

SHAKESPEARE THE ILLUSIONIST

MAGIC, DREAMS, AND THE SUPERNATURAL ON FILM

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction. From Stage to Screen	i
PART ONE: FILM LANGUAGE	
1. Silent Ghosts, Speaking Ghosts: Movies about Movies	13
2. Méliès and the Pioneers	19
PART TWO: SHAKESPEARE FILMS	
3. “Stay, Illusion”	31
4. Supernatural Comedies <i>A Midsummer Night’s Dream</i> and <i>The Tempest</i>	38
5. “The Most Unfortunate Major Film Ever Produced” Shakespeare and the Talkies	62
6. Ghosts and Courts The Openings of <i>Hamlet</i>	80
7. <i>Macbeth</i> and the Supernatural	130
Conclusion. A New Hybrid: Taymor’s <i>Dream</i>	162
Notes	167
Bibliography	203
Index	217

INTRODUCTION

From Stage to Screen

“IF SHAKESPEARE WERE alive today, he would be writing screenplays.” This remark, or something like it, has often been attributed to Sir Laurence Olivier. Barbara Hodgdon says that her colleague Jim Burnstein credits his teacher, Russell Fraser, but she allows that Olivier was probably the first to remark that if Shakespeare were around now he would be writing new television comedies or soap opera parts for aging actors. Certainly by the late 1960s or early 1970s, the idea that Shakespeare wrote “cinematically” was circulating in academic culture, spawning courses titled Shakespeare on Film or (eventually) Shakespeare and Film.¹

Julie Taymor’s film of *Titus Andronicus* opened in December 1999. In the first sentence of his *New York Times* review, Jonathan Bate offered a slightly different version of the remark but without attribution: “If William Shakespeare were alive today, he would be writing and directing movies.”² Indeed, Shakespeare has been called, bizarrely, the most popular screenwriter in Hollywood.³ There are not only film or television versions of all of his works but also multiple versions of many. Numerous spin-offs adapt Shakespeare’s plays, often unrecognizably; these include *West Side Story* and *Warm Bodies* (both *Romeo and Juliet*), *Kiss Me Kate* and *10 Things I Hate about You* (both *The Taming of the Shrew*), *The Lion King* (*Hamlet*), *O* (*Othello*), *Scotland PA* (*Macbeth*), and *She’s the Man* (*Twelfth Night*). There is even *The Tale of Arcite* and

INTRODUCTION

Palamon (1998), a ten-minute Vimeo version of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a play Shakespeare cowrote with John Fletcher that had not been filmed before. Adaptations in languages other than English flourish around the globe, such as Grigori Kozintsev's Russian films of *Hamlet* (1964) and *King Lear* (1970); Akira Kurosawa's three Japanese films *Throne of Blood* (1957, loosely based on *Macbeth*), *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960, *Hamlet*), and *Ran* (1985, *King Lear*); and even Éric Rohmer's *Conte d'hiver* (1992, *The Winter's Tale*), in the course of which the heroine sees a representation of Shakespeare's play and changes her life.

Anticipating the success of their *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), Warner Brothers made an eccentric twenty-minute promotional film in which a screenwriter falls asleep and visions appear. Hamlet, for example, performs a jazzy dance sequence backed by a group of Hamlettes. Finally Shakespeare himself appears, asking, "Is it for this that I spilled so much magic ink?" and Hamlet concludes, "Today the screenplay is the thing."⁴ Variations on the theme of updating Shakespeare are endless. In an amusing essay for the *New Statesman*, Ed Smith, a former cricketer turned critic, wrote, "I remember my parents' friends telling me that if Shakespeare had been alive in the 1960s, he'd have been a pop star. Now, it's more likely he would be writing television dramas for HBO."⁵ In contrast, Stan Hayward, writer of short films like *Small Talk* and *When I'm Rich* and of the television cartoon series *Henry's Cat*, made the following deliberately contrarian statement:

For certain Shakespeare would not have gone into TV. Writing for TV is not very creative, and is bogged down in all sorts of conditions about budgets, deadlines, legal issues, screen slots, and global distribution, apart from the fact that TV is often written by teams, and for certain will have much altered by the time it reaches the screen. Very few authors become screenwriters, though they may sometimes be consultants. Though Shakespeare's work is well suited to Box Office movies, he would probably find the theater and radio more satisfying.⁶

Another critic, Aljaž Krivec, writes on the same website, "Maybe he wouldn't even be an artist. Perhaps he would seek his potential in venture capitalism, since he was kind of a businessman too, or maybe he would be the head of the BBC?"

