

“England Never Did, Nor Never Shall, Lie at the Proud Foot of a Conqueror”:
Shakespearean Cinema and the (De)Construction of British Nationalism

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In March 1607, one of the earlier British trading enterprises, the East India Company, financed its third voyage to India under the command of Captain William Keeling. A portion of Keeling’s journal of the voyage was later published in 1849 as part of the Hakluyt Society’s *Narrative Voyages towards the North-west, 1496-1631*. Keeling recorded that while their ships were docked in Sierra Leone, the sailors entertained themselves by performing Shakespeare on board one of the ships, the *Hector*:

1607 September 5th

I sent the interpreter according to his desier aboard the Hector wher he brooke fast and came aboard me wher we gave the tragedie of Hamlett.

September 30

Captain Hawkins dined with me wher my companions acted Kinge Richard the Second.

September 31

I invited Captain Hawkins to a ffishe dinner and had Hamlet acted aboard me wch I p’mit to keep my people from idleness and unlawful games or sleep (Hakluyt 47).

Fifty years after its publication, Sidney Lee charged the publication’s editor, Thomas Rundall, for forging this portion of Keeling’s journal because these few pages appeared to be missing from the original journal. The debate over the alleged forgery lasted for nearly fifty years. In 1950, Sydney Race argued:

It is fantastic to think that in a crew of rude sailors, of the early years of the 17th century, could be found amateur players capable of producing Richard the Second one night and Hamlet the next, a task that no professional company would attempt nowadays. What opportunities would the men on board a small and overcrowded ship have of memorizing two of Shakespeare’s most difficult plays, what

¹ *King John*, Act 5 scene 7.

unnamed man of genius played the part of Hamlet, and who was the young sailor who took the part of Ophelia? Was the play performed with or without costumes, scenery and properties? [That was] indeed an unusually docile crew if in the heat of Sierra Leone they were prepared to listen to Hamlet rather than to indulge in ‘unlawfull games or sleepe’. Could the like be found nowadays? (345-6).

What I find interesting about Race’s comments is the fundamental assumption on which he bases his argument: that Shakespeare is—and always has been—the intellectual property of the educated and elite. Of course Shakespeare’s plays were just as accessible to the “baser” ordinary folk of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras as they were to the aristocracy. Race’s historical short-sightedness reflects the lofty status Shakespeare had achieved within high culture by the mid-twentieth century. William Foster echoed Race’s rhetoric later in 1950:

It is almost incredible that Keeling’s illiterate sailors could have produced, in however elementary a fashion, two of Shakespeare’s plays (especially the long and difficult *Hamlet*); but the conclusion I draw is, not that the passages describing them are forged, but that they have been misinterpreted. Neither Keeling nor Rundall mentioned Shakespeare at all in this connexion; and I am convinced that what the sailors performed were their own rough versions of the *stories* of Hamlet and Richard II—stories which were widely known and had doubtless been made still more popular by Shakespeare’s use of them. Such versions would have a minimum of dialogue (perhaps largely extempore) and a maximum of action; and they would be much on a par with the play presented by Bottom and his associates before Duke Theseus, as portrayed in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (415).

Foster’s assertion that the sailors’ Shakespearean adaptations “would have a minimum of dialogue” and a “maximum of action” reflects another deeply entrenched attitude of the mid-twentieth century: that Shakespeare’s language what constitutes him as “high culture.” On the flip side of that argument is the assumption that Shakespeare appeals to the masses because of his play’s interesting narratives. The lay theatre patron better accesses Shakespeare when the language is downplayed and the action and spectacle are emphasized. This illustrates an interesting paradox, which Ania Loomba articulates: “Archival differences are submerged in a

common understanding that lowly sailors cannot perform the real Shakespeare. And yet, it is Shakespeare's use of stories already in circulation that prompts the sailors to enact his plays. Shakespeare is simultaneously both popular and aristocratic—he embodies 'national' culture" (113).

