

Shakespeare on Film

When it comes to studying the dramatic works of William Shakespeare, it is important to remember that Shakespeare did not write his plays for the express purpose of being read or closely studied. Shakespeare in fact intended for his plays to be performed before public audiences for the purpose of mere enjoyment. While reading Shakespeare's plays as we are doing in this course certainly allows us to come to understand and appreciate the depth of his stories and the richness of his language, we can more fully appreciate and understand Shakespeare's dramatic works by watching productions of them either on stage or on screen. It is almost always preferable to watch Shakespeare's works performed live and in-person upon a theatrical stage, as this is exactly the manner in which Shakespeare intended for them to be performed. However, it is also possible to gain a deeper appreciation of Shakespeare's dramatic works by watching film production of his plays. Thankfully, hundreds of different film productions of virtually all of Shakespeare's major plays have been made, with several dozen of them readily available on DVD or for downloading. Students who are studying Shakespeare and wish to gain a deeper understanding and sense of his dramatic works should spend some time watching at least a couple of different film adaptations of Shakespeare's dramas in order to gather a sense of how different directors cast, stage, and film their unique visions of Shakespeare's dramas. Viewing different actors' interpretations of the same Shakespearian character—such as, for instance, Hamlet, Richard III, or Macbeth—can help us to further understand just how rich these characters are as well as just how open they can be to different interpretations and understandings. What follows below is a list of some of the best—and easiest to locate—film adaptations of some of the plays by Shakespeare that we are studying in this course. These films should be available in most video stores, on iTunes, or elsewhere on the Internet.

Hamlet (1989, 1996, and 2000)

Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film version of *Hamlet* is, arguably, the single best film adaptation of Hamlet ever made. Branagh directed the film and starred as Hamlet. Branagh's performance is more nuanced and subtle than other, more recent film depictions of Hamlet, including Mel Gibson's gritty 1990 version (which sets the play in the medieval era in which Shakespeare himself set it) and the 21st century set *Hamlet 2000*. Branagh's film is the most textually faithful to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* of all the film versions of the play that are available. Many have praised Branagh's decidedly down-to-earth and mentally balanced depiction of Hamlet, which many critics feel to be in line with Shakespeare's vision of the character. While Branagh does not add any language to his version of *Hamlet* that does not appear in Shakespeare's original play, he does choose to present dialogue-free flashback scenes that were only suggested in the play itself. If you choose to watch this film, take special note of Branagh's delivery of Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be soliloquy" in the third act and the unique way in which Branagh presents the scene.

Henry V (1944 and 1989)

Kenneth Branagh's 1989 film production of *Henry V* is considered a far more realistic portrayal of the drama than Laurence Olivier's famous 1944 film version. Many film critics and Shakespeare experts view Branagh's performance of the role of Henry V as the finest cinematic performance of the role. Branagh's delivery of the "St. Crispin's Day Speech" is widely considered to be the highlight of the film and deserves special attention for the power and force of Branagh's delivery. Interestingly, Branagh makes the unique choice to clothe the play's Chorus in 20th century clothing and have them deliver their speeches directly to the camera while the rest of the characters, attired in traditional 12 and 13th century clothing, ignore the camera. This was not something that Shakespeare in any way indicated in his script but is instead a decision Branagh made for the purpose of highlighting the removal of the Chorus from the action of the play.

Twelfth Night (1980 and 1996)

There have been a few film adaptations of *Twelfth Night*, but the most notable are the 1980 BBC television production and the 1996 British film production. The latter production was notable for setting the action of the play in the 19th century, which served to give the story a subtle cultural and political implication that Shakespeare himself could never have imagined.

Richard III (1955 and 1995)

Laurence Olivier's 1955 film version of *Richard III* is considered to be the finest film production of the play. Critics praise Olivier's version for the power and intensity of his performance in the role, particularly for his now famous delivery of the character's soliloquys directly to the camera. The 1995 film version of the play is also noteworthy for Ian McKellen's powerful and original performance and its shifting of the play's historical setting to a decidedly dark and fantastic version of 1930s England.

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1959, 1968, and 1999)

Several unique film versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been produced. The 1968 British film production is considered to be among the best film versions of the play. The 1999 film adaptation, which features an American and British all-star cast, is a particularly lavish (even overdone), though uneven, film production of the play. While it might prove difficult to locate on DVD, the 1958 Czech animated and puppet production of the play is perhaps the most creative and original film production of any of Shakespeare's plays.