style here is that of Bob Fosse, modern and raunchy (Branagh notes also a tribute to the nightclub sequence in *Singin' in the Rain*). Moving away from the formal elegance of the 1930s films into the more *noir* world of 1960s eroticism, Branagh here illustrates the confusion brought on by allowing sexual impulses to rule one's behaviour. Fittingly, the sequence is not shot in one take, and there are few full-screen views of all the dancers: it is a dark, sexual and anonymous moment, with flashing thighs and groping hands. As in the 1960s films, a cigarette enjoyed by all the girls (now fully dressed) is a sign of post-coital languour. This is one of the cleverest sequences in the movie in terms of grabbing the audience's attention and ensuring that the film of Shakespeare's play does not come across as a worthy but dull museum piece.

The Pageant of the Nine Worthies having been cut, as noted above, the stage is clear for another moment of striking contemporaneity, though here also with a strong touch of affectionate nostalgia for the past great days of the Broadway musical and the 1930s cinema choreography of Busby Berkeley. Nathan Lane (Costard), in top hat and tails, sings a slow and affectionate 'There's no business like show business' (Irving Berlin), the Broadway anthem first sung by brassy diva Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946). By the time the whole cast of the play has joined in, in an upbeat tap chorus, it is clear that this substitution for the Nine Worthies is in its own way metatheatrical, a commentary by the actors on the strange and delightful job that they have. In any 'realistic' production, certainly the King and Princess would never be seen in a Broadway chorus line, much less with the lower-class comics on an equal footing—in fact, led by Costard the clown. The number becomes an overt acknowledgement of the work of theatre, and in particular comedy, in lifting our spirits. 'I wanted to celebrate Nathan Lane having this wonderful Broadway quality,' Branagh says, 'so that he can sing "There's No Business Like Show Business" in such a moving fashion. It's very touching, because he's got that sort of sad clown's face. I was watching, and thinking, "you really believe in this, don't you? You really believe in this show business being the cure of all ills."²⁰ Shakespeare's play too has many such suggestions as it draws to its end.

²⁰ Anderson, interview, combustiblecelluloid.com, 2000.

Marcade the royal messenger solemnly arrives to interrupt the festivities with the news of the King of France's death. Newspaper headlines ask 'Will France Fall?' Of course it will—everyone in the audience knows that it did in the real world, though in that real world France had no king, and the foreign threat was the much more frightening Hitler and his Nazis. Branagh only offers glimpses of the German enemy; his concentration is on the experience of the individuals of an imagined France (as Shakespeare's was). The lovers, as the men go off to war, separate in multiple visual references to the end of one of the great romantic films of World War Two, *Casablanca*, made in 1942 by Michael Curtiz when the outcome of the war against Hitler was profoundly uncertain. That film celebrates the values of love, and of loyalty and honour—concepts underlying Shakespeare's romantic play with its equally unexpected refusal to 'end like an old play.' Instead of an easy romantic ending, the men are given tasks by the women—to fulfil their masculine duty, and to restrain their impatience for sexual fulfilment in marriage until this work is done. The close analogy with the many films made to support the war effort by linking romance with the higher duty that the times demanded, is strikingly apt for Branagh's directorial vision of the Shakespearean play, while the generic move from escapist romantic comedy to wartime drama mirrors the shift in American national politics from isolationism to international commitment. Harry Warner, whose Warner Bros studio made *42nd Street* and other 'escapist' musicals in the 1930s but switched to making such wartime classics as *Casablanca* in the early '40s, was said to have declared, 'I don't want us to be known as the studio that made the best musical comedies during the war.'²¹

One song remains to be sung—the Gershwins' 'They can't take that away from me', sung first by Fred Astaire in the film *Shall We Dance*. Ginger Rogers is silent and motionless as he sings this yearning, melancholy piece, and significantly, no dance sequence follows in the 1937 film or in Branagh's final shots in his film narrative. Branagh sings the opening lines, his voice deliberately 'cracked', in character as the now deeply feeling Berowne. Each of the other men takes a line and sings it to his girl. The girls share the second verse, so that all eight of the lovers have a last song that acknowledges their love, and they finally sing in unison as the cars draw out of the castle and head to the airport and separation.

²¹ Warner is quoted in Philip Furia and Laurie Patterson, *The Songs of Hollywood* (OUP, 2010), p.155.

