CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Shakespeare Test

> That's what I like about Shakespeare; it's the pictures.
>
> —Al Pacino, *Looking for Richard*

The making of Shakespeare films dates nearly from the start of commercial presentations of the cinematic medium. In the earliest screen adaptations from Shakespeare, there were palpable tensions at work, not only between aesthetic and financial objectives, but also between developing notions of what film is and does. One filmic impulse is to document, but with Shakespeare there are any number of subjects worth documenting: the playtext, a particular theatrical realization of that playtext, or the historical conditions reflected or represented in either playtext or stage version. Another filmic impulse is, of course, to tell a story: here, too, Shakespeare's playtexts offer an embarassment of rich possibilities. Further complicating matters are the uneasy, inescapable relations that the genres of nonfictional and fictional film bear with one another. The problem of distinguishing between modes of representation and ways of manipulating materials (Plantinga 9–12) is as old as narrative filmmaking itself, and Shakespeare very quickly became part of the developing dilemma.

It was in the 1890s that Georges Méliès pioneered the practice of storytelling through the exciting new medium; he also pioneered the

practice of borrowing from familiar materials, such as the Faust legend in *The Cabinet of Mephistopheles* (1897) or Charles Perrault's account of *Cinderella* (1899). Méliès would later borrow from Shakespeare—an abridged *Hamlet* and a film, starring himself, about the composition of *Julius Caesar*, both in 1907—but his were not the first Shakespeare films. Back in 1899, film's documentary capacities had already been exploited to record performances from Herbert Beerbohm Tree's London production of *King John*; this likely comprises the very first Shakespeare film. Long believed completely lost, Tree's *King John* survives in at least one sequence—part of the title character's death scene (McKernan 1–2). Yet another filmic impulse, carried over from theatrical institutions, is to deliver a product embodied by a recognizable star performer. In what survives of the film of *King John*, Tree is as much the draw and the focus on screen as he was on stage.

These impulses combine and compete not only in this first Shakespeare film but in many, if not most, of its successors. This book investigates what the Shakespearean project reveals about individual films and about film in general. Presenting a cinematic version of one of Shakespeare's playtexts invariably foregrounds questions of film's identity as a cultural production. The play's the thing both to bring pressure upon the technical and affective "natures" of the medium and also to highlight its relations to theater and the entertainment marketplace. Shakespeare's own status as cultural icon underscores film's relation to strata of culture and to self-identified centers of culture such as museums and academia. His otherness as a figure from the past and his longstanding appeal to non-English speaking audiences enhance film's ability to serve in both transgressive and institutional capacities within national boundaries and beyond.

Most studies of Shakespearean film have understandably concentrated on what the medium of cinema reveals or obscures about Shakespeare: productions are evaluated in terms of fidelity to the text, compromises between Elizabethan stagecraft and changing filmic convention, actors' performances and directors' achievements in "realizing" the playtext. Here, I will regularly address such issues but will be more concerned with how filmmakers have approached their task of adapting Shakespeare for the screen and what results as film and as interpretation from their strategic choices. The challenges implicit in the task of realizing Shakespeare in the cinema have inspired—or provoked—many different strategies of identification, negotiation, and transformation. Even so, there are

identifiable, shared patterns at work among several films. I suggest that focusing on shared patterns of adaptation can allow Shakespeare to illuminate the medium for filmgoers, just as his works have helped define the medium for filmmakers. The similarities stem from a nearly universal point of departure: an encounter with a classic text, especially one produced by a cultural figure as imposing as Shakespeare, places no small stress upon screenwriters, directors, designers, actors, and production companies more generally. The attempt to mediate between that text and either a specialized or a mass audience forces filmmakers to confront the nature of film, its relation to viewers, and its relation to cultural norms of art, gender, power, and profit.

My subtitle, *Ocular Proof*, is taken from Shakespeare's *Othello*, a tragedy about desire and trust, envy and suspicion, identity and otherness. The phrase signals the kind of testing—another meaning of "proof"—to which film is subjected when linked with a Shakespearean text. The next chapter will examine three films that are inspired by this play to explore cinema's status as a representational medium: the 1922 German version directed by Dimitri Buchowetzki, the 1955 Soviet version directed by Sergei Yutkevich, and the 1995 retelling by Oliver Parker.

The third chapter explores documentary approaches to making Shakespeare films. When film is defined by its power to document events, it may maintain a subordinate role not only to the playtext but to the stage. Strategies of deference and, occasionally, resistance will be considered in connection with some of the earliest films: the chapter includes, along with the 1899 *King John*, a 1913 *Hamlet* with Johnston Forbes-Robertson; a 1936 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer short, *Master Will Shakespeare*, which in the guise of documentary offers a fanciful biographical sketch of the playwright; Stuart Burge's 1965 film of the National Theatre *Othello* featuring Laurence Olivier; the 1969 film of Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* featuring Nicol Williamson; and finally, *Looking for Richard*, Al Pacino's film documentary of a never-realized version of *Richard III*.

