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Introduction

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Introduction

by LAURIE E. OSBORNE, GUEST EDITOR

THE ESSAYS IN THIS ISSUE of *Colby Quarterly*, entitled “Screening Shakespeare,” exemplify a range of approaches that critics are currently developing in the burgeoning field of Shakespeare on film. In addition to the startling increase in the number of Shakespearean films—including plays that have rarely been filmed like *Titus Andronicus* and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*—an accompanying flood of Shakespearean film criticism has begun. In the last year alone, several new books have been published: Michael Anderegg’s *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Kenneth Rothwell’s *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Kathy Howlett’s *Framing Shakespeare*, Mark Thornton Burnett’s *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siecle*, Sarah Hatchuel’s *A Companion to the Shakespearean Films of Kenneth Branagh*, and Deborah Cartmell’s *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen*, to name just the most recent. An array of collections have also appeared—Christie Desmet and Robert Sawyer’s *Shakespeare and Appropriation* and Russell Jackson’s *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* will soon be followed by Courtney Lehmann and Lisa Starks’s *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*—expected from Associated University Presses in Spring 2001. Amid all this analysis of Shakespeare on film, our issue offers new essays that display the array of challenges now facing critics of Shakespearean film and adaptation.

Eric C. Brown’s “‘What’s to come is still unsure’: Madness and Deferral in Nunn’s *Twelfth Night*” not only takes up a relatively neglected yet important film but also offers a deceptively traditional approach in exploring the mutual illumination engendered in the interplay between Shakespearean text and film. In his exploration of the nuances of Trevor Nunn’s cinematography, Brown suggests that “[i]n its production of visual imagery that adopts and enlivens ideas already available in the play, this film refashions early modern notions of time, hope, and madness into a vibrant exploration of the power and impotency of love, desire, and identity. Nunn’s attention to light and dark, the sea and land, motion and stasis, and to moments that challenge the audience’s own comfort over what’s to come, and what’s already been, all contribute to these problematics” (28). Brown’s essay emphasizes Shakespearean *film* in its specific cinematic structures first and foremost, while attending to the textual features that the production foregrounds. By celebrating Nunn’s

achievement in combining “sad and merry madness” through the media of film images and movements, Brown explicitly links Nunn’s film strategies with the complexity of *Twelfth Night*’s modulations of tone and patterns of exclusion and inclusion.

As a result, our issue opens with an essay that embraces yet exceeds early criticism of Shakespeare on film which often concentrates on how Shakespearean films or cinematic editing change the plays or illuminate textual issues. As Brown’s essay shows, the text can illuminate the filming as well; the mutual closeness of analysis erodes the early priority ascribed to Shakespeare’s texts rather than the intricacies of film representation. All too often, Shakespearean films have been either called into account for their divergences from theatrical practice or employed as visual glosses on the text rather than studied in the cinematic contexts of film editing, star production, or the specific distribution and marketing situations that affect filming.

Douglas Lanier’s essay, “The Idea of a John Barrymore,” explicitly avoids tracing Barrymore’s history as a theatrical or even film actor of Shakespeare. His concern is “to examine the *idea* of a John Barrymore, that is, the ways in which his image has been appropriated and deployed by the American film industry as it sought to shape a mass audience’s view of Shakespeare and in the process fashion its own cultural authority, and the ways in which recent theater has sought, in the midst of the current Shakespeare film boom, to re-appropriate Barrymore’s afterimage for its own institutional ends” (32). His argument extends “Shakespeare on film” beyond the narrow confines of films of the plays to include both film and theatrical allusions that contribute richly to the evolution of early twentieth-century cultural negotiations with Shakespeare.

Lanier explores the complex use of Barrymore’s star image and career, both by the actor himself and the subsequent films and plays that invoke him. His account of the nuances and evolution of the “Barrymore image” points toward a crucial need to rethink the often vexed competitive interaction between stage and film. Lanier’s essay not only demonstrates the importance of changing conditions in stage and film production individually but also opens up the question of Shakespeare’s function in these intersecting and ideological structures of representation. As a consequence, although his close consideration of the recent Broadway plays featuring Barrymore may seem to diverge from our issue’s topic, in fact Lanier’s significant advance in the study of Shakespeare on film is his elucidation of the symbiotic relationship between stage and screen Shakespeare, in which patterns of influence and meditations on Shakespeare’s plays move in both directions. As Lanier suggests, film Shakespeare does not simply supercede theatrical Shakespeare, but the two realms coincide and interact in significant ways that Shakespearean film critics must take into account more broadly than they have done so far. In fact, as he addresses the developing figure of “the Shakespearean,” Lanier calls for greater attention to the cultural construction of this figure across dif-

ferent media, along the lines of work like that of Michael Anderegg and Courtney Lehmann.

