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978-0-521-87199-0 - Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse

Judith Buchanan

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Wresting an alphabet

Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,
 Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
 But I of these will wrest an alphabet
 And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.

Titus to Lavinia, *Titus Andronicus* III.ii.42–45¹

In the course of Shakespeare's early tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, Titus's daughter Lavinia is rendered mute: her tongue is cut out and, as if this were insufficient, her hands too are hewn off. Despite these evident impediments to communicative performance, Lavinia's gestural eloquence is the subject of comment and admiration by other characters. When faced with his brutally muted and mutilated daughter's exquisitely tormenting sighs, winks, nods and kneelings, Titus commits himself to learning the meaning of her signs, to 'wrest[ing] an alphabet' from the silent gestures whose significance is initially, and frustratingly, lost on him.

Titus's urgent desire to draw meaning from Lavinia's elliptical and codified performance is matched by his recognition that it may not yield up its secrets without study on his part. His words are considerably affecting on both counts. They also bear usefully on subsequent wordless performances whose specific import may not be immediately self-explanatory. In terms directly borrowed from Titus, therefore, the project of this book is, similarly, to seek to 'wrest an alphabet' from silent Shakespeare films and the performances they contain, to tease out their mysteries and to lay their eloquence before the reader.

The number of Shakespeare films made in the silent era may surprise. Between 1899 (when the first Shakespeare film was made) and 1927 (when the first properly commercial sound film was released), a total of between two hundred and fifty and three hundred films adapted from

¹ All Shakespeare quotations from Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (eds.), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988).

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Shakespearean sources were made by the British, American, French, Italian, German and Danish film industries.² As is the case for so many films from the silent era, however, large quantities of them have since gone missing, or been destroyed, or have disintegrated beyond the point of possible restoration. The cellulose-nitrate stock onto which all films before the 1950s were shot makes them liable to combust spontaneously or, like all polymers, simply to decompose irrevocably. Nitrate film is equally vulnerable to damage from moisture in the atmosphere as it is to slight increases in temperature. The arrival of the sound era in the late 1920s quickly despatched silent film to the status of ‘yesterday’s thing’ and, as a result, the cans containing gently crumbling or spontaneously combusting prints of silent films were not a mainstream archiving priority for some time.³ As a result of a combination of neglect, loss, disintegration and wilful destruction, of the three hundred silent Shakespeare films originally made, only approximately forty now survive.

Some of the losses incurred are acute. There is, for example, no surviving print of Georges Méliès’ innovative 1907 film, *Le Rêve de Shakespeare* (*Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* in its English release), nor of Vitagraph’s updated and culturally translated 1912 film, *An Indian Romeo and Juliet*, which reconceives of Shakespeare’s doomed love story as that between a Mohican princess and a Huron brave. In a curious piece of theatricality that self-consciously displayed the combustibility and impermanence of film, the prints of the 1911 Herbert Beerbohm Tree/William Barker *Henry VIII* were all publicly and ceremonially burned by Barker himself specifically to increase their market value ahead of the scheduled blaze.⁴ The 1916 Fox big-budget *Romeo and Juliet* starring screen vamp Theda Bara (playing a Juliet who was, as she herself expressed it, ‘no Sunday-school girl’) is lost,⁵ as is the 1916 *Macbeth* that ambitiously attempted to combine a fast-moving Hollywood action picture with the acting talents of the English classical stage actor Herbert Beerbohm Tree. Of all the many films missing, disintegrated or destroyed, the one I personally most

² The *Filmography* lists all films discussed, including the current status of each (lost or extant, commercially available or held in archive preservation prints).

³ A significant number of film archives were, however, founded in the mid-1930s partly to arrest the effects of the destruction of silent film prints. See David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 24.

⁴ This was a marketing ploy, announced ahead of time, to generate publicity (and revenue), making audiences feel the urgency of seeing the film during its limited six-week run before the prints were all recalled and destroyed. See Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (NY: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), pp. 80–2.

⁵ Theda Bara, ‘How I Became a Film Vampire’, *Forum* 62 (July 1919), 83–93 (92).

