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Simply Genre Films: Extracting “King Lear” from “House of Strangers” and “Broken Lance”

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

SIMPLY GENRE FILMS: EXTRACTING “KING LEAR” FROM “HOUSE OF
STRANGERS” AND “BROKEN LANCE”

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Sophia G.I. Funk

2014

To: Interim Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Sophia G.I. Funk, and entitled Simply Genre Films: Extracting “King Lear” from “House of Strangers” and “Broken Lance,” having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Kenneth Johnson

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James Sutton, Major Professor

Date of Defense: September 25, 2014

The thesis of Sophia G.I. Funk is approved.

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Florida International University, 2014

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my mother whose unyielding support and encouragement have allowed me to flourish throughout my life and academic career.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Florida International University, 2014

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The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate and refute Yvonne Griggs’ claims that the films “House of Strangers” (1949) and “Broken Lance” (1954) are as Griggs deems genre-based adaptations of William Shakespeare’s “King Lear.” I argue that the films, although they have some essential elements of “King Lear,” lack intentionality and reception, pivotal components in determining viability as a Shakespearean film adaptation. Using Griggs’ book as my critical background, I will show that these films are better classified under their respective genre categories, Western and film noir, not as “King Lear” genre adaptations. I will also suggest criteria for determining the level of canonicity of a “King Lear” film adaptation. Popularity of films does not determine validity, and a film does not need purported Shakespearean provenance to validate its ratings. Some films, like these, merely reference or pay homage to Shakespeare through use of essential elements of “King Lear”; here, I deem such affinities to be more unintentional than intentional.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	
“King Lear” and its adaptations.....	1
CHAPTER ONE	
“House of Strangers” as Film Noir, not “King Lear”.....	22
CHAPTER TWO	
“Broken Lance” as Western, not “King Lear”.....	33
CODA	
“A Thousand Acres” a successful “King Lear” adaptation.....	48
CONCLUSION.....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	53

INTRODUCTION

King Lear and its adaptations

In the last 70 years, since the end of World War II, there has been a tremendous interest in adaptation of Shakespearean plays. Films, television series and episodes, video games, graphic novels, and even children and adolescent literature have all become part of what some critics now call the Shakespeare industry, a massive effort to capitalize on the fame and supposed cultural significance of the author's plays by repackaging and repurposing them for a modern audience. Capitalizing on Shakespeare has all been well and good. Producers, directors, actors, authors, and screenwriters have benefited handsomely from the popularization of Shakespeare; the public has perhaps greater access than ever to versions and adaptations of the plays. Critics and scholars now have a whole new field of inquiry and critique. This thesis joins that conversation, but it does so in an effort to limit that field, to provide some rational boundaries to the field. Focusing upon Shakespeare's great tragedy *King Lear*, this thesis examines two purported adaptations of the play and finds them lacking serious connection to Shakespeare's work. In doing so, I determine a new set of definitions for assessing *King Lear* film adaptation.

Douglas Brode, one of the leading figures in the critique of the Shakespeare industry, argues, “[Shakespeare’s] plays were written to be seen, not read—at least not by anyone other than the company performing them” (Brode 3). Brode continues, “The plays were meant to be enjoyed in the immediate sense, not as removed literary works to be studied, like butterflies mounted by some eager collector who presses out all the lifeblood and mummifies beauty under glass” (Brode 3). In other words, Shakespeare’s plays, originally designed to be performed on the early modern stage of the late 16th and early

17th centuries, are now best understood in contemporary performance on today's stage or television or movie theater screen. Brode draws further parallels between Shakespeare's plays and Hollywood cinema; he claims that the plays' primary issues and themes (murder, love, betrayal, and supernatural elements) are all central as well to many contemporary films which thrill and delight cinema audiences. The many spaces left open for interpretation in Shakespeare's plays, a vestige of Shakespeare's understanding that his plays would be performed in low-budget scenarios, avail his plays to adaptation or appropriation not only in today's theater, but in the cinema as well. Written in a time when notions of authenticity and authorship were of little concern to writers and readers alike, it is fitting that Shakespeare's works continue to serve as inspiration for contemporary books, plays, and films.

Just how far can such adaptation go? One contemporary media outlet, Cliffsnotes, dedicates an entire section of its website to Shakespeare, where it hosts not only the marquee textual summaries associated with the Cliffsnotes brand (so often visited by despairing high school and college students), but also other media forms, such as "Cliffsnotes Films." In these short films, Cliff, a superhero-esque character, guides viewers through animated, truncated renditions of Shakespeare's plays. Interestingly, the Cliffsnotes Films are available for a price—\$1.99 per film—not free for site-goers to stream. The films are therefore available at a premium, beyond the free site content. If site goers and viewers want the humor, entertainment, and potential understanding that these films offer, the site goers are going to have to purchase it (perhaps a vestige of the original book-form of Cliffsnotes guides which were available for-purchase in bookstores). Through appealing, cartoonish characters, viewers can obtain a sense of the

Shakespearean plot and storyline summaries through humorous, appealing, accessible images which are relevant in a time where cartoons are often considered as adult media. In addition to the Cliffnotes films, site-goers may also view videos of short lectures by John Basil, Director of the American Globe Theatre and an expert on Shakespearian performance.

Similarly, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) made a foray into the animated Shakespeare realm in the early 1990's with its series, *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*, also known as simply *The Animated Shakespeare*. These animated repackagings of Shakespeare, although now quite dated, exhibit a conscious effort to stir appeal for Shakespearean texts through attractive new media. More recently, one media outlet, "Thug Notes," provides streaming videos of "Sparky Sweets, PhD," a man dressed in urban garb, donning an exaggerated gold chain and touting "classical literature, original gangster." The video episodes provide summaries and analyses of popular required secondary school readings, including several of Shakespeare's texts. The episodes also employ animated cartoonish decoupages of characters such as Sparky Sweets, who uses urban popular language to provide information. The videos contain occasional profanity, used for emphasis, which is bleeped out, making the videos appropriate for daring teachers.

Thus, although marquee Shakespeare texts may be slowly pushed out of curricula in favor of more contemporary texts, Shakespeare's plays still appear on required reading lists in secondary and postsecondary institutions. Additionally, although the implications of YouTube videos and animated Shakespeare media are that young people are not reading the texts, the videos maintain the original performative aspect of the texts through

new media. It might also be the case that in accessing Shakespeare through such videos and media sites, today's youth are afforded a better (or equally good) introduction to the author's plays than that their parents, grandparents, and teachers gained from their bookish approaches to the plays.

The aim of these media, however, is to make the original text more accessible and understandable. These sites refer back to the original play, rather than move away from it. Therefore, there is no argument in media like the animations of Cliffsnotes and BBC whether, however truncated, *Hamlet* is anything but *Hamlet*, for example. The audiences who seek out these shortcuts to comprehension and appropriation expect and understand the conceit. Although a Cliffsnotes' film watcher falls under a different category than the learned, familiar Shakespeare connoisseur, the media's purposes coincide--making Shakespeare's texts available to mainstream audiences, and helping them be more easily understood by those audiences. In other examples of media, the purpose and reappropriation of Shakespeare's work is not as clear.

Contemporary culture, which emphasizes technology and appropriation of images and themes into mass media, creates boundaries which are constantly modified, pushed, and transgressed. The imposition of a boundary facilitates the human desire to challenge or transgress it. Peter Berbegal posits, however, that liberation from boundaries is unattainable because once a boundary is passed, it merely readjusts, moving to a new horizon; the boundary does not in fact disappear. In this light, we might say that some films seek to push or move the boundaries of acceptability, thereby creating a new image of Shakespeare's works. Other films, conversely, may just be different from the canon for the sake of being different. These very distinctions, however, make it difficult to

determine the worth, merit, and value of a Shakespearean film adaptation. Criteria must be in place and used in practice in order to ascertain the validity of Shakespearean film adaptations; this thesis seeks to do this work.

Reception and intentionality are two crucial elements that I believe must be present in adaptations and reworkings of Shakespeare. By reception I mean the way in which critical and mainstream audiences receive the work as a Shakespearean adaptation, or not. In this case, I use the term to assess whether the audience--learned or lay people--easily and effortlessly recognizes a film or work as clearly and unobtrusively derived from Shakespeare. Michael Anderegg argues that the relationship “between production and reception, actor and audience, speaker and listener” is what makes “the culture of the nineteenth century America—including the plays of Shakespeare—at all ‘popular’” (Boose and Burt 4). Intentionality, although sometimes difficult to assess and prove, is the other essential element in Shakespearean adaptation. Intentionality refers to the author’s, filmmaker’s, or producer’s intention to create or rework a Shakespeare text or plotline. Thus, I assert that unless a film adaptation bears the hallmarks of both intentionality and reception, then we must say that the film is at most a “Shakespeare-influenced” work, merely paying homage to, or making a figurative, not literal, nod to Shakespeare’s work.

In accordance with Anderegg’s assertion, Lynda Boose and Richard Burt argue that the absence of the clear interaction between mass media and observer nullifies the essence of Shakespeare’s appeal. Boose and Burt synthesize Anderegg’s points, concluding that “mass culture is now a threat to literature and to academics who teach it” (Boose and Burt 4). However, Boose and Burt note that “Shakespeare (both as an icon

and cited text) comes up in so many media and so often that it is impossible to archive all the examples,” but he sees Shakespeare’s permanence in mass culture as not necessarily “identical with greater public access” (Boose and Burt 5). Boose and Burt also argue with Terry Eagleton, who claims, “Shakespeare is the quintessential commodity, at once ever new and consolingly recognizable, always different and eternally the same, a magnificent feat of self-identity persisting through the most bizarre diversions and narrations” (Boose and Burt 13). Burt counters that the “self-identity Eagleton attributes to Shakespeare as a commodity is no longer there” (Boose and Burt 13). Perhaps a post-modern perspective elucidates a balance between the two viewpoints: Shakespeare is not only “consolingly recognizable” in mass media, but also his presence and works are hyper-recognizable to certain academic groups who ascribe value or validate seemingly commonplace films or other media simply because they “find” Shakespeare there. What is more astounding than the argument of what the essence about Shakespeare is, or if that essence is a commodity or represents cultural capital, is the very fact that scholars, writers, and academics are still conversing about Shakespeare almost four centuries after his death. Therefore, regardless of access or weight, Shakespeare remains present in popular culture. Thus, it is the job of the discerning academic to sift through the myriad of supposed Shakespeare references and ascribe value and weight where those elements are found.

