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Looking for Mr. Shakespeare: Four Films in Search of a Hollywood Identity; or The Hollywood Four[1]

I call them "The Hollywood Four." They were the only feature-length sound adaptations of Shakespeare[2] released by major studios in the heyday of the Hollywood "classical" cinema. Prior to the late 1950's, "old Hollywood," that crossroad of art and commerce, churned out movies that became the envy of the world. An exasperated German cinéaste, Rudolf Messel, quotes a fellow countrymen as saying "America with all her faults [did] one thing . . . well . . . she could produce popular films – films that were stupid, inane . . . often immoral, but . . . films that did fill the theatres."[3] Unhappily my Hollywood Four did not always fill the theatres but with a vigorous shelf life on disk and tape, "ultimates" in industry

[1] Presented in San Francisco at the annual meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in the session "Mr. Shakespeare Goes to Hollywood," April 3, 1999. Some elements adapted from Chapter II of *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999.

[2] British Film Institute computer-based SIFT catalog lists Widgey R. Newman's snippet from *The Merchant of Venice* as a first attempt at a Shakespeare talkie. Other contenders have been a 1927 extract from Gounod's *Romeo and Giulietta* (Mc Kernar and Terris), and Thomas Edison's failed 1913 "Kinetophone" of a scene from *Julius Caesar* (Freedman).

[3] D. Bordwell, et al., *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, Columbia University Press, New York 1985, p. 378. Quoted from R. Messel, *This Film Business*, Ernest Benn, London 1928, p. 259.

jargon, they remain available and are: the Fairbankses 1929 *Taming of the Shrew*, the Reinhardt/ Dieterle 1935 *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the Thalberg /Cukor 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Houseman/ Mankiewicz 1953 *Julius Caesar*.[4] This quartet shared the dozen or so hallmarks of classical Hollywood cinema that film scholars like David Bordwell have identified as setting them apart from the postwar continental movies that defied the classical Hollywood mantras of seamless continuity, unobtrusive camerawork, and orthodox capitalist ideology. Francois Truffaut even said that "we loved the American cinema because the films all resembled each other,"[5] yet an occasional classy writer like William Shakespeare qualified for a prestige picture that bent the rules.

Let's begin with the Pickford/Fairbanks *Shrew*, the first *feature-length* talking Shakespeare picture and the one with the deepest roots in America's golden age of silent film. Director Sam Taylor, an ex-gag writer for Harold Lloyd comedies, persuaded a courageous Mary Pickford to play Kate opposite Douglas Fairbanks's Petruchio in a scenario indebted to Garrick's abbreviated *Catherine and Petruchio* (1754),[6] a decision she later bitterly regretted.[7] "Purist" critics went into terminal culture shock, especially when for the first time in 1929 British audiences at the London Pavilion world premiere heard harsh American voices speaking Shakespeare.

Although working closely with producers Pickford and Fairbanks gave Taylor a unit director's independence, he couldn't function without the Hollywood assembly line infrastructure. No wretched wage slaves as in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, Taylor's technicians, who nowadays are listed interminably in the closing credits, were skilled craftsmen with their own protocols but always ready, like stone masons in medieval cathedrals, to subordinate their own art to the higher common purpose – a seamless work of art that concealed art. The guiding genius was artistic director, William Menzies (assisted by Laurence Irving), who had designed the spectacular sets for *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) and, then later on, for *Gone with the Wind* (1939). As Bordwell stresses, classical style always

[4] *The Taming of the Shrew* d. Sam Taylor. w. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford. sd/bw. Pickford Corporation/Elton Corporation. USA 1929. 63 mins; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* d. Max Reinhardt/ William Dieterle w. James Cagney, Mickey Rooney, Dick Powell. Warner Bros. sd/bw. USA 1935, 132 mins; *Romeo and Juliet* d. George Cukor p. Irving Thalberg w. Norma Shearer and Leslie Howard. Metro Goldwyn Mayer. sd/bw. USA 1936. 126 mins; *Julius Caesar* d. Joseph Mankiewicz p. John Houseman w. Marlon Brando, James Mason. Metro Goldwyn Mayer, sd/bw. 121 mins. For fuller credits, see entries #584, #392, #526, and #214 in: K. S. Rothwell and A. Melzer, *Shakespeare on Screen: an International Filmography and Videography*, Neal-Schuman, New York–London 1990.

