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Lines, Damn You: Shakespeare and the Birth of Film

The phrase "Silent Shakespeare" may feel contradictory. Isn't Shakespeare all about the words? Yet, to the filmmakers of the silent era and their audiences, the idea was not so unusual. It was widespread: between 1899 and 1927, between 250-300 silent films were made that in some way dealt with the Bard.[1] Silent Shakespeare hit its peak of popularity during the "Transitional Era" of film, from roughly 1907 to 1911. According to data from the Internet Movie Database, in 1909, 13% of films were Shakespearean. But the phenomenon quickly tapered off with the introduction of multiple-reel film in 1911. By 1914, the number had fallen to below 0.4%.[2]

What accounts for the sudden rise and fall of Silent Shakespeare? Why this surge? Yes, it could be explained by pointing out that film was adapting drama from theater to create a new art form, but why would filmmakers not rely on modern theater, which is far less dependent on language than Shakespeare?

Scholarship on Shakespeare and Silent Films often comes as a footnote to a more general look at Shakespeare in film from all eras, as when Douglas Brode treats the silent productions of each Shakespeare play in a paragraph at most.[3] Two scholars focus specifically on this topic. In 1968, Robert Hamilton Ball collected reviews, summaries, and stills to allow future scholars to treat films which, sadly, are no longer extant. More recently, Judith Buchanan has greatly

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[1] Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.
[2] Based on data from IMDb, accessed April 10, 2017.
[3] Douglas Brode, *Shakespeare in the Movies: From the Silent Era to Today* (New York: Berkley Boulevard, 2001).

expanded on his research by adding a critical analysis. Yet these studies have contributed to the wrongful maligning of Silent Shakespeare. Ball concludes that "[silent Shakespeare] could not be good Shakespeare because too much was missing."[4] Buchanan tends to agree, naming it as a "niche" element for both film and Shakespearean studies.[5] The two scholars review the films based on what they feel that the films *should* have done rather than on what they actually did. They conflate their subjective aesthetic judgments with the cultural significance of the films.

In this essay, I argue that, in its nascent stages, the film industry used Shakespeare's cultural legitimacy and popular accessibility to establish cinema as a legitimate dramatic medium. It is only around 1912 when filmmakers felt comfortable enough in the creation of a recognizable filmic idiom that the industry started to distance itself from theater and assert itself as a distinct form of narrative. If this is the case, then the story of Silent Shakespeare is an excellent measuring-stick for the development of cinema as a dramatic medium independent from theater.

I. Prehistory (1591-1898)

There were many factors before the arrival of moving pictures that, while not *necessitating* silent Shakespeare, suggested a place for it. First of all, Shakespeare himself wrote his plays in a way that is consistent with motion pictures. First, his plays are centered around scenes, not acts, just as films are. Second, he generally uses fifty to seventy-five brief scenes which is roughly as many as a feature-length film.[6] Third, between scenes, in eschewal of Aristotelian unity, Shakespeare takes the narrative through rapid shifts over time and space,

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[4] Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1968), 300.
[5] Buchanan, Op. Cit. 7.
[6] Brode, Op. Cit. 6.

something which theater must rely on the imagination to accomplish, but film can effortlessly depict. Finally, the iconic moments of Shakespeare -- Hamlet holding Yorick's skull, Marc Antony shaking the conspirators' bloody hands, the Battle of Bosworth Field -- all cry out for a medium with a pictorial language. Shakespeare wields poetic power, but his plays were written to be seen, and of course theater has an important visual dimension to it, but film has complete control over the viewer's perspective of the image through its framing of each shot.

Second, by the nineteenth-century,the idea of Shakespearean plays as not just poetry but also as stories began to come to the fore, especially in the wake of the popularity of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807).[7] Shakespeare's status as a world-renowned storyteller is widely noticeable even to-day: many people who have never read *Romeo and Juliet* can recount the basic plot, as can many for *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. Nevertheless, it was in the Lamb's *Tales* that Shakespeare's poetry and narrative were first separated, paving the way for adaptations that did not rely on his specific language.

Taking that ability to adapt Shakespeare without his words even further were the pantomime theaters who adapted Shakespeare without *any* words. From the Restoration until the repeal of the Licensing Act of 1843, spoken word on stage was heavily regulated by laws requiring royal patents in order to curb possible seditious behavior. Very few patents were granted, and so many stage companies had to find a way around the ban. One very effective way was through "ballets of action" which pantomimed and gestured their way through plays, such as Robert William Elliston's largely silent 1809 production of *The History, Murders, Life and*

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[7] Buchanan, Op. Cit. 54.

Death of Macbeth.[8] Thus, there was a precedent as well for silent Shakespearean adaptations, albeit in the theater.