Of course, attitudes toward Shakespeare like those expressed by Race and Foster pre-date the twentieth century. Katherine Eggert reports that in 1850 a reviewer for the Boston publication *Literary World* asserted that Americans would never truly be able to understand Shakespeare's language without spectacle and literalism. The reviewer wrote that "the story must be told as to children; every circumstance made out and presented with a literal fidelity instead of having it suggested that 'the flask is red with wine,' we must be informed that there is 'just one point and a half in the bottle there upon that table which you see standing in the middle of the stage' " (qtd. in Eggert 72). The reviewer goes on to suggest that Americans are much more suited for "pantomime, and the black-featured minstrelsy of Christy" (qtd. in Eggert 72). Like Race and Foster, this anonymous reviewer also assigns Shakespeare's language the status of high art, thereby rendering it beyond the comprehension of common people. But the reviewer's comments also reflect an overtly nationalized—and racialized—argument about Shakespeare's status: that Shakespeare's plays are inherently and essentially British and, therefore, can only be accessed appropriately by the British. As Eggert points out, the reviewer's remarks also assign a value to American theatre and culture. She states that the reviewer positions American culture in "a no man's land, poised as it is between the equally foreign influences of both 'low' African-American and 'high' European culture" (72).

Benedict Anderson's theories explain the significance of Foster, Race and the Boston

writer's attitudes towards Shakespeare. Anderson argues that the nation-state is an imagined community, meaning that nations imagine themselves into existence. In this process of imagining, nations must negotiate what it means to belong to the community. Although members of a single nation could potentially be divided against one another by differences in class, race, gender, etc., the nation-state must somehow invite these groups of people to recognize themselves as a singular body within a common culture and to see themselves as somehow different from other cultures and communities. This sense of belonging to a community is manufactured through systems of language, education, and mass communication—or, I would add, popular culture. Ever since the seventeenth century, Shakespeare's plays have been used in all three of these mediums to construct a sense of British national identity. Shakespeare must be constructed as accessible to the lower classes through narrative and spectacle, as Foster and Race suggested, in order to be a universal and therefore unifying cultural force. However, Shakespeare cannot be too accessible or else he would cease to be essentially British. For this reason, Shakespeare is designated as high art, as the property of the elite, and as beyond American comprehension—as the Boston reviewer intimated. Shakespeare must remain exclusive and incomprehensible to all but the elect few in order to assert the superiority of the British culture above all other cultures.²

Because it is arguably the definitive medium for mass communication in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the cinema would initially appear to be an ideal medium for the

² For a deeper discussion of the ways in which Shakespeare has been constructed to serve various ideological and political goals, I would refer the reader to work of cultural materialists such as Gary Taylor in *Reinventing Shakespeare*, Michael Bristol in *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare*, and Jean Marsden in *The Appropriation of Shakespeare*.

construction of a British national identity—especially Shakespearean cinema. Of course, Shakespearean cinema has been effectively used for this purpose, as I will prove with my discussion of Laurence Olivier’s 1944 version of *Henry V*. However, Shakespearean films produced in the last fifteen years by both British and non-British entities have also worked against these nationalist goals. As I will demonstrate in this paper, recent Shakespearean films have consciously sought to disavow Shakespeare’s “Britishness.” I will argue that Shakespearean cinema has diminished Shakespeare’s use-value as a tool for imagining the British nation-state because it has deconstructed Shakespeare’s status as British high culture.

