Shakespeare's Plays and Modern Adaptations

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Abstract: The main purpose of this essay is to examine the obstacles that modern adaptors encounter when filming Shakespeare's plays, particularly *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. This essay argues that in trying to overcome the problems of the text, the language, poetry and stage convention, filmmakers have developed certain techniques in order to enable the screen serve Shakespeare's dramatic structure, his characterisation and his poetry.

Keywords: Script; Film; Macbeth; Antony and Cleopatra; Stage Convention; Audience; Actor; Screen; Adaptation.

Despite Shakespeare's plays have universal appeal all over the world and thus have been translated into several languages, this essay argues that adaptors experience difficulty with the text, the language, poetry, stage conventions with reference to *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Skilled adaptors do their best to film these plays. In so doing, they experience some problems, according to which some critics claim that Shakespeare's plays are impossible to film. To overcome this, filmmakers have developed certain techniques in order to enable the screen serve Shakespeare's dramatic structure, his characterization and his poetry.

To begin with, Shakespeare's great poetry seems to be one of the most common difficulties that modern adaptors experience. It is possible to recognize that directors`s criteria for a successful production may include the treatment of *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* as poems since most of Shakespeare's plays have a large body of poetry. Manvell (1971) remarks that

> The rhetoric of bad Shakespearean acting from Shakespeare's own time till ours has dulled this quintessence of dramatic poetry. Today we try to find ways of speaking it which, while retaining the shape and rhythm of poetic utterance, do not lose the grasp of either thought or emotion in what is being said. The new media, with their emphatic close- shots, can be brought into full play to enhance and underline the significance of the words. Or they can, like the effusive stage productions, use spectacle and pictorialism to mute the sense of the lines, and turn Shakespeare's scintillating poetry into what souds like the baying of the human bounds (7-8).

This shows that the actor should keep the influence of the rhythm of the verse he delivers.

It is obvious to note that one of Shakespeare's salient features lies in his use of dramatic poetry with which he clothes and humanizes the actions in his plays. He relied heavily on the suggestive power of his poetry in order to quicken the imagination of his audience. Puns, jokes, and subtle poetic effects made a greater impression on Elizabethan audience than on modern audience, who is less alert to language. It is of prime importance to mention that the techniques of presentation adopted by the new technology should effectively utilize the great aspects of Shakespeare's adaptability to the screen, the excitement of the action as well as dramatic poetry. Therefore, it seems hard, not to say impossible, to change, what might be called, Shakespeare's poetic dramatic atmosphere into visual terms by replacing his poetic imagery with imagery re-conceived visually. In order to overcome this subtle obstacle, the directors of *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* effectively exploit the aural and visual means, including the use of musical phrasing. Therefore, this seems to increase the modern audience's understanding of the power of Shakespeare's words and poetry. In addition, it is natural to say that Shakespeare's verse has strong rhythms, which sometimes run counter to normal editing technique and create a great difficulty to the modern actor. In other words, this rhythm mirrors the ebb and flow of the inner depths of the characters in the text. For example, Colin Blakely, who plays the role of Antony, says:

> Vanish, or I shall give thee thy deserving
> And blemish Caesar`s triumph. Let him take thee
> And hoist thee up to the shouting plebeians;
> Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot
> Of all thy sex. Most monster-like be shown
> For poor`st diminitives, for dolts, and let
> Patient Octavia plough thy visage up
> With her prepared nails (Antony and Cleopatra Act IV, scene xii).

The poetic language of this speech undoubtedly demands a suitable voice with both high and low pitch along with a consistent movement of his lips in order to keep the rhythm of these lines which mirror the psychological situation of Antony. In addition, in Shakespeare's text, there are sometimes certain echoes, certain pauses, which the text absolutely demands. That is, information about the identity of the characters and about the time as well as the place of the action was incorporated in the dialogue with the emphasis upon action and speech rather than the scenic background. Therefore, if the director wants to visualize them, he has to cut some which lose the original fluidity of the structure. For instance, in the version of *Antony and Cleopatra*, Miller (1981) has made some cutting, especially in Act five, scene two: " Where`s Seleucus?…/ Put we Γ th` roll of conquest (lines 140-181). Those who are involved in this kind of deletion are Seleucus, Cleopatra and Caesar. This deletion seems to leave an unsatisfactory impression. Therefore, the director has to adopt a careful style of cutting, which seems to be equally fair to the rhythm of the verse and to the rhythm of the pictures. In this regard, Halio (19 88) asserts: "[filming Shakespeare's plays, as Kozintsev recognized, may permit-even require-heavy cutting of the text insofar as the director must translate Shakespeare's verbal images into visual ones" (16).

