Studying Shakespeare on Film: An Interview with Professor Judith Buchanan

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Ping Tang (Tang for short hereafter): Professor Judith, thank you very much for accepting my interview. I am very lucky to meet you in University of York and audit your interesting course “Film Encounters Literature” that has broadened my academic horizon.

Judith Buchanan (Buchanan for short hereafter): Well, Tang Ping, as you know, it’s a great pleasure to have you with us this year. I am delighted to help you own the intellectual and research horizon as well. That gives me pleasure.

Tang: As we all know, since the first Shakespeare film appeared on screen in 1899, a vast number of academic enquiries, performance strategies, cultural dialogues and critical approaches have been the focus in the Shakespeare study. As an expert in Shakespeare on film, could you briefly describe some crucial approaches to studying Shakespeare films?
Buchanan: In fact, some of approaches to studying Shakespeare films are thinking about what Shakespeare film is. As a sort of highbred product, it started very early in the entertaining history. Quite quickly, people were arising practice about Shakespeare film and finding a way of categorizing, pleasing, and analyzing the film with the broader cultural fair. One of things they say about the earliest film was that they were good for people, and good for the film industry because the early film industry was always struggling against the very charged of degeneracy, of being morally suspected in one way or another. But in order to be able to present a confluent narrative to be able to speak back against that, some were interested in using such rich materials and helped it assert in its own cultural and moral world. And thirdly, we Anglo-Saxon English speaking tradition, using Shakespearean materials was in some way the best short-cut, the most economical indicator of cultural work that a filmmaker could be reachable, so Shakespearean material was tremendously useful in those ways as part of debate about the cultural and moral work of the industry per se.

Other approaches to studying Shakespeare film have been wide-ranging. One is called the performative, about the performance tradition, about the acting style, about the gestural conventions after the coming of the sounds, and about the vocal conventions deliberately as well. How is it related directly to the theatrical? The cinema history of Shakespeare and the theatrical history of Shakespeare are always cross-blending, interrelating and fitting into each other. The literary and editorial approach that people take. So what sort of script is generated? How and what the editorial patterns mind the generating of that film? What is omitted? What is adjusted? How they thought it might or might not relate to the other editorial pattern within the play history? The direct cinematics help those films set within a broad film history, especially about the design, cinematography, and their own cinematic editing style. What they can tell us about the charting history of Shakespeare film both can and cannot give us an access to a broad history of industry development as well. Because sometimes these films are vulgarized before the front of technological development. Another time they have to be dragging their feet to deliberately reach a degree in order to try some extra theatrical.

And different national film industry, what they are about, for example, the different European approaches, the British national film industry, the Italian, or the French, or the German or the American film industry. I have done a very little on Asian Shakespearean history so I know a little bit about it. This is the cultural-
historical. The cultural-historical approach we say is about the particular interpretation, the particular film. Let’s talk about *Hamlet*. It tells us about the moment of the production, not just a reflection on a Shakespearean play. It is also of course imbibing, taking on some of the particular narrative, fantasy, desire, and anxiety of its own specific cultural historical moment, and sometimes deliberately, and sometimes accidentally channelling waves of beating those back to its own reception community as well. I mean *Hamlet* is the best example because *Hamlet* is a very sensitive indicator of the cultural change, of cultural specificity of different location and different moment, where the voice of the dissent and discontent against the ruling authority can take on the very particular sort of the cultural and political power. The pedagogical, the celebrity culture, many approaches, and other cultural factors also have been promised and addressed to Shakespeare film in one time or another.

**Tang:** In your influential book *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse* (2009), you thoroughly illustrate the history and development of the silent Shakespeare films through the lens of film theory. You have summarized the features of these films are “repeatedly commended for their pictorial qualities, engaging performances, pleasing use of location scenery, narrative clarity, passion, humour, delicately employed special effects, fluency in cutting between planes of action, edifying social and educative aims [...]” (Judith Buchanan, 2005: xviii-xix). I am very interested in the entertaining function of early silent Shakespeare films. Do you think this entertaining function to arouse early cinema audience’s interest was very crucial at that time?