The Successful Construction of the British Nation-State in Olivier’s *Henry V* (1944)

Olivier’s *Henry V* was certainly not the first cinematic adaptation of the Bard’s work. According to the Internet Movie Database, the earliest recorded film performance of a Shakespeare play was *King John* in 1899, just five years after the invention of film. Over ninety-five Shakespearean adaptations were made during the Silent Era. A number of the films were produced in non-English speaking countries such as India, Germany, Italy, and France (online). However, Shakespearean films after the advent of sound in 1929 were not entirely successful. Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V* transformed the way Shakespeare was dramatized on the big screen. In the audio commentary for the 1999 Criterion release of *Henry V* on DVD, film historian Bruce Eger points out:

Henry V was the first successful screen adaptation of a Shakespeare play. Up until its release, film adaptations of Shakespeare had succeeded neither as Shakespeare nor as films. Olivier’s was the first to succeed on both counts. He did this with an approach that was different from any other before him. Those who came before, such as George Cukor with *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), had created works that chafed against the original plays, awkwardly stuffing theatre

onto the movie screen. Olivier, by contrast, revelled in Henry's theatrical origins while also using the strongest elements of cinema.

However, Olivier had deeper motivations for making *Henry V* besides merely adapting Shakespeare for the screen. *Henry V* was consciously produced as a British propaganda film during the height of World War II, which is why this film is especially relevant to a discussion of Shakespearean cinema and British nationalism.

Henry V seemed an obvious choice as a propaganda film for a number of reasons. The most obvious reason was that Shakespeare was regarded as a symbol of the cultural superiority of the British nation's rich literary heritage, as has previously been established in this paper. Shakespeare's name alone could automatically evoke a sense of national pride. Another less obvious reason Olivier and the producers selected *Henry V* as a vehicle for the representation of their nationalistic vision was because the play had originally been used to those ends in Shakespeare's time. The history play was an extremely popular genre during the 1590s because, as Derek Cohen explains, the Elizabethans perceived the retelling of history as "a matter of urgent national interest, regarded both as a means of preserving peace and political stability and as a matter of national self-definition" (294). After years of civil war and attacks from neighboring countries, the Elizabethans began to feel a sense that it was a time of national stability and therefore a time to reflect upon the achievements of the past. The history play was an ideal for this purpose. Shakespeare's *Henry V* perfectly embodied the ideal history play. While *Henry V* is far too complex to be reduced to the label "propaganda," the play is probably one of the most jingoistic of all Shakespeare's history plays from this era. After all, the play celebrates the conquests of a British monarch who, if he had lived a few months longer, would have been king of both England and France. Olivier and his co-screenwriter Alan Dent

recognized that they could easily highlight *Henry V*'s clearly nationalist undertones for their wartime audience.

The British government did not initially understand how a film about the victories of a medieval king could become an effective propaganda tool and they initially declined to finance it. However, as the course of the war changed direction in 1943, the Ministry of Information began to see its value. Bruce Eder explains:

The war had entered a new phase. Although there were still terrible German air attacks, it was clear these weren't going to shatter the island nation. Additionally, with the Americans now fully in the war and some victories under the belts of the Allies on the battlefield, it was clear that at some point there was going to be an invasion of the continent. And it now seemed that retelling a story of England's last successful invasion of the continent had some virtues. "We did it once in an even more mismatched battle and we can do it again" was the underlying message of this film *Henry V*.

Besides foreshadowing the eventual invasion of Normandy, *Henry V* had numerous other uncanny parallels to wartime England. Just as the medieval French army had superior armor and weaponry—which ironically led to its downfall—the Germans possessed superior tanks and submarines. Also, when King Henry refused to give himself up for a ransom, the British would have been reminded of King George VI's refusal to flee with his family from London during the Battle of Britain and the invasion of England. Lastly, although it was set in medieval times, *Henry V* portrayed a few elements of democratic warfare: Henry fights alongside his men, disguises himself and talks to the soldiers personally the night before battle, and the play focuses for a moment on the sacrifice of the young boys in the battle. Such subtle elements would have worked to draw wartime audiences into the film.

