

A History of Shakespeare on Screen

A CENTURY OF FILM AND TELEVISION

Kenneth S. Rothwell



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Shakespeare in silence: from stage to screen

Nickelodeons, penny gaffs, and fair grounds

How best to imagine Shakespeare's words in moving images? The challenge to auteurial ingenuity began in September 1899 when William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson, an early collaborator with Thomas Edison, teamed up with actor/director Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree to film excerpts from *King John*, then playing at Her Majesty's Theatre in London.¹ Sir Herbert might have hesitated if he had realized how Dickson's technology would one day make waiters out of thousands of unemployed actors. The mechanical reproduction of art was in the air, however. Over the next three decades, film makers would grind out an estimated 150,000 silent movies, though but a tiny fraction, fewer than one percent, perhaps 500, would draw on Shakespeare. With their newly patented Cinématographe, the Lumière brothers had already projected on a screen at a Parisian café one-minute "actualities" of workers leaving a factory.² After a rival Edison movie exhibition on April 23, 1896, at New York City's Koster & Bial's Music Hall, Charles Frohman magisterially declared that "when art can make us believe that we see actual living nature, the dead things of the stage must go."³

Photographed in widescreen 68 mm at the Thames embankment open-air studio of Dickson's British Mutoscope and Biograph Company, Tree played the dying King John in act five, scene seven, against a studio backdrop for Swinstead Abbey. He was flanked by Prince Henry (Dora Senior) and the Earl of Pembroke (James Fisher), and by Robert Bigot (F.M. Paget), all in period costumes. As the poisoned king, Tree's writhing and clutching and gyrating and swiveling and squirming mime the agony of a human being whose "bowels [are crumbling] up to dust" and whose inner torment is akin to "hell" (5.7.30-45).⁴ In King John's death, however, Tree breathed life into an upstart rival to Shakespeare on stage – Shakespeare on screen in moving images. Ironically Shakespeare's *King John* also proleptically deals with the economic forces that would drive this fledgling art from its very beginnings – the curse of "tickling commodity," that "smooth-fac'd gentleman," which Philip the Bastard describes as "this bawd, this broker" that forces even kings



1 In *King John* (UK 1899), Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree as the dying monarch writhes in agony at Swinestead Abbey, while Pembroke (James Fisher), Prince Henry (Dora Senior), and Bigot (F.M. Paget) look on.

to “break faith” (2.1.573–85). The most cash-driven art form in history, film from the beginning has been enslaved to “tickling commodity.” Marx’s insight that capitalism’s gains for humanity’s material comfort often come at the price of its soul needs no better illustration. The iron rule of profit or perish has commodified Shakespeare, dictating the scope, size, frequency, and even the artistry of filmed plays, and at the same time forced the Shakespeare director into an inevitable synergy with popular culture.

At the start of this century, however, no one envisioned the revolutionary potential of the movie industry. Movies were working-class entertainment at England’s penny gaffs and music halls, American vaudeville, sideshows at European country fairs, and entr’acte diversions. Since by 1905, France controlled 60 percent of the world’s film business, not surprisingly the next Shakespeare “movie,” produced by the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, emerged, complete with “sound,” at the 1900 Paris Exposition. It photographed Sarah Bernhardt in moving images energetically fighting Laertes (Pierre Magnier) in the duel scene from *Hamlet*, with synchronized Edison cylinders providing the sound of clashing épées.⁵ Having played Hamlet on stage thirty-two times in 1899 alone, as well as performing in other earlier Shakespearean roles, and with an extraordinary flair for publicity,⁶ Sarah Bernhardt was a natural choice to star in this second ever Shakespeare movie. In her career, frustrated by the dearth of first-rate female parts and encouraged by the French stage tradition for cross-dressing, she acted in over two dozen *travesti* ranging from minor (a page boy) in *Phèdre* to a truly *grand premier travesti rôle* as in *Hamlet*.⁷ Moreover, contrary to prevailing ideas about “Hamletism” that stressed the prince’s inward femininity, “revenge permeated the production of the Bernhardt *Hamlet*.”⁸ In silent movies, Bernhardt’s famous silvery voice was stilled but on the other hand the French accent that prevented her from playing Romeo against Ellen Terry’s Juliet became irrelevant, for by substituting images for words her personality crossed international language barriers. As Carl Laemmle proclaimed in a trade journal advertisement, “Universal pictures speak the Universal language.” The spectacle of Shakespeare performed in a déclassé venue at a fairground may have shocked the bourgeois, who probably felt as did Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray at a cheap London theatre that “I must admit I was rather annoyed at the idea of seeing Shakespeare done in such a wretched hole of a place.” Bernhardt’s *Hamlet*, like Tree’s *King John*, as the extant frame enlargements show, went no further than being a record of a theatrical performance on a conventional stage set, a first step in the evolution of the Shakespeare movie from theatre into film.⁹

The sound effects for a fencing duel in Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* remind us that “silent” films were really never silent. As David A. Cook has noted, silent

film was an “aberration,” and “movies were intended to talk from their inception.”¹⁰ Thomas Edison’s plan for a “coin-operated entertainment machine” envisioned motion pictures illustrating sound from a phonograph, not the other way around. Live musicians quickly showed up in theatres to fill out the awful silences, and typically theatre owner Lyman H. Howe of New York City advertised in a trade journal for “an imitator to create sound effects back of the screen . . . a man [with the] natural ability to produce animal and mechanical sounds.”¹¹ A manager in Clear Lake, Iowa, needed a “singer and piano player combined,” to whom he would pay “a good salary,”¹² for he subscribed to the universal belief that “a good piano player is essential to the success of . . . electric theatre.”¹³ Female pianists could now use their previously unmarketable talents “by earning an honest living playing in a public place.”¹⁴ Audiences soon became so accustomed to sound that when the unfortunate John Riker, a projectionist isolated in his booth, mistakenly grabbed a live wire, his shrieks of agony as 1,000 volts surged through him were interpreted as splendid sound effects and wildly applauded. Rescued by the piano player, Riker’s roasted hand had “to be pried loose from the wire.”¹⁵