Third, the popularity of the Magic Lantern between the late seventeenth century and until around 1916 pointed the way for a medium that spoke through images and through a live lecturer (as silent films did until around 1914). The Magic Lantern was a simple device similar to a slideshow projector that projected still images onto a large screen. Many slides were placed together to tell a story. It is telling that there was available a series of mass-produced Magic Lantern slides that related the stories of Shakespeare.

Finally, two other nineteenth century trends worth noting are the drive for "realism" in Victorian theater and the tendency towards removing the spectator further from the action as if they were viewing a "framed picture."[9] Victorian productions as the nineteenth century went on became more and more spectacular in their demand for realism: in archaeological style, everything down to costumes and scenery were designed to be as period appropriate as possible. Theater suffers from a certain limitation in this respect, as it is precisely because it *isn't* what it depicts that it is theater, and so the way was being paved for more "realistic" depictions. Simultaneously, there was a move toward removing the audience from the action, such as the two-foot wide picture frame placed around the proscenium of the Haymarket Theatre in 1880. Buchanan notes the trend towards "detached voyeurism" which was suggesting a place for a medium in which the audience and actors were completely separated in time and space.[10] This and the other above trends demonstrate that there was certainly a place for silent film in Shakespeare.

[8] Buchanan, Op. Cit. 43. Elliston did use recitation as well, which so long as accompanied by music was legal.
[9] Buchanan, Op. Cit. 53.
[10] Ibid. 53.

II. Pioneering Age (1899-c.1906)

There is not really a neat starting point for the arrival of film, but by 1896 moving pictures of fewer than 3 minutes had been introduced. By 1899, moving pictures had already acquired something of a reputation for being low culture. The British Mutoscope and Biograph Company had been churning out several films a week and some of these had raised some controversy: films with risqué subjects, such as *Studio Troubles* and *Wicked Willie* had recently caused quite an uproar and there were raising demands for some sort of moral sanitizing of the industry.[11] It was in this environment that the first known Shakespearean film was made.

Although there was probably not an immediate causal link between the negative reception of *Studio Troubles* and the filming of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's 1899 *King John,* there definitely was a conscious effort by Biograph to use this Shakespearean production to provide some legitimacy for both the company and the film industry in general.[12] Tree's motives for filming the play are not as clear, but Biograph had recently produced with American actors a short scene from *Trilby*, a play which Tree had recently finished a production of with himself as the villain Svengali. The screenings of the film in England definitely profited from Tree's recent performance still being fresh in the public mind, and it is possible that Tree wished to get ahead of this performance of *King John* lest he should again have some of his thunder stolen by actors from across the sea.[13]

Of the four scenes that were filmed, only one currently survives: the death scene of King John. The film strikes modern tastes as quite odd. In the center of the stage is the white-robed

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[11] Ibid. 58.
[12] Ibid. 60.
[13] James Ellison, ""Beerbohm Tree's *King John (1898):* a *fin-de-siecle* Fragment and its Cultural Context." *Shakespeare* 3 (2009), 309.

King John (played by Tree), who many times rises and sinks in his throne as the poison overcomes his body. By him are the Earl of Salisbury (S.A. Cookson), Prince Henry (Dora Senior) and the Earl of Pembroke (James Fisher White). One can see Tree mouthing the dialogue from the play: "There is so hot a summer in my bosom, that all my bowels crumble up to dust: I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen upon a parchment, and against this fire do I shrink up."[14] One sees Prince Henry offer John his tears, and John's refusal of them before he slinks back into his chair dead. Although Tree's performance to modern sensibilities seems somewhat hamish, it is worth remembering that at this time it was the very pinnacle of realism.[15]

Biograph took the film and played it at the Palace Theatre of Varieties in London, where it was shown alongside newsreels of Lt. Dreyfus and various sporting events. The film ostensibly brought the high culture of Tree's production through the low culture of film to a somewhat lower class audience. Yet, it is worth remembering that the Palace was somewhat more high end than other variety halls, and that many of the spectators could and would go see Tree's actual production. Still, this film, despite its obvious lack of words, demonstrates the ability of cinema to convey the high style of Shakespeare through time and space to any audience. More experiments followed: the legendary Sarah Bernhardt filmed a sound version of the fencing scene from *Hamlet* in 1900, while Méliès worked his magic in the studio to produce several films, all of which are now sadly lost, which treated Shakespeare with special effects.[16]

III. Transitional Era (1907-1911)

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[14] *King John* V.vii.30-33
[15] See slide 1
[16] I mourn particularly the loss of "La rêve de Shakespeare" from 1907 which depicts Shakespeare imagining the assassination of Julius Caesar.