Olivier also deliberately omitted aspects of the play which did not serve his propagandistic purposes. Olivier cut out all references to Scotland as a potential threat to

English stability as it could have alienated the Scottish allies. He also removed the references to Thomas Grey, Richard Earl, and Henry Scroop's treason in order to downplay any sense of disunity among the English troops. Olivier also eliminated any parts of the play that would have offended twentieth century sensibilities, such as Henry's blood-thirsty threats to the people of Harfleur and Henry's comment to Katherine that she must "needs prove a good soldier-breeder" (5.2).

Olivier used comedy in order to downplay the more sinister elements of Shakespeare's play. For example, the opening scene between the two clerics underscores the self-serving motivations behind the church's plan to encourage Henry's invasion of France. The clerics object to a new bill which would strip the church of much of its power and wealth. They decide to encourage Henry to wage war for the crown of France to keep him from passing the bill and to generate more income for the church through France's conquest. This scene not only casts the Catholic church's political role in a negative light, it questions whether Henry's motives for waging war are truly "righteous." The cynicism of this scene would have gone against the grain of his project to unify Britain and to imbue England with a sense of national pride. So, Olivier used humor to undercut this scene's potentially darker elements. Felix Aylmer portrays the Archbishop of Canterbury as a sort of befuddled old man. Robert Helpmann plays the role of the Bishop of Ely with a slapstick, Stan Laurel approach. The performances are deliberately flawed and they are frequently interrupted by the raucous Elizabethan audience who is watching them perform live.³ Olivier further distracts his audience from the gravity of the scene with the

³ For readers who have not yet seen Laurence Olivier's *Henry V*, I should point out that the film begins as a documentary-like recreation of what an Elizabethan performance of *Henry V* might have looked like and, after the scene in which Henry decides to embark on war, it

clerics by following the two actors as they exit backstage. As the actors hurriedly prepare for the next scene, the audience soon forgets the serious implications of the scene they have just witnessed.

Beyond the film's content, Olivier also employed the formal elements of cinema—specifically music, cinematography, and production design—to draw audiences to his nationalistic vision. One unique aspect of *Henry V* was that it was the first Shakespearean film to be shot in color. Technicolor had developed its two-strip color process by the late 1920s and the three-strip process by the end of the 1930s, but because color-sensitive film stock was so expensive, the majority of films continued to be made in black and white.⁴ Only rare big-budget, A-grade studio releases such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) were shot in color during this time period. In an era of wartime rationing and restraint, Olivier's choice to film *Henry V* in Technicolor was a bold one. However, he recognized that filming *Henry V* in color would signal to viewers that this was a film of epic proportions and that it had very high production values. Color was a great way to lure the audiences into the theater and hold them captive for the duration of the film.

One of the most interesting if not idiosyncratic aspects of the film is Olivier's production design, particularly for the French courts. Olivier clearly intended for the medieval French to represent the Germans of World War II and his design concept for the French courts clearly

dissolves into a cinematic production of the play. *Henry V* dissolves back into an Elizabethan production again at the end of the film during the Chorus's final speech.

⁴ The two-strip color process was so named because Technicolor's original process bonded two strips of film together, one red and one green, to create a color effect. The later three-strip color process bonded together three strips of film—red, green, and blue.

reflect his attempt to code the French as “the other.” Olivier told his production designer that the scenes in France had to feel like they were distinctly medieval and that they should work to achieve this effect by mimicking the general composition and settings of fourteenth century paintings. He suggested that his designers should use Duc de Berry’s illuminated manuscript *The Book of Hours* as inspiration. Consequently, several scenes from the film appear to be taken directly from *The Book of Hours*. Bruce Eger describes how this bizarre effect was created in the film:

Medieval painting, including the images of illuminated manuscripts, have no feeling of perspective. They are distinctly two-dimensional with flat backgrounds. And the size relationships between people and objects is often distorted. Nobody was quite sure whether film—especially Technicolor film—could be made to mimic this quality. It meant, among other matters, that in lighting the sets and choosing the camera angles, there could be no trace of shadows, because shadows enforce the illusion of depth and depth of field or perspective was precisely what was not wanted for the scenes in the French court. . . . [The production designers] were guided in their work by the conventions of medieval painting in one other major respect: the use of bright colors to emphasize certain parts of an image. . . . This is very primitive but, shall we say, direct and aggressive use of Technicolor. It’s also a use of Technicolor film to achieve effects that were half a millenium removed from the advent of motion pictures.