By 1908 the Kleine Optical Company was advertising its “remarkable consignment of film subjects” showing “famous French actors.”¹⁶ Like everyone else, the French rejoiced in finding literary properties by famous authors like Shakespeare whose “public domain” status meant freedom from any unpleasantness about royalties. Mesmerized by the prestige of the Comédie Française, French film makers developed the Film d’Art movement to glorify French theatrical tradition, which nurtured high culture but inhibited the growth of film art. In America, some companies like Adolph Zukor’s Famous Players, anxious to earn the cachet of high art, imitated the French, their movies often being lower-cased as “film d’art,” and the creation in Italy of the Film d’Arte Italiana added further confusion for filmographers. The assumption was that movies were not themselves an art but had to have art put into them with literary classics. Jean Mounet-Sully, “the greatest French actor of the period,” who played Hamlet at the Comédie Française, as well as Othello opposite Bernhardt’s Desdemona, soon followed, or even preceded Bernhardt, with a vignette from the *Hamlet* graveyard scene;¹⁷ and Georges Méliès, the inventor of trick photography, who put flying machines into space and showed people floating on air, performed the title role in a *Hamlet* segment (1907), as well as a cameo William Shakespeare in *Shakespeare Writing Julius Caesar* (1907), a portrayal of the assassination.¹⁸ Paul Mounet, younger brother of Mounet-Sully, was cast in the lead of *Macbeth* (c.1909). A Pathé semi-Shakespearean *Cleopatra* (1910) starring Madeleine Roch anticipated a long line of films about the Egyptian witch that had little to do with

Shakespeare's tragedy, culminating in the mega-budget 20th-Century Fox *Cleopatra* (1963) with superstars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. A derivative *Romeo Turns Bandit* (1910), which though only marginally indebted to Shakespeare, broke with and moved away from the merely presentational by employing a rudimentary film grammar. In general, however, the Film d'Art obsession with theatrical models distracted continental cinéastes from the main challenge of envisioning Shakespeare in cinematic tropes. The history of Shakespeare in the movies has, after all, been the search for the best available means to replace the verbal with the visual imagination, an inevitable development deplored by some but interpreted by others as not so much a limitation on, as an extension of, Shakespeare's genius into uncharted seas. In the United States, on the other hand, the trek westward to Hollywood sufficiently disconnected the movies from Broadway theatre to make possible by 1929 the thoroughly liberated Pickford/Fairbanks *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The economic engine in North America driving the production of cheap, one-reel movies was the "nickelodeon," a term coined by John P. Harris of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, by cleverly merging his admission price with the Greek word for music hall.¹⁹ There were no cinemas and then suddenly there were hundreds, and thousands. Like the 1576 opening of James Burbage's professional theatre in Shoreditch, the new movie theatres revolutionized the entertainment industry. An editorial writer in the trade journal *Moving Picture World* observed that "there is a new thing under the sun . . . It is the 5-cent theatre . . . it came unobtrusively in the still of the night," and had multiplied "faster than guinea pigs."²⁰ By 1907 North America alone could tally 2,500 to 3,000 "nickelodeons," or "5-cent theatres," or "electric theatres," as they were variously labeled. It did not take much to get a 5-cent theatre started – an empty store with enough space to cram in 200 to 500 chairs; phonographs; a cashier; a "cinematograph" with a reliable non-smoking operator; a canvas for a screen; a piano; a leather-lunged barker; and of course a manager to oversee all this. Predictably the respectable classes sniffed at the honky-tonk flavor and spurned the upstart.

Such heady success did not go unchallenged. In the midst of its severe growing pains, the movie industry became a lightning rod for hostility. It threatened the praetorians of culture and morality who intuited how these new "site[s] of cultural contagion associated with the 'lower orders'"²¹ would one day destroy the iron control of church and school over the masses. The Reverend E. L. Goodell stopped a showing of the Edison *Nero and the Burning of Rome* (1908) because the school children were worked into "a frenzy of fear when they saw men seized, choked, stabbed and their limbs twisted by their torturers."²² Some little girls covered their faces with their hats to shut

out the sight. An Episcopal bishop deplored the “demoralizing influence” of the nickelodeons.²³ Harassing fly-by-night theatre operators, many of whom were eastern European Jewish immigrants, for showing movies on Sunday became a favorite pastime of New York’s Finest, but then also it might be a charge of “imperiling the morals of young boys,” as in the lamentable case of George Watson who allowed juveniles to watch the drugging of Evelyn Nesbitt in *The Great Thaw Trial*.²⁴

With Machiavellian cunning, the vaudevillians and other theatre people who were at risk of redundancy, calculating that politicians would more gladly listen to men of the cloth than to men of the motley, manipulated the clergy into lobbying against 5-cent theatres. In a last-ditch effort they also undercut the scruffy nickelodeons by incorporating movies into their vaudeville programs in real theatres.²⁵ The actors’ clandestine scheming achieved dizzy success on Christmas Eve, 1908, when in a spasm of self-righteousness New York City’s Mayor George B. McClellan shut down 500 nickelodeons, ostensibly because they were fire traps, which they indubitably were, but also possibly to appease those who saw them as dens of iniquity. An editorial in *Moving Picture World* accused the actors of chicanery and sarcastically thanked the Mayor for his “unexpected Christmas present.”²⁶ In Los Angeles saloon keepers complained that the nickelodeons were stealing customers away.²⁷ In London, the penny gaffs competed with the public houses.

