

# SHAKESPEARE ON CELLULOID:

## Linking Home and School

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### Introduction

We each bring a unique set of experiences and understandings to our reading of film. As teachers, we are able to situate literature, films, art and music in increasingly sophisticated frames of reference that we have developed through our reading and research. Our students, on the other hand, bring an increasing cultural diversity and range of experiences to their reading which is equally complex. Greater recognition of home cultural experience expands the potential for students to make links with school through their reading.

The texts of Shakespeare's plays provide scripts for performance, allowing students to draw on their cultural backgrounds and invest the plays with new meanings, but I wish to focus on the films as providing special opportunities for making cultural links between home and school. This paper explores the potential for working with film to make links between the diversity of cultural experience that teenagers bring to the classroom and common school literacy practices.

The paper challenges many conventional readings of the plays and suggests that an expanded cultural understanding of them increases both their enjoyment and their value for students. I have described a number of features and highlighted a number of contemporary issues that create lively discussion in the classroom. The text of the paper is intended to be evocative – if not provocative. The boxed sections are suggested as focus activities for students studying the films as text.

### Making Bucks

Shakespeare was a commercial playwright and a theatre owner. He was in business to get crowds through the doors. He developed a new tragedy and a new comedy every season. If things worked, he ran with them. He was commercial first. As such, in the 1990s he would probably have been a film producer/director – perhaps in the style of Kenneth Branagh with his ensemble approach to film-making, perhaps in the manner of Spielberg with his wide range of interests and universal issues. For Shakespeare, the performance had to

'work' for the Elizabethan audience, and so they should 'work' today.

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### Student Activities

Most of Shakespeare's audience walked or rode a horse across the river to the seamier side of London town to pay for entry to stand and watch the performance in the open air.

- Imagine you have joined the audience. Describe the sights and sounds and smells around you.
  - What types of entertainment would you be willing to walk to, pay for and then stand and watch? Discuss.
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The development of 'Shakespeare-mania' as a film phenomenon has been a long time coming. Early attempts like Mary Pickford's (1929) hilarious feminist version of *The Taming of the Shrew* are well worth watching as precursors to the frenetic Zeffirelli version (1967) which, by using well-known Hollywood identities, established Shakespeare's box-office credentials for the late twentieth century.

Zeffirelli's *Shrew* (1967) followed by *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Polanski's *Macbeth* (1972) probably herald the dawn of acceptance of film in the teaching of Shakespeare. The more recent phenomenon of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* rests within this renaissance of film translation. The revival of Shakespeare in this distinctively twentieth century cultural medium provides an opportunity for students to reflect on the nature of entertainment in varying social and cultural contexts. It allows them to reflect on differences between the customs and conventions of Elizabethan England and the 'world' of contemporary film translations of the plays.

A brief examination of the range of Shakespearean translations to film in the past decade appears to support a continuing scholarly insistence that the plots and themes are timeless (e.g., Bloom, 1998; Fraser, 1988; Rygiel, 1992). Luhrmann's retention of sufficient of the original playscript to call the film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* represents an interesting claim about the accessibility of the Elizabethan language. Zeffirelli suggests in the credits that his actors would have been speechless without Shakespeare's playscript. Hoffman commands the same recognition of an 'original' playscript for the 1999 film translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while Kenneth Branagh felt obliged to present the 'complete' playscript of *Hamlet* in four hours, presumably in an effort to remain 'true' to the original. We might reflect on the ways the plays have been translated into films and consider whether (for all the differences between them) they reveal significant continuities.

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### Student Activities

- Polanski's *Macbeth* cuts all of scene 1 except the final couplet, adds a dying line for Macduff and a complete final scene for Donalbain. Parker cuts most of Desdemona's duty speech from *Othello* and Branagh's *Hamlet* is moved ahead several centuries in time. With all of these changes, is it still reasonable to say that the films are the 'same' as Shakespeare's playscripts?
  - Even greater changes are made in the musicals, *Kiss me Kate* (*The Taming of the Shrew*) and *West Side Story* (*Romeo and Juliet*). Can these films properly be described as 'Shakespearean'?
  - *Johnny Hamlet* and *Joe Macbeth* show us Shakespearean – based characters as American cowboys and gangsters while Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* becomes a modern American street tragedy. How far can we move a Shakespearean playscript before it ceases to be 'Shakespearean'.
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Free translations like *Forbidden Planet*, *China Girl*, *Joe Macbeth* and *Johnny Hamlet* have moved from outer space to New York and the wild west and these present interesting challenges for students and teachers alike as they provide opportunities to discuss the integrity of film translation. Similarly, foreign film translations like the Russian *Hamlet* or the Japanese *Macbeth* (*Throne of Blood*) and *King Lear* (*Ran*) provide opportunities to explore the cultural demands and necessities of a film translation when it is removed from its original geographical and cultural context. As an Australian reader, I expect castles in Shakespearean film translations to be made of stone. To me, the wooden castles in *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* look as though they belong to the American wild west. The cultural shift to Japan or America has a significant impact on the way I interact with these texts.

