

READING SHAKESPEARE

FILM FIRST

Mary Ellen Dakin

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Page 78: Plot line for *Romeo and Juliet* in Figure 6.3 adapted from the New Folger Library Shakespeare edition of the play edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (Washington Square Press, 1992). Reprinted by permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Page 86: “Critical Film Review” list adapted from *Great Films and How to Teach Them* by William V. Costanzo (p. 299, National Council of Teachers of English, 2004). Copyright 2004 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Page 88: Figure 7.1 chart adapted from “Where to Be or Not to Be: The Question of Place in *Hamlet*” by John Golden (*English Journal* 99.1, 2009). Copyright 2009 by the National Council of Teachers of English.

Page 137: Formatting for Handout 7.1, *Henry V* viewing guide, reprinted and adapted with permission from *Reel Conversations: Reading Films with Young Adults* by Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder. Copyright © 1997 by Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder. Published by Boynton/Cook, Portsmouth, NH. All rights reserved.

Foreword

I can now admit that, as a high school English teacher, I was ambivalent about teaching Shakespeare. I knew that I *should* teach Shakespeare; I even *wanted* to teach Shakespeare. I just couldn't bear the looks on the students' faces when I would say, "Our next unit is a Shakespeare play. It will be exciting. It is important. You'll be a better person because we do this. Really!" In some years, we navigated *Hamlet* without too many scars—*Macbeth* not so much. In my world, at least, the melancholy Dane was an easier sell than the murderous Thane, even with the witches. My seniors liked *The Taming of the Shrew* because it was the only comic work we read the entire year other than "A Modest Proposal," and they didn't really find Swift's proposal all that funny.

I used the best techniques I could come up with, mostly aping my college professors. Usually I would provide what I considered necessary background information (Shakespeare's Life, the Elizabethan Period, the Globe Theatre), the students would read scenes aloud (without rehearsal and without expression), and every few lines I would ask them what they thought it meant. If they were silent for much longer than ten seconds, I'd cave in and *tell* them What It Meant, so we could move on. If I lucked into an effective strategy, I'd probably use it again the following year. Looking back on the experience, I see that I had no theoretical framework to guide me, much less any coherent ideas about instruction. I taught Shakespeare like I taught everything else—as a Text We Would Analyze Together. Students would be engaged. I would will it so.

What I needed was the work of Mary Ellen Dakin.

If you have read Mary Ellen's first book, *Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults* (NCTE, 2009), the wealth of terrific teaching ideas in this book will not surprise you. What may surprise you is how perfectly *Reading Shakespeare Film First* addresses so many of the challenges of teaching English in the chilly new world of twenty-first-century content and skills, Common Core State Standards, standardized tests, increasing calls for academic rigor, and students distracted by media overload. After all, how can we hope to do Shakespeare justice in a linguistic environment in which *text*, *message*, and *friend* are accepted as verbs? How can we seriously explore hamartia when the word *tragedy* is used to describe everything from a celebrity divorce to a tornado?

When I first read the title of the current book, I admit I was skeptical. I liked the idea of using film to teach Shakespeare, but I was afraid

the author was one of those teachers who use film *only* in the service of literature. You might even have had a colleague like that—one who would prefer that students interact only with words on a page, but who might deign to show part of a film version as a visual aid for the honors students or use *only* the film with the standard students because that was better than nothing. These colleagues might tolerate a film experience, but a reading experience was infinitely preferable. As a longtime media literacy advocate, I wanted no part of an approach that put film in a subservient role. However, I was also worried about the “film first” claim, fearing the scandalized traditionalists would immediately dismiss such a book. Mary Ellen might have ventured too far out of our collective comfort zone.

As I read the manuscript, however, I was immediately both relieved and impressed. Mary Ellen is the kind of reflective practitioner I so admire. She sets out with a huge commitment to engage her students in Shakespeare’s plays and a few simple yet powerful ideas for applying the tools of media literacy to this purpose. She tries some strategies. She notices what’s working. She refines the strategies. She shares her ideas with colleagues, and they then use and refine the strategies. You can see the momentum building around her. This is action research at its best: classroom innovation by thoughtful teachers, resulting in active learning by both students and teachers. And she pulls it off! She really does use media literacy best practices to teach the plays of Shakespeare, and she does so in ways that honor both media literacy and Shakespeare.