In the first decade of film, however, for a brief shining hour the Vitagraph Company’s Brooklyn, New York studio emerged as a world hub for Shakespeare films. In 1908, J. Stuart Blackton’s Vitagraph Company²⁸ entered into this rough-and-tumble marketplace with a series of one-reel Shakespeare movies. The cultural politics of turn-of-the-century America made this marriage of elitist Shakespeare with the populist nickelodeons inevitable. Seeing a compelling need for “quality” motion pictures to attract “classier” audiences, and perhaps inspired by France’s Film d’Art movement, Blackton made public domain Shakespeare a pawn in a bid for higher social status. “Class,” “classy,” and “classier” became the mantras of the early film makers as they fought to gain respectability, envisioning a mythical audience for high-mimetic Shakespeare made up of Margaret Dumont types out of the Marx Brothers movies. Shakespeare movies were a small part of the campaign to obliterate socially aware films sympathizing with the plight of the exploited workers.²⁹ Movies became the sites of contestation for nothing more or less than the American soul. The Vitagraph line of “quality” products included films about George Washington, Dante’s Francesca da Rimini, and biblical tales, though its trade journal puffs also listed low-brow material like *The Cook Makes Madeira Sauce* right alongside its “high art” *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.³⁰ Another ideological agenda behind all this

do-goodism was the need to civilize the hordes of eastern and southern Europeans disembarking at Ellis Island by exposure to solid Anglo-American values. Through beatifying George Washington, who was after all only transplanted English country gentry, and showcasing Shakespeare, the tired and huddled masses who jammed the nickelodeons could more quickly be melted into the pot.

Vitagraph's Shakespeare movies were highly compressed one-reelers of ten to fifteen minutes in duration that privileged tableaux, such as the assassination of Julius Caesar, or the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, which were familiar even to the unscrubbed masses. Vitagraph Shakespeare titles, all released between about 1908 and 1912, in addition to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* included *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, *Henry VIII [Cardinal Wolsey]*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Twelfth Night*. *A Comedy of Errors* used only the title, and *Hamlet* was planned but never completed. Often directed by William V. Ranous, a veteran stage actor, or Charles Kent, they were mass produced in a row of rooftop stalls, or in glass-roofed indoor studios in Flatbush. Sometimes the company went out on location in New York City's Central and Prospect Parks, or, in one instance on the beach at Bay Shore, Long Island, for Viola's emergence from the sea.³¹ By all accounts there was a wonderful, almost amateurish atmosphere. Scenery and costumes were likely to have been borrowed from Broadway or slapped together by a makeshift crew, including the actors, who weren't yet high-paid superstars.³² They also moonlighted from theatrical jobs on Broadway, a powerful and inhibiting influence on the new art that weakened when the studios moved west to Hollywood.

The Shakespeare and other "high art" films demanded a story-telling grammar that went far beyond the filmic strategies of the earlier "actualities." Film scholars disagree over which film to credit as the "first" to tell a story but Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is generally held up as a milestone event,³³ along with D. W. Griffith's subsequent *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) that carried editing to new heights. Porter's railway thriller may not have been the first to do everything but it pointed the way to a rhetoric that would eventually include all the tricks of the trade, such as shifting camera angles, editing in the cutting room, dramatic lighting, full shots, close-ups, intercutting of sequences, slow motion, rhythm in editing, and so forth.

Like the other Vitagraph Shakespeare films, Blackton's *Romeo and Juliet* (1908), starring Florence Lawrence and Paul Panzer, went beyond the primitive "actualities" by using the camera not just as a recorder of but as a participant in the cinematic story telling. The struggle of these early movies was to break out of the prison house of the proscenium stage on nearby

Broadway and make a film that did not look as if it had been photographed with a camera nailed to the floor in the sixth-row orchestra. The camera needed to be released to close in on the action. The two principals, Lawrence and Panzer, later became big stars, Lawrence as a D.W. Griffith favorite, and then as the famed "Biograph Girl" and "IMP girl," the first beneficiary of the new star system that allowed actors to cash in on their fame. After her breakthrough, by 1916 Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree commanded \$100,000 for six weeks' work, and by 1919 Mary Pickford was demanding \$675,000 a year plus 50 percent of the gross.³⁴ Paul Panzer subsequently flourished as the villain in the Saturday-morning thriller serial, *The Perils of Pauline* (1914).

Seventeen different camera set-ups, or shots, thirteen title cards, and noticeable editing off camera make up Vitagraph's 15-minute compression of *Romeo and Juliet*. There is occasional cross-cutting, movement from indoor to outdoor settings, and a minimum of obviously fraudulent painted canvas backdrops. A long shot may interrupt the monotony of mid-shots, or actors are filmed from varied angles, but the close shot is not yet in the vocabulary. Title cards with dialogue and bridging explanations help out in the losing battle to make the aural entirely visual. The movie opens with the sonnet-prologue on a card reading "Two households, both alike in dignity, In fair Verona, where we lay our scene," and so forth. Other bridging cards offer helpful but slightly misleading comments such as "Capulet introduces his daughter, Juliet, to Paris, her future husband." For the Capulet ball and balcony scene, the laconic words "Love at First Sight" suffice, following which Romeo mimes his love for Juliet, while Tybalt's ever-widening mouth signals outrage. Another card reads "The Secret Marriage of Romeo and Juliet in Friar Laurence's Cell" just prior to a sequence showing the Friar, who resembles George Bernard Shaw, joining the couple in matrimony. The camera completely broke with theatre when the crew went out on location for the balcony scene at a house near Fort Hamilton, Brooklyn; for the duel between Romeo and Tybalt to the Boat Lake in Central Park; and for Verona's streets to Central Park's Bethesda Fountain.³⁵ Even without sound-recording equipment, to stay in character old-time Shakespeareans of the stature of Forbes-Robertson and Frederick Warde scrupulously spoke the lines but some of the lesser sort of actors may have been uttering gibberish.

Interiors were more likely to be thrift-shop stage sets with curtains and cardboard for doors and walls. Harsh lighting was a problem, as when Juliet emotes before drinking off the vial of potion and collapses too heavily on the bed. "Tickling commodity" intrudes in Juliet's bedroom, and elsewhere, with the Vitagraph logo, "V," inscribed over her bed. A precursor to today's FBI warnings on videocassettes against illegal copying, the logo was a relic of the rancorous patent wars that pitted the "Edison group," which included

Vitagraph, against such upstarts as Carl Laemmle of the IMP group (Independent Motion Picture Company of America). The movie industry's endless law suits must have made many attorneys rich and happy.³⁶ A more satisfactorily realistic scene in *Romeo and Juliet* is the apothecary shop, which boasts a window apparently stocked with a skull, bat, alembic, and beakers, though they may only be good *trompes-l'oeil*. The director himself, William Ranous, played the apothecary.