[5] Quoted in D. Bordwell, at al., *The Classical Cinema*, p. 3.

[6] J. Agate, "Notes," *The Magazine Programme*, London 1929.

[7] M. Pickford, *Sunshine and Shadow*, Doubleday, New York 1955, pp. 311–312.

accommodated differentiation within standardization so that the film skips the conventional establishing shot in favor of a mid-shot Punch and Judy show, whose slapstick battle of the sexes omits the epistemological profundities about "supposings" in the Sly Induction scene. After that the camera pulls back to reveal a master shot of a bustling Padua crammed with street life, though the extras look too well scrubbed for Italian street people, unlike the gloriously grubby London streets in *Shakespeare in Love* (1999). Fairbanks and Pickford, like Burton and Taylor later on, epitomized the old Hollywood studio star system. Swashbuckling Douglas Fairbanks, wearing his trademark expression of maddening insolence, also fit the screen writer's formulaic, goal-oriented hero who knows what he wants and how to get it, whether as the Thief of Bagdad, or Petruchio.

After D. W. Griffith's pioneering innovations, Hollywood's belief in alternation between master shots and analytical close-ups locked into a cinematic Nicene creed, which came to be known as "the American fetishizing of the shot."[8] Following a master shot of Baptista Minola's grand home, Bianca, Hortensio, and the harried Baptista appear in close and mid-shot. The rhythm accelerates with a *découpage*, or montage worthy of Eisenstein, whom the Pickfords once visited in Russia,[9] that clinically documents the Minola's dysfunction. Separate shots show a smashed window, people and objects hurtling down the staircase, a shattered mirror, and a dog scrambling for cover underneath a chest. The camera tracks up the stairs to reveal total disarray, and then pans left to reveal the virago herself, Mary Pickford as a smoldering Kate, who with equal ferocity can crack a whip or a quip.

Gremio's description of the "mad marriage" becomes one of those reported scenes, like the drowning of Ophelia, that movie directors cannot resist adding. Its slapstick origins lie in the silent version that was released for small-town theatres without sound equipment, a common practice during this transitional period between silent and sound movies. A sight gag has Petruchio insolently munching on an apple while kneeling at the altar beside his furious bride. When he hands the apple core to Grumio, the poor devil is stuck with surreptitiously disposing of it, even under the baleful stare of a nearby monk.

It takes more than even Douglas Fairbanks to tame this Kate. When, in the controversial speech of submission, Kate utters the word "obey" she subverts it by broadly winking in the direction of Bianca (as Diana Henderson has pointed out)[10] to underscore the sisterly bond in the "female

[8] D. Bordwell, at al., *The Classical Cinema...*, p. 60.

[9] E. Katz, *The Film Encyclopedia*, Perigee Books, New York 1979, p. 381.

[10] D. E. Henderson, "A Shrew for the Times," [in:] *Shakespeare, The Movie*, eds L. E. Boose and R. Burt, Routledge, London 1997, p. 154.

subculture," which will always have the last word anyway, since statistically women outlive men. Although called "America's Sweetheart," Pickford was a self-referential Kate Minola, off-screen a shrewd real estate operator, very much the new woman of the Jazz Age, not likely to knuckle under easily to any man.

No film better shows Hollywood as "The New Weimar" than Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which appeared after the notorious 1926 "Par-ufa-met" agreement, by which Paramount and Metro effectively crippled Germany's UFA, and triggered a mass exodus of German filmmakers to Hollywood,[11] an early result being F. W. Murnau's 1927 expressionistic *Sunrise*. After Reinhardt's successful Hollywood Bowl *Midsummer Night's Dream*,[12] Jack Warner, whose company specialized in gangster movies and Busby Berkeley musicals, boldly gambled $1 1/2 million to film it on a 38,000 square foot sound stage.[13] A close head shot of the premier ballet dancer in the Masque of Night, choreographed by Branislawa Nijinska with music from Mendelssohn, combines expressionistic soft focus and the continental style of portraiture. The ballerina ascends toward the stars with her arms and hands gracefully crossing, twining and intertwining, until only the delicate white fingers are visible before they dissolve into the blackness. This exquisite moment may not be Shakespeare but it is pure Reinhardt, who had been staging the play since 1905. The play's darker, Kottian side, surfaces in the nightmare wood of gnarled elves and mythical unicorns, mostly inspired by former Reinhardt actor and co-director William Dieterle, whose *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939) later showcased his impeccable taste for the grotesque.[14]

