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William Shakespeare, filmmaker

It has become a popular commonplace that had Shakespeare been born in the twentieth century, he would have been a filmmaker. This idea has had a long history, stretching back at least as far as George Méliès's 1907 film *La Mort de Jules César*. In it, Shakespeare, suffering from writer's block, falls asleep. As he does, he dreams of the assassination scene from *Julius Caesar*, presented behind him in one of the double-exposure shots for which Méliès was renowned. His writing problems solved, Shakespeare awakes with delight and even stabs a loaf of bread, imitating what he has just seen.[1] The effect is to reverse the usual relationship between Shakespeare's theatrical script and the cinematic image of Caesar's murder. As Méliès presents the writing process, one of Shakespeare's most famous scenes springs from an imagination not bound to the stage, an imagination fundamentally visual not verbal. The final shot, of Shakespeare's face surrounded by the flags of many nations, suggests that his international appeal springs not from his words but from the moving images that lie behind them. It suggests that the essentially visual – and thus panlinguistic – nature of Shakespeare's imagination, like that of silent film, makes his work capable of crossing cultural boundaries. Shakespeare and film, Méliès argues, are conjoined at an essential level. Something of this same idea appears in the final moments of *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998). Again, the scene is of Shakespeare composing. Having lost his love but gained a royal commission, Shakespeare sits down to write *Twelfth Night*. We see what Shakespeare imagines: dreamy images of Viola's shipwreck, the drowning of Shakespeare's rival Lord Wessex, and Viola's arrival on a vast, sandy beach, all cross-faded with Shakespeare's upturned face, his pen poised to begin. Shakespeare imagines the opening scenes of his *Twelfth Night*, that is, as a movie, one which he only afterward records as a playscript. This moment in the film follows Shakespeare's triumphal stage presentation of *Romeo and Juliet*, a play also rooted in Shakespeare's erotic experience but which has pointedly crude, unrealistic stage effects (note Juliet's red handkerchief for blood, for example). It is

as if in finding his footing as an artist Shakespeare's imagination has become cinematic – pointedly he does not imagine *Twelfth Night* as a stage performance, and the final image of the film, in which Shakespeare imagines Viola walking on a pristine beach, emphasizes with its white expanse the cinematic screen itself. If in the film's ending Viola has slipped the shackles of the marriage market, so Shakespeare has transcended the primitive mechanics of Elizabethan playhouse practice in favor of the cinema of the mind.

I begin with the commonplace of Shakespeare as filmmaker because it articulates a persistent desire of filmmakers and producers throughout the last century, a desire somehow to appropriate Shakespeare's accrued cultural authority for the institution of the cinema, a desire that lies behind the enormous array of Shakespeare films produced since the inception of Shakespeare on film in 1899. That desire begs to be parsed closely. On the one hand, to claim Shakespeare as a filmmaker is to (re)claim him as a fundamentally popular artist, working unashamedly in a commercial medium directed at mass audiences. Such a claim runs counter to a dominant perception of Shakespeare – that his work is high culture, appreciated best by intellectuals, academics, and bluebloods. Both *La Mort de Jules César* and *Shakespeare in Love* insist upon Shakespeare's status as a popular artist, *La Mort* with its final shot and its choice of scene (the assassination of a potential emperor), *Shakespeare in Love* with Shakespeare's dual burden throughout the film, to capture the true nature of love free of stage convention while creating a bankable hit, something he does with *Romeo and Juliet*. The primary beneficiary of this conception is typically not Shakespeare at all but rather the commercial film industry, which can then use Shakespeare, (re)defined as both "popular" and "artistic," to legitimize its own pursuit of mass commercial appeal.