The fourth chapter considers what happens when film is primarily defined by its commercial aspects, especially by audience appeal as established by popular performers who are cast in Shakespearean roles. This is illustrated by the 1929 United Artists *The Taming of the Shrew* with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks; the 1935 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle, featuring several Warner Brothers contract players; the 1936 MGM *Romeo and Juliet* featuring Norma Shearer, Leslie Howard, and John Barrymore; and two

films directed by Franco Zeffirelli, the 1966 *The Taming of the Shrew*, which starred Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, and the 1990 *Hamlet* featuring Mel Gibson and Glenn Close.

The fifth chapter focuses on cinematic versions of Shakespearean plays that assert themselves as films as distinct from theater: that is, they exploit—and often advertise—the medium's illusionistic powers or its radical plasticity. Such films can overtly address such issues, with Olivier's 1944 *Henry V* a prime example as it restages both Elizabethan-style performance and nineteenth-century "historical" settings before building to 1940s-era naturalism in the battle scenes. Other examples of self-consciously filmic approaches are: silent versions of the plays produced by the Vitagraph Company in the United States from 1908 to 1911; the 1954 *Giuletta e Romeo* directed by Renato Castellani; the 1962–66 *Othello* directed by Liz White (not shown until 1980); the 1969 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Peter Hall; *Roman Polanski's Film of The Tragedy of "Macbeth"* from 1971; and Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's "Romeo+Juliet."*

Several strategies of cinematic adaptation build upon the revisions of Shakespeare that dominated pre-1900 theatrical practice, especially in the tradition of companies led by actor-managers. The sixth chapter will consider the rivalries and interdependencies at work in the careers of the three actor-directors who crafted some of the most influential Shakespeare films: Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, and Kenneth Branagh. A primary concern will be the cinematic medium's connections with past and contemporary directorial practices; further emphasis will be placed on the kinds of exchanges—both borrowings and rebuttals—that occur between and among these filmmakers. Initial examples will be taken from Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet* and 1955 *Richard III*, with some reference to his earlier *Henry V*. Welles's 1948 *Macbeth* was overshadowed by Olivier's *Hamlet*; his 1952 *Othello* enters into dialogue with his rival's success and the 1966 *Chimes at Midnight* enters into debate with his contemporary's view of the Henriad and of Shakespeare generally. Branagh's 1989 *Henry V* and 1996 *Hamlet* clearly engage with the filmic and the financial precedents set by Olivier, but also react to Welles's innovative approaches and cautionary example. These issues are explored in Branagh's "rehearsal" for a cinematic *Hamlet*, his 1995 film *A Midwinter's Tale* (see Figure 1).

The seventh chapter considers Shakespeare and transgression, the social dynamic that both challenges and shapes cultural norms. Shakespearean playtexts present a number of opportunities for transgressive

FIGURE 1. Kenneth Branagh advises Michael Maloney on one of Hamlet's soliloquies during the filming of 1995's *A Midwinter's Tale* (*In the Bleak Midwinter*). Photo courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger's Movie Material.

gestures, both within filmic conventions (the ubiquitous asides and soliloquies) and sociopolitical conventions (cross-dressing, a range of sexualities and gender roles, class-based coding alternately reinscribed and critiqued). These opportunities pertain whether or not the film-makers situate themselves "with" or "against" the Shakespearean play-text; the cultural significance of Shakespeare as author and authority allows for considerable conformity as well as transgression. Examples involving gender issues include what may be the second Shakespeare film ever made, a 1900 vignette featuring the legendary stage actress Sarah Bernhardt as Hamlet; the 1920 German *Hamlet: The Drama of Vengeance* in which the young prince turns out actually to have been a woman; Paul Czinner's 1936 *As You Like It*; and Kenneth Branagh's 1993 *Much Ado About Nothing*. Sociopolitical approaches to film and to Shakespeare recur in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1953 *Julius Caesar* and 1971's *Peter Brook's Film of William Shakespeare's "King Lear."* Both Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* and the 1995 *Richard III* adapted by Ian McKellen and Richard Loncraine touch on the interrelation between political and sexual identity. While McKellen and Loncraine effectively engage with the camp aesthetic, yet more assertively transgressive adaptations of Shakespeare can be found in Derek Jarman's 1980 *The Tempest*, Peter Greenaway's 1991 *Prospero's Books*, and Trevor Nunn's 1996 *Twelfth Night*.