### The ensemble and authorship

The presentation of young William Shakespeare in the film *Shakespeare in Love* suggests that the actual writing of 'Shakespeare's playscripts' may never have been undertaken by Shakespeare (cf Bate, 1997). Instead, as the company owner and director, Shakespeare suggested the ideas and probably wrote major speeches that were needed to fit particular sections of each play.

The value of considering Shakespeare's plays as the result of an ensemble of actors working together to develop an entertainment is that it allows us to see why the folios are different, and why there do not seem to be any remnants of Shakespeare's playscripts written in his own hand.

Tom Stoppard, who co-wrote the screenplay for *Shakespeare in Love* has been threatened with law suits for taking his ideas, and much of the action and dialogue, from an earlier play but the paradox is that the approach is truly Shakespearean. If it is a good play and a good idea then there is no reason why author shouldn't borrow and recycle them. Unfortunately, the concept of authorship is far more rigid in our own time than it was 300 years ago.

The printing press has played a large part in hardening our ideas of who wrote what. Despite the continuing role of editors and publishers in influencing writers to meet commercial demands or social expectations, the author of a printed work is considered to be a simply identifiable person or group of persons. The complexity of filmmaking, however, makes it difficult to attribute the authorship to any single member of the vast team who works on the production. Screenwriters, directors, producers, actors and even sponsors may all shape the wording as much as the interpretation. Editors, similarly, create subtle differences that may create entirely different readings by sequencing shots to match the demands of music, sound and dialogue.

*Shakespeare in Love* shows Christopher Marlowe giving Shakespeare an idea for a play, the leading actor agreeing to take a smaller part because it better fits the needs of the story and accidental business on stage being included because it is popular with audiences. *Shakespeare in Love* provides some very useful possibilities for the interpretation and understanding of both Shakespearean playscripts and Elizabethan times.

### Audience expectations in drama and film

We tend to reject exotic stories set in familiar places while accepting the same unlikely stories if they are set in far off lands or times. All the 'interesting' things seem to happen to other people! Shakespeare's audiences could appreciate stories set in Italy, Spain or Egypt where they might have rejected the same stories set in London. Readers create a reality in their mind as they read, which is related to the social setting in

which they operate. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet may work in a Shakespearean playscript, but will they work in suburban Adelaide, or Melbourne, or Wollongong? If so, which suburbs will they work in and why not another?

Film involves a different kind of reading than a play. The film audience may move to a performance space but the actors, the settings and the filmmakers will not be there. The film reader steps through the screen into a world that has been artificially created at another time and place. Not only does the film reader/viewer need to accept that the actors are 'real people' but that they can 'play' their role for the first and only time, every time the film is screened.

Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, using the common 'play within a play' approach, reverses conventional reading theory by moving the actor from the screen into the audience and then out into the world of the audience. Suddenly, real people are expected to accept that the character played by the actor is also real, that the actor can get bored with playing the same scene at every screening. The audience is not escaping into the film, the film actor is escaping into the audience. Escapism is deconstructed and the inferred distance of the reading is questioned.

Kenneth Branagh's Iago in Parker's *Othello* includes the film's audience into his thoughts by looking out of the screen and talking to us. The acknowledgement of the audience by the actor, of the reader by the text, is disconcerting because, as readers, we have hidden ourselves in the darkened cinema, suspended our disbelief to enter into the world of the Shakespearean play.

Films are made according to rules of communication which are as strict as the spelling and grammar rules we use to write a story, an essay or even a diary entry. When we go to see a film in a cinema, we expect comfortable seats and the lights to be turned out; we expect the film to be in focus and we expect to be able to hear the sound track. If things happen which confuse us or which seem unreal within the story, we may argue that the film is poor quality. If the style of the film does not follow the usual rules for film editing and

composition then, again, we may argue that the film is poor quality. We generally expect to see a film which follows rules that we are already familiar with. Directors such as Parker and Luhrmann increase our consciousness of these rules by consciously breaking them.

