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Recommended Citation

Mudd, Samantha L., "From Print to Projection: An Analysis of Shakespearian Film Adaptation" (2008). *Student Research Conference Select Presentations*. Paper 10.

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From Print to Projection: An Analysis of Shakespearian Film Adaptation

By Samantha Mudd

A close relationship between literature and film is nothing new. For over 100 years, turning mental pictures into visual images has captivated filmmakers and viewers alike, allowing for further expression, interpretation, and sometimes understanding of the original text. Even the theatrical works of William Shakespeare have been adapted onto film, relocating the action from stage to screen and bringing his art to larger audiences than ever before. With the technology of film, the conventions of Elizabethan theatre are challenged as filmmakers choose to modify or relocate the action of the plot. But is this acceptable? Many scholars argue that this type of exposure is harmful, while fans often settle into the idea that "the book is better." However, by overcoming the prejudices of adaptation and analyzing the film as its own art form, audiences may change their attitudes. It becomes evident that well done Shakespearian film adaptation acts more to elaborate, rather than corrupt the original text and culture's perception of Shakespeare.

Richard III and *Henry V* are only two of the many Shakespeare plays to be touched by the film bug. However, along with this from-print-to-projection transformation comes prejudices about their film counter parts—*Richard III* by Richard Loncraine and Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*. In the introduction of *A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, Robert Stam identifies typical prejudices against film adaptations like these. For example, the preconceived notion that literature is more complex than film is often false. But this idea combined with what Stam identifies as logophilia—the perception that a text is sacred—really acts as a limiting force for Shakespearian films and their reception. Not only do these prejudices create a higher level of pressure for the filmmaker, but also they can potentially repel viewers. As Stam notes, though, many tend to “[lament] what has been ‘lost’ in the transition from novel to film, while ignoring what has been gained” (3).

So what's the deal with this friction? The “logophiliacs” view film as a corruptor, sneaking between the lines and assaulting the sacred words and plot devices of the English language's master. Nevertheless, Hollywood culture could

definitely benefit from a Shakespearian kick in the behind, although audiences are often intimidated by the mere mention of Shakespeare, let alone his original language. The truth is, Shakespeare's work is so universal that it can be widely translated to different times and places.

It is this universality that allows adaptations of Shakespeare's plays to span the spectrum from theatrical to filmic. Although Branagh's *Henry V* rests somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, Branagh opted to remain relatively faithful to the original text. Yet Branagh's creativity was hardly dampened by this choice, as he artistically couples action and language to reflect a multi-dimensional King Henry on film. The depiction of the eponymous character is strongly enhanced by the capabilities of film. For example, Henry's entrance immediately portrays his character as an intimidating figure, as his backlit silhouette marches towards the throne and people of the court scamper to their seats. At this point in the story, Henry is a relatively new king, so it's no surprise when this powerful image is quickly challenged by the bishops of Eli and Canterbury who want Henry to invade France. They eventually succeed in influencing his decision, but to

visually illustrate Henry's dilemma, Branagh utilizes camera angles to enhance the significance of the characters' staging. The last frame of Canterbury's speech zooms in on King Henry's face with the bishops on either side, staring intently at Henry. This suggests that Henry is caught in the middle of this decision, and gives viewers their first glimpse of a dynamic Henry. Without the abilities of film, Henry's internal conflict may go unnoticed, or, at the very least, may remain more speculative. With this in mind, one presumes that Branagh wanted to embrace the abilities of film in order to enhance Shakespeare's original characterization of King Henry. This adaptation is mostly true to the text, accentuating Henry's dynamic nature and allowing the viewers to judge Henry's actions for themselves.

While Branagh embraces filmic abilities in *Henry V*, Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* grabs film technique by the ankles and shakes until all the goods come out. In an essay regarding cinematic conventions in *Richard III*, James Loehlin correctly asserts that this film both "embraces and exploits [mainstream] conventions to make a striking and imaginative Shakespeare film that remains every inch a movie" (67). Here Loehlin implies that the difference between a film

and a movie boils down to Hollywood pop-culture, which has always been an obstacle for Shakespearian adaptations. Accordingly, if an adaptation incorporates literary or artistic techniques it may be considered a film; if it veers too far from the original and embraces modern fads or trends, it may be considered a movie. If this is true, Loncraine balances these opposing art forms by updating the setting to 1930s England and utilizing modern warfare, glamorous costumes, editing, and a catchy soundtrack to create a highly filmic adaptation. For example, the opening scene begins at a colorful party where Richard, played by Ian McKellen, leads the audience from room to room while delivering a soliloquy. *McKellen, who also played Richard in the Royal National Theatre's production of Richard III* for years, reveals his scheme to become king. This scene intensifies as the camera follows Richard from the public arena of the party, to an extremely private realm--the bathroom. The camera's ability to move the audience from room to room insinuates that Richard's corrupt thinking may be a result of his loneliness. This could potentially go unnoticed on stage. What's more, McKellen delivers his final lines in this scene while peering directly into the camera lens. This symbolic

gesture allows McKellen, an infamous stage actor, to acknowledge film as a viable, relevant source of Shakespeare and his art.

On a more general note, Loncraine contrasted this modern setting by taking perhaps the biggest risk in mainstream Shakespeare film: using Shakespeare's original language. This could possibly repel audiences, but where Branagh's choice to use Elizabethan English may be a given, Loncraine establishes a tension between the language and the setting. This tension is highly reflective of the story's plot and, perhaps more significantly, the friction between Shakespeare and film. Without the medium of film, this statement would be non-existent. With film, this issue is brought to light, forcing some sort of compromise between films and movies, as defined by Loehlin.

Although Loncraine exploits mainstream movie culture, his attempt to bring Shakespeare into it curiously questions the validity of Shakespeare's place in pop-culture. Many argue that transferring this traditionally high culture figure into pop culture reaps no benefits. However, the questionable motives of the powerful King Henry and King Richard prove that Shakespeare was often a source of

commentary for the culture in which he lived. Thus, Shakespeare's second-class status in Hollywood forces us to take inventory of our current cultural values.

Does our refusal to give these films a fair, prejudice-free chance suggest an issue with what we consider entertaining? And in a world of "Spark Notes,"

"Cliffsnotes," or any other notes, are we taking short cuts to understanding

Shakespeare by renting the movie and calling ourselves cultured? Absolutely not.

In addition to the challenges faced by all filmmakers, those adapting Shakespeare must find a balance when properly modifying the text for film, making adaptation a true art form. Furthermore, the fact that these adaptations act as a tool for cultural criticism and introspection signifies the validity of Shakespearean adaptations and proves that these films have potential to enrich culture.

Simply put, one cannot assume that film corrupts. Film adaptations act to expose audiences to masterpieces and hopefully draw viewers in for more.

Shakespeare did, after all, originally create for the masses. Films based on his work are merely an echo of his intentions, functioning similarly and translating the context for modern audiences. Rather than condemning adaptation, we should

acknowledge its ability to flex Shakespeare's universal capabilities.