Many contemporary films intentionally adapt Shakespeare’s works, taking the titles of the plays, setting the work in different time periods, using different language, or abandoning both time period and diction. Popular or innovative filmmakers and Hollywood actors add sexiness to these *de rigueur* interpretations, with some films even touting homage to Shakespeare’s work regardless of the movie title. Boose and Burt link

the 1990's popularization of Shakespeare in the media to directed, "market-tested" adaptations, repeatedly citing a prime example of this trend: Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996). Although Boose and Burt claim that "pop culture/youth culture (for which we may also read masculine culture) must give some critics, particularly feminists, pause," their prediction that Hollywood's "increasing portrayal of regressively stupid white males...as a kind of Hollywood pandering to the anti-intellectual machismo of its adolescent buyer" would lead to an equally regressive Hamlet model (following Mel Gibson's 1990 portrayal in the Zeffirelli adaptation) did not necessarily come to fruition (Boose and Burt 18). Boose and Burt feared that fusing Shakespeare with pop culture would be a disservice; however, pop culture or not, reworking Shakespeare ensures exposure to new audiences. For example, consider the popularity and significance of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, which for many high school English classes today stands in binary opposition to the Zeffirelli *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). These two versions of Shakespeare's romantic tragedy are considered the only "worthy" adaptations suitable for classroom use. As a tandem, the two adaptations form the yin and yang of what *Romeo and Juliet* is for many of today's high school students.

Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is a successful adaptation because of many elements, mainly its successful fusion of textual and modern components. For a neophyte Shakespeare film adaptation viewer, the film's fusion of period and textual dialogue coupled with an edgy, alternative Verona Beach punk reality create a strong audience connection to both dialogue and action. The dialogue emphasizes heightened tensions between the rival families who in this quasi-dystopian reality wage their duels and challenges in the streets and at the beach rather than in court. Marquee actors of the

1990's deliver the dialogue, notably Leonardo DiCaprio (Romeo), Claire Danes (Juliet), and John Leguizamo (Tybalt). Seasoned actors like Paul Sorvino (Fulgencio Capulet, Juliet's father) also ground the cast. *Romeo + Juliet* holds its own among more traditional Shakespearean film adaptations like Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* and even his later *Hamlet* (1990). But as Boose and Burt note, *Romeo + Juliet* is a *market-tested* film which "tries" to be a hip, sexy adaptation, a project at which it succeeds.

Other films like *Scotland, PA* (2001), move farther from the original text, abandoning the title, setting, character names, and dialogue, but retaining core plot and storyline items. Although an acceptable and humorous film, *Scotland, PA*—a very clever re-imagining of *Macbeth* set in a small-town Pennsylvania diner—does not enjoy the same mainstream, market-tested appeal as *Romeo + Juliet*. Instead, *Scotland, PA* occupies a niche, independent cinema market. *Scotland, PA* is too far removed from, and perhaps too tongue-in-cheek about, its Shakespearean source to gather the weight, force, and cachet of its source play. For all of its edginess, *Romeo + Juliet*, on the other hand, clearly capitalizes on its relationship to Shakespeare's play. Most recently, new versions of *Much Ado About Nothing* (2013) and *Winter's Tale* (2014) show the limits of this different, niche category. Although academics or film aficionados may appreciate Shakespeare's presence in mainstream media, Joss Whedon's 2013 project shows the decided limits of this niche market. Whedon's *Much Ado About Nothing* (shot in 12 days in Whedon's Santa Monica home) opened to a very limited release in a handful of cities in June 2013 and grossed around \$180,000, a paltry sum when compared to the same weekend's top-grossing release, *The Purge* (a science-fiction horror movie), which garnered \$34,000,000. Although *Much Ado About Nothing* succeeded in breaking box

office records, those records were for independent film records, not mainstream cinema records. Whedon's film also differs from other adaptations because it was self-consciously *trying* to be something unique; shot in black and white, it was trying to establish an artsy, independent film art house "look."

Other films, like Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1998), can be classified as more traditional Shakespearean film adaptation. Branagh's film touts itself as being completely unabridged textually. However, the film is thus a lengthy and unwieldy four hours; the running time alone detracted mainstream audiences from viewing the film. Additionally, the costuming and setting for the film, although advanced several centuries, is still an 18th century Baroque period piece; again a choice potentially excluding mainstream audiences because of the film's look.

Other Shakespearean film or television adaptations fail to garner positive reception because of their over-zealous quest for fidelity to the source text. Boose and Burt attribute the failure of the 1980's televised BBC Shakespeare films, to "Time-Life Corporation's determination to produce televised 'classics' that would exhibit a uniform fidelity to imagined assumptions about Shakespeare's text and times" (Boose and Burt 16). Boose and Burt, therefore, also equate the search for supposed "fidelity" to a potentially stifling, limiting endeavor. As viewers and reviewers of the films see, the reception of these "faithful" adaptations is varied.

Just as the question of fidelity in contemporary adaptations proves out of place in contemporary studies, the idea of fidelity in the early modern period is out of place.

Yvonne Griggs writes that,

preoccupation with the author and *the work* is a relatively recent development. Such preoccupations would have no validity in Elizabethan and Jacobean times when writers like Shakespeare were adept in the art of borrowing the ideas of other authors; the very notion of a stable work by the author, Shakespeare, would have been alien in this age and borrowing seen as an age-old accepted means of creating. (Griggs 16)

Griggs cites that “new critical studies,” as well as cultural forces, “do much to lead us away from entrenched debates revolving around issues of fidelity to a so-called ‘primary source’ text” (Griggs 15-16). Griggs, therefore, seeks to dislodge academic film criticism from the grip of fidelity and source texts with the hope of drawing broader parallels and connections between *King Lear* cinematic adaptations using a cultural studies approach. Griggs attempts to balance and divert from traditional debates over fidelity and give academic attention to the works which “may have a less overt relationship with Shakespeare’s play than others, but they are no less a part of the adaptive landscape than traditional canonical adaptations” (Griggs 19). Griggs surmises that the quest for fidelity is a “*misguiding light*” (Griggs 20).

Griggs’ book, *Screen Adaptations: Shakespeare’s King Lear: A Close Study of the Relationship Between Text and Film*, provides a useful introduction to the text and offers notable historical issues surrounding the text and productions, in addition to framing the evolution of adaptation criticism. However, Griggs assumes a little too much from viewers of the films. Although there are undoubted parallels to the *Lear* text, and her point of bringing the source text down from an untouchable pedestal is valid, I feel that

some of the film adaptations that she cites lack necessary elements essential in deeming or classifying the films as *King Lear* film adaptations.

Griggs believes that film criticism should be tailored to fit the academic situation and work. Griggs criticizes trying to make film criticism fit into an “author-dependent, auteurist standpoint that purposely invests the film with the same kind of aesthetic weight as the source text” (Griggs 18). Griggs writes that endeavoring to make films fit a source text-adaptation dichotomy leads to a “reductive, fidelity-conscious” reading, which she does not value (Griggs 18). Griggs contends that even films which are “deemed canonical can be read as genre products” (Griggs 19). Her vision is admirable, and her book provides much-needed discussion about *King Lear* film adaptation, but in the case of the two films that I will discuss in this thesis, I believe her claims are too far reaching.

Although Griggs concedes that adaptations are not without criticism, two films in particular that she focuses on, *House of Strangers* (1949) and *Broken Lance* (1954), fail to elucidate both intentionality and reception. Griggs argues that,

Paying homage to the text does not necessitate its treatment as untouchable, immutable literary movement: dues paid, the relocated text must find a niche within its new market place, and should establish a sense of the cultural preoccupations of its own era of production. (Griggs 189)

As time passes and technology further entrenches works regarded as classic literature, what is homage, adaptation, or simply a popular theme begins to blur. Griggs suggests that critical reception of Shakespeare adaptations facilitates a broader academic interpretation of what it means to be a Shakespearean adaptation, a designation which implies a degree of fidelity to a source text. Griggs writes, “New critical studies of not

only the resulting adaptation but of the processes and cultural forces at work in their conception and production do much to lead us away from entrenched debates revolving around issues of fidelity to a so-called ‘primary source’ text” (Griggs 16). Griggs feels that scholarly pursuit of fidelity or primacy usurps the inherently creative collaboration in cinema which should remain in the forefront. Griggs writes, “Film is a highly collaborative process relying on collective creative energies. However to the detriment of open debate, film scholars and Shakespeare scholars alike continually strive to retain the primacy of ‘authorship,’ the director invariably usurping the role of writer and in this instance becoming a pseudo-Shakespeare” (Griggs 16). The quest for authorship, Griggs believes, generates a culture of exclusion for works which do not fall into standard, traditional film adaptation guidelines. Griggs writes, “Attempts to establish the primacy of auteur-driven adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in turn generate a questionable, elitist hierarchy of screened Shakespeare that manufactures a discrete body of film work deemed canonical (and thus worthy of critical consideration), and a body of screen adaptations that fall outside the parameters of the canon and into a critical no-man’s land” (Griggs 16). Griggs aims to replace “value judgments based on notions of literary and auteuristic pedigree” with “meaningful discussion about the intertextual connections established during the *process* of adaptation from text to screen” (Griggs 28). Griggs’ support of works that fall out of the standard parameters for screen adaptations justifies her consideration of works that fall outside of critical reception, but her method does not explain how scholars decide what is and what is not a Shakespearean adaptation in the first place.