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regret not having seen is James (J.M.) Barrie's 1916 cinematic pastiche *The Real Thing at Last*. This film wittily differentiated between, and unsparingly lampooned, British and American styles of performing Shakespeare by juxtaposing contrasting hypothetical productions of *Macbeth* from either side of the Atlantic (see Chapter 6). That such films should be unrecoverable is as significant a loss for those with an interest in early twentieth-century Shakespearean performance as it is for those concerned about the preservation of early cinematic material more generally. Given the attrition rates for silent film in general, however, the fact that, losses notwithstanding, a not inconsiderable forty silent Shakespeare films *have* survived is testimony as much as anything to the staggering numbers initially made.⁶

The imprecision of the tally of silent Shakespeare films merits a gloss. The most significant challenge is to decide how 'Shakespearean' – how close in plot, character, structure, theme, setting and/or quoted language – a film needs to be to qualify as a 'Shakespeare film' for the purposes of enumeration. Amongst the many and varied cinematic skirmishes with Shakespearean material in the period, there is inevitably some latitude in defining the terms of such an enquiry. The approach I have taken tends towards the generously inclusive to incorporate inconsequential flirtations with Shakespeare's plays and characters as well as more earnest cinematic adaptations. The films included in the count therefore range from the fully earnest to the gleefully parodic, from the stultifyingly theatrical to the confidently cinematic, from the period adaptation to the imaginative update, from the studio picture to the location shoot, from live action to animated cartoon, from the picture intended for projection as part of a theatre-based show to that intended for autonomous film exhibition, from the one-reel memorialising performance record to the full length, big budget feature, from the picture commended for its Shakespearean charm to that censored for its gore or disapproved of for its sexual explicitness. It includes films produced by major multi-national film companies and by smaller independents, in the US and across Europe and starring actors of such prestige, profile and range as Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Sarah Bernhardt, Georges Méliès, Ermete Novelli, Dante Capelli, Julia Swayne Gordon, Florence Turner (the 'Vitagraph Girl'), Florence Lawrence (the

⁶ David Francis, former Head of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress (LOC), estimates that only 10 per cent of the films produced in the US before 1929 still exist. If this figure is symptomatic, the survival rate for silent Shakespeare films is slightly above average for the era. The cultural capital associated with Shakespeare might help to account for their slightly enhanced survival rates.

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‘Biograph Girl’), Charles Kent, Maurice Costello, Francesca Bertini, Frank Benson, Frederick Warde, Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Francis X. Bushman, Theda Bara, Ruggero Ruggeri, Asta Nielsen and Emil Jannings. It includes films which court a high seriousness of tone and films which glory in their own idiocies. The silent Shakespearean filmography is, that is, eclectic in both material and approach.

The only previous book-length study to take on this eclectic body of films was written in the late 1960s by the meticulous American scholar Robert Hamilton Ball. Those of us who come after owe a weighty debt to Ball, who made it his labour-intensive business to produce a comprehensive survey of the field as it then appeared.⁷ Ball’s book distils the findings of more than a decade of entrepreneurial research, makes for delightful as well as densely informative reading and is *the* invaluable resource in this area. However, the sheer extent of the book’s coverage necessarily prevents Ball from giving sustained attention to any individual film or even cluster of films.

My approach is more selective. While alluding to the wider body of other films that form the background to, and useful comparators for, each film under discussion, I select a smaller number for detailed discussion. Some of the films I consider were also known to Ball; others – such as Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s 1899 *King John*, Thanhouser’s 1910 *A Winter’s Tale* (all prints of which were believed to have been destroyed by a fire in 1917) and the 1912 Frederick Warde *Richard III* – have come to light since. Other films simply proved impossible for Ball to locate in the very different research world of forty years ago. Prints of the 1908 Vitagraph *Julius Caesar*, the 1909 Film d’Arte Italiana *Othello* (*Otello*) and the 1909 Cines *Macbeth* (*Macbett*), for example, are now archivally catalogued and so possible to trace in ways they were not then.

The commercial release of films in reviewable formats has also transformed the critical landscape into which I write in comparison with the one Ball knew. His readership would rarely have had the opportunity to see many, if any, of the films he discussed. I am writing for a readership for whom some of these films will already be well known through the four currently available DVDs: the BFI’s *Silent Shakespeare* (featuring seven silent Shakespeare films), Thanhouser DVD’s *Thanhouser Presents Shakespeare 1910–1916* (featuring three Thanhouser productions), Kino Video’s 1912 *Richard III* (produced in association with the AFI) and Kino’s 1922 *Othello* (which also features four supplementary shorter

⁷ Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*.