**Buchanan:** There are many proactive functions of the early silent Shakespeare film. Some of them were industrial, some of them were cultural, and some of them as you said were about pure entertainment. Sometimes the famous Shakespearean actor was keen to the faith, for the benefit of the future generation. Once they were called something of his own performative genius on film in order that more people then could be crowned into the theatre, could be given an access to something of his own special quality. There are several examples about the memorial life, the desire for longevity and for enjoying their reputation in the public. To cite the story that is well known without less significance. If you want to tell a story with the minimum words and none-spoken, a few words in title, you could tell a story that people already knew with much great visual economy. That would be helpful. You could compress the quite big story into the relatively short number of scenes. Only something people
would be able to make up between the gap, between the highlight of the story and the compressed version. That would be called the industrial desire for the sort of cultural respectability. Shakespeare film fits that desire very neatly. Then as you said, also the desire for entertainment, just a pure joy of a fun story. I think it was relating to comedy. When relating to Shakespeare, the banks of different motivations that came together were much more complicated. So the very early Shakespeare films are the highbred product. They try to be a film, try to connect the stage history; in doing so they might deny some cinematic probability. They often complect and ribbon. They are torn between the different thoughts of aspiration about what they might be delivering.

Tang: So you mean that at that time the directors and producers also paid great attention to the cultural identity by offering this kind of classical Shakespearean products.

Buchanan: Yes. Shakespearean drama was not the only rich material that is reachable and can make sensation about the industrial and cultural ambition, including the biblical materials, the operatic materials and even the king materials. Anything looks respectable of the classics, the ancient literature as well. The ancient drama was reachable. In order to be able to assert something about the cultural ambition of industry, they will directly pick again up some of British, or humorous or slightly doggy tendencies. Part of reason is that, in the very early stage some theatres were in danger of being shut down, because the voices of the middle class assaulted that the cinema was back for you, back for the social fabric of the white community. So producing Shakespeare film spoke back to that because on the contrary it is educative; it’s elevating; it’s good for you. So often the production company will be making two sorts of films. One was called cultural calling card which communicates what they want to be publicly on the record of the company, and the other was the whole stream of the comedies, or something has less cultural ambition. Their basic way was to make money.

Tang: The famous American actor, director, writer and producer Orson Wells once asserted Shakespeare would have made a great movie writer. How do you remark this comment, especially in the silent era?

Buchanan: Maybe I can think that it is beyond the silent era as well. Orson Wells’ commentary that Shakespeare would have made a great movie writer is tricky. The counter-factual question is what the history is different and what this particular writer has landed in the different historical moment, and what he would be a 20th-
century writer not his late 16th-century and early 17th-century writer. What he thinks is true is that he wrote absolutely for the very specific conditions that were available to him. So we have the very connected to the material possibilities which he was writing. He wrote for the early modern London stage and he knew what he could do. So to that instance, I imagine a writer of his connectiveness would suddenly be situated in whatever planes, spaces, whatever avenue were available, in whatever moment he found himself. I think he has to be looking for the best available audience and for the popular audience. So possibly yes.

Another thing is the way which he writes because he was writing for the early modern London stage. He is thinking about the enormous scenic theatre. One thing as you know, Tang Ping, the way of a play was not founded by the scenery. For example, in England, the Victorian stage, the 19th-century stage becomes extremely interested in the scenery. It's a highly scenic stage. The effects of the visible design of any one theatrical moment, the setting design became a big industry itself. The stage properties, and the whole business of scenery became quite complacent, heavy, noticeable and conspicuous. But it also means the scene changes when you move from one location to another require appropriate break that they can move their next scenario. The early modern stage wasn't inhabited about moving from one space to another by heavy scenery. They were just none-scenic. As we know, so much imagination can reflect very quickly from one space to another, from one time to another without being bounded by the material limitation. So could be the early modern stage. There was an emphatic point about the travel, about the narrative imagination to move from one space to another. Shakespeare was used to being unbounded by the scenic space.