The aim of this book is not to offer another answer to the question of whether Shakespeare would have written for the screen if he were alive today (though I think he would) or even whether he would have become the head of BBC drama but rather to assess what various filmmakers and television directors have in fact made of his plays—at least, of those that contain major ingredients of the supernatural such as ghosts, witches, and fairies. That is a very different question from what Shakespeare himself would have done, though his presence obviously haunts all these films, even those that try the hardest to leave him behind.

The ways in which each text was trimmed and restructured offer important clues to how each director approached his or her Shakespearean material. Length is an important film convention: most films are between 90 and 130 minutes long. Most screenplays for Shakespeare films therefore provide at best only some 50 percent of the original plays (the famous line in the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* about “the two hours’ traffic of our stage” is probably not an accurate measure “in an age of sandglasses, sundials and inaccurate clockwork”).⁷ Exceptions are Peter Hall’s 1968 *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Kenneth Branagh’s 1996 four-hour *Hamlet* (whereas in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* of 2000, only 35 percent survives). Olivier’s screenplay for his 1948 *Hamlet* (cowritten with Alan Dent) is a classic instance of the radical trimming that is normal in film adaptations.⁸ Olivier eliminated all the minor characters: not only Fortinbras, Voltmand, Reynaldo, and the English ambassador but even the Second Gravedigger and Hamlet’s “excellent good friends” Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.⁹ Perhaps this final exclusion is what, some sixteen years later, provoked Sir Tom Stoppard to start writing what became his now-classic *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*,¹⁰ successfully revived in London’s West End in 2017 with Daniel Radcliffe as the less intellectually curious of the two “friends” of Hamlet. Some film versions of *Hamlet*, as we shall see, even cut the Ghost, at least from what is visible on-screen. That poses a serious problem because film is primarily a visual medium. Olivier was famously dissatisfied with the Ghost and ended up voicing the part himself, though at a slower speed.

The editor of Olivier’s film was Helga Cranston; her papers have recently been analyzed by Samuel Cowl.¹¹ When she first went to Denham studios to start work, she found that Olivier had blackened his face

INTRODUCTION

and stuck a lightbulb in his mouth. His idea was apparently to make the Ghost appear like a negative photographic image. She told him she had recently been to Paris and had seen Jean Louis Barrault's stage production of the play (Barrault is best known now for his performance of the mime Baptiste in Marcel Carné's *Les enfants du paradis* [*Children of Paradise*], 1945). In Paris the Ghost was barely visible but was given a powerful stage presence by an amplified heartbeat. Olivier seized on the idea and made his Ghost a shadowy figure but with a muffled voice and a heartbeat that announces his arrival, both on the battlements and later in Gertrude's closet.

MAGIC

Shakespeare seems to have always been fascinated with stage devices for presenting magic or the supernatural. Early in his career, in *1 Henry VI*, he has Joan la Pucelle talk to fiends who (in the Folio stage directions) "walk and speak not," "hang their heads," "shake their heads," and eventually "depart." The Duchess of Gloucester and Margery Jourdain summon spirits that appear onstage and utter prophecies that come true in *2 Henry VI*. And in his last plays, Cerimon in *Pericles* resurrects Thaisa with the help of spells, napkins, and fire, while in *Henry VIII* there is (in Folio 4.2) "The Vision," in which a sleeping Queen Katherine is visited by six white-robed figures wearing golden vizards; these masked visitors bow, dance, and hold a garland over her head. In the later plays, especially the romances, which could use the new (1610–11) indoor artificially lighted Blackfriars Theatre as well as the Globe, he exploited the contemporary popularity of magic for the miracles of *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* and used masque effects for the supernatural, as in the harpies' intervention to remove the banquet and in the descent of Jupiter on an eagle in *Cymbeline*.

These examples suggest, as does the presence of both high and low culture in his plays, that Shakespeare might have been happy to learn from the tradition of *trucage* (trickery), even from horror movies or melodrama, just as Orson Welles and Kurosawa did in their versions of *Macbeth* and as occurs in some filmic versions of *Dream* and *The Tempest*. In the latter, Prospero, who also alludes to Ovid's witch Medea (5.1.33–50), would then be Shakespeare's final version not only of the Renaissance magus in all his ambivalence but also of

the playwright as illusionist.¹² The play begins with a storm that soon turns out to be faked.