Branagh decided to end the film with a montage of imagined events of the war, showing each of the characters briefly as they encounter this changed reality. Underscoring the montage is Patrick Doyle's arrangement of 'They can't take that away from me' for a melancholy trumpet solo and strings. Branagh comments towards the end of the film that in the planning stages they had looked for unfamiliar songs, and even tried writing their own, but eventually realised that the great songs of Kern, Berlin, Gershwin, and Porter matched their sense of the play's artistic stature: these classic songs 'are open to all sorts of interpretations, just like Shakespeare himself'—that is, dependent upon performers for their continued life; the 'pure' text, we might say, is the dead text. The final credits to the film take the audience back to images of all the couples dancing joyously in earlier sequences; but now to the tune of 'There's no business like show business'—the 'only possible song', says Branagh.

We might conclude that the film celebrates showbiz, and insists on its importance to the community, from Shakespeare to the present. If that means recalling, recreating, reappropriating earlier work, as long as it is done with confident flair (rather than anxious diffidence), it is doing the work that a postmodernist theory of art encourages. As academic critic Samuel Crowl writes:

Branagh's nerve and intelligence are his most original qualities. His genius as an artist is as a synthesiser; his imagination works like a magpie, stealing good ideas from others but linking them in surprising and original ways... Branagh is a product of the postmodern moment dominated by a sense of belatedness; a sense that originality is exhausted and that only parody and pastiche and intertextual echo remain. Rather than finding such a condition enervating, Branagh's work seizes on its possibilities ...²²

—and on the energies of his co-worker actors and designers. To quote Branagh himself, on the showing of *Top Hat* to his cast on day one of rehearsals: Fred and Ginger 'are geniuses and we're not. But if we can capture the twinkle in the eyes and feet of those performers, then we'll recapture something that gives people a lot of joy'²³ —what film critic

²² Samuel Crowl, 'Flamboyant realist', pp. 226-7.

²³ Branagh, quoted in Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, Pearson Education 2005, p. 213. Against this observation we can set the perverse comment of Katherine Eggert (unfortunately published in a major student resource book): 'Branagh's and the rest of his cast's poor imitations of Astaire have the effect not

Derek Elley rightly perceived as 'a superior stock-company glee.' There is an influential strand of theorising about postmodernism that is deeply suspicious of joy, or indeed of pleasure in any form (except, perhaps, the intellectual pleasure of knowing more than your neighbours).²⁴ Working *outside* this paradigm is a set of artists who are knowingly postmodernist in their ways of referencing and playing with the past. Perhaps the most fundamental quality of this mode of postmodernist appropriation or celebration is that it is not worried about whether or not the audience is equally 'knowing'. The artists (here, Branagh and his collaborators) know what it is they are revivifying in a different context; the audience (apart from a few thirties-musical geeks) is able to sit back and enjoy the virtuosic performances without feeling the need to engage in deconstructive critique. Branagh's various cinematic strategies have ensured that the film is of its moment, the end of the twentieth century; its nostalgia is laced with historic awareness. In capturing the energy of live performance yet framing it as artificial, 'unrealistic', it allows us to see the human performers underneath the mask and enjoy and honour their work. Shakespearean play-texts, in particular the comedies, make a point of offering the audience exactly the same opportunity. In the case of *Love's Labour's Lost* I suggest that Branagh's film could offer teachers and students a way into understanding the generic qualities of romantic comedy, whether Shakespearean or later: the film foregrounds the joyous, creative artificiality of the genre and of any mode of courtship (sonnets, dancing, games, songs ...), and, like all the best romances, reminds us of their fragility in the face of war, danger, and death.

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only of *revealing* this production as in some way second-rate, but of *designating* this production with that status.' Eggert, 'Sure can sing and dance', p. 79. Eggert's critique depends upon a reverence for the 'original' that automatically downgrades the work of its modern re-creators.

²⁴ Katherine Eggert, quoted in the previous note, is an example of Jameson's doom-laden perspective on contemporary creativity. A more empathetic but still critical Jamesonian view of the film is offered in Ramona Wray, 'Nostalgia for Navarre: The Melancholic Metacinema of Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost*', *Film/Literature Quarterly*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2002), 171-8. In particular Wray utilises Jameson's dismissive view of 'nostalgic' artistic practices, with an argument naïvely based on an appeal to 'real history' (173) which excludes the history of art and its habit of creative reappropriation.

on Shakespearean drama including *As She Likes It: Shakespeare's Unruly Women* and, most recently, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies*.