

Cambridge University Press

0521835372 - A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television,
Second Edition

Kenneth S. Rothwell

Excerpt

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Shakespeare in silence: from stage to screen

Nickelodeons, penny gaffs, and fair grounds

How best to imagine Shakespeare's words in moving images? The challenge to auteurial ingenuity began in September 1899 when William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, an early collaborator with Thomas Edison, teamed up with actor/director Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree to film excerpts from *King John*, then playing at Her Majesty's Theatre in London.¹ Sir Herbert might have hesitated if he had realized how Dickson's technology would one day make waiters out of thousands of unemployed actors. The mechanical reproduction of art was in the air, however. Over the next three decades, film makers would grind out an estimated 150,000 silent movies, though but a tiny fraction, fewer than one percent, perhaps 500, would draw on Shakespeare. With their newly patented Cinématographe, the Lumière brothers had already projected on a screen at a Parisian café one-minute "actualities" of workers leaving a factory.² After a rival Edison movie exhibition on April 23, 1896, at New York City's Koster & Bial's Music Hall, Charles Frohman magisterially declared that "when art can make us believe that we see actual living nature, the dead things of the stage must go."³

Photographed in widescreen 68 mm at the Thames embankment open-air studio of Dickson's British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, Tree played the dying King John in act five, scene seven, against a studio backdrop for Swinstead Abbey. He was flanked by Prince Henry (Dora Senior) and the Earl of Pembroke (James Fisher), and by Robert Bigot (F. M. Paget), all in period costumes. As the poisoned king, Tree's writhing and clutching and gyrating and swiveling and squirming mime the agony of a human being whose "bowels [are crumbling] up to dust" and whose inner torment is akin to "hell" (5.7.30–45).⁴ In *King John*'s death, however, Tree breathed life into an upstart rival to Shakespeare on stage – Shakespeare on screen in moving images. Ironically Shakespeare's *King John* also proleptically deals with the economic forces that would drive this fledgling art from its very beginnings – the curse of "tickling commodity," that "smooth-fac'd gentleman," which Philip the Bastard describes as "this bawd, this broker" that forces even kings to "break faith"

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¹ In *King John* (UK 1899), Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as the dying monarch writhes in agony at Swinstead Abbey, while Pembroke (James Fisher), Prince Henry (Dora Senior), and Bigot (F. M. Paget) look on.

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(2.1.573–85). The most cash-driven art form in history, film from the beginning has been enslaved to “tickling commodity.” Marx’s insight that capitalism’s gains for humanity’s material comfort often come at the price of its soul needs no better illustration. The iron rule of profit or perish has commodified Shakespeare, dictating the scope, size, frequency, and even the artistry of filmed plays, and at the same time forced the Shakespeare director into an inevitable synergy with popular culture.

At the start of this century, however, no one envisioned the revolutionary potential of the movie industry. Movies were working-class entertainment at England’s penny gaffs and music halls, American vaudeville, sideshows at European country fairs, and entr’acte diversions. Since by 1905, France controlled 60 percent of the world’s film business, not surprisingly the next Shakespeare “movie,” produced by the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, emerged, complete with “sound,” at the 1900 Paris Exposition. It photographed Sarah Bernhardt in moving images energetically fighting Laertes (Pierre Magnier) in the duel scene from *Hamlet*, with synchronized Edison cylinders providing the sound of clashing épées.⁵ Having played Hamlet on stage thirty-two times in 1899 alone, as well as performing in other earlier Shakespearean roles, and with an extraordinary flair for publicity,⁶ Sarah Bernhardt was a natural choice to star in this second ever Shakespeare movie. In her career, frustrated by the dearth of first-rate female parts and encouraged by the French stage tradition for cross-dressing, she acted in over two dozen *travesti* ranging from minor (a page boy) in *Phèdre* to a truly *grand premier travesti rôle* as in *Hamlet*.⁷ Moreover, contrary to prevailing ideas about “Hamletism” that stressed the prince’s inward femininity, “revenge permeated the production of the Bernhardt *Hamlet*.”⁸ In silent movies, Bernhardt’s famous silvery voice was stilled but on the other hand the French accent that prevented her from playing Romeo against Ellen Terry’s Juliet became irrelevant, for by substituting images for words her personality crossed international language barriers. As Carl Laemmle proclaimed in a trade journal advertisement, “Universal pictures speak the Universal language.” The spectacle of Shakespeare performed in a déclassé venue at a fairground may have shocked the bourgeois, who probably felt as did Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray at a cheap London theatre that “I must admit I was rather annoyed at the idea of seeing Shakespeare done in such a wretched hole of a place.” Bernhardt’s *Hamlet*, like Tree’s *King John*, as the extant frame enlargements show, went no further than being a record of a theatrical performance on a conventional stage set, a first step in the evolution of the Shakespeare movie from theatre into film.⁹