But to answer this question invites us to think about what sort of playwright he was in his own moment. He was the playwright under the material conditions of performance spaces he was just writing. For example, in 1599 the Lord Chamberlain's Men—the Shakespearean company acquired the Globe, and he understood how to write for the Globe, but in 1608 they also acquired a Blackfriars playhouse which was indoor play space and in which he was much more possible to create nuance effects of lighting and sound. It made musical effects much more possible, and the stage effects much more possible too. After 1608, we see Shakespeare's writing *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* and these plays are clearly intimately aware of the new play's space under what sort of effects that space may possibly be in terms of musical nuance, and in terms of stage effects too. So the
question that William could be a movie writer is about what sort of writer he was and how he was connected to the specificity of the medium and spaces which he was writing. He was very connected to and very aware of writing specifically with those in his mind so in whatever historical moment he was dropped into and in whatever media were available to him to write to and explore in that moment, he was being explanatory with the social nimbleness. That would be the characteristics of Shakespearean.

**Tang:** As a matter of fact, literature and mass media are interdisciplinary and complementary. The cinematic adaptability of Shakespearean drama also lies in its twisted plots, the shifting of spaces between the different scenes. It seems that in the film production, it is easier for the director and producer to adapt this kind of materials because in the film the montage is used to show the shifting of different scenes. And another reason is that the genre of Shakespearean materials, such as comedy about the love and friendship, tragedy about revenge and war, and historical plays, are easily adapted by the modern and contemporary directors and producers. How do you think these distinct features of Shakespearean drama contribute to Shakespeare film adaptation?

**Buchanan:** This is a very good question, Tang Ping. I think you are right. There is something which is particularly inviting, particularly tempting about the grand narrative, the narrative that slipped across the time and space. So the filmmakers feel the invitation about what they can do. They hold that invitation quite keenly. And certainly they have taken up the invitation so there are many Shakespeare films still being produced. That is showing the side of the very popular medium. In terms of the themes we are taking on, the films about love and war. And there is something, which is recognizable, non-historically specific. So Shakespeare is both interested specifically in his own moment and also interested in the human condition, in what to be a human, to be alive. We can always find a way of inviting these things to resonate with us, whenever that moment might be, within the different cultural, historical, political circumstances as well. They can be invited back into the engagement with the new context repeatedly as well, which is possible to create a sharing heritage of Shakespeare work. I think the idea of sharing cultural heritage is really very important, partly because of its unique, excellence of the materials, and partly because of satisfactory evidence in the history which is made available. Shakespeare is known in the Anglo-Saxon world, but also across the world in a way which is very difficult to rival. His reputation as a literal dramatist, a poet and
dramatist is probably unrivalled in the global time. The fact is that we have the global community of people who know his work and who can quote him to each other, who can know the story, who can know the characters, and feel that literal and imaginative world is yours and is mine. So a lot of things you and I don't share in the modern history, but you and I do share the long understanding on and knowledge of Shakespeare. In some way, it is a way of connecting with each other and people can meet across other sort of boundary. That sort of cultural legacy is invaluable and very useful. The telling of the story was about the language. Actually whether the title was to be translated by the new language, the story was told visually and the very lively visual history of Shakespeare transcend the language barrier. Many Shakespearean plays were performed in other languages, some of which I know, some of which I don't know. The fact that you don't actually know the language which is currently being performed strikes the way quite quickly and you still feel the part of the current of the drama, part of the cultural heritage that belongs to me and you, and to the rest of the world as well. In the shared space which is very unique, there are a lot of authors to cross these barriers. To this instance, this is remarkable. So Shakespeare is excellent in himself but also because of the sort of history that could surround him. He is also the most wonderful way in which the cultural encounter can happen, probably in the none-rival way.

Tang: Jack Jorgen in his well-known book *Shakespeare on Film* (1977) classified Shakespeare films into three modes: the “theatrical” mode, the “realist” mode and the “filmic” mode (Jack Jorgen, 7-11). Can we use this classification to differentiate *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Adrian Noble, 1995) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Michael Hoffman, 1999)?