Prospero-Shakespeare is often compared with the famous Dr. John Dee, Queen Elizabeth's astrologer and magician. He was a highly ambivalent figure, both medieval and modern, using pure mathematics but often for superstitious or occult purposes. He had trouble with the authorities at various times, but Dee first came under suspicion not for some egregious use of alchemical magic or even for using incomprehensible mathematical symbols but for his role in a student play. At Cambridge, as a budding magician would, he invented a special effect, a giant flying beetle, for a student production of Aristophanes's *Peace*.¹³ Whether the authorities regarded Dee's trick as physically or spiritually threatening is unclear, but they apparently arrested him, and not for the last time. Elizabeth, however, had such trust in Dee that she had asked him to choose the date for her coronation. Add to this composite and interestingly subversive image of the Elizabethan magus those "jugglers" of the street corner and popular stage admired by Reginald Scot in his *Discovery of Witchcraft* but denounced by Ben Jonson in the Induction to *Bartholemew Fair*,¹⁴ and we can begin to imagine how the Shakespeare who invented Prospero the masque-maker and Autolycus the trickster might have enjoyed making movies.

ILLUSION

There are so many good books in print about films of Shakespeare's plays that yet another must have an angle of its own. The thread that ties the following chapters together is the capacious concept of illusion. I use the term largely for the ways in which the art of making movies has exploited the special kinds of trickery, or *trucage*, that are peculiar to film and allow it to assert its difference from live theatre. The independence of movies from theatre is especially obvious in the ways these films represent the supernatural—fairies, ghosts, witches, visions, even prophetic dreams and fantasies.¹⁵ Indeed, the term *illusion* was sometimes closely related to *ghost*, almost synonymous with it. In Chaucer's *House of Fame*, for example, the dreamer begs, "O Criste . . . Fro Fantome and Illusion / Me save" (I 493).¹⁶ This book is largely about Shakespearean plays in which elements from a beyond-the-human world are pertinent, even when—as in certain productions and especially in works made for

INTRODUCTION

television—there is an absence of represented ghosts. More might be said about elements in other plays, such as the figures that appear to Richard III on the eve of the battle of Bosworth and the various ghosts in *Julius Caesar*, but the main focus here is on two of the comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, and two of the tragedies, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.¹⁷

The term *illusion* has an interesting history. The earliest occurrences cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* relate it to derision or mockery, often devilish: Richard Rolle around 1340 writes of “the illusyone of the enemy”; in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* Pandarus says the priests of the temple claim that dreams are revelations from the goddess but also “[i]nfurnal illusions”). Other *OED* occurrences include Thomas More’s description of fantasies “[d]one by the deuil . . . for the illusyon of them that with ydolatry had deserued to be deluded” (from *Dialogue Heresydes*), Samuel Purchas’s “illusions of their bewitched mindes” (from *Pilgrimage*), and Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *Henry VIII*, from which we learn that “by th’ Diuels illusions / The Monke might be deceiu’d.” Thus, in each of these late medieval and early modern usages, the idea of illusion is attached to a religious reference and is entirely negative. Illusion is to be avoided as the devil’s work.

By the end of the eighteenth century, a different kind of context began to become relevant. The most famous purveyor of the “optical illusions,” as they were described by the *OED*, was Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), a Franco-British painter whose well-known efforts to capture the Romantic sense of the sublime include *Coalbrookdale by Night* (1801) in London’s Science Museum and *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803) in the Tate Gallery.¹⁸ In 1771 Loutherbourg settled in London, where David Garrick paid him £500 a year to design scenery and costumes and oversee the stage machinery at the Drury Lane Theatre. He is chiefly remembered for his mechanical inventions. One of these was called the Eidophusikon, meaning “image of nature.” It has sometimes been regarded as a kind of pre-cinema.¹⁹ Described by the *Public Advertiser* as “various imitations of Natural Phenomena, represented by moving pictures,”²⁰ it was the fruit, its inventor claimed, of twenty years of experiment. Inside his Leicester Square house he built an opulent miniature theatre cum art salon. There, for a fee of five shillings, up to 130 fashionable spectators sat in comfort to watch a series