Reinhardt theatricality and Hollywood grandiosity merge beautifully. The iron law that classical film scripts begin *in medias res* is only slightly violated with Mendelssohn's overture against a static charcoal backdrop of a moonlit forest. Russell Jackson and Robert Willson have shown, however, that the scenarists were contemplating an even grosser transgression of the classical scenario primer by beginning with Theseus' war against the Amazons[15] (which does open the egregiously non-classical 1987 Coronado gay/punk *Midsummer Night's Dream*). Alternation between master shots of Theseus' palace and cut-ins to the principal characters insure classical

[11] D. A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, W. W. Norton, New York 1981, p. 126.

[12] J. L. Halio, *Shakespeare in Performance: "A Midsummer Night's Dream,"* Manchester University Press, Manchester 1994, pp. 36–38.

[13] Warner press kit.

[14] J. Baxter, *Hollywood in the Thirties*, A.S. Barnes & Co., New York and London 1968, pp. 67–68.

[15] R. Jackson, "A Shooting Script for the Reinhardt-Dieterle *Dream*," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 1988, n° 4, p. 39.

continuity by rapidly identifying all the characters. The close shots take the spectator not just to the edges of the narrative but well into it. And so after the establishing shot, a close-up of Theseus (Ian Hunter) and Hippolyta (Veree Teasdale) shows the wronged Amazon queen looking a bit stand-offish in a bizarre snake costume. While everyone else joins in a rousing diegetic hymn, "Theseus Be Blest," as if in a dumb show, Lysander (Dick Powell) and Demetrius (Ross Alexander) spar for the attention of beautiful Hermia (Olivia De Havilland), while a forlorn Helena (Jean Muir) looks wistfully toward an indifferent Demetrius. Egeus (Grant Mitchell) testily stomps his staff at the inattentive Hermia. Traces of local Hollywood talent survive in midshots of anachronistically costumed Athenian choristers, some looking like Hollywood's own Vienna Boys Choir; others the 1933 Vassar Daisy Chain; and another, the Senior Men's Geriatric Chorus. Peter Quince (Frank McHugh) conducts the socially marginalized "crew of patches, rude mechanicals" (3.2.9), comprised of studio contract actors like Joe E. Brown (Flute) and James Cagney (Bottom), a flagrant kind of code switching, or stunt casting, that elicited the usual howls from traditionalists who did not think the Declaration of Independence extended to putting the meaner sort into Shakespeare. An earlier plan to give Bottom a shrewish wife, which has now surfaced in the recent (1999) Hoffman/Kline *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, died somewhere between script and release.[16] The subversive fairy world of Oberon (Victory Jory), Titania (Anita Louise) and 14-year-old Mickey Rooney as a marvelous Puck achieves Rembrandt effects through gauze-covered lenses and Reinhardt's highly publicized "Akron Spider Cobweb" machine, all of this forest being in contrast with the hard bright edges of Theseus' palace.

Fortunately with Theseus' "Four happy days bring in another moon," Shakespeare had already anticipated the screen writer's love affair with suspenseful deadlines for temporal continuity, usually signaled by clocks on a wall, flipping calendar pages, or a news paper blown in by the wind. Erich Wolfgang Korngold's musical arrangement subliminally contributed to this sense of movement. He was so successful that some have said the movie supported Mendelssohn rather than Mendelssohn supporting the movie. Like Igor Stravinsky, Korngold probably didn't think so. To Stravinsky good film music should function like wallpaper, there but unseen, or unheard, ready to fill in the cracks of silences when necessary, another sacrifice to the dogma that art should conceal art.[17]

If the spirit of Weimar Germany hovered behind *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the ghost of Britannia haunted the staid 1936 *Romeo and Juliet*,

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 40.
[17] D. Bordwell, *The Classical Cinema...*, p. 33.

