

POPULARIZING SHAKESPEARE

The artistry of Franco Zeffirelli

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"I have always been a popularizer," Franco Zeffirelli declares in the self-portrait that concludes his *Autobiography* (Zeffirelli 1986:341). He is speaking of his work in staging and filming opera, but his words apply equally well to his Shakespeare films: *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966), *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), and *Hamlet* (1990). As he once explained to an interviewer: "I have always felt sure I could break the myth that Shakespeare on stage and screen is only an exercise for the intellectual. I want his plays to be enjoyed by ordinary people" (Lucas 1967:94). Comparison will show that in all three of his Shakespeare films his efforts in this direction have much in common. The differences among them will also reward analysis and help to explain why of the three—all of them estimable in their own ways—*Romeo and Juliet* is the most successful, artistically as well as commercially.

Two reasons make Zeffirelli's success as a popularizer especially worth examination now. Costs of filmmaking have risen so high that if full-budget Shakespeare films are to be made at all they must have a wide appeal that only Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Kenneth Branagh have so far achieved. Furthermore, it is beginning to look as though Zeffirelli's approach will prove to be more durable than Olivier's. Olivier's most popular films, *Henry V* (1944) and *Hamlet* (1947), have dated badly; now about fifty years old, they have for some time been virtually intolerable—even laughable—to my college students; while Zeffirelli's nearly thirty-year-old *Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet* seem almost as accessible as ever and indeed still have the power to make audiences laugh and weep. Of Branagh, and his work as a popularizer of Shakespeare, more will be said at the end.

As Zeffirelli's career as a filmmaker attests, a popularizer and a popular artist are not necessarily the same. At best, his recent forays into films with a directly popular appeal have had mixed results. ¹ It was as a popularizer that Zeffirelli made his name in films, and it is as such that his greatest successes have come. In a sense Shakespeare himself was not only a popular artist but also a popularizer. For a largely illiterate audience he transferred from page to stage and from narrative to drama some of the central writings of his time, such as the historical chronicles of Plutarch and Holinshed. Like Zeffirelli, Shakespeare's gifts were not those of an originator *ab ovum*: almost all of his plays are reworkings of sources. Of course, despite wholesale cutting, Zeffirelli makes much more use of Shakespeare's language than Shakespeare did of his own sources; his art is that of an adaptor or free interpreter whereas Shakespeare transmuted inherited materials into distinct creations. As Zeffirelli has been quick to acknowledge: "Direction is not pure creation. You take somebody else's conception and have to respect it. Your work is going to pass, their work is remaining" (Zeffirelli 1963:439). Unlike Shakespeare, Zeffirelli has focused on acknowledged masterpieces for his filmed popularizations—Verdi's operas *La Traviata* (1983) and *Otello* (1986) and the Bible (in his 1977 television miniseries, *Jesus of Nazareth*) as well as Shakespeare. Moreover, all the classics Zeffirelli has chosen have previously had a much broader range of appeal than they do today. His ability to reactivate this appeal is basic to his success. Strictly speaking, he is a *re*-popularizer. ²

From a recently published question-and-answer session on filming Shakespeare that Zeffirelli gave shortly after the success of his *Romeo and Juliet*, one may piece together an impromptu *apologia* for his practice as a popularizer, before and since. At its heart is his address to the general public:

With the cinema, you have to make up your mind whether you do a film for a small number of people who know it all—and it's not very exciting to work for them—or really to make some sacrifices and compromises but bring culture to a mass audience.

(Zeffirelli 1990:244)

From the fact that during his student days Shakespeare's plays reached him in Italian, Zeffirelli draws confidence that they apply "to every human being on earth, no matter what cultural background" (241). By the same token he, even though Italian, can serve as their intermediary to others: "If we really believe in the great values, we communicate one way or another, despite the difference in

language, civilization, background, and age" (242). Essentialist and universalist as can be, Zeffirelli here sums up in a sentence the extravagantly all-inclusive faith of a popularizer.

As a go-between, Zeffirelli is wary of "parting company with the audience and asking them to contribute the kind of attention which comes through the brain" (Zeffirelli 1990:244). Instead he has sought to provide "something they could really identify with" (244), "to make the audience be there with their guts and heart" (262). And their imaginations: he seeks "to make the fantasy of the audience come to life and run together with the actors" (254). The search for this kind of compelling rapport drives all his work: "to make the thing really happen for the audience of today-to make the audience understand that the classics are living flesh" (252).