Best of all, Mary Ellen shows us how *we* can do it, too. She describes classroom scenarios vividly, allowing us to hear the voices of her students and colleagues as they find new ways to engage in Shakespeare and puzzle through challenging texts. Her students learn to view three faces of the plays—as literary, theatrical, and cinematic experiences—so our students can learn these skills, too. She shows us the process and provides us with the handouts to make the lessons work.

Oh dear! Now I’ve done it. You just turned to the back of the book, saw all the amazing handouts, stopped reading, and headed for the cash register (or, if you are online, you “added it to your cart” and clicked on “purchase”). Well, come back here a minute! There’ll be time for that. Sure, you can use those handouts tomorrow at third period, but I’d recommend you also *read* the book—all of it—from *front to back*. You need to earn those handouts, my friend.

I love the structure of this book. Mary Ellen begins simply—analyzing movie posters and trailers as a way of building interest in the plays—and her strategies build in complexity from there. She explains

in careful detail how to approach each of the three faces of film. Then she shows us great ways to use an entire film. By the time you get to the transmediation project in Chapter 8, you may feel the top of your head peeling back ever so slowly to make room for all of the new ideas you want to try out yourself.

This book fills a void we didn't know existed until Mary Ellen showed us the opportunities we were missing. She has shown us ways to use media literacy techniques—coupled with thoughtful exploration of interrelationships between text, theater, and film—to engage today's students in Shakespeare. Her strategies are impressive, her tips and coaching supremely useful.

Best of all, her love and appreciation of Shakespeare and her commitment to her students are evident on every page.

Alan B. Teasley
Duke University

Preface

The chapters of *Reading Shakespeare Film First* replicate the stages of a journey made by its author, her students, and colleagues, who set out in earnest several years ago to explore the brave new world of William Shakespeare's early modern English text transmediated into images, sound, and film, and who returned to our books as readers transformed. (For an examination of reading Shakespeare's printed text, begin with *Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults*, published by NCTE in 2009.) The eight chapters map a sequence of instructional practices designed to support students in the acquisition of both the language of film and the language of William Shakespeare's plays. The chapters evolve from teaching scenarios in which the balance of instruction shifts gradually from reading Shakespeare word first to reading Shakespeare film first.

The companion website, www.readingshakespeare.org, is designed to connect, extend, update, and animate the material in both books and to host a dynamic conversation about reading Shakespeare in the twenty-first century with all our students.

Introduction

... *what's past is prologue*, . . .
The Tempest 2.1.289

In the dark backward and abysm of time, a three-year-old girl stands in front of a small television screen transfixed by an old movie and the strange boy who won't obey the rules of being human. Filmed in black and white, he is all sparkle and haze. He laugh-speaks and he brays. *Who is this?* she wonders. One day she finds him beneath the kitchen table, visible only to her. For a short time, Puck is her friend. Then he vanishes and over the years he slumbers in memory, indistinct as a dream.

Fast-forward to a high school on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts. Now an English teacher, the grown-up girl suspects that if students can learn to read Shakespeare's language in all its magical complexity, the skills they master will transfer to their reading of literature and enrich their lives, and no child will be left behind. She brings Max Reinhardt's 1935 film production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into the classroom, thinking that the film will reward students with a retelling of the text, but she learns that the language of literature is compounded by the language of film. She understands now, as she writes this book, that even the most formalist productions of Shakespeare on film blaze a trail in directions Shakespeare never traveled, by means of sequential and variable frames, camera angles and movement, editing, densely detailed sets, lighting, special effects, and a highly interpretive sound track. Film is so much more than a retelling of a literary work; it is a *revision*, in the fullest sense of the word. Still, film does not speak in a language foreign to the brain; it is a native language unstudied and unschooled.

"We are born," biologist Lewis Thomas writes, "knowing how to use language" (105), and though it is barely one hundred years old, the language of film may be as innately decipherable to us as the language we learn in the womb. In his 1982 groundbreaking study of the foundations of cinema literacy, Stefan Sharff argues that "the ability to decipher and follow a cinema syntax resembles the innate faculty for language," though our comprehension of a "visual grammar is still tentative . . . and often unconscious" (2-3).

As we work with students on the literary and theatrical richness of Shakespeare's text, we can no longer relegate to the corners of consciousness the cinematic richness of Shakespeare on film. The potential for the

mutual reinforcement and transfer of twenty-first-century literacy skills between text and film is too promising to overlook. This book is meant to guide teachers and students on a journey there and back again, with carefully researched and classroom-tested strategies for crossing over from Shakespeare's rich and strange early modern English to equally rich and strange modern film and graphic productions of his plays.

