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Dictators, Fry Cooks, Film Students, Basketball Players, and Gang Bangers:
How Shakespeare Looks on Film in the Late Twentieth Century and Beyond

by

Charles R. Bielinski

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

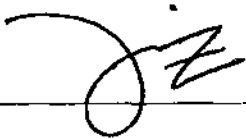
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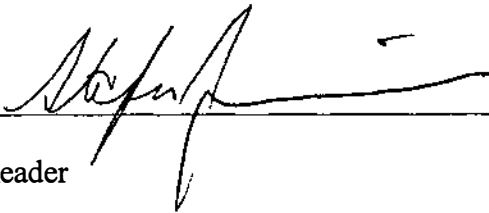
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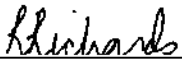
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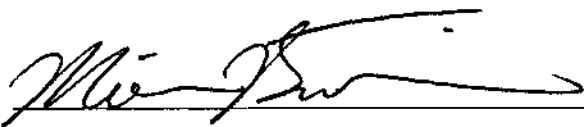
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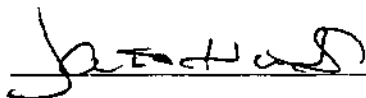
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Table of Contents

Chapter One	1
“To show our simple skill, that is the true beginning of our end.”	
Chapter Two	11
“I will bite my thumb to them, which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.”	
Chapter Three	19
“The play's the thing, with which I'll catch the conscience of the king.”	
Chapter Four	26
“You came on earth to make the earth my hell.”	
Chapter Five	32
“I did what I did, and that's all you need to know.”	
Chapter Six	41
“We're not bad people, Mac...”	
Chapter Seven	49
“All's well that ends well”	
Works Cited	52

Abstract

Within the genre of the alternative Shakespearean universe, there exist two sub-genres. The two sub-genres are the Shakespeare language, contemporary era film and the contemporary language, contemporary era. Though films in these genres have existed since the dawn of filmmaking, they recently been marketed to more mainstream audiences.

This thesis incorporates five of the more recent examples of these particular genres of Shakespearean film: *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, *O*, and *Scotland, Pa*. Each film is a unique take on the original Shakespearean work that it represents. The filmmakers include many of their own original ideas along with a re-imagining of the ideas taken directly from Shakespeare. In many cases the filmmakers have decided to tailor events and character motivations to fit the film that they have chosen to create. The choices, and their degree of success, must be analyzed in order to provide a complete analysis of the films.

Many scholars and critics have viewed these films harshly upon their release and again when subjected to critical study. This is not entirely fair, as the films cannot be judged based on their faithfulness to the original work alone. The audience has changed since the time in which Shakespeare lived and, as a result, some of the stories need to be changed as well.

Chapter One

“To show our simple skill, that is the true beginning of our end.”

Mass confusion exists in the final scene of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. As befitting Shakespearean tragedy, there are multiple deaths accompanied with revealing commentary that helps the audience develop a better understanding as to the reasons, if any exist, behind the events of the play. During this final scene, Othello is left alone with a dying Emilia, who has just been stabbed by her villainous husband Iago, while other characters attempt to apprehend the fleeing villain. When Iago is escorted back to the room after being apprehended, Othello draws his sword and uses it to wound Iago. Lodovico, visiting from Venice, orders that Othello be disarmed immediately, and at this point in the play, it seems as if some sense of order is restored. It appears that both Iago and Othello will be punished for their roles in the tragic circumstances that have left Roderigo, Emilia, and Desdemona dead. However, after Othello’s final monologue Shakespeare includes a stage direction that states that he stabs himself. What Shakespeare does not include, however, is a notation or any sort of instruction as to where the blade Othello uses for his suicide comes from. Since he was disarmed earlier after wounding Iago this is certainly a puzzling development in the play. A decision must be made at this point to explain how Othello obtains another sword and it is a decision that has a direct impact upon all of the preceding and proceeding events in the play. That decision, it seems, is one that must be made not by Shakespeare but rather the director of the play or film production.

This decision about how Othello obtains a sword can influence how the audience views the characters and situations at the conclusion of the play. For example, in Oliver Parker's cinematic version of the play *Othello* (1995) it is Cassio, with whom Othello was extremely close before Iago began his sinister plan, who provides Othello with the dagger that the main character subsequently uses for his suicide. Parker at this point wipes away the memory of any animosity that may exist between Othello and Cassio, animosity that has been revealed in the play and the film to be building throughout the course of events leading to the conclusion. Parker overtly states his belief to the viewers that despite his actions Othello still has the respect and love of his former lieutenant and trusted friend. Parker distinctly wishes for his audience to believe that Cassio, who cares so much about reputation that it helps drive the central plot of the play forward, is willing to overlook the damage Othello had previously done to his career. In having Cassio provide his former friend and general with the means to end his own life rather than allow Othello to face the shame of a likely public trial after being taken back home as a common criminal Parker is making a bold statement in direct contradiction to the events that Shakespeare has plotted. Parker is ignoring the aforementioned animosity between the two characters and showing the audience that Cassio's loyalty is more important than his maligned reputation. Had Parker made a different decision, perhaps having Othello draw a blade he had hidden himself, this conclusion and the emotional response of the audience would be entirely different. If Othello was solely responsible for ending his own life, the action would signify a cowardly way to avoid

being punished for his own actions and he would be viewed as the animal that some in Venice believed him to be from the beginning of the play.

The questions to be studied further are how exactly Parker arrived at his conclusion and what textual evidence exists, if any, that lead him to his conclusion. Screenwriters, directors, and actors do not typically make random choices when assembling the stories they wish to tell. At times, however, it appears that when a play written by Shakespeare is translated to film choices are made that have no direct textual link to the play or are not entirely grounded in the story that Shakespeare was telling. With a Shakespearean film, whether the setting is authentic or modern, while the story is all Shakespeare, the methods of telling the story and choosing the elements to include in the story are entirely up to the filmmakers. In creating a film production, a director usually has the screenwriter's complete vision, including, at times, notes and thoughts about characters motivations and back stories. Screenwriters generally also supply directors with a great deal of blocking and other stage directions written within the scripts. Shakespearean plays, however, are generally lacking stage direction, to the point where little, if any, direction exists at all. As a result, the filmmakers have a great deal of latitude in certain situations. The directors of Shakespearean films can essentially become auteurs even though they are working from one of Shakespeare's original compositions.

Parker, as an example, chooses to show the audience the consummation of the Desdemona and Othello relationship, a scene that other modern directors have also felt the need to include in their productions. This entirely new scene is also

central to *O* (2001), a film that is going to be examined in greater detail later in the thesis. By including this scene, Parker is displaying its importance to his vision of the story. Shakespeare, however, had chosen not to include that scene and the textual evidence exists that Othello is summoned to return almost immediately by the fracas that ensues after he leaves the celebration with Desdemona intent on consummating their marriage. It is likely that Shakespeare believed that such an event never occurred, as there simply was not enough time in the original play for it to happen. In adding this scene and others not included in the original works of Shakespeare, filmmakers have the ability to add their visions to the canon of Shakespearean literature.

Shakespeare's place in the canon of literature is secure and lines quoted from his plays and sonnets can be heard in all sorts of likely and unlikely places such as lecture halls and ESPN's *SportsCenter*. However, the primary identification of a film version of the very same play undoubtedly belongs to the director and sometimes the screenwriter, if they are not the same person, of the film. This occurs despite the fact that the filmmakers may choose to keep portions, or even all, of the original dialogue written by the Bard. Directors bring their own vision of specific scenes, line deliveries, and character development and they form their film how they see fit even when their intent may occasionally clash with that of the original. The choices that they make along the way during filming are what make each production unique, perhaps not necessarily better, or even good at times, but at least unique. Two

directors may certainly approach one play in very different ways, each cutting or juxtaposing scenes and dialogue to fit exactly what they desire for the final product.