Buchanan: Jack Jorgen was not the only critic who comes up with these three parts of categorization of Shakespeare film. They always fall out into something more or less equivalent to Jorgen's category. First, I am uniquely nervous for the taxonomy, the systematic categorization for two aspects because people are always opposing any cultural products, any artefacts, any performance of the events to be dropped neatly into one or other category. And in doing so, that might more or less catch something, but would probably destroy each other. So I prefer to look at each production and allow it to do its own work. You invite me to think about these two films, Adrian Noble's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Michael Hoffman's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* because they are rather different films. Adrian Noble's film which would be the early one, emerged directly from the successful adaptation
from RSC (the Royal Shakespeare Company) so that production becomes alive if you are proud of that history. Literally, they brought the stage visible in that production and we can remember its own theatrical history. It is not delimited some of the ways, some of the very early adaptation in the stage, some production as well. It does not take the theatrical perspective on the scene. It has much more fluent cinematography, much more fluent camera work that can be found in or around the scene. The budget played much more roles. For example, in Hoffman’s film, the space is contained. Part of that is quite fun. Some way to make it theatrical, conspicuous is appropriate for A Midsummer Night’s Dream which is self-reflection on what the theatrical hallucinism is and think about what the stage hallucinism is. In the photography, the bush becomes the attiring house and invites you to play a part of the attiring house. They talk about the green floor of the woods. This grassy floor here let’s pretends to be a stage because now this stage is pretending to be the grassy floor. The play is internately bound up in question of less pretend of what it is. So the fact is that Noble’s play doesn’t try to eliminate this theatrical currenty from the film limitation. It is in some way highly appropriate for this particular play. Hoffman’s film is much more examplitive. It casts the film stars; you have Michelle Pfeiffer, Kevin Kline, the well-known movie name. It really feels like the extremely cinematic experience. It has a fun to the approach to the allocationship as well. Yes, it’s true that if one applies Jorgen’s taxonomy to these two films, relatively easy to speak taxonomy, but the other film might contest the boundary more.

Tang: Prospero’s Books (1991) directed by Peter Greenaway has always been regarded as one of the most celebrated screen adaptations of Shakespeare’s The Tempest. Prospero’s 24 books that are intentionally, skilfully, technologically and aesthetically displayed in the film fill its Mise-en-scène as Prospero’s written texts and property for the action. In your book Shakespeare on Film, you say “The film could therefore as aptly (if not as elegantly) have been called The Books’ Prospero as Prospero’s Books” (Judith Buchanan, 2005: 175). It seems that Greenaway attempts to celebrate the Renaissance culture and art. At the end of the film, Shakespeare’s complete First Folio and the manuscript of The Tempest are rescued by Caliban while other books are totally destroyed. How can we understand this paradoxical and significant ending? Some critics think this ending represents the potential dangers of traditional books in the postmodern world filled with the advanced technology. What is your idea on this?

Buchanan: Well, that is a series of rich questions. What do you think about
this film?

Tang: Personally speaking, I like this film because I admire the director Peter Greenaway. I think he has tried his best to show the audience the encyclopaedia of the Renaissance culture and knowledge by the character Prospero. He thinks the function of knowledge is very important and is a kind of focus. The second reason is that I like this kind of style, this pictorial style because many shocking and beautiful pictures are presented to the audience. The third one is about this kind of body art. Some people condemn this film because there are many naked actors and actresses. I think these naked bodies are a kind of aesthetic element of the film. That is my impression for this film.

Buchanan: Yes, this film is quite controversial. I think people find it exhausting to watch this film, exhausting because it is visually whole busy, it's unremitting. It's not very interested in the dramatic power in the questions of what happen next. It's much more interested in the visual completeness and the intellectual richness of the associations of having been conjured. So in some way, it is a little bit more like visiting the art gallery and you are really amazing in rich moment. You can think of the free frame in one moment in this film, and spot the reference, and then think about what the resonance of that reference is and how possibly it can be employed in order to enrich the interpretations. I'd like to salute to Greenaway for some of the radical associative thinking that Greenaway brings out the work together and yields the very interesting result through that sort of theories of unexpected juxtaposition. I find it naturally fitting and assimilating proactive in the way I'd like to salute.