By the same token, *Macbeth* is, for instance, more celebrated for its poetry, which establishes its real unity. In this play, Shakespeare's poetry achieves its greatest breadth and naturalness. He can turn everything and every experience from the most exalted sentiment to the lowest command into verse. Besides breadth of experience, there is depth of emotion. By means of rhythm, images, figures, even sounds of the verse, he makes every experience not only talked about, but also actually felt. Hence, it seems very difficult, for Seidelman (1981), to keep the effects of these during making the film and similarly, for the modern actor, Jeremy Brett, to live the experience of the lyrical and poetical role of Macbeth. In particular, Macbeth in the text says:

> Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
> I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
> Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
> To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
> A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
> Proceeding from the oppressed brain?

[….]
Witchcraft celebrates
Ale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy ace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, toward his de-
      sign
Moves like a ghost. Thou surew and firm-set earth,
          [….]
I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven, or to Hell   (Macbeth, Act II, scene i).

When Brett comes to deliver this soliloquy, he has to be aware of the syntax and the rhythm of this soliloquy. First, it has different lengths of sentences so that in saying them, he should live Macbeth`s discomfort. Second, the rhythm coincides very closely with the syntax and there is a clear sound of Macbeth`s doubts. The stress comes in the opening syllable of line 636, 'Moves like a ghost'. The stress falls on the final syllable of the line as the quietness intensifies in the soliloquy. This stress becomes more noticeable at the end of Macbeth`s mechanical resolution. In the last five lines, there is a repetition of vowel sounds in ' threat', 'bell', 'knell', 'Heaven', 'Helt', and 'he'. This gives a complex crosspattern of sounds and words. They pull the lines together and force the sense on the audience's ears. Consequently, it does not seem an easy part for Brett, who has to be aware of all of these. Otherwise, he cannot imitate this role properly.

The second obstacle that the filmmaker encounters is misunderstanding of the stage conventions. However, Bradbrook (1932) remarks that most of Shakespeare's plays can be acted on any stage (55). In trying to find out whether this is true or not, it seems of prime importance to describe the Elizabethan stage. The stage and the auditorium of the Elizabethan theatre were based on the inns of the court. The auditorium was of course small. Manvell (1971) argues that "[t]his stage extended out into the auditorium, so that the actor could walk at will to the forestage, and literally be among his audience [….] Soliloquies in films can be actually presented as spoken thought as in […] film versions of *Macbeth*- the words spoken, but by unmoving lips" (14-5). There was a pit, designed for the lowest classes that stood during the performances. There was a gallery for the rich around the wall. The galleries and the tiring-house behind the forestage were roofed. The rest was open to the sky. The stage consisted of a very large platform that jutted out so that the pit audience stood on three sides of it. There was the inner stage under the continuation behind the stage of the gallery. This was supplied with a curtain, but the open forestage was not. Above the inner stage was a balcony. It formed another curtained stage. This galley was used for kings addressing subjects from balconies, for the storming of walls for Cleopatra`s monument. Costumes and properties were extravagant including gallows, fountains and ladders. Extensive music was used and sound effects as cannon, drums or unearthly screams were common according to Nagler (1959). Nevertheless, there was no darkness to focus attention on the stage, and there were no facilities for stage lighting. All these things are in clear contrast to the modern stage conventions. Thus, a serious problem of adaptation is posed when it comes to producing the plays under present day conditions.

The advantages are not at all with the modern stage. It is true that the picture stage can do more in terms of realistic effects. However, this kind of realism is not important to Shakespeare's plays. Seidelman (1981) does not make a great deal of deletions in *Macbeth* and he presents the text as it is. Therefore, the version is seen as dull. In fact, there has been a real trend away from realistic scenery in the theater back to a conventional or stylized simplicity as is emphasized by Eckert (1972). One effect of Shakespeare's stage upon his work was to make the scenes in the plays more person-scenes than place-scenes.