Griggs attempts to unearth and validate *Lear* film adaptations (according to her standards) that have remained hidden away and unevaluated thus far. Griggs writes, “screen adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays have continued to thrive; their sheer volume suggest that the stories they tell and the issues they raise are still of interest to contemporary audiences” (Griggs preface). Griggs strives to analyze the “influences at work in each film’s adaptive transition from play text to screen” (Griggs preface). Griggs surmises that since *King Lear* “draws upon an amalgamation of existing narratives” it is “constantly reworked and radically edited to realise interpretations that suit the mood and values of its contemporary production climate” (Griggs 3). In other words, Griggs believes that *King Lear*’s relatable storyline lends it to a multitude of adaptations including those she deems “have remained outside the critical fold for far too long” (Griggs preface). In part then, her project is recuperative, a reclamation of *Lear* adaptations lost and forgotten.

To Griggs, the *Lear* text is an ever-present, ever-adaptable text which is readily available for appropriation and reworking. With *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*, Griggs believes that the connection the films have to *Lear* is notable enough to showcase these works in several chapters of her book. Griggs further touts that the complex *Lear* text presents “a range of themes for exploration on both stage and screen” (Griggs 10). Griggs continues that the text’s “concerns are often cited as universal and timeless, its locale seen as being open to a multitude of interpretations” (Griggs 10). Finally, “its chameleon-like properties mean that its dominant thematic preoccupations vary from one stage or screen production to another, depending upon the interpretation adhered to” (Griggs 11). However, Griggs believes that although the *Lear* text is ever-present,

Shakespearean film adaptation studies has gaps that need to be filled. Griggs argues that “Whilst the boom [in Shakespeare film adaptation] is a positive, the inception of a discrete and canonical discipline, generated to discuss a certain type of Shakespeare film, is not” (Griggs 195).

Griggs separates her book into sections explaining canonical adaptations, what she calls “art house reconfigurations,” and “various mainstream genre adaptation of the play” (Griggs preface). Griggs relies heavily on the concept of “genre-based adaptations” which she writes, “highlight their genre affiliations over and above any overt affiliation with Shakespeare’s play” and “employ character frameworks and narrative patterns from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, but they also make fascinating ideological and thematic connections with the play text” (Griggs 28).

Griggs’ outlook and project advance the scholarship on *King Lear* film adaptation. Her introduction of the *King Lear* text provides cogent, practical, and useful information which sets up her claims on the tenuous nature of authenticity. Griggs’ project has weight and furthers discussions of *Lear*, cultural capital, and Shakespeare. However, in the cases of *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*, Griggs overextends herself. *King Lear* and Shakespeare do not have to be present and located in every work which seems to be possibly nodding to the Bard or referencing a trope from a Shakespearean play. I believe that because intentionality and reception of *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance* are not considered by Griggs, her claims for the “King-Lear”ness of these films go too far.

If intentionality and reception are disregarded, film criticism would be overworked in discussing films with similar Shakespeare storylines or plots as living,

breathing Shakespearean film adaptations. Films like *Warm Bodies* (2013), which details an atypical romance between a living teenage girl and a zombie teenage boy who eventually becomes a warm body, would have to be considered under the category of *Romeo and Juliet* film adaptation. *Warm Bodies*, although it showcases two seemingly doomed young would-be lovers named Julie and R (the zombie teenaged boy's friends all want to eat the living girl, and the living girl's father is a militant leader of the zombie resistance and wants to eradicate all zombies), is not a Shakespearean film adaptation; it merely echoes a tried-and-true storyline which Shakespeare's play popularized and references the character names.

To clarify and elucidate terminology, I will explain in my own words and in my own terms, the criteria that I will use to discuss *King Lear* film adaptations. What film critics deem canonical seems to mean that the adaptive work holds a direct connection with the original Shakespearean work. The first indication of that connection is the title; most canonical works hold a "Lear" word title, or at the very least, have "King" or "Kingdom." Titling differentiates a canonical work from a middle ground or simply nontraditional adaptation.

Adherence to the source text for use in adapting for screenplay or script seems to occupy the next logical guideline. Canonical works hold a close textual connection to the source text's dialogue. In a general sense, costuming also signals a canonical work or one aspiring to be deemed canonical. Costuming in these films represents an attempt at authentic or period costuming. Although this is an elusive aim, which is arguably unattainable, filmmakers feel grandeur and costuming indicates a high level of Shakespearean authenticity.

Inclusion of most characters and most scenes are also elements of films deemed canonical. Adept academics laud productions which retain a majority of Shakespeare's original lines, follow along the plot of the source text, and adhere to most, if not all, act and scene divisions. Some academics will suffer through many hours of a Peter Brook production, for instance, simply because their assessment of the film's merit is based entirely on academic knowledge. Examples of canonical *King Lear* film adaptations include Peter Brook's *King Lear* (1971), Grigori Kozintsev's *Korol Lir* (1971), and the filmed RSC productions.

In the middle ground category, fall films like *King of Texas* (2002). These films are the equivalent of fusion cuisine in dining. Films in the fusion category exhibit some of the canonical elements such as language plot line or storyline, but may make changes such as character names, the name of the adaptive work, or period changes. In the fusion category, genre becomes an issue of contention. Genre complicates film because genre has its own guidelines and requirements. A film in pursuit of genre/style may lose sight of the source text. Genre overpowers fidelity, in other words.

The fusion genre makes the Shakespearean work more appealing to a broader, non-academic audience, but the film still may not garner mainstream acceptance. An example of another tragedy with broad appeal is *Romeo + Juliet*, Baz Luhrmann's aforementioned interpretation. *King of Texas* seems to be the only film which occupies the fusion category for *King Lear* film adaptations. Although *King of Texas* was a TNT made-for-television movie, the made-for-TV element actually substantiates and validates the film's place in the fusion category. Although some canon-obsessed academics may disregard *King of Texas*, the film has a broader, practical appeal to cable viewers. Also

with the advent of a larger body of media for streaming and purchase on the internet, viewers can enjoy or purchase *King of Texas* online or on DVD in a non-network TV setting. Additionally, Patrick Stewart is a marquee Shakespearean actor, giving the film additional credibility to a well-versed viewer.

Had *House of Strangers*, or *Broken Lance* been produced or written with a *Lear* reworking in mind--that is, if intentionality were evident-- these films might fall under the fusion category. However, there is little to no indication, beyond Griggs' own appraisal, that the films were created with any *Lear* connection in mind whatsoever. These films, I argue, merely echo elements and situations appearing in *Lear*. It is only an obsessive academic critic, such as Griggs, who would seek to establish parallels between these films and the *Lear* source text, connections which may not intentionally exist.

In order to establish the absurdity of claiming either *House of Strangers* or *Broken Lance* (or *Big Show*) as *Lear* adaptations, all we need do, to begin, is consider their most immediate textual source, not Shakespeare's play but Jerome Weidman's 1941 novel, *I'll Never Go There Any More*. Weidman's novel is the purported source text which was adapted for the screenplays and stories of all three films. One edition of Weidman's novel dons a gold cover which teases, "A Summer Vacation Thrust Him into Manhood." At 35 cents, in a time when that exceeded the average hourly salary, the high-priced book whose cover illustrates two men loafing on a porch and one lazy blonde woman with them, promises to be some racy tale, perhaps with a love triangle. The book cover and title beg the question of where "there" is and why the unidentified character does not wish to return.

Avon Books published one edition of Weidman's novel. The publisher, which started in 1941, is now Avon Romance, a subsidiary of Harper Collins. The present-day Avon Romance's website touts bare-chested muscle men and beautiful ardent women on its book covers and ask readers to "Submit to your desire" should they wish to submit a manuscript for publication. Given the parameters of romance, *Lear* scarcely fits the pattern. Although there are affairs and marriages in *Lear*, that is not the genre of the play.

The strongest romance in *Lear* is with greed. Ironically enough, greed seems to be the only tie Weidman's novel has to the *Lear* storyline. Weidman's novel recounts, in first-person, the summer Arthur Thacker, a university student from upstate New York, spends working in Manhattan at a firm while deciding if he wants to return to university. During Thacker's stay, a rough, seasoned coworker, Max Maggio, befriends Thacker and becomes a self-imposed mentor. Maggio introduces Thacker to his madam, Mary Eggleston, and other escorts. One escort is Sophie Kouzak, a rough-talking, unattractive, fat, young woman from Portland, Oregon. Although Sophie is uncouth and unattractive, Thacker and Maggio share a love-triangle with her and vie for her services.

The firm owner, Ora Dorgenicht, shares his old friend Max's life story with Thacker one afternoon early on in the story. The story of Max's earlier career as a big-time criminal attorney seems to be largely the basis for the *House of Strangers* screenplay. The story of Max's attorney career is at best a few pages; it is not a substantial exposition. Although Max's time as a lawyer and his subsequent imprisonment affect his life, the novel focuses primarily on Max's fall from grace, a riches-to-rags story. The story's time period, Max's life after prison, shows Max as poor and pathetic. Although Max seems to have few perceptible redeeming qualities, he

manages to maintain professional and personal connections despite his fall from professional success. Mary Eggleston recounts Max's plight to Arthur and mentions “Those terrible brothers of his” (Weidman 143). Max, who acts as the favorite son (arguably the Cordelia figure) in *House of Strangers*, is by no means submissive in either interpretation. In fact, Weidman’s Max is unattractive, brusque, and crude, frequently adding “Period.” as a definitive marker that he refuses to further discuss any situation. Weidman’s Max is decidedly an unlikable person overall. Max has uncouth habits like purchasing cans of sardines that are years old and leaving the cans open overnight before eating the sardines.

One connection to the movie screenplay is the background in banking. Ora Dorgenicht’s father had been a successful German banker; Max Maggio's father had been a prosperous Italian banker (Weidman 48). Max’s father sold his barbershop, where he had managed to accumulate a small fortune, and went into the finance business (Weidman 49). Max Maggio’s father sent four sons to Harvard to study law and two daughters to Vassar or Smith. Although Max “had too much of his father's drive and ruthlessness,” Max, not his barber financier father, is the one whose temper and love of material possessions permeate the story (Weidman 51).

