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

Judith Buchanan

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SHAKESPEARE ON SILENT FILM

Several hundred films based on Shakespearean material were made in cinema's 'silent' era. What economic and cultural ambitions combined in order to make Shakespeare such attractive source material for the film industry? What were the characteristic approaches of particular production companies and of particular national film industries? How were silent Shakespeare films marketed, distributed, exhibited and received? Through a series of close readings, and drawing upon a wealth of fresh primary research, this engaging account tells an evolving story that both illuminates silent Shakespeare films already known, and brings into critical circulation other little known films not yet commercially available. Subjects covered include nineteenth-century precursors of silent Shakespeare, the film industry's transitional era, the many Shakespeare films of the Vitagraph Company of America, films of the 1916 Shakespeare tercentenary, silent films of *Hamlet* and Asta Nielsen and Emil Jannings as the stars of German Shakespeare films of the 1920s.

JUDITH BUCHANAN is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of York and the author of *Shakespeare on Film*. With a background in early modern literature, she now writes on silent cinema, on literary and biblical adaptation in the cinema, cinematic authorship, bodies on film and cinema's material legacies. She provided the introduction and voice-over commentary for the British Film Institute's *Silent Shakespeare* DVD.

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for Maureen, aunt and friend

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I cannot too much muse
Such shapes, such gestures, and such sound, expressing –
Although they want the use of tongue – a kind
Of excellent dumb discourse.

The Tempest

[In these silent films] it struck me that I was witnessing a dead art, a wholly defunct genre that would never be practiced again. And yet, for all the changes that had occurred since then, their work was as fresh and invigorating as it had been when it was first shown. That was because they had understood the language they were speaking. They had invented a syntax of the eye, a grammar of pure kinesis ... It was thought translated into action, human will expressing itself through the human body, and therefore it was for all time ... They were like poems, like the renderings of dreams, like some intricate choreography of the spirit, and because they were dead, they probably spoke more deeply to us now than they had to the audiences of their time. We watched them across a great chasm of forgetfulness, and the very things that separated them from us were in fact what made them so arresting: their muteness, their absence of color, their fitful, speeded-up rhythms. These were obstacles, and they made viewing difficult for us, but they also relieved the images of the burden of representation. They stood between us and the film, and therefore we no longer had to pretend that we were looking at the real world. The flat screen was the world, and it existed in two dimensions. The third dimension was in our head.

Paul Auster, *The Book of Illusions*

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Parts of this book have previously appeared in other forms. Several sections had a first, less detailed outing in *Shakespeare on Film* (2005). Sections of the Introduction appeared in an earlier instantiation in the Introduction to the December 2007 special issue of the British Shakespeare Association journal *Shakespeare*, which I guest-edited. Sections of Chapter 3 appeared in an article ('In Mute Despair') that came out in that same special issue. A briefer version of Chapter 5 appeared in the June 2006 issue of *Shakespeare*. All appear here reworked and with permission.

Having the opportunity to go through the notes and unpublished catalogue cards of the diligently systematic scholar Robert Hamilton Ball has been tremendous. Nothing could replace his invaluable book *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (1968) and this book does not intend to try. I do, however, consciously make use of his legacy to further the enquiry that he began, in tune, I hope, with his voracious appetite for detail and nimble capacity to convert detail into story. In this work, therefore, I warmly acknowledge my debts to his pioneering scholarship.

Meanwhile Kostja has, as ever, kept things together with wit and generosity, while Douglas and Frederike have been happening up around us in their chirpy, individual ways. I thank all three for cutting me enough slack to write the book, for relocating cheerily to Washington when there was research to be done there, and for their regular and infectious injections of hilarity into the business of life.

I first sampled the pleasure to be had in considering the performance implications of a Shakespeare play a quarter of a century ago, when my

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mother helped me plan an 'O' Level essay on *Macbeth*. I caught the bug then and have since been fortunate enough to be able to convert this particular pleasure into a professional interest. I therefore take this opportunity to thank my Mum for getting me started (and for much more besides).