But the journey doesn't have to begin with words on the page; the journey can and sometimes should begin with images and film. "More movies have been based on Shakespeare's works," observes William Costanzo, author of *Great Films and How to Teach Them*, "than on any other writer's" (165). When Shakespeare is in the curriculum, and he usually is, we have an exciting opportunity to guide students in an exploration of what film scholar Judith Buchanan calls the "transmediation" of Shakespeare from the medium of literary script to screenplay and film. This book is the record of a sustained attempt to take Shakespeare into the twenty-first-century classroom and to learn from the convergence of old and new media why we continue to hold Shakespeare's mirror up to nature and see ourselves and our world new-framed.

We need to infuse our teaching with the rich complexity of text, language, and reading, terms used in their fullest sense throughout *Standards for the English Language Arts* published by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE):

Briefly, we use the term *text* broadly to refer not only to printed texts, but also to spoken language, graphics, and technological communications. *Language* as it is used here encompasses visual communication in addition to spoken and written forms of expression. And *reading* refers to listening and viewing in addition to print-oriented reading. (2)

This book began as the longest single chapter in a manuscript I submitted to NCTE in 2007 and removed before publication in 2009 because it did not thoroughly and thoughtfully answer all the questions I had about reading Shakespeare on film. I needed to learn much more about spoken and visual language, graphics, and technological communications. Beyond research and the crucible of practice, I hoped that the Common Core State Standards we now share with colleagues across content areas and state lines would break down the walls that divide us and foster meaningful collaborative learning. With patient guidance from editor Bonny Graham at NCTE, with thoughtful support from Robert Young, director of education at the Folger Shakespeare Library, and with constant help from colleagues and administrators throughout the

Revere Public Schools—Allison Giordano Casper, Althea Terenzi, Matt Despres, George Hannah, Kelly Chase, Tim Alperen, Bill Drewnowski, Nancy Barile, Sara Rice, and Antonio Cinelli in the English department; Mark Fellowes, Bill O'Brien, and Michael Bonanno in history; David Eatough, Axel Larson, and Erin Parker in science; Alec Waugh in music and technology; Nick Botto in special education; Director of Humanities Jonathan Mitchell; Principal Dr. Lourenco Garcia; Literacy Coach Christina Porter; Library Media Specialist Rachel Bouhanda; Audio-Video Specialist Paul Amato; Senior Associate at Great Schools Partnership Mary Hastings; photographer and former student Jennifer Cimino, artist and former student Jennifer Sao—the chapter became a book.

How should we read Shakespeare with all our students in the twenty-first century? It is the central argument of this book that we need to learn with our students how to read Shakespeare in triplicate, as the stuff of transformative literature, theater, and film. The combined effect will be greater than the sum of its parts. Our students will learn from the most frequently taught, most frequently performed, and most frequently filmed author in the English-speaking canon that language is malleable as clay and meaning is a shared construction, that performance is a dynamic act of selective reading, and that film is new-age hieroglyphics. It is our students who will construct the future paradigms of literature, rhetoric, and art. Let us prepare them.

Note: All handouts can be found in the appendix at the back of the book. Unless otherwise noted, all line citations in this book are from the Folger editions of the plays, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine.

The Prologue

*And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.*

A Midsummer Night's Dream 5.1.15–18

EXTERIOR / FOLGER SHAKESPEARE LIBRARY, WASHINGTON, DC / DAY
Teachers, students, scholars, filmmakers, and tourists walk along the marble exterior of the library, stopping occasionally to view the inscribed bas-reliefs before wandering inside. From within, the sound of voices, the white noise of public space, and intermittent silence acoustically reflect against the oak-paneled walls.

INTERIOR / GREAT HALL / DAY
Standing before an exhibit of posters and photographs from silent film productions of William Shakespeare's plays produced at the dawn of the twentieth century, scholar Deborah Cartmell speaks to a small group.

Cartmell: The question we need to ask is, if we lose the words, do we lose "Shakespeare"?

INTERIOR / ELIZABETHAN THEATRE / DAY
On the stage, film director Michael Almereyda stands before a large monitor projecting his 2000 film adaptation of Hamlet, the audio muted. He speaks to a gathering crowd.

