The Shakespeare Stratagem: Legitimacy, Legality and the Nickelodeon Shakespeare Boom

Eddy Von Mueller
Emery University

At first glance, the idea of a silent production of a Shakespeare play seems almost absurd. After all, William Shakespeare is revered as much as a poet as a dramatist. As unforgettable a character as a Falstaff or a Lady Macbeth might be, however ingenious and poignant his plots, it is nevertheless above all the *words* of Shakespeare that we remember. The plays are, by and large, now "texts," in the most literal sense of the terms. We memorize a scattering of sonnets and soliloquies in high school, read *Romeo and Juliet* aloud in a class, perhaps see a local pro-am troupe of demimondaines updating *Titus Andronicus*, or watch Mel Gibson glower his way through *Hamlet*—but in the end, it's all about the words. Shakespeare, then, is in many ways today a verbal and linguistic phenomenon. The English used in Shakespeare's plays may not be entirely comprehensible to us, but it is immediately discernable as *his*, a signature sound, if you will.

And yet, in the first decades of the twentieth century, during the apparent stillness[1] of the film medium's first three decades, and throughout the world, numerous motion pictures were made based on the works of William Shakespeare. Some, like J. Stewart Blackton's 1909 Vitagraph production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are little more than costume novelties. Others stand out as milestones of cinematic craft and art, like Dmitri Buchowetzki's superb 1923 version of *Othello*.[2] But in either case, these efforts demanded that Shakespeare be radically reinvented, both in form and in context. Obviously, a silent Shakespeare must be largely devoid of poetry—or, rather, the burden of poetry must be displaced to the visual and the cinematic, to direction, design, and image. Early cinematic interpretations are, necessarily, Shakespeare done dumb (and, some might argue, dumbed down), plot and character in this new medium being conveyed according to different principles and on a different scale than the theatrical stage afforded

or allowed. Celluloid Shakespeare represented something new to the movies as well. In the early years of the twentieth century, motion pictures were widely viewed in the United States as a low-brow novelty for the working class. In turning the camera on Shakespeare, American filmmakers were boldly going where they had never gone before—into the realm of high culture.

While a few vignettes derived from the tragedies had been produced in Europe, little sign of any American cameraman using the most marvelous new toy of Machine Age to represent Shakespeare appeared prior to 1908. In that year, though, a modest Shakespeare boom began. No fewer than thirty adaptations of various plays were made in the United States between 1908 and 1913, in keeping with standard industrial practice at the time, one or two reels (less than roughly 18 minutes in length). The brevity of film entertainment was well suited to the context in which it was consumed. Until the mid-teens, motion pictures in the United States were exhibited primarily in storefront theaters, sometimes called nickelodeons, many of which were situated in urban communities and most of which catered to a predominantly working class audience. Programs were changed frequently, sometimes daily, and few individual films were perceived to be noteworthy attractions in themselves. Nor were particular performers in pictures much of a draw; film actors were un-credited in the United States until the early teens. Such being the case, production focused on short films, quickly and cheaply made, and in the first decade of the twentieth century, the motion pictures (or "flickers," a slang term referring to the strobing phenomenon produced by inadequacies in projection technology) were, if not actually disreputable, at the very least suspect—an anonymous, ephemeral, cheaply made, cheaply sold, and practically disposable diversion. The movies might be wildly popular with the masses—with as many as 6000 Nickelodeons in America by 1908, bringing in a staggering $2 million a week—but to the middle-class and the elite, they were anything but art.

So why were the nickel theaters in 1908 suddenly showing Shakespeare? In a nice display of dramatic timing, the Bard bows in at the movies at a moment in which the fledgling film industry stood at a crucial crossroads. In Europe, motion pictures had already been acknowledged as an important expressive force, the latest of lively arts, but Americans were deeply divided in their attitudes towards the new medium. Middle-class reformers, as leery of the flickers as they were of the teeming millions who made up the majority of their audience, decried the negative moral

impact of "nickel madness" with zealous ferocity. Movies were denounced in editorials and from the pulpit, and the nickelodeons were condemned as lurid dens of vice. Nor were the overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon and Protestant mainstream of the dominant American culture group pleased with the Jewish immigrants that had emerged as the dominant force in film exhibition.[3]