At the same time Zeffirelli seeks also to be faithful to Shakespeare's work and to hold tenaciously true to what he sees as its core (Zeffirelli 1990:242). In *Romeo and Juliet* this core idea was Zeffirelli's decision to take literally Shakespeare's indication that Juliet was about fourteen and that, in that time of boy actresses, "he wanted a young kid to play the part" (257). From that everything else followed: "In every scene I said, 'Don't forget she is fourteen. She's fourteen, and that holds the structure of the play together.'" Given that fidelity to what he sees as Shakespeare's central intention, Zeffirelli is unrepentantly prepared for the sake of audience rapport to make necessary "sacrifices and compromises" where non-essentials are concerned. The apothecary had to go because the episode raises questions in the audience's mind that impede the wave of emotion that makes Romeo's suicide acceptable. The killing of Paris was shot but finally cut because if Romeo "was a murderer-'ugly boy, ugly boy!' It wouldn't have worked" (244-45). At times, as with his inventive handling of Mercutio's sword-fight with Tybalt and death, he is prepared to grant himself some poetic license: "it is not quite what Shakespeare meant, but I think he would have liked it" (251).

In Zeffirelli's view, alterations may also be justified because of the centuries that stand between Shakespeare and ourselves. It is the popularizer's responsibility to bridge this gap to the classics and imagine that the author had been able "to write that play today for us" (Zeffirelli 1990:257). So Romeo and Juliet's love-making in the film was appropriately more physical than Shakespeare's circumstances permitted.

A movie-maker who seeks a popular audience must also mediate boldly between the original theatrical medium and film: "cinema creates a different chemistry with the audience, a different taste, and the attention of the audience moves so fast...fantasy gallops in the audience in movies (Zeffirelli 1990:261)...your mind flashes-flashes-flashes" (263). Hence Zeffirelli felt justified in cutting the parts of the original that slowed this rapidity-the pestilence in Mantua, the clowns, the friar's speech at the end (260): "sometimes it is better to do without certain things than jeopardize rapport" (262).

In his relation to his film audience Zeffirelli differs fundamentally from Olivier. When Olivier made his films, he of course stood with Gielgud at the center and pinnacle of high-culture Shakespeare. Zeffirelli was not without high-culture credentials himself: he had worked as a designer for Visconti, directed at La Scala and Covent Garden, brought a hit Italian *Hamlet* to London, and directed *Romeo and Juliet* at the Old Vic. Yet where Olivier in his Shakespeare films was in the position of sharing a family heirloom with outsiders, Zeffirelli-as an outsider-was in a more inviting role, escorting the uninitiated on the same journey of discovery he himself had made as a youth.

Some of Zeffirelli's success at the box office has come from frankly commercial calculations, although their crassness has typically been redeemed by a touch of imagination. His first feature film, *Taming of the Shrew*, was conceived as a remake of the Douglas Fairbanks/Mary Pickford version (Zeffirelli 1986:200). With Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton for *Taming of the Shrew*, as with Mel Gibson and Glenn Close for *Hamlet*, he chose hugely popular stars. Of course, it is a fact of Hollywood life that bankable stars are virtually essential to funding feature films. Indeed, Taylor and Burton themselves put up most of the money for *Taming of the Shrew*. Yet Zeffirelli's casting has also consistently had an element of discovery and risk about it. Neither Taylor nor Gibson were thought of as Shakespearians, and until they proved otherwise serious doubts were expressed about their ability to perform their roles. Such risks could also prove an opportunity. "Cinema is a day-by-day discovery, and fresh is best,

" he has observed (Zeffirelli 1990:250). For example, he found it more satisfying to direct Taylor than Burton because certain of his acting patterns were stale (Zeffirelli regrets that he did not dare to challenge them) whereas with Taylor: "she was fresh like me. She was new [to Shakespearian acting] and very insecure, and so we worked on a lot of new ideas, and she burst out in a much more unexpected way than her husband" (250). In *Romeo and Juliet* he pushed this element of discovery to an extreme, choosing then unknowns for the leading roles-only to find that at first no major company would finance it (267).