While the flatness and bright colors of these sequences are somewhat off-putting by contemporary standards, the decision to depict the French scenes as medieval paintings serves an important ideological function for the film. The French courts are portrayed as flat and lacking depth in order to alienate the audience from the French. The British courts are full of movement and have an almost documentary-like realism but the members of the French court, by contrast, appear as frozen and stylized as an illuminated manuscript. Olivier’s intention was that audiences would identify with the British and feel disconnected from the French.

Olivier’s nationalistic project was a clear success. Not only was the film well received

by most of the Shakespearean critics of the time, but it was very successful in the box office as well. An estimated two million people had seen *Henry V* within six months after it opened in England. That figure is especially impressive when one considers that England only had a population of 40 million people at the time of the film's release and that a large portion those people were serving in the army overseas (Eger). *Henry V* clearly touched a cultural nerve for the British people during the final chapter of the war. This strong sense of British nationalism and unity prevailed in the years following World War II. This was due in part to projects like *Henry V* which had helped to imagine the British nation-state into existence. Olivier invoked a collective memory of an undisputed national past, bonding what would otherwise be disparate groups of people under a common national banner.

Shakespearean Film in the “Branagh Era” and the Deconstruction of British Nationalism

The success of *Henry V* initiated a classical era in the production of Shakespearean cinema. Olivier himself went on to direct and act in several more Shakespearean adaptations, most notably *Hamlet* (1948) which received several Oscars, including the award for Best Picture. Other non-British directors also began to adapt Shakespeare's plays for the screen. Orson Welles directed *Macbeth* (1948), *Othello* (1952), and *Chimes at Midnight* (1965), which featured a compilation of scenes about John Falstaff from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays. Franco Zeffirelli directed *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968). Most of these productions were traditional Shakespearean adaptations modeled after the Olivier's cinematic template.

Film historian Kenneth Rothwell notes that after Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971)

Shakespeare almost completely disappeared from mainstream film for nearly twenty years (246). However, the tremendous critical and financial success of Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) sparked a sudden interest in Shakespearean cinema. Since 1989, a countless number of Shakespeare adaptations have graced the screens. However, Shakespearean cinema in what Rothwell refers to as "the Branagh Era" is markedly distinct from the films of the Olivier Era—in both tone and style.

One of the key distinctions of the recent Shakespearean productions is that they seem to resist the nationalistic ideologies of the earlier films. In his book *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain*, Andrew Higson discusses how Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities relates to film. He states:

Individual films will often serve to represent the nation to itself as a nation. Inserted into the general framework of the cinematic experience, such films will construct imaginary bonds which work to hold the peoples of a nation together as a community by dramatizing their current fears, anxieties, conceits, pleasures, and aspirations. . . . Of course, this work is never completely achieved: all film texts are the site of ideological tensions, audiences may read a text against the grain, other more critical films exist which serve to challenge the nationalizing myths found in the most resolutely patriotic films (7).

The screen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in the last fifteen years indeed challenge the nationalizing myths of the British nation-state which were infused in films such as Olivier's *Henry V*. I will demonstrate this by briefly examining how three contemporary Shakespearean adaptations—Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), and Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995)—have attempted to downplay Shakespeare's essential "Britishness".

