

---

# BOOK REVIEWS

---

Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt, eds. *Shakespeare; the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video*. London: Routledge, 1997. 268p.

DIANE PARKIN-SPEER  
SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE UNIVERSITY

This collection of sixteen essays is a good introduction to current criticism of Shakespeare films, television, and videos; also the essays survey Shakespeare movies from the earliest attempts to some recent ones by Branagh and Loncraine. Animated versions of the plays are also discussed. The essays are by well-known film critics and scholars in the U.S. and Great Britain, demonstrating the multiplicity of critical approaches to the moving image.

There is an inherent irony in analyzing popular culture with heavy critical tools and academic mindset, but the essays are provocative and informative. The notes and lists of references at the end of each essay provide a quick introduction to recent critical trends about Shakespeare's dramas; however, there is no inclusive bibliography which would help, considering the large amount of Shakespeare criticism appearing yearly. As with many other critical views in the last two decades of Shakespeare, Milton, and other major writers, there is not much real liking or enjoyment of the Renaissance writer's dramas. An undercurrent of dislike, apology, or excuse occurs for continuing to produce popular works based closely or loosely on various plays. The introduction by the editors clearly announces their trendy but tired critical assumptions: the move toward cultural studies, the elasticity of the text and meanings, and the bland acceptance of versions which frankly re-write and distort Shakespeare. Surely these are over-corrections from former unwarranted bardolatry. Still the emphasis on popular presentations is important because Shakespeare was a popular dramatist in his own time, appealing to a wide variety of persons and writing his plays partly because being a shareholder and playwright of his company increased his income and allowed him to retire to the life of a country gentleman after a successful London career. (In his time he was something of a cultural materialist without being fully conscious of it.) The editors are even interested in films which only have allusions to the early playwright or even just the same patterns of plot and characterization. Some terms such as "American cultural imperialism" and "post-colonial" are used rather loosely and

are not well defined; some new coinages appear such as “metadigital” and “metacomputational allegory.”

The introduction as well as most of the following essays lack a long historical perspective; little understanding or remembrance is apparent that the early Greek plays and the English Renaissance plays were themselves popular, appealing to large audiences and sometimes reinforcing prevailing beliefs and social practices.

James N. Loehlin’s essay on Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* and movie conventions is one of the most insightful—a good analysis, well written with hardly any of the usual critical jargon. Another good essay is Robert Hapgood’s analysis of Franco Zeffereilli’s Shakespeare films. Hapgood shows convincingly how the Italian filmmaker’s intent to make the filmed plays appealing to a large popular audience is carried out with the medium’s conventions and inherent capacities. A really fascinating essay is “When Peter Met Orson: the 1953 CBS King Lear” by Tony Howard. Peter Brook made many important changes in the play so that the live TV production would be seventy-three minutes long and also because Orson Welles played Lear. Both believed that adapting the play to a new commercial form was essential. The music was by Virgil Thomson, another indication of its excellence. The live production is described as well as critical reactions at the time. Diane E. Henderson’s “A Shrew for the Times” makes some insightful points because of her historical research about various versions from D.W. Griffith’s 1908 *Shrew* to Zeffereilli’s version with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Some later TV versions are also discussed. However, like some other critics, Henderson faults directors for not creating movies the critic believes should have been made; the movies of the play and the play itself are not liberal enough, not feminist enough. (This is similar to book reviewers who fault an author for not writing the book the reviewer thinks should have been written.)

Other interesting essays are Peter S. Donaldson’s analysis of *Prospero’s Book*, which is an interpretation of the *Tempest* by Peter Greenaway in a digital film; Kenneth S. Rothwell’s somewhat jargon-filled analysis of *King Lear* films, especially Godard’s; and Lynda E. Boose’s essay about Jonathan Miller’s 1981 television version of *Othello*. She dislikes the casting of Anthony Hopkins as Othello since he isn’t black; she emphasizes the voyeuristic nature of the play and television form. This seems to be a fairly obtuse understanding of the play. Ann Thompson reminds the reader of Asta Nielson’s acting career and her silent film version of *Hamlet*; also Thompson comments on Shakespeare in film and television from 1984-1995 in England. She also mentions an 1881 book which commented on Hamlet’s feminine and masculine traits. Katherine Eggert’s comments on Warren Beatty as a Hollywood Cleopatra and Susan Wiseman’s comments on *My*

*Own Private Idaho* are distant from the theme of the book, popular moving images of Shakespeare's plays. Richard Burt's "The Love that Dare not Speak Shakespeare's Name: New Shakesqueer Cinema" presents some interesting ideas about diversity in Shakespeare productions and their cultural meaning for a particular time. He discusses some pornographic films, based on Shakespeare plays.

The essays provide a survey of various critical approaches with interesting illustrative black and white photographs which are helpful. The volume is a snapshot of the 1990s' academic views of movies, television, and popular U.S. culture. The historical perspective or understanding is limited to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In academia Shakespeare has strangely undergone a metamorphosis into an enemy dramatist or *bete noir* of the commentators. Such is also the fate of Milton and some other major writers from earlier periods in the view of many 1990s analyzers in cultural studies—I suppose in the interests of modern writers, diversity, and especially critical orthodoxies. ✱