Her “Shakespeare the Savior or Phantom Menace?: Kenneth Branagh’s *Midwinter’s Tale* and the Critique of Cynical Reason” takes up this challenge with the most well-known current “Shakespearean” on film, Kenneth Branagh. Using postmodern theory and specifically Sloterdijk’s account of cynical reason, Lehmann illuminates the intersection of Branagh’s personal history, his developing film ambitions, and the tensions between his film and theatrical work, arguing that “*Midwinter* unfolds through a motley ensemble of characters who replay scenes from Branagh’s life-long battles between theater and film, regional authenticity and Hollywood commercialism, company integrity and individual success, cultural marginality and the mainstream” (55). Her reading of Branagh’s “little *Hamlet* film” extends earlier work on Shakespearean film auteurs not only through the theoretical lens of postmodernity but also through the persistent interrogation posed in the film about *why* Shakespeare must go on. Her analysis of the film director’s fascination with Shakespeare becomes as well an exploration of the gap between the explosion of current modes of (pop) cultural exchange and Shakespeare, as quilting point, as the potential creator of community.

As in Lanier’s essay, the tension between staged and filmed Shakespeare is a focal point for Lehmann, yet, as she points out, *A Midwinter’s Tale* does not offer a simple critique or a straightforward vilification of Hollywood commercialism. Rather Branagh’s film closely explores a postmodern “cynical reasoning,” reasoning that “acts against better judgment” by accepting a disillusioning logic of material exchange value over values attached to community-building. Shakespeare’s function here is challenged both within the film, which represents the financial and personal conflicts arising in the community production, and within the “real-life” context of Branagh’s temptation by a potential big-budget Hollywood role in *The Phantom Menace* and his two-fold Shakespearean ambitions, as a filmmaker who wanted to produce *Hamlet* and the founder of the communal Renaissance Theatre Company. In the course of her expert analysis of the many levels in what she terms Branagh’s “auteur-biographical film”, Lehmann also opens up the idea that it is “the *aesthetic itself* that is jeopardized within postmodernity” (57).

Richard Burt’s essay recasts the postmodern threat to the idea of the aesthetic as its desacrilization in “Shakespeare and the Holocaust: Julie Taymor’s *Titus* Is Beautiful, or Shakesploi Meets (the) Camp.” With a characteristically capacious account of Shakespeare’s appearance in popular culture, Burt focuses on the sudden proliferation of films of *Titus Andronicus* in the late 1990s and specifically on the marketing and cinematic strategies in Julie Taymor’s *Titus*. In examining Taymor’s self-conscious, explicit linking of *Titus* to Fascism in conjunction with representations of Shakespeare within Holocaust and concentration camp films, Burt notes that “this mutually supportive exchange between Shakespearean tragedy and the Holocaust did not

prove to be especially successful.... I take the box office failures of *Titus* and *Jakob the Liar* and the post-theatrical release marketing of *Titus* to be representative of a larger failure, namely, that Shakespeare cannot save the Holocaust, nor can the Holocaust save Shakespeare. This failure is not due to the aftermath of the Holocaust, in which tragedy and poetry are no longer possible, but to the present desacralization of the aesthetic in mass culture” (81).

Burt’s essay traces Taymor’s use of film editing and cinematic allusions to invest *Titus* with a Facist use of youthful innocence. Her goal is to show that *Titus* is particularly appropriate now, but, as Burt’s essay shows, the stylized filming and her textual choices are only partially successful. Part of the failure results from *Titus*’ inescapable identification within the film genre of horror, despite its art-house aspirations. Nonetheless, both the failures and the successes of such productions are crucial to the larger contexts of popular culture, wherein Shakespeare’s position is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. To elaborate on this point, Burt closes his essay with provocative insights into the current apparent split between Right and Left in Shakespearean criticism generally, when both sides take up only some versions of Shakespeare on film in their own causes. Burt points out that, although critics like Harold Bloom and Jonathan Bate are quick to embrace some Shakespearean films and dismiss others as trash, the “distinction between Shakespeare and schlock is drawn by more progressive critics as well, who are caught in a similar contradiction between elevating some Shakespeares as the bearers of aesthetic and cultural value and dismissing other Shakespeares as trash”(101). The pursuit of such distinctions, Burt argues, ultimately occludes crucial contexts for Shakespearean films as part of mass culture.

