

Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks, eds. *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*. Madison, N.J: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002. 243 pp. ISBN 0-838-63910-0

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Editors Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks have assembled a collection designed to speak to one of the great symptoms of academic work in our time: the destabilization of the once-hallowed status of the Author. From the theoretical advances of Barthes, Foucault, and the poststructuralist school to the ongoing debate over "true" authorship, even Shakespeare himself has not been immune to the slings and arrows of postmodern circumstance. In no other arena is this more prevalent or noticeable than in film adaptations of Shakespeare's work, wherein the play text must be placed into conversation with not only the visual medium of film, but also with other (sometimes complementary, sometimes competing) "authorial" voices: those of director, actor, and screenwriter. By engaging fruitfully with the theories that have thrown authorship itself into doubt, and by assembling texts from a variety of perspectives to address the explosion of Shakespearean adaptation and appropriation over the past twenty years, editors Lehmann and Starks have put together a collection that is robust, readable, and highly useful to scholars at all levels.

Divided into three parts, *Spectacular Shakespeare* approaches Shakespearean film from a variety of critical perspectives. The first section, "Appropriating Culture, Race, and Authority," considers from a postcolonial perspective how "images, identities, and even countries become objects of conquest in the name of Shakespeare" (13). Marguerite Hailey Rippey begins by tracing the image of Othello through a couple of rather obscure instantiations: a 1940s George Cukor film named *A Double Life*, and an episode of *Cheers*. Using Žižek and theorists of African American identity, she builds a larger case for how popular re-readings of *Othello* implicitly privilege the construction of white male identities, relegating Othello himself to little more than a "symbolic referent to the aspects of white male consciousness that American society perceives as dark, foreign, and primitive" (41). Alfredo Michel Modenessi's "(Un)doing the Book 'Without Verona Walls'" focuses on the cultural politics of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), painstakingly re-reading the film's kitschy deployment of Mexican iconography. Less of an attempt at demonstrating the reinterpretation of the Shakespearean source material, than a consideration of the film as a

visual artifact, full of ideologically loaded icons, Modenessi's effective cultural reading looks at the film in its own terms, (re)thinking it as cultural capital rather than placing the film in the service of Shakespearean studies.

The second section, "Reframing Romance: Sex, Love, and Subjectivity," shifts to the subjective dimensions of Shakespeare to consider such concepts as sexuality and identity-formation. Laurie Osborne's "Cutting Up Characters" offers a highly detailed look at Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, which is set against a strong reading of the original text, in an effort to consider the tensions and ambiguities between twentieth-century demands for gender equality and Viola's own ideology of romantic love. Samuel Crowl's "The Marriage of Shakespeare and Hollywood" zeroes in on *Much Ado About Nothing*, initiating the book's second-half focus on the controversial auteur-figure of Kenneth Branagh. Crowl's analysis does an excellent job of attending to the gender roles imbricated in both film and text and considering Branagh's use of film as a medium. Like the collection itself, this essay strikes a delicate balance between the film tradition (here, the "screwball" comedies of the 1940s) and the Shakespearean tradition. Courtney Lehmann's "Shakespeare in Love: Romancing the Author, Mastering the Body" returns to yet another figure of Viola, this time from *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). In one of the collection's more ambitious pieces, Lehmann painstakingly analyzes the adaptation of Shakespeare: not just the film's reprocessing of *Romeo and Juliet*, but also its re-presentation of Shakespeare's own body. Through a combination of gender criticism and Frankfurt School cultural critique, she details the film's highly complex economy of work and pleasure, reading the mystique of Shakespeare's author-ity in conjunction with our own "critical desire" (141). As if to help answer the question that she and her co-editor Lisa Starks pose in their introduction, "Are We In Love With Shakespeare?," Lehmann demonstrates how *Shakespeare in Love* both presents and mystifies what Deleuze and Guattari might have called the "desiring-machine" of the authorial corpus; popular culture's "dismemberment" and "resurrection" of Shakespeare as "an authorial body-in-pleasure" plays out not only an imaginary version of "feel-good capitalism," but also the "inexhaustibility of enjoyment" inherent to the text (125, 141). Theoretically dense yet accessible in its detailed reading, Lehmann's essay perhaps more than any other typifies the "pleasure" presented by this collection.