At the same time, I do recognize that the cinema is a temporal art but it is an form in time. And for that reason, it is a drilling and elevating process. It is like beating the whole lot of gallery; it is wonderful, heavy about it. But one is always thinking it's too much. You are interested in Caliban and his recue of the books in the end. In the middle of the film, the bombardment of cultural goody has been effected the excessive but also it's too much. The books are property of Prospero, the stroll of Shakespeare, stroll of Greenaway, stroll of Gielgud. Only he has been speaking the drama into which he has scripted to himself as a central character. In that decisive moment, the most possible expression of Ariel makes his own intervention into the book. Prospero then picked up the quill and broke the quill visually. Then he sat down and participated in the world beyond. From that point, the drama he had absolutely controlled over in his own dictating fantasy is no longer
being directed in quite such his owned control way. Of course a satisfying Shakespeare play does not play out the exactly as a phantom side of Prospero might want to do. Prospero speaks of some kind of pseudo-forgiveness that his brother Antonio resounded completely unregretfulness. The play is thereto some sort of resolution, but the resolution isn't absolutely resolved. It is irresolute resolution, something is dissolved, something is not resolved. Unlike the end of A Midsummer Night's Dream, a much earlier comedy made in the 1590s, where the ends tide up the sense of neatness of common ending, in the end of The Tempest, there are fracturing line of things which have not been said.

You specifically drew my attention to the moment when Caliban rescues the books. The fate of the books has always, through this film, been illustrative of what we both think of the characters. So the characters are sympathetically warned to protect, respect, adore the books, and give proper care of the book. So Miranda and Prospero and the other open and leave it gently and give their care to the books. Caliban’s moral world is apparently being directly aligned to his treatment of the books until his final moment when he becomes the force to rescue the books. That interesting thing is about his own cultural status within the play and his cultural status within the wide performance history of the play. As you know, Caliban has been the remarkably finely true indicator about how the society being interpreted in The Tempest thinks about the colonial project. So quite often in the 19th century, in the English interpretation of the British Empire in the play, Prospero is always the eloquent colonial educator, Caliban was the unregretful local native who has being privileged to be exposed to the benefit of the Empire. In the postcolonial world with the anxiety about that the colonialism has many so-called benefits that are powerfully abroad, Caliban’s voice becomes mine, my Caliban, my mother which keeps me directly on the island. Those sorts of things then take on a sort of power and rightness as the colonized feedback to the colonial and so Caliban owns his sensitivity of the new language in the play. He is taught to how to name the sun and how to name the moon, yet he manages to resist using the name as it is thought of a gesture of linguistic fire of his linguistic educator. So he is clever and nimble to use his own language even to avoid some of the linguistic competence that he has been refuted. We know that Caliban is clever and linguistically eloquent, but he is also being used eloquently in the way to the politically eloquent. The fact that he has rescued the books is also partly ensuring his own longevity. You know he wants the tale to be told. Certainly in the 1990s world, Caliban is becoming a sort of heroic voice.
Caliban as a voice takes on the mirror of different sources and the symbolic identities. Yes, it is a fun moment when he rescues those books but also as an indicator of his own will that this story should be carried on being told.

Another question you ask is about the fate of the books in this world in related to the other sources of media. This is a very comparatively puzzled play in which we adore the books, then drown and burn the books. We don't like the idea that the literature to be burned. In this film, the burning of the literature becomes a sort of cinematic spectacle that film triumphant, cinematically triumphant. But of course part of the triumphant is being enacted in the trial that all cinemas are incompatibly engaged with literature.