This strategy emerged early in the history of screen Shakespeare when, in the face of claims that silent film was eroding cultural standards, studios like Vitagraph produced silents on Shakespearean topics to demonstrate film's morally – and culturally – uplifting potential and to assert the compatibility of traditional high art with the new medium.[2] But the strategy persisted well into the age of talkies. The three major Shakespearean films of the 1930s, Paramount's *Cleopatra* (1934, a free adaptation), Warner Brothers' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), and MGM's *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) were all designed as artistic showcases for the Hollywood studios in which they were made. Olivier's *Henry V* opens with a theatrical performance at the Globe Theatre to which the onscreen audience responds enthusiastically, a reminder of Shakespeare's status as a popular playwright, before Olivier moves eventually to a conventional cinematic presentation

of the Battle of Agincourt. Branagh's Shakespeare films of the 1990s have consistently featured metadramatic sequences that celebrate what Branagh sees as the communal or populist orientation of Shakespeare's works and the communalism of Shakespearean players and their audience.[3] Indeed, a recurrent motif in Shakespeare films, faithful and free, is of an enthusiastic popular reception for a Shakespeare adapted to modern cinematic tastes. Even when this motif bears an ironic charge, it voices a powerful, persistent cultural fantasy of the twentieth century: if Shakespeare's work could only be brought into accord with the protocols of mass culture, particularly those of film, he might be wrested from the hands of cultural elitists and handed (back) to "the people." Such a fantasy, promoted within popular culture and by Shakespearean filmmakers alike (though in quite different forms), serves far more to reinforce the perception that film is a culturally democratizing medium than it does to describe the effects of adapting Shakespeare to the screen.

On the other hand, to reconceive of Shakespeare's imagination as fundamentally cinematic is to relocate Shakespeare's quintessence not in his language – the altar at which bardolaters have traditionally worshipped – but in those elements most central to the cinema – plot action, character, and most importantly photorealistic images. It is to posit that Shakespeare settled for (rather than chose) dramatic poetry because he lacked a camera to convey the fevered creations of his mind. This conception has roots in film's competition with the stage throughout the twentieth century. So long as Shakespeare is identified with his language, the argument runs, his works remain localized, situated firmly in the British past, hobbled by an antique idiom, tied to stage conventions both artificial and outmoded. To think of Shakespeare as a filmmaker, not as a theatrical wordsmith, then, is to treat his relationship to dramatic poetry and the Elizabethan stage as a matter of historical accident rather than creative synergy, and thus to locate his essence in an image-driven media form which, putatively, is more universal and timeless. It is also to separate Shakespeare from the literary, for so reconceived he is not a writer engaged primarily with other books or poetic or theatrical traditions, but one who writes from direct personal experience, experience to which the camera can supposedly give more direct access. The claim that Shakespeare is fundamentally cinematic also implies its converse – that filmmaking is in some way fundamentally Shakespearean, that is, potentially artistic rather than just entertainment, global in its reach and universal in its appeal. Such is the implication, for example, of Méliès casting himself as Shakespeare in *La Mort de Jules César*. Linking Shakespeare to film becomes a means for articulating (or simply accepting) the cinema's considerable ambitions as a media form.

The earliest examples of screen Shakespeare were closely tied to the theatre, offering viewers records of stage performances to which they otherwise had no access. Within a decade a new strain of Shakespearean filmmaking, first emergent in the later films of Vitagraph's American film series of 1908–12, broke with the stage and created productions conceived specifically for the camera. These films used real locations rather than stage sets and took advantage of such cinematic techniques as intercutting lines of action, using closeups to reveal character or emphasize narrative detail, tracking action with the camera, and substituting a telling image or tableau for a speech. These films asserted an ideal of photorealism that would come to dominate Shakespearean filmmaking. The growing divide between stage and screen Shakespeare can be seen in Shakespearean film burlesques, which first appear in significant numbers in the mid-1910s. Unlike nineteenth-century stage burlesques, which transposed Shakespeare into an inappropriate (usually working-class) social register, these films typically featured a disastrous Shakespearean stage performance, often performed by amateurs. These films make their parodic object specifically *theatrical* Shakespeare, demonstrating how easily stage performance lapses into absurdity. Equally telling are films that chronicle the corrupting or murderous power of Shakespeare over stage actors. *The Mad Lover* (also known as *A Modern Othello*; Léonce Perret, 1917) and *Carnival* (Harley Knoles, 1921) feature performances of *Othello* which an actor threatens to act out in reality what is merely a play, presenting stage performance as seductively dangerous and stage Shakespeareans as suspiciously unstable. Film's hostile treatment of theatrical Shakespeare continued into the age of the talkies. For Shakespearean film, the advent of sound technology threatened to bring a return to the theatricality of the past, since it necessarily foregrounded Shakespeare's language. Notably, the three major Shakespeare films of the early talkies era – *The Taming of the Shrew* (Sam Taylor, 1929), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (William Dieterle and Max Reinhardt, 1935), and *Romeo and Juliet* (George Cukor, 1936) – were, despite all their considerable star power, box-office and critical disappointments.

