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

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Abstract
Kenneth 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 Love’s Labour’s Lost, a Shakespeare play that many had never heard of (and that also sounded somewhat eccentric), so the DVD 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, and its manner of achieving this through embracing a postmodern aesthetic. If it was to please neither Shakespearean nor postmodern purists, this paper argues that Love’s Labour’s Lost has much to offer not only to a less censorious audience, but also to a critical understanding of the genre of romance.

Full Text:

I found Kenneth Branagh’s Love’s Labors Lost to be delightful. There are those who approach the Bard with religious awe and will be scandalized by how much of the original script has been truncated here and replaced by singing. And there will be those hate or adore Branagh and cannot view this movie without comparing it to others of his movies. Even infusing Shakespeare’s comedy with a string of Gershwin-era songs and dances. But while his Much Ado About Nothing was a frothy, wonderful gem, Love’s Labour’s Lost . . . just didn’t quite work. It’s a noble try, though. Whether the concept itself is flawed is up for debate. Love’s Labour’s Lost is a comedy. However, this rendition brings a more entertaining aspect to the famous classic. However, Kenneth Branagh’s Love’s Labors Lost never manages to blend these promising elements successfully. As a summer afternoon entertainment it is far from terrible, but one had hoped for something more. As director, Branagh sees to it that even a Shakespearean novice like Alicia Silverstone handles the Bard’s verse decently. However, Branagh presents almost every musical number in an arch, over-the-top, almost campy style— as if he was interrupting Shakespeare to make fun of musicals. My companion put it well when he asked, “Why do I get the feeling that every number is ‘Springtime for Hitler’?”