What finally made Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* possible was another way of attracting financial backing for a film project: that it promised to draw young audiences. Consistently, he has sought to be timely and especially to address the young. For the opening carnival in *Taming of the Shrew* he had hired young extras. In his approach to *Romeo and Juliet*, as we have seen, his characteristic accent on youth was of the essence. For his Old Vic production of the play he chose unusually young principals and cast. While rehearsing the play he is said to have frequented *West Side Story*, then playing in London. Certainly his film draws on similar youth-culture, generation-gap appeals. As he recounts in his *Autobiography*, the fact that a Hollywood producers teenage son was moved by what he saw of the film in progress was crucial in the producer's decision to fund its completion (Zeffirelli 1986:228-29). In its first year, Paramount's one and a half million dollar investment returned forty-eight million dollars at the box office (240).³

In choosing Mel Gibson Zeffirelli hoped to have found "the Hamlet for the nineties." "We must bring the young kids to see Shakespeare," he told one interviewer, "I began to look at youngish actors, and I landed on this extraordinary Gibson" (Stivers 1991:52). He explained to another that Gibson has "an image the kids can identify with...that old-fashioned movie-star magic" (Darrach 1991:38). Zeffirelli has never tired of recounting the moment of decision when he saw a parallel between Hamlet's abortive meditation on suicide in the "to be or not to be" soliloquy and the scene in *Lethal Weapon* when Gibson as Martin Riggs cannot bring himself to pull the trigger that would end his life. Did Zeffirelli succeed in finding a Hamlet for the nineties? Certainly the film speaks to my current students more powerfully than any other film version of the play. Barbara Hodgdon, however, has some astute reservations, finding that the film "never quite intersects with late twentieth-century history" (Hodgdon 1994:290). And it has not had anything like the box office success of his *Romeo and Juliet*. The *New York Times* summary was judicious: "Mel Gibson may not be a Hamlet for the ages, but he is a serious and compelling Hamlet for today" (James 1990:C21). "A Hamlet...for today," then, if not quite "the Hamlet for the nineties" that Zeffirelli sought.

Aspiration toward timeliness, although it helps to attract paying customers, need not lead to a cheapening of the original. Zeffirelli has not, for example, succumbed to the too-easy updating that can come with modern dress; all of his Shakespeare films have had period mountings. "You can't take the Fifth Symphony and play it as jazz," he has observed (Zeffirelli 1963:439). There was much more to the power of his *Romeo and Juliet* than an appeal to the latest teenage fad. In my own experience the film, overnight, made the play teachable to college students, who had hitherto rejected it as celebrating the high school puppy love they were trying to put behind them. What they found in the film is illustrated by the testimony of Michael Cole and Helen Keyssar, who have looked back as adult teachers on their student experiences of the play and the film. Both were put off by the play when they read it; both were caught up by the films immediacy. Cole "was captured first by the fight among the boys" (Cole and Keyssar 1985:58), and as the precise "tragic possibilities of all-consuming passion" came home to him, he "wanted to reach out and say, No! Stop! Don't do it." Keyssar also wanted to say "Stop," but-carried away by "their fervor of reckless abandon"-she "also wanted neither of them to stop because to stop was to arrest their passion as well as mine." The film's "unabashed eroticism" was thus one of its attractions for her, but with it came a tragic "sense of irretrievable loss": "the film made me feel what death was all about: It was about absence, and I recognized that absence because the human beings on the screen had been made so present to me" (59).

Zeffirelli's concern with youth and contemporaneity goes deeper than a desire for dollars. What he writes about renovating his house applies equally well to his adaptation of classics: "my real pleasure is to make whatever I have added look as if it has always been there...this notion of belonging both to

the past and the future pleases me so much. When I succeed, I feel I have defeated time..." (Zeffirelli 1986:345). Through his ongoing work in cinema, he has said with a sigh, "I want to keep young for my work for the future" (Zeffirelli 1990:244). In turn his work has appealed to the young because it is itself young at heart.

Zeffirelli's Shakespeare films have a highly distinctive style, well suited to fulfilling his goals as a popularizer. Many of his ways with Shakespeare parallel Shakespeare's own ways with his sources. Both artists are bold in their appropriation of their originals and seem uninhibited in fulfilling the demands made by their mediums. Just as Shakespeare takes whatever liberties are required to convert narrative into drama, even altering historical materials, so Zeffirelli does the same in converting drama to film. What he says of opera may be applied to his total acceptance of film:

Don't pretend to the audience that it is seeing a musical comedy; don't disguise opera or apologize for it or try to make it something it's not. Opera is complete in itself.