The sound effects for a fencing duel in Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* remind us that “silent” films were really never silent. As David A. Cook has noted, silent film was an “aberration,” and “movies were intended to talk from their inception.”¹⁰

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Thomas Edison's plan for a "coin-operated entertainment machine" envisioned motion pictures illustrating sound from a phonograph, not the other way around. Live musicians quickly showed up in theatres to fill out the awful silences, and typically theatre owner Lyman H. Howe of New York City advertised in a trade journal for "an imitator to create sound effects back of the screen . . . a man [with the] natural ability to produce animal and mechanical sounds."¹¹ A manager in Clear Lake, Iowa, needed a "singer and piano player combined," to whom he would pay "a good salary,"¹² for he subscribed to the universal belief that "a good piano player is essential to the success of . . . electric theatre."¹³ Female pianists could now use their previously unmarketable talents "by earning an honest living playing in a public place."¹⁴ Audiences soon became so accustomed to sound that when the unfortunate John Riker, a projectionist isolated in his booth, mistakenly grabbed a live wire, his shrieks of agony as 1,000 volts surged through him were interpreted as splendid sound effects and wildly applauded. Rescued by the piano player, Riker's roasted hand had "to be pried loose from the wire."¹⁵

By 1908 the Kleine Optical Company was advertising its "remarkable consignment of film subjects" showing "famous French actors."¹⁶ Like everyone else, the French rejoiced in finding literary properties by famous authors like Shakespeare whose "public domain" status meant freedom from any unpleasantness about royalties. Mesmerized by the prestige of the Comédie Française, French film makers developed the Film d'Art movement to glorify French theatrical tradition, which nurtured high culture but inhibited the growth of film art. In America, some companies like Adolph Zukor's Famous Players, anxious to earn the cachet of high art, imitated the French, their movies often being lower-cased as "film d'art," and the creation in Italy of the Film d'Arte Italiana added further confusion for filmographers. The assumption was that movies were not themselves an art but had to have art put into them with literary classics. Jean Mounet-Sully, "the greatest French actor of the period," who played Hamlet at the Comédie Française, as well as Othello opposite Bernhardt's Desdemona, soon followed, or even preceded Bernhardt, with a vignette from the *Hamlet* graveyard scene;¹⁷ and Georges Méliès, the inventor of trick photography, who put flying machines into space and showed people floating on air, performed the title role in a *Hamlet* segment (1907), as well as a cameo William Shakespeare in *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* (1907), a portrayal of the assassination.¹⁸ Paul Mounet, younger brother of Mounet-Sully, was cast in the lead of *Macbeth* (c.1909). A Pathé semi-Shakespearean *Cleopatra* (1910) starring Madeleine Roch anticipated a long line of films about the Egyptian witch that had little to do with Shakespeare's tragedy, culminating in the mega-budget 20th-Century Fox *Cleopatra* (1963) with superstars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. A derivative *Romeo Turns Bandit* (1910), which