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AFI	American Film Institute
AMBC	American Mutoscope and Biograph Company
Ball Collection	The Robert Hamilton Ball Collection, held at the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC
BFI	The British Film Institute (London)
BFK	Bundesarchiv-Filmarchiv, Koblenz
BL	The British Library (London)
BMBC	British Mutoscope and Biograph Company
BUFVC	British Universities Film and Video Council
CSC	Il Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Rome)
CNPG	Cinema News and Property Gazette
FAI	Film d'Arte Italiana
fps	frames per second
Folger	Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC.
GEH	George Eastman House, Rochester, New York
ILN	Illustrated London News
ISA	International Shakespeare Association
KLW	Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly
LOC	Motion Picture and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
MLS	The Magic Lantern Society
MPM	Motion Picture Magazine
MPW	Moving Picture World
NFTVA	National Film and Television Archive, London (now the BFI National Archive)
NY	New York
NYPL	New York Public Library

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NYT	New York Times		
PRO	Public Records Office, London (now the National Archives)		
SB	Shakespeare Bulletin		
SQ	Shakespeare Quarterly		
Theatre Museum	The Theatre Museum, Covent Garden, London		

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Shakespeare and silent cinema do not strike the casual observer as natural allies. For all the apparent oddity of the match, though, nearly three hundred silent Shakespeare films were made between 1899 and 1927.¹ Even some of those involved in their production were struck by the disconcerting nature of the project. While filming his *Hamlet* in 1913, for example, the famous English classical stage actor Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson is said to have stomped through a wood in frustration at the ‘capped’ nature of the performance he was required to give in this context, shouting at the cameraman, ‘Lines, damn you, give me lines!’² Two years earlier, on 27 February 1911, at a showing of Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s *Scenes from Shakespeare’s King Henry VIII* at the Palace Theatre, London, a gentleman in the audience had allegedly taken it upon himself to represent the crowd when he jumped to his feet minutes into the projection to call out, ‘I say, you know, we can’t hear a thing.’³ This genteel heckler simply could not, it seems, credit that anyone would have the *sangfroid* to perform Shakespeare without the words.

Audiences today tend to agree. For many, the most noticeable characteristic of these films is the thing conspicuously missing from them. In its muting of Shakespearean drama, silent Shakespearean cinema cannot but seem self-negating, the result of a senseless act of stripping away of all that is nuanced, beautiful and meaningful in the inherited source.

¹ The use of the term ‘silent’ for films of the era is conventional. The word, however, is misleading since films were never, of course, silent at the point of exhibition. Though they typically lacked integrated sound, they were always exhibited with live musical accompaniment, and sometimes also, as discussed in the Introduction, by live vocal commentary and/or other sound effects. The number of ‘silent’ Shakespeare films is also discussed in the Introduction.

² Paul Dehn, ‘The Filming of Shakespeare’, in John Garrett, ed., *Talking of Shakespeare* (NY: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), pp. 49–72 (50). Forbes-Robertson’s desire to speak the lines for the camera is part of movie legend. See, for example, Iris Barry, *Let’s Go to the Pictures* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926), p. 97.

³ Dehn, ‘The Filming of Shakespeare’, p. 50.

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Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this body of films has typically been considered too flimsy, too silly a project perhaps, to merit critical discussion of the sustained type that, by contrast, has been generously lavished on Shakespeare films of the sound era.⁴