A filmmaker takes great risk in deciding to adapt Shakespeare for the screen. After all, most of the English speaking population has read and discussed, through high school English classes, at least a few of the plays from the Shakespeare catalog. According to curriculum maps and reading lists across New York State, most students have at least read *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* before they graduate. That means that the audience for these potential films, and a varied audience it usually is, is complete both with casual viewers looking to be entertained by something they are familiar with in addition to the scholars and critics who watch to critique and scrutinize. Most of these filmgoers will already have many expectations when entering the theater or starting their DVD player in the living room. Whether it is a favorite line or a favorite scene the typical viewer already has formed an opinion of how it should be played out on film. Perhaps, in regards to the casual viewer, high school English teachers have had an influence on this opinion, explaining what they believed Hamlet meant when he delivered the famous “to be or not to be” soliloquy and explaining how it should be performed. Worse yet for the filmmakers, the viewers could be learned scholars, academics who most certainly know, or at the very least think they know, the actual intent of Shakespeare or the original delivery of a specific line. The fact is that most viewers are not going to see the movie out of possible enjoyment but rather for the possibility that they can

discredit the film's limitations and comment on the incorrectness of the adaptation (Potter 10).

However, despite the great risk involved, Shakespeare's plays are being adapted for the screen quite frequently. A quick check of the Internet Movie Database, a website that lists movie productions past, present, and future, shows over five hundred entries attributed to the writer William Shakespeare and lists entries in every decade since 1890. Most directors who choose to adapt Shakespeare appear to try to remain true to the text and in doing so simply create a basic stage production on film (Rippy B16). This is certainly the easy choice and the one that is the likeliest to avoid the film being cloaked in controversy. Obviously, there are more possibilities for special effects and location on film than on the stage but most of these productions are extremely faithful to the original works in language, setting, and dress. Kenneth Branagh has particularly become identified with this genre of Shakespeare film as he has adapted many of Shakespeare's plays into what are essentially stage productions on screen with a much larger budget. Branagh is responsible for one of the few Shakespearean film productions, his version of *Hamlet* (1996), which is billed as containing every line of the original play as written by Shakespeare. More recently, however, more eccentric and innovative interpretations of Shakespeare's plays have been produced. These interpretations have done everything from making slight changes in plot to changing entire scenes and the gender of characters. This concept of the reworking of a Shakespeare play is not new however, as a *King Lear* production was once staged with a happy conclusion in the

seventeenth century (“Inaccessible”). The biggest, most innovative changes yet involve plays in modern, updated settings, sometimes even with modern language replacing the original dialogue. Shakespearean plots have been used in updated settings for quite a long time without having the benefit of the original language; the basic plotline of *West Side Story* (1961) is an example of this. However, one recent trend has seen both the location updated and the language retained. There have also been many more faithful modern language adaptations that retain much, if not all, of the plot. *Macbeth*, for example, now travels in a post-apocalyptic future rather than his native Scotland, in one of the more odd examples of this genre of film, and becomes a the assistant manager looking to move ahead in a fast food restaurant during the psychedelic seventies in another. The former example retains the use of Shakespearean dialogue, while the latter utilizes modern language but does retain much of the plot. In fact, *Scotland, Pa.* (2001), the movie being referred to in the latter example, finds a way to include the weird sisters that is both entertaining and thought provoking. A recent series on the BBC has shown that the era of the modernized Shakespeare adaptation is still thriving as *Taming of the Shrew* (2005), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2005), *Much Ado about Nothing* (2005), and *Macbeth* (2005) all received this modernized treatment.

Sometimes, as is the case with *Richard III* directed by Richard Loncraine, the concept of the modern setting with Shakespearean dialogue seems to flourish, occasionally it succeeds slightly, and at other times, the updated setting is so distracting that it completely takes away from the enjoyment of the words being

spoken if Shakespearean dialogue is retained. It is difficult to make Shakespeare sound original (Potter 9), but directors such as Michael Almereyda, Baz Luhrmann, and Richard Loncraine have proven that the works of Shakespeare can be made to at least look original regardless of the degree of their success. For their films each director has taken a play and placed the characters and dialogue in a completely new setting. Luhrmann takes *Romeo, Juliet*, and their feuding families and sets them in the fictional modern day city of Verona Beach, a place not unlike Miami with its gangs and bright neon colors. Loncraine re-imagines what it would have been like if Germany had won World War II and molds Richard himself into a Hitler-like figure. Finally, Almereyda's *Hamlet* is the heir to Denmark Corporation, an entity that is headquartered in New York City rather than the crown prince of Denmark. Each of these adaptations succeeds on some level, and each director gets name recognition when there is discussion of his particular version of Shakespeare. Each will also be examined in greater detail later in the thesis:

The other type of modern Shakespeare film is one that abandons Shakespearean dialogue in favor of modern language along with the utilization of modern settings. *Scotland, Pa.* and *O* are two of the newer entries into this category of Shakespearean film. Each has varying degrees of success as a Shakespeare adaptation and each provokes thoughtful discussion. As opposed to *West Side Story* or more loosely based tales such as *Romeo Must Die* (2001), a *Romeo and Juliet* tale where Chinese action hero Jet Li and R & B singer Aaliyah play the very non-romantic title roles, the directors of these new films attempt to squeeze as much of the

original work as possible into their vision, even using the original names of the characters in most instances. Again, as with the modern setting, original dialogue films, the success of these new films is varied.

When studying Shakespearean film and examining how and why the directors of such films choose to make their decisions about which lines of dialogue to omit (if maintaining the original dialogue) or what scenes to attempt to adapt (if modernizing the film) it must first be proved what level of adaptation is being dealt with and what the director's intention is. When looking at lists of film versions of *Romeo and Juliet* both *West Side Story* and *Romeo Must Die* appear as well as the films directed by Zeffirelli and Luhrmann. However, little critical discussion outside of identifying the basis for their central plotline has taken place about the former two films as depictions of Shakespeare and articles abound concerning the latter two. If a film is not truly an adaptation of a Shakespearean play and is only loosely borrowing the plotline, it has no place in this discussion. The motivations of Jet Li's character Han Sing in *Romeo Must Die*, referred to as Romeo condescendingly during the film, are of no critical concern because the film is not truly an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the fact the two lead characters display very limited romantic involvement throughout the film.

The five films that are going to be studied in this thesis all have a more direct connection to the original Shakespearean play on which they were based than films such as *Romeo Must Die*. Each film must first be examined in detail as an adaptation in order to prove that it truly has a direct connection to the original work before

moving on to the central, more analytical part of the thesis. Of course, when viewing a straightforward adaptation such as those created by Branagh the connection can easily be seen. However, with the new, more modern methods of Shakespearean filmmaking, the connections are not always as easily seen or accepted. After that connection has been established the way in which the director chooses to deal with both textual and extra-textual material can be scrutinized.

Chapter 2

“I will bite my thumb to them, which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it.”

Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* is perhaps the most widely known of the updated setting, Shakespearean language category of Shakespeare film adaptations mainly because of its target audience. The marketing of the film version of the play, a staple in high school freshman English classes across the country, was aimed almost exclusively at teens. The release of the film brought about nearly “as much passion and violence of expression as the play itself” (Hamilton 118). Released by 20th Century Fox in 1996 this version of the story of the two star-crossed lovers, despite keeping the Shakespearean language, was directed and produced with teens in mind as the main audience. Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio, arguably the two best young actors of their generation at the time and certainly two of the most recognizable faces to young America when the film was produced, portray the two title characters. The pre-*Titanic* (1997) DiCaprio had recently received an Oscar nomination for his performance in *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993), and Danes had just been nominated for an Emmy for the television series *My So Called Life* (1994). The musical soundtrack features contributions from pop music icons such as Prince and well-known alternative bands such as lead singer Shirley Manson and her band Garbage. Luhrmann’s film succeeds on most levels, and if not for the visually bizarre setting, may be considered among the excellent examples of this particular genre of Shakespeare films (Welsh, “Postmodern” 152). The movie was also one of the more commercially successful Shakespearean

adaptations in the history of the genre as it made nearly fifty million dollars, after being made with a budget of fifteen million dollars, during its theatrical run (IMDB).