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though only marginally indebted to Shakespeare, broke with and moved away from the merely presentational by employing a rudimentary film grammar. In general, however, the Film d'Art obsession with theatrical models distracted continental cinéastes from the main challenge of envisioning Shakespeare in cinematic tropes. The history of Shakespeare in the movies has, after all, been the search for the best available means to replace the verbal with the visual imagination, an inevitable development deplored by some but interpreted by others as not so much a limitation on, as an extension of, Shakespeare's genius into uncharted seas. In the United States, on the other hand, the trek westward to Hollywood sufficiently disconnected the movies from Broadway theatre to make possible by 1929 the thoroughly liberated Pickford / Fairbanks *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The economic engine in North America driving the production of cheap, one-reel movies was the "nickelodeon," a term coined by John P. Harris of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, by cleverly merging his admission price with the Greek word for music hall.¹⁹ There were no cinemas and then suddenly there were hundreds, and thousands. Like the 1576 opening of James Burbage's professional theatre in Shoreditch, the new movie theatres revolutionized the entertainment industry. An editorial writer in the trade journal *Moving Picture World* observed that "there is a new thing under the sun... It is the 5-cent theatre... it came unobtrusively in the still of the night," and had multiplied "faster than guinea pigs."²⁰ By 1907 North America alone could tally 2,500 to 3,000 "nickelodeons," or "5-cent theatres," or "electric theatres," as they were variously labeled. It did not take much to get a 5-cent theatre started – an empty store with enough space to cram in 200 to 500 chairs; phonographs; a cashier; a "cinematograph" with a reliable non-smoking operator; a canvas for a screen; a piano; a leather-lunged barker; and of course a manager to oversee all this. Predictably the respectable classes sniffed at the honky-tonk flavor and spurned the upstart.

Such heady success did not go unchallenged. In the midst of its severe growing pains, the movie industry became a lightning rod for hostility. It threatened the praetorians of culture and morality who intuited how these new "site[s] of cultural contagion associated with the 'lower orders'"²¹ would one day destroy the iron control of church and school over the masses. The Reverend E. L. Goodell stopped a showing of the Edison *Nero and the Burning of Rome* (1908) because the school children were worked into "a frenzy of fear when they saw men seized, choked, stabbed and their limbs twisted by their torturers."²² Some little girls covered their faces with their hats to shut out the sight. An Episcopal bishop deplored the "demoralizing influence" of the nickelodeons.²³ Harassing fly-by-night theatre operators, many of whom were eastern European Jewish immigrants, for showing movies on Sunday became

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a favorite pastime of New York's Finest, but then also it might be a charge of "imperiling the morals of young boys," as in the lamentable case of George Watson who allowed juveniles to watch the drugging of Evelyn Nesbitt in *The Great Thaw Trial*.²⁴

With Machiavellian cunning, the vaudevillians and other theatre people who were at risk of redundancy, calculating that politicians would more gladly listen to men of the cloth than to men of the motley, manipulated the clergy into lobbying against 5-cent theatres. In a last-ditch effort they also undercut the scruffy nickelodeons by incorporating movies into their vaudeville programs in real theatres.²⁵ The actors' clandestine scheming achieved dizzy success on Christmas Eve, 1908, when in a spasm of self-righteousness New York City's Mayor George B. McClellan shut down 500 nickelodeons, ostensibly because they were fire traps, which they indubitably were, but also possibly to appease those who saw them as dens of iniquity. An editorial in *Moving Picture World* accused the actors of chicanery and sarcastically thanked the Mayor for his "unexpected Christmas present."²⁶ In Los Angeles saloon keepers complained that the nickelodeons were stealing customers away.²⁷ In London, the penny gaffs competed with the public houses.