All of these essays raise useful questions for the future of Shakespearean film analysis. Eric Brown’s essay explicitly shows that “what’s to come is yet unsure,” especially in the arena of close cinematic analysis that explores re-workings of Early Modern concepts like madness. Our contemporary sense of deferral and uncertainty clearly underlie the effectiveness of Nunn’s melding of textual elements and filming strategies, yet an array of theatrical interpretations and film developments enable that melding. My personal uncertainty includes where such close readings should go now. Since they tend to link two distinct historical moments—the Early Modern moment of composition and the twentieth-century moment of filming—such readings could move to reanimate intervening theatrical/film histories which intrigue critics like Lanier. We have reached the point in Shakespearean film criticism that Shakespearean film has its own histories of influence, its own influential film techniques, and its complex positions in popular culture beyond the wide screen.

Lanier’s arguments about the function of “the Shakespearean” as well as Shakespeare should extend to production and (anti-)stardom of Shakespearean academics. From Harold Bloom’s popularization of Shakespearean humanism to Linda Charnes’ quoted (or misquoted) comments in the *New York Times* about academic envy of Bloom’s best-selling Shakespeare and the failure of

theory to provide fun, we as academics have become mass media figures ourselves.¹ Richard Burt's "loser academic" seems to me related to Lanier's elaboration of Barrymore as a "decadent Shakespearean."² However, the loser academic is deployed to different purposes since the marketing of a Shakespearean professor is a matter of indirect commodification—we are commodities, purchased by our students' families to provide knowledge and often expected somehow simply to pour that knowledge into not-so-willing minds. What the figure of the academic Shakespearean offers to film study is both the impetus to explore the loser figure, perhaps especially as explicitly encoded in films like *Looking for Richard* that stage the hapless, inept academic and as less visibly recorded in the collaborations that academics have increasingly begun to make with film and multimedia producers. The latter category is more capacious than the former, ranging from Russell Jackson's position in the Branagh Shakespeare production machine to Arlene Steibel's production of the "academic" components of *Othello: The Interactive Guide* and *Hamlet: A Murder Mystery*, from Peter Donaldson's web project at MIT, bringing video Shakespeare online, to Richard Burt's website, moved from University of Massachusetts webspace to <<http://www.naughtyprofessor.com>>. Shakespearean critics not only analyze film adaptations; they also participate in the reproduction, promotion, and circulation of Shakespeare on film as well as on stage.

If this alternative Shakespearean figure deserves some future analysis, perhaps that attention can serve the more wide-reaching concerns raised in these essays about the crucial intersections between film and stage. Both Lanier's and Lehmann's essays point out very clearly that the interplay between theatrical and cinematic Shakespeare deserves more close attention. The two essays, examined together, demonstrate just how subtle and intricate the balance and shifts of influence can be between the two forms of performance—and consequently how significant the critical sense of that interaction is to any analysis of Shakespearean film or stage productions.

New Shakespearean film criticism must and does expand the contextual field of our research into what filming Shakespeare can be. Lehmann treats a film that is about a stage production of *Hamlet*, as the internal play seeks to redeem regional, theatrical Shakespeare as the quilting point of community. Yet the production, despite its many self-referential aspects and invocations of Branagh's Renaissance Theatre Company, is in fact a film, just as the image of John Barrymore as decadent Shakespearean actor is, at least initially, a *film* representation rather than a stage persona. In Lehmann's analysis, film has become the location for playing out a nostalgia for the stage—its sense of presence—that seems at risk of being swamped by the media overload and postmodern flattening of affect supposedly produced by film; in Lanier's, the

1. See Ron Rosenbaum, "The Play's the Thing, Again" (*New York Times* 6 Aug. 2000: 12-13), followed quickly by Charnes's responding letter to the editor, "As I Pronounced It" (3 Sept. 2000: 4).

2. Richard Burt, *Unspeakable ShXXXspearses*. See also *Shakespeare: The Movie*, ed. Lynda Boose and Richard Burt (New York: Routledge, 1998).

stage in turn recuperates Shakespeare and the film star Barrymore in plays that meditate on their own conditions of possibility and production.