**Tang:** Both *Prospero’s Books* and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) have highlighted the actor’s writing image in the film. The writer’s writing space is not only a potent metaphor, but also a significant symbol. In the introduction to *The Writer on Film: Screening Literary Authorship* (2013), you point out that the writer’s lives and acts of writing have reflected upon “the material, imaginative and commercial operations of literary processes” (Judith Buchanan, 2013: 4). Do you think the popularity of the literary biopic in the recent years is a great challenge to Roland Barthes’s famous idea “The Death of Author” and reconstructs the value of author in the context of the postmodern society?

**Buchanan:** Right. I think in some circumstances, the author was already dead before Roland Barthes declared his death, but on the other level, the author has never been dead even Roland Barthes declared it. However much we want to reach back for what sort of materials we intend to work, the work has always been free to do its own work, independently of the author. And however much subsequently the author has been declared to be dead, the readers have retained a kind of curious interest in a point of authorial origin. Yes, I do think the surging interest in literary biopic is illustrative of what we, as the reader, want of the literal experience—we want a point of personalized author’s origin; that point is the author. We want to understand the play from which it came. Quite often we want to see the quick coincidence between the author’s life and the life of work that the author has written. As many literal biopic fall such agenda, they make sure the theme might emphasize the continuity between the authorial life and the life of the work, and that is really pleasing to some romantic ideas of the authorship.

**Tang:** What do you think about the future, or futures of Shakespeare film and the study of Shakespeare on film?
Buchanan: I think it’s healthy. I think there is a proliferation of Shakespeare film in development right now. They are interested into each other though they sound quite reverse and the funding is being abound, the starring being produced. The plethora of annotation of any one play is that you never know the next one. You never do the definitive version. So only the next inclusion of the ongoing story, and the fact of the ongoing story is always craved in the expectation. For example, right now there are two big budget films about *Macbeth* to be released in 2015. One film (*Macbeth*, 2015) is starred by Michael Fassender and Justin Kurzel, and the other (*Enemy of Man*, 2015) is one starred by Sean Bean, which is directed by Vincent Regan. I should say these both are the Anglo-Saxon production that I happen to know about. But I directly don’t know in other languages. You might know the Chinese ones as well but I don’t happen to know right now. I would like to know much more Chinese Shakespeare film as I do the mainstream of Anglo-Saxon production of big budget production which will be released next year. What they add is the diversity, and the crushing how one version is assimilated into the next. No one version is another adaptation of its original pretext. They all have to be aware of the cycle and legacy of the adaptative history of the play, the point of which they have eliminated and the point of which they diverge from or resist. So ever in rich story of adaptation, we have availability to catch the other culture in context as well. You might know the Japanese version, *Throne of Blood* (1957) by Akira Kurosawa.

Tang: In the globalization of the 21st century, Shakespeare on film has been and is being the focus in the Shakespeare study all over the world. Finally, do you have any suggestions for the Chinese scholars in this field?

Buchanan: Well, because we share the heritage of the early modern materials, you know and we know, you Chinese fellow scholars of Shakespearean know and my fellow British scholars of Shakespearean know, and people around the world as well. Enormously, uniquely valuable lens through which different cultures can reflect in our own time, our own place, and our own set of cultural and historical priority. So I personally welcome the globalization of Shakespeare and Shakespearean studies. I can learn from my Chinese peers and Chinese scholars about how Shakespeare you use as the lens of filler to be interpreted through Chinese culture. I know that *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* have been interpreted in Chinese culture.

Tang: Yes. In 2006, the famous Chinese director Feng Xiaogang’s film *The Banquet* was adapted from *Hamlet*. It is about the power, love, death in the ancient China. This film has achieved great success and won high box office. Another film
appeared in the same year is *Prince of the Himalaya* directed by Hu Xuehua. It is also adapted from *Hamlet* and the background of the story is in ancient Tibet, a northwest part of China. So far, these two films are the best adaptations of Shakespearean plays in China.

**Buchanan:** I know these films. They are tremendous films and that is the very exciting development from our point of view. The plays are about the moment within the Chinese frame. Shakespearean is adopted, adapted and appropriated, so he is always global but always local.

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