The definitive work to address the relationship between Shakespearean stage and screen in the era of sound, most critics agree, was Olivier's *Henry V* (1944). Olivier acknowledges Shakespeare's theatrical roots by staging the play's first three scenes in the Globe before he makes a transition to a conventionally cinematic (and comparatively wordless) treatment of the battle of Agincourt. Olivier's film registers the pressure to shift the narrative from stage to screen, and, given that the play's prologue focuses on Shakespeare's seeming dissatisfaction with the resources of Renaissance playmaking, his film seems to affirm the superiority of cinematic representation and

Shakespearean drama's potential congruity with it. When Kenneth Branagh returned *Henry V* to the screen in 1989, he excised all traces of theatricality. The opening sequence moves almost instantly from primitive fire to modern electricity (on the word "invention," no less), and the Prologue offers his critique of the "wooden O" on a film soundstage, making explicit the argument implicit in Olivier's film. Indeed, the modern Prologue, anachronistically walking through scenes of fourteenth-century history, lends the film a documentary, "you are there" quality, as if film gives unmediated access to the past Shakespeare presents. More recently, the pressure to erase Shakespearean theatricality has extended to its most famous example, Hamlet's play-within-the-play. In Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000), the Danish prince becomes a Gen-X independent filmmaker and his "Mousetrap," an avant-garde video.

If popular culture has sometimes sought to present Shakespeare's adaptation to the screen as a liberation from the shackles of the stage, an apotheosis of his heretofore unrealized imaginative intent, until relatively recently Shakespeare film criticism has fixated upon the problem of transposing Shakespeare between media. Speaking broadly, until the 1980s critics addressed Shakespearean film adaptations through one of two models, script-centered and film-centered. With its roots in earlier forms of performance criticism, script-centered criticism begins with the Shakespearean script and measures the film at hand against it, typically with an eye toward specifying its degree of fidelity. This entails not merely analyzing the patterns of textual cuts and additions by the filmmaker and identifying the principles that lie behind them, but also adducing key images and themes in the Shakespearean text and examining how they are translated into visual terms. With a faithful rendering of Shakespeare's script as the ideal, the governing critical assumption is that a good Shakespearean film is one that best or most completely "realizes" the Shakespearean script. By contrast, film-centered criticism embraces cinematic integrity as its key criterion of value; its interest is in the extent to which Shakespeare has been fully converted from stage to screen. Jack J. Jorgens's influential typology of Shakespearean film adaptations exemplifies this approach.[4] Jorgens posits a continuum of three adaptational modes – theatrical, realist, and filmic – within which any given Shakespeare film might be situated. Theatrical adaptations transfer stage performances to the screen with minimal accommodation to cinematic convention; realist adaptations recast Shakespeare in terms of traditional cinematic realism, with emphasis on naturalistic *mise-en-scène*, continuity editing, conventional camera placement, and photographic "objectivity"; filmic adaptations emphasize the camera's expressive possibilities, foregrounding non-illusionistic, deliberately stylized

or "poetic" lighting, editing, sound, and production design. Jorgens's typology, we should note, is also an evaluative scheme. We should value a Shakespeare film, he implies, insofar as it leaves the theatre behind, an assumption which in practice tends to privilege arthouse Shakespeare over mainstream adaptations. Despite their differences, however, both script-centered and film-centered criticism conceive of Shakespearean film adaptation primarily as a formal issue.