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silent Shakespeare films).⁸ With regards to coverage, this book therefore has a twin objective: first, to develop the debate about films that may well already be known to readers, and second, to bring into critical circulation some films not commercially available and so, as yet, scarcely known, if at all. In the examples I choose, I attempt to keep a balance between these two pools of material. Films I examine which are currently only available in archival prints include releases from early Italian production companies Cines and Film d'Arte Italiana (FAI), from the early American producers Vitagraph and Thanhouser, and three separate films of *Hamlet* – starring Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson (1913), Italian classical actor Ruggero Ruggeri (1917) and Danish film star Asta Nielsen (1920). Most of the films discussed are extant, but some are only recoverable through the paper trail of scripts, catalogue descriptions, review and production reports they leave behind. All case-study films (extant or not, commercially available or not) are chosen for their capacity to illustrate with particular clarity, grace or piquancy some of the symptomatic issues raised by silent Shakespeare films as a more extensive body.

*

From a contemporary perspective, silent Shakespeare films seem oxymoronic in conception. The collaboration of this dramatic material with this medium of expression might even be considered a liaison of antithetical forces: one imaginatively evokes the image through the suggestive power of the word, the other does not just erode the power of the word by its privileging of the image, but all but evicts those words from its playing space. As if in acknowledgement of the contradictions inherent in the match, the resulting films themselves often pay homage to multiple masters: stage and screen, word and image, textual fidelity and filmic autonomy, inherited iconographies and vital performance, high culture and popular culture, heritage and topicality, 'author' and market, acts of memorialising and acts of making new. They are, therefore, frequently both burdened and enriched by competing agenda.

Being caught between worlds has not typically endeared them to the critical establishment. For some Shakespeareans, silent cinema could bring only loss and intolerable dilution to Shakespeare's dramatic poetry, generating little more than a husk of frantic and undignified gesturing from

⁸ For publication details of these commercially available DVDs, and a list of their precise contents, see the Filmography.

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its engagements with the world's greatest dramatist. 'There was little point in tackling Shakespeare seriously until the movies could speak,' wrote Laurence Kitchin in 1966. The Shakespeare films that were made in the pre-sound period were, he continued, 'half piously theatrical and half frivolous'.⁹ Roger Manvell considered the films 'absurd little charades'.¹⁰ Robert Hapgood maintained it 'hard to see' the attraction of silent Shakespeare films which, he claimed, could only possibly be of interest 'as a curiosity'.¹¹ And even Ball referred to the films as 'inadequate' and 'ridiculous'.¹² Most damning of all was Jack Jorgens' summary account of the phenomenon:

First came scores of silent Shakespeare films, one- and two-reelers struggling to render great poetic drama in dumb-show. Mercifully, most of them are lost.¹³

Jorgens' celebration of the loss of these films makes difficult reading. If a mercy *is* to be identified in this history, it is surely not, as Jorgens would have it, that most early Shakespeare films are lost, but rather – given the fate of the majority of films of the era – that not quite all of them are. For Jorgens, however, these were shadows whose innate capacity to offend could, it seems, only be 'mended' by being razed from the history.

Principally considered risible aberrations in the history of Shakespearean performance (when considered at all), they have scarcely fared better in the history of the film industry. Here they have fallen prey to charges of paralysing textual fidelity and a medium-inhibiting reverence for stage practice. At root, they have struck cineastes as inherently anti-cinematic, burdened by the memory of a literary wordiness that they cannot slough off even in silence and, as a result, unable fully to embrace the cinematic resources on offer. Writing in 1915, the American poet and early film theorist Vachel Lindsay made the case emphatically for cinema to distance itself from a trammelling theatrical heritage:

the further [the motion picture] gets from Euripides, Ibsen, Shakespeare, or Molière – the more it becomes like a mural painting from which flashes of lightning come – the more it realizes its genius.¹⁴

For cineastes, therefore, Shakespeare came to epitomise the theatrical burden that was inhibiting the cinema from realising its own potential.

⁹ Laurence Kitchin, *Drama in the Sixties: Form and Interpretation* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 142.

¹⁰ Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (London: J. M. Dent, 1971), p. 17.

¹¹ Hapgood, 'Shakespeare on Film and Television' in Stanley Wells (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 273–86 (274).

¹² Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film*, p. 302.

¹³ Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 1.

¹⁴ Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* revised edn. 1922 (NY: Liveright, 1970), p. 194.

