

# How to Read a Film and Film a Reader

by  
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Eventually, after Gutenberg, reading became a solitary, silent act, no longer a shared recitation or an extension of the oral age. Reading, the unadulterated, ink-wrought, one-on-one encounter with the manifest thoughts of an absent other in the solitude of one's own mental space, challenged the authority of God and governor, to which the fates of Luther, Tyndale, and the many martyrs of the right to read readily attest. And what could be more threatening to the social institution called "theater," a most ancient, oral, public enterprise, than that rapidly spreading, radicalizing, democratizing, privatizing emergent communications medium, the printed book?

By the time of Elizabeth's reign, reading was in, and literacy was spreading rapidly. An alert culture critic such as Shakespeare could hardly help but notice the rise of reading and its potential to alter the media habits of the people—including their use of the theater.

In its many manifestations, reading was a common concern of Shakespeare's. Every one of the 37 plays contains references to some aspect of literacy or reading matters—all within the first act. In fact, 28 of the plays contain such references in the first scene. In one form or another, signs of literacy virtually permeate the plays. But now we find ourselves in what some have called a post-literate period. And just as Shakespeare boldly borrowed from and adapted the histories, myths, and stories of his predecessors, our movie makers make free with their sources as well, editing and shifting, emphasizing or de-emphasizing according to what they deem worthy of attention.

What do the screen writers and directors of the post-Gutenberg age make of Shakespeare's concern for those most un-theatrical—perhaps even anti-theatrical acts, reading and writing? Directors usually fudge the action, using voice-over, narration, and other devices to speed up the business. Shakespeare too knew that watching a character read an entire letter would bore an audience,

so both Malvolio and Brutus, for example scan their mail aloud with mutters and "etceteras." But what have film makers made of all this?

### Methodology and Definitions

To limit the scope of the task, I've imposed a few methodological techniques and operational definitions. First, I've counted the number of reading references in the scripts, how many of them made it to the screen version, and how many times the director inserted stage business or props that constituted reading references. Next, I determined whether there were any thematic pattern to Shakespeare's use of reading references and whether the deletions of such references affected the presence of those themes for the movie viewer. Finally, I appraised the effect of those added references: did they augment the original effect, shift its emphasis, or introduce new or contradictory perspectives?

I've defined reading and reading matters as any references to books, letters, documents, etc. that appear in the texts and to the appearance of any object in the films that might involve the act of reading, whether anyone actually reads them on camera or not. This includes metaphoric or imagistic references as well. For example, if a character is holding a letter or a book is on a shelf in the background, these are cited as comprising references to reading matters. Similarly, when Richard III says of Hastings, "[I] Made him my book, wherein my soul recorded/The history of all her secret thoughts. . .," this too is treated as a reading reference.

### Romeo and Juliet

Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is dense in reading material, and Romeo himself has a high level of reader consciousness. Fifteen of the play's twenty-two scenes contain reading references, and in eight of those Romeo is engaged in some form of reading or writing behavior: three involve letters, and the rest involve his use of reading metaphors. In fact, Romeo's first and last scenes both contain reading images, and his very last speech includes a telling book reference. In contrast, Juliet has only two reading usages, both are metaphors, and

both cast reading in negative terms.

As we all know, Romeo is a young, impetuous man, easily smitten and fickle in his affections. He is on the cusp of maturity as his society is on the cusp of literacy, and the two qualities are closely linked. Shakespeare repeatedly shows Romeo as an adolescent striving to be an adult: as he woos Juliet; as he tries to intervene between Mercutio and Tybalt; as he struggles with the semantic traps of group identification; as he labors to balance family loyalty with personal desire. He moves between the oral qualities of adolescent tribal culture—spontaneity, impulsiveness, myth, poetry—and the qualities embodied in literacy—contemplation, delayed gratification, linear pursuit, logic.

In Romeo's first scene, he explains his moping demeanor with references to writing wills and to reading notes about beauty. The second scene contains the inciting moment of the plot, which turns on reading. The Capulet servant, unable to read the party invitation list, asks Romeo for help. Romeo toys with some linguistic word play:

Servant: . . . can you read anything you see?

Romeo: Ay, if I know the letters and the language. (1.2. 60-61)

and thereby his fate is cast. Reading takes him to Juliet and, ironically, deprives him of her in the end. The simple act of missing the letter from Fr. Laurence causes the final blood bath.

Along the way there appear other reading details and striking reading metaphors, the most beautiful and extended being Lady Capulet's speech to Juliet singing the praises of the suitor Paris. It includes fifteen book-based images, puns, and allusions. To cite just a few:

This night you shall behold at our feast:  
Read o'er the volume of young Paris' face,  
And find delight writ there with beauty's pen;  
.....



