

OXFORD SHAKESPEARE TOPICS

Shakespeare
& the
English-
speaking
Cinema

 RUSSELL JACKSON

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Preface

The organization of this book is 'horizontal', in that, rather than offer a chronological account of its subject, or one divided strictly according to genres, its chapters approach films from a number of different perspectives. Excellent historical accounts, in particular Kenneth S. Rothwell's *History of Shakespeare on Screen* (2nd edition, 2004), provide alternative and comprehensive introductions. Although considerations of dramatic genre hover over some chapters more than others, in general I have tried to reflect our sense, as playgoers and readers as well as cinemagoers, of a compromise between dramatic and cinematic genres. The first chapter, 'places', deals with the realization of the locations of the action and the choice of historical period; this leads to 'people', a discussion of the ways in which individual characters and relationships have been influenced by these decisions. The third and fourth chapters consider the part played by the erotic in comedy and tragedy respectively; the fifth deals with politics – 'power plays' – in films from plays of a range of dramatic genres; and the sixth with films that adapt more radically or make significant use of Shakespearian 'originals'.

In order to keep the book to an appropriate length, I have quoted sparingly from the very considerable body of informed, perceptive, and challenging critical commentary that has appeared since the 1970s. The brief conclusion, 'Rewind', suggests some ways in which the reader may wish to take the book's subject further. The suggestions for 'Further Reading' (pp. 177–184) include scholarship and commentary that I would have liked to engage with, but which in any case will provide the reader with ideas, arguments, and information to take back to the films and, I hope, what I have written here. The restriction to 'English-speaking' cinema precludes discussion of such influential films as Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957, from *Macbeth*) and *Ran* (1987, from *King Lear*), but I have allowed myself comparisons in a few instances with Grigori Kozintsev's Russian versions of *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1969).

In the text and filmography, directors' names are used to identify films, not out of a dogmatic devotion to the *auteur* theory, but because it is a term of convenience in common use. In order to keep my text tidy, the nationality of films is indicated in the filmography but not within the body of the text. References to the plays are to the act, scene, and line numbering of the *Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (2nd edition, Oxford, 1986).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my colleagues in the department of Drama and Theatre Arts at the University of Birmingham for their support during a period of study leave that enabled me to complete this book. I have benefitted from insights gleaned from discussions with students in study options on its subject, and from other scholars and critics in conferences and symposia. Like all those engaged in the study of Shakespeare on film, I owe an incalculable debt to Kenneth S. Rothwell and Bernice W. Kliman, to whose memory this book is dedicated, for their collegial engagement in debate and the example of their published work. Patricia Lennox, who has shared in the viewing and discussion that lies behind this book, and Peter Holland and Stanley Wells, who commissioned it, have been acute and encouraging in their comments on its drafts.

RJ

Birmingham
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Introduction: Legalized Plagiarism and the Rewards of Adaptation

Jean Renoir, discussing his 1936 film adaptation of a short story by Guy de Maupassant, 'Une Partie de campagne', insisted that he truly believed in the idea of 'a framework within which one embroiders':

It's a question of plagiarism. I must admit something: I'm absolutely in favour of plagiarism. I believe that if we want to bring about a great period, a new renaissance of arts and letters, the government should encourage plagiarism . . . I'm not kidding, because the great authors did nothing but plagiarism, and it served them well. Shakespeare spent his time writing stories that had already been written by little-known Italian authors and by others.

Apologizing for what may seem a digression in his commentary on the film in question, Renoir points out that borrowing of this kind 'frees you from the unimportant aspect', to concentrate on 'the way you tell the story . . . the details, the development of the characters and the situations'.¹ The sense of freedom that Renoir enjoys in his reworking of the story can be paralleled in the suggestion by Julie Sanders that 'it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of interpretation take place'.² Deborah Cartmell suggests a convenient classification of adaptations from text to screen: transposition, commentary, and analogue.³ It is possible to go further. In *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2007) Thomas Leitch, having surveyed various taxonomies of adaptation, proposes a list of ten strategies: celebration, adjustment, (neoclassical) imitation, revision, colonization, deconstruction, analogy, parody (and pastiche), imitation (secondary, tertiary, and quaternary), and allusion.⁴ All, he suggests, are present in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo+Juliet* (1996).