It was during the transitional era that the most Shakespearean films were made. By this time, film had developed into primarily a means of relating narrative. Although newsreels and films of local events still had their place, people were going to the new nickelodeons to watch a story. While film companies created original stories of cowboys, criminals, and romances, it was only natural that they sought to tell famous stories as well. However, as the 1911 lawsuit which the estate of Lew Wallace brought against Kalem for their 1911 *Ben Hur* film shows, it was even better to use a public domain source. There were two natural places to go for public domain stories of universally praised quality: Shakespeare and the Bible. Furthermore, these stories were well known enough that an audience might very well be familiar with the story and thus follow along with the plot more easily. These films were the best received of the silent Shakespeare films, despite their sense of conflictedness between stage and screen, and between authenticity and interpretation.

In three different industries, three different idioms of Shakespearean silent film were created. In America, populist adaptations designed especially for non-intelligentsia were produced by popular companies such as Vitagraph and Thanhouser. Between 1908's *Macbeth* and 1910's *Twelfth Night*, Vitagraph made ten more or less direct adaptations of Shakespeare. Vitagraph's savvy marketing team made certain that these films were well-publicized and seen to represent the core foundation of what Vitagraph was putting forth.[17] A contemporary review raved,

> Vitagraph hits the taste of the average audience better than any of the others… The Vitagraph dramas have a very moral and respectable tone; the plots are just mental enough to make people think they are thinking…[I]t releases these fancy films every now and then, biblical and classical subjects -- you know the kind...they all showed ambition and went to swell the Vitagraph prestige.[18]

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[17] In reality, Vitagraph made most of its money off the aforementioned cowboy and crime story films.
[18] "The Old Lady in the Audience: Mother Squeers Gossips About the Film Makersm" *Motography* (May 1911), 77-8, from Buchanan, Op. Cit. 109.

The production team at Vitagraph did a fantastic job of accomplishing two competing agendas: at once raising film's cultural credibility with erudite pictures while at the same time keeping the "average audience" along with them. Their goal was to educate and to entertain -- and they chose Shakespeare to do that.

In France and Italy, there was a drive to treat worthy subjects in cinematic form, and as a result the films were more intended as an artistic statement. Between *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* of 1907 and *Le Roi Lear au Village* of 1911 when the impact of the art film had run its course, France and then Italy sought to produce works by famous authors with theater directors, and a cast of theater names. The desired result was similar to the Vitagraph series -- to educate and entertain the masses-- but the goal was more on the artistic than the commercial side.

Finally, in England, film had stagnated: less than fifteen percent of films shown in London were home products.[19] Because of production costs, producers were unwilling to run the risk on experimentation and speculation. Furthermore, English directors showed a dependence on the literary sources and often silently copied what appeared on stage.[20] Much of England's silent Shakespeare had the added impetus of actors seeking to have a permanent artefact of their stage-show, much like 1899's *King John*. These films in particular showed rather slavish devotion to the original medium, theater, to such an extent that the actors often stubbornly insisted on saying all the lines despite their inaudibility to the future audience, a practice known as "mugging." Frustrated by the lack of dialogue during the filming of *Hamlet* in 1913, Sir

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[19] Ball, Op. Cit. 74.
[20] Ibid. 74. The key exception is the work of William George Barker who proved that *Hamlet* could be made cheaply and expediently and made an apparently amazing film of Tree's *Henry VIII*, sadly, however, none of his works survive.

Johnston Forbes-Robertson was said to have shouted furiously "Lines, damn you, give me lines!"[21]

IV. Multiple Reels (1911-1914)

With the introduction of more reels of film allowing for longer films, Silent Shakespeare started to decline. It was no longer enough to provide a competent plot as the Americans had done, and the art film with its treatments by stage authors had given way to scenarios written by writers specifically trained in the idiom of film.[22] By this time, Hollywood was coming to the forefront of cinema, there came to be "film stars" such as the Vitagraph girl, Florence Turner, and conventions and norms had been sufficiently established for the creation of more original stories and the adaptation of less well-known material in a way that would be intelligible to modern audiences.[23] In short, film had come into its own as a medium beyond a vehicle for storytelling. Yet, in this time, there were also some more loose adaptations of Shakespeare such as the sadly lost *An Indian Romeo and Juliet* (1912), which imagines the star-crossed lovers as Iroquoian instead of Italian. Straight Shakespeare was still translated onto the silver screen, such as in the only known film version of *Cymbeline,* which was made by Thanhouser in 1913, but many of these films started to look more and more antiquated, such as Frederick Warde's four-reeled *Richard III*, which still relied on an accompanying lecturer, a practice which was quickly going out of fashion by then.[24]

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[21] Buchanan, Op. Cit. xvii.
[22] Ball, Op Cit. 131.
[23] Cf. Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was* (1915) based on Porter Emerson Browne's 1909 Broadway play.
[24] Warde's *Richard III* is the oldest surviving feature length film. Warde went on tour with the film, giving a recital of lines after each reel.