Luhrmann's setting of Verona Beach is that of any seemingly typical coastal city that could be found driving down route A1A in Florida going south towards Miami and Key West. There are beach area boardwalks complete with seedy bars and even seedier pool halls, while further inland is the city itself, filled with office buildings, skyscrapers, and other aspects of city life. It is both "a place beset by urban violence" and "a world where a regular American girl of Juliet's age can easily find a gun to kill herself" (Walker 138). The Montagues and the Capulets wage their war gangland style all over the city landscape with handguns and automatic weapons substituting for knives and swords. The community appears to be in fear of the two gangs that run the town, and the police in the film, represented by the Prince who is known here as Captain Prince of the police department, appear powerless. Despite the fact that this seems to be in stark contrast to the original play Elsie Walker, writing in *Literature and Film Quarterly*, argues that this version of *Romeo and Juliet* should be accepted into the canon of revolutionary Shakespeare films (101).

Romeo and Juliet is the most frequently taught of Shakespeare's plays in the high schools of America (Guenther 17). As stated before that was the target audience that Luhrmann intended to reach and he certainly created a film to do just that. The first glaring example of this direction towards teens is the soundtrack of the film. It is, in fact, a soundtrack so well received by the target audience that it sold enough albums to be considered a hit by Billboard the year it was released (Guenther 19).

Certainly appearing at the top of the Billboard charts was a first for a soundtrack from a film containing the words of William Shakespeare. During the wedding scene Luhrmann selects a gospel rendition of the Prince hit song “When Doves Cry.” More importantly, synthesizers and electronic beats play during the first battle between rival gang lieutenants Benvolio and Tybalt. The vocals on the track constantly repeat, “the boys, the boys,” and the reference is not to the participants as young adults but rather partners and “boys” in the gang warfare that has spilled out in to the streets of Verona Beach. Very few Shakespeare adaptations have used a rock score, and Luhrmann is the first to actually leave the words in the songs he uses and not just insert the musical accompaniment itself (Guenther 19). The musical choices complement each scene well and manipulate the emotions of the viewers as they are watching the film. Of course, this manipulation leaves the film open to justified criticism. If the emotions of the viewer need to be manipulated it suggests that the belief of the director is that the viewer is not intelligent enough to be able to interpret scenes and navigate the emotions on their own.

There is also a creative and inspired use of the scenery in two distinct places during the film. On the beachfront of this wild city there is a dilapidated stage that looks as if it is about to fall apart. The viewers’ first introduction to Romeo occurs at this very stage. He is writing in his journal of how his heart aches for Rosaline and Luhrmann frames the shot so that DiCaprio is seen on stage much as if he would be performing at the Globe (which, in this version, is actually the name of the pool hall that serves as the local hangout for “the boys”). Later in the film the action returns to

this venue when Mercutio is stabbed and killed during his brawl with Tybalt. The old stage literally crumbles after Mercutio's death scene in a shot that is most certainly saying to the viewers that this version of *Romeo and Juliet* is very much removed from the limitations of the stage (Walker 135). Unfortunately, this can easily be interpreted as Luhrmann biting his own thumb to the critics and stating that the version we are seeing is his own and should not be associated with those more classical versions done on stage.

The party at the Capulet house, the beginning moments of the brief and doomed love affair between the two main characters, provides the best look within one scene of how this film works brilliantly and fails spectacularly at the same time. First, the Capulet mansion is very reminiscent of the homes found along the ocean in Miami. It is enormous, complete with a guardhouse, regal staircases, and bedrooms the size of a small house. Certainly this setting would seem to work alongside the text of the play well. The Capulet's home should be regal, and Luhrmann makes sure that it appears that way. The problem is that one envisions such a home to be that of the base of operations for gangsters such as Al Capone and John Gotti rather than a respected member of the community. Of course, as mentioned earlier, Luhrmann's intent was to portray the Capulets and Montagues as rival gangs, so he has succeeded with the visual but the feeling just is not quite right. These are no longer two families with a long standing feud, the origins of which have been left in the past, but rather families waging war over territory, in much the same way as in a gangster film. Instead of a feud with an unknown origin Luhrmann has given the viewer a feud with

a distinct and even believable origin. Luhrmann is manipulating the story to tell the tale he wishes to tell as opposed to simply inserting what Shakespeare wrote into his own film. In order to fit the story in the gangland environment he creates complete with automatic weapons the two heads of household cannot be contributing members of society.

Old Capulet, here with the very mafioso sounding name of Fulgencio Capulet, easily identifying him as a local organized crime figure, is dressed as Julius Caesar for the masked ball. This and the other costume choices serve to manipulate viewer to the understanding of the motivations and meaning behind the characters that Luhrmann chooses to but this is not necessary and serves as a distraction. Juliet's father certainly has many moments throughout the play where he displays his dictator-like qualities; however, he is acting much as a father in the time period of the original play would act and in a similar manner as the other patriarchal characters Shakespeare created. Other examples of this forced association of dress are Romeo dressed as a knight in armor, Juliet as a winged Angel, and Tybalt as the devil. The costume choices certainly work for each character individually and are a nice touch but have the choices been made because they look and feel right or because it will assist the target audience in identifying how they should feel about each of the characters? Unfortunately for Luhrmann the latter will probably always be the answer for most critics and scholars. This resulting feeling is that while this is a direct adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* it is only Shakespeare light instead of a quality update of the original despite the use of his original language. Apparently the

assumption has been made by Luhrmann that the viewer will not be able to understand the story without such assistance as is provided with the costuming choices made during the masked ball scene. "Everything is about revealing the language" rather than allowing the language to tell the story itself which is what makes most scholars cringe upon viewing the film (Hamilton 121).

Perhaps the most controversial moments in the film occur during the use of familiar Shakespearean quotes and elements placed throughout the film in various ways. A billboard proclaims that Prospero's Whiskey is "the stuff that dreams are made of" and another displays in a visual very similar to the red and white advertisements for Coca-Cola the words "wherefore I' amour?" Both of these moments and others, such as the naming of the aforementioned Globe pool hall, serve to distract the audience from the story itself. An even worse example of this blatant placement occurs in *Hamlet* (2000) directed by Michael Almercyda, which will be discussed at length later. The typical viewing audience of the film, teenagers, is most likely not going to understand the references anyhow so it will not have an impact on their viewing of the film. However, anyone familiar with Shakespeare is likely to see the references and have a strong opinion about them. At this point Luhrmann has become almost too hip and is on the edge of losing what little value the film has. He is forcing elements into the film instead of allowing them to occur naturally. When Montague, Ted Montague in this version, asks his wife during one particular scene to hand him his Longsword, and she reaches behind her inside the limousine for an automatic rifle, the moment is fairly interesting. We have already seen a handgun

labeled as a Rapier 9mm and it seems only logical in this world that Longsword would be the make of the particular weapon that Montague is asking for. It is a plausible explanation of lines in the text referring to swords and daggers but the billboards did not have to be treated the same way. Obviously in the landscape that Luhrmann has created gaudy advertising billboards would need to exist but perhaps ones with real advertising would have not only made more sense but would have been less distracting as well.

Regardless of the obvious visual differences and updates that Luhrmann provides, he makes very little changes with the story itself, even if some liberties with the text are taken. Perhaps the most major change he does make occurs at the very end of the film. The original ending written by Shakespeare shows that after the deaths of Romeo and Juliet the two families are reconciled as both fathers declare peace. However, Luhrmann's film ends with no such reconciliation and is a bold statement being made by Luhrmann according to some scholars. "The television narrator who began the narrative ends it, the film comes full circle" (Downing 129). The film does not come to a complete conclusion, as does Shakespeare's original play. Instead, the events of the play will continue, as there is no end to the feud that began the play. Luhrmann perhaps is directly stating that he will make no apologies at this point for the film he has made. He will not make apologies for what he has created and not showing the reconciliation perhaps is his way of "biting his thumb" at the critics. He once explained that his intention was to bring the play to film exactly as he believed William Shakespeare himself would have intended it done. Luhrmann

stated, “the film's editing style is designed to complement the rolling rhythms of iambic pentameter” and that the film was made “the way Shakespeare may have if he had been a filmmaker” (Crowdus, “Words”).

Chapter 3

“The play's the thing, with which I'll catch the conscience of the king.”

Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* succeeds the least of these three films in its quest to provide a modernized update of Shakespeare. Although it certainly can be identified as a Shakespeare play, the director takes many liberties with the story and makes many of his own choices with no real support from the text. At first the storyline chosen by Almereyda seems perfectly tailored for the world of Denmark that Shakespeare created. Set in New York City, the film transforms Denmark into a corporation that appears to be on the same level as a successful Fortune 500 company. Gertrude and Claudius live in a posh suite in the Hotel Elsinore and Polonius, who appears to be an executive of high standing within the company, lives in an elegantly hip house with glass floors. The corporate world of today, a world full of evil deeds reported daily, such as hostile takeovers, insider trading, and Enron-like company collapses, should fit quite easily with a story of a king being poisoned by his brother for control of a kingdom. Unfortunately, what sounds good as a concept is not executed well at all and has many head-scratching moments that leave the viewer unfulfilled at best.

The essential question asked when a Shakespeare film with Elizabethan language is set in more modern times is stated by Joana Owens and is also directly related to the central questions being discussed in this thesis:

do the updated elements of the new version help to illuminate the text's central themes, or do those same elements ultimately alter these

themes to the extent that the audience's attention becomes focused on concerns that seem more strictly modern in nature? (72)

The attention of the audience of this particular film is focused nearly entirely on modern issues during the movie because of a number of choices made by the director to make the play fit into his created setting. Instead of enjoying the update as a new, exciting look at the play, it becomes a distraction, and Almeyrada's themes become much more prominent than those contained within the original play.

This Hamlet, and Almeriyada for that matter, seems obsessed with video as he seems to always be carrying a camera with him at all times, and his apartment is full of video and electronic equipment. The reason for this obsession however does not stem from a character trait in Hamlet himself, but rather it seems as though the video obsession was an early choice Almereyda made to deal with a major plot point.

When Hamlet decides to test the king by using the play within a play in Shakespeare's original text, it is because the opportunity presents itself to him when the traveling players arrive at Elsinore. It is merely a wonderful and very believable coincidence when staged in the time period of the original play that serves to help Hamlet solve his problem. Here it is not an opportunity taken full advantage of with a quick decision by Hamlet but a brilliant idea conceived entirely by Hamlet himself as a result of his expertise in film production. He has made the decision to create a short film to see the guilt of the king, and once the decision is made then makes a quick trip to Blockbuster Video and begins to splice together his creation from previously made works and his own private film library. Thus, it was necessary that

it was established early on that Hamlet was so good with film and had an editing bay and the necessary hardware and software in his apartment. Rather than simply insert the play in the modern setting as Luhrmann and Loncraine do with varying degrees of success, Almereyda shoves the play into the modern setting whether it will fit or not. This choice is important because it places Hamlet in direct control of his destiny. In the original play, Hamlet is presented with an opportunity and decides to move forward with his plans. In this version, it is Hamlet himself who creates the opportunity.

Whereas Luhrmann manages to create a memorable and inspired depiction of the most famous scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, the balcony scene, Almereyda instead creates a reason for the occurrence of one of *Hamlet's* most famous scenes rather than allowing it to fit as is, and it alters the context of the scene. When Ophelia arrives to deliver Hamlet's love letters back to him, she is doing so after being wired with an electronic listening device by Polonius so that he and Claudius can hear the entire conversation. During this scene, Hamlet is supposed to be attempting to convince Ophelia that he has indeed gone mad, and it is the scene in which he insults her and tells her to go to the nunnery multiple times. His motives in the play are clear and the scene is written in the play as one of great difficulty for Hamlet because he does not want to be making the statements he is making to her as the two have a rich romantic history. Hamlet is being forced to hurt Ophelia, his love, as it is the only way that he can continue his charade. In this film version each hateful line that he says comes after the discovery of the electronic listening device that Ophelia is wearing.

“Hamlet’s discovery of the wire is what sets him ranting,” (Kauffman, “Muses” 26).

The entire feeling of the scene is now changed, and Hamlet is no longer trying to make Ophelia believe in his madness so that she in turn will convince the king and her father. Instead, Hamlet is shown to be angry at the betrayal and deception she has undertaken because of her father and his uncle. Contrary to feeling tortured for having to make Ophelia believe that he is going insane and gaining audience sympathy, this Hamlet is portrayed as being vengeful and very capable of the killings that he intends to commit later in the play.

The most distracting element in this film occurs during a scene in Hamlet’s apartment as he has the television playing in the background. The image on the screen is that of a production of Hamlet in Elizabethan dress during the graveyard scene and the actor playing Hamlet is holding the skull to the sky in a dramatic performance. Ethan Hawke’s portrayal of Hamlet and the famous soliloquy is now being measured against the scores of other actors who have played Hamlet. This comparison is forced upon the viewer even if it is inevitable that the comparison is being made. There are other movies playing in the background during the film on Hamlet’s various televisions in his apartment that made sense based on the time period and were not distracting. For example, a fleeting glimpse of a James Dean film, Dean being an iconic example of the loner personality, works perfectly without being forced upon the viewer (Owens 24). The meaning behind the image is easily deduced and does not seem out of place like the placement of the other Hamlet production does.

A few of the oddest choices made by Almereyda occur at the end of the film. One of them occurs when technology, in a film where technology is the true king, is “temporarily eradicated” (Burnett 54). First, instead of flying Hamlet in the private jet of the Denmark Corporation, which one assumes must exist, the king has him fly coach on a commercial airline flight. The only explanation for making this choice is that it is the only one that would work for the setting that has been chosen. This follows with all the choices that Almeyrada has been making all along. He is less interested in describing his own vision of the motivations of characters and more concerned with making sure the plot fits what he intends to film. Had Hamlet been flown in the private jet of the company he wouldn’t have been able to convincingly make the effort to obtain the order of death and switched the plans to change the order to one for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern instead. This is another example of forcing the story to fit in the setting.

The most identifiable moment concerning the stunning lack of technology occurs at the every end. In a film that is very much modern with electronic equipment, Laertes and Hamlet still have their fencing duel over Hamlet’s role in the death of his father. The invitation for the duel is delivered via fax machine but the insertion of a traditional duel is an odd choice after every other scene in the play has been made to fit in this created world. Even in getting a piece of the film right, by not forcing the scene to fit to his setting, Almereyda ends up being wrong because of the history of his past choices. The fact that these two characters, men of privilege in

society, are willing to face each other to the death just doesn't feel quite right in the setting Almereyda has created.

An example of an extra-textual choice that Almereyda makes that does work well is one that is very similar to Parker having Cassio provide Othello a sword for suicide, and that is Gertrude's death scene. "Gertrude tells us, through her behavior, that the cup is poisoned, and she deliberately drinks it down to save her son from drinking it" (Kauffman, "Muses" 26). It is an interesting choice that is made by Almereyda that gives Gertrude a final moment of respect in the film. She finally sees the tragedy that she has allowed to unfold throughout the film and decides that this will be the end of it all. She also makes the decision knowing that she will take her own life, perhaps as penance for her role. It is an ambitious interpretation of the final scene and a risky one that Almereyda deserves to be commended for inserting in the film. Much like the decision of Parker to have Cassio provide Othello with the weapon with which to end his life, this is a directorial choice that is very thought provoking and allows for much more discussion.

Another positive element that could be overlooked because of the poor execution of the film is that when Hamlet says, "Denmark is a prison" in conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, visually it can be seen that he truly believes this when making the statement. In this production the viewers can see it to be true with their own eyes as well. To begin with most of the camera work in the film is done in close-up, which gives the feeling of being trapped within the frame. Also, key scenes in the film take place in plate-glass apartments, the narrow aisles of Blockbuster

Video, the narrow hallways of the hotel, and the aforementioned airplane (Burnett 53). Hamlet can also only relate to people through video and not in person. His most affectionate moments with Ophelia are captured on film, and he can only show emotion when watching those moments and not when she is with him. He is certainly trapped in a prison, whether or not it was one created by himself. Almereyda is actually very successful at offering the viewer a plausible interpretation of that line. Unfortunately, there are too many distractions in the film and questions left for the viewers that interfere with any successful choices Almereyda has made.

Chapter 4

“You came on earth to make the earth my hell.”

