

FILM AS A MEANS OF POPULARIZATION OF CLASSICAL AUTHORS

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Abstract

Literature and film have always had a close relation ever since the invention of cinema. Film producers consider literature as a ready-made stock of scripts that they can access any time. Shakespeare's plays are probably some of the most adapted works in cinema history, having been turned either into highly modern films or into films that closely observed the original text. Film adaptations managed to do something that theatre seemed unable to do lately, that is to popularize classical authors and to bring them into the spotlight once again.

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Shakespeare has entered the modern era with the invention of cinema. Ever since its first days, cinema has had a close relationship with the Shakespearian plays. Some of the oldest film adaptations go back as far as 1909 and 1910 for *King Lear*.

The fascinating fact about Shakespeare in the context of film adaptation is the fact that there is no other playwright to have had so many of his plays turned into films.

Almost all of Shakespeare's plays have been turned into films. Some, like the BBC series, have respected closely the original plays, while others have moved the action into a modern context. Regardless of the way in which the plays were adapted they seem to continue to fascinate film directors, given the fact that from 1909 to 2008 there have been so many films done after the bard's plays. This fascination might be explained by the fact that Shakespeare's plays, whether tragedies or comedies, never seem to go out of date. The issues they deal with are essentially human, thus they are forever modern. Feuds between rival families, love quarrels, father-daughter problems happened in the 16th century and they still do.

First of all, the 1999 version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with a screen play by Michael

Hoffman and starring Michelle Pfeiffer, Stanley Tucci, Calista Flockart, is a very good example of adaptation by modernizing only one of the three levels mentioned by Holmes. In this case the director chose to move the action of the play into another time frame. The setting and the costumes are those of the 19th century, but the text is Shakespeare's own, without any alterations.

This version closely observes the setting of the original play. With the exception of the 19th century costumes everything is as Shakespeare initially imagined: the mysterious forest, the fairies causing troubles to the mortals, etc. The reason which dictated this relocation in the 19th century is the fact that some people may find it hard to relate to a 16th century character. By moving the action in the 19th century, the director offers the viewer a context he can relate to, since this time frame is closer to us than the 16th century, but at the same he manages to give the impression of a story from another century.

If we are to think that even in Shakespeare's time the actors used in 16th century costumes in plays that were set in ancient Athens, then we can conclude that the director of this film actually, observed a theatrical convention that was not unfamiliar to Renaissance theatergoers.

The fact that the costumes belong to the 19th century does not change the essence of the play. In fact, a person who has no knowledge about the history of costume might not even realize that the costumes in this film are from another epoch *i.e.* anachronic.

All in all, this is an adaptation which balances very well the elements of modernity with those of the original play. The viewer gets acquainted with a very faithful version of a *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but he or she can at the same time relate to the setting and the decor.

The incongruity between the costume, and the language of the characters is less perceivable than in the case of Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, where the action was relocated into the 20th century Verona Beach. Luhrmann chose to relocate the action, but to keep Shakespeare's original lines. It is somewhat similar to the above mentioned film, however, the viewer might be somewhat disturbed by the discrepancy between the 16th century language and the very modern costumes.

I have found this version a bit far fetched, because it confuses the viewer who might ask himself or herself whether this is Shakespeare or some sort of parody. Although this adaptation falls into Holmes' category of partial modernization, I think Hoffman did a better job at this than Luhrmann, who can be accused of using high profile actors such as Leonardo di Caprio for a rather poor adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The second adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is even more recent. It is a 2005 Hallmark version, which is very modern. With a screenplay by Peter Bowker, starring Bill Patterson and Imelda Staunton, this version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is set in the 20th century. The director chose to modernize the original play on all three levels linguistic, literary and socio-cultural.

First of all, the characters were "recreated". Few are the characters that keep the original name and "function". We can still recognize Oberon, Titania, Puck, Bottom, Helena, Hermia, Snug and others, but other characters are more difficult to spot. Egeus, Hermia's father, becomes in this version Theo who is married to Polly. Lysander is turned into Xander, whereas Demetrius turns into James.

There is also a change in the characters' psychology: Egeus, now turned into Theo is no longer a tyrannical father but rather the kind of parent that is deeply concerned with his daughter's well being. In the end, he will understand and approve Hermia's choice, but only after getting back with his wife Polly and remembering what is like to be young and in love. Oberon and Titania are also presented as a couple that, in spite of their deep love for each other, still quarrel like two teenagers. Peace between the two fairies is restored only after they

two remember what brought them together in the first place. Thus, they share in common with Theo and Polly the same marital problems.

The drastic changes operated by the screenwriter on the characters are mainly due to the fact that the action of the play no longer takes place in Athens but in a 20th century camping.

This is a very free adaptation, however it is in my opinion one of the best modern versions of Shakespeare. The viewer can relate easily with the characters and the situations, the humor of the film is somewhat in keeping with the 20th century tastes. For instance, when Oberon convinces Theo to go back to Polly and make up he tells him that he has to say to his wife three things: "I love you, I need you and you were right."

Another element of modernity is the fact that Oberon is played by the black actor, David Daniels. This choice of the director should not puzzle the filmgoer as it stresses the multiracial characteristic of the American society. At the same time it makes the film more interesting and, why not, exotic.

Another very good modern adaptation of a Shakespearian play is the 2005 BBC *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by David Richards and starring Shirley Henderson and Rufus Sewell. Although, a very modern version, this film manages to translate the humor and the uniqueness of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* into nowadays London.

The script does not retain any of the original lines. However, it does manage to render in a very modern fashion the intensity of the quarrels between Kate and Petruchio.

The names of the characters were slightly altered we have Katherine Minola, Bianca Minola, Petruchio, Lucentio and other. The character Katherine's father is replaced in the film with Mrs Minola, a very modern mother who believes that her daughters should get married, but they should do that by forcing their husbands to sign premarital contracts.

In order to eliminate what could have been regarded as a sexist interpretation of Shakespeare's play, the character of Katherine had to be updated. She is turned into a workaholic, ball-breaking politician, tipped for the leadership of her party. There's nothing feminine or

touchy-feely about her – she’s blunt and rude, very unlike her glamorous mother and sister. She will agree to marry the penniless, but very eccentric aristocrat Petruchio simply because the electorate like married politicians.

The marriage between Kate and Petruchio is done because each of them had something to gain from it: Petruchio wants Kate’s money and Kate wants Petruchio’s title because it would make her even more credible and, why not, more appealing in the eyes of her electorate.

The film ends in a very feminist manner, Kate becomes prime-minister and Petruchio, now deeply in love with his wife, stays at home and takes care of their triplets. The director chose to end the story this way, by implying that Kate does not submit to Petruchio’s will, but rather that she understands that it takes two in a couple and that sulking like a spoiled child every time something goes wrong is not the answer.

In my opinion, this is one of the best modern adaptations of a Shakespearian play, because it manages to preserve the main message of Shakespeare’s comedy, still adjusting it to the needs and concerns of a 21st century audience.

To conclude, I would like to say that it is very hard to adapt Shakespeare for the screen, but it gets even more difficult when trying to adapt the bard for a modern audience, because there is a very thin line between adaptation as translation and adaptation as creative rewriting.

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 23. *King of Texas* (2002), directed by Uli Edel.
 24. *Romeo and Juliet* (1996), directed by Baz Lurhman.
 25. *The Taming of the Shrew*, BBC (2005) directed by David Richards.