V. World War I and the Beyond (1914-1918)

With the outbreak of the First World War, film suffered a tremendous blow: England's and France's industries were put on hold, with the latter nearly fatally wounded, while Italy ceased to be a major player in film. The American film industry dominated, yet, there the tide turned against Shakespearean film: There claims arose that "too much attention has been paid to Shakespeare lately," costume movies were unpopular, people wanted "society pictures," and perhaps most fairly, "Shakespeare should be heard."[25] At the same time, the industry shifted: contemporary literature was being adapted more than classic literature, public association shifted from production companies to actors who had particular niches which limited the nature of the vehicles for their talent, and specialty pictures were no longer financially incentivized as the middle class came to provide most of the industry's margins.[26] Although there was a brief revival in 1916 at the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death with films such as Thanhouser's *Master Shakespeare Strolling Player* or Metro and Fox's competing *Romeo and Juliet'*s, Shakespeare just ceased to be profitable in the United States, and so no more films were made.

One of these tercentenary films which is sadly lost gives us an idea of how the movie industry had more or less cemented its image with the people. Sir James M. Barrie's *The Real Thing At Last* by mocking both the American and English filmic idioms and Shakespearean films proves that by 1916 the general public knew film tropes well enough for them to be an object of satire. Two parallel stories are told: an American and a British version. Macduff and Macbeth's duel is on a skyscraper in America, off which Macbeth would be thrown in Hollywood style; in England, the two grapple in a muddy ditch. Likewise, in England, the witches are weathered hags, but in America they are Hollywood glamor-girls. Barrie's burlesque was poorly-received

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[25] Ball, Op. Cit. 217.
[26] Ibid. 217.

by reviewers who found it in poor taste, but the fact remains that by the time of the film, there was a Hollywood to make fun of and a Shakespearean film convention to be lampooned.[27]

After the First World War, France's industry recovered but no longer was interested in Shakespeare films, the new players -- Sweden and Russia -- did not care for Shakespeare, although England's film industry continued to churn out stage-adaptations and two-reelers. For the most part, Silent Shakespeare had been forsaken for economic and aesthetic reasons: it did not make money, and the theory of the art of film demanded words and music to fully tell Shakespeare. The only place producing more or less direct adaptations of Shakespeare was the new Weimar Republic in Germany, where Shakespeare and been revered since before Schlegel. Five Shakespearean adaptations were made there between 1920 and the arrival of sound.

VI. Conclusion

With 1927's *the Jazz Singer*, silent films quickly went out of style: they were shut up in archives where the volatile nitrates would spontaneously combust robbing future generations of the treasures housed within the frames. Gone was Theda Bara's Juliet, Méliès' William Shakespeare, D.W. Griffith and Beerbohm Tree's production of *Macbeth*, J.M. Barries' hilarious *The Real Thing at Last*.[28] We are lucky to have as much as we do.

In the end, silent film chose Shakespeare because he was accessible yet cultured and could fit into the ever-changing nascent film industry; he lent film credit as a dramatic medium, while not alienating by too much the masses. Yet, film was not content to stay as a dramatic medium. Once film's place as entertainment -- which was by no means a foregone conclusion --

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[27] Ibid. 225. It is unclear whether Barrie knew about the upcoming collaboration between Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and D.W. Griffith for *Macbeth*.

[28] Based off *Macbeth* made for Shakespeare's centenarry.

was solidified, cinema felt comfortable enough in its own skin to be itself. Thus, as film cast off Shakespeare, it cast off being merely drama, just as it cast off being merely an updated magic lantern by casting off lecturers. There is, then, something worthy about studying Silent Shakespeare, by studying when the film industry sloughed off Shakespeare, we can see precisely when film ceased its aspirations to drama and begin to will to be itself. It is telling that great directors, men who would revolutionize cinema, such as Melies and Griffith worked on Shakespeare: in creating the filmic idiom that we know today, they had to pass through the Bard's realm.

Slides:

1. *King John* (1899), l-r: Earl of Salisbury (S.A. Cookson), Prince Henry (Dora Senior), King John (Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree), Earl of Pembroke (James Fisher White). Picture from Buchanan

2. *Le Reve de Shakespeare* (1907), Melies as Shakespeare watches his version of the Caesar's assasination. Picture from Ball

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3. *Julius Caesar* (1908), Vitagraph -- Caesar is assasinate

4. *L’Assassinat du Duc de Guise* (1907)

5. *Re Lear* (1910), Film d'Arte -- King Lear banishes Cordelia

6. *Richard III,* Sir Francis Robertson Benson, 1911

7. Cymbeline, Thanhouser, 1913

8. A poster for *Richard III,* Keane, 1912

9. Romeo and Juliet, Fox, 1916

10. Asta Nielsen's 1920 *Hamlet* -- Hamlet mourns her father