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Lev Kuleshov spoke for many cinephiles in 1918 when he called upon film-makers to reject the alleged charge of being ‘not literary enough’ and ‘not dramatic’ and to embrace the idea that ‘the cinema’s language [should be] cinematographic!’¹⁵ Inherited literary and dramatic values had, in this characteristic articulation, become the inappropriate import that was stifling cinema’s own uninhibited engagements with its own ‘language’. In the face of antagonism from both directions, the position of silent Shakespeare films is not just that of an idiosyncratic curio: it is awkwardly and provocatively liminal – caught between a Shakespearean world and a filmic one and apparently wonderfully well placed to disappoint both.

In the chapters that follow, I take account of the weight of criticism the films have attracted from both Shakespearean and cineaste camps. I consider the contradictory charges of textual violation and of stultifying textual reverence. I also, however, attempt to see beyond such limited and limiting readings to the ways in which the films’ divided allegiances can illuminate a range of issues: the aspirations of both theatre and cinema as institutions, the tonal register of performance styles, the status of stars, the priorities of production companies and of national film industries, the history of Shakespearean performance and even, at times, the nature of the plays themselves. It will be part of the project to delineate the lines of tension created by the encounters and contests to which the films play host and to show how expressive the resulting dissonances can be about the inherited material, the medium of adaptation and the complexity of the cultural baggage that attends the union of the two.

It is salutary and right to begin this study by remembering that, despite their considerable numbers and richly individual virtues, the indecision of their medium allegiances has mostly debarred silent Shakespeare films from forming more than a quirky aside in film history and an idiosyncratic corner in the history of Shakespearean performance. They are far from central to either. Positioned at the peripheries of two intersecting histories in this way, they present a particular challenge for anyone seeking to give a just account of them. The challenge is this: how to pay due attention to this curious body of films without in the process distorting the balance of the broader dramas in which, with a few exceptions (notably including the two *Romeo and Juliet* films that caused a market stir in 1916, the aesthetically striking 1920 Asta Nielsen *Hamlet* and the grandly overblown

¹⁵ Quoted in David Bordwell, *On the History of Film Style*, p. 27.

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Emil Jannings 1922 *Othello*), they have only ever been considered merely bit-part players? The simple fact of writing a book-length study on silent Shakespeare film might be thought an attempt to draw in this material from the edges of other stories into a more privileged position at the centre of its own. This is not my intention. I am interested in these films partly *because* of the discrepancy between their prevalence and individual merits on the one hand and the fringe position they occupy in relation to other, more dominant histories on the other. That fringe position, as critically determined, is in itself illuminating about cultural hierarchies and how history privileges some tales, or some modes of telling tales, over others: I would therefore be loath to lose the sense of roguish marginality from the account. It forms a necessary part of the contextualising backdrop to the appeal of the films themselves.

CRITICAL REPUTATION ON FIRST RELEASE

The first audiences for silent Shakespeare films certainly did not struggle to find viewing pleasure in them. Indeed, the standard critical response on release was broadly, and often warmly, enthusiastic. There were, of course, those who felt it incumbent upon them to express suspicion about the value of wordless cinematic Shakespeare *per se*. Even the self-declared sceptics, however, usually confined their cautious comments to their introductory remarks. More often than not, such remarks then served simply as the ground-clearing precursor to making an exception in the case of the particular film currently under discussion. Three film releases of the 1916 tercentenary provide a useful source of examples for this critical tendency.

In the British trade paper *The Cinema News and Property Gazette* in November 1916, an anonymous reviewer began his account of Fox's *Romeo and Juliet* with a general consideration of what was at stake in adapting Shakespeare for moving pictures:

It is well-known that the beauty of Shakespeare's work lies in his complete mastery of language ... The problem the producer has to face in placing Shakespeare on the screen is, Can he incorporate into his actions Shakespeare's flow of words?¹⁶

Having thus established his own cultural legitimacy as someone who valued literary worth, the reviewer concluded his thoughts about the adaptation process by conceding that so long as there was no direct pretence to *be*

¹⁶ *CNPG* v.11, n.215 (23 November 1916), 16.

