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A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen

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The position of Shakespeare on screen studies is so relevant as an independent research and teaching field that one can hardly find a Shakespeare companion or a journal devoted to media or film studies that does not include a chapter or a full section dedicated to tackle the issue of Shakespeare on film. The very critical analysis of this topic has also changed with the passing of time. The early approaches to the subject mainly compared the literary text with its film adaptation. Those prospects have been left behind in favour of daring new perspectives that not only look at the literature-film connection through new interesting ways but also explore, as Cartmell (2000: xi) stated, "the ways in which comparisons of film texts can reveal assumptions about Shakespeare and how these assumptions are created, perpetuated or challenged on screen."

Such variety of critical approaches has been the spice of the critical life of Shakespeare on screen studies up till now. In the shape of monographic volumes, chapters in companions on Shakespeare, or companions on the subject of Shakespeare on film itself, the critical work published on the issue has been plentiful and varied. As far as monographic studies is concerned, since the classic volume by Peter S. Donaldson (1990), some interesting works have been published lately. Among those that became a compulsory reference for researchers on this field we have to mention the monumental *History of Shakespeare on the Screen* by Kenneth Rothwell (1999), the analysis by Deborah Cartmell (2000) or even Stephen Buhler's revealing volume (2002). Regarding chapters on general companions, many interesting pieces have also been published. The impressive companion edited by Richard Dutton and Jean Howard (2003) – four volumes extensively reviewed on *Sederi 14* (Bueno 2004:

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249-264) – included the chapters written by Mark T. Burnett (2003), Kenneth Rothwell (2003), Barbara Hodgdon (2003) and Peter J. Smith (2003) on contemporary and classic film versions of Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies and history plays. Recently, the volume edited by Stanley Wells and Lena Orlin (2004) also included its mandatory article on Shakespeare on Film and Video written by Tony Howard (2004). With regard to companions or collections of critical essays, the Shakespeare on screen field of research has been very well represented by several interesting works – some of them already classic references – such as those edited by Richard Burt and Linda Boose (1998 and 2003), Anthony Davies and Stanley Wells (2002), Robert Shaughnessey (1998), Courtney Lehman and Lisa Starks (2002) or Russell Jackson (2002).

From these three subdivisions of critical material, I think it is the latter category the one that offers the most innovative critical approaches. This is so not only because the way we look at both Shakespeare criticism and at the movies based on Shakespearean material has changed nowadays, but also because the way we understand the world – and the very concept of Culture itself – has also changed to some extent. In a visually saturated world driven by images, the need to elaborate critical interpretations of visual texts has never been so important. It is essential – I would even say vital – that we include in the future curricula of our degrees a section devoted to analyse visual texts from a well-based critical point of view. This new companion edited by Diana E. Henderson – and included in the *Blackwell Concise Companions to Literature and Culture* series – constitutes an essential reference to see how this complex issue will be dealt with in the future, as it offers an approach to the subject that differs from what previous companions have already offered up till now. In these changing times in which our conforming to the European Higher Education Area will convey a severe change for English Studies in our country, Diana Henderson's remarks (2), taken from her introductory chapter "Introduction: Through a camera, Darkly" (1-7), are more than appropriate:

At a time when education is increasingly driven by the logic of the international marketplace and the role of the humanities is much in debate, we cannot afford the luxury of ignorance ... Never has been so urgent and important, then, that we as students, consumers and producers of screen images comprehend and convey the skills needed to analyze them and interpret them well. And just as

Shakespeare's plays, over the centuries, have provided occasions for thought and argument about human society, character and experience – and at the same time have provided great pleasure – so too Shakespeare on screen presents a rich territory for developing these skills as well as taking delight ... The wider reach and potential democratic possibilities of screen media broaden access to Shakespeare, but also raise questions about the appropriateness of reiterating centuries-old and often dated political or moral assumptions. The complex play between mediation and immediacy, past and present, aesthetics and politics, imagination and realism: all these and more can be explored through the study of Shakespeare on screen.