One way that contemporary Shakespeare adaptations mute the Bard's inherent Britishness is to neutralize the political potency of his works. Olivier's *Henry V* is hardly

politically ambiguous; his film clearly glorifies war and celebrates the king as a historical British hero. By contrast, Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* is decidedly more elusive, simultaneously depicting the king as barbaric and blood-thirsty yet sympathetic and heroic. In an insightful essay about Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V*, Donald Hedrick argues that Branagh's film is neither anti- nor pro-war. Hedrick demonstrates how Branagh uses mud as a signifier to whitewash both the war and the character of the king. He states: "The film implies that if war has a necessary dark or muddy side, the character of King Henry is thereby exonerated; if the king has his own dark side, on the other hand, the character of war is exonerated. We arrive, then at a knotted ambiguity in which one implied critique or political interrogation is paired up with a different one, a paring which effectively cancels out both of them" (47). He argues that the film deliberately promotes the inherent ambiguity of the play, but not to the same end. Whereas Shakespeare deeply questions the king's character and his motivations for war, Branagh maintains "a conservative rather than critical ambivalence, progressive merely in the weakest sense of its openness toward some undecidability, but undecidability here really an alibi for tactical indecision" (49). Hedrick implies that Branagh gives equal justification to a reading of the film as anti- or pro-war so that he won't alienate paying audience members from either side of the political spectrum, thus securing his film's American marketability.

Another way that contemporary Shakespearean filmmakers disavow themselves of the ideology of the British nation-state is to deconstruct Shakespeare's status as an icon of high culture. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* was consciously made with this purpose in mind. Luhrmann discusses his reasons for making *Romeo + Juliet* in an interview featured on the DVD release of the film:

What we were doing was absolutely disregarding the accumulation of what I call “Club Shakespeare,” which dates back to the Victorian period. . . . We just wanted to get it back to the kind of violent, direct, passionate, musical, free, energetic, bawdy, savage, rambunctious storytelling that it was when this author brought it to the stage. . . . In a city of 400,000 people—that’s London—he [Shakespeare] had to get an audience of 4,000 mostly drunk, yelling, screaming ticket buyers into the theater every day. . . . So, Shakespeare firstly had to tell his story in such an aggressive, sexy, noisy, rambunctious way that he could shut them up and, at the same time, reach out and touch every kind of person from every kind of background.

Luhrmann’s film clearly reflects his revisionist views about Shakespeare. Set in contemporary California, Luhrman’s film re-contextualizes the antiquated Elizabethan elements of *Romeo and Juliet* into more accessible, modern forms. The play’s opening prologue takes the form of a news broadcast and as headlines in newspapers and magazines. The billboards on Verona Beach advertise their products using phrases from Shakespearean plays, such as “add more fuel to your fire” from *Henry VI, Part III* 5.4. The characters carry guns rather than swords and allude to their “long swords” and “daggers” as though these labels referred to the gun’s make and model. Queen Mab becomes a hallucinatory drug which Romeo ingests before he crashes the Capulet party. Luhrman takes an irreverent, Derrida-esque delight in subverting Shakespearean culture by pairing it with popular culture. Michael Anderegg explains the curious effect of these bizarre juxtapositions. He states that *Romeo + Juliet* is intended to be

at once highbrow and lowbrow, a sign of culture and a vehicle for puncturing cultural pretension. . . . At first glance, Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* could be mistaken for yet another (mis)appropriation of Shakespeare’s play for purposes of parody or even burlesque, a hip (hop?) retelling aimed at an irredeemably low-brow audience of clueless teenagers inhabiting an intellectually bankrupt culture. [Luhrmann] simultaneously encourages and undermines such a reading. Through the film, Luhrmann sets up expectations and then subverts them, freely manipulating past, present, and future time, wedding richly poetic language to pop-culture imagery, theatre to film, employing cinematographic and editing styles that evoke both MTV and the “historical” avant-garde (57-8).

Luhrman de-Britishizes Shakespeare by removing what Anderegg calls his “otherness,” his foreignness—those elements which could potentially alienate Shakespeare from the common people. However, similar to Branagh’s purpose in neutralizing the British politics of *Henry V*, Luhrmann’s end goal in transforming Shakespeare’s plays from high art into base entertainment is to merely make him accessible—and therefore marketable—to a paying audience.