Academics and critics too easily write that the screenplays for the two films were adapted from Weidman’s novel. Griggs herself miscites the adaptive source in her 2007 article as “John Weidman’s novel *House of Strangers*,” later correcting information in her book chapter citing that both *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance* are “loosely based on Jerome Weidman’s novel *I’ll Never Go There Anymore*—a novel which in turn borrows from Shakespeare’s reconfigured narration of the Lear myth” (Griggs 2007, 94

and 2010, 102). Griggs' claims too seems a reach; *I'll Never Go There Any More* amounts to little more than drug store romance drama with a hint of true confession or true romance; the novel is most assuredly not a *Lear* adaptation because its storyline and reception lack any indication that Weidman sought to or did rework Shakespeare.

Nevertheless, Griggs deems *House of Strangers* a "genre-based adaptation" of *King Lear* (Griggs 28). However, when released in 1949, the film arguably was not trying to be anything more than a source of entertainment for viewers. The film was not trying to be film noir or trying to be *King Lear*; *House of Strangers* existed merely as a collaborative effort of Twentieth Century Fox, Darryl F. Zanuck, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, and Philip Yordan. At the time of the film's release, *House of Strangers* was not touted as a *Lear* adaptation, either. The genre-adaptation designation has surfaced presumably as a result of the growing interest in cinematic adaptation studies. Griggs justifies her list of *King Lear* film adaptations, which includes *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*, by declaring, "Some of the re-workings of the *Lear* narrative, of both art house and more mainstream generic leanings, may have a less overt relationship with Shakespeare's' play than others but they are no less a part of the adaptive landscape than traditional canonical adaptations" (Griggs 19). What Griggs fails to elucidate is her criteria for determining what in particular classifies a film as a *Lear* adaptation, rather than simply a film with a story about family troubles. Griggs applies a broad cultural studies approach but does not provide any guidelines for selecting potential non-traditional adaptations.

Griggs asserts the value, then, of artistic expression over the source text-adaptation relationship. Griggs credits contemporary theory shifts as her justification for critics who may raise questions of fidelity regarding the adaptations. Griggs writes, "New

critical studies of not only the resulting adaptation but of the processes and cultural forces at work in their conception and production do much to lead us away from entrenched debates revolving around issues of fidelity to a so-called ‘primary source’ text” (Griggs 16). What direction does film adaptation take once it is lead away from “entrenched debates,” however?

House of Strangers, and *Broken Lance* showcase families with a stubborn, tyrannical, indignant father/business owner who is unyielding in his business agenda and methodology. The father has multiple children, primarily sons, who work tirelessly for him. In each film, one son is the favorite who can do no wrong. As in *King Lear*, the fathers in *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance* deal with being divested of the power to control their "kingdom" which is represented as a family business or ranch lands. However, similarity in plot or storylines is not sufficient to deem films as *King Lear* adaptations. These films must demonstrate and exhibit intentionality and reception as *King Lear* film adaptations beyond merely Griggs’ appraisal. Since *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance* do not fit the criteria that I previously outlined for *King Lear* film adaptation, the films are not representations of *King Lear* film adaptation.

CHAPTER ONE

House of Strangers as Film Noir, not *King Lear*

House of Strangers was released in 1949 under Twentieth Century Fox, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz with a screenplay written by Philip Yordan. Rather than reworking *King Lear*, *House of Strangers* parallels the story of Amadeo Peter Giannini, who founded Bank of America. According to the PBS “Who Made America” website entry, Giannini extended loans to Italian immigrants when other lenders would not. According to the Turner Classic Movie’s website note page on *House of Strangers*, “...production head Darryl F. Zanuck wanted the family in the film to parallel the founders of the Bank of America, the Giannini family. The Gianninis ostensibly objected, as did Twentieth Century-Fox's president, Spyros P. Skouras, who thought that his own family was the source of the ‘Monettis’” (TCM). The dispute over the source or inspiration for the Monetti family demonstrates the unintelligibility of the film. The Monettis offer a caricature of not only Italian immigrants in the Great Depression but of any struggling immigrant family with domineering parents and disagreeing siblings during the time period.

Although Fox classifies *House of Strangers* under the film noir genre according to its “Fox Film Noir” DVD series, *House of Strangers* is arguably not even a true noir film. Film noir (described by actor Tony Curtis as a “feel-bad” genre) is gritty, disappointing, upsetting, and, as the name describes, dark; all of these qualities are applicable descriptions of Shakespearean tragedy (Douglas 438). However, the similarities between Shakespeare and film noir are genre-based, not based on the individual merits of *House of Strangers*. The term “noir” was coined in 1946 by French critics reviewing a group of

American thrillers, which had a “harsh, true-to-life quality, a mood of pessimism and despair” (Douglas 438). Douglas continues, “in noir, and only in *noir*, it’s possible to be both archetypically American and irremediably unhappy” (Douglas 438). *House of Strangers* has certain elements of noir, just as it has certain elements of *Lear*. David Mermelstein argues, “*House of Strangers* isn’t really noir at all” (44). Mermelstein summarizes the film as Gino Monetti being pitted “against three disgruntled sons, while Gino’s only content child, Max (Richard Conte) romances upper-crust Irene Bennett (Susan Hayward)” (44). Interestingly, Mermelstein concedes that *House of Strangers* could have “had a noir tint had director Joseph Mankiewicz further altered Jerome Weidman’s novel” (44). Interestingly, none of these critics seem to have read Weidman's novel. Had the critics read *I'll Never Go There Any More*, they would have realized that the novel has little to do with the screenplay. What was a minimal side story in the novel is the entire storyline of the screenplay. Nevertheless, Mermelstein concludes that *House of Strangers*’ draw is “Mankiewicz’s snappy banter for Conte [Max] and Hayward [Irene], and Robinson’s [Gino’s] scenery-chewing turn” (44). *The Christian Science Monitor* in December 1949 reviewed *House of Strangers* as “Inept drama of family dominated by Little Mussolini. Unpleasant people, characterization weak” (22). Another article in *The Christian Science Monitor* critiques *House of Strangers* as a sort of “Deaths of Five Salesmen” commentary on the “American way” of life and concedes that the characters “do not excite the same sympathy in the spectator [as in *Death of a Salesman*]” (5).

According to an obituary, Weidman “often wrote about the rough underside of business and politics—and daily life—in New York” (Gussow 23). In the adaptations of

Weidman's novel (including *The Big Show*), owning a business or running an extensive ranch serve as loose contemporary American parallels to the Jacobean kingdom. Since screenwriter Philip Yordan scripted both *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*, the films are close variations. Weidman's purported inspiration for *I'll Never Go There Anymore* and his other novels was his experience growing up in New York. The screenplay adaptations of *I'll Never Go There Anymore* yield storylines that parallel some situations in *King Lear*, but the screenplays' connection to the text is unintentional and a testament to the timelessness of Shakespeare's storylines (not screenwriter or author intentionality) as the screenplay has other, solidly connected parallels to other sources. As mentioned previously, *House of Strangers* dramatizes the rise of Bank of America founder, Amadeo Peter (A.P.) Giannini.

In *House of Strangers*, Max Monetti and his three brothers—Joseph, Pietro, and Tony—are irremediably displeased with their respective situations. Max, an attorney who earns his living by running a bail bonds and legal consultation business (headquartered in his father's bank), services local street criminals. Joseph, the oldest son, acts as his father Gino's right-hand man but only in the sense that Joseph is always doing his father's bidding; Joseph enjoys no reward from scrubbing his father Gino's back while Gino bathes, driving Gino to work, and fielding business questions while working in the bank with Gino. Pietro, an athletic, tall, young man, is a bank guard by day and an amateur prizefighter by night. Pietro is still establishing himself as a fighter and does not accept any cash rewards from fights because that would "compromise his amateur status." Tony seems largely without substance, acting as the pretty-boy son.

The patriarch, Gino Monetti (played by Edward G. Robinson), a brusque, rough-talking Italian immigrant, owns and operates a bank where he admittedly says, "I do what I think is right! No one tell [sic] me what to do!" Gino also says, "What do you mean *we*? I am the bank!" The film begins following Gino's death, establishing that tragedy, and recounting the years prior to Gino's death. Of Gino's four sons, three do their father's bidding yet by their own appraisal are underpaid and underappreciated. Richard Conte, a film noir actor who starred in many other notable films of the genre, plays Gino's favorite son (As Griggs argues, the Cordelia-like figure), Max Monetti. Conte's experience in film noir translates into a nuanced and believable portrayal of a son who negotiates between his father's hatred for his brothers and the possibility of a new life for Max, free from the oppressive hatred. Gino's world implodes after standing trial for his questionable business dealings. As a result, three sons, Joe, Pietro, and Tony, take over the family bank, make it their own, and leave Gino with a modest weekly allowance; Max serves seven years in prison for attempting to bribe a juror on his father's trial.

The plot development establishes Max as distinct from his brothers; Gino talks down to his other sons but not to Max. Max is a lawyer, a job of high social prestige, while his brothers all work menial jobs in the bank (clerks and a bank guard). Gino grants Max a leniency that Gino does not allow his other sons, one of whom, Pietro, Gino calls "Dumbhead" as a nickname. Max manipulates his father's temperament while his brothers fear merely have a conversation and confronting their father about how they feel mistreated. At the weekly Wednesday night family dinner, Max keeps the entire family waiting. Gino, who usually angers when things do not go his way, sees no issue with Max being late to the family tradition. Gino makes the entire family sit at the dinner table and

wait to eat until Max arrives. When Pietro takes a bite of bread before Max arrives, Gino orders him to spit out the bread and reiterates that everyone must wait to eat until Max arrives.