whose producers lived in the shadow of the dreaded purists who had excoriated Hollywood for Americanizing Shakespeare. They therefore pre-emptively crammed the screen with a veritable wax works of upper class snobbery recruited from Hollywood's colony of expatriate British actors: Leslie Howard (Romeo), Ralph Forbes (Paris), Violet Kemball Cooper (Lady Capulet), and C. Aubrey Smith (Capulet), the estimable Smith for once not serving with Errol Flynn at the Khyber Pass as colonel of the Queen's Own Royal Regiment of Imperial Horse Dragoons. Thirty--five-year-old American Norma Shearer was allowed to play Juliet because she was a talented actress, no more antiquated than Katherine Cornell, then playing Juliet on the Broadway stage. A 44-year-old icy Basil Rathbone was cast as the fiery Tybalt, while to add even more "class," the great John Barrymore was paraded as a scenery-chewing, over-age-in-grade, but nevertheless charming Mercutio. Norma Shearer's Juliet and Leslie Howard's 43-year-old Romeo exactly embodied the middle-brow stereotype for "sublime" Shakespearean actors, which 60 years ago was closer to a lofty Forbes-Robertson than to a Leonardo Di Caprio. Prof. William Strunk, Jr. of Cornell University sprinkled academic holy water on the enterprise.

Cumbersome sound and camera equipment forced MGM to spend a million dollars on an 8-acre back lot replica of Verona rather than going on location. Carpenters worked from 2769 pictures and 54 scale models,[18] and Oliver Messel painstakingly designed elaborate costumes, as shown by his color sketch book at the Folger.[19] When Thalberg discovered Tchaikovsky for the first time, however, a miffed composer, Herbert Stothart, was forced to drop his plan for carefully researched 16th-century modes and to borrow heavily from Tchaikovsky,[20] then all the rage (who of us over 65 can forget "Our Love"?).

With deeply embedded antitheses between Montagues and Capulets, light and dark, womb and tomb, youth and age, love and death, the inner design of *Romeo and Juliet* lent itself admirably to the MGM official style. The feuding houses of Montague and Capulet as they cross the piazza in Verona, after a motif inspired by Gozolli's "Procession of the Magi,"[21] inspire textbook parallel editing, match-cuts, and shot/reverse shots, until the metronome-like pattern yields to the frenetic montage of the street riot. The single-word "*Fight*," in the Folio licenses a wild mêlée with 40 or so

[18] *Time* 28, 24 Aug. 1936, pp. 30–32; *Literary Digest* 121, 18 April 1936, p. 23.

[19] O. Messel, *"Romeo and Juliet"* with designs by O. Messel, B.T. Batsford, London 1936.

[20] A. De Mille, *Dance to the Piper*, Little, Brown, Boston 1952, pp. 233–234. For further commentary on Hollywood's infatuation with Tchaikovsky, see H. R. Coursen, *Shakespeare in Production, Whose History?* Ohio University Press, Athens 1996, p. 49.

[21] M. Lillich, "Shakespeare on the Screen: A Survey of How His Plays Have Been Made into Movies," *Films in Review*, June 1956, p. 251.

shots from a variety of camera angles. Capulets rush toward Montagues; Peter (Andy Devine) comically struggles to remove his stuck dagger from a scabbard; and in the inevitable Odessa steps quotation a terrified woman clutches her baby. The prince's entrance brings a return to the master shot, this time of subdued citizens in the piazza. The camera has taken us deep inside the action and then allowed us, godlike, to view it from an Olympian distance.

No debutante cotillion in pre-war America photographed by *Life* magazine could have been more genteel than Agnes De Mille's elegantly choreographed Capulet ball. Likewise the stately pace of 90 shots for 205 lines of dialogue in the balcony scene is precisely attuned to mature actors, not the teen-agers of Zeffirelli and Luhrmann. The low-key lighting for Leslie Howard's approach through sepulchral gardens to Juliet's balcony stirs up creepy feelings that the cement statues in the cemetery have come alive at midnight. With the fastidious Howard and Shearer speaking more eloquently than passionately, the film straitjackets the play in the way that the sonnet imprisons Juliet's language at the Capulet ball, until she "gallops apace," so to speak, in her own unfettered blank verse (3.2.1). This movie never gallops apace but it canters beautifully.