Almereyda: My main job was to imagine a parallel visual language that might hold a candle to Shakespeare's poetry.

INTERIOR / READING ROOM / DAY
At the threshold, a high school English teacher who has recently downloaded the Common Core State Standards app reads from her cell phone:
CELL PHONE SCREENSHOT: To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries.

Teacher scrolls down: Along with high-quality contemporary works, these texts should be chosen from among seminal U.S. documents, the classics of American literature, and the timeless dramas of Shakespeare.

Teacher swipes across the screen and enlarges Reading Standard 7: Students must integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Teacher enters the Reading Room and approaches the desk.

Teacher (in an uncertain tone): How do I teach students to read literature in words and in diverse formats and media?

CUT TO TITLE SHOT: The title "Shakespeare" appears in Elizabethan script on a solid background, then "Reading" appears before it in American Typewriter typeface, then the compound adverb "Film First" appears after it.

Editor (in VOICE-OVER): Some of the answers will speak from the pages of this book.

1 Reading Still Images

Look here upon this picture, and on this . . .

Hamlet 3.4.63

Let us hold the text of Hamlet’s verbal assault upon his mother in one hand and in the other an electronic pad broadcasting an assault of media, and then let us ask our students, who constitute not only a new generation but also perhaps a new breed of learner, to read from both, lowering neither hand to the secondary status of “supplementary.” Will the literacy skills required to comprehend twentieth- and twenty-first-century media texts—films, film posters and publicity stills, film trailers, videos, advertisements, websites, newscasts, songs and sound tracks, to name some—transfer to, and in the process transform, our reading of literature and Shakespeare’s early modern English text? They will when we expand our understanding of a Shakespeare “edition” to include not only paperbacks and annotated or newly revised editions of his plays but also the great variety of modern forms in which Shakespeare’s work is presented. A deep engagement with Shakespeare in the twenty-first century demands the slow reading of Shakespeare in all its iterations. But how do we slow the assault?

Start with stills. Beginning the study of critical viewing with Shakespeare film stills instead of film clips helps students to focus on the elements of visual composition without being overwhelmed by them. Movie posters, for example, are designed to lure viewers to the movie theater, but they can also lure students to the play we are about to read and view in English class. The Internet houses an impressive archive of publicity posters produced for Shakespeare films going back to some of the earliest Hollywood productions.

The Visual Composition

In Chapter 1 of *Seeing and Believing: How to Teach Media Literacy in the English Classroom*, Ellen Krueger and Mary T. Christel pay homage to the authors of a 1968 film textbook long out of print by citing “the five principles of visual composition” (1) outlined by William Kuhns and Robert Stanley and discussing the application of these terms to teaching. The following definitions and bulleted questions are adapted from or inspired by Krueger and Christel’s work.



Framing refers to the subject, who or what viewers see, in an image, as well as to the ways in which the camera limits the viewer’s field of vision. This can pertain to more than the outer borders of a shot or image; it can, for example, refer to inner frames within a frame such as windows, doorways, arches, or any geometric pattern that focuses attention on a particular space, object, or person (Krueger and Christel 1). On the first day of our study of visual compositions in grade 10 English, I positioned an empty black frame around objects and people in the classroom so that students could immediately see the effects of framing. Then, since we were about to read *Hamlet*, a play that

has been filmed “approximately one hundred times” (Jess-Cooke 2), I projected this poster for the 1990 Franco Zeffirelli production onto the whiteboard and asked students:

- Who or what is the subject of this image? What is framed inside the borders of this image? What sort of world is this?
- Inside the outer frame, do you see smaller frames—geometric shapes such as circles, squares, or lines—that draw your attention?

Students saw the subject of this image ranging from the plural to the singular; though they agreed that Hamlet, in the form of Mel Gibson, is the main subject, some students argued that his relationship with the other characters in the image is the real subject. Though this was a prereading activity and few students had prior knowledge of the play, students immediately noted the empty darkness framed within this image and the abrupt vertical line of the sword that divides Mel Gibson’s face from Glenn Close’s. Though there is no interior architecture in this frame, they noted the horizontal line of troubled faces extending across the image. They seemed curious about the shadowy world boxed inside this frame.