This precious book of love, this unbound lover,  
To beautify him, only lacks a cover. (1.3.80-82; 87-88)

However, Juliet is not book-warmed and just two scenes later, following the party, she lets Romeo know that book learning is not the way to her heart—or to her bed. She chides Romeo for the restrained formality of his technique with the gibe, “You kiss by the book,” leading him hastily to offer to mend his reading ways, starting with his own written name:

My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself,  
Because it is an enemy to thee:  
Had I written, I would tear the word. (2.2.55-57)

Upon his departure from her balcony, Romeo further disavows the notion that there’s any appeal to written word:

Love goes toward love, as school-boys from their books;  
But love from love, toward school with heavy looks. (2.2.157-58)

Later, upon learning that Romeo has killed Tybalt, Juliet again reveals her displeasure of book associations with the line,

Was ever book containing such vile matter  
So fairly bound? (3.2.83-84)

Juliet, the passionate, spontaneous, unrestrained and unrestrainable lover, is no book lover. The male character she most resembles is the equally volatile and untamed Mercutio. They, in fact, would have been better matched, at least in terms of media compatibility. Mercutio does not engage in Romeo’s linguistic banter with the Capulet servant, and for all his poetic flights, convoluted images, and clever puns, never uses reading-based images or metaphors, and only once refers to writing, and that in a disdainful way that suggests that he too might be non-literate. (“Any man who can write can answer a letter.”)

Now, consider Zeffirelli’s flashy, unapologetically cinematic treatment of Romeo and Juliet. If Shakespeare’s character is Romeo the Reader, Zeffirelli’s is Romeo the Oralist, and the Verona residents function in a trivialized, non-literate culture, unsullied by print’s restraints.

The film begins with Shakespeare’s scene of tribal, oral volatility and non-verbal message meaning—the provocative thumb biting; but Zeffirelli escalates the action to the point of having members of both clans run through the streets repeatedly shouting the clan names “Montague! Capulet!” like an incantation. The fight builds into a riot, and the viewer can keep track of who’s on which side only because the characters are color coded by clan livery. The film continues in this highly visual manner with little patience for the reading elements in the script. Zeffirelli thoroughly purges the play of most other scenes not involving Romeo that contain additional reading references.

Zeffirelli assigns Romeo’s role as reader to his friend Benvolio instead; Benvolio welcomes Romeo with a book in his hand, while Romeo carries flowers, a sign he is unbookish, in tune with nature. This pattern continues till the final fade.

Of the play’s 20 separate speeches containing reading matters, only three are kept in the film; two are plot devices, and one is in the famous exchange between lovers over “What’s in a name?” The film, however, adds nine items of book presence to the original script. Three are books that Benvolio carries, and the others are set details in either Capulet’s or Fr. Laurence’s chambers. Even Benvolio mysteriously loses his book in the opening scene when he trails after Romeo. Later Mercutio snatches Benvolio’s book out of his hand.

So merciless in his cutting of reading references is Zeffirelli that he even cuts the servant-with-party-list scene, thereby eliminating the plot device that justifies Romeo and Mercutio’s attendance at the party. The party itself is filmed similar to the opening fight, giving emphasis to the oral culture rituals of music, song, and dance.



Even as a plot device, reading matters look ridiculous. Fr. Laurence tells Fr. John, "Give this letter into the hand of Romeo in Mantua," and a close-up tells us to pay attention to the letter. Shortly, we see Fr. John and Romeo passing each other on the road in a clichéd shot.

The effect of Zeffirelli's edits is to simplify the story to one of adolescent passion bereft of the undercurrents of cultural and psychological nuance with which Shakespeare's reading themes and metaphors endow the play. Instead, the film's rollicking and visually lush crowd scenes privilege the oral culture components and diminish the presence of a cultural context based on written law and custom. The film thereby sacrifices one of the play's thematic tensions in favor of heightening the sense of a compatible marriage between oral and cinematic elements.

### Richard III

Like Romeo and Juliet, Shakespeare's Richard III is a play in which reading matters play a significant part. Of the play's 28 scenes, 18 contain reading matters, nine of which involve or refer to Richard. Richard is a master of the manipulation of documents as well as of people and speech. He finagles death warrants, sends and intercepts letters, and uses a prop Bible to feign religious devotion and humility. Frequently, characters high and low speculate about the nature of the written word, beginning with the murderers of Clarence who observe that the written word gives one power in the mortal world though there's no similar warrant that bears weight in the heavenly one. Later, Richard's exchange with the young prince before he is hustled off to the Tower includes some ruminations regarding whether it's in the written record that Caesar began the Tower. The discussion raises the question of whether writing makes a thing so. Richard closes with a revealing pun, "I say, without characters fame lives long" (3.1.81). It seems that Richard knows the damage that writing can do to reputation, a thought that foreshadows the anti-penultimate scene with its reference to flyers that are posted on the tents at night stating, "Jockey of Norfolk, be not so bold/For Dickon thy master is bought and sold" (5.3.305-06).