### A little matter of love and death

At a time when death has become an acceptable topic for discussion in Australian classrooms, youth suicide and religious belief have rendered *Romeo and Juliet* relevant again – not as a love story but as a serious discussion of the rights and responsibilities of teenagers in love and the issues surrounding family tradition, social behaviour and religious belief.

Zeffirelli's *Romeo + Juliet* focuses our attention on the discussion of an arranged marriage between Paris and Juliet. Juliet is too young for marriage, argues her father. Many are married younger than she is, responds Paris. Zeffirelli's camera zooms across the courtyard to a close-up of the embittered Lady Capulet as her husband responds. Luhrmann effectively deletes this scene and, in consequence, constructs an entirely different romance. Zeffirelli's aged Paris supports a discussion of arranged marriage that was the focus for *The Taming of the Shrew*.

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#### Student activities

View the scenes in which Paris asks for Juliet's hand in each of the Luhrmann and Zeffirelli film translations.

How important is it for parents to accept the partners their children marry?

- Is love necessary for a happy marriage?
- Is parent approval necessary for a happy marriage?
- Is Lady Capulet's reaction to Paris's proposal fair to Juliet?

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In an Elizabethan setting where Catholic/Protestant rivalry was both bitter and long-standing, a play exploring rivalry between feuding families would have been openly allegorical. The priest is complicit in defying the Montagues, allowing Romeo and Juliet to marry secretly and against their parents' wishes. When Romeo dies, Juliet has little option but suicide. She will not be accepted back to her own family, she cannot throw herself onto the tender mercies of the Montagues and she cannot – being a lady – be expected to survive without the trappings of her genteel background. Her option is similar to 'Suttee', the Hindu custom of the wife immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

### Mum and marriage

As Dennis Robinson has pointed out in discussing film translations of 'Hamlet':

Olivier stresses a strongly oedipal relationship between Hamlet and his mother. Critics have noted the view of Gertrude's empty bed in the opening sequences with its suggestiveness of a woman's vagina. The bed is prominent in the arras scene when Hamlet kills Polonius. Part of Hamlet's struggle with his mother takes place in and around this same bed. Olivier was forty at the time of the filming and Eileen Herlie, who plays Gertrude, was twenty-seven, so it is probably not surprising that the scene has considerable sexual *frisson* – even when viewed almost half a century later. Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close is even more explicit while Branagh's *Hamlet*, on the other hand, is not provided with *any* apparent sexual yearnings for his mother. What seem to be simple directorial choices provide us, as film readers, with a range of interpretive options. Their effectiveness becomes a challenge for us as readers and our judgement of the director's choice becomes an issue in our determining the effectiveness of the translation. (Robinson in Bechervaise, 1999)

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#### Student activities

In the Greek tragedy by Sophocles, Oedipus killed his father and married his mother. Sigmund Freud suggested that it was common for young boys to love their mothers and, during early adolescence, to even have sexual feelings toward her. Freud called this the 'Oedipus Complex' and recognised that it was a phase of development which was both normal and, in normally developing boys, relatively brief. Similar feelings for young girls toward their fathers are called the 'Electra Complex'.

Kenneth Branagh rejects the oedipal relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude though both Olivier and Zeffirelli have accepted it.

- Discuss the possibility that times have changed since the earlier filmed translations and that Branagh's film, using the full script, provides sufficient entertainment without having to pull in an unlikely relationship to explain the motivations of the characters.

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Olivier's Gertrude appears to suicide for the love of her son but the interpretation is difficult to justify. Like the suicides of Romeo, Juliet and Ophelia, it certainly defies the teaching of the Catholic Church but, again, it restores a social order; old Hamlet is revenged, his wife's technical infidelity is acknowledged and Hamlet's oedipal concern with his mother is confirmed.

As teachers, we can draw on the insights of the cultural diversity we often have access to in our classrooms. More importantly, we can involve the students who live with these cultural differences as a part of their family and social order with accessible interpretations and, hence, access to their own beliefs through the apparently safely distanced observations of a long-dead white male.

### Loving the 'Lethal Weapon'

One of the more difficult Shakespearean playscripts is the apparently misogynistic *Othello*. Neither the Orson Welles film translation nor the recent Parker translation shed much light on the clearly disproportionate jealousy that Iago so easily evokes from his master. Certainly, the cutting of the playscript further obscures Othello's motivation for killing his young wife, Desdemona. However, even a close reading of the complete playscript reveals little for the reader whose experience derives from an essentially British background.