The flurry of public disapproval was effectively used by pioneering industrialist Thomas Edison, who had conceived of motion pictures as an entertainment commodity in 1891 and who promised order and reform following the formation in July of the Motion Picture Patents Company, a technology-based and nakedly monopolistic cartel that shared essential film patents, restricted access to any company unwilling to play ball, and sought to steal a march on the new Nickelodeon millionaires and take control of the controversial industry. So intense were the anti-film sentiments that, in December, George B. McClellan, the Mayor of New York, issued an order revoking the operating licenses of the city's 600 or more nickel theaters. The demand for movies (or perhaps, the clout that several billion nickels could buy) was such that exhibitors were able to stymie the ban in a matter of days,[4] but such a direct assault on the film business could hardly be ignored. The concerns of reformers agitating against film consumption and content would have to be addressed.

Nor could the fledgling film trade ignore the courts. In 1908, a district court in New York heard the case of *Harper and Bros. vs. Kalem* and issued a decision that reverberated through the motion picture industry for years. Eventually appealed all the way to the Supreme Court (*Kalem Co. vs. Harper Brothers* 222 US 55, 1911), the suit had been filed by the publishers of the popular *Harper's* magazine, who sought to force filmmakers to compensate publishers for film subjects poached from print sources protected by copyright—a common tactic among cost-conscious producers fiercely competing for the audience's attention. Anticipating legal actions leveled by authors, publishers and news syndicates, the men who made movies steered immediately clear of copyrighted properties. The so-called Public Domain became the new preferred hunting ground—and soon movie-makers were mining it for any kind of material familiar to viewers but free from legal liability. The New York and New Jersey based "studios" began turning out short films based on nursery rhymes and fairy-tales (*Cinderella Up-to-Date*, 1909), history (*Washington Under the British Flag*, *Life of Napoleon*, both 1909), poetry (*The Sands of Dee*, 1912), the Bible

(*Salome*, 1908; *Judgement of Solomon*, 1909), and Charles Dickens (*Oliver Twist*, 1909).

And, of course, Shakespeare.

It is possible to see in these two dilemmas the contradictory position in which the popular medium found itself in 1908: on the one hand, the anti-nickelodeon movement and the New York ban reveal an impulse to banish the moving image to the margins, branding it a noxious and an outlaw form; the Harper and Bros. suit, on the other, was an attempt to draw the film industry into line with the regulations that governed the legitimate mainstream of American capitalist enterprise. Considering the crisis in legitimacy and crisis in legality confronting producers and exhibitors, the silent interpretations of *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Richard III* that hit storefront screens after 1908 no longer seem aberrant, but rather, strategic—drawing from the venerable well of the safely un-copyrighted Shakespearean canon, and effectively killing two birds with one stone: simultaneously demonstrating good corporate citizenship and elevating their product safely above the reproach of the reformers. Like the Bible or Little Bo-Peep, who could possibly object to Shakespeare as suitable to share with the Great Unwashed?

The first spate of Shakespeare films from this period are more products of the early cinema's mode of production than faithful adaptations of the renowned plays. Typical of nickel Shakespeare is the 1909 version of *Midsummer's Night Dream* made for the Vitagraph company by J. Stewart Blackton, who produced seven such subjects between 1908 and 1914, the year film production in the United States began to shift towards more substantial feature-length fare. The narrative is condensed to a series of exterior static scenes or tableaux, photographed in long shot and frontally staged as if for a theatrical audience. These somewhat aloof vignettes are punctuated by printed inter-titles, none of which contain so much as an iamb of Shakespearean pentameter (presumably, the relevance of the inter-titles would have eluded in any event many members of the nickelodeon's polyglot and often illiterate audience).

This seems to suggest either that the broad strokes of the stories are well-known enough to the film-going public of the time to be taken as read, or more likely that the narrative nuances of the often complex tragedies are irrelevant. So, it would appear, is acting. Without closer shots of the actors, performance in the film is limited to pantomime histrionics, which lend little to our understanding the acrobatically twisted plot of *Midsummer's Night's*

Dream. Thus, in the nickel tragedies, the finer points of Shakespeare's text, the performance of his poetics and the elegant unfolding of his plots, are nowhere to be found in Blackton's short.