Placement “refers to the position of the camera in relationship to the subject” (Krueger and Christel 1). This can mean the distance and angle of the camera as well as the effect these things have on the

viewer's perception of the subject. Though I knew that later in the unit I would distribute a glossary of film terms, we needed to talk quickly about close-up, medium range, and long shots. Drawing a stick figure on the board, I explained that a long shot usually shows the full body, a medium shot is usually from the waist up, and a close-up is usually from the shoulders up. A low-angle camera shot looks up at the subject and tends to make the subject appear larger and perhaps powerful or important, whereas a high-angle camera shot looks down on the subject and can make the subject seem small and sometimes weak or trapped. An eye-level camera shot tends to be natural, or neutral. While director and film scholar Stefan Sharff warns against such oversimplifications of cinematic syntax (32), at this point in our study of camera shots and angles I suggest these readings without insisting on them. Again, using the Zeffirelli *Hamlet* poster, I asked:

- Who, or what, is the subject of this image?
- What is the distance between the camera and the subject—Is it a close-up shot? A medium shot? A long shot? How does the camera distance influence the way you see the subject?
- What is the angle of the camera? High? Low? Eye level? How does the camera angle influence the way you see the subject?

Students agreed that this is a medium shot because Mel Gibson is shown from the waist up, though the people behind him can be seen only from the neck up. They also noted that Gibson is closest to the camera, though Glenn Close seems to be very close too, just behind Gibson and higher.

Some students thought that Gibson and Close must be married or the king and queen in this play, though neither is wearing a crown, and Mel Gibson, as one student pointed out, isn't wearing a wedding band. They counted six people in this image, all arranged very closely—"Too close," one student said—and figured that the people farthest from the camera must be the least important. "If they're close, do they like each other?" I asked. Disagreement ensued; some thought they looked too angry to like each other, but others thought they looked troubled and that they needed to stick together because something was wrong. Students agreed that the camera angle is eye level but thought that only one person, Hamlet, was looking directly at us.

"What effect does that have?" I asked.

"It's like he sees us and he needs to talk to us," one student said.

Subject arrangement is the physical arrangement of people, objects, and background in the frame, which can convey or imply relationships. Arrangement can be, and often is, layered, with some things in the

foreground, some in the middle ground, and some in the background. I asked:

- Who or what is in the foreground?
- Is there a middle ground in this image? Who or what is in the middle ground?
- Who or what is farthest from view?
- What does the subject arrangement imply about the relationships in this film?

Though our classroom conversation had already included comments and conjecture about the relationships of the people in this poster, revisiting the image for its layers inspired additional discoveries.

"The sword is the most important thing in the picture because it's in the foreground," one student insisted.

"But Gibson's hands are holding it," another student pointed out.

"Why is the sword upside down? Why does it cover almost half of his face? Why are his hands the object most in the foreground? Why do we see the hands of only one other person in the middle ground? What is this image trying to tell us about the play we're about to read?!" These questions tumbled out of me and over the quizzical faces of my sophomores, and we were struck by how many decisions had to be made to produce this iconic poster.

"And one more thing," I blurted. "Someone thought that the farther the faces got from the foreground—in other words, the faces in the middle ground and the background—the less important the people must be. But are there other ways to think about this?" I wondered.

"Younger to older?" one student offered.

"More powerful to less powerful?" another added.

"Yeah, because Gibson has a sword and he looks really strong, and that guy at the back looks really old and weak," a third student affirmed.

Yes, that guy at the back, I thought, Paul Scofield in the role of the Ghost. Then, as if he could read my thoughts, a student said, "How about more alive to less? Maybe that guy is dead!" I could only smile mysteriously.

Lighting is the intensity of light, or the lack of light, or the contrast between light and shadow in a frame. *Color* is the palette of hues in the image, and as with lighting, its effect can be manipulated through intensity and contrast. In a black-and-white image, the orchestration of grey can be especially significant. Light and color are often used to draw the viewer's eye to a particular place in the frame. Together, light and

color can convey the mood of an image. The final question set focused on these two elements of visual composition:

- Where is the light in this image most intense? Who or what is being highlighted?
- What color is most intense in this image?
- What is the effect of darkness or shadows?
- How would you describe the mood of the image, based on its light and color?

Students were most struck by the charge of light that runs from Mel Gibson's clenched hands up through his sword and into the right side of his face. When I asked them what effect the half-light of Gibson's face has on their reading of him, some students thought it made him look more powerful, even dangerous. "Does it make him look less human?" I asked. There was silence, then one student replied, "No, but maybe the sword is more powerful than he is. It's brighter than his hands."