Of the three most well known films in this sub-genre of the alternative Shakespearean universe the film that has received the greatest critical acclaim is Richard Loncraine’s version of *Richard III* (1995), which was the combined vision of Loncraine and actor Ian McKellen, who originally played the role in a similar production on the stage. The Yorks are once again invading England, but it is a pre-World War II era England, and the Yorks look eerily similar to an invading Nazi army. Part of the reason for the success of the adaptation could be attributed to the attitudes of the parties responsible prior to the beginning of filming. McKellen stated that he believed he was not updating Shakespeare because Shakespeare and his stories were already up to date. “These scripts are just so rich and so constantly relevant that...if you're playing Macbeth-there are plenty of kings and political leaders who have discourse with psychics,” (Crowdus, “Shakespeare”). Shakespeare’s plots are modern, he said, and added that there are plenty of historical and current situations to which the dialogue of any of the plays could be applied. The assumption was not made that Shakespeare had anticipated the coming of Hitler and the Nazi party but that he definitely understood the possibility and concept of dictatorships well enough to have written about it four hundred years ago (Crowdus, “Shakespeare”).

Shakespeare chooses to begin his story of Richard’s rise and fall with a soliloquy, specifically the famous speech about the “winter of discontent.” Richard is telling the audience of the plans he has for the remainder of the play and is describing

how he will go about achieving success. Loncraine does not begin his film with this speech, however. The viewer instead sees King Henry and his son Edward at their headquarters where Edward is viewing battlefield reports, and Henry is preparing to eat dinner. There is a warning delivered via ticker-tape that Richard is nearby and ready to attack. Almost immediately the attack does in fact begin, and the viewer is treated to the first images that show that Loncraine and McKellen will be successful with their adaptation. "A figure in a Darth Vaderesque mask shoots Edward in the head, moves quickly into the connecting chamber, and shoots the old king at prayer" (Mitchell 133). While the first speech of Richard in the play reveals his character and motivations, the first visual image of Richard is successful in doing so for the audience of the movie. After the killings occur, and Richard removes his mask, he smiles snidely, reveling in the aftermath of the murders. Richard makes an entrance similar to that of Darth Vader in *Star Wars* (1977) amidst smoke and a broken wall. One of the most famous villains in the history of the stage is now identified alongside perhaps the most famous villain in the history of film. However, as opposed to Luhrmann dressing his characters in costumes at the ball, this choice does not have the feeling that it the filmmakers made the choice in case the audience was not sure how they should feel about Richard. Visually, it does not seem different from dressing Juliet as an Angel and Romeo as the knight in shining armor. However, Loncraine and McKellen do not appear to be forcing their feelings on the audience. Richard is a monster, as the rest of the film will show, and the choice of costume is appropriate.

In the celebration scene that occurs next, there is music involved, but it is much different from the music of *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. The music is that of a modern big band, but the lyrics are that of Elizabethan language. Specifically, the lyrics are words from "The Passionate Shepard to His Love" by Christopher Marlowe. If the lyrics to this song had been those of a big band hit of the 1930's instead of a Marlowe poem, it would have been distracting to the viewer much like the billboards in Luhrmann's film. Instead, the musical choice accompanies the film and enhances the scene. Thankfully, the setting seems to work just fine, as Richard strolls to the microphone to begin his victory speech. He starts at the microphone with "now is the winter of our discontent" and the speech takes on a clever turn when through a close up and pull back of the camera it is shown that he is finishing the speech in the urinal while relieving himself (Mitchell 136). Richard's contempt for his family is even clearer here than when he speaks of it in Shakespeare's play, as his intentions to have his brothers set upon each other are revealed while urinating. Through the speech alone it seems that Richard is simply bored and looking for entertainment. However, when the visual of the bathroom and Richard relieving himself are viewed along with the words it adds an extra level of evil to an already evil man. He is planning the downfall of his family in the lavatory and his feelings towards them all are quite clear.

Another choice that leads to the effectiveness of this particular adaptation is that of having American actors portray the Queen and her relatives. "In the play Queen Elizabeth's Woodville Family are reviled by Richard as outsiders" (Mitchell

138), and having Robert Downey Jr. and Annette Bening play the members of the family is a brilliant move on the part of Loncraine. Rather than force the parts to fit Loncraine allows history to speak for itself and one is reminded of the historical situation of Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson (Mitchell 138). As McKellen stated earlier, Shakespeare is already up to date, and one needs to look no further than the current political climate to find examples of how truly up to date he is. The members of the American family are true outsiders to Richard's world, and this choice enhances the original message that Shakespeare chose to convey.

Even most critics who cannot come to terms with Shakespeare in a modern setting and discount such a film as ego-based productions by the filmmakers agree on one scene in the movie as being a nearly perfect mesh of the language and the visual. "Only one scene in the play has a kernel of intrinsic interest for me," writes Stanley Kauffman in *The New Republic*, "the wooing of Lady Anne" (Kauffman, "Shrinking" 30). Loncraine has the scene take place in a morgue, and instead of occurring during the funeral procession of Henry, it happens literally over the dead body of Edward, Anne's husband. This enhances the meaning of the scene greatly because of two factors. First, because the viewer has seen Richard murder Edward onscreen in the film as opposed to where the actions are described to the viewer in the play, it makes the viewer more uncomfortable knowing that Anne is being lied to by Richard having watched as he murdered Edward earlier in the film. Also, the fact that he is wooing her in a morgue over her husband's dead body shows the charisma of Richard even more than in the play. He is able to turn a room full of dead bodies

into a place of love and first courtship and that is a remarkable feat. "Once again McKellen transforms a most unexpected place into a lover's chamber," (Andrews 91). Some critics, such as Richard Alleva writing in *Commonweal*, are not entirely convinced of the success of the scene. He points to the shortness of the scene as a problem as Shakespeare had given more time to the wooing in the original text. Alleva states that, "the current version gives us not a rendering of the wooing but an abstract" (19). What must be pointed out though is that while Loncraine and McKellen have cut some of the dialogue due to time constraints, the scene still works as good as or perhaps better than the original because of their choices. Had the scene been extended it surely would have lost some its strength. Loncraine needed to make the choice to excise some of the dialogue in order to strengthen the final product on film.

The scene in the morgue, however, shows one of the biggest problems in adapting the works of Shakespeare for the screen. In order to deliver the film with a reasonable run time, some dialogue and certain scenes must be cut, and there is simply no way around this. The alternative is to do what Kenneth Branagh did in his version of *Hamlet*, leaving the text nearly fully intact from start to finish. Unfortunately, in the Hollywood climate of today where films with a two-hour run time are commonplace that is not always possible, this means that choices have to be made. The only way to solve the problem of cuts is to make an actual film of the play rather than an adaptation (Crowdus, "Shakespeare").

The ending of the film is perhaps inspired by the demise met by James Cagney in the classic gangster film *White Heat* (Alleva 18). Richmond is chasing Richard through a battlefield of chaos with men and equipment strewn all over the field. When Richard's getaway jeep crashes he cries out, "A Horse! A Horse! My kingdom for a horse," and the line works in this context despite the fact that he is sitting in a jeep in the middle of a modern battlefield. It works because the viewer is not expecting or thinking that Richard is crying out for an actual horse but rather he is merely exasperated and needs some form of transportation. Of course, actual horses could have been used in the production, but that would have left the viewer asking similar questions to Almeriyada's *Hamlet*. Eventually, Richmond pursues Richard through what appears to be an abandoned factory, all the way to the open top story of the building. Rather than be shot by Richmond at this point, Richard jumps in to the fire that is raging below as the song "I'm sittin' on Top of the World" begins to play. "The ending is wonderfully ambiguous," (Mitchell 132) and the viewers are not sure whom the song plays for. It maybe for Richmond who will now be the new king or it may even be for Richard who will now "rule in Hell" (Mitchell 132). Either way it is a truly fitting end to this alternative universe of *Richard III*.

Chapter 5

“I did what I did, and that's all you need to know.”

There are two standout examples of the modern language, modern setting genre of Shakespearean film, *O*, directed by Tim Blake Nelson and *Scotland, PA* directed by Billy Morrissette. As mentioned earlier, most of films in this sub-genre appear to borrow only some of the original story and are more or less only inspired by the plays written by Shakespeare. These two films, however, attempt to recreate the story with a modern twist and follow the plots of their predecessors quite closely. Nevertheless, this forces the directors to make choices regarding such devices as character motivation and the level of success of these choices must be discussed and analyzed. By referring to these films as standout examples, it is not an attempt to provide commentary on the level of their success but rather a statement commenting on their perceived faithfulness to the original work.