A cross-cultural reading empowers students with more traditional cultural backgrounds to discuss the rights and responsibilities of both wives and husbands. Desdemona's speech to her father about the rights and responsibilities of a daughter and a wife (reminiscent of Katherine's speech to her father and to the husbands in *Taming of the Shrew*) provides clear access to such a discussion but does little to explain her husband's blind jealousy. The cutting of the play obscures understanding and this is demonstrable in the recent Parker translation but it is not sufficient as the playscript maintains a similar lack of information.

The vision of the warrior in history, on the other hand, provides entry to an interesting discussion of the construction of the male in society. Othello is a warrior, a general. His role is to act decisively, to act promptly and to count the dead after the battle. His feelings are subordinated to his responsibility to act. The quality of mercy is not an issue for Othello. In consequence, inexperienced and confused by the finer feelings of his relationship with Desdemona, he appears not as a

warrior giant but an emotional pygmy. He is easily duped by his 'mate' and he over-reacts.

Such an interpretation appears simplistic in light of the myriad of interpretations that has been presented, but none provides a more coherent justification for Othello's behaviour. Nor on the other hand do any of the established interpretations provide a motive for Othello's trust in Iago. Iago the evil one is inconsistent with the representation of his wife Emilia. If he was uniformly evil then she could be expected to question his motives in taking the handkerchief. She would be unsurprised by subsequent events. The playscript does not support such an interpretation and, hence, the play becomes difficult to develop a coherent reading from.

Consideration of the warrior society, only too familiar to Elizabethans in the wake of Elizabeth's ascension, mismanagement in Ireland and strained relations with European neighbours, provides an opportunity to consider the warrior husband in a similar light to, perhaps, Martin Guerre; to consider the death of Desdemona in light of the stoning of the widow in *Zorba the Greek* – or, as previously mentioned, the social demand for Juliet's suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*. As an exploration of the contrast between mature and immature emotional response in a relationship, Othello, Petruchio from *The Taming of the Shrew*, Romeo and Juliet, Ophelia from *Hamlet* and even Lady Macbeth suggest an ongoing thematic consideration of the male/female relationship in Shakespeare's playscripts. That the exploration of the macho-man, cave-man approach to love has been set in a far-off land, involves a gentle-woman and an uneducated, upwardly mobile opportunist allows more graphic examples to be offered to the audience than might have been possible in a domestic setting.

### Student activities

Films such as *Lethal Weapon* and *Terminator* tend to show women in subordinate roles to warrior males as a natural order. The television series, *Xena the Warrior Princess* is one of the few recent entertainments to successfully question this position.

Consider the following discussion topics:

- A woman's place is in the home.
- A married woman's role is to obey her husband.
- If a man has to take responsibility for his family then he has the right to maintain family order in any way he sees to be appropriate.
- There is a 'natural order' which is characteristic of every society at every time in history. Othello has no other option than to punish Desdemona.

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### In closing

Welles' film translation of *Othello* foregrounds the havoc wrought by Iago and the torture he has brought on himself, to be enforced by the newly elevated Cassio. In the opening scene, the camera is focused on the face of the dead Othello. His body and that of Desdemona are shouldered by pallbearers and carried solemnly through the crowds to the funereal drumbeat of a piano. At the same time Iago is dragged through the streets by a chain attached to a collar. He is thrown into an iron cage that is then winched high up against the castle walls while Governor Cassio, sighted among the populace, looks on.

Highlighting the dramatic situation at the end of the play has the effect of emphasising Iago's activity in the play. Audience attention is focussed on him as the most prominent living character. The director invites us to ponder his fate. (Robinson, in Béchervaise, 1999)

Observation of how Welles emphasises Iago's 'activity' underscores the basic thesis of this paper. The traditional literary heritage model of some English classrooms does little to involve the increasing numbers of students meeting Shakespeare from non-anglocentric cultures. The relatively unadulterated use of the Shakespearean text in film translations such as Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* has established that language need not be a barrier to understanding. The increasing popularity of Shakespearean translations to film strongly suggests that the plays remain accessible and educative. Access to a widening range of cultural experience expands the range of opportunities for classroom access. The challenge is to step back far enough to allow students to bring their home experience to the classroom; to explore the plays through the lens of their own cultural experience and, in response, take home a widening understanding of their own evolving cultural identity.

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