"That's because it's metal and it shines," a student countered.

"Is this a black-and-white photograph?" I asked. "The film isn't shot in black-and-white." There were yeses and nos and the gradual realization that in spite of its limited color palette, this image has a warmth that undercuts Gibson's icy stare and the perceived coldness of the metal shaft in his hands.

"It's black and goldish," a student declared. Though I had cast my eyes upon this image countless times since first seeing it in 1990, not until this class discussion did I really see that this image speaks in the warm, sepia dialect of early modern photography. I found myself thinking of Claudius's question to Hamlet in 1.2, "How is it that the clouds still hang on you?" and Hamlet's enigmatic reply, "Not so, my lord, I am too much i' th' sun."

"Based on the colors and the light, what word would you use to describe the mood of this image?" I asked.

"Dark."

"But hopeful."

"Tense."

"All mixed up." That one caught me by surprise.

"What do you mean? Isn't this a simple color palette? Isn't this light and dark, angels and demons, good and evil?" I prodded them, gently mocking the adolescent tendency to divide the literary world into two-dimensional heroes and villains.

"These might all be good people, but they all have shadows. Maybe that symbolizes something," a young woman said. I wanted

to hug her but instead I just smiled. They were almost ready to begin reading *Hamlet*.

After this introduction and whole-group discussion of a single film poster for the play we were about to read (see Handout 1.1 for the set of bulleted questions), I distributed color prints of two other *Hamlet* film posters (see Figure 1.1) and challenged students to read these new images in small groups and discuss the ways in which the posters are constructed from the raw material of framing, placement, subject arrangement, lighting, and color.

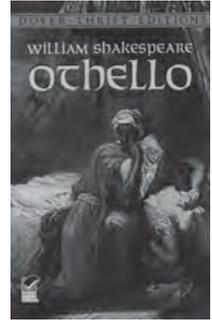
To support students' understanding of the complexity of visual composing and to guide their discussion, I created Handout 1.2 so that it relates each principle to a job at a construction site, defines each element, and includes the bulleted questions that guided our whole-group analysis of the Zeffirelli poster. Because I wrote these questions with the three images before me, as well as with posters of other films, Handouts 1.1 and 1.2 can be used with almost any film poster or publicity still.

In the spirit of *not* judging a book by its cover, colleague Tim Alperen extended this activity in his grade 9 English classroom to the reading of *Othello* book covers in a variety of print editions. The commentary for each image is Alperen's:

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| <p><i>Hamlet</i>. 1990. 135 minutes. Directed by Franco Zeffirelli. Mel Gibson as Hamlet.</p> | <p><i>Hamlet</i>. 1996. 242 minutes. Directed by Kenneth Branagh. Branagh as Hamlet.</p> | <p><i>Hamlet</i>. 2000. 123 minutes. Directed by Michael Almereyda. Ethan Hawke as Hamlet.</p> |

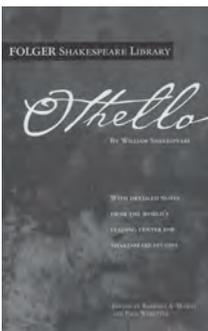
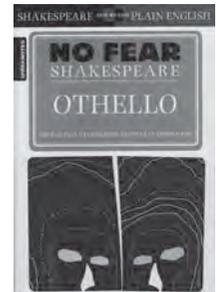
Figure 1.1. Posters for three different film versions of *Hamlet*.

The **Dover Edition** (this is the edition students will read from) is a painting depicting the perverse consummation of Othello's relationship with Desdemona, either after or during her death. This Othello is clearly dark skinned, and the expression on his face is enigmatic, open to a range of interpretations from "guilty" to "remorseful" to "deceptive." In the painting, Othello holds a pillow, but prior to reading the play, kids don't really know what to make of it, so this is worth revisiting when we encounter the "smothering," as there are, indeed, textual variants governing the stage directions here, and this image is arguably an editorial emendation that persists somewhere between the choice of cover and text of this edition.



The **Arden Edition** simply shows a white handkerchief in mid flight against a black backdrop, my personal favorite because of its ambiguity. Postreading *Othello*, it's pretty clear that it is a hanky, but prior to experiencing the play it can actually be difficult to discern what it is or what it signifies. I have seen kids screw their faces up in consternation and bewilderment trying to make sense of it.