(Merkling 1962:15) The whole-heartedness of Zeffirelli's embrace of the film medium adds zest to his work and is a key difference from Olivier. Try as he would to be cinematic in his directing and acting, Olivier often fell between the two stools of theatre and film. With all due respect for the greatness of his stage acting and the historical importance of his groundbreaking contributions to the filming of Shakespeare, one must acknowledge that as a film director his blocking now seems static and stage-bound. Even as an actor, Olivier in his film portrayals of Henry V and Hamlet often seems wooden and underacted-perhaps he was trying too hard not to overact in a stagey way. And his attempts to employ "movie magic" today often seem embarrassingly superficial.

Nowhere is the contrast between the Zeffirelli and Olivier approaches more evident than in their attitude toward Shakespeare's dialogue. Both are obliged to cut a great deal of it, but Zeffirelli takes many more liberties than does Olivier in the way of transpositions and interpolations. Olivier relies more on the poetry and seems more conflicted about reworking it. Regarding as a benefit what might be thought a defect, Zeffirelli takes the fact that English is for him a second language as license to start with the story, which communicates in any language, and to keep his emphasis there: "you have to tell the story from scratch ...using a language that makes clear and accessible every single word of William Shakespeare [included in the film script]" (HBO Special 1990). Poetry may be welcomed as "an additional beauty" (Zeffirelli 1990:241)-witness Burton's alluring evocation of "ruffs and cuffs and farthingales and things"-but clarity comes first. ⁴

Zeffirelli revels in the audience-involving visual opportunities that motion pictures afford. The wonderful richness of Shakespeare's words, their Renaissance copiousness and plenitude, has its cinematic parallel in the profusion of Zeffirelli's images. Although the fertility of his invention seems effortless, it is also based on hard work, inspired by the "passionate attention to detail" he learned as a stage designer for his mentor Visconti:

Everything was always researched to a point far beyond the needs of the actual scene. You immersed yourself in the period, the place, its culture, so that even though the audience might not take in every detail they would be absolutely convinced of its essential "tightness".

(Zeffirelli 1986:85-6)

A Florentine, Zeffirelli was already thoroughly at home in Renaissance Italy. A master-stroke of his *Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet* was to capitalize on his birth-right and take literally the Italian-ness of their Shakespearean settings in Padua and Verona. Both are very much "Made in Italy," being shot there and with largely Italian designers and technicians. Since the two films came first and close together, I will consider them as a pair before coming to *Hamlet*.

Zeffirelli's Padua and Verona are attractive places for an audience to visit and engagingly full of life. Both are densely populated and noisy, inhabited by animated, voluble, volatile people. Padua seems more crowded (it was shot in studios in Rome), Verona more spacious (it was shot mostly on locations). Clothing in Padua is riotously colorful; in Verona its colors are more restrained, governed

by the Capulet and Montague liveries (at their ball the red-clad Capulets serve rose wine in rose-colored goblets; the roses in their garden are pink). In both places the pace of life is very rapid. As befits a farce, this is especially true in Padua; in Verona a lot happens fast but in a more modulated way—as when the leisurely, half-playful tempo of the duel between Mercutio and Tybalt gives way to the fury of the hand-to-hand struggle between Romeo and Tybalt.

The audience response Zeffirelli seeks in the two films is broadly based and fluid, covering a wide spectrum between detachment and engagement. He has remarked on the “air of unreality” he imparted to his Padua (Zeffirelli 1986:214), along with many naturalistic touches; in his Verona the balance is tipped: it also has story-book qualities, but there he places more emphasis on a realistic atmosphere, including hand-held camera work. Both films are very pleasing to the eye. At times the painterly look of his shots invites his viewers to be onlookers, sitting back and enjoying the beauty of the film as it unfolds. Much more often they are encouraged to sit forward and be caught up in the action.

The immediacy of both films is heightened by intense sensory appeals, not only to seeing and hearing but, vicariously, to all the other senses. In the woolloft scene, the super-softness of the piles of fleece in which Kate at first luxuriates suggests one kind of tactile sensation; her penchant for bashing men over the head with a lute, planks, and a warming pan suggests the opposite extreme. Nor are our inner noses neglected, as when Petruchio's smelly feet remain unwashed in “the silver basin full of rose-water” (*Taming of the Shrew*, 1.1.53-4) which fastidious Hortensio has provided. Zeffirelli loves such contrasts, and in *Taming of the Shrew* elaborates them to the point of sensory overload. In *Romeo and Juliet* the contrasts are fewer but larger and more telling, as between the cool greenery in Capulet's garden and the hot and dusty plaza where the duels are fought.