It was not in such terms, however, that these films were principally understood on first release. The story about the heckler at the Palace Theatre may have its basis in fact, or may simply be a piece of retrospective myth-spinning. If the latter, it is of interest for expressing a subsequent moment's desire to visit its own prejudices back upon a time yet itself to assume these particular concerns. And if the former, this picture-goer might either have been articulating his genuine puzzlement about the technology (though it was, of course, not new in 1911), or might simply have been a wag making a satirical interjection to entertain the crowd. Real or hypothesised, earnest or ironic, however, the outcry should not be taken as indicative of a general anxiety about silent Shakespeare films in the early cinema period. The quantities of primary materials that come under scrutiny in this book show that of all the many things for which Shakespeare films of the pre-sound era were lauded and/or castigated, the languagelessness of the performances was far from dominant.⁵ A detailed trawl through the trade papers, 'fanzines' (as they would subsequently become known) and other relevant journals of the period⁶ reveals that Shakespeare films were, by contrast, repeatedly commended for their pictorial qualities, engaging performances, pleasing use of location scenery, narrative clarity, passion, humour, delicately employed special effects, fluency in cutting between

⁴ Scholars whose work has proved the exception to this include Jon Burrows, Anthony Guneratne, Russell Jackson, Luke McKernan, Roberta Pearson, Kenneth Rothwell, Emma Smith, Lisa Starks, William Urrichio, and, above all, Robert Hamilton Ball whose immense, charming and minutely researched *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (NY: Theatre Arts Books, 1968) remains the invaluable point of reference for all in the field.

⁵ The primary materials examined for this book include scripts, film-makers' and actors' reminiscences, screen acting manuals, writers' manuals, company logbooks, distributors' account books, exhibitors' catalogues, theatre programmes, press books and other marketing materials, reviews and moving picture gossip – what James M. Welsh aptly calls the 'mass of shifting and disintegrating evidence' of the period in his article, 'Shakespeare with – and without – words', *Literature/Film Quarterly* v.1 (1973), 84–8 (84).

⁶ The principal British trade papers and film periodicals of the period were: *The Biograph*, *The Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly (KLW)*, *The Cinema News and Property Gazette (CNP)*, *The Optical Lantern and Cinematic Journal*, *The Pictures*, *The Illustrated Films Monthly*. The principal American publications were: *The Moving Picture World (MPW)*, *Film Daily*, *Motography (The Nickelodeon)*, *The Motion Picture Magazine (MPM)*, *The Motion Picture Classic*, *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, *Exceptional Photoplays*, *Variety*. Other contemporary newspapers and journals covering the pictures to which I refer include *The Picturegoer and Society*, *The New York Times (NYT)*, *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, *The Era*, *The Illustrated London News (ILN)*.

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planes of action, edifying social and educative aims, appealing showcasing of popular stars and even for their sensitivity in interpreting Shakespearean dramatic moment and poetic force. Since there were plenty of non-linguistic aspects of the films to which critics could profitably attend, they only rarely needed to carp about the missing language in order to fill copy. If the pictures were excused the requirement to *be* Shakespeare, they could, more simply, be invited to operate in interesting proximity to his work. And if they were allowed the space to be autonomous entertainments in their own right, critics could equally be excused the obligation to disapprove of them out of some moral mission to protect Shakespeare from dilution or pollution. The films, that is, could be accepted, and judged, on their own merits rather than being held to account for the thing they self-evidently were not.

Resisting the temptation to define silent Shakespeare films principally by lack has the advantage of making it easier to discern the things that these maverick films delightfully and tellingly *are*, both as film industry products and as performance readings of Shakespeare. Accordingly, this book will explore what these moving pictures can reveal about technical, interpretive and institutional developments in the film industry during the silent era (1895–1927). And it will also ask how these films illumine the ways in which Shakespeare was being read, received and transmitted in this period. Even in its necessarily selective interpretive approach to Shakespeare, silent film can, after all, render some aspects of ‘the Shakespearean’ with aplomb. In his essay ‘Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool’, George Orwell wrote:

Lear can be imagined as a puppet show, a mime, a ballet, a series of pictures. Part of its poetry, perhaps the most essential part, is inherent in the story and is dependent neither on any particular set of words, nor on flesh-and-blood presentation.