What shines through instead in Blackton's film is magic. The camera is a powerful tool for manufacturing fantasy and illusion, and Blackton himself was a master of the trick film. His work includes some of the first animations (*Humorous Phases as Funny Faces*, 1906), special-effects spectacles (the enormously popular *Haunted Hotel*, 1907), and inventive historical re-enactments (*Lincoln's Gettysburg Address*, 1912). In his *Dream*, characters miraculously appear and disappear (always tricky on the stage, but easily accomplished on-screen), and the mouth of Nick Bottom's temporary ass-head moves with silent speech. At one point, the staid succession of static shots is suspended and Puck "flies" off in search Oberon's magic herb. Blackton uses almost invisible wires to suspend the actor playing the mischievous sprite over a spinning globe, complete with synthetic clouds. It's an impressive bit of filmic trickery, upstaging by a mile the be-toga'd breast-beating that precedes and follows it. In the hands of a veteran trickster like Blackton, Puck's errand, colorfully recanted, but thoroughly incidental to the progress of the play, becomes the central event and the principle attraction in the film.

This appears to be the pattern for most early cinematic treatments of the Bard. William Shakespeare's is unquestionably a name of renown, and his plays were a reliable resource for filmmakers searching for respectable material, but the texts themselves are used primarily to frame sequences containing a spectacle of the sort already popular with the core motion picture audience—a duel, a dance, or trick-film special effects. For instance, a number of early *Hamlets* dwell on the climactic clash between Laertes and the Danish prince. Much is made as well of his father's ghost (always a good excuse for some hocus-pocus of the type at which the film camera excels). Blackton's 1908 rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* deliberately lingers long over the young swain's duel and over the poisoning in Juliet's boudoir (exactly the sort of potentially salacious location that would be scandalous were it not for the purifying mantle of Avon's Favorite Son). Shakespearean subjects in the nickelodeon era, then, not only answered the legal concerns raised by the copyright battles, but they also allowed filmmakers to evade criticism without radically altering the nature of their production practices. These films provide standard cinematic attractions—costume melodrama, sword-play, and camera magic—in a new package, one well-suited to easing middle-class and upper-class anxieties.

It was also a strategy that had worked once before. The nickelodeon's most potent adversary in the entertainment industry and the dominant form of popular culture in the United States at the turn of the century was vaudeville. Though the origin of the form (and for that matter, the term) is a subject of some dispute, vaudeville was unquestionably the king of pre-cinematic entertainment. By the mid-teens, there were 1,000 vaudeville theaters in America, in big cities and small towns, many of them lavishly appointed affairs able to accommodate audiences numbering in the hundreds, a far cry from the close quarters of the nickel theaters.[6] Vaudeville presented a something-for-everyone program or "bill" of live entertainment—everything from comic monologues and "chalk-talk" routines to operatic overtures and virtuoso piano solos—to a multi-class, all-ages, national audience. Like the film business, vaudeville was centered in New York City. Beginning in the mid-'80s, baronial impresarios Benjamin Franklin Keith and Edward F. Albee had begun building extensive chains of theaters and organizing performers into national touring "circuits," exploiting the telegraphically and telephonically linked newspapers to market acts.

By the time the upstart screen trade was having its troubles in 1908, the vaudeville industry was well on its way to being streamlined, standardized, and mainstreamed, but it had had a checkered past, the remains of which remained solidly on the program. Vaudeville bills often included any number of low-brow acts, such as hula dancers, physical oddities, trained animals and the always-popular "regurgitators," and shows almost invariably opened with such so-called "dumb acts."[7] "Dumb acts," like the "Flickers," were bound to raise more than a few middle-class, reform-minded eyebrows. Circuit moguls like Albee, Keith, and Marcus Loew responded by putting their profits into making their "Big-Time" theaters more and more lavish and by luring higher-class (and higher cost) acts onto the circuit. Concert musicians, legitimate theater actors and well-known public figures, from ball-players to war heroes, appeared on the "Big-Time" vaudeville stage.[8]