In the first decade of film, however, for a brief shining hour the Vitagraph Company's Brooklyn, New York studio emerged as a world hub for Shakespeare films. In 1908, J. Stuart Blackton's Vitagraph Company²⁸ entered into this rough-and-tumble marketplace with a series of one-reel Shakespeare movies. The cultural politics of turn-of-the-century America made this marriage of elitist Shakespeare with the populist nickelodeons inevitable. Seeing a compelling need for "quality" motion pictures to attract "classier" audiences, and perhaps inspired by France's Film d'Art movement, Blackton made public domain Shakespeare a pawn in a bid for higher social status. "Class," "classy," and "classier" became the mantras of the early film makers as they fought to gain respectability, envisioning a mythical audience for high-mimetic Shakespeare made up of Margaret Dumont types out of the Marx Brothers movies. Shakespeare movies were a small part of the campaign to obliterate socially aware films sympathizing with the plight of the exploited workers.²⁹ Movies became the sites of contestation for nothing more or less than the American soul. The Vitagraph line of "quality" products included films about George Washington, Dante's Francesca da Rimini, and biblical tales, though its trade journal puffs also listed low-brow material like *The Cook Makes Madeira Sauce* right alongside its "high art" *Midsummer Night's Dream*.³⁰ Another ideological agenda behind all this do-goodism was the need to civilize the hordes of eastern and southern Europeans disembarking at Ellis Island by exposure to solid Anglo-American values. Through beatifying George Washington, who was after all only transplanted English country gentry, and showcasing Shakespeare, the tired and

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huddled masses who jammed the nickelodeons could more quickly be melted into the pot.

Vitagraph's Shakespeare movies were highly compressed one-reelers of ten to fifteen minutes in duration that privileged tableaux, such as the assassination of Julius Caesar, or the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, which were familiar even to the unscrubbed masses. Vitagraph Shakespeare titles, all released between about 1908 and 1912, in addition to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* included *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *Henry VIII [Cardinal Wolsey]*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Twelfth Night*. *A Comedy of Errors* used only the title, and *Hamlet* was planned but never completed. Often directed by William V. Ranous, a veteran stage actor, or Charles Kent, they were mass produced in a row of rooftop stalls, or in glass-roofed indoor studios in Flatbush. Sometimes the company went out on location in New York City's Central and Prospect Parks, or, in one instance on the beach at Bay Shore, Long Island, for Viola's emergence from the sea.³¹ By all accounts there was a wonderful, almost amateurish atmosphere. Scenery and costumes were likely to have been borrowed from Broadway or slapped together by a makeshift crew, including the actors, who weren't yet high-paid superstars.³² They also moonlighted from theatrical jobs on Broadway, a powerful and inhibiting influence on the new art that weakened when the studios moved west to Hollywood.

The Shakespeare and other "high art" films demanded a story-telling grammar that went far beyond the filmic strategies of the earlier "actualities." Film scholars disagree over which film to credit as the "first" to tell a story but Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is generally held up as a milestone event,³³ along with D. W. Griffith's subsequent *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) that carried editing to new heights. Porter's railway thriller may not have been the first to do everything but it pointed the way to a rhetoric that would eventually include all the tricks of the trade, such as shifting camera angles, editing in the cutting room, dramatic lighting, full shots, close-ups, intercutting of sequences, slow motion, rhythm in editing, and so forth.

Like the other Vitagraph Shakespeare films, Blackton's *Romeo and Juliet* (1908), starring Florence Lawrence and Paul Panzer, went beyond the primitive "actualities" by using the camera not just as a recorder of but as a participant in the cinematic story telling. The struggle of these early movies was to break out of the prison house of the proscenium stage on nearby Broadway and make a film that did not look as if it had been photographed with a camera nailed to the floor in the sixth-row orchestra. The camera needed to be released to close in on the action. The two principals, Lawrence and Panzer, later became big stars, Lawrence as a D. W. Griffith favorite, and then as the famed "Biograph Girl" and "IMP girl," the first beneficiary of the new star system that allowed

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actors to cash in on their fame. After her breakthrough, by 1916 Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree commanded \$100,000 for six weeks' work, and by 1919 Mary Pickford was demanding \$675,000 a year plus 50 percent of the gross.³⁴ Paul Panzer subsequently flourished as the villain in the Saturday-morning thriller serial, *The Perils of Pauline* (1914).