The Vitagraph *Julius Caesar* (1908) shows no striking advance in film grammar over the *Romeo and Juliet*. It breaks with theatricality by moving outdoors. There is much *Aida*-like parading around of Roman soldiers in papier-mâché helmets who brandish wooden swords and carry placards reading "SPQR," but the "Forum" looks suspiciously like the steps of a Carnegie public library. Almost without exception the movie's fifteen set-ups are in mid-shot, without changing camera angles or using close-ups and long shots. Freed from the spatial and temporal restrictions of the stage, the camera shows events that are only reported in the play, such as the proffering of the crown to Caesar three times. The assassination of Caesar, a plausibly mimed Antony's funeral oration, and an out-of-doors funeral pyre for Brutus create familiar tableaux for a mass audience. Truly cinematic in its early use of special effects is the Méliès-like materializing of Caesar's ghost from thin air in Brutus' tent before Philippi. The battle field at Philippi is something of a disappointment, a flat arid landscape, boring even as the site of carnage. Brutus and Cassius stomp around followed by tiny detachments of soldiers. Costuming is rudimentary. When Brutus' Portia pledges fidelity to her husband, she is only vaguely Roman, being swathed in the yards of material thought chic for ladies traveling first class on liners like the *Titanic*. This cover-up was necessary because a "reverend gentleman" actually objected to costumes showing the men's legs. Ball also quotes a story of actors' bare legs being disastrously painted to avoid the expense of tights.³⁷

Julius Caesar failed to impress Mr. W. Stephen Bush, America's earliest critic of filmed Shakespeare, who often waxed ecstatic over other Vitagraph movies. Bush, a frequent correspondent for *Moving Picture World* and its British counterpart, *Bioscope*,³⁸ regularly advertised his services as a lecturer to supplement "high art" films,³⁹ and in that way, like the pianists, he compensated for a film's unbearable silence. He uncharitably noted that the funeral pyre at the end of *Julius Caesar* "had a fatal resemblance to a Rhode Island clambake"; neither did he miss out on the opportunity to plug his own profession by pointing out that these plays on screen "are [little] more than a bewildering mass of moving figures to the majority of the patrons of electric theatres, but none stands more emphatically in need of a good lecture than *Julius Caesar*."⁴⁰

The seeds of filmic greatness lie deeply buried in the Vitagraph *King Lear* (1909),⁴¹ which strives for a realism that can only be achieved with enormously expensive sets. Actualities showing the Household Brigade on parade are one thing, but underfunded actualities of a Shakespearean play only succeed in becoming non-actualities. The movie begins innovatively by identifying the characters (but not the players) with their names superimposed below them. About thirteen different set-ups show events from the old king's testing of his daughters to his dying lamentations over the body of Cordelia. The parallel Gloucester plot and the scandalous love triangle among Goneril, Regan, and Edmund collapse under the weight of compression and would require W. Stephen Bush's lecturing service to sort out the story line for the bewildered audience. Exterior shots are non-existent. The white cliffs of Dover are painted on canvas and the storm scenes take place inside a studio with a fake hollowed-out tree for mad Tom to hide in. To spare the audience, and appease the enemies of nickelodeons, when Cornwall gouges out the old man's eyes, "Lest it see more, prevent it. Out vild jelly!" (3.7.83), Gloucester's back is to the camera. In the foreground, the indignant servant stabs the wicked Cornwall, and in a magical flash of pure film, Oswald breaks loose from an irate Kent, runs directly toward the camera, and with a wild look on his face almost invades the audience's space.

The festive *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909) and *Twelfth Night* (1910) forced Vitagraph's director Charles Kent out of the studio and into the parks with happy results. Not only is the lighting cheerful but also then and future famous actors like Maurice Costello as Lysander and his two little daughters, Dolores and Helene, project high spirits, immensely enjoying themselves. Like all the Vitagraph one-reelers, *Midsummer Night's Dream* moves at the pace of a fast-forwarded videocassette, or as if the Reduced Shakespeare Company had made a movie for Vitagraph, an outcome that sometimes happens when a silent film is projected at the wrong speed. Notwithstanding technical glitches, certain scenes capture the spirit of the play. William V. Ranous, about whom little seems to be known except that he was a journeyman actor, makes a hilarious Bottom as he mimes the weaver's blustering attempts to show how he can roar or play any role in the Pyramus/Thisby skit better than anyone else. The antics of Puck and the emplacement of an ass's head on Bottom are made to order for tricky visuals. There's quite a charming scene by a pond as Puck (Gladys Hulette) is suddenly lifted up into the air to search for the magic flower. An unaccountable switch in casting occurs when a young woman called Penelope replaces Oberon. It's Penelope, not Oberon, that Titania quarrels with and Penelope who sends Puck out to look for the potion. Perhaps the director feared that the pedophile subtext about the Indian boy might upset the censorious classes.