Despite the lofty disrespect of many high-brow entertainers and the principle trade press (*Variety*, in particular, was once known for its years of hostility towards vaudeville), actors as respected as Ethel Barrymore and even the legendary Sarah Bernhardt did "turns" in vaudeville, drawn by the substantial fees recognizable names or "headliners" could command.[9] Such luminaries performed scenes from legitimate dramas and played in one- and two-act works, some of them by popular authors like Conan Doyle,

and performed monologues and speeches from famous dramatic works, including those of William Shakespeare.[10]

With more opulent sites of consumption and a scattering of more elevated bits added to the bill, the vaudeville industry exploded, eventually encompassing almost the entire entertainment spectrum and the most diverse audience any cultural form had yet attained. Professionals and intellectuals rubbed metaphoric, if not literal shoulders with the working class at America's vaudeville theaters, and Woodrow Wilson regularly played hookey from the White House to attend shows at Keith's "Big-Time" theater in D.C.

Vaudeville had a scope and breadth that the hungry young film industry could but envy in 1908 (the movies wouldn't catch the presidential eye until 1915, when Griffith's Civil War epic, *Birth of a Nation*, played a command performance for Wilson, a history buff, who praised it as "history written in lightning).[11] It was likely a secure and established multi-class audience that the new nickelodeon millionaires coveted. It would hardly be surprising to find the immigrant moguls adopting tactics similar to those that had proved so successful in vaudeville. After 1908, the nickel theaters retained the proletarian core of their program, delivering the chases, trick films, non-fiction actualities, and slapstick ephemera that had been the mainstay of storefront exhibition since 1902 (even as "Big-Time" vaudeville retained regurgitators). Superficially classier fare was simply added to the bill, adding value to their product through the borrowing of famous names, if not through the manufacture of high-quality adaptations. Before the movies had big-name stars of their own to sell, New York's nickelodeon barons used other famous names as a draw, names like "Macbeth" and "Anthony" and "Cleopatra"—and above all, "Shakespeare."

It would not be going too far to suggest that "Shakespeare" functions in early moving pictures almost as a hallmark or a brand, a sign that suggests a link between the mechanical passion of the masses and older, more celebrated cultural forms. It is a sign that suggests safety and sophistication as well. The vaudeville turns taken by legitimate actors and tragedy queens helped familiarize a healthy sampling of the American populace with short-format Shakespeare and other high-culture abridgements, and the film industry in its turn exploited the cultural cachet of the Elizabethan playwright and his plays for their own purposes.

This process can be seen clearly in operation in the career of one actor in particular. Frederick B. Warde regularly moved between

the legitimate stage and the vaudeville circuit and became a living link as well between "vaude" and the flickers. British by birth, Warde came to the United States in 1874 and, like so many British actors since, made a name for himself first as a serious stage actor and then in pictures. Warde was a regular cast member at New York's Booth theater, one of the metropolis' so-called "legit" establishments, but the English tragedian was a familiar face in "Big-Time" vaudeville on the East Coast as well. He also promoted himself as something of a Shakespeare specialist, lecturing widely on the subject and even opening an "Institute of Oratory, Expression, and Shakespearean Studies" at his upstate New York home in 1909. Though his later career was marked by financial and professional disappointment, his reputation (or desperation) was such that Warde, then in his 50s, was tapped by producer M.B. Dudley in 1911 to play the lead in the most ambitious American Shakespeare production yet.

If films like those made by Blackton, Griffith and their nickelodeon-era peers introduced Shakespeare to the movies without altering to any great extent the nature of filmed entertainment, the same cannot be said of the 1912 production of *The Life and Death of Richard the Third.* Long believed lost and only recently re-discovered, the film is a frank imitation of *Queen Elizabeth*, a lavishly appointed four-reel "feature" directed by Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton. The picture was distributed by the European Societé de Film D'art and starred renowned tragedienne Sarah Bernhardt in the title role, the first legitimate actor of her stature to appear in pictures. The film was imported in 1912 by nickel theater mogul Adolph Zukor (who would later reign over the Paramount empire), who made a small fortune on the lavishly staged, if somewhat stodgily executed epic.[12]

For reasons both financial and tactical, other American filmmakers were eager to emulate Zukor's *Elizabeth* triumph, and 1912 saw two such feature productions, Dudley's *Richard* and Griffith's clandestine *Judith of Bethulia*, a sweeping story drawn from that other great crucible of legitimate film narrative, the Bible. Since Griffith's film was never released in its intended four-reel form, *Richard* holds pride of place as the first domestically produced feature film exhibited in the United States.