The final method by which contemporary Shakespearean adaptations resist being constructed as solely British is to downplay Shakespeare’s language. Shakespeare is defined as “British” largely because of the complexity of his language. As such, adaptations which privilege Shakespeare’s language before plot and spectacle are frequently defined as British. In a review of Trevor Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* (1996), Nicholas R. Jones stated: “Nunn’s film, on the face of it, steers clear of the ‘cutting-edge’: its style is verbal, meditative and restrained—in short, ‘British’ ” (online). By that same token, Shakespearean films which privilege spectacle and plot are often decried as American, just as the Boston reviewer in 1850 had suggested. Richard Loncraine’s *Richard III* reflects the tension between the more theatrical British mode and the cinematic American mode of representing Shakespeare. On the one hand, *Richard III* starred some of the most prestigious Shakespearean actors of Britain—Ian McKellen and Nigel Hawthorne. On the other hand, *LA Times* movie critic David Gritten reports:

Here on the set of *Richard III*, a film adaptation of one of the world’s best known plays starring a bunch of distinguished classical actors, it comes as a surprise that everyone is trying to play down the S-word. The S-word? That stands for “Shakespeare.” He’s the guy who wrote *Richard III* some four hundred years ago, in case you weren’t quite sure. In truth, the people behind *Richard III*. . . are hoping to attract those very people who aren’t quite sure of the film’s provenance. “I’m encouraging everyone working on this film not to think of it as Shakespeare,” says director Richard Loncraine. “It’s a terrific story, and who wrote it is irrelevant.” / “We’re trying to make the most accessible Shakespeare

film ever made,” says producer Lisa Katselas Pare (qtd. in Boose 11).

Loncraine and Pare’s comments suggest that merely invoking Shakespeare’s name could be a serious marketing liability.⁵ *Richard III* succeeds in its attempts to divest itself of Shakespeare as much as possible—particularly his language. The first word of Shakespearean dialogue occurs nine and a half minutes into the film. The nine minute preface is purely visual, with the exception of a few explanatory titles. The preface introduces all the major characters and their relationship to each other. Richard, for example, blasts through Henry VI’s library in a tank and shoots both the monarch and his son in the forehead in cold blood. This immediately establishes Richard as a blood-thirsty, heartless villain. James Loehlin writes that Loncraine’s film employs a “primarily visual method of story-telling. Scenes and even speeches are broken down and intercut into short, clear sequences whose impact is supported by establishing shots, music and visual paraphrases: the words serve to reinforce or complicate a visual meaning that precedes them” (68). In Shakespeare’s original play, most of the murders are committed offstage, but Loncraine deliberately depicts the violent murders on the screen in order to enhance their brutality and, by extension, Richard’s brutality. Loncraine’s adaptation also draws upon extra-filmic nuances to make the play more accessible to a contemporary audience. Loncraine visually draws parallels between Richard and Hitler: the costumes are reminiscent of the Third Reich

⁵ As a side note, Loncraine and Pare’s comments are strangely reminiscent of the urban legend which is circulated among theatre folk about Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth*. Whenever a given company is going to perform the play, all actors and stage crew are supposedly forbidden to say the name “Macbeth” at any time except as part of their assigned lines. Instead, they refer to Macbeth as the “Scottish king” or to the play as “the Scottish tragedy.” Theatre people believe that stating Macbeth’s name could result in terrible tragedy during the performance such as injury or even death. If an actor accidentally slips and mentions the M-word, he or she must perform an “unjinxing” ritual. Perhaps film crews should adopt a similar policy for the name “Shakespeare.”

uniforms and the film echoes some of the scenes from Riefenstahl's *Triumph of Will* (1934). All of these elements are designed to help the viewer make sense of the film's meaning. The film's meaning, therefore, is constructed not through Shakespeare's dialogue, but primarily through the elements of the cinema: the visuals, music, and production design.