Many critics consider *O* to be an example of a glorious failure in the genre, a prime example of the problems of attempting to modernize Shakespeare. Whereas audiences can accept the plot and character motivation in such stories as *Romeo and Juliet* and *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), another modern-language Shakespeare film adaptation, because of their context as teen films, plays like *Othello* and *Macbeth* are much more complex. On the surface, it would seem that the tale of the jealous moor would be very fitting for insertion into a high school setting; however, critics such as James Welsh argue against this. Welsh states in *Literature Film Quarterly*

that “Othello is more problematic: not only is it far more serious, but it is also far more difficult to dumb down” (225). Of course, in some way, all the films discussed in this thesis have had to combat being labeled “dumbed down” versions of Shakespeare. Films that take complex plots and present them in the simplest way for the audience to understand and even in some cases such as the next two films that will be examined, films that strip the plays of their original language.

Nelson’s *Othello*, known here as *Odin* or *O*, is the lone black student at an all white prep school, and he is the star of the school’s exceptional state-ranked basketball team. He is dating the daughter of the dean (Desi) and is like a son to the team’s coach (Duke), a point that the audience does not even have to infer as it is stated by Duke himself during one of the opening scenes. Duke also happens to be the father of one of O’s best friends and teammates, Hugo (Iago). Again, as was the case with the previously discussed three films, on the surface this all fits. However, it is with these original choices that Nelson and screenwriter Brad Kaaya have opened themselves to criticism and it is because of this that most critics cannot accept the film and immediately harbor unease and negativity.

The true beauty of Shakespeare’s play is that the motivations behind Iago’s manipulation of events are never entirely revealed to the audience. Yes, it is implied that Iago believes that Othello has slept with his wife, and it is also stated that Iago is upset over Othello’s promotion to command. However, beyond simple jealousy his motives are debatable and not easily understood. In the film *O* there is never any doubt about the motives of Hugo, as Nelson and Kaaya have told the viewers all that

they really need to know in the opening scenes. Whereas the Duke is a somewhat extraneous character who promotes Othello in the play, this Duke is Hugo's own father. It is not a great leap of faith to believe that Hugo would hate O, and in a contemporary society where such stories are chronicled in the newspaper and television, it is not much of a further leap to believe that Hugo would want O to suffer. Instead of being amazed at the events that are unfolding and puzzled as to why Iago could hate Othello so much, the viewer is being led to empathize with Hugo's hatred and desire for revenge. At least the audience will be able to understand Hugo's motivations. While the consequences of his actions are certainly difficult to justify what happens in the end there is at least perhaps an understanding as to why the events are occurring.

During the first scene of the film, his father berates Hugo for not completing his assigned task while he gives O the job of winning the game that they are playing. Hugo's look is a mix of sadness and disappointment, and the viewer can clearly sense his frustration with the situation as he is literally standing outside the celebration circle when O wins the big game. The students have flooded the court, and Hugo is left standing at the fringes of the celebration, watching as O is heralded as the hero. Much later in the film, in case the viewer is still unsure as to how to feel about the situation, Nelson chooses to focus the camera on Hugo when he is eating a quiet dinner with his father. Duke can be heard but not seen, and the entire conversation is about how Duke and Hugo must protect and look out for O. The audience can easily

see that Hugo, although described in the film as one of the most popular people in the school, is an outsider, even in his own family.

Finally, if the viewer is still not adept at understanding and accepting why Hugo is acting in this manner it is revealed early in the film that he is also jealous of O's athletic prowess. In an attempt to be able to perform at the same level, Hugo has been taking steroids for some time in hope to be able to compete on the same level as his rival. Roid Rage, a condition where the user of such drugs is overtaken by irrational and violent behavior, is a very real problem in contemporary society, and its effects are well documented. Many in the viewing audience would be aware of this condition. Emily, Hugo's girlfriend in the film even alludes to the fact that he had been acting very strange lately and did not seem to be himself. Perhaps the deadly combination of these drugs and Hugo's jealousy and hatred has driven him to orchestrate the events of the story. The film will use drugs as an excuse for behavior later on, and that will be discussed here as well. In this case simply by including these two elements in the story, Nelson has fundamentally changed the makeup of the entire play. It is easy to understand why some critics cannot get past these two choices and easily dismiss the film. However, as Steve Criniti argues the choice to assign Hugo a motive is more a "pragmatic than artistic one" (116).

Criniti argues in *Literature and Film Quarterly* that if character's motives are not revealed early on then the message of the film, and the audience will be lost as the film progresses. Motivations are therefore necessary to understand actions in a society that will not accept ambiguity. If an audience does not have answers to the

questions, such as why events are occurring, the audience will simply not care about the film, and if the audience does not care about the film it will not be successful. A modern language adaptation has to answer all the questions presented in the script, and that is a problem the other type of modern update discussed earlier, where the language is kept relatively close does not need to worry. *Scotland, PA* will also fall prey to this difficulty, as will be seen later in this discussion.

In addition to Iago, another character who undergoes a dramatic transformation when presented in the film is Roderigo, known here as Roger. In keeping with the context presented in the play, Roger is very wealthy and apparently comes from a prominent family because the school library is named after his father. Roger also is interested in Desi and has desired her for some time. His first introduction is very similar to the play, and he calls Desi's father using his cell phone as he and Hugo lurk outside her home. When the audience sees Roger next, he is being held by Michael Cassio, the number two star on the team, while being beaten by O. Continuing with the idea that motivation in all characters must be present for modern audience understanding, this presents the audience with a very clear motivation for the actions of Roger. After the events that occurred at Columbine High School in 1999, and the increased awareness of young adult issues, it is easy to see Roger as a victim of bullying. Later, in the absence of the character Montano from the play, Roger is wounded during a fight with Cassio after being beaten yet again. Now, not only does he want Desi for himself, he truly hates both Cassio and O setting up the motivation for his participation in the film's closing scene. He is no

longer acting just out of desire to have a place in Desi's life because he has a reason to wish Cassio were dead as a result of Cassio's displayed bullying.

In a play where the issues of race are very present, with Iago consistently utilizing racial slurs and references while speaking, the lack any overt racial commentary until the forty-eighth minute of the film is very puzzling. At this point in the film, Desi is having a conversation with Em, Hugo's girlfriend, and she mentions how sex between her and O was rough the night before. Although this coupling is out of sequence, it is clear that Nelson follows the same school of thought as Parker that was mentioned in the introduction to this thesis and felt the need for a graphic depiction of the relationship between Desdemona and Othello. More will be discussed about that momentarily, after analyzing the issue of race, as the scene is uncomfortable and misused.

Going back to minute forty-eight of the film, despite the fact that the only other black actor in the cast is Hugo's drug dealer, race, up until this point, has not been overtly mentioned and there has only been little innuendo about the subject. Early on, after the Dean confronts O about his relationship with Desi, it is implied that O has a street reputation and that he was brought to the school for the sole intention of playing basketball. Such recruiting of athletes is not unheard of, and there has been plenty of it detailed at great length in the current media. The implied racism is very subtle, as the Dean never really exhibits any discomfort that is directed towards O purely on a racial basis. It very much appears that his only concern is for his daughter and the fact that she deceived him. Also, when O is discussing the scar

that is prominent on his back, he jokingly states that it was due to the fact that his mother could not afford health care, when in fact he states afterwards that he fell off his skateboard, an activity prominently identified racially with white youth. These two instances do not do much to set up the racist overtones the film will soon display.