Directed by Societé de Film D'art veteran Andre Calmettes (who directed an abridged *Macbeth* in 1910) and James Keane, the film was sometimes peddled as *Mr. Frederick Warde in Shakespeare's Masterpiece 'The Life and Death of King Richard III.'* The foregrounding of Warde speaks to his drawing power, and to Shakespeare's. Much

like *Elizabeth*, it is essentially a filmed play, a stately procession of dressy tableaux. Lacking any of the kinetic action or camera magic of the nickel Shakespeare shorts, this prototypical feature treatment of the Bard is a much more serious affair, principally preoccupied with showing off its sets and costumes (impressive, for the era) and Warde's broadly intense performance as the hunchbacked king. As might be expected, there are more titles than in most shorts, but having visited Shakespeare's feast of language, the cinema has still ta'en only the scraps. The virtuosity implied by an actor's reputed mastery of Shakespeare, and the high-culture sheen imparted by the Shakespeare brand name (and by a full-blown feature film), are what is selling *Richard*, not the vaunted poetics of play itself. For American film culture in 1912, Shakespeare has a power that transcends the printed page or the spoken word.

The moment of the nickel Shakespeare boom is a fascinating one, one that illuminates the complexities of a powerful new medium and of American culture in the early years of the twentieth century. It is a moment marked by crisis, ambition and compromise, between audiences, industries and ideologies. And William Shakespeare stands, in absentia, at the center of it all. The length of Shakespeare's shadow across world culture is immeasurable in so slight a paper as this one, but certainly the significance of works of William Shakespeare to the evolution of the motion picture is undeniable. Even out of silence, Shakespeare helped call American cinema out of the realm of quickie flickers and storefront theaters and forge from a working class novelty a dramatic mass-medium.

Notes

1. The term "silent" when applied to early cinema is profoundly misleading one. While it is true that no sound was recorded during the production of most films made before 1926, and that no fixed sound "track" was provided to exhibitors showing the material, films were nevertheless never seen in silence. Musical or auditory accompaniment was highly varied—small theaters might have a lone piano player or a lecturer while larger movie palaces of later years could accommodate whole orchestras to play along with pictures—but there would invariably be something to break the silence.

2. Buchowetzki's film was made at Germany's UFA studio at the height of its powers as the world's premier center for cinematic innovation, and featured in the title role of the passionate Moor Emil Jannings, regarded as one of the finest screen actors of his day. In the movies, as in theater, playing Shakespeare is, regarded as the acid test for thespian achievement, another of the ways in which Shakespeare functions as a powerful sign of quality in contemporary popular culture.

3. Xenophobia and anti-Semitism would haunt the film industry for decades to come, and the nickelodeon kings who would dominate the American cinema

into the 1960s, men like Louis Mayer, Sam Goldwyn, and Adolph Zukor, frequently found themselves targets of public hysteria and disapprobation, well into the post-war period.

4. Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America: A Cultural History of the Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 30-31.

5. Griffith, who would later revolutionize American cinema with his controversial 1914 epic, The Birth of a Nation, made a Shakespearean short of his own, *The Taming of the Shrew*, during the 1908 wave.

6. Charles Stein, ed., *American Vaudeville As Seen By Its Contemporaries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 104.

7. A startlingly common attraction in vaudeville, these performers specialized in drinking liquids and then returning them in unusual ways. One imbibed, separately, water and goldfish and then filled a tank held by cooperative audience member with both. Such an act would doubtless have been as gripping in Shakespeare's day.

8. Sklar, 31.

9. John E. Dimeglio, *Vaudeville U.S.A.* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), 152.

10. Stein, 232.

11. David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 77.

12. Cook., 38.