As befits a love tragedy, the eroticism of *Romeo and Juliet* is much more direct than that of *Taming of the Shrew*. Once they have fallen in love at first sight, Kate and Petruchio share few tender looks or touches. Romeo and Juliet hug and kiss, even in the balcony scene, and are shown partly nude after their wedding night; but their sensual ardor is best conveyed by Olivia Hussey's non-verbal portrayal of Juliet's sexual awakening—from gasps and giggles of joy to post-coital relaxation.

Above all is the kinetic appeal of these two films, intensified in well-chosen places by explosions of violence. They are very much “movies,” and Zeffirelli makes the most of the charge of vitality that they can give his viewers. Not only are his principals active and energetic (no one stands still to deliver a speech) and their stories dynamically told, but on the sidelines numerous little stories are sketched, suggesting the flow of ongoing community life. Not for nothing did Zeffirelli as a director of opera learn to individualize his La Scala choruses (Zeffirelli 1986:126). This is especially true of *Taming of the Shrew*. For one example among dozens, through reaction shots at the wedding, we can follow Bianca's anxiety that the marriage will not happen (with its impact on her own marriage prospects) and her joy when it does occur. Even the props are given stories, as when Michael Hordern's Baptista-hunched over with paternal cupidity—is amusingly careful to retrieve the family silver Petruchio has been fondling. In *Romeo and Juliet* Capulet's ball is similarly treated. The first meeting of the lovers takes place amid round-dances so dizzying that even the camera is caught up in the whirl (Cirillo 1969/70:87). On the sidelines, a domestic triangle is sketched between Tybalt and Lord and Lady Capulet. But elsewhere in this film Zeffirelli gives most attention to working out fewer stories at greater length and depth.

Taken together these various elements in Zeffirelli's filmmaking comprise a composite art of storytelling, by which he claims and rewards the attention of his viewers while ensuring that, without too much effort, they will be alerted to everything they should know. Again, his methods are instructively overt in *Taming of the Shrew*, where indeed the neophyte film director seems intent on displaying everything he can do at once. So he is busy cross-cutting between the wooings of Kate and Bianca, exaggerating (hilariously but to scale) the slap-stick part of Kate's first wit-combat with Petruchio, ramifying the chase motif, underlining the dialogue by repeating key phrases, visually undercutting Petruchio's line “I will not sleep till I see her” (1.2.102) by having him immediately drop off to sleep, musically mocking his bombastic speeches by a march on the soundtrack. Such textured interworking

of parts extends to all aspects of the film.

Romeo and Juliet is no less integrated, but in it the director's hand is less obtrusive. As before he allows his inventiveness several virtuoso displays—the opening brawl, the ball, the duels—all of them handled in his characteristically supercharged, richly textured style. These come in the first part of the film. As in *Taming of the Shrew*, Zeffirelli then changes emotional gears in mid-course, as he delineates the problems that confront the two marriages. But in *Romeo and Juliet* this change is reflected much more graphically, in the subdued style of the interiors (Jorgens 1979:89). And for the most part Zeffirelli seems to let the story tell itself, pausing in places to admire the beauty of the lovers' faces and bodies, but in a compelling way entering into the story's own pace, rhythm, and points of climax, which he emphasizes by lavish use of background music.

The style of *Romeo and Juliet* is thus much more mature than that of *Taming of the Shrew*. Yet looking back over the features the two films share, one can see that they all help to enhance the intense rapport that Zeffirelli seeks with a popular audience.

After a farce and an early tragedy, *Hamlet* presented much more of a challenge to Zeffirelli's skills as a popularizer. In telling its long and complex story, he takes his usual approach. He focuses sharply on the core of family tragedy; politics scarcely figure, Fortinbras is gone without a trace, as is the opening appearance of the Ghost. The pace is rapid (this is an "action film"). Of Hamlet's soliloquies, only "to be or not to be" emerges entire; "how all occasions" is cut entirely and the others are severely reduced. The characterization of the Prince accords with this approach. Virile, dynamic, violent, wild, Gibson's Hamlet is not a more than usually thoughtful man. Zeffirelli in fact goes to elaborate pains to provide external occasions for his reflections, even in soliloquy. This Hamlet, as Gibson says, is "a man of action" (Darrach 1991:42).

To readers conscious of what is omitted from the original, the film may seem choppy. But if we take the film-script on its own terms we can see that Zeffirelli finds a number of ways to enhance its flow for moviegoers who may not know the play. He frequently divides Shakespeare's scenes into shorter segments. So the second scene opens as in the original with Claudius's statement from the throne about his marriage, but what follows is broken into a series of fast-moving, private exchanges. Unlike Shakespeare's hero, who must make intuitive leaps in order to understand the forces against him, Zeffirelli's Hamlet, thanks to extensive eavesdropping, is never taken by surprise. We are always therefore carried forward by the clear logic of what he does.