Discussion of adaptation has problematized the terms 'original' and 'fidelity', partly motivated by a desire to avoid a hierarchy of texts and in response to the alleged death of the author, but it remains current in the thinking of those who work on screen (or stage) versions, and is an appropriate and convenient word for their raw material. The redirection of emphasis from the author – a concept defined variously even in the time when the plays were written – has been a salutary element in critical thinking, but authorship is still invoked by the makers and distributors of films, notably in the appropriate legally and professionally significant credits on scripts. 'Fidelity' to the original, though, is not a quality prized implicitly or explicitly in the present work, but it should be acknowledged that, for better or worse, this concept, however discredited in theoretical writing on adaptation, continues to have currency in the popular reception of films. Colin McCabe, introducing *True to the Spirit* (2011), a collection of essays addressing the problematic nature of these concepts in relation to specific examples, observes that in recent theoretical writing '[t]he endless attacks on fidelity . . . meant that [critics] were ill equipped and unwilling to sketch that particular form of productivity that preserves identity at the same moments that it multiplies it'.⁵ 'Circulation' and engagement with the audience's pleasure in recognizing and enjoying changes by invoking the source texts may be a more useful way of describing the interplay between audience, film, and original: current advertising (spring 2013) for a tie-in edition of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* promises 'the book that inspired the film'. In a sense, what we are dealing with is the (re)circulation of originals that are themselves revisiting existing plays, novellas, or chronicles. This having been said, and for all one's desire to see the 'original' retrieved as faithful to audience perceptions, it is important to acknowledge that, in Linda Hutcheon's words, 'to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be originary or authoritative'. The source may be seen or read after the adaptation – as the publishers of Tolkien clearly hope – and '[m]ultiple versions exist laterally, not vertically'.⁶

Some Definitions: 'Shakespeare', 'English', and 'Cinema'

The title of this book includes terms whose significance may seem self-evident, but which call for some examination. What do we mean by 'Shakespeare', 'English-speaking', and 'cinema'?

The first is perhaps the easiest to define: we are considering the ways in which the plays in the Shakespeare canon have been adapted for a new medium and the processes and results identifiable in a number of examples. Invoking the canon carries with it the implication that all and any of the plays (and poems) in the various editions of the *Complete Works* might be in question, and that all of these are safely attributed to the sole authorship of Shakespeare. In practice, although some plays have been accepted as the product of collaboration – *Macbeth* is the prime example – so far as the general public is concerned, the participation of Thomas Middleton as a reviser is of little interest, and film-makers and their audiences have so far not shown any desire to make such matters a factor in their work or enjoyment. Given that the creation of a script from the 'raw material' of *King Lear* or *Hamlet* is itself an act of radical revision, the existence of different equally 'authentic' versions of the same play from the dramatist's own theatre and lifetime has not usually been a consideration: Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), with its claim to deliver the whole of the play's dialogue, nevertheless makes eclectic choices from First Folio and Second Quarto texts. Critical comment on the textual decisions made by all film-makers – what to include or exclude, and so on – informed by debate regarding meaning and significance of the original texts, is of course another matter. So, for pragmatic reasons, 'Shakespeare' here refers primarily to the plays commonly attributed to the dramatist, and the 'original' will denote the texts on which the screen versions are based.

As for 'English-speaking', the emphasis here is mainly linguistic, Shakespeare films in other languages being part of a diverse 'world cinema', but it also signifies the very fact of speech in films.⁷ Before the advent in the late 1920s of synchronized sound for dialogue, the adaptation of storylines, episodes, and characters bore only limited responsibility for delivering the equivalents for the spoken words of the original texts. Before the talkies came along, moreover, the movies could speak to everyone, because the substitution of title cards in the language of the country where they were shown made films easy to export. *Hamlet*, with Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson in the title role, released in 1913, was the most notable (surviving) British Shakespearean film of its era, but, as Judith Buchanan argues, has a less sophisticated interpretive agenda than the Italian film with Ruggero Ruggeri released in 1917: the former's origin in the dramatist's own country and

the eminence of its principal actor as an exponent of the role in the original language do not guarantee its claim to artistic superiority.⁸ The 'silent' cinema – even this term needs some qualification, as films were not watched without accompaniment of music and in some cases sound effects – had its own kinds of eloquence in acting, *mise-en-scène*, and editing, and there was usually little need to render dialogue in the intertitles. Relatively few survive of the total number of films made from Shakespeare's plays between 1899 and 1927, estimated at between 250 and 300. There was considerable variety in kinds of adaptation, from what might be the illustration of episodes in a familiar play (the 1910 *Richard III* with Frank Benson's company), to sophisticated revisionist versions such as *Hamlet, the Tragedy of Vengeance* (1920) in which the great star Asta Nielsen appears as a prince who is really a princess in disguise.⁹ Silent films were more vulnerable to revision than talkies during their period of distribution, sometimes at the hands of exhibitors, occasionally by their creators. Among the silent Shakespeare films made after the First World War, the *Othello* made in Germany with American finance in 1922 and directed by Dmitri Buchowetski, seems to exist only in a version some twenty minutes shorter than when it was first shown.¹⁰