Perhaps the most important scene in the play regarding how much reading matters is the short Scrivener's scene, Act 3, scene 6. This brief scene serves no plot purpose and seems to function as an editorial interlude in which the author expresses his view that writing and documents have the power to blind and control, that reality is in fact a product of the written word.

Although Olivier's film seems to strive for authenticity in terms of its look, acting, cinematic restraint, and respect for the script, it too cuts and adds freely when it comes to reading matters. Only ten of the original 18 reading references are retained, and six unscripted details are added. Some of the cuts are the result of plot tightening: Richard's scene with Elizabeth in which letters are mentioned is cut; the Scrivener scene is gone; Richard's discussion about the history of the Tower is out; Richmond no longer asks for ink and paper on the eve of the battle. Other cuts are selected line edits, again, one assumes, in the interest of keeping the film within feature length time parameters.

Six additional scenes or elements of scenes in which reading matter is a feature of directorial interpretation or stage business are all thematically related and remarkably heavy handed. The first involves a pair of monks in the background of King Edward's throne room who share an open prayer book from which they perform Gregorian chant. While the monks sing at their book, Gloucester is seen in the foreground whispering plots which will become the basis of his rise to power. Shortly, Edward signs a warrant for Clarence's death, which Gloucester tucks in his sleeve, and the royal entourage leaves, passing the monks who close their book and place it on the table before them. The camera lingers on their impassive posture with the large book at rest. This scene sets the stage for more closed and ignored reading matters to come.

A few scenes later, Richard encounters Buckingham and Catseby, takes their revocation document, and tucks it in his left sleeve cuff. Then, when he meets with the assassins he has hired to kill Clarence, they ask for a warrant of access. Richard takes a paper from his left sleeve, realizes it's the wrong one, replaces it and takes from his right sleeve the document they need. Olivier has displayed one of the most trite clichés for duplicity: the man has something up his sleeve.



Olivier has added two other book details. One is a closed volume on the window sill of Edward's death chamber, an echo of the earlier closing by the chanting monks. The other is a piece of business in Richard's pose with the two priests in the scene in which he seeks favor and acceptance from the Lord Mayor and citizens. The script calls for Richard to hold a book:

And, see, a book of prayer in his hand,  
True ornament to know a holy man. (3.7.98-99)

But Olivier takes the image further by showing Richard dropping the book on the ground once it has served its purpose. It is left lying as Richard slides down the bell rope to conspire with his henchmen on what steps to take next.

Olivier adds the other reading matter detail in the scene in which the Archbishop is sent out to get strawberries. One end of the conference table is strewn with a variety of documents. When Hastings is condemned, everyone moves away from him, leaving him alone with a pile of papers. It's an effective image to impart the idea that rules and procedures have been completely abandoned now that Richard has ascended the throne.

### Conclusions

In these two plays, as in others, Shakespeare seems to present the page as the locus of contested authority, not just in terms of political or personal power, but in terms of moral and social cohesion. This would hardly be surprising considering the prevalence of strife in Elizabethan England over issues of printing, reading, and censorship.

In the two cases under investigation here, the film directors/adapters both choose to edit the reading elements heavily. Olivier adds unscripted stage business that gives to Shakespeare's work a spin which, while not in Shakespeare's text, nonetheless augments Shakespeare's apparent interest in reading matters. Zeffirelli, in contrast, has set about expunging as many of the reading matters as he possibly can. Because Romeo and Juliet moves rapidly and

uses the full range of cinematic effects, it seems hardly surprising that this could happen. But in doing so, Zeffirelli has created a different character, one who seems very much a late 20th century teenager, quite unlike the impetuous lad from Verona who nonetheless knows his way around a library. This new Romeo is an MTV kind of kid, one who would never think of stopping to write his dad a letter explaining things before going off to his dead bride's tomb. And though everybody still dies in the end, it seems to me less likely that this cinema Romeo, or his counterparts watching in their high schools or at home with their rented videos, will be as inclined to think about his actions or their consequences as his theatrical predecessor. Yes, Zeffirelli gets us crying for the lovers, but contemplation of abstractions may be harder in oral/cinema/video cultures. In this regard, Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet is fully in tune with its time.