Many of Zeffirelli's alterations of the original are resourceful. Simply by having Polonius observe Hamlet's silent visit to Ophelia sewing, he is able to move directly to the scene where Polonius expounds to the king and queen the causes of Hamlet's lunacy. He efficiently accomplishes some exposition by substituting King Hamlet's funeral for the Ghost's first appearance. But this time the commercial compromise Zeffirelli made to obtain funding (holding the running time to two and a quarter hours) cramped everyone's style, especially his own. This is most evident in his handling of Hamlet's aborted voyage to England, where the story-telling is almost as jerky as in a silent film: first comes a short shot of Hamlet's boat at sea; then—between Ophelia's mad-scenes—a short sequence in which the Prince exchanges the fatal packets and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are summarily beheaded; finally, Hamlet is back in Elsinore, with no indication of how he got there. How much more adroitly Zeffirelli abbreviates the delayed delivery of Friar Laurence's message to banished Romeo! He simply shows the messenger riding his donkey on the road to Mantua and being overtaken by Romeo's servant on horseback; he then points the irony by having the two of them unknowingly pass the messenger on their way back to Verona.

In general Zeffirelli's inventiveness in *Hamlet* is not as robust as before. Elements derive from previous Shakespearean films. During the credits, the subjects who wait, silent and still, outside King Hamlet's funeral recall the still more frozen figures who await the outcome of the opening scene of Peter Brook's film of *King Lear*. At the end Gibson's antic duelling-style echoes that of Nicol Williamson's still more eccentric Hamlet. His debts to Olivier's *Hamlet* film are numerous. In addition to the mother/son incest, they include having the interview between Ophelia and Laertes follow immediately after the

“solid flesh” soliloquy, having Hamlet on a level above Polonius for the “words, words, words” exchange, having “to be or not to be” follow rather than precede the nunnery scene, having Gertrude turn away from Claudius after the closet scene, having Laertes and Claudius do their plotting after rather than before Ophelia's funeral. As it happens, each of these borrowings works effectively in its new context, but their number suggests that the springs of Zeffirelli's invention were not flowing as freely as before: “fresh is best.”

A more serious shortcoming is that Zeffirelli's approach to the mounting of *Hamlet* cut him off from many of the ready appeals which had helped to make his Italian Shakespeare films so popular. ⁵One cannot move from his Padua and Verona to his Elsinore without a feeling of sensory deprivation. Although some idea of the daily life of Elsinore is suggested, there is nothing like the involving abundance of surrounding life to be found in the earlier films. The open spaces in the castle seem huge and virtually deserted. Nor is there the same kind of color and beauty as before. Except for the queen's costumes, clothing is drab and the stone walls are mostly bluish gray. Background music is sparingly used, primarily pedal tones for the Ghost; more frequently, the soundtrack records the neighs of horses, cries of gulls, howling winds and other atmospheric sounds.

Obviously, Zeffirelli was trying for something different from his earlier work, an austere vision suited to the particular world of Shakespeare's play and designed to concentrate our attention on his strong cast of English and American actors. It would be harsh to dismiss it, as does *Sight and Sound* as “set-text cinema Shakespeare at its most inexpressive” (Romney 1991:49). It must be conceded, though, that Zeffirelli does here deny himself the extended, free-form cinematic fantasias that distinguished his previous Shakespeare films, and that he is simply not as much at home in Elsinore as he was in Padua or Verona.

Whatever the stylistic shortcomings of his Shakespeare films, Zeffirelli never loses sight in them of the human drama at the heart of the originals. This is the most important source of his success as a popularizer. “Squeeze Shakespeare's characters to the utmost,” he told an interviewer, “and you still find poetry.” His focus therefore is on “this poetry of the human relationships...” (Kitchin 1960:217). As he stated elsewhere:

The aim in my profession is to create beauty and to make dreams come true. I am fed up, however, with the label “creator of beauty.” Beauty is just the frame. Inside it must be the picture. I don't think people cried and suffered with my *Romeo and Juliet* just because the costumes and sets were beautiful. They cried because I really grasped the essence of this love story, the reality and the vitality of the characters.