The dinner scene illuminates Gino's fast temper; Gino vacillates from praise for Max's fiancée, Maria, to scolding Pietro, to praising Mamma's cooking to admonishing Joe for asking for a raise. Gino's logic for his sons' pay is that Gino had a tough life, built a business from very little, and will leave everything to his sons when he dies. Just as Lear says "I gave you all," Gino sees the bank as the "all" which he has to offer his sons; however, similar to Lear, Gino is not prepared to divest himself of that "all" even in a titular fashion (Shakespeare 2.2.439). When the record that Gino plays loudly on the phonograph ends, he orders Pietro to, "Change the record, Dumbhead!" The genre and 1930's gangster time period setting allow for Gino to actively reprimand, insult, and admonish his adult sons. Gino is the leader of the family's small empire, and in his mind, his status grants him the right to act in whatever fashion he deems fit.

Gino's role as strong, patriarchal figure initially downplays his chaotic decisions or "madness" of sorts. However, his rash ways are unavoidably enmeshed in his character's everyday dealings. Gino's very profession centers around extending loans to bank patrons haphazardly, with an arbitrary calculation of interest rates, and without any ledger system to track the monies. Gino completes tasks in his own time frame; he is not concerned if someone is waiting on him or is inconvenienced by his tardiness. While Joe waits dressed in his suit and ready to go to work, Gino sits in the bathtub covered in soapsuds. Further demonstrating his control over his sons, Gino asks Joe to come over and scrub Gino's back. While wearing a three-piece suit, Joe sits on the edge of the

porcelain claw-foot bathtub scrubbing away at his father's back as his father sings.

Singing is a sign of madness found not only in the *King Lear* text in the storm scene of Act 2, Scene 2, but in many other Shakespeare works like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Kendra Preston Leonard writes, "Music has long been associated with madness" (Preston Leonard 3). Preston Leonard surmises,

Changing social and scholarly attitudes toward the play, their characters, and the condition that falls under the early modern catch-all of 'madness' have led to a wide range of musical accompaniments, signifiers, and incarnations of the 'distractions' feigned by Hamlet and Edgar, the disassociation experienced by Ophelia and Lear, and the hallucinations that plague Lady Macbeth (Preston Leonard 5).

Gino's madness is also supported by his phonograph blaring "The Barber of Seville."

Gino refuses to lower the volume if people are calling on the telephone or visiting at the house.

Just as King Lear and Cordelia are carted off to prison in Act 5, Scene 3, Max and Gino have a 1930's prison experience; Gino is brought up on charges related to his questionable business dealings with bank patrons and is liable to be sentenced to many years in prison on multiple counts, so Max attempts to pay off a juror in the hopes of saving his father from jail time. Max beseeches his brother, Joe, to aid in the bribery process with the juror. Joe, gulping down beer and shoveling his dinner in his mouth, refuses. Joe says that if their father got himself into this mess, he can get himself out of it. The juror refuses Max's offer, and police officers wait for Max as he leaves the juror's apartment building. Even in an act of redemption, under-handed as it may have been,

there are repercussions in noir. The act of bribery is Max's last attempt at trying to save his father, making Max a unique son since his brothers refuse help for their father; the brothers are merely standing aside, waiting to be free of their father's control in both the personal and professional realms.

Following the trial, Gino's other sons gain legal control of the bank, leaving their father with no power or notoriety. A building plaque, which once garnered Gino's name, now lists the names of Joseph, Pietro, and Tony Monetti with their respective positions at the bank. Gino dashes into the bank, which is being renovated, and contests that his sons cannot make changes to his business. Joe tells Gino that Gino is no longer legally connected to the bank and should stay away as to not tarnish the new reputation that Joe is trying to build for the bank. When Gino questions how he is going to live with no income, Joe says that Gino will get a small weekly allowance and needs to "start smoking cheaper cigars." When Gino asks what he will do, Joe replies, "Go to the park and feed the pigeons." Joe directly tells Gino that he is both powerless and penniless, mirroring the Act 2, Scene 2 less direct exchange between Regan, Goneril, and Lear. In the text, Goneril asks, "What need you five and twenty? Ten? Or five?" (Shakespeare 2.2.450). Regan counters with "What need one?" (Shakespeare 2.2.451). Lear's daughters more felicitously tell Lear that he will not keep such a large company of knights whereas Joe takes outright pleasure in taking control away from his father and telling him, "You can stay in the house," granting Gino permission to stay in his own property. Again, however, the film scene's similarity to *Lear* is unintentional and not something that most audience members discern. Gino being divested of his stake in the bank displays Joe's change of

direction in character and perhaps displays a sort of poetic justice or punishment for Gino's mistreatment of his son earlier in the film.

At the beginning of Max's prison sentence, Gino dutifully visits and writes Max, keeping him abreast of the family gossip and dealings. Gino has passion similar to Lear's when Lear tells Cordelia, "So we'll live/And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh/At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues/Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too" (Shakespeare 5.3.11-14). However, the similarity between the Gino/Max Lear/Cordelia prison dynamic is unintentional and merely an interpretation. Gino beseeches Max to avenge the wrongdoing his brothers enacted on Gino. Gino wants Max to exact revenge and harness the anger that Gino feels towards his other sons. Since Gino's sons divest him of power over controlling the business or their lives, Gino sees Max as the only power or hope for power that Gino has. Since Max is in prison, Gino feels even more powerless and emasculated, which is why he writes and visits Max fanatically.

Max's time in prison affects his personal relationships as well. The film bears similarity with the Edmund Goneril/Regan love-triangle relationship through Max's relationship with both Maria, his betrothed, and Irene, the femme fatale who tempts Max away from his fiancée. Maria is the embodiment of dedication, wholesomeness, and acts as a bridge to the old country way of life where marriage is the first step in building a relationship and family. Maria has faith in Max regardless of the accusations that her mother makes about Max running around with "some woman," who is Irene. Gino, naturally, defends his favorite son by saying that Irene is just a business relationship and "Sometimes you gotta mix the business with a little a' pleasure." Gino also cites that the

ways of America are different in comparison with the ways of the old country, Italy; therefore, since Max is a product of the American tradition, he cannot be held to the confines of decorum which extend from the old country. Gino admits in this scene that although Max is not connected to the old ways, Gino still is (he says as he raises his hand towards Maria's mother, a looming threat of a reprimanding slap). Gino once again maintains order through the threat of violence. Although they are not blood relatives, Irene serves as the foil to the enchanting bastard child, Edmund. Irene and Max's relationship leads to Maria marrying Max's brother, Tony, while Max is in prison.

The battle scene of *House of Strangers* occurs feuding brothers. The film could not escape censorship, which oddly yields a work akin to the Nahum Tate 18th century revision of the *King Lear* text. The film's incongruous ending is likely the result of the Hays Code of 1930, which placed prohibitions on depicting amoral activities or situations in films. Will H. Hays, the chief censor in Hollywood at the time, proclaimed at the code's unveiling, "[The code] states the considerations which good taste and community value make necessary in this universal form of entertainment" (Mondello 1). The code enumerated restrictions on profanity use, costume, sex, and crimes against the law, to list a few sections. The general principles of the code were:

- 1) No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
- 2) Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.

3) Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

In line with the code, Max could not allow the evil that his father bestowed upon him to grow. Irene describes Gino as “A dead man, and evil man, a bad man.” Irene continues, “You [Max] are filled with his [Gino’s] poison; it breathes in you.” In the beginning of the film, it seems as though evil will triumph, and Max will exact retribution on his brothers for taking over the bank and putting Max in jail for seven years. The Hays Code prevented such an outcome, however, because that outcome would have lowered the moral standards of the film viewers. Therefore, at the end of the film, Max realizes that he no longer wishes to pursue retribution for his time spent in jail nor his father’s death. Although Max laid the foundation of fear when he first visits his brothers at the bank after his prison release, the element of romantic love and hope for the future stir Max away from thoughts of violence, anger, and estrangement of his family. In true noir form, Max’s decision to forgive his brothers and the past is almost too little too late as Max’s brothers meet him in the old house and attempt to kill him. Pietro, the former prizefighter, once again blindly takes orders like the “Dumbhead” his father labeled him as. Pietro beats Max at Joe’s beseeching. Just as Joe orders Pietro to throw Max from the balcony, Max convinces Pietro otherwise. The Cordelia figure is also ordered to be killed, but anger towards the father redeems the Cordelia figure, whom Max represents. The brothers realize that their source of discontent is not strife from each other but from a lifetime of abuse from their father. The siblings unite against their father’s wishes, which seem to have been that the brothers destroy each other.

If *House of Strangers* is chalked up to be merely a *King Lear* film adaptation, then the genre intention of the film is lost. *House of Strangers* falls into the long list of studio productions of the 1940's and 1950's, a time when cinema production was booming and when the movie theater provided visual entertainment (pre-television and television network booms). Actors during the time had contracts with a studio to act in a certain number of films per year. Hollywood was a machine. One popular and cheap convention was for filmmakers and studios to purchase the rights to a recently published novel, novella, or short story and adapt the content of the story into a screenplay. Adaptations from novels, plays, or short stories were cheaply appropriated and quickly produced; in terms of intention, *House of Strangers* falls under that concept. Weidman's book serves as one of many examples of a book which was adapted for cinema in some capacity. Yordan adapted a story from the book into a screenplay which produced not one revenue-generating film but three.

Some films enjoyed high levels of success from being adapted from their textual counterpart. For example, filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock earned his only Academy Award for best picture for his 1941 film *Rebecca*, which was adapted from the 1938 book of the same title by Daphne du Maurier.

House of Strangers does not enjoy the same level of acclaim as a Hitchcock film, but lack of acclaim should not detract from the film's fine cast of notable actors who play their roles well in a family drama which does not always quite hit the mark for film noir designation nor does it contain all of the essential elements of a *King Lear* film adaptation; most importantly, regardless of reception then or now, *House of Strangers* lacks author and screenwriter intentionality and audience reception for being a *King Lear*

adaptation. The similarities in the plot or storyline that *House of Strangers* may share with *King Lear* are unintentional, and once again, serve as a testament to the timely plot and storylines that Shakespeare employed in his plays, not any intentional adaptation of *King Lear*.