The same story gets told twice, once in pictures when the rude mechanicals come to the forest and again with explanatory cards: "The tradesmen come to the forest to rehearse their play. Puck changes the weaver into an ass. Titania awakens and falls in love with him." Later, at the peak of the silent era, F.W. Murnau's famous *The Last Laugh* (1924) eschewed title cards in favor of telling the story only in pictures, a virtuoso feat wildly acclaimed by purists. A *Moving Picture World* reviewer congratulated Vitagraph on its success with *Midsummer Night's Dream*: "We wondered . . . who amongst the American filmmakers would be the first to strike into the rich preserve of material which Shakespeare offers the producer." He praised the Vitagraph director for his skill in compressing the scenes into "a continuous and intelligible story which does not destroy the narrative."⁴²

Vitagraph's *Twelfth Night* (1910) showed increasing cinematic sophistication. Florence Turner, "The Vitagraph Girl," plays a saucy little Viola who, as the first explanatory card tells us, is "separated from her twin brother Sebastian by a shipwreck [and] finds herself in the realm of Duke Orsino." Cross-dressed as Cesario, Turner contrasts nicely with Julia Swayne Gordon's Olivia, who is muffled under the layers of garments that turned Victorian actresses into Volumnia lookalikes. Something close to a deep-focus shot occurs when in Olivia's mansion, courtiers retreat and exit in the background even as in the foreground Viola woos Olivia: "Make me a willow cabin at your gate, / And call upon my soul within the house" (1.5.268). Charles Kent's miming of Malvolio's pomposity when he intercepts the forged letter captures the essence of the dialogue. The audience sees the letter in close-up on a title card: "be not afraid of greatness. Some are [born] great, some [achieve] greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em" (2.5.144). Then as the gulled Malvolio in close mid-shot devours the contents of the letter, the conspirators, Maria, Sir Toby and Aguecheek, gleefully hop and skip. The closing sequence accelerates as the twins are reunited, Maria confesses, the duke discovers Cesario is a girl, and Olivia finds solace in the arms of Sebastian. There is a moment allowed for Charles Kent as the abused and rejected Malvolio to vent his spleen on his tormentors. Decades later, Nigel Hawthorne as Malvolio would have a greater opportunity to wring the full poignancy out of Malvolio's downfall in Trevor Nunn's full-length film of *Twelfth Night* (1996).

Disputes about the nature of the audience for these Vitagraph Shakespeare films ironically recapitulate the many studies of the audience at Shakespeare's Globe playhouse. Lower class? Upper class? Both? There is no simple answer. More in the audience hailed from the huddled masses rather than the coddled classes, but the "class" of the audience tended to correlate with the style of neighborhood that the "nick" was situated in. It should not

be forgotten, however, that even the most wretched of the earth had heard of and respected Shakespeare. From Mark Twain's rednecks in *Huckleberry Finn*, residents of sad, little towns along the Mississippi, to the eastern European immigrant Jews in New York City who revered the Shakespeare of Yiddish theatre, Shakespeare possessed enormous cultural capital. For America's nouveau riche, there was no more prestigious cultural trophy than a leather-bound complete Shakespeare for display in the parlor, even if the pages were uncut. The people who paid their nickels to see Shakespeare on screen were schoolboys who giggled at the overacting in *Julius Caesar*, outside salesmen resting between their appointed rounds, persons who simply delighted to see something more enlightening than the morning drill of the king's household guards in London, and totally perplexed and confused immigrants glad to be in out of the cold. When a law suit over an unauthorized movie of General Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur* struck fear into the movie industry, Shakespeare's status as public domain intellectual property made him all the more attractive.⁴³

Film critic W. Stephen Bush saw through bourgeois pretensions and found hope in the nickelodeons. Bush attacked the "fashion in certain quarters to look upon the electric theatre as chiefly the poor man's amusement."⁴⁴ A high-minded foe of elitism, he rhapsodized that the poor woman's nickel at the movie was the equal of the rich woman's gold at the opera, and predicted that one day the carriage trade would be drawn to movies. He was also sensitive to the difficulties involved in "condensation and arrangement" but believed that the Vitagraph films were probably as "good as any that could have been made." Like many after him, he warned that "to condense or in any way to alter Shakespeare is as delicate and dangerous a task as meddling with an overture by Mozart or a painting by Rembrandt."⁴⁵ Still, he believed that "there is no play of Shakespeare that cannot be told in moving images," and that "the notion that Shakespeare, as the half-educated put it, is 'too deep' is altogether wrong."⁴⁶

Bush's professional stake in explanatory lectures and recitations at silent Shakespeare movies may have fueled his zeal for the new art. As we have seen, he firmly believed that the solution to the oxymoron of Shakespeare on silent film was to flesh out the title cards with an "epilogue" in a kind of lecture/performance. That way the "best class of people" would flock to the Shakespeare movies, the "banal, the vulgar and the foolish"⁴⁷ would stay away, and high culture would be served. Unfortunately a lecturer like Bush was an extra expense and it's not at all clear how many 5-cent theatres bought his lofty services. As for Vitagraph studios, its "high art" Shakespeare films survive today only in archives, more often than not the targets for brainless laughter, though they should be respected not so much for what they did

as for doing anything at all. The Vitagraph empire eventually was swallowed up by Warner Brothers, which purchased it in 1924 for \$735,000.⁴⁸

From nickelodeon to palace

While Vitagraph cranked out its one-reelers in New York, cinéastes in England, France, and Italy made Shakespeare films until World War I dictated a readjustment in priorities. After the war, the Germany of the Weimar Republic produced ambitious movies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. The movies increasingly expanded in length from one to three and four reels to fit the needs of the emerging "Palace" theatres that were steadily replacing the tacky nickelodeons, penny gaffs, and fair grounds as exhibition sites.⁴⁹ The movement from nickelodeon to palace resembled the shift from the "public" Globe to the "private" Blackfriars playhouse in Shakespeare's London, though the new movie palaces unlike the Blackfriars, attracted both the classes and the masses. S.R. Rothafel's ("Roxy") opening in 1916 of the Regent movie theatre in New York City at the corner of 116th Street and 7th Avenue signaled an emerging era in New York,⁵⁰ and Rothafel in 1927 followed up with his famous \$10-million Roxy Theatre, "a cathedral of the motion picture" near Times Square. Among its wonders were "foyers and lobbies of incomparable size and splendor" as well as "a staff of attendants [ushers] thoroughly organized and drilled under the direction of a retired Colonel of the U.S. Marines."⁵¹ Roxy's ostentatious theatres, temples of dreams, enshrined megalomania, monuments of bad taste, were part of an international movement. By 1914 Paris boasted a Pathé Palace (600 seats), and Gaumont-Palace (6,000 seats) with an 80-piece orchestra pit.⁵² In England, the Balham Empire had already opened in 1907, and was unique in being "a theatre devoted entirely to the display of living pictures."⁵³ The grand opening of the Palace Electric in Mansfield, England, sent Alderman Alcock into raptures as he congratulated all involved for having produced such a fine building, with its "marble-floored vestibule . . . brass-mounted beveled glass entrance and electric blue seats."⁵⁴ In Croydon, another palace opened with "a beautiful vestibule, carpets, hangings, etc."⁵⁵ With theatre names like Odeon, Bijou, Jewel, Picturedrome, Electroscope, movies were clearly acquiring the "classy" cachet the movie people were dying for. As Dennis Sharp has pointed out, the new theatres often functioned "like Roman Catholic churches," resembling "a bulging whale on the outside and a stomach full of whipped cream on the inside," for the function of church and theatre building alike is to keep the faithful focused on the holy mysteries within, not the superstructure without.⁵⁶