Shut your eyes and think of *King Lear*, if possible without calling to mind any of the dialogue. What do you see? ... a majestic old man in a long black robe with flowing white hair and beard ... wandering through a storm, cursing the heavens, in company with a fool and a lunatic. Presently the scene shifts, and the old man, still cursing, still understanding nothing, is holding a dead girl in his arms while the Fool dangles on a gallows somewhere in the background. This is the bare skeleton of the play.⁷

⁷ George Orwell, ‘Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool’ (first published in *Polemic* 7 [March 1947]) in Orwell, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* v.4 (1945–1950), Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds.) (London: Secker and Warburg, 1968), pp. 287–302 (293).

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Images from *Lear*, Orwell argues, are imprinted so deeply upon our collective visual imagination that it is possible for the play to be evoked in its skeletal form as a series of cameo pictures. Part of its *poetry* (to claim the offered licence) is inherent in the story implied by this sequence of pictures. Broadly understood, the drama's identity is not, therefore, exclusively dependent on the specificity of its words. Needless to say, it is the words that have inspired the series of extra-linguistic expressions that now form part of the broader *Lear* legacy. However those non-verbal expressions have also taken on a life of their own, no longer merely the derivative and lesser cousin of the words that first authored them. As such, they have come to constitute an analogue life for the drama, and it is partly in this parallel, pictorial form that the drama latently resides in our individual and collective imaginations.⁸ This culturally prevalent and yet only half-consciously acknowledged series of images emerges from a remembered composite elision of edition illustrations, Shakespearean paintings and well-known cameo moments from the play's performance history. *Lear* is not unique in this respect. Each of the plays has its own parallel life as a sequence of pictures from which iconic moments stand out: Romeo scaling the balcony, Portia addressing the court, Malvolio cross-gartered, Ophelia drowning in the brook, Othello murdering Desdemona, Macbeth reaching for an air-drawn dagger, Prospero conjuring a sea-tempest.⁹

A silent Shakespeare film can act, more or less consciously, as a conduit to this communally owned pictorial 'version' of a play by trading upon, or even quoting, the series of images conventionally associated with each. Equally, it can diverge from established pictorial expectations by reconfiguring the play in terms that defy the conventionalised pattern of Shakespearean tableaux we have come to expect. Both when adhered to and when eschewed, the set of culturally prevalent images associated with

⁸ The paintings, drawings and engravings that contribute to the iconic force of the image of *Lear* in the storm include: Poussin's 'Landscape with Storm' (1651), Romney's 'Lear in the Tempest tearing off his Robes' (1762), Reynolds's 'Lear' (before 1762), John Runciman's 'Lear in the Storm' (1767), Alexander Runciman's 'King Lear on the Heath' (c.1767), Mortimer's 'Head of Lear' (1775), West, 'King Lear in the Storm' (1793), Wilson's 'David Garrick as King Lear' (1754), Dyce's 'King Lear and the Fool in the Storm' (1851). All reproduced in Jane Martineau *et al.*, *Shakespeare in Art 1720–1820* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ For a discussion of the iconicity of *Lear* in the storm and of other celebrated moments in Shakespeare, see Sillars, *Painting Shakespeare*, particularly pp. 83–93.

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each drama necessarily forms part of the interpretive lens through which we view the films.

Orwell is not alone in reminding us that well-known dramatic literature is a more complex concatenation of formal elements and cultural forces than merely a set of scripted words awaiting performance interpretation. W. Stephen Bush, for example, is worth heeding on this score. As a regular, and thoughtfully zealous, contemporary commentator on moving pictures in the American trade paper *Moving Picture World (MPW)*, Bush waged an ongoing campaign to establish the artistic credibility and moral standing of the early cinematograph industry. His interest lay particularly in pictures made from reputable literary or theatrical sources. In an article for *MPW* in 1911, he approvingly quoted theatre critic Clayton Hamilton on the subject of rendering theatrical material on screen:

The kinematograph bereaves the drama of the spoken word; and it must be surprising to the literary theorists to learn how much is left – how vividly the essential elements of action, character, and setting may convey themselves by visual means alone. Pantomime has been recognized for many centuries as a legitimate type of drama: but it is safe to say that the variety and the extent of its adaptability as a means of story telling were never fully understood until the invention of the kinematograph demanded of it an unprecedented exercise.¹⁰

Hamilton's words have a sustained relevance in relation to silent Shakespeare films. The question 'how much is left' when cinema 'bereaves the drama of the spoken word', however, starts from a premise that presupposes a finite and stable starting position from which only loss is then possible in subsequent adjustment. There are other ways of viewing this transaction and, therefore, other questions to ask. How is translated expression found for ideas inherited from a source? How are emphases clarified or adjusted in the transmediating processes of excision and selective concentration? What new considerations are introduced both through cinema's proper absorption in its own emerging presentational codes, interpretive priorities and commercial imperatives and also through the cultural-historical moment in which the particular interpretation is being wrought? This book seeks to uncover 'the variety and extent of [the] adaptability' of Shakespearean 'pantomime' in moving pictures, and by doing so, to learn not only 'how much is left' when the drama is bereft of the spoken word but also how much is rethought, recast and remade in the process.

¹⁰ W. Stephen Bush, 'Signs of a Harvest', *MPW* v.9 n.4 (5 August 1911), 272.

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Before pursuing the book's analytic and historical agenda, however, a brief prefatory word about the personal experience of living intimately with these films while preparing this book. In the course of these preparations, I have viewed and reviewed the films in any number of modes: at full speed, in slow motion, frame by frame, forwards, backwards, occasionally upside down (when I have accidentally mis-fed a print), on Steenbeck viewers in archives in Britain, the US, France, Germany and Italy, with live improvised and live scored musical accompaniment, with brilliantly appropriate and grimly inappropriate canned musical accompaniment, animated by actors speaking the lines, in eerie silence, as a series of stills, as archived paper deposits, projected onto the exterior walls of the Globe Playhouse in London, on domestic screens, while leafing through star cards to identify a player or through a Shakespeare play to pin a dramatic moment, while giving simultaneous commentary on them at academic conferences and at public screenings, or while simply sitting back alone to let them unspool uninterrupted for my private pleasure. As I have wondered at the verve, variety, eccentricity and ambition of these pieces of cinematic history, the single aspect that has affected me most significantly, staying with me after the cans of film have been returned to cool storage or the DVD to its shelf, has consistently been the simple presence of the individual actors. The muted, gesturing figures rendering both grand Shakespearean moment and inconsequential pieces of linking business in mimed action, often drained of their intended colour in the surviving prints and vulnerable to ridicule by being exhibited at an inappropriate projection speed, tell a story that is not only their own but that of their moment more generally.¹¹ As seen now, that tale can play out as one of figures marooned in time, earnestly (and sometimes skittishly) playing to a world that has moved on without them, to a spectatorship that now finds them curious, antiquated, stylised and in one way or another *too much*. But they were not always poignantly stranded in the wrong moment. As they were first committed to celluloid, they were the lords of time, occupying the moment with touching confidence, and often playing to considerable acclaim. The seeming remoteness of the actors can certainly estrange the contemporary spectator unaccustomed to the screen acting conventions informing those performances and the

¹¹ For a useful account of projection speeds in the era, see Kevin Brownlow, 'Silent Films – What Was the Right Speed?', in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI, 1990), pp. 282–92.

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shooting conventions employed to film them. However, it is also this seeming otherness that then renders more arresting those moments in which the sense of removal falls away and a piercingly recognisable truthfulness in the performances cuts across the divide between then and now, between the long-gone actor and the contemporary spectator, between their world and ours. In renewing our collective acquaintance with some of these films, this book hopes to reconnect us also with some of the actors who occupy and animate them.