To the mutual influences of stage and film, Richard Burt would add the variety of contemporaneous media in which Shakespeare appears. Whether a greater or lesser presence than film, the Shakespeares of ads, science fiction, situation comedies, serial romance and comic books influence both the production and reception of Shakespeare on film. As Lanier notes, the other contributory media participate in the historical patterns of deploying Shakespeare or, in Lehmann's terms, of relating Shakespeare to systems of exchange and the production (or failure) of community. Shakespearean film can no longer be readily isolated from general cinematic history and the development of film genres; nor, as these essays show, can screened Shakespeare be isolated from theatre or less artistically sanctioned forms of popular culture.

As a result, we must take up Burt's challenge that we attend to apparently dismissable Shakespeare. His forthcoming essay collection currently entitled *Shakespeare After Mass Media: A Cultural Studies Reader*, limits its attention to Shakespeare on film precisely because that field has come to stand for ALL of mass culture; Burt's collection offers a resource for genuinely correcting the position of Shakespearean films, big and small, schlock and art. Doug Lanier's book on Shakespeare in popular culture, forthcoming from Oxford, also includes film as a part rather than an exception to popular culture. Both these upcoming volumes will encourage critics of Shakespearean film to expand their contextual fields, to face the greater challenge as locating in a nuanced way the position of filmed Shakespeare within all the myriad ways that Shakespeare and his texts appears on various screens, small and large.

I would add that the difficulties of the impulse toward inclusion and exclusion will persist nonetheless. Merely embracing the "schlock" Shakespeare and the less successful Shakespearean films will not resolve the issues of cultural value that continue to surface whenever Shakespeare or his plays are invoked or parodied. Dealing with current phenomena carries with it the potential myopia of an analysis from within the cultural movement. Our earlier twenty-first century assessments of success or schlock must necessarily derive from our historical vantage point. This fact requires that, as scholars and teachers, we justify our attention to less conventionally valued Shakespearean films rather than just catching as many as possible in our critical net.

To give an example of my own, Kenneth Branagh's *Love's Labour's Lost* proves the importance of Shakespearean box office duds in part because it pushes the relationship between Shakespeare and film in a crucial direction—a fully articulated encounter between Shakespeare and film canon, to the extent of interleaving songs from 30's musicals with Shakespeare's own linguistic, lyrical indulgences. Unlike Taymor's efforts to elude *Titus'* inevitable association with horror film, Branagh is explicitly *forcing* the encounter between one of Shakespeare's most artificially contrived plays and the elaborate artifice that has always marked the film musical. In this regard,

Branagh's film raises issues comparable to the complex mutual influence of stage and film that Lanier and Lehmann treat; however, we can use Branagh's film to explore more thoroughly the mutual influence (and failure of influence) between Shakespearean film and the evolution of film genres.

Love's Labour's Lost succeeds in some of the more aptly chosen and performed musical numbers, in its use of the film conventions to truncate the linguistic excess of Shakespeare's comedy (in the twirling newspaper headlines and stories which transmit the plot efficiently), and in its ability to elaborate the comic resolution which, as Branagh's Berowne comments "is too long for a play." And moments of success are more than many contemporary films have to offer. The parts of the film that work well manage to celebrate the idea that Hollywood Shakespeare can transcend media differences and exploit the visual and aural strategies developed throughout film history to convey information efficiently and entertain on multiple levels.

However, the failures of the film are even more significant for two reasons. First, the passion for film and specifically film musicals that drives this production pits Shakespeare against Hollywood as much as it allies the two. Although Branagh makes clever and occasionally very funny parallels between two forms of artifice, Shakespearean linguistic play and cinematic visual and aural play, the collision between the two in some of the scenes creates a revealing incongruity. When the four lords move from Shakespearean wordplay to recognizable Cole Porter song and dance, the disjunction is at times greater than the conjunction. Unlike Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, which exploits the rhythms, lyricism, and melancholy of its music as intrinsic to the film editing and thus to the play, *Love's Labour's Lost* inadvertently raises the issue of whether Shakespeare's plays might actually be essentially at odds with film traditions and strategies.