However, during the scene between Desi and Em, after Em shows great concern and states that, despite the fact that she truly likes O, he exhibits qualities that are sometimes less than desirable. These are qualities that the audience has already seen on a number of occasions and have nothing to do with race whatsoever, such as the aforementioned beating of Roger. Desi's response to Em is a truly puzzling line. "Would you be so concerned if he was white," she asks after Em reminds Desi that she herself had asked O to stop during intercourse because something had changed their act of intimacy into an act of power and rage by O. This act is displayed on screen very graphically, so that the audience can easily see that it is no longer the two lovers consummating their relationship but rather is O displaying his anger-fueled tendencies, which the audience needs to see in order to accept the film's conclusion. Em's response to Desi, as she states "that is so easy" seems to mimic the response of the viewer. It is an easy way to bring the discussion of race into the film, a discussion that needed to take place at some point because it is central to the play and without it the film could not be viewed as an updated Othello. Unfortunately, the awkward inclusion of the line does little to enhance the subject matter, and only brings about other questions. The audience finds themselves wondering where this particular

discussion came from and why it took nearly an hour to be included in a film whose running time is only ninety-four minutes.

From this point on, however, race seems ever present in a film where it only existed as subtext, and a minor one at that, previously. One of the largest departures from the play and other adaptations is that even Michael Cassio joins in the racist diatribe and, in fact, ends up being the truest pure racist in the entire ensemble. Hugo's motivations are not concerned with race, Roger's motivations are not concerned with race either unlike, perhaps, some of the original character Roderigo's motivations. Even the Dean, the substitute for Brabantio, is not motivated by race but rather the fact that his perfect daughter deceives him. When Hugo confronts Cassio as O waits outside his bedroom and asks him leading questions about his relationship with another girl, Brandy in the film and Bianca in the play, Cassio responds with stereotypical hate speech. "The ghetto just popped out of him," Cassio responds, adding, "That nigger is out of control." It is an odd statement coming from a character who has previously shown no signs of racism. However, it is a necessary statement based on Nelson's previous choice to ignore racism earlier in the film. At this point, before the climax of the film, the audience must be given the racist connection in order to fully realize the conclusion of the film and feel the necessary sympathy for O as he commits the murder of his beloved Desi. O even states at the conclusion that now people can talk about the "nigger who lost it back in high school."

The conclusion of the film is the most stunning departure from the original plotline. Hugo mirrors Iago and states that, "I did what I did and that is all you need to know." Unfortunately, as stated earlier in this discussion, that is not all the modern audience that is viewing the film wants to know and as a result Hugo explains his exact motivations for his actions during a voice-over at the end of the film. He explains that even though he knows that a person should not be jealous of others he definitely was jealous of O. This is not a revelation to the audience as it had been implied all along, but the filmmakers apparently felt it was important enough to be explained directly. Hugo further states that, "one of these days everyone is going to pay attention to me." To explain further that Hugo's motivations are a simple cry for attention is in direct defiance of the original work by Shakespeare. Iago wants attention because he feels, perhaps rightfully so, that he has earned his place in society through hard work and determination to be successful. While that does not excuse any of his actions, it does make them seem more plausible. Hugo has described himself throughout the movie as someone who does not have the skills and talent to be successful on the basketball court. Nelson may have made a film that adopted Shakespeare's basic plot and included many of the elements of the original but his view of the text is certainly different from that of most of the readers of *Othello*.

Chapter 6

“We're not bad people, Mac, just underachievers who have to make up for lost time.”

Scotland, PA is an examination of Macbeth through the lens of a modern dark comedy. If *Richard III* is the most successful of the modernized, Shakespearean language films as determined in this thesis then *Scotland, PA* is the most successful of the group of entirely modernized Shakespeare films because, in general terms, it follows the same method of storytelling and adapting the source material to achieve the final product. The film has many moments similar to Richard uttering the famous line, “A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse,” and sitting in a burned out Jeep in the Loncraine production. With the contemporary English Shakespeare film productions, filmmakers can avoid most of these situations because the language, setting, and action can be adapted to fit the new surroundings. If scenes do not work well or characters do not fit, they are merely jettisoned from the final product or tailored to fit their new surroundings. However, Billy Morrisette has decided early on in the film that he would accept most of the original storyline of Macbeth and come up with more inventive ways of including them in his film. As a result, *Scotland, PA* is highly successful at being a modern adaptation of the play and is thoroughly entertaining as well.

To begin with, the film is set in the decidedly low-class world of the food industry. Morrisette, growing tired of the tendency of Shakespeare adaptations to recast the plays with high-ranking government officials and corporate leaders, has made a conscious decision to adapt the play with a more modern sensibility in a

world where the middle and lower classes are the most predominant classes in society (Brown 149). Morrisette's interpretation of the text is that it is essentially a portrayal of class struggle, and he sets his film up so that it is an examination of that particular subject. Here Duncan is not the king but rather the proprietor of a moderately successful restaurant and is someone whom the community looks at as a leader, despite the fact that he is decidedly average. Duncan is the typical small-town restaurant owner who must work long hours and dedicate himself to improving his business in order to maintain a very modest living. He is certainly living far from the lifestyle of regality that audience members in Shakespeare's times would wish to aspire to for their own lifestyle. However, to Joe and Pat Macbeth this is all very desirable as it is a level up from their meager existence as employees in Duncan's restaurant. This choice displays from the beginning that Morrisette understands the difficulties of adapting Shakespeare to the screen and understands that bringing the audience in to the film is the first important task that he must complete. This departure from the original story seems eerily similar to assigning a motive to the character of Hugo in *O*; however, it actually is not much of a transformation from the original work. All Americans want to be able to determine their place in the social order, and that status climbing mentality is no different now from in Shakespeare's time (Deitchman 140). The fundamental motivation for the play's action has not changed, only the scenery and words have.

Morrisette potentially had a problem with the opening scene of the play, and it must have given him difficulty in deciding how to adapt the characters of the weird

sisters into the film. In a very believable real world setting, it would be difficult to accept that these supernatural creatures exist and would certainly have had the potential to ruin the film if they were left relatively intact. Morrissette's introduction of the characters is perfect and the way that they are handled throughout the film is exceptional. The first words of the film are uttered by Hippie #1, played by Amy Smart, as she commands one of the other two Hippie characters to, "light another one," referring to the joint that they are smoking. As the scene continues, it is obvious that the characters are at a county fair after closing time, sitting on the Ferris wheel and therefore must be some of the carnival workers who are employed to take the carnival from town to town. The dialogue flows within the setting, and Morrissette even acknowledges the fact that the audience may have a problem with Shakespeare being adapted in an irreverent manner:

Hippie #3: Oh, Christ! Who dropped the chicken?

Hippie #2: I would have eaten that.

Hippie #3: It was foul.

Hippie #2: The fowl was foul?

Hippie #3: No shit, the fowl was foul.

Hippie #1: And the fair was fair.

Hippie #3: The fowl was fair.

Hippie #2: The fair was foul.

Hippie #3: My ass hurts.

Hippie #2: I don't think that one works.

Morrissette is preparing the audience that some of what they will see will not work.

Morrissette, however, does an exceptional job of translating one of Shakespeare's bloodiest plays into a world where, as Hippie #2 states later, "These are modern times, you can't go around killing everybody."

This film opens on the battlefield as the play does; however, this battlefield is located behind the counter at Duncan's fast food restaurant. The characters are introduced in the opening scenes and with little effort anyone familiar with the text of the play can easily deduce who they are even if names were not associated with them. Pat Macbeth shows contempt for her job and her place in society, believing it is beneath her. Joe Macbeth, her husband, is a fry cook working the front lines of the battlefield but still not being fully appreciated for what he does despite the accolades he receives. All his subjects, the customers of his restaurant who populate the town, envy Norm Duncan and his son, Malcolm, who is not happy with his life and wants nothing that his father could offer him. "Scotland sucks," he yells at the football game he is attending where his brother Donald is forced to play football and become a man.

Two actions elevate Macbeth to a higher status within Duncan's management staff. First, there is his heroic victory against Duncan's enemies, in this case two ruffians who are intending to start a food fight and cause a ruckus amongst the customers in the establishment (Hoefler 155). Once again, in case the audience is unaware of what this scene is supposed to do, Morrissette plays appropriately heroic music in the background and slows the images on screen to establish that this is an important moment. Macbeth is, in fact, better than his current status in life and should be heralded as a hero. The second incident comes later when Macbeth dispatches Doug, Duncan's manager, who has been stealing money from the register. Doug is the representation of Macdonwald, the unseen villain in the play whom

Macbeth is triumphant against in battle. The first prophesy, if Morrissette had chosen to include it, which he does not, has come true. Macbeth is now elevated to the status of assistant manager of the restaurant to serve under Malcolm as he waits to assume the throne of the fast food kingdom, a position that Malcolm clearly does not want.