By 1953, when MGM released producer John Houseman and director Joseph L. Mankiewicz's $2 million *Julius Caesar*, classical Hollywood cinema was on its deathbed, done in by economic and technological viruses. This *Julius Caesar* was neither native American, imported German, nor pseudo-British but wouldbe New York Actors Studio with an adroit mix of British and American stage and film actors. Regrettably Shakespeare in a rare lack of foresight had failed to create a classical Hollywood hero. Except possibly for the ruthless Octavius Caesar (Douglas Watson), neither Brutus (James Mason), nor Cassius (John Gielgud), nor Caesar (Louis Calhern), nor even Antony (Marlon Brando) follows a clear trajectory to success. To remind us of their importance, however, ubiquitous statues of prominent citizens with their hair brushed well forward in the high Roman style expressively fill the *mise en scene* as the camera tracks Cassius and Brutus through public squares and palace corridors, enough statuary I estimate to stock the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photographer Joseph Ruttenberg indulges his taste for portraiture by giving even the actors faces of chiseled stone. Brutus stands next to a bust of Tarquin as he speaks of how his ancestors drove the tyrant from Rome, while earlier the shadows from tree branches play over his face to emblemize the anguish of a man whose political idealism convinces him that he is a sacrificer, not a butcher. Casca's report to Cicero of the "civil strife in heaven" invites a film noir ambiance totemic of the dark forces unleashed in Rome. The men may be stone but the lovely women, Portia (Deborah Kerr) and Calpurnia (Greer Garson) are

anything but that, as in despair they play insightful *eirones* to their husbands' self-deceiving *alazones*.

As Robert Hapgood has pointed out, the steep staircases, balconies, ramps, become metaphors for the ups and downs of power in Rome.[22] While hundreds of toga-clad extras mill around in the narrow streets, the arrogant Caesar remains framed at the center, even when pressed in on by cheering riffraff. At the senate, a low camera angle makes Caesar the epitome of mastery, as "constant as the northern star" (3.1.60), while behind him a dark-browed, scowling Casca (Edmond O'Brien) sneakily maneuvers to stab him in the back.

Non-classically, for it meant greater expense, Mankiewicz filmed the virtually uncut script in the same sequence that Shakespeare had written it, and allowed the actors uninterrupted delivery.[23] Marlon Brando as Antony had the extras cheering over his funeral oration when it turned out that he didn't always talk like Stanley Kowalski. Miklos Rozsa, another Weimar import, composed the fine musical score, as inconspicuous as wallpaper, but sonically affirming the rise and fall of Caesar and Brutus.[24] A deeply embedded political subtext, like the Wellesian Mercury Theatre anti-fascist *Julius Caesar*, may or may not connect Cinna the poet with McCarthy-ite witch hunting: "I am not Cinna the conspirator . . . It is no matter, his name's Cinna" (3.3.32). If this connection exists, it is too subtle to detect for MGM had subscribed to the 1947 Waldorf Declaration blacklisting suspected dissidents.[25] No red hunt, however, could invalidate Cassius' famous prediction that "this our lofty scene [shall] be acted over/ In [states] unborn and accents yet unknown!" (3.1.112), even in Hollywood classical style.

Finally, though, the Hollywood Four show again how in the classical system differentiation could work even within the framework of standardization. They challenge the opinion of our German critic that American movies are inevitably stupid and inane. Not so, when we consider also how uncannily they validated Northrop Frye's[26] seasonal classifications with a springtime comedy (the rollicking *Taming of the Shrew*); summery idyll (a romantic *Midsummer Night's Dream*); autumnal tragedy (a reverential *Romeo and Juliet*); and wintry tragic irony (a theatrical *Julius Caesar*). There must have been a higher dynamic at work than monolithic systems

[22] R. Hapgood, "Shakespeare and the Included Spectator," [in:] *Reinterpretations of Elizabethan Drama*, ed. N. Rabkin, Columbia University Press, New York 1969, p. 123.

[23] J. Houseman, "Filming *Julius Caesar*," *Sight and Sound*, 23 July/Sept. 1953, p. 25.

[24] M. Rozsa, "*Julius Caesar*," *Film Music*, 13 Sept./Oct. 1953, p. 9.

[25] D. A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, Norton, New York 1981, p. 409.

[26] N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1957, pp. 163–239.

of management, production and distribution. For a shining moment, product merged with art. To echo a recurring theme from *Shakespeare in Love*, "It's a mystery."

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