Love's Labour's Lost's other shortcoming—the uninspiring quality of some of the musical interludes—is equally significant. Such moments point out that Kenneth Branagh is not Fred Astaire, and Alicia Silverstone is not Esther Williams. No surprise there. However, what the competent but unremarkable dance sequences reveal is that film musicals (and perhaps other film genres) arise from musical and dance expertise. The genre built on the skills of Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Debbie Reynolds, and others, grows from the success of films like *Singin' in the Rain*. The incomprehensibly odd water ballet actually makes the point even more emphatically since Esther Williams and her adoring fans enabled such wet hijinks to flourish, but the convention does not translate to an actress best known for *Clueless* and an era where the revelation of female form offered by the bathing suit is a relatively mild titillation. In pursuing the musical, Branagh has in some ways inexplicably neglected his own seminal talent.

Arguably Branagh's Shakespearean expertise, built from stage performance and an ability to convey his understanding the words he is speaking, has produced an emergent film genre, the Shakespearean film (see Hatchuel). Its ability to flourish, unlike Olivier's efforts in the same direction, might be

best proven by the wide array of directors who have been encouraged (and funded) to film their own versions—Franco Zeffirelli, Al Pacino, Michael Hoffmann, Oliver Parker, Michael Almereyda, Julie Taymor, Trevor Nunn, John Madden, Baz Luhrmann, and the host of porno and horror film directors that Richard Burt has catalogued. The range of success here is variable, but the development of a film genre and its long-term effects are not definitively tied to the bottom line.

As there were innumerable film musicals that did not achieve box office success, some of these Shakespearean films have not succeeded at the box office or with critics. The true measure of their success will be endurance and their ongoing influence rather than their immediate earnings. As such, I might be tempted to suggest that the film genre emerging here will ultimately be the *Hamlet* film. Not only has there been the relentless repetition of the play but also productive parodies, adaptations, and allusions. Branagh's own *Hamlet*, displaying a typical sensitivity to film structures, draws explicitly on earlier *Hamlet* films.

In creating the "complete" *Hamlet*, Branagh as director uses film editing in place of textual editing to produce a coherent character within the extended play. Whereas many critics, including Kathleen Campbell, Bernice W. Kliman, and Neil Taylor, have demonstrated how earlier film productions of this play cut the text in order to produce the Prince of Denmark as a more focused character, Branagh produces the "full text"—and the full character—by echoing and frequently exaggerating the cinematic strategies that reinforced the textual editing of earlier film productions.³ The circular panning of Laurence Olivier and the zoom shots of Gregor Kozintzev become part of Branagh's framing strategies during the psychological and the political moments of the production, respectively. The characteristic close-ups of Tony Richardson's film are exaggerated in the images of just eyes, mouths, or ears in Branagh's film. He also exploits and revises the single, long take of Hamlet's soliloquies which John Bennett used for the BBC and the swift cutting which produced Franco Zeffirelli's energetic and forceful Hamlet. Branagh invokes the psychological, political, and adventure-hero constructions of the character within a film which promises to surpass all of them by supplying the complete Hamlet. As he himself commented during the filming of the final sequences, "I am making six films at once. This one is Diehard" (Branagh 205).

By now, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has become so thoroughly a cinematic property that intercinematic references may be an inevitable structural element of any new film of the play (certainly Almereyda's recent *Hamlet* also alludes to earlier films within the Hamlet genre as well as other film genres). Quite possibly not all the apparent allusions to earlier film *Hamlets* in Branagh's production are intentional. However, consciously or uncon-

3. Neil Taylor finds these earlier films limit the text to anywhere between 31% and 87% of the play, between Zeffirelli and Bennett (191-92).

sciously, his deliberately eclectic film editing structures his attempt to encompass the whole play. In the process, he creates a Hamlet that exploits the play's cult status and potentially signals Shakespeare's cult status for film. Whether Branagh's *Hamlet* becomes a full-fledged cult film or not, it reveals admirably how deeply intertwined film editing and concepts of Shakespearean characterization have become.⁴ Shakespearean film now has its own rich generic history upon which to draw; current scholars in the field can discover in those patterns of cinematic influence fruitful ways to explore the Shakespeare boom we are inhabiting and creating.

As these reflections attest, our issue points out fruitful ways to develop earlier models of Shakespearean film criticism—to reexamine the interlocking structures of film and text; to explore further the deployment of the Shakespearean and Shakespeare himself; to rethink and retheorize the film auteur and even to include schlock Shakespeare for its valuable gloss on the texture of mass culture. As Shakespearean film scholarship has become canonically accepted enough finally to merit an issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, the Shakespearean film itself stands poised to extend its influence into film theory and production.

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4. This topic is part of my work in progress, "Shakespearean Short Cuts: Fragmentation and Coherence in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*."

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