Seventeen different camera set-ups, or shots, thirteen title cards, and noticeable editing off camera make up Vitagraph's 15-minute compression of *Romeo and Juliet*. There is occasional cross-cutting, movement from indoor to outdoor settings, and a minimum of obviously fraudulent painted canvas backdrops. A long shot may interrupt the monotony of mid-shots, or actors are filmed from varied angles, but the close shot is not yet in the vocabulary. Title cards with dialogue and bridging explanations help out in the losing battle to make the aural entirely visual. The movie opens with the sonnet-prologue on a card reading "Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene," and so forth. Other bridging cards offer helpful but slightly misleading comments such as "Capulet introduces his daughter, Juliet, to Paris, her future husband." For the Capulet ball and balcony scene, the laconic words "Love at First Sight" suffice, following which Romeo mimes his love for Juliet, while Tybalt's ever-widening mouth signals outrage. Another card reads "The Secret Marriage of Romeo and Juliet in Friar Laurence's Cell" just prior to a sequence showing the Friar, who resembles George Bernard Shaw, joining the couple in matrimony. The camera completely broke with theatre when the crew went out on location for the balcony scene at a house near Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn; for the duel between Romeo and Tybalt to the Boat Lake in Central Park; and for Verona's streets to Central Park's Bethesda Fountain.³⁵ Even without sound-recording equipment, to stay in character old-time Shakespeareans of the stature of Forbes-Robertson and Frederick Warde scrupulously spoke the lines but some of the lesser sort of actors may have been uttering gibberish.

Interiors were more likely to be thrift-shop stage sets with curtains and cardboard for doors and walls. Harsh lighting was a problem, as when Juliet emotes before drinking off the vial of potion and collapses too heavily on the bed. "Tickling commodity" intrudes in Juliet's bedroom, and elsewhere, with the Vitagraph logo, "V," inscribed over her bed. A precursor to today's FBI warnings on videocassettes against illegal copying, the logo was a relic of the rancorous patent wars that pitted the "Edison group," which included Vitagraph, against such upstarts as Carl Laemmle of the IMP group (Independent Motion Picture Company of America). The movie industry's endless law suits must have made many attorneys rich and happy.³⁶ A more satisfactorily realistic scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is the apothecary shop, which boasts a window apparently stocked with a skull, bat, alembic, and beakers, though they may

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only be good *trompes-l'oeil*. The director himself, William Ranous, played the apothecary.

The Vitagraph *Julius Caesar* (1908) shows no striking advance in film grammar over the *Romeo and Juliet*. It breaks with theatricality by moving outdoors. There is much *Aida*-like parading around of Roman soldiers in papier-mâché helmets who brandish wooden swords and carry placards reading “SPQR,” but the “Forum” looks suspiciously like the steps of a Carnegie public library. Almost without exception the movie’s fifteen setups are in mid-shot, without changing camera angles or using close-ups and long shots. Freed from the spatial and temporal restrictions of the stage, the camera shows events that are only reported in the play, such as the proffering of the crown to Caesar three times. The assassination of Caesar, a plausibly mimed Antony’s funeral oration, and an out-of-doors funeral pyre for Brutus create familiar tableaux for a mass audience. Truly cinematic in its early use of special effects is the Méliès-like materializing of Caesar’s ghost from thin air in Brutus’ tent before Philippi. The battle field at Philippi is something of a disappointment, a flat arid landscape, boring even as the site of carnage. Brutus and Cassius stomp around followed by tiny detachments of soldiers. Costuming is rudimentary. When Brutus’ Portia pledges fidelity to her husband, she is only vaguely Roman, being swathed in the yards of material thought chic for ladies traveling first class on liners like the *Titanic*. This cover-up was necessary because a “reverend gentleman” actually objected to costumes showing the men’s legs. Ball also quotes a story of actors’ bare legs being disastrously painted to avoid the expense of tights.³⁷