The eighth chapter examines the linguistic and cultural translations that shape non-Anglophonic films intended as versions of Shakespearean playtexts. The strongly political significances of many of these films regularly coincide with their engagements with issues of linguistic authority and cultural influence—both welcome and unwelcome. Italian filmmakers, inspired by the settings for many of the plays, were early pioneers in adaptation. Films made in Germany both point toward and look back at the enormities of the Nazi regime. Engagements with the burdens of Stalinism are evident in such Russian films as the 1955 version of *Twelfth Night* and Grigori Kozintsev's later adaptations of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Japanese explorations are provided by Akira Kurosawa in his 1957 *Kumonosu-djo* (*The Castle of the Spider's Web*), a rerendering of *Macbeth* (shown in the United States in 1961 as *Throne of Blood*), in his 1960 *The Bad Sleep Well* (based on *Hamlet*), and ultimately in *Ran* (*Chaos*), his 1985 revisioning of *King Lear*. Examples from France include the early *Shylock*, adapted from *The Merchant of Venice* in 1913; *Les amants de Verone*, a 1949 revisiting of

Romeo and Juliet; *Ophélia*, Claude Chabrol's 1962 seriocomic dissection of adaptation and translation; and, from 1987, Jean-Luc Godard's deconstructed *King Lear*.

My conclusion concentrates on three Shakespeare-inspired films marking 1999 as the centennial of Shakespeare in the cinema. Michael Hoffman's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continues the star-delivery approach, going so far as to transform Bottom into a romantic lead, the better to accommodate one of the film's biggest box-office draws. That decision, however, is but one of many indicating the filmmaker's uneasiness with the Shakespearean playtext and with the precedents in Shakespeare films he feels he must follow; Hoffman may be envious of the freedom often enjoyed in versions of Shakespeare in languages other than English. No such linguistic resentment appears in the giddy pastiche *Shakespeare in Love*, which wittily appropriates every Shakespearean tag that it can while paying tribute to the history of Shakespearean performance on stage and on screen. Finally, Julie Taymor's *Titus* reconnects with recent innovations in stagecraft and rediscovers a long-neglected play.

In all of these films, we can see the conjunction or collision of different motives, aims, means, and ends. Filmmaking is a commercial enterprise, not unlike the playacting of Shakespeare's day. But, as Pierre Bourdieu has observed about other forms of "symbolic capital" (74–76) , Shakespearean plays have been invested with so much cultural significance that they seem to stand beyond economics altogether. As a result, they have come to stand for culture itself, in its elitist and egalitarian aspects; they have represented culture both as social construction and as a bridge between nations, peoples, and times. No wonder, then, that film's own uncertain and unsettling relationship with culture becomes a major part of the story when Shakespeare is adapted for the cinema. It turns out, after all, that the play's one thing among many, many others that provide the bases for Shakespearean film.

Three more preliminary comments.

First, several well-known and influential screen productions that connect with Shakespeare have been relegated to cameo status. Because of the emphasis on film itself, this book will address versions primarily intended for video release only when they have recognizably influenced a later, different film production. Similar strictures apply to cinematic versions of plays written as stage derivations from Shakespeare: witty travesties like *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and expansive musicals

such as *Kiss Me Kate* and *West Side Story* will receive only brief mentions. This is, in part, an attempt to impose some limits on a vast area of study; it is also, more importantly, a recognition of how such works vastly increase the interactions among performance codes appropriate to different media. There are more than enough negotiations at work between and among the "film codes" (Guntner and Drexler 31–32)—the cinematic conventions associated with specific genres—employed in Shakespearean adaptations.

Second, several of the productions that are discussed here have not always been accepted as "canonical" versions of Shakespeare (Holderness 63–64). At times, adherence to models of specifically literary criticism has hindered the study of Shakespearean film (Collick 6–8). Resulting analyses have privileged the work of acknowledged auteurs, while often eliding the difference between them and canonized authors. Other dynamics—especially commercial ones—in filmmaking could be either ignored or dismissed, as differences between "high" and "low" Shakespeare were exaggerated (Levine 1991, 169–72). That critical moment seems to have passed. There has recently been an explosion of studies interested in situating Shakespearean performance more surely in contemporary contexts: see, for example, the collections edited by Bulman, by Boose and Burt, and by Burnett and Wray; see also individual studies by Howlett and Willson, with many others.

Consequently (and finally), this study endeavors to place all Shakespeare films amidst the cultural practices, economic pressures, career trajectories, and audience expectations that shaped their production and reception. For that reason, I will make reference to directors' other films, to actors' other roles, to screenwriters' other works, and to the markets that studios targeted—even when these are not specifically Shakespearean. Too often, Shakespeare films have been considered in isolation from other cinematic works and from each other: silent film versions of the plays, for example, have been aggressively marginalized, even by some of their most devoted students. Twentieth-century (and later) filmic texts participate in a range of discursive networks as broad as those that framed Early Modern texts, such as Shakespeare's plays. Film, Shakespeare, and their interactions can best be understood when, as Leah Marcus has recommended for literary studies, "a wider historical and cultural matrix" is seen "as constitutive, an integral part" of their networks (23). There is much to be learned, especially, from examining how the worlds of film connect with the scenes of Shakespearean stagecraft, in

which boundaries are happily, disturbingly, and deliberately blurred and redefined. Shakespeare's lines constantly oscillate between commerce and art, audience and player, high and low, comedy and tragedy, male and female, power and resistance, play and life. So, in their multifarious way, do the movies.