A two-reel, 33-minute *Shylock* (1913), one of the last of the Film d'Art attempts to record classical French theatre, might have been suitable for Paris' grand new Gaumont Palace. Directed by Henri Desfontaines, the Globe Film Company trade journal advertisement declared that it "would be impossible to exaggerate the splendour and attractiveness of this beautiful and compelling picture story adapted from Shakespeare's immortal work, 'The Merchant of Venice.'"⁵⁷ The distinguished cast included Harry Baur (Shylock) of the Athénée Theatre, Romuald Joubé (Antonio) of the Odeon, and Mlle. Pépa Bonafé (Portia) of the Apollo – all from leading Paris theatres. Harry Baur first appears on screen in a formal cutaway, as if he, like W. Stephen Bush, would lecture on Shakespeare's play, with Jean Hervé (Bassanio) and Mlle. Pépa Bonafé in Elizabethan dress. Title cards confide that this is "Venice on the Rialto" and that in Belmont nearby there is "a lady richly left . . . her name is Portia." The establishing shot of the Rialto with its pathetic cardboard backdrop disappointed a contemporary critic, who noted that "the film producer by not making the greatest possible use of natural outdoors effects, deprives himself of one of the greatest advantages that he possesses over the regular stage."⁵⁸ A crowd scene on the Rialto, a flashback of Bassanio spitting on Shylock as he drafts the bond, and cross-cutting to compress the space between Portia's carefree Belmont and Shylock's careworn Venice reveal a shift from theatricality toward narrative film making. Title cards bridge the episodes as with an announcement about the loss of Antonio's ships just before the opening of a frenetic trial scene. Harry Baur's Shylock is of the pre-Holocaust vintage, an object of mirth and scorn rather than a victim of bigotry. Ironically the Jewish Harry Baur would himself a few years later fall victim to Adolf Hitler's pathological anti-Semitism. In the courtroom, he menacingly whets his knife, and then a minute later he is being pursued by a hooting, jeering mob. The deeper point that Belmont, like the golden casket, remains only superficially attractive and that Shylock, like the leaden casket, yet conceals stern virtues, remains unexplored.

To the south, during this pre-war period, the Neapolitan flair for grand opera infiltrated Italian Shakespeare movies, which also in the Film d'Arte Italiana mode displayed the same anxiety as the French to please only the elitist cadres from the theatrical world. While partial toward the Roman history plays, the Italians also drew on *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Winter's Tale*.⁵⁹ A Film d'Arte Italiana *King Lear* (1910) followed the French model of Film d'Art by putting famous actors and great plays into movies. Directed by Gerolamo Lo Savio, the celebrated tragedian Ermete Novelli played the title role with Francesca Bertini as Cordelia. An 11-minute one-

reeler, *King Lear* omits the Gloucester plot and focuses on the king, his three daughters and faithful Kent. Even with the Gloucester plot eliminated, the story line still requires heavy use of title cards for coherence. Having the wind actually ruffle the actors' hair and garments shows another step in the movement away from theatricality toward realism.

Francesca Bertini (Portia) and Ermete Novelli (Shylock) appear again in Lo Savio's color-tinted *Il Mercante di Venezia* (1910). The very first title card by proclaiming that "Lorenzo who is in love with Jessica, the daughter of Shylock the Jew, arranges to come for her" privileges Jessica's rebellion against Shylock over the bond, ring, and casket plots. Novelli's interpretation of Shylock as a man primarily distraught over his wayward daughter turns the Jew into a King Lear figure: "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child!" (*Lear* 1.4.288). The ingrate Jessica's betrayal exacerbates Shylock's anguish over the loss of Leah, the wife whose "turkis" ring he would not have sold "for a wilderness of monkeys" (3.1.122). An inter-title announces that "Antonio's ships have been wrecked, and he is ruined . . . He is taken before a court of justice," after which in a familiar stage tradition Shylock whets his knife. A title card prints out Portia's reading to Shylock of the law that plainly outlines the penalties for shedding Christian blood. Sadly as Shylock bitterly laments his predicament, the surviving print (from the NFTVA) abruptly ends.

Lo Savio's 25-minute *Romeo and Juliet* (1911) gave the lovely Francesca Bertini, who by 1915 became one of Italy's greatest stars, a chance to display her talents as a silent film actress with Gustavo Serena as her Romeo. Like Lillian Gish, Bertini could convey almost any mood with only a slight change in expression, showing radiance when with her Romeo, and sullenness when told by Father Capulet to marry Paris. Lo Savio's editing included deletions, transpositions, and additions to adapt the play script to the needs of an audience unfamiliar with the play, and to make the verbal visual. In place of the opening brawl, which comes after the Capulet ball, a mounted Romeo dismounts to retrieve Juliet's glove, which Romeo will later rhapsodize over ("O that I were a glove upon that hand, / That I might touch that cheek!" – 2.2.24). The Italian love for operatic spectacle, which survives in Zeffirelli's Shakespeare movies, brightens the *mise-en-scène* for the Capulet garden, which is filled with statuary, handy for concealing eavesdroppers like the Nurse. The ballroom gleams with shimmering candelabra, a vaulted ceiling and elegantly costumed dancers.