In particular, Seidelman (1981) experiences difficulty with *Macbeth,* especially with the ghost appearances. In terms of the stage, Seidelman (1981) has to accomplish hard things in order to reveal a convincing sense of supernaturality. He also has replaced the stage convention with something more superfluous that is not needed. To illustrate this more, it seems significant to elaborate on the first scene of act one in *Macbeth*. It begins with darkness, rain, and foreboding; it is set in a desert place. The witches

seem to be indifferent to man's fate. This atmospheric beginning scene suggests that Macbeth's fate is sealed. It is natural to recall the bleak, barren strangeness of this scene when one sees the completion of retribution and the beginnings of the restoration of order in the play's final scene. When it comes to the film version, Seidelman (1981) uses a certain kind of decor, make-up, smoke, darkness and loud music in order to create a strong sense of supernaturality. Some of these seem to be unnecessary, as they do not achieve that sense of supernaturality. Moreover, Mitty, Mayenzet and Wright, who act the parts of the witches, successfully imitate the witches in terms of the rapid speech, which has couplet rhyme. However, their bodily movements as well as their physical appearance seem to be unrelated to the real ghosts. Therefore, it is so hard, for Seidelman (1981), to convince the audience that they have a real ghost on the stage as well as they cannot arrange matters so cleverly that the ghost actually seems to appear from nowhere and vanish. Knight (1949) remarks that "the Weird Sisters and their Apparitions in *Macbeth*-all may have thunder. But observe that a ghost never does. A ghost is to be considered less than a human being" (50).

Furthermore, unlike Shakespeare, who relied on his word and was free of the modern techniques, the modern adpaptor is not at liberty to shift the scenes. The stage, for instance, seems to be inadequate to the range and complexity of Cleopatra`s theatrical imagination. Eggert (2001) demonstrates that this imagination "insists on realizing what the stage cannot show, from the 'Emperor Antony' for whom "realms and islands were/ As plates dropp`d from his pocket" (*Antony and Cleopatra* Act V, scene ii) to Cleopatra herself, who is both "fire and air" and "marble-constant," both "no more but e`en a woman" (*Antony and Cleopatra* Act IV, scene 15; Act V, scene ii) and a queen with "nothing/ Of woman" in her" (*Antony and Cleopatra* Act V, scene ii) (202). *Antony and Cleopatra* seems, for instance, to be difficult to be staged, especially the third and fourth acts. These acts have about 24 short scenes. They are set in different locations, such as Syria, Alexandria, Rome, and Athens. The construction of the play and the movement seem to be highly complicated. This play is very loosely constructed, especially Acts (2, 3, 4) with too many fragmentary scenes. Bradley (1999) criticized the large number of scenes in acts 2, 3, 4 and their loose construction as defective (283). Van Doren (1939) shows how this fragmentation extends even into the rhythms of the poetry. These rapid changes of the scene and the vast distances involved in this play create a problem for modern producers, such as Miller's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1981). Shakespeare did not rely, as the modern realistic theater does, on elaborate stage scenery to create a strong sense of atmosphere and locale in the play. Shakespeare could move so freely because of the absence of scenery and other theatrical effects on his stage. He could rely on the imagination of his audience and the descriptive power of his poetry in order to create a sense of locale he desired. Therefore, these scenes become symbolic of the conflicting values of the play. For these, for battle scenes involving large numbers of people, Shakespeare relied on the suggestive power of his poetry to quicken the imagination of his audience. In turn, Miller (1981) should rely on a new technique to deprive the play of its dullness. For example, decor has been used to reveal more about Cleopatra`s palace. In this sense, Bradbrook (1932) asserts:

> *Antony and Cleopatra* is the most Elizabethan of all Shakespeare's plays from the point of view of construction. Its whole effect depends upon the sense of the worldwide nature of the struggle. of the struggle…. This effect is gained not only by imagery but by the rapid shift of the scenes, the cinamatogrph method of showing Antony in Rome and Cleopatra in Egypt…. In spite of complexity of movement *Antony and Cleopatra* is simply staged, except or the galley scene and the last act. The exact position of Cleopatra`s monument and how she is captured is impossible to determine, owing to the lack of stage directions. In 4.13, it is certainly above; at the end of 5.2 certainly below (48-9).

Similarly, Seidelman (1981) is not free when moving from one scene to the other in the version of *Macbeth*. In return, he uses some kinds of shot, such as black colour, which dominates the screen when shifting to the following scene. This kind of solution, representing the technique, seems to be inadequate as it interrupts the audience's attention.

Obviously, the choice of the cast seems to be a serious problem that the modern adaptors experience. It is difficult to find a modern actor who can successfully play the parts of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Antony, Cleopatra and those of other characters. In order to overcome this, Seidelman (1981), in the case of *Macbeth*, has already done a very notable selection of the actors. However, several actors have been so good and, would do great jobs on the screen. Obviously, Jeremy Brett is one reason for undertaking

Macbeth in the first place. Piper Laurie as Lady Macbeth Tim Prager as the bloody Sergeant are also chosen simply because they can make these characters so powerfully real. For the rest of the cast, it seems too difficult to find those who can imitate the real characters. Therefore, when it comes to the screen, it is possible that some of the shots of a certain character carry no dialogue with them but they are close and revealing. In other words, the actors should be the real characters in terms of the clothes and make-up of their faces. Regarding any of Shakespeare's characters, the modern actor must be confined and disallowed to go beyond the scripts. In other words, he has to learn by heart the exact text of Shakespeare without being allowed to go beyond it. By implication, he is devoid of his free will.