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CHAPTER TWO

Broken Lance as Western, not *King Lear*

Just as film noir's gritty, irresolvable situations may mirror Shakespearean tragedy, the American Western genre's culture of gun-toting, horse-riding violence, with emphasis on revenge can also be an apt setting for tragic narratives. *Broken Lance* shares a storyline with *House of Strangers* but sets that story in the western genre/style. However, like *House of Strangers*, *Broken Lance* does not contain the essential elements of *King Lear*: author and screenwriter intentionality and audience reception that the film is *King Lear* film adaptation.. The father (or as Griggs argues, Lear) figure's violent tendencies are once again freely expressed and develop without fear of reprisal. Westerns are violent, and so is the *King Lear* storyline. The decision to set a *Lear*-esque story in a western ranch is a logical development and appropriation. But, as mentioned above, *Broken Lance* does not hit the mark precisely enough to be claimed as a *Lear* adaption. The film's lack of essential *King Lear* elements will be elucidated further when, later, I will discuss a Western which does aptly fit the *King Lear* Western genre film adaptation category. Whereas violence on the theater stage is often met with mixed reception, violence in a Western is not only expected, but embraced, making the western both an apt setting and genre. Griggs writes that,

The western's classification as a genre of determinate space predetermines the story's thematic concerns and its ideological position, leading us to expect a certain type of macho hero operating within a clearly defined cinematic world. We anticipate an ideologically contested setting in which

society's values remain in flux, conflicts over territory and value systems providing the narrative momentum. (Griggs 94)

During the 1950's, violence was acceptable when depicted in the western genre. It was deemed appropriate for little boys in America to play "Cowboys and Indians" or wear a cowboy outfit or game of some sort, which included the ever-necessary pistol. Westerns on the radio, TV (*The Lone Ranger*), and cinema screens allowed an outlet for the idea of martial law to resolve conflicts. Since the plots and situations of westerns seemed so distant in both time and location, concessions were made for activities and actions that were above the law.

Trying to make *Broken Lance* rigorously fit into a *King Lear* guideline or parameter both stifles the genre and belittles the academic. Sometimes a movie in the Western genre is just that. During the 1950's, Westerns were a hugely popular outlet and many big-name, top-billed actors appeared in them. *Broken Lance* was not originally received as a *King Lear* adaptation, and audiences have scant reason to make that association today while they watch the film.

Broken Lance, like *House of Strangers*, begins with (arguably) a Cordelia-like figure, Joe Devereaux, being released from prison. When Joe walks into the governor's office downtown, he immediately fixes his attention on a large painting of his father, Matt, with a plaque below with his father's birth date and date of death. The opening scene establishes the foundation for conflict throughout the film.

Matt Devereaux, played by Hollywood icon Spencer Tracy, is aggressive, gruff, and described in the film as "an old tyrant." While Devereaux could be said to represent a patriarchal figure such as King Lear, he really equates to the quintessential American

patriarch of the 1950's. Devereaux tolerates nothing and runs a capacious ranch, which generates ample business. When asked at one point why Devereaux had a man hanged, Devereaux claims that the man was trying to steal his cattle. Later, when Devereaux is called to task on the hanging, upon further examination, he reveals that he cannot accurately count how many thousands of head of cattle he has but estimates the figure at around 50,000. Devereaux uses the hanging of the man, for which Devereaux never suffers legal recompense, as a warning and display of principle to others who might think to challenge his authority. It does not matter to Devereaux if he has 50 cattle or 50,000 head of cattle; someone trying to engage in dishonest activities or make a quick buck at Devereaux's expense will not disrupt his property and business. Like Lear, Devereaux rules as he pleases with little concern for his court-equivalent, which is represented hereby Devereaux's sons and hired hands.

An early scene in the film establishes Devereaux's absolute control. After his sons, Mike and Denny, steal and attempt to re-brand cattle to sell as their own, Devereaux slaps Mike, who complains that his father pays insufficient or "lousy" wages. Instead of violence and an unstable temper being a looming fear or threat as in *King Lear*, here violence is realized and enacted whenever Devereaux deems appropriate. Devereaux, like Max Monetti in *House of Strangers*, vehemently disagrees that his sons are underpaid. Devereux believes that whatever money he pays his sons is "twice as much as what [they] are worth," an assertion he makes physically by slapping his son Mike and then asking his son, Joe, "What are we gonna do? We could hang 'em right here or we could shoot 'em?" When Joe says, "Cut it out, Pa!" Devereaux responds, "Oh, he must think I'm foolin," implying that he would follow through on hanging his sons for trying to steal

from him. Devereaux dismisses the suggestion of notifying the Sheriff because then “the whole town would know,” and Devereaux does not want his sons’ activities to compromise his own ruthless reputation. When Joe tells his brother Ben “We can’t let him do this,” Ben contends, “Why not? I told them they were only asking for trouble.” In a moment similar to Kent’s beseeching of Lear to “in thy best consideration check/This hideous rashness,”(Shakespeare 1.1.151-152), Joe grabs his father’s arm and says, “Pa, you don’t mean this! They’re your own sons!” However, similarity to Lear and Kent is unintentional and contrived. Joe acts as any rational figure would; he contests his father’s idea of hanging and killing Joe’s brothers, Mike and Denny.

This cattle theft confrontation scene establishes that to Devereaux, the ranch is more prominent than family, and in matters of disloyal activities, his sons are no different than common outlaw criminals and will be handled as such. Additionally, the scene supports Devereaux’s masculinity. In her article “*They’d Kill Us if They Knew: Transgression and the Western*,” Sue Brower reinforces the concept of the cowboy as masculine power symbol when she writes, “...the western archetype of the cowboy still possesses power as symbol of American courage, strength, capability, and masculinity” (Brower 47). Devereaux further asserts control by banishing his sons because of their dishonest activities. However, as Brower suggests, the genre facilitates the hard-hitting macho persona. With *Broken Lance*, the tyrannical figure is commensurate with the Western storyline much more clearly than it does the *Lear* storyline. Devereaux is the typical, macho Western cowboy. Although Lear could be described as a cowboy, in the case of *Broken Lance*, the cowboy is not King Lear. In the case of *King of Texas*, another

Western that I will discuss later, Lear is both a cowboy, and the cowboy is intentionally portraying King Lear.

The cattle-thieving-sons scene is also the first instance of setting apart Devereaux's youngest son, Joe, from the other three ruffian offspring. Devereaux looks to Joe for advice on how to deal with the situation. Not only does Joe not defy his father (he is not involved in the cattle theft), but he is also biologically different, having a different mother than the older brothers. Joe's mother is Native American, creating a rift not only in the family members' dynamic but in the negative reception the family and Devereaux field. The element of race transforms *Broken Lance* to address relevant issues such as race and cultural acceptance. Brower suggests that “[minority] characters’ marginal status is paired with some transgression” such as drunkenness or infidelity (Brower 50). However, Señora Devereaux (a term which her husband uses and prefers, suggesting that it would be better if she were Mexican instead of Native American) is not relegated to this category. Instead, the race that she and Joe share serves as a signifying term to differentiate them from the “white” man and “white” brothers, establishing conflict between both society and Joe's brothers; both Señora and Joe are inherently good, however.

Joe is able to reason with his father in a seemingly daring way. In one scene before dinner with guests, Joe waits with all of his brothers, later telling his father that Joe invited the brothers because he figured that Devereaux “was just being bullheaded” in banishing them. When Devereaux threatens Joe, Joe brushes the comments aside with “you’ve got your good shirt on” and “Besides, I think I could lick you,” or overpower his

father in a fight. Devereaux accepts Joe taking action and speaking frankly, thus proving that Devereaux views and interacts with Joe differently.

Devereaux demonstrates his power in an altercation with a copper refinery owner. Devereaux leads his sons in riding past armed guards into the restricted property of the Western Copper and Refining Company to demand that the mine foreman stop polluting the water supply. Devereaux tells the foreman to move the run-off drains, but the foreman refuses, telling Devereaux that he has no right to make demands. Devereaux does not care about the law or repercussions; he is only interested in maintaining his cattle business, which is compromised by polluted water which is killing the cattle. In a display of virility, Devereaux ignores the foreman and impending mob of workers whom the foreman claims will be out of jobs if the mine closes down. Devereaux knocks down the water run-off slides and instructs his sons to shoot at the feet of the encroaching men as Devereaux and his men ride away. Devereaux only cares about his ranch and operations. He demands respect, and when it is not given, he is insulted and seeks retribution. Devereaux does not expect that he will have to account for his actions, but as Griggs writes, "...his violent responses to any infringement upon his hard-earned territorial gains—responses that once ensured his capacity to tame the frontier wilderness within which he functions—set in motion the disintegration of his empire" (Griggs 94). Thus, the film focuses on the apex of Devereaux's life, his vast ranch, and the subsequent downward spiral which ends not only in his loss of lands to his sons, but also the loss of his life.

In *Broken Lance*, as in *House of Strangers*, the wife serves as the advisor. Señora Devereaux is reasonable and levelheaded; she only wants peace between her husband and

their sons. She is able to communicate with her husband in an intuitive and gentle manner which never angers the violent patriarch. Señora Devereaux contrasts the wife/mother, Mamma, in *House of Strangers*; Mamma speaks very few lines, her most important being, “I once had a husband and four sons. Now, I live in a house of strangers.” Señora Devereaux maintains her advisory role throughout the film and ensures that her son, Joe, does not make rash decisions.

Following the cattle incident, Devereaux asks Señora Devereaux, “Don’t they have everything they need on this ranch?” Señora Devereaux retorts, softly, “I do not think it is money they need. They are not my sons, so it is difficult to say, but I think they need you, my husband. You have never given them anything of yourself.” Señora Devereaux addresses a looming issue of her husband being uninvolved in his role as a father since all of his energy and time goes towards the ranch. Devereaux contests that he “has a big ranch to run—the biggest in this part of the country,” reinforcing that his primary concern is his business (ranch lands) which he says that he “built it all up for them [his sons].” In what Devereaux tells his wife is “Indian talk,” she says, “If you do not give of yourself, they take,” a simple, yet profound statement urging her husband to recognize his shortcomings in dealing so uncompassionately with his sons. Señora Devereaux says what the absent queen or princess might have said in *King Lear*, should the role of a mother and wife been included. Señora Devereaux, in the end, is also the reason that Joe does not seek retribution towards his brothers.