of moving scenes projected within a giant peephole aperture measuring eight feet by six feet. The darkened auditorium combined with skillful use of concealed and concentrated light sources, colored silk filters, clockwork automata, and winding backscreens to create a uniquely illusionist environment. Audiences could watch five landscapes in action, each derived from his paintings or representing aspects of the fashionable sublime. Dawn crept over the Thames at Greenwich; the noonday sun scorched the port of Tangier; a crimson sunset flushed over the Bay of Naples; a tropical moon rose over the wine-dark waters of the Mediterranean; and a torrential storm wrecked a ship somewhere off the Atlantic coast. Between scenes, painted transparencies served as curtain drops, and the audience was entertained with violin music and song.²¹ Colored lantern slides and the ingenious lighting of transparencies represented the moon and stars and even the effect of running water.²² Garrick, who made extensive use of Louthembourg's skills, became "the first actor-manager to establish a watertight separation between the stage and the auditorium," and so to make extensive uses of processes of illusion.²³ In 1762 Garrick had managed to stop audience members from sitting on the stage, and the so-called fourth wall concept began to develop. A curtain marked the stage off from the audience, and the thrust or apron stage for which Shakespeare had written disappeared. Eventually, in 1880, the stage at the Haymarket was encased with a golden frame.²⁴ Spectators were invited to contemplate the stage without any direct participation, as voyeurs.

Closer to the time when cinema was invented, the word *illusion* began to be distinguished from *hallucination*: illusions, we are told by an article in *Nature* (June 30, 1881) cited in *OED*, "must always have a starting-point in some actual impression, whereas a hallucination has no such basis." Illusion and realism had become closely linked. Spectacular performances like those of Henry Irving included real trees, even real animals, and water: at Sadler's Wells, technical devices like water tanks allowed for rain or storm, shipwrecks, and fountains to be simulated on stage. Painters like Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Edward Burne-Jones, aided by advances in lighting, were employed to enhance sceneries and stage effects.²⁵

Around the same period, the word *illusionist* came into use; possibly under French influence, it quickly became the equivalent of the

INTRODUCTION

much older terms *conjuror*, *magician*, and *enchanter*. Only in the twentieth century, according to the *OED*, did the adjective *illusionistic* appear: an article in the *Modern Language Review* in October 1938 writes of the great Swiss art historian Heinrich Wöfflin's conception of the baroque as defined by "the tendency . . . to employ an illusionistic realism for the purpose of sensationalism." Thus, in the modern period, scientific and artistic contexts became relevant, replacing the earlier religious contexts; illusions can be produced by human skills.

One suggestive use of the word is when Horatio addresses the ghost of Hamlet senior as "illusion" (1.1.109).²⁶ The play calls into question many inherited concepts, partly because it makes use of the rapidly changing and unstable nature of the English language. In this case we hesitate, as must the audience, between the earlier, often satanic, sense of the word, and a newer questioning about the relation of illusions to hallucination: are they the devil's work or the brain's? Hamlet's ghost may be both. As we shall see, ghosts and *trucage* are often related: on the stage, still more so on film, Horatio's cry "Stay, illusion" is richly ambiguous.

Early Shakespeare films never settled into any uniform understanding of how to manage illusions. On the one hand, we find delight in what the new art form could do to enhance the impression of the real, such as a ship viewed at medium distance floating in the sea from which Ferdinand staggers ashore onto the beach in the Percy Stow *Tempest* of 1908. On the other hand, the illusion can be disrupted in quite novel ways. At the end of *Richard III* (1916), Frederick Warde turns back into himself, and we see him sporting a tweed jacket and "bowing and smiling graciously to his adoring fans," as if the cinema audience were present in his theatre.²⁷ This is very like what Tom Gunning has called "the Cinema of Attractions," when the actors smile at the camera or the assumed audience as if "to solicit the attention of the spectator" to themselves as actors, not to the character they play.²⁸ Indeed, an arresting way to imagine the distinction between theatre and screen is to realize that from the actor's point of view, the camera's ability to see their eyes makes all the difference.²⁹

Some recent *Hamlet* films even extend the permitted range of illusion in film. In Kenneth Branagh's version, for example, we see a dagger being plunged into Claudius's ear, and for a moment we may

think Hamlet has finally done the deed. But immediately we are shown a shot of Hamlet still hesitating to stab his uncle. We quickly have to rethink what we have seen and realize that the film has taken us into Hamlet's thought, his intentions, rather than showing us what actually happened. The moment exploits the inherent realism of cinema but makes us momentarily doubt its credibility. Similarly, in Michael Almereyda's version, as her father is reading Hamlet's love letters aloud to Gertrude and Claudius, Ophelia suddenly jumps into the swimming pool in an attempt to drown herself. But in the next shot she is still on the edge of the pool. She did not jump—or not yet. What the film showed us was her secret wish to commit suicide in water, which will happen later. These two instances of metacinema cannot but call attention to the nature of illusion itself. The film in which they appear is an illusion, but how much of an illusion if the viewer is jolted back into the larger film's reality by experiencing the inset illusions? We are at least invited to think hard about the issue.