In the 1980s there emerged a new mode of Shakespearean film criticism, what we might call ideology-centered criticism. Leaving behind the notion that film adaptation should passively "realize" Shakespeare, this critical mode conceived of film adaptation as an ideological process. Shakespeare films actively recast Shakespeare's text in the service of particular political or ideological ends, ends which the critic teases out for critique. Ideology-centered criticism has a specific and general horizon. In the act of re-interpreting a Shakespearean play, each Shakespearean film appropriates Shakespeare's considerable cultural authority for a director's or producer's particular political vision – in Olivier's 1944 *Henry V*, to bolster the war effort, and in Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet*, to mythologize the "make love, not war" movement. But by their very nature, Shakespearean films also transfer (or at least duplicate) Shakespeare's cultural authority from stage and page to the film medium, an operation which has perhaps far-reaching consequences given the corporate, commercial, and global nature of film production. Ideological critics have tended to accept the postmodern premise that the Shakespearean script cannot be erected as a norm against which to judge individual films; "Shakespeare" no longer refers to an established text or ideal performance but to a set of variants without a norm. The critics have also tended to reject film-centered criticism's primary interest in format, preferring instead to focus on the content of Shakespearean films, analyzing their acknowledged and unacknowledged agenda. Even so, ideology-centered criticism is not value-free, for in practice films are often measured against the ideological norms – stated or unstated – of the critic. The most productive recent criticism of Shakespeare on film has taken up this approach, asking not only "how have the formal features of Shakespeare's script been adapted to film?" but also "to what end(s) is Shakespeare being used in this film?" and "how does this film (re)produce, change, or contest Shakespeare's cultural authority?"

Ideological criticism came of age in the shadow of the political conservatism of the Reagan and Thatcher eras, and it was followed by an extraordinary revival of Shakespeare on film in the 1990s in which Shakespearean filmmakers actively courted the mass market by reshaping the plays in terms of popular genres, most notably action film, teen romance, and nineteenth-

century costume drama. These filmmakers, Branagh in particular, presented the movies as a means for giving Shakespeare's work back to "the people." This claim has posed a difficult problem for ideological critics. On the one hand, ideological critics have been concerned not only with unmasking the cultural politics of Shakespearean films but also with highlighting their progressive potential – in Alan Sinfield's words, laying out "the complex interplay of the dominant with residual, emergent, subordinate and oppositional forces" with an eye toward finding "space for socialist *intervention*."[5] In addition to providing greater access to Shakespeare in performance, film might offer the possibility of a Shakespeare aligned with populist values or a Shakespeare that exposes the mechanisms of dominant ideology.[6] On the other hand, most ideological critics have remained deeply sceptical about the newly "popularized" screen Shakespeare. Recent critical discussion has focused on whether the Shakespeare films of the last decade, aimed at a mass audience and financed by mainstream studios, are a progressive or conservative development in the history of Shakespearean performance. This debate reminds us how complex the question of Shakespeare's popularity on film is, and the ease with which quite different notions of Shakespearean popularity can be confused or conflated.