(Zeffirelli 1984:34)

As discussed, Zeffirelli sees as crucial the ability of a popular audience to identify with his protagonists. All three films feature attractive and high-spirited individuals—one in *Hamlet*, pairs in the other two—who win our admiration by the resource and resilience they show in asserting themselves in surroundings which in one way or another would stifle their lives. Even Kate and Petruchio, as much as they fight with one another, are allied as free spirits in a conventional world. She defies the patriarchy, he flauntingly exploits it. All of the leading characters are frustrated in the expression of love, whether because of external circumstances or, in the case of Kate and Petruchio, of their own insistence on dominance. With *Hamlet*, Zeffirelli has explained:

The problem of the boy is quite simply—whom to love? He did not really love his father; that was a secondary character in his life. Ophelia? No, there is no love-story possible there, he is always uncertain, ambiguous—*because his heart is not come out of mother's womb! Because there is no safer place in all the earth!*

(Zeffirelli 1991:94, Zeffirelli's emphasis)

Accordingly, Gibson at one point in the film kneels before his mother and for a moment presses his head to her womb.

The resulting conflicts can be explosive-as with Kate's violent tantrums and Romeo's rage after Mercutio's death; Hamlet, Gibson explains, is "a mine-field of contradictions...you never know when he's goin' to explode...the man is a livin' bomb" (Darrach 1991:42). Yet Zeffirelli's most moving moments depict suffering and loneliness-when Kate, locked in a room, peers through its transom while her fate is decided; when Mercutio looks longingly back at Romeo as their friends hurry him away or when Juliet is white-faced in her disillusionment with her parents and nurse; when Hamlet roams the parapets looking down from great distances at the plots against him, or when mad Ophelia hurries about, alone in her own world. It is through Zeffirelli's sure and sensitive revelation of their vulnerabilities that they win our sympathies.

As Zeffirelli has disclosed details about his life, the autobiographical parallels to this patterning have become evident. His illegitimacy, with an absent father who at first would not acknowledge him; his successive mother-figures (his nurse, his dying mother, his aunt), each change involving a withdrawal of love (Zeffirelli 1986:9); his homosexuality; his adventurous ability to win his way through war, poverty, and artistic hostilities-all help to explain the submerged personal resonance that adds depth to the emotional power of these films (Donaldson 1990; Watson 1992). His kinship in spirit with Kate, Juliet, and Mercutio gives his audience unusual access to their inner lives and thus strengthens our identification with them.

With Hamlet, one need not look far for personal connections with Zeffirelli's formulation of his tragedy: "at the heart is this boy's anguishing problem, about who he is, and what he's supposed to do in life" (Zeffirelli 1991:94). Yet the deep tie Zeffirelli sees between Hamlet and his mother does not quite fall into place. Certainly the incestuous implications derive authentically from his own life: he has revealed how when he was five years old he regularly slept in a narrow single bed with his mother, who "would cling to me as if trying to draw warmth and health from the being she had made" (Zeffirelli 1986:7). Some years before Zeffirelli made the *Hamlet* film, he described Hamlet as "a boy taken just in the moment when his affections would move away from his mother, but he dies too soon" (Zeffirelli 1963, 440); and some of this formulation seems to persist in the film. Significantly, Zeffirelli has habitually referred to Gibson in interviews as a "boy." Glenn Close's Gertrude is unusually girlish and Helena Bonham Carter plays Ophelia as a fourteen-year-old. But Gibson's Hamlet simply does not look like a boy nor does Close's Gertrude look old enough to be his mother. That is why, although the closet scene is the most powerful one in the film, it doesn't sit well with the rest. In this case Zeffirelli's private compulsions are not fully in tune with the main action.

In their poetry of human relationships the three films pose progressively greater challenges. In *Taming of the Shrew* there is only the one principal relationship, between Kate and Petruchio, which Zeffirelli does much to clarify. Between the moment Kate decides to follow her husband rather than return to her father and her final speech of devotion (which Taylor delivers without irony (Zeffirelli 1986:216), her tug of war with her husband for dominance moves through a series of distinct phases (I count eight), often heralded by her wicked little smile. In this progression, she more and more takes the lead in defining the terms of their marriage, most of all at the very end, when Petruchio, while boasting of his triumphs, turns his back on her only to find that she has run off once more.