Señora Devereaux adds dimension to this family story. Dimension from a feminine view is absent from the Lear story, and in the case of *Broken Lance* in particular, it sets the film farther away from Lear. Señora Devereaux's humanity reflects

on Matt, even in the moments they are together. Such insight and thoughtfulness are not present in *King Lear*. Lear exists unchecked and unrestrained by a female influence.

Previously, Ben Devereaux tells his father that the ranch needs to open a business office in town to be competitive and profitable in the market. Barbara, a dinner guest who later becomes Joe's wife, says that it looks like Devereaux's sons can take care of themselves and manage the business; Devereaux says that they "have been *raised to*," implying that they do not act as they were raised. Devereaux concedes that Ben could handle running part of the business, but as Barbara says, giving up control is something Devereaux "wouldn't like... a bit." Devereaux asserts, "What's more, I'm not going to do it." Ironically, Devereaux makes the comment to Barbara that when she has children, she must have daughters because "it's simpler, and they are much prettier;" Devereaux's comment is amusing considering the daughters of King Lear.

Devereaux, like Gino Monetti, is put on trial. Devereaux, like Monetti and Lear, is stripped of his power when his above-the-law bravado catches up with him. The copper refinery sues Devereaux because of the damages that he caused to the refinery operation. The refinery, a big eastern company, is also an enemy to Devereaux's provincial methods. Just as Devereaux uses the unnamed cattle thieves he hanged as an example, the copper refinery uses Devereaux as an example and trumps Devereaux's control. Also, the governor, who holds prejudice against Devereaux's half American Indian son (who is courting the governor's white daughter), does nothing to stay the accusations. The governor enjoys his success in politics because of Devereaux making the governor's behavior an example of a western courtier, of sorts, turning against the king.

Before the trial, Devereaux's lawyer advises Devereaux to divide the property up between his four sons so that the refinery could not take any of the property from Devereaux in the event of a legal judgment. Since his sons now legally control the land, they must execute an agreement ceding the portion of the land that the mine occupies to the refinery. The brothers refuse to execute the agreement that would keep Joe out of jail. Like Regan and Goneril, the brothers' thirst for power controls them.

During the trial, Joe asks his brothers to say that they were also responsible for the refinery incident, but they all refuse to come to their father's aid. Joe, like Max Monetti and Cordelia, feels responsible for his father. Devereaux's lawyer advises him to cede the land to the oil company and let Joe take the blame. Devereaux could take full blame himself and serve jail time but does not because of his desire to maintain power over as much of his ranch as possible.

Devereaux is sick with grief over his favorite son being in prison. After his sons turn on each other and refuse to help Joe, Devereaux whips Ben and then suffers a mysterious attack, which cripples Devereaux's overall health. Like Lear, the idea that his offspring could be evil slowly kills Devereaux. Devereaux slowly loses strength, his temperament changing from a demanding one to a begging one. When Devereaux learns that Ben plans to sell part of the ranch to an oil company (to Devereaux big business is the enemy), he asks Ben not to sell to the oil company. Ben refuses and says, "It's a little late for asking now, Pa." Like Joe in *House of Strangers*, Ben revels in his father's now powerless, sick, and weak state. Devereaux tries to assert his power as a patriarch and says, "I'm telling you not to sell." Devereaux takes one last action and rides his horse, when he knows the stress will kill him, trying to head off his sons from meeting with the

oil company representative. In his last display of power, Devereaux dies while on horseback.

Joe's fate is similar to Max Monetti's in *House of Strangers*; Joe spends time in prison, is released, and then wants to exact revenge against his brothers who actively allowed Joe to serve time. Joe and his father do not enjoy the same prison-time correspondence as Max and Gino or Lear and Cordelia; Joe merely disappears to prison having limited screen time. Devereaux's emotional connection to his son is akin to what Lear felt towards Cordelia who was also not present for a portion of the play. The same Hays Code, which prevented an all-out death brawl between Max and his brothers in *House of Strangers*, also prevents Joe from killing his brother or vice versa. Instead, Joe and Ben have a fight, which is ended by one of the family's Native American hands who shoots Ben before Ben can shoot Joe, reinforcing Brower's assertion that minority figures in westerns are charged with transgressive acts; because of his race, it was acceptable that this spiritual, wild man uses force to protect Joe. Joe, free from guilt, marries Barbara and rides off into the sunset, letting go of any further vendetta against his brothers at his mother's beseeching.

The reception of *Broken Lance* at the time of its release focused on qualities that distinguished it as a Western; no one at the time likened it to *King Lear*. A 1954 *New York Times* article lauds the "achingly beautiful" Arizona landscape that *Broken Lance* was set to be filmed in and heralds the advanced film equipment, which includes a camera truck with a 250 horsepower motor and six-wheel drive (Campbell X5). Also among the lauded caravan of *Broken Lance*'s equipment is "one huge truck carrying forty steers and another bearing twelve horses" (Campbell X5). The emphasis here is on the

modernization and innovation of the production set and accommodations for this Western film. *Broken Lance* is revolutionary according to Campbell because it is a Western shot on location with technologically advanced equipment. Production Manager Richard McWhorter says in the article that safety and innovation are important because “the average age of motion picture workers is much higher than in other industries” (Campbell X5). McWhorter continues that, because of the altitude changes in the West, “We don’t want them to exert themselves beyond the absolute minimum, which is plenty of exertion anyhow” (Campbell X5). McWhorter concludes, “We want them to use machines for physical work whenever possible” (Campbell X5). Another *New York Times* article touts *Broken Lance* as an “Offbeat Western” (A.W.). The article claims that the film is based upon a “screen play by Richard Murphy based on a story by Philip Yordan,” making no mention of Weidman’s novel or any adaptation (A.W.). The article further references the “saga of the self-made, autocratic cattle baron who helped shape the West” and suggests that *Broken Lance* “makes a refreshingly serious and fairly successful attempt to understand these towering men” (A.W.). The article continues, “The standard clichés of the Western are plentifully evident in this drama, but they do not debase it to any great degree” (A.W.). Once again, the beautiful landscape, filmed in CinemaScope, is praised. The article further remarks on the principal actors and their individually accomplished acting in the film and posits that the flashback scenes which comprise a large portion of the film and establish “the tale of tough and vital Matt Devereaux” are unnecessary (A.W.). The review attributes the family schism as a result of the trial proceedings which land Joe in jail. Another notice touts *Broken Lance* as a story about “a father who wanted his four sons to build an empire and carry on his name” (CSM 4).

Thus, attempting to unabashedly declare the film a *King Lear* adaptation is problematic and somewhat inorganic; *Broken Lance* naturally falls into the Western genre. Deeming *Broken Lance* a *King Lear* adaptation detracts from the genre and individual accomplishments of the film. Notably, *Broken Lance* deals with a subplot concerning racial and ethnic relations between “the white man” and Native Americans. The film does more than merely reference these racial issues; *Broken Lance* features a marquee actor, Spencer Tracy, in a lead role, both married to a native American woman and opposed to racial prejudice that he experiences firsthand because of his wife and “half-breed” son. Robert Wagner, in one of his earlier roles (prior to the notoriety of his marriage to actress Natalie Wood), plays Tracy’s “half-breed” son. Griggs writes that *Broken Lance* is a “message film” which “won Dmytrk a Golden Globe for Promoting International Understanding” (Griggs 94). Although Griggs continues that Dmytrk’s “veiled expose of the corruption and racism at the core of American society presents further intriguing connections with the Lear myth,” it is unfair to merely ascribe a Lear connection as means for validating the racism and corruption claim (Griggs 94). The problem of racism at the core of America’s foundation is powerful and relevant on its own; the film does not need *Lear* to legitimize its claims.

Another Western, however, *King of Texas*, demonstrates both screenwriter intentionality and audience reception. Following its television release, *King of Texas* did not garner high ratings from newspaper reviewers. There is no question, however, that the made-for-television movie was a reworking or adaptation of *King Lear*. As Griggs and others mention, the Western genre can benefit the Shakespearean tragedy. Although Anita Gates criticizes *King of Texas* as a *Lear* story that “never comes to life,” Gates does not

dispute that “the film makes a solid connection with the time and place” of the Western (Gates B13). Gates writes, “There has always been something Shakespearean about the Old West, or at least our dramatizations of it” (Gates B13). Gates continues, “*Lear* fits easily into mid-19th-century Texas, where the patriarch is a powerful rancher who knows Sam Houston from the old days” (Gates B13).

King of Texas relocates the *King Lear* tragedy to the frontier west following the Battle of the Alamo and Texas Revolution, pivotal events in American history. Although the time period represents uncertainty in territorial expansion and ownership, the King Lear figure, John Lear, occupies the pioneer role. John Lear is a man who has made progress in his own empire and in the formation of Texas. *King of Texas* maintains the narrative of three daughters—two eager for power and one hesitant to kowtow—but throws in a presumably firstborn son who died, as well as a mother whom John Lear “worked to death” according to his daughter Susannah. Although the language is reconfigured to a pseudo-Texan drawl, the essential storyline and key phrases of the text are retained and recognizable. In addition to the storyline, plot, and dialogue, most of the characters are retained, including the fool (Rip) and even the loyal servant who shoots the Cornwall figure (Mr. Highsmith) to prevent the Gloucester figure’s (Westover’s) blinding (which is also unsuccessful as it is in *King Lear*).

King of Texas had mixed reviews at best; many found the film’s conceit trite. One review by Steven Murray dubs *King of Texas* as “an eye-roller of an idea” (Murray E1). Murray thinks that the film “sounds like the misguided thesis of a graduate student” (Murray pE1). Again, Murray’s review affirms, in content and headline, (“Shakespeare

Saddles Up in 'King of Texas'") that *King of Texas*, however misguided, is an attempt at adapting Shakespeare's text and relocating the play to Texas.