Sound films were not immune from this kind of revision, as the plethora of 'director's cuts' and the inclusion of 'missing scenes' as extras on DVDs attests. Sometimes alterations have been made to satisfy different censorship and certification regimes in the territories where they have been distributed, or the 'final cut' has been the privilege of a studio rather than the director. Mary Pickford, persuaded in the 1950s not to destroy the films she had made in the first decades of the century, had *The Taming of the Shrew* (1929) revised to alter some sequences and even shots, so that a medium or long shot might be rephotographed from the original footage to produce a closer shot on specific characters or action.¹¹ The fact that this was the first of the Shakespearian talkies, with a silent version provided for showing in cinemas not yet equipped for sound, suggests (as with the 1922 *Othello*) the need for further research on the textual aspects of these films.

This brings us to the third of the terms that need definition: 'cinema'. It has been chosen in preference to 'film' because it represents collectively the various regimes of production, distribution, and consumption within which the films exist and for which they have been

conceived. The term also explicitly excludes work made exclusively for television or other video or online viewing. Moreover 'film' is commonly used to denote the medium itself, with an emphasis on its artistic qualities and potential, while the more colloquial 'movies' celebrates the show business and entertainment dimension. Even more dignified than 'film', which is after all the name of the coated celluloid itself, is 'the moving picture', and early attempts to settle on an appropriate term for the finished product included 'photoplay', which suggests kinship and equivalence with the theatrical drama.

In the text and filmography I have followed the convention of referring to films by the name of their director and the year of production. This corresponds to the way in which the various productions are commonly identified. However, the choice begs a number of questions. This is not the place for discussion of *auteur* theory, but some consideration should be given to the ways in which, for example, George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) or Orson Welles *Othello* (1952) reached the screen. At one end of the spectrum is the *Romeo and Juliet* made for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) in 1936. It can be attributed, conventionally, to Cukor as director, but he was a highly skilled artist working within a system that indicated directors in the credits with a degree of prominence that did not always reflect their executive power once the footage left the studio floor. Strictly speaking, the 1936 *Romeo and Juliet* should be thought of as being 'by' its studio, MGM, a so-called 'prestige' product designed to add lustre to the studio's reputation even if it did not do good business at the box office. (It didn't.)

Much of the work of Orson Welles, including his three completed Shakespeare films, represents the other end of the spectrum. Here the director/scriptwriter/actor – a classic 'triple threat' in film business parlance – was unquestionably the *auteur*. His career has even been construed as '*Despite the System*', the title of a book by Clinton Heylin that describes Welles' struggles after the first fine flush of studio-supported independence represented by *Citizen Kane* (1941).¹² The difficulties encountered in securing finance for *Othello* can stand as symptomatic, albeit to an extreme degree, of the problems still faced by the independent film-maker; Welles had to interrupt the filming several times, going off to act in other people's films to make money to carry on, stopping and starting in a variety of locations,

devoting his considerable energies to raising funds as well as to all the other responsibilities he characteristically took on himself. Typically, an independent company will now gather funding from a variety of sources, indicated one after another by their various 'idents' at the start of a film and their presence in the final crawl of credits; will have financed itself by selling distribution rights in advance; and will have had to secure guarantees (a completion bond) to cover these funds, as well as (in most cases with British and other European films) securing the participation of television companies. Canal+, Channel Four Films, the BBC, and other providers will all have their specific requirements, depending on the place the product may have in their own plans for exhibition. Sometimes this has included the framing of significant action within a 'safe' video area within wider-screen formats: in older VHS tapes it was not unusual to be told that a film had been 'reformatted', which usually meant that shots had been 'panned and scanned' to provide alternative angles on participants in dialogue who would otherwise disappear off the sides of the video frame.

Since the 1950s, production in the English-speaking cinema has been affected crucially by a number of factors: the move in Hollywood from production wholly by studios themselves to their participation in (and provision of facilities for) productions originating with agents, stars, and producers who put a package together; the rulings that divorced – with only partial effect – distribution and exhibition from the studios' production activities; the necessity for American studios to spend revenue from the export of their products in the country where it was earned; and the influence of television and various forms of domestic consumption, from videotape to DVD and now to digital streaming.¹³ The initial opening in cinemas and the published grosses are now held to contribute more to a movie's reputation and attractiveness, and consequently its profitability in other media, than to the revenues it earns overall.

These factors have had a bearing on the techniques of film-making, notably in recent years and in view of the fact that the word 'film' is an anachronism when applied to work originated and shown by digital means. Meanwhile the cinema – the place of viewing usually designated as 'theatrical' in the trade – has been under threat, with respites in its much-publicized decline achieved either through the use of techniques (such as the various widescreen formats) best appreciated in