The issue is especially vexed in the Shakespeare classroom, where recent changes in video technology have made it possible – indeed *de rigeur* – for teachers to integrate Shakespeare on film into their pedagogical routines. Since the introduction of the VCR in the 1980s and DVD in the 1990s, instructors regularly teach the Shakespearean script alongside video performances, using the same regimens of close analysis for each, so that students now expect to be introduced to Shakespeare through film. Without doubt video offers students greater access to Shakespeare performances and places questions of performance front and center in classrooms once dominated exclusively by literary and historical approaches. It also holds out the promise of stimulating students' appreciation and taste for Shakespeare by recasting the Bard as contemporary and hip, a figure of pop, not elite, culture. This hope was particularly sparked by the extraordinary success of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), the film that spawned the concerted "teening" of Shakespeare in a cycle of youth-oriented Shakespeare films and spin-offs throughout the next several years. Since the mid-1980s, Shakespeare teachers and filmmakers have developed an increasingly symbiotic relationship, both using film as an instrument of popularization: teachers have come to depend on film to spur student interest in Shakespeare, while filmmakers depend upon the educational market for their work's financial viability. Even in the classroom, it would seem, Shakespeare is now regularly introduced to youth as a

filmmaker *manqué*, so much so that they find it difficult to imagine him otherwise.

The triumph of Shakespeare film in the classroom has widespread ideological implications, not merely for pedagogical and critical practice but also for the (re)conception of Shakespeare in coming generations. Screen Shakespeare would seem to liberate students from an excessive reverence for the Shakespearean text and to reinforce the notion that Shakespeare's plays have their life in performance, not on the page. Indisputably, these films have garnered an interest in Shakespeare among many students, in and outside the classroom. Even so, the exact nature of that interest demands critical scrutiny, particularly when it is linked with ubiquitous axioms of contemporary popular culture that are hardly ideologically neutral. A major risk is that uncritically using Shakespeare on film simply naturalizes Shakespeare's relationship to the film medium rather than drawing attention to the screen's ideological transformation – for good or ill – of Shakespeare. This risk is magnified by the aura of celebrity surrounding the cinema, but also by instructors' preference for films that use Shakespeare's language rather than modern idioms. Paradoxically, fidelity to Shakespeare's language in film adaptations can mask the ideological work of the filmmaker, even when Shakespeare's narrative is transposed to a different era or setting, because it allows for the illusion that the filmmaker is passively "realizing" the Shakespearean script, the "essential" Shakespeare. Reinforced is the sense that Shakespearean content is freely commutable from medium to medium, period to period, and is not media- or historically specific, but also that film is Shakespeare's "proper" medium rather than one of several media forms – all associated with particular social orders – to which his work has been retrofitted. To put this another way, the popularity of Shakespeare offered by film often comes at the price of engaging the ideological nature of adapting Shakespeare to the screen, and it risks turning the classroom into yet another promotional arena for the protocols of contemporary media culture.

Despite the introduction of film into the Shakespeare classroom and changes in pedagogical and critical fashion, text-centered criticism continues to reign supreme, partly because assessment regimes continue to stress mastery of the Shakespearean text as an academic skill. In practice textual fidelity remains a primary concern – those films perceived to be most faithful to the Shakespearean script, those most useful for teaching the text, are those most frequently taught and written about. The danger is that discussion of the ideological nature of Shakespearean film adaptation becomes subordinated to or obliterated by other premises: that some films more accurately or correctly reproduce their Shakespearean sources, that cinematic fidelity to Shakespeare is possible or desirable. The truth is that all film performances

by their cinematic nature must radically reinvent their Shakespeare. The great virtue of unfaithful or free adaptations – beside the strengths of individual films themselves – is that they foreground issues of remediation and ideological recoding often tacit in many Shakespeare films. The changes free adaptations make in the language, genre, narrative, characters, and tone of their Shakespearean sources reveal lines of cultural force at play in their so-called "faithful" counterparts.