Again in *Romeo and Juliet*, the prime relationship is of course that between the lovers. Zeffirelli chose not to emphasize the difference Shakespeare brings out between Romeo's dreaminess and Juliet's practicality, yet he does differentiate between them in his own way. In the emotion tone of their love, hers is hot, his is cool. In her hates, too, Juliet has a kind of fierce intensity that Romeo shows only when revenging Mercutio's death. Each of them also has important secondary relationships, Juliet with her nurse and parents, Romeo with Mercutio and Friar Laurence. It is especially on the latter that Zeffirelli puts his own touch. He is less sympathetic to Friar Laurence than is Shakespeare (Zeffirelli 1990:264-65), having him run off altogether at the end, repeating "I dare no longer stay." To Mercutio he gives a manic reading of the "Queen Mab" speech, a forehead-to-forehead intimacy with Romeo, and the twist that his friends mistake his death throes for clowning. Tybalt, too, is given more than Shakespearean depth, especially his dismay at seeing the blood on his sword after unintentionally stabbing Mercutio.

Thanks to *Romeo and Juliet's* richer characterization, Zeffirelli was thus able to give fuller expression than in *Taming of the Shrew* to his powers of rendering human relationships. In *Hamlet*, however, Shakespeare's reach too much exceeded Zeffirelli's grasp. The play presents a web of human relationships within and between the two families. Zeffirelli's acclaimed stage *Hamlet* in Italian left no doubt that conceptually he was fully able to handle such intricacies; when this production came to London it was praised for treating all of the principals as developing characters (Young 1964), and the same is true of the film, where the gifted actors do a remarkable job of supplying nuance for their abbreviated roles. They make the most of the few key moments they are allowed—Paul Scofield's Ghost yearningly reaches out to his son (who does not respond in kind), Alan Bates's Claudius struggles to keep his composure but finally loses it completely at "Give me some light!", Glenn Close's Gertrude, poisoned herself, realizes with horror the murderousness of the king. Such moments suggest what they might have done if given more scope. Claudius especially suffers from the omission of his functions as a ruler and the reduction of his attempt at prayer to a series of heartfelt groans. Zeffirelli has himself expressed regret that he did not include more humor: "Mel has an ironic humour that matches Hamlet's" (Robinson 1991:19). Two hours and a quarter was simply not enough.

It is in *Romeo and Juliet* that Zeffirelli's artistry as a popularizer is at its best. In every way the film represents a happy conjunction of play, medium, style, cast, audience, and cultural moment.

Kenneth Branagh is often compared with Olivier, and as an actor his delivery of his lines does show a comparable sensitivity to Shakespeare's language, whether grand or subtle. Yet where popularizing Shakespeare on film is concerned he is—as screenwriter and director of *Henry V* (1989) and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993)—as much in the tradition of Zeffirelli. His shooting *Much Ado about Nothing* in Italy with a mixed cast of American and British performers certainly recalls Zeffirelli's practices, and the parallels, whether conscious or not, go further. Always careful to label his scripts as "adaptations" of the original, Branagh is almost as free as Zeffirelli in cutting and interpolating to suit his filming needs. Both clearly love film and delight in the opportunities it offers, occasionally permitting themselves fantasies that extrapolate on Shakespearean moments—as when Mercutio clowns in his fountain or Benedict capers in his. Yet their work is still recognizably based on Shakespeare: as with Zeffirelli much of the appeal of Branagh's films comes from his ability to revitalize qualities that originally made the plays popular. Except for *Hamlet*, both have sidestepped the most challenging of Shakespeare's works (for the most part they are probably best left to stage productions and art-films); instead they have chosen relatively early ones, plays whose dialogue could be cut without great loss and whose characterization was tolerant of the simplifications endemic to popular culture. Branagh is as bold as Zeffirelli in seeking rapport with the audience and makes the same kind of extensive use of mood-music. Audiences find their films of Shakespearean comedies genuinely funny; like the first meeting of Kate and Petruchio, the eavesdropping scene of *Much Ado about Nothing* evokes spontaneous laughter, a rare distinction. Neither is shy about laying claim to compelling reasons for audience identification with their leading characters: even more than Zeffirelli, Branagh's films have been about young people; he is himself young. And no less than Zeffirelli he plays on our sympathies by enhancing the vulnerability of his leading characters—his Henry V sheds more tears in the exercise of his royal office than does Shakespeare's and his Beatrice, like Zeffirelli's Kate, is warmer and softer than in the original. In all these ways, whether from instinct or observation, Branagh seems already to have learned and applied the lessons in popularization that have emerged from this analysis of Zeffirelli's Shakespeare films. As I write he is about to release his four-and-a-half-hour version of *Hamlet*. There is thus every reason to hope that Branagh will continue to carry on where Zeffirelli has left off.