As the volume wants to be faithful to this preliminary assumptions, it offers a series of essays that consider different critical approaches to Shakespearean visual texts, trying to shed some light on the skills needed to evaluate them and on their contents, in an effort to teach the reader "to distinguish between the trivial and the significant in analyzing human creations (3)," a goal that humanities and cultural studies have always aspired to obtain. Thus, a first-rate group of contributors – many of them authors of some of the works quoted at the beginning of this review – presents a wide-ranging study of the Shakespeare on screen topic in eleven chapters that deal with the subject from different conceptual categories or points of view: authorship, cinema studies, theatricality, the artistic process, cinematic performance, gender studies, globalization, cross-cultural interpretation, popular culture, television studies and remediation. My aim in the following lines will be to offer a brief but precise account of the contents of these essays.

After the introduction by the volume's editor, Elsie Walker, in chapter one "Getting Back to Shakespeare. Whose film is it anyway?" (8-30), analyses the essential question of film authorship, of the director as an *auteur* who sees through the textual 'author', i.e. Shakespeare, to offer a filmic text that to a certain extent establishes a conversation with the source text. After considering how Shakespearean academics have dealt with these issues of "textual fidelity," of "being true to Shakespeare" – issues that have caused many problems when evaluating Shakespearean films in the past –, Walker studies the strategies adopted by several Shakespearean productions and by their directors/*auteurs* – Branagh, Pacino, Luhrmann, Taymor, Almerayda, Hoffman and Loncraine – when "getting back to Shakespeare." The essay presents a very interesting

multiplicity of strategies that share a common ideal “to explore the complex significance of the sign *Shakespeare*” (27). And it is precisely that complex significance of “Shakespeare The Icon” that makes this issue a topic that will always be present in any critical volume gathering Shakespeare on screen studies.

Once the essential question of authorial dialogue has been presented, Anthony R. Guneratne leads the same debate to the film studies arena. In chapter two, “‘Thou Dost Usurp Authority’: Beerbohm Tree, Reinhardt, Olivier, Welles, and the Politics of Shakespeare” (31-53), Guneratne focuses on the political implications of four directors in four different Shakespearean adaptations that “had explicit political dimensions for their intended audiences” (32): Herbert Beerbohm Tree’s *King John* (1899), Max Reinhardt’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1936), Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944) and Orson Welles’ *Othello* (1952). In a well structured essay Guneratne reviews the first fifty years of Shakespeare on screen, focusing the issue on the author(*auteur*)ship relations established between the four adapters, their four Shakespearean texts and the political-ideological implications of their films. Guneratne vindicates that “any adaptation is an ideological gesture expressive of an attitude to a textual residue.” His essay is a good proof of such an assertion.

From author and text we move to staging. In chapter three, “Stage, Screen, and Nation: *Hamlet* and the Space of History” (54-76), Robert Shaughnessey presents one of the best essays of the volume. He analyses the evolution of the concept of staging not only in Shakespearean adaptations but also in their recent critical evaluation. Shakespeare on screen studies have become fully cinematized, as many of the most successful recent adaptations have been, in which the stage space of the play has been replaced with the screen space. Theatricality disappears in favour of full cinematic enactment. After a thorough introduction to the topic (54-62) that explains such a *mise-en-scene* displacement, Shaughnessey focuses on the problematic relation between theatre and film taking *Hamlet* as an example. To be more precise, two films are analysed, Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948) and Tony Richardson’s *Hamlet* (1962). Though commonly described as examples of cinematic theatricality, Shaughnessey uses these two films in order to “suggest ways in which theatre may be more nuanced, more historically located, than has previously been conceded, and that in a cultural context of seemingly endless and inescapable mediatization, this may be a

positive force" (62). Shaugnessey's essay succeeds in bringing the theatre into sympathy with the screen.

Also *Hamlet* driven, chapter four, "Learning from Campbell Scott's *Hamlet*" (77-95) fully deals with the creator's perspective. The volume's editor, Diana Henderson, writes a simple but highly interesting piece of work where she focuses on the aforementioned important dichotomies: *auteur*/author, theatre/film, text/adaptation, Shakespeare on film/Shakespeare on film criticism. However, this time the aim of the essay is to think about these issues from both perspectives: that of the artist and that of the Shakespearean scholar, which by the way also constituted one of the key intentions of some experimental films such as Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996). So, the creator clashes with his creation, the scholar confronts the finished work of art, and through the analysis of Campbell Scott's *Hamlet* (2000) as a case study, Henderson examines "the concerns preoccupying filmmakers, their views of their own roles, and the ways in which their priorities redirect or even defy the usual forms of scholarly interpretation" (77). By confronting the scholar and the artist, Henderson offers a very interesting view of looking at Shakespeare on film.