A clichéd establishing shot of William Shakespeare reading the play aloud to a circle of friends frames Baldassare Negrone's *Una Tragedia alla Corte di Sicilia* (1913). With its lavish costumes, realistic settings, and relatively sophisticated editing, a movie that begins in bondage to the library escapes

into a filmic world. In rewriting for the screen, Negroni keeps major sections of the play intact but combines them with traces from Shakespeare's own source, Robert Greene's *Pandosto, The Triumph of Time*. The Italian flair for the spectacle of grand opera and the nineteenth-century taste for extravagant stagings of *The Winter's Tale*, like the revivals of Mary Anderson (1887) and Beerbohm Tree (1906), are reflected in the opulence of the banquet at Leontes' palace, as well as with the crowds of extras for the trial of Hermione. The fluid camera work embraces a variety of shots from mid to long, and then some tight framing to show Leontes' inner torment over Hermione's friendliness with Polixenes. If there were sound he would be muttering, "Too hot, too hot! / To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods" (1.2.108). The ostensive acting style of silents, carried over from theatre, allows the sharp-tongued Paulina, whose nagging tongue almost comes alive even in the silence of the screen, to plead eloquently for her mistress, until interrupted by the arrival of the oracles. A title card relays the news that "The two messengers return with the oracle," and we are told that the queen remains distraught. Paulina administers a sleeping potion to Hermione, tells Leontes that the queen is dead, and excoriates him again for his cruelty. Antigonus arriving with little Perdita at Bohemia, for inexplicable reasons is not pursued and eaten by a bear (thus throwing away Shakespeare's most memorable stage direction, *Exit pursued by a bear* – 3.3.58). He is instead captured by thieves and thrown alive into a volcano crater, reminiscent of Vesuvius or Etna. The statue scene goes in a whole new direction when Paulina displays a supine Hermione, who shows no signs of awakening, not even a twinge, despite the title card's contrary "the wakening of Hermione." The film ends with a return to the framing device of Shakespeare and his friends, who like the Hermione of his play have been miraculously revived.

Another Italian film, Paulo Azzuri's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1913), shows a film rhetoric so highly developed that some historians have challenged the accuracy of its release date. The iris-outs, the dissolves, the cross-cutting, the story-telling powers, clearly go far beyond the Vitagraph *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909). While starring Socrate Tommasi (Lysander), and Bianca Hübner (Helena), an adorable Puck's flagrant scene-stealing validates the proverbial warning against acting with dogs or children. Chiaroscuro lighting makes the wood at night intensely plausible, and the excessive use of inter-titles notwithstanding, this unpretentious movie leaves the audience as cheerful as the fairies happily skipping down the road in the closing fade. The day of Jan Kott and the dark wood had not yet arrived.

The scope and grandeur of Shakespeare's Roman plays make fine scenarios for lush Italian epics like Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* (1912), and Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914), which paved the way for D. W. Griffith's colossal

Intolerance (1916),⁶⁰ and ultimately the Cecil B. De Mille Hollywood extravaganza "with a cast of thousands in living Technicolor." Enrico Guazzoni's eight-minute *Brutus* (1910) drew on Shakespeare's sources in Plutarch but without much reference to the way that Shakespeare imagined them. More realistic than the Vitagraph *Julius Caesar*, it shows a triumphal march through Rome with hundreds of gawking and cheering extras, double exposures of the dream "recounted" to Calphurnia, Calphurnia begging Caesar not to go to the senate, and Caesar's ghost appearing magically in Brutus' tent at Philippi. After his triumph with *Quo Vadis*, Guazzoni's ambitious multi-reel Cines *Marcantonio e Cleopatra* (1913)⁶¹ and *Giulio Cesare* (1914) inevitably privileged spectacle over Shakespeare and showcased leading Italian actors Gianna Terribili-Gonzales and Amleto Novelli as Cleopatra and Caesar. Marching Roman legions, unruly mobs, sea fights, catapults, and arrows provide the spectacle of a real movie in contrast with the British Will Barker *Julius Caesar* (1911) that uneventfully recorded a stage production at the Stratford Memorial Theatre. Vestiges of Shakespeare's play survive in *Giulio Cesare* in the plot against Caesar with title cards proclaiming "Beware O Caesar of the Ides of March," "And thou too, Brutus," and "Friends, Romans, countrymen." Guazzoni's energies did not go unappreciated. Eight years later in 1922, the film was brought to New York for a showing at Bim's Standard Theatre in "revised and re-edited" form, possibly with spliced-in clips of mob scenes from the very similar *Marcantonio e Cleopatra*. One critic thought it of "relatively ancient manufacture" with "its harsh, ungraded lighting . . . episodic rather than continuous story and its dependence upon mass as opposed to individual action." The audience of teenagers "accorded Antony [*sic*] Novelli (as Caesar) the same honor they customarily give to Tom Mix, Harry Carey and William S. Hart."⁶²

In England, just before the outbreak of the war, at London's New Gallery Kinema in Regent St., Gaumont premiered an important feature-length *Hamlet* (1913) in E. Hay Plumb's film produced by Cecil Hepworth using the Drury Lane stage company. This most complete (59-minute) film of *Hamlet* yet then made allows a glimpse into late Victorian theatrical codes as interpreted by an actor many considered the greatest Hamlet of the century, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson. With the help of supporting players like Gertrude Elliott (Ophelia), Percy Rhodes (Ghost), and Robert Atkins (First Player), Forbes-Robertson, though at sixty in one sense hopelessly miscast, with his cadaverous and melancholy face nevertheless embodied the establishment's image of a lofty and unendurably sensitive Hamlet, an English variation on a Jules Laforgue's Franco-romantic idea of "Hamletism." Modern audiences, sated on post-Freudian readings, will find such restraint as Hamlet *not* putting his head on Ophelia's lap at the play scene refresh-



2 The versatile Frederick B. Warde, the Yorkist duke of Gloucester in M.B. Dudley's recently discovered *The Life and Death of King Richard III* (USA 1912), exults over the demise of his victim, King Henry VI of the House of Lancaster.

ing. Just as if he were at Drury Lane, Sir Johnston actually recites his lines while on camera. At the same time, there is an unmistakable escalation in cinematic adeptness, Hepworth having insisted on translating "the words of the play into action in the film"⁶³ as shown with the exterior shots at Lulworth Cove in Dorset, with the Méliès-like dissolve in the Ghost scene, and with the intercutting between Ophelia walking by a stream and of Claudius and Laertes conspiring to poison Hamlet.⁶⁴ Hepworth and Plumb's attention to cinema art challenges the dogma that London's West End theatre always suffocated the British film industry's initiative.