To illustrate this proposition, consider two very different "free" adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* produced during the 1990s Shakespeare film boom: *Tromeo and Juliet* (Lloyd Kaufman, 1996) and *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998). *Tromeo and Juliet* is an example of that time-honored genre, the Shakespearean burlesque, produced by Troma Studios, specializing in low-budget exploitation films for the teen market. Typical of burlesque, emphasis falls on the gap between the "high" register of the source material and the "low" idiom or social class into which it is transposed; in *Tromeo*'s case, that idiom includes gleefully vulgar language and action, gratuitous sexual titillation, comically graphic violence, and deliberately crude production values, in the words of the film's promotional tag, "Body Piercing, Kinky Sex, Dismemberment. The Things That Made Shakespeare Great." In this version, Tromeo is the working-class son of down-and-out Monty Que, a former softcore artfilm maker cuckolded and swindled out of his business by "Cappy" Capulet, a viciously puritanical hypocrite anxious to marry off his daughter Juliet to London Arbuckle, heir to a meat-packing fortune and a lovelorn fool. *Tromeo* includes a number of motifs from Shakespeare's play, each perversely twisted: Juliet's close relationship with her Nurse becomes a lesbian tryst with Ness, her live-in caretaker; Tromeo and Juliet meet at a costume party at which Tromeo is dressed as a cow; Juliet's anxious soliloquies about Romeo are transformed into bizarre dreams about eroticism and pregnancy; the potion Juliet receives from the priest does not simulate death but transforms her temporarily into an ugly human-pig mutant calculated to horrify Arbuckle (he commits suicide rather than marry her); in the end, instead of dying the couple discover that they are brother and sister and choose to marry anyway.

Produced within a year of *Romeo + Juliet*, the film which became the template for the teen Shakespeare boomlet to follow, *Tromeo* satirically targets not Shakespeare *per se* but the implicit sensibilities of Luhrmann's adaptation and through it the mass-market screen Shakespeare of the 1990s. Most obvious among the elements it satirizes is the relationship between social class and "popularization." The film parodically weds Shakespeare to American trash culture, a world presented as primarily urban working-class and rabidly anti-highbrow in its orientation. Notably the film's villain,

Cappy Capulet, is a social climber, anxious to be accepted into polite society even though he lacks the taste and savoir-faire to present himself properly; his near-psychotic desire to control his daughter's sexuality and wed her to the wealthy but boorish Arbuckle spring from his entirely hypocritical social aspirations. *Tromeo and Juliet* targets the bourgeois, leisure-class romanticism of *Romeo + Juliet*, this despite Luhrmann's veneer of urban grit and knowing uses of youth culture. Luhrmann's lovers certainly identify with "the people" – Romeo slums with his friends at seedy Verona Beach's Globe, a run-down pool hall, and Juliet's closest confidante is her working-class Latino nurse – but they do so from the security of their parents' prosperity, with ready access to designer clothes, cool cars, and fab parties. Alienation from their parents Luhrmann's teen lovers may feel deeply, but the production's dominant register is upper class. This sensibility operates too in its treatment of the urban setting. Whereas Luhrmann's metropolitan Verona is an urban fantasyscape modeled on a media image of Los Angeles, its street life experienced largely from great heights or distances (in the establishing shots) and in video bites (in the riot scenes), Kaufmann's effects-unenhanced New York is a world of trash-strewn, photographically ugly streets, empty lots, and seedy dives where Tromeo and his friends actually live rather than just visit. For Luhrmann, the street serves a hip signifier; for Kaufmann, it functions as a social determinant.

Kaufmann's handling of setting accords with *Tromeo*'s lampooning of other stylistic elements of *Romeo + Juliet*. The physical violence of *Tromeo* is not conducted from within the safety of stylized choreography, as is the case with the opening gun battle in *Romeo + Juliet*, but rather is graphic, cruel, and gratuitously excessive to the point of uneasy comedy. Whereas Luhrmann's Romeo and Juliet are unusually chaste teenagers, perhaps a mark of decorum and a nod in the direction of the educational market, Kaufmann's film acknowledges, even celebrates sexuality (in all its polymorphous possibility) as a driving force for the lovers' romance and treats Cappy's brutal attempts to regulate Juliet's sex-life as far more perverse than the urges they target. Indeed, Kaufmann everywhere reasserts the primacy of the body in various carnivalesque and grotesque forms, in the theme of meat, in bodies tattooed or pierced (sometimes on camera), in mutations or various blendings of animal and human. As a counter *Romeo + Juliet*, *Tromeo* targets the bourgeois–idealist decorum that tacitly governs Luhrmann's adaptation, a polite, finally high-cultural (re)vision of Shakespeare on film that keeps a strategic distance from those "popular" elements that give the film its street credibility. Contributing to the critique is *Tromeo*'s deliberately crude production values and shoddy special effects, a stark contrast to the glossily photographed, MTV-style edited, and