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Shakespeare, Shakespearean moving pictures could achieve much. In the Fox *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, he wrote:

the eye feasts upon a riot of action and a bounty of beauty, which is almost immeasurable ... As a spectacle, the Fox show is supreme ... The action of the play follows faithfully the drama ... After all, Fox is very wise. He is not playing Shakespeare; he is screening Shakespeare ... We think that many a cinemagoer will turn eagerly to the pages of Shakespeare after seeing this successful presentation. The beautiful pictures, the high-standard acting, bring the world-old story as vividly to the mind as any producers could.¹⁷

The picture was thus received as a beautiful allusion to Shakespeare (as, perhaps, a ballet or a painting might also be), as a lively vehicle for storytelling and as an advertisement for Shakespeare, tempting picture-goers towards the real thing by means of an appealing 'taster' experience. The following week, the same paper once again declared the impossibility of adapting Shakespeare successfully for the screen, only then to announce that the impossible had in this case been achieved:

To convert the spirit of Shakespeare into a silent form that will register clear and true, without seemingly missing a single important line in the brief, would seem next to impossible, *yet it has been done*. (my emphasis)¹⁸

Both *MPW*'s review of the Metro *Romeo and Juliet* and *Variety*'s of the 1916 Thanhouser *King Lear* adhered to the same critical formula:

We have all heard it said that the works of the Bard of Avon are not for the screen – that the 'upright stage' robs them of their matchless dialogue. The Metro production measurably disproves the assertion. Elaborate use has been made of the text. Artistically and clearly presented are these gems of the world's best literature; there is no possibility that their images will be marred by those who are 'capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb-shows and noise.' ... 'Romeo and Juliet' ... will possess a distinct double appeal – to the eye and to the mind.¹⁹

The value of Shakespearean plays upon the screen is questionable and in most instances in the past such photoplay productions have not proved box office magnets. But judged from an artistic standpoint the Thanhouser (Pathe-Goldrooster) five-reel production of "King Lear" is deserving of almost unlimited commendation ... Frederic [sic] Warde in the title role contributed an interpretation of the part that can, without fear of contradiction, be set down as a classic.²⁰

An acknowledgement of the problems considered innate to the venture, followed by a sweeping aside of the identified problems with an

¹⁷ *Ibid.* ¹⁸ *CNPG* v.11, n.216 (30 November 1916), xxvi.

¹⁹ George Blaisdell, Review of Metro *Romeo and Juliet*, *MPW* v.30, n.5 (4 November 1916), 685.

²⁰ 'Jolo', Review of *King Lear*, *Variety* v.45, n.6 (5 January 1917), 25.

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appreciative account of the exceptional virtues of the particular film discussed became, in fact, a recognisable critical response. Although it was accepted as a truism in some quarters that adapting Shakespeare for silent film was misguided ('It is well known that . . .', 'We have all heard it said that . . .'), in practice, as first released, these films were far more frequently the cause of pride, admiration and congratulation than of embarrassment or incredulity. Sceptical commentators were comfortably outnumbered by those who declared themselves impressed by the cultural, artistic and commercial potential of the endeavour to bring Shakespeare to the screen for the appreciation of the masses.

Individual aspects of the films' production, marketing, distribution and exhibition practices will be discussed as they become relevant in the pages ahead. However, there is one exhibition convention of the early cinema period – the use of a live lecturer during the projection – that bears so directly upon the idea of what silent Shakespeare films *were*, and how they were received, that it merits a separate note ahead of time.

LIVE LECTURERS

Between 1895 and 1913/14 (when the practice mostly fell into abeyance), a more or less expert, more or less charismatic showman-lecturer was laid on at some exhibition venues to accompany the picture show with a live recitation or talk. This figure was in many respects a direct continuation from the magic lantern tradition. At lantern shows, the lanternist himself, or a specialist lecturer imported for the purpose, would either extemporise or give a scripted reading to enliven and explain the projected images. Introducing a comparable figure to moving picture shows tempered the impression of cinema as an entirely pre-packaged phenomenon whose formal characteristics were all fully determined ahead of time.²¹ As Norman King has argued, a live commentary included as part of the exhibition 'actualised the image and, merging with it, emphasised the presentness of the performance and of the audience', so encouraging 'a sense of immediacy and participation'.²²

The usefulness of such an accompanying lecture for Shakespeare films was clear. W. Stephen Bush hired himself out as a guest lecturer for the

²¹ On the similarities and differences between lantern and moving picture lectures, see Richard Crangle, '“Next Slide Please”: The Lantern Lecture in Britain, 1890–1910' in Richard Abel and Rick Altman (eds.), *The Sounds of Early Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 39–47 (45–6).

²² Norman King, 'The Sound of Silents', *Screen* v.25, n.3 (May–June 1984), 2–15 (15).