With war clouds gathering over Europe, four feature-length Shakespeare

movies appeared in the United States between 1912 and 1916 ("feature" being defined as a film lasting at least 40 minutes). M. B. Dudley's "lost" five-reel *Richard III* (1912) besides being one of America's earliest feature-length movies also went beyond merely recording Shakespeare's play and moved toward an independent cinematic art. In 1996, it miraculously surfaced in the Oregon basement of William Buffum, a former projectionist and amateur collector, who had carefully preserved the highly flammable and wickedly unstable old-fashioned nitrate print. The title role of the malevolent Richard duke of Gloucester belonged to an itinerant British-born actor, Frederick B. Warde (1851–1935), whose stage career took him into every backwater in America, as well as to the major cities, where he played an amazing variety of characters, everything from Brutus to Hamlet to King Lear.⁶⁵ Directed in part at least by James Keane, the 61-year-old Warde eagerly adapted to the new medium, speaking of what "a great thing moving pictures had become," and how the French Film d'Art had embraced "the services of real artists."⁶⁶ As a practical man of the theatre, Warde, a regular on the prestigious North American Chautauqua Assembly lecture circuit and the recipient of an honorary doctorate of letters from the University of Southern California, discovered that he could tour with a film more economically than with an entire acting company, especially if he single-handedly furnished the commentary and the recitations during the reel changes, as advocated by the industrious W. Stephen Bush. Like a Japanese *benshi*, he could explain to his fans what they had already seen to make the silent movie's inscrutability scrutable.

Despite Warde's stage background, the filmed *Richard III* is not a stagy movie, unlike F.R. Benson's contemporaneous British *Richard III* (1911) whose firm attachment to the Stratford Memorial Theatre moved film historian Rachel Low to pronounce anathema on it as typical of "pre-1914 stage adaptations at their worst."⁶⁷ Playing the prototypical medieval vice figure and serio-comical villain, Richard duke of Gloucester, Warde's homicidal antics prefigured Hollywood's enormously popular gangster film genre of the 1930s. Marching armies and mounted knights, and be vies of lavishly dressed ladies-in-waiting fill the *mise-en-scène* in various locales of Westchester, New York. A real three-masted warship arrives at "Milford-Haven" (actually City Island on Long Island Sound) with the rebellious Lancastrian forces of Henry earl of Richmond, the future King Henry VII. James Keane, who is thought to have composed the screenplay, was caught up in a whirl of adding, deleting, and switching seventy-seven separate scenes around to make the play into a movie. He followed in the Colley Cibber stage tradition going back to at least 1700 by opening with Richard's vicious murders in *King Henry VI, Part Three* of the Lancastrian Prince Edward and King Henry VI to whip the audience into a froth of indignation over the abominations of Richard, this

"bottled spider," this "boar," this "toad." There are scenes added: Edward signing the death warrant for Clarence, Richard wooing Princess Elizabeth, and Richard's hapless Anne drinking poison. Characters are deleted: the acid-tongued Queen Margaret, "she-wolf of France," and the Woodville faction of Rivers, Dorset, and Grey. Events are transposed to explain the strange death of Clarence in the Tower. Visual metonymy translates Shakespeare's words into sharp visual equivalents, as when Machiavellian Richard, following Colley Cibber's famed Drury Lane alterations ("See how my sword weeps for the poor king's death"), wipes the blood off his sword after the assassination of King Henry, or thrusts his ring at the helpless Lady Anne in the first wooing scene, or fawns before the two little princes. These illusions then turn back into reality as the film ends by showing Frederick Warde himself, now in the mufti of a tweed jacket, as he appeared long ago live in the theatre, bowing and smiling graciously to his adoring fans. The film falls short of the contemporary Italian epics like Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis* but compares favorably with the techniques of most American movies of the period.

In a Warde Shakespeare movie, the page and stage always hover in the background. The opening of Edwin Thanhouser's ambitious art film of *King Lear* (1916) looks back nostalgically to the library. Again the star is Frederick B. Warde, this time with cigar smoke curling around him, and perusing a volume of Shakespeare. Suddenly he dissolves from a Victorian gentleman actor/scholar, the "Irving of America," into a hirsute King Lear. Page, stage and screen, the triad of Shakespearean incarnations, have momentarily interfaced, but book and stage must literally be dissolved to make way for the movie. As a special effect, the dissolve seems tame by comparison with today's John Woo, Hong Kong exploding action movies but for Edwardian audiences it may have stirred up a sense of "wonder" like that which Jacobean audiences at the Whitehall court masques felt after the sudden and abrupt disclosure of masked figures in grottos and caves.

Ernest Warde, the director and Frederick's son as well as the Fool in the movie, employs a film rhetoric of long and close shots, as well as sporadic close-ups. Nevertheless a 30-second framing card outlines the plot, and more title cards list names with images of the leading actors, as, for example, "Goneril, eldest daughter of King (Ina Hammer)," and "Her husband duke of Albany (Wayne Arey)." A contemptuous Goneril and Regan with headbands around their brunette hair and glowering expressions embody pure malignancy, while Cordelia (Lorraine Huling) in white radiates schoolgirl innocence. In mid-shot the entire assemblage, some ten persons in the crowded *mise-en-scène*, cluster around the royal throne for the division of the kingdom. Additional intercut title cards thread the narrative together with comments such as "Which of you doth love us most?" though cards do not