The third section of the book, "The Politics of the Popular: From Class to Classroom" offers excursions into the modern cultural dynamics of Shakespearean reception, from considerations of the "dumbing-down" of these plays in popular cinema to considerations of their pedagogical value. More particularly, what all three essays seem to have in common is that they are all equally haunted by the specter of Kenneth Branagh, particularly his still-controversial rendition of *Hamlet*. In many ways, *Hamlet* becomes the test-case for considering the efficacy of Shakespearean film; it presents

an interpretive fulcrum where Elizabethan textuality meets Hollywood presentation-value. This tension is explicitly played out in Douglas Lanier's "'Art Thou Base, Common, and Popular?'," which examines Branagh's entire body of work in order to spell out a very particular tension: Branagh's desire to resurrect the Golden Age of Shakespearean actors is fundamentally at odds with his desire to popularize the Bard and bring him to the masses. Elizabeth Dietchman also examines *Hamlet* as an interface for the culture's understanding of Shakespeare by studying several Hollywood films of the mid- to late-1990s that explicitly cite the Shakespearean text. These popular films use Shakespeare less as material for adaptation rather than as raw material for inventions of their own design: Hamlet becomes both a figure of high-cultural capital and an action hero. She ultimately gestures toward a pedagogical enterprise that would not emphasize "what Shakespeare means," but rather what we might "mean by Shakespeare" (184). Annalisa Castaldo rounds out the section with the most overtly pedagogical of the three essays, "The Film's The Thing." Engaging with the materiality of film, Castaldo develops a pedagogical model devoted to studying the cuts and collages that movies use to reinterpret the text. Looking at Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* from the perspective of Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur*, she suggests that we should dislodge centralized "correct" readings of the text, and recommends instead that we read the plays alongside the films to understand more clearly how each interprets the other. Of all the essays in the collection, Castaldo's is perhaps the one most devoted to considering the pedagogical possibilities inherent in adaptation.

The book concludes with a whirlwind of an essay from Richard Burt, entitled "Te(e)n Things I Hate about Girlene Shakesploitation Flicks in the Late 1990s, or, Not-So-Fast Times at Shakespeare High." Recoursing wildly through some fifteen films from the late Nineties, Burt tracks down not only full-on adaptations of the plays, but also small Shakespearean references that many researchers in Shakespearean appropriation are content either to miss or to ignore. Despite its breadth, the article offers detailed analyses of four films that place Shakespeare in the service of complicated and often contradictory notions of feminism and empowerment, including *10 Things I Hate About You* and *Never Been Kissed*. Taken as conflicts between the "good girls" and the "hotties" or "bad girls," all four films place Shakespeare in the service of complicated gender dynamics. Burt argues, however, that despite their seeming to offer liberated feminist re-visions of Shakespearean heroines, the films' deployment of "teensploitation" stereotypes have the ultimate effect of producing only safe, sterilized, feminine figures. Burt layers his analysis densely with abundant evidence from the films, and intercuts references to other popular films throughout. With this essay positioned strategically at the end of the book, one must wonder if Lehmann and Starks are throwing down some sort of interpretive gauntlet. Is the challenge for Shakespeare Studies after

the Death of the Author to follow Shakespeare in all of his textual disseminations into territory regarded by most scholars as at best unfamiliar and at worst hostile?

*Spectacular Shakespeare* poses this question and more, and does so through a collection of essays that are usefully varied in their approaches and choices of texts. Certainly valuable for scholars of Shakespearean adaptation, *Spectacular Shakespeare* is also a terrific potential resource for students. Its use of current films makes the book approachable and readable, and the various essays' treatment of critical and postmodern theories are well-explained and very accessible. Upper-division students who lack extensive exposure to theory would stand to gain a great deal. Its only negative quality, in terms of its usability, has nothing to do with the book itself. Published in 2002, *Spectacular Shakespeare* was poised at the crest of a huge wave, at the height of a decade-long Shakespearean renaissance in the cinema. Over the past three years, though, the New Wave of Bardolatry seems to have faded a bit. Kenneth Branagh's last attempt was 2000's unevenly received *Love's Labour's Lost*, and the last Hollywood production to attempt a full-on adaptation of a full Shakespearean text was the semi-disastrous Almereyda *Hamlet*, starring Ethan Hawke. We may ask in retrospect if the various spectacular excesses of Branagh and Lurhmann did not cause the "movement" to collapse on itself like so many "heaps of fragments." Still, despite the slight waning, the Shakespearean cinematic revolution is bound to keep moving on. According to the Internet Movie Database, Branagh has *As You Like It* slated for release in 2006, and popular and scholarly interest in Shakespeare and Shakespearean appropriation is continuing to develop new methods for seeing and performing the text in fresh ways.

### Online Resources

Internet Movie Database Information for Kenneth Branagh, *As You Like It* [cited June 1, 2005]. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0450972/?fr=c2l0ZT1kZnxteD0yMHxsbt01MDB8dHQ9b258ZmI9dXxwbj0wfHE9QXMgWW91IEtpa2UgSXR8aHRtb>

Internet Movie Database Information for Michael Almereyda, *Hamlet*[cited June 1, 2005]. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171359/>

References

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