The **No Fear Edition**, which, for the record, I do not use but some kids do bring to class, does work in our lesson. The image on the cover is ambiguous: sketches of the barest of outlines of two faces—both with green eyes, which is actually a nice touch, you have to admit. The fact that there are two faces could be evocative of Janus, but I do not provoke thoughts in any direction, especially at this point when we are first getting started on the text; ideas of what the images imply *after* reading the text are compared to our first readings of the book covers—this holds for all editions.



The **Folger Edition** is another really good one, especially to the extent that it doesn't lead the jury, if you will, anywhere. It's a mass of color, a textured swath of reddish blackish something! Students have no idea whether it is an extreme close-up of a detail or brushstroke from a painting—it could be a bloodstain seen through a microscope. When forced to guess at the intentions of this visual composition other than intentional ambiguity or even misdirection, some students might suggest passion overriding reason.



The **Norton Critical Edition** is adorned with a portrait of the Moorish ambassador to Queen Elizabeth in 1600. Given the nature of the Norton edition, it makes sense for them to opt for a more empirical consideration of the cover image. Whether William Shakespeare actually saw this man in London, as some scholars wishfully wonder, the image is a fascinating study in cultural and psychological messages.

The obvious summarizer to an introductory lesson on reading visual compositions is to ask students to make predictions about the literary elements of the play they are about to read—the characters, conflict, mood, and themes—based on the images they practiced reading in the movie posters. In the grade 10 *Hamlet* classroom, the Zeffirelli poster helped students to predict that there will be action, conflict, murder, and death in the play. “There will be royal problems,” Jeanette and Diego predicted based on the Branagh poster. “Someone gets married and Hamlet isn’t happy about it.”

The Almereyda poster inspired the most intense conjecture. Some students thought that by placing his hands on top of his head, Hawke’s Hamlet, unlike Gibson’s, “is not in control of the action,” or that “he will go through a series of actions that he made up in his head.” Jimmy and Soun predicted that this Hamlet “puts his hands on his head to symbolize that his mind is more powerful than his hands.”

On this day I discovered almost by accident that teaching students to read different film posters of the same play establishes what Shakespeare scholar Jonathan Bate calls “the first law” of Shakespeare, which is that “truth is not singular” (327). Seeing words and images in duplicate and triplicate encourages students of all ability levels to play with the possibilities of text.

The Commercial Composition

A film poster is an advertisement for a commercial product as well as an artistic one, and the lesson narrated in this chapter on the principles of visual composition can and should be extended to include the ways in which images are packaged to appeal to consumers and to elicit a response. So the next day I asked students to search online for posters of popular teen films and, using Handout 1.2 as a guide, to identify the elements of visual composition. Students clustered in small groups around computers in the library media center and engaged in exuberant chatter as posters of teen films flickered across the screens. Javier even

found a poster for a 1998 action movie called *Thundercats* that appears to be modeled on the 1990 Zeffirelli *Hamlet* poster.

As an extension of what they were learning about reading visual compositions, I wanted students to link the visual elements—framing, placement, subject arrangement, lighting and color—to a poster’s message and commercial appeal. So after each group had settled on a single poster and filled Handout 1.2 with their notes, I projected these summary questions on the whiteboard:

- What do you know about the writer, the director, or the producer of the film?
- What message does the poster send about the film?
- Who is the target audience for the poster and the film? How do you know?
- Do you find the poster appealing? Why?

But as I checked in with students, none knew anything about the writers, directors, or producers of their favorite films, and all assumed that they themselves were the target audience. When I asked them for visual evidence of the posters’ messages and appeals, they pointed to the most obvious elements of the posters, such as the titles, the slogans, the movie stars, and the props.

Though the day before beginning a play by William Shakespeare might not be the best time to launch a study of the messages and values implicit in commercial images, I hoped that our closing discussion would set the stage for such a future lesson. So we bravely returned to the three *Hamlet* posters to reread them now not as visual compositions but as advertisements for a product. The discussion confirmed that while students were gaining an understanding of visual literacy, their knowledge of media literacy was limited.

Borrowing a graphic organizer from the grade 11 Advanced Placement English Language and Composition course as a visual anchor for our summary discussion, I projected the rhetorical triangle on the whiteboard (see Figure 1.2). This was the first (but not the last) time my sophomores would work with the triangle. When I asked them what commercial message each poster sends about *Hamlet*, they reverted to observations made the day before about the literary messages regarding characters, conflict, imagery, and themes.