Morrissette takes a distinct position on how the events in the play unfold and what is the impetus behind them. When walking home from a bar, Mac encounters two of the stoner hippies frolicking at the fair. The hippies keep chanting, "Mac, Mac, Mac," as they play and as Mac approaches them as they reveal themselves to be having a playful discussion with words, in particular the word Mac. After talking about macramé and Fleetwood Mac and offering the cinematic Macbeth a drag on their marijuana joint, the two hippies invite Mac to meet their girlfriend, who will tell his fortune. Mac then asks how these two unique individuals happen to know his name, and their response is to be shocked that his name actually is Mac. They were calling him that because as they say, it is just like stating, "watch your step, Mac." Perhaps he really did meet these people as he walked although it is more likely that he did not and they were only appearing to Mac as part of a drunk and stoned dream. Either way the message is quite clear; Morrissette is interpreting the source text as providing an implication that individuals determine their own fate. Hippie #1, during their palm reading session, only repeats the statements from the argument that Mac and his wife were having at the bar, and the only true insight she provides into what should come later was the inclusion of a drive-thru window at the restaurant. It is established later in the film, however, that Mac has had many wonderful and

inventive ideas throughout his tenure at the restaurant, and once this fact is established, it is not difficult to believe that the idea for the drive-thru came from himself and not this encounter. An encounter that Anthony Hoefer writes in *Literature Film Quarterly* probably never even occurred and was only a part of Mac's drunken, drug induced stupor (156). This would explain the inclusion of the characters of the hippies later as they are only a part of Mac's subconscious and not corporeal at all.

Everyone familiar with the source text knows that at some point Mac will need to murder Duncan, but as Hippy #3 states in the film, "these are modern times," and the idea of Mac murdering Duncan in cold blood in a somewhat comedic, albeit darkly comedic, film simply will not work. Morrisette combines pieces of the original text with some of his own ideas and comes up with a very plausible scenario that is easy for the audience to accept. Once Pat has confessed to Mac that it is the only way for them to be successful in life and the murder must be done, Mac follows Pat into the closed restaurant at night in order to commit the act that will drive the rest of the action. Morrisette emphasizes the fact that neither Mac nor Pat is a murderer by having Duncan accidentally die during the comical kidnapping ordeal by falling into one of the deep fryers. "It's done, it can't be undone," Pat remarks as Duncan lies burning in the hot oil, and Mac is staring amazed at what he sees. The oil has spattered all over the floor and in that instant the knowledgeable viewer who was discussed in the introduction knows that this oil will serve as the "damned spot" that Pat must attempt to wash away later in the film as it has burned her hand, a mark that

she will wear visibly. Thirty-eight minutes into the film Morrissette has already done what most of the modernized Shakespearean films have failed to do, and that is marry the source material to a successful film. The audience can trust that what Morrissette will deliver later will be acceptable and will not disappoint. Although there are still many difficult decisions to be made about interpreting key scenes, the audience can have faith that Morrissette will do a commendable job.

Morrissette's decision to craft the film into a study of the class struggle within the United States is continued with his choice of the person suspected of the murder of Duncan, a homeless man named Andy. In the play two sleeping guards drugged by Lady Macbeth are immediately implicated in the murder, and since there must be at least one suspect from a lower social class than the Macbeths, the likely choice is Andy, referred to as "some homeless guy." Since Macbeth must commit more murders throughout the course of the play, Andy also serves as an opportunity for Macbeth to demonstrate just how far he has fallen into immorality. Later, when Andy is released from jail, Mac is convinced that he must kill Andy in order to maintain his position. This allows the audience the opportunity to see how Mac is being corrupted by the relative power he has acquired and his desire to maintain his new status.

After Pat and Mac are crowned as the new king and queen of the fast food world, Morrissette makes what is perhaps his greatest commentary on the central theme of the play. Regardless of their new found social status, Pat and Mac are still essentially the same people they were before. They are not royalty, or in this case middle class, and have not ascended higher because they are not capable of

understanding what it means to be any different than what they are at the beginning of the film. Pat still sprinkles her speech with curses, and Mac still drinks and hunts with his low-class friends. In fact, to illustrate this point further, when Pat and Mac are being honored for their success, the banquet of the film, Pat is dressed garishly inappropriate, as if she was attending a much more formal occasion. This echoes a scene earlier when construction is being complete on their new restaurant and she is wearing “gold jewelry inappropriately matched with her t-shirt and jeans” (Deitchman 144). Morrisette may have updated the setting and words of the play, but he has kept the central theme, the central theme as he understands, intact. The play is about class struggle, and as Ian McKellen pointed out earlier, Shakespeare’s plots are still very modern and appropriate indeed.

Chapter 7

“All’s well that ends well”

The final determination must be made whether or not the translation of text to screen is not only justifiable but also whether or not the translation is a worthy addition to the Shakespearean catalogue. Judgment of these films will never be passed merely on their addition to the cinematic landscape alone. As explained earlier, any film adaptation of Shakespeare that can even loosely be identified with the original work will be judged also in its relationship to the original play it is based on. If the films have brought Shakespeare to a new audience, then the answer to the question of whether or not the film is worthy must be a resounding yes. However, if the audience is completely unaware of the connection to Shakespeare then the answer must be a qualified no. Billy Morrisette explains his desire for creating an update *Macbeth* as an attempt to bring the story of Macbeth to “the kid in the back row who is getting stoned, reading the Cliff Notes” (Brown 147). It appears that all of the films and filmmakers examined in this thesis seem to have the same intention as Morrisette.

Luhmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* and Nelson’s *O* were marketed with teen and young adult audiences in mind. When I attended the opening weekend of *William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet* I was definitely one of the oldest people in the theater at the relatively young age of 24. Most of the audience was comprised of teens, and most of those teens were young females. It could be assumed that most of them had either just read the play in class or more importantly, according to

Morrisette, were sitting in class as the play was being discussed and not taking an active role in that discussion. Precisely the audience that Morrisette is mentioning in his quote are the people who were attending the screening of the film. *O* is currently being viewed, along with *William Shakespeare's Rome and Juliet*, in tandem with *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet* in many classrooms across the country, including my own high school classroom as well. It is important to note that in all these cases the newer works are not taking place of the originals but rather supplementing them. It is highly doubtful that academics, teachers, and professors, are replacing the original text with these updated versions. Considering this fact that the newer films are allowing more discussion to take place regarding the original work and the intentions of Shakespeare as he wrote them, these films are very acceptable as they do bring more readers into contact with the plays. Of course, of these two examples, only Luhrmann's film allows the audience to hear a version of Shakespeare with some of the original text, and that is a problem for most scholars and academics, as it is Shakespeare's language that is primarily identified with his place in the canon of literature. Shakespeare's plots are found in other films as well and have been as long as film has existed, as was mentioned earlier, so that cannot be the only manner with which to identify a film for placement in this new genre that has been discussed.

Instead, more appropriately, the degree to which the filmmakers attempt to remain true to the ideas of the original must be proven. These ideas, the themes and discussions contained within the plays, do not necessarily have to be entirely accepted by the academic community either but rather must be the filmmakers' beliefs after a

thorough examination of the source material. Oliver Parker chose to have Cassio hand Othello a sword so that his former general could take his own life as discussed in the introduction. Parker is showing his belief that respect, a topic must discussed in the play, is important enough to Cassio for him to allow Othello to regain some of it before his death. The same is true with Gertrude making the conscious choice to drink poison in Almerayda's film. All of the films discussed within this thesis began as a close reading of the text from the filmmaker and while their reading could be disagreed with in some cases, it cannot be undervalued. One of the most wonderful conventions of literature is that multiple meanings can be gleaned from reading the same text depending on an individual's experience. Almerayda, Loncraine, Luhrmann, Nelson, and Morrissette have now added their experiences and meanings to Shakespeare's and as a result, future readers and viewers will be able to bring more understanding to both the films and the original text.

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