Within the same performative perspective we move a step ahead. In chapter five, "Spectacular Bodies, Acting + Cinema + Shakespeare" (96-111), Barbara Hodgdon studies, as she states, a central issue to understanding any performance: the relationship between the emotive speaking voice and the still or moving body. Hodgdon considers the interaction between the actor and his/her cinematic performance in a wide film corpus that ranges from Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000) to Branagh's film of *Henry V* (1989). A well structured essay that brings the language of Early Modern England face to face with modern bodies and performances.

The actor/acting perspectives have been dealt with. So it is time to move on closer to a critical analysis of such performative perspectives through the filter of gender studies. This is what Pascale Aebischer does in the next chapter of the volume, "Shakespeare, Sex, and Violence: Negotiating Masculinities in Branagh's *Henry V* and Taymor's *Titus*" (112-132). She offers a very interesting study of male representation in these two excellent films, both of them landmarks of two crucial moments in the history of Shakespeare on film. As she had partly done in two previous works (2002 and 2004), Aebischer analyses in two different epigraphs how both directors build in their

films several male stereotypes that form the body of their narrative. The article works quite well as an introduction to a very interesting topic that could be completed with the reading of Aebischer's monograph (2004).

With a slight change of perspective, Mark Thornton Burnett presents in chapter seven, "Figuring the Global/Historical in Filmic Shakespearean Tragedy" (133-154), an analysis of several interpretations of the concept of history and Shakespearean tragedy in a world dominated by a global filmic conception. As he did in a previous work (Burnett 2003), though he focused on different films, Burnett now examines "a discrete group of Shakespeare films that display an acute responsiveness to the conventions and exigencies of the global Hollywood machine." Such films are Jeremy Freeston's *Macbeth* (1997), Michael Bogdanov's *Macbeth* (1998) Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), Gregory Moran's *Macbeth* (2001), Billy Morrissette's *Scotland PA* (2001) and Stephen Cavanagh's *Hamlet* (2005). *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are thus two tragical icons whose filmic versions "enter into a critical dialogue with the historical process." How that dialogue is built in these films bearing in mind that "glocal" process we are all immersed in is the aim of Burnett's essay.

The issue of cross-culturality is highly connected with the question of globalization and with the understanding of history. That is precisely the topic of chapter eight, "Reading Kurosawa, Reading Shakespeare" (155-175), in which Anthony Dawson looks into the work of a classic *auteur* when it comes to transcultural filmic Shakespeare: Akira Kurosawa. Kurosawa's Shakespearean films constitute a subgenre within the field of film studies on Shakespeare. Just to mention several instances of critical works on this topic, we could bring up the epigraphs and chapters on Kurosawa's films included by Stephen Buhler (2002: 167-173), Kenneth Rothwell (1999: 191-200) and Peter S. Donaldson (1990: 69-92) on their monographs, or the superb article written by Robert Hapgood (2002) that appeared on Davies and Wells' companion, which by the way is the only work among these four I have quoted that Dawson cites in his reference list. As a follower of the lines laid down by classical scholarship on Kurosawa, Dawson focuses on *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985), but presents a quite interesting socio-contextual perspective. He also criticises how Kurosawa uses some filmic devices in *Throne of Blood*, although in my opinion he does not show enough convincing evidence to support such criticism.

In chapter nine, “Will of the People: Recent Shakespeare Film Parody and the Politics of Popularization” (176-196), Douglas Lainer introduces the issue of popular culture. To a certain extent he follows the trend of previous works (e.g. Lehman and Starks 2002) that began to suggest how important the popular culture perspective was when it comes to evaluate Shakespeare on film. Lainer’s analysis not only focuses on the parodies – such as John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1996) – that have contributed to popularise the works of Shakespeare and his figure as an icon of English culture, but also examines in detail the parodic elements that form part of the narrative structure of some recent “canonical” films such as Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* (1995) or Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (1999). Lainer deals with both aspects quite well and the list of revised films – especially as far as the first aspect is concerned – is really exhaustive.