“Think of the word *message* as an opinion or claim,” I said. “What claim does the Zeffirelli poster make about *Hamlet*?” Silence ensued, so I rephrased. “Does this poster say, ‘I don’t care what you’ve been told about Shakespeare. This flick is macho and action-packed!’?” Silence.

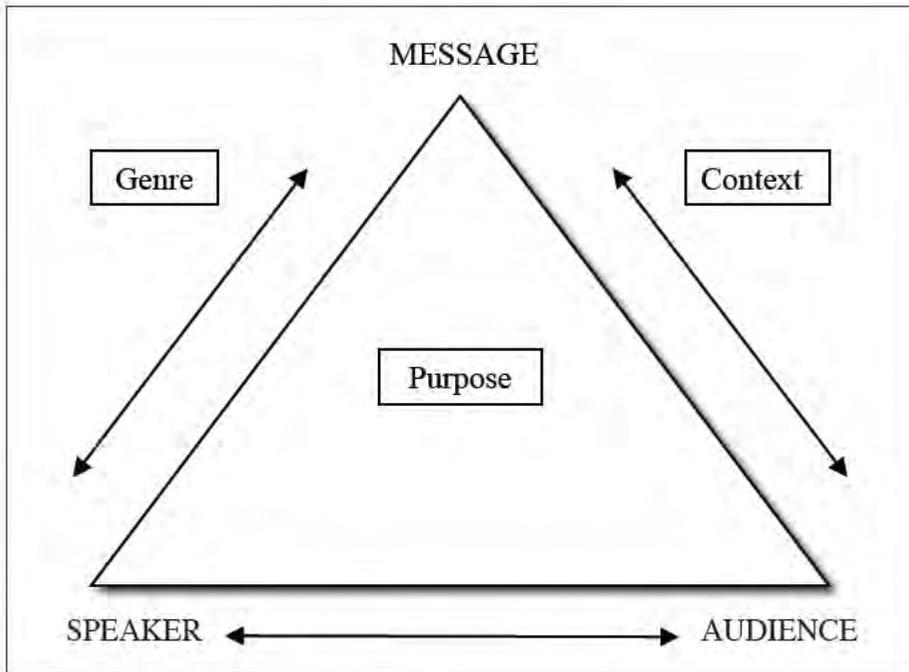


Figure 1.2. The rhetorical triangle.

"Does the Almereyda poster say, 'So what if Shakespeare's been dead for 400 years. This *Hamlet* is high-tech!'" Silence.

"Okay, what type of film does the Branagh poster present *Hamlet* as? What genre?" The rest was silence.

"Rhetoric," write Hephzibah Roskelly and David Jolliffe, "is the art that humans use to process all the messages we send and receive" (2). Because the primary focus of my course at this time was to prepare students to read the literary message of *Hamlet*, tomorrow we would move beyond visual compositions into the wild and whirling world of words. But I knew that I would need to explore more fully with all of my students the rhetorical structures and strategies employed by poets, princes, and producers.



Studying Shakespeare in the high school classroom can and sometimes should begin with images and film. In *Reading Shakespeare Film First*, Mary Ellen Dakin asserts that we need to read Shakespeare in triplicate—as the stuff of transformative literature, theater, and film. The potential for the mutual reinforcement and transfer of 21st century literacy skills between text and film is too promising for classroom teachers to overlook.

The heart of this book is a triangle whose three points are literary, theatrical, and cinematic; the chapters map a route around the perimeter of the triangle, guiding teachers and students with carefully researched and classroom-tested strategies for crossing over from Shakespeare's rich and strange early modern English to equally rich and strange modern film and illustrated productions of his plays. Along the way, readers engage in

- Reading and analyzing film stills, movie posters, and book covers
- Recognizing the three faces of film: literary, theatrical, and cinematic
- Exploring in depth the theatrical and cinematic elements of Shakespeare and then reconnecting them to the text
- Reading Shakespeare in full-length films
- Transmediating Shakespeare's scripts into theater and film

As the "old" language of Shakespeare is constantly renewed through the "new" language of film, students develop 21st century literacy skills through a marriage of the two.

We do not eject books each time we insert a DVD in the Shakespeare classroom; book and disk are paper and digital sheaves of the same text writ large. Film returns us to our books, bilingual.

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