Moreover, the way the modern actors speak the lines which in many cases were designed for particular actors at the time of Shakespeare seems to be another shortcoming. This happens because there is a necessity of making old-fashioned idiom alive and meaningful for a modern audience. The idiom of Shakespeare is dissimilar to that of today. In addition, the actor needs to find an emotional truth within this idiom and structure. When the actor cannot capture this truth, he produces a verse, which seems to be liable yet dull. This undermines the need for the search for the truth of a character as well as the truth of the expression within poetry. It is important for this film to have close-ups, which must be more revealing form of expression that acting has ever had to encompass.

At this stage, it is essential to cast light on some of the characteristics of the actors to whom Shakespeare has written his plays. These actors, such as William Kempe, Richard Burbage and even William Shakespeare himself, succeeded in giving a good impression of their capacities to imtate the life of Shakeapeare`s plays. The good actors must have spoken the verse for what it is by using the rhythms and the flavours that it has. They were able to convince the audience that they were not actors but real characters. In other words, they lived the experiences of the characters as well as those of poetry. They also had the ability to speak the speech in line with the rhythm, rhyme and tempo. What they could do effectively is speaking long speeches with great success. According to Harbage (1955), "[i]t is conceivable that Elizabethan actors spoke at the rate of 185 words a minute and presented a 22,500- word play in two hours" (45). Moreover, they, by their speech, established the location, and the theme. Once again, the plays were written for them and Shakespeare was a ware of their potentials.

However, the modern actor seems to be unable to live the experience behind the words and thus he is unable to live the poetic experience. What he is in great need of is to express the actual psychological behaviour of the characters. In *Antony and Cleopatra,* Cleopatra illogically says blank verse at the messenger whilst impatient for his news. However, in the film, Jane Lapotaire, who plays the role of Cleopatra seems to fail in conveying the actuality of that role. She delivers the lines slowly and unnaturally. She does not imitate the real life and seems to learn those lines by heart. For example, Lapotaire delivers a speech in act five, scene two: "Give me my robe," she pauses for thirty seconds, then she delivers "put it on my crown," then she stops for twenty seconds. With a different pitch, she says: "I have / Immortal longings in me" (*Antony and Cleopatra* Act V, scene ii). She fluctuates in delivering her speech between slowness and rapidity. In short, she seems to be unnatural, especially the movement of her eyes and her hands. Similarly, modern actors experience difficulty delivering long speeches within these texts. Harbage (1952) emphasizes that "Modern actors tend to flinch when they come to the long speeches, either because they want more leisure for acting, or because they are touched with the modern notion that all but the inarticulate are insincere… our actors should speak at the rate normal to them and intelligible to us, and should deliver the lines with relish and deliver them as verse" (46). In the text, *Antony and Cleopatra*, there is a very long speech said by Cleopatra: "O Caesar, what a wounding shame is this…? Thou wouldst have mercy on me" (*Antony and Cleopatra* Act V, scene ii). In the film version, this speech is cut. This seems to be as a result of its length, which causes difficulty to Jane Lapotaire. Knight (1949) points out "There are two main deficiencies in our twentieth- century acting. One is the inability, or lack of desire, or to use the full spectroscope of the voice, confining its tones to a monotonous grey, and missing therefore not only the rhetoric and emotional song of great drama [….] The other limitation is the confining of acting to heads and hands. True acting must search for expression throughout the body" (222). These shortcomings can be easily seen when the witches appear in *Macbeth*. Mitty, Mayenzet and Wright, who act the parts of the witches, move their hands in a way inappropriate to the real witches. In addition, their voice seems to be inadequate and they speak their words without convincing the audience that they are the real witches. They

employ insignificant, melodic, and clearly visible gestures, such as the hand dropping from the wrist with forefinger pointing down.

In summary, it can be said that Shakespeare's plays seem to be not easy to be filmed since they may lose most of their originality. They cause difficulty to the modern adaptors because they have poetic language, which is hard to be vivid under modern techniques. In addition, the stage convention seems to be a serious problem since the adaptor is not at liberty to shift from one scene to another. Moreover, Shakespeare`s characterizations seem to be another shortcoming when the actors play the roles of the characters. They have to do several rehearsals in order to live the experiences of these characters. Thus, after examining all these problems, it can be said that modern adaptors need more skills and appetites in order to overcome these problems.

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