Chapter ten, “Brushing Up Shakespeare: Relevance and Televisual Form” (197-215), finally brings up the topic of Shakespeare on the TV screen. Although it is an issue that had already been dealt with in previous works (e.g. Rothwell 1999; Burt and Boose 1998, 2002; Davies and Wells 2002), its inclusion clearly signals how Shakespearean criticism has evolved from a perspective exclusively based on Shakespeare *on film* to a more modern critical *on screen* stance that includes a wider meaning of the term “visual text.” Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio offer a thorough study of two British television programs: the chapter on Shakespeare included in the TV series *Great Britons* (2002) and *In Search of Shakespeare* (2003), the magnificent documentary in four parts directed by Michael Wood. The essay deals with both works in depth, though more attention is paid to the thematic and formal devices of *In Search of Shakespeare*, as it constitutes in my opinion a filmic work of greater significance in the history of Shakespeare on screen. This article is, as far as I know, one of the first critical analysis of Michael Wood’s documentary and it is also the first to be included in a critical companion. All those who lecture on Shakespeare on Film and include Wood’s documentary in the seminar’s syllabus – as it is my case – will appreciate the presence of this essay and will use it as an excellent supplementary reading material.

With the thematic label of *Remediation* and connected to some extent with the issue of popular culture, Peter S. Donaldson offers in chapter eleven a study of technology as the key narrative element of Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000). The essay, “Hamlet among the Pixelvisionaries: Video Art, Authenticity, and ‘Wisdom’ in

Almeryda's *Hamlet*" (216-237), stresses the narrative importance of this element as the concept Almeryda bases his adaptation of *Hamlet* on. A specific narrative use of this concept is clearly seen in the videos *Hamlet* is constantly recording and editing, which constitute a fundamental part of Almeryda's filmic narrative. Donaldson also relates this thematic element to video art and studies the topic accordingly. Although the issue of technology in Almeryda's film had already been discussed in previous works – e.g. Burnett (2003), Rowe (2003) –, Donaldson presents a brief and very clear essay that offer new interesting points of view on the topic.

As a supplement to the editor's introduction, the companion concludes with a final afterword, "Unending revels: Visual Pleasure and Compulsory Shakespeare" (238-249), in which Kathleen McLuskie summarizes the aims of the volume and lists some ideas for future research in the field of Shakespeare on screen.

Just to conclude, I only want to make two general comments as far as structural and formal aspects are concerned. From an structural point of view, the essays are superbly interwoven with the overall structure of the volume. Diane E. Henderson's praiseworthy editorial work has to be mentioned here. The order of the topics in the volume has not been left to chance. Rather, it is due to a careful design in which every essay refers to the following one in a perfect thematic flow that makes the reading of the whole volume a coherent and pleasant activity. With regard to formal aspects, the presence of an index at the end of the volume (253-264) is always appreciated by the reader. In this case, the index is supplemented with a chronology (xii-xxiv) that offers very useful cross-references on historical events, media events and Shakespeare on screen, which allow the reader to obtain a general overview of the social, historical and filmic context of the essays included in the companion. Bibliographical references are listed in two sections: a select bibliography at the end of the volume that includes, as the editor stated, "works cited in multiple essays in order to avoid redundancy" (xi), and a reference and further reading list individually included in every essay. To me, this double system is sometimes confusing. I would have combined both sections into one single final bibliographical list.

All things considered, I think that the work presented in this volume is really impressive. It covers every necessary aspect needed to understand the discipline and completes what has been published

so far opening new avenues for research. If six years ago Deborah Cartmell (2000: 112) finished her monograph indicating that “it is time to rethink the way we interpret Shakespeare on Film,” I consider that all that rethinking done in the past years has been appropriately summarised and expanded in this magnificent volume. It presents enough material to “keep making sense of our subject, and await the next viewing” (7). What more could one ask for? The careful reading of the essays included in this companion will elicit from us the wish to “continue to discern something meaningful: perhaps a new perspective, a reminder of the world or a counterbalance to its more terrifying realities. Sometimes – let us hope often – we may feel sheer irrational pleasure. For the pictures continue to move, in many and mysterious ways” (7). So, the Shakespeare on screen show must – and will – go on. Let us, Shakespeare academics and scholars all, book our tickets for the next release. I am sure the sight will not be dismal.

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