cinematically allusive style of Luhrmann's film. *Romeo + Juliet* assumes and rewards sophisticated pop and high cultural literacies, a quality Jostein Gripsrud has dubbed "double access,"[7] one he identifies as a newly emergent form of class privilege; Luhrmann addresses the kind of viewer who can appreciate both Elizabethan verse and allusions to spaghetti westerns and Prince ballads. Rather than presenting Shakespeare as seamlessly congruent with pop culture, *Tromeo* insists upon their comic incommensurability, something particularly apparent in the gap between Shakespearean dialogue and contemporary teenspeak. To Juliet's observation that "Parting is such sweet sorrow," for example, Tromeo replies, "Yeah, it totally sucks." In short, *Tromeo* highlights and critiques the tacit decorum cast over Shakespeare by its cinematic "teening," a film style it presents as "popular" but which is in fact characteristic of an educated class-fraction capable of navigating freely between two registers of cultural literacy. The sardonic ending of *Tromeo and Juliet* makes its skewering of bourgeoisified Shakespeare particularly clear. Instead of Luhrmann's tragic ending in which the lovers are beatified by an ascending camera, Kaufmann pictures Tromeo and Juliet married, living in suburban New Jersey in the shadow of chemical plants with their mutant children, a savage parody of the middle-class happy ending.

Shakespeare in Love engages a rather different issue precipitated by the cinematic mainstreaming of Shakespeare in the 1990s. If that mainstreaming sought to transform Shakespeare's long-standing reputation as box-office poison, his new status as a commercial entertainer potentially jeopardized his status as an icon of Authorship – the "Bard" – and with it the very source of cultural authority that made Shakespeare an attractive object for film adaptation. *Shakespeare in Love* acknowledges – albeit ironically – Shakespeare's new home in the cinematic marketplace by recasting the Elizabethan world as a half-timbered Hollywood where the demand for a blockbuster breeds conventionalized writing, "love and a bit with a dog." As the film opens, Shakespeare is caught between the need for a hit and his desire to produce art on par with that of Marlowe, a double-bind that has rendered him creatively and physically impotent. His challenge is to pursue commercial success with a popular audience without compromising his potential to create "authentic" art capable of showing, in the words of Queen Elizabeth, "the very truth and nature of love." That authenticity he finds with Viola de Lessups, a poetry-loving beauty who is contracted by her father to marry Lord Wessex but who loves Shakespeare. Their passionate, doomed affair provides the basis for *Romeo and Juliet*, pushing Will out of formula comedies into the realm of romantic tragedy where, the film suggests, he finds his distinctive voice. Viola's dilemma doubles

Shakespeare's: she finds herself trapped by the marriage market that renders her artistic aspirations – her desire to act – inert and regards her as little more than chattel. If *Romeo and Juliet* has been rendered overfamiliar by seemingly endless citations, parodic and straight, of the balcony scene and the basic narrative of lovers divided by feuding, *Shakespeare in Love* seeks to revivify the play by giving it a biographical backstory, one more in line with contemporary romance and one which shuttles freely between two horizons of allusion, highbrow and pop cultural. But, additionally, using the *Romeo and Juliet* narrative as a parallel to the playwright's artistic plight suggests that Shakespeare's own play uncannily anticipates the problem of his unsettled cultural status in the age of the multiplex. Like Juliet and Viola, Shakespeare risks losing his authority to the demands of commerce.