Not all works garner the same level of acclaim as Jane Smiley's novel, *A Thousand Acres*, or Grigori Kozintsev's film, *Korol Lir*. However, a film does not have to garner high ratings for it to be considered a *King Lear* adaptation. As mentioned, *King of Texas* demonstrates both intentionality and reception, and the essential elements of the *Lear* tragedy are reworked to suit the Western genre and time period. Ironically, Murray concedes that *King of Texas* surpasses the film version of *A Thousand Acres*. Murray writes, "director Uli Edel's version is heads above 1997's Michelle Pfeiffer vehicle, 'A Thousand Acres'" (Murray E1). Darryl H. Miller appreciates the vision of *King of Texas* and writes that the "sharp-eyed transfer of King Lear" indeed "blows the cobwebs off any preconceived notions about the original and invites renewed appreciation for Shakespeare's insight into human nature" (Miller F2).

One essential *Lear* element is the tyrannical old father who cannot fully divest his power. Patrick Stewart befits the physical criteria for the ageing patriarch. Gates writes that "Stewart looks the part of a grandfatherly Old West hero, with a full head of white hair and a thick white beard" (Gates B13). Despite Stewart's varied repertoire of Shakespearean characterizations, Gates feels that Stewart did not bring as much power to his role as John Lear as his other roles. Gates writes, "Even the storm scene, every Lear's moment of demented glory, is unmoving" (Gates B13). Acting critique aside, Stewart is unarguably portraying Lear in a *King Lear* reworking. Gates and others do not dispute the essential elements of *Lear* regardless of the elements' successes in *King of Texas*. Murray remarks that as John Lear, "Stewart is terrific, an ornery despot gradually reduced to

childlike helplessness” (Murray E1). Lear’s longtime friend also demonstrates dedication. Gates concedes that “Westover, the film’s Gloucester equivalent” is “a full human being, an old soldier with deeply sad eyes who cares deeply about what happens to Lear” (Gates B13).

Interestingly, there is some evidence that during the time period in which *King of Texas* is set, Shakespeare was performed onstage and taught in schoolhouses. Gregory Curtis writes that in the frontier West, Shakespeare was a cultural icon. Curtis quotes Alex de Tocqueville, who says of America in 1831 that there is “hardly a pioneer’s hut which does not contain a few off volumes of Shakespeare” (Curtis 7). Curtis also writes that in Corpus Christi, Texas, prior to the Mexican War, “General Zachary Taylor built a large theater for the troops’ entertainment” where plays like *Othello* showcased. Curtis continues that apparently General Ulysses S. Grant auditioned for the role of Desdemona and was considered but later rejected as he did not have “proper sentiment” (Curtis 7). The speech of the frontier West, which was “rooted in Elizabethan English,” made the language of Shakespeare’s plays “less remote than it does today” (Curtis 7). What is more, opera houses and theaters during the frontier West time period served as symbols of culture for established towns. Curtis writes, “The presence of an opera house showed that the community, though it might stand isolated on the Texas prairie, was civilized” (Curtis 7). The Texas opera houses purportedly performed Shakespeare’s tragedies which were “more popular than the comedies, which by comparison were seldom performed” because the tragedies “were seen as elevating and moral” (Curtis 7).

Thus, *King of Texas* functions successfully because the production works towards a unified adaptation vision. *King of Texas* does not enjoy any level of acclaim based

purely on its being a Western; here the genre enhances the essential *King Lear* elements but does not create those elements.

Broken Lance operates in a different mode than *King of Texas*. *Broken Lance* is a Western first and foremost. During the mid-20th century, many Hollywood actors began their acting careers starring in Westerns, while many other actors had an acting career based solely on the Western film genre. *Broken Lance* needs to be assessed and evaluated within the context of its production time and reception, not as a supposed adaptation of Shakespeare's great tragedy. *King of Texas*, however, is a fitting example of Shakespearean film adaptation, and a Western adaptation of *King Lear* which demonstrates essential *King Lear* elements, screenwriter intentionality, and audience reception.

CODA

A Thousand Acres: a successful King Lear adaptation

Jane Smiley admits in various interviews, including a conversation during the 1996 World Shakespeare Congress, that her novel, *A Thousand Acres*, is indeed her retelling of *King Lear*. As Caroline Cakebread writes, “A reaction against traditional readings of *King Lear*, Smiley’s novel seems to have been rooted from its inception in the process of ‘revision’” (Cakebread 85-86). By resituating the perspective of *King Lear* to Goneril’s viewpoint, Smiley engages and challenges Shakespeare’s text, whether critics agree with her individual retelling or not. In fact, James A. Schiff deems her retelling doubly successful. Schiff writes,

To my mind, of the many recent retellings, Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres* stands out as the most resounding success, as an independent story and as a retelling of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Texts that use the mythical method must not only deliver an interesting contemporary story, but simultaneously must make the reader ‘feel [as if] the chosen analogy has enriched his understanding of the primary material’ (White 90-91)...*A Thousand Acres*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, is successful in both regards. (Schiff 370)

Smiley’s text clearly challenges *Lear*, and academics clearly acknowledge and receive her text accordingly: this is a *Lear* adaptation that meets both the author intentionality and audience reception requirements. Smiley admits that part of her issue with Shakespeare’s play was its disregard of feminine concerns, something she sought to address in her novel. Schiff writes, “Smiley’s central objective then in rewriting *Lear* is

to provide a motivation for an understanding of the two older daughters; in so doing, she is creating a feminist version of *Lear*, giving a voice to those otherwise unheard and maligned heroines” (Schiff 370). Neil Nakadate writes of Smiley’s early discussion with her husband during a lunch at McDonald’s, about how she wanted to rework *King Lear*. Smiley recounts that the process was an exhausting one which she could only take on a couple of pages at a time. Nakadate cites an article where Smiley says that the writing was “laborious and exhausting” (Nakadate 163-164). Smiley continues, “Two pages and I was wiped out. I could hardly drag myself back to the typewriter” (Nakadate 164) Smiley also says that her decision to rework *King Lear* was rooted in her “longstanding dissatisfaction with an interpretation of *King Lear* that privileged the father’s needs over the daughters” (Nakadate 163). Clearly, throughout her authorship of *A Thousand Acres*, *King Lear* was prominently in Smiley’s mind, even if the novel includes many surprising, revelatory departures from the source play.

Thus, Smiley fills in gaps and spaces that Shakespeare left open and unanswered. Marina Leslie writes, “Smiley’s revision asks us to reconsider the assumption that Lear’s shame is groundless or out of all proportion; at the same time she blurs the lines between shame and guilt” (Leslie 40). Smiley’s mission, however, is not an unheard of one. Schiff writes, “Perhaps more than ever before, the refashioning of canonical texts has become a major literary enterprise, with both established and unknown authors trying their hands” (Schiff 367). The association with Shakespeare grants authors a level of acclaim as well. Schiff continues, “In addition, the contemporary writer can link his or her name to the earlier canonical writer or tale, perhaps appropriating some of its authority and success” (Schiff 368). Smiley’s novel demonstrates what a *King Lear*

adaptation with both intention and reception might be: a masterful reworking of the play, bearing both clear affinities and clear departures from the source. Its relationship to the tragedy is entirely different from the purported adaptations, *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*, genre films where such associations are unintentional rather than intended. The novel begs to be read and interpreted alongside *Lear*; the films, to be properly evaluated, must be taken on their own terms, freed from the overeager association with *Lear* suggested by critic Yvonne Griggs.

CONCLUSION

Although Douglas Lanier argues that “Shakespeare film in the nineties popularized the practice of resituating Shakespearean narrative in a new setting or time period,” whether popular or not, *House of Strangers* (1949) and *Broken Lance* (1954) enter into the Shakespearean film adaptation conversation and challenge the boundaries of acceptability (Lanier 106). The result of the conversation, however, is that these films lack some essential elements of Shakespearean film adaptation, including author/screenwriter intentionality and audience reception. To viewers of the time, these films did not have Shakespeare-inspired plots; the films merely represented central issues of family, power, relationships, and cultural values and considerations. The film noir gangster movie, *House of Strangers*, follows the demise of an Italian immigrant banker, and allows for conflict between the “old” and “new-world” ways; quick tempers, and unpleasant situations which may never be resolved, are prevalent. The western, *Broken Lance*, shows the conflict of the new western frontier with encroaching big business from the east; here, the threat of violence is taken and developed into a commonplace reaction to unwanted situations. Regardless of the setting, the relationship between the characters is what makes a story, adaptation, or interpretation relevant. The tragic patriarchs of these films, like their textual “forefather,” Lear, may be largely unlikable, but they show an element of devotion to a business, a way of life, and at least one child that endears them (in whatever small amount) to audiences. The preponderance of discussion as to the validity of these films as Shakespearean adaptations is a testament to the timeliness of Shakespeare’s subject matter and plots—but it misses the point. Brode writes that the combination of Shakespeare’s personality and overriding worldview “culminates in an

oeuvre, a body of work that, perceived from an overview, expresses a consistent, if gradually changing ‘take’ on life” (Brode 12). It is that take on life which audiences continue to excavate or locate centuries after Shakespeare wrote his plays—but this does not mean it is to be found everywhere. Yes, Shakespeare continues to inspire contemporary audiences; Lanier surmises that “in a postmodern age, when supposedly distinctions between highbrow, middlebrow, and popular culture have collapsed, the cultural prestige attached to Shakespeare, residual now though it may be, has undergone a recuperative transformation” (Lanier 104). Shakespeare’s contemporary recuperation is not sufficient evidence, however, to disregard the intentionality of filmmakers and the original audience’s reception of artifacts like *House of Strangers* and *Broken Lance*. In the final analysis, these supposed Shakespearean film adaptations of *King Lear* remain simple genre films, *noir* and *western*, not *Lear* adaptations.

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