Julius Caesar failed to impress Mr. W. Stephen Bush, America’s earliest critic of filmed Shakespeare, who often waxed ecstatic over other Vitagraph movies. Bush, a frequent correspondent for *Moving Picture World* and its British counterpart, *Bioscope*,³⁸ regularly advertised his services as a lecturer to supplement “high art” films,³⁹ and in that way, like the pianists, he compensated for a film’s unbearable silence. He uncharitably noted that the funeral pyre at the end of *Julius Caesar* “had a fatal resemblance to a Rhode Island clambake”; neither did he miss out on the opportunity to plug his own profession by pointing out that these plays on screen “are [little] more than a bewildering mass of moving figures to the majority of the patrons of electric theatres, but none stands more emphatically in need of a good lecture than *Julius Caesar*.”⁴⁰

The seeds of filmic greatness lie deeply buried in the Vitagraph *King Lear* (1909),⁴¹ which strives for a realism that can only be achieved with enormously expensive sets. Actualities showing the Household Brigade on parade are one thing, but underfunded actualities of a Shakespearean play only succeed in becoming non-actualities. The movie begins innovatively by identifying the characters (but not the players) with their names superimposed below them. About thirteen different set-ups show events from the old king’s testing of

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his daughters to his dying lamentations over the body of Cordelia. The parallel Gloucester plot and the scandalous love triangle among Goneril, Regan, and Edmund collapse under the weight of compression and would require W. Stephen Bush's lecturing service to sort out the story line for the bewildered audience. Exterior shots are non-existent. The white cliffs of Dover are painted on canvas and the storm scenes take place inside a studio with a fake hollowed-out tree for mad Tom to hide in. To spare the audience, and appease the enemies of nickelodeons, when Cornwall gouges out the old man's eyes, "Lest it see more, prevent it. Out vild jelly!" (3.7.83), Gloucester's back is to the camera. In the foreground, the indignant servant stabs the wicked Cornwall, and in a magical flash of pure film, Oswald breaks loose from an irate Kent, runs directly toward the camera, and with a wild look on his face almost invades the audience's space.

The festive *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909) and *Twelfth Night* (1910) forced Vitagraph's director Charles Kent out of the studio and into the parks with happy results. Not only is the lighting cheerful but also then and future famous actors like Maurice Costello as Lysander and his two little daughters, Dolores and Helene, project high spirits, immensely enjoying themselves. Like all the Vitagraph one-reelers, *Midsummer Night's Dream* moves at the pace of a fast-forwarded videocassette, or as if the Reduced Shakespeare Company had made a movie for Vitagraph, an outcome that sometimes happens when a silent film is projected at the wrong speed. Notwithstanding technical glitches, certain scenes capture the spirit of the play. William V. Ranous, about whom little seems to be known except that he was a journeyman actor, makes a hilarious Bottom as he mimes the weaver's blustering attempts to show how he can roar or play any role in the Pyramus/Thisby skit better than anyone else. The antics of Puck and the emplacement of an ass's head on Bottom are made to order for tricky visuals. There's quite a charming scene by a pond as Puck (Gladys Hulette) is suddenly lifted up into the air to search for the magic flower. An unaccountable switch in casting occurs when a young woman called Penelope replaces Oberon. It's Penelope, not Oberon, that Titania quarrels with and Penelope who sends Puck out to look for the potion. Perhaps the director feared that the pedophile subtext about the Indian boy might upset the censorious classes.

The same story gets told twice, once in pictures when the rude mechanicals come to the forest and again with explanatory cards: "The tradesmen come to the forest to rehearse their play. Puck changes the weaver into an ass. Titania awakens and falls in love with him." Later, at the peak of the silent era, F. W. Murnau's famous *The Last Laugh* (1924) eschewed title cards in favor of telling the story only in pictures, a virtuoso feat wildly acclaimed by purists. A *Moving Picture World* reviewer congratulated Vitagraph on its success with