Shakespeare in Love offers a spectacular recuperation of Shakespeare's artistic status with its presentation of a fictional opening performance of *Romeo and Juliet*, pictured as a runaway popular success with everyone from prostitutes and puritan preachers to the Queen herself. What gives the performance its power, the film suggests, is not only Shakespeare's writing but a novel element of the production, a woman (Viola) rather than a boy in the role of Juliet. For the film audience, that power is deepened by our knowledge that the lines Will and Viola exchange as Romeo and Juliet express their otherwise forbidden passion for each other. Unlike the Elizabethan audience, we filmgoers are able to witness the "real" romantic tragedy that lies behind the fictional stage narrative. To put this another way, this performance of *Romeo and Juliet* gains its authenticity and thus artistic authority to the extent that we perceive it leaves behind that distinctive mark of English Renaissance theatricality, the cross-dressed nature of women's roles, and instead accords with distinctive canons of mainstream cinematic performance: photographic naturalism (women in women's roles) and method acting (channeling "real" emotions through the fictional narrative).[8] Within the film, Queen Elizabeth stands in for the film spectator, aware, as the stage audience isn't, of Will and Viola's romance and of Viola's desire to break the stultifying limits on women's lives symbolized by cross-dressing. Elizabeth legitimizes Will as Author by recognizing that the power of his writing springs from his truthfulness to his own deeply felt experience, "reality" rather than stage convention or commercial formula. This embedded stage performance transmutes what has become the most clichéd and stagy of Shakespeare's plays into terms that (re)affirm Shakespeare's authority as a poet of love and that render his work more compatible with cinematic naturalism. It prepares for a more complete transmutation in the film's coda where the playwright's imagination is presented as fundamentally cinematic, the to-be-written opening page of *Twelfth Night* fading

directly into the final widescreen shot of Viola striding westward, toward Hollywood.

The reinvention of Shakespeare as a filmmaker I've discussed here is part of a longer history of reinventing Shakespeare in each age's various self-images and favored media.[9] It is a process which began as early as the publication of Shakespeare's collected works in the 1623 First Folio, a volume boldly claiming that Shakespeare's stageplays could exist as a book for readers and that its author could be counted as a literary classic. For nearly 300 years since that publication, the Shakespeares of page and stage co-existed and competed on a variety of fronts for cultural primacy. That dynamic has been altered by last century's reinvention of Shakespeare as a filmmaker, a reinvention which by the 1990s came to seem decisive. The adaptation of Shakespeare to film is thus not simply another in a long line of reinventions, but a more fundamental alteration of his work and cultural meaning. Certainly the filming of Shakespeare promises to guarantee his continued cultural vigor in an arguably increasingly post-theatrical, post-literary age, and it may provide a means, as Méliès hoped it would at the beginning of the screen Shakespeare era, for gaining the Bard a genuinely global popularity. We should, however, reflect upon the potential limits and losses of this latest Shakespearean avatar, not out of nostalgia for some lost golden age of Shakespearean performance, but in recognition that the undeniable power of Shakespeare on film may contribute to the decline of the very medium – and with it certain notions of the "public" and particular forms of public culture – that makes Shakespeare Shakespeare. In the classroom we might make visible to students the ideological implications of film adaptation, highlighting larger-scale cultural and political processes of mediatization within which they are enmeshed. Shakespeare's adaptation to the screen testifies to modern popular culture's continued, albeit ambivalent, attraction to the resilient cultural authority of his works. But if Shakespeare has entered the twenty-first century reborn as a filmmaker, it behooves us not just to celebrate his cinematic popularity but to scrutinize it closely.

NOTES

1 Méliès's film is lost, though a detailed description of it, produced for the *Star* Film catalog, survives. See Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: A Strange Eventful History* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1968), pp. 36–7.

2 See William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 65–95, and Kennet Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 5–11. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of early cinema's desire to enhance the cultural value of the genre.