The Americanization-Internationalization of Shakespeare

Clearly, contemporary productions of Shakespearean films by British and non-British entities—*Romeo + Juliet* is an Australian film—are consciously removing all traces of Shakespeare's inherent Britishness or "otherness" from their adaptations. Katherine Eggert comments on this phenomenon:

Whether they applaud or decry the democratization of Shakespeare in contemporary popular culture, critics generally agree that Shakespeare without Shakespeare, stripped as much as possible of Shakespearean language and translated into American popular idiom, has triumphed. . . . While Shakespearean language is still devalued by both American producers and audiences, Shakespeare productions that cater to an American taste for spectacle and distaste for dialogue are now considered to be the superior ones. One might well expect, then, that British Shakespeare films would be the last bastion of script-based Shakespeare, holding the fort against anti-high-culture, dumbed-down spectacles. But in what we might term the post-postcolonial relation in which America and Britain now find themselves—one in which, culturally and economically speaking, the colonizer is now the colonized—British producers of Shakespeare films are to be found not fending off the barbarians at the gates, but rather absorbing and repeating the customs of the new overloads (74-5).

There are several reasons why Shakespeare has become Americanized, but I believe Andrew Higson's discussion of the cinema's role in the construction of imagined communities provides the best explanation.

To review, nation-states imagine themselves into existence by negotiating what it means to belong to the community. The cinema is one of the catalysts through which a wide variety of

potentially antagonistic groups can somehow come to view themselves as a singular body within a common culture. One way the cinema manufactures this sense of belonging is by defining the members of the nation-state as essentially different from the members of other nation-states. National cinemas “can also be presented in the international arena as part of a strategy of cultural and economic resistance, a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood’s international domination” (Higson 8).

The problem is that these national film industries are established within a capitalist system. Films cost a tremendous amount of money to produce. The average Hollywood feature costs \$102.9 million (“Average” online). Because filmmaking is such an expensive and financially risky venture, each film needs to reach as many different demographics as possible. A larger audience base is the only way to ensure that the filmmakers will recoup their production costs and make a profit. Filmmakers in most countries cannot recoup their costs if they are marketed solely to their own nations.⁶ Films must address international audiences in order to increase their marketability. Higson explains that “in crossing national borders, [national cinemas] begin to imagine the social on an international scale. The maintenance of national boundaries is thus increasingly at odds with the potential of the mass media to cross national boundaries and create new, multidimensional, even global, imaginative territories and cultural spaces” (8). British cinema is no exception.

American national cinema—more commonly referred to as “Hollywood”—recognized

⁶ Because of their large populations, America and India are the only exceptions to this rule. These countries can easily recoup their costs by marketing to their national audience. This is one of the factors which led to America’s rise to “world domination.” Incidentally, India’s own national film industry, “Baliwood,” is the most prolific national film industry in the world, producing an average of 600 films per year.

the need for an international audience as early as 1915. To a greater degree of success than any other national cinema, the American film industry has most easily represented itself as international. As I've demonstrated extensively in other projects, Hollywood has also employed aggressive marketing techniques and trade legislation ever since 1915 to ensure its virtual omnipresence in all foreign markets. For that matter, American cinema has been integrated into the national consciousness of these foreign markets for many years. Thomas Elsaesser has stated: "Hollywood can hardly be conceived. . . as totally other, since so much of any nation's film culture is implicitly 'Hollywood' " (166). Because England and America share a common language, British cinema is particularly prone to produce films tailored for an American (Hollywood) diet. Duncan Petrie has argued that "there is no British cinema, there is only British input into international (American) cinema" (613) because the few British films that are made are almost solely financed by Hollywood studios. The irony that this bizarre paradox brings us to is that "if Hollywood constitutes the international standard, then in a sense, a distinctive national film production is by definition non-standard and marginal. . . One implication of this scenario is that, for a cinema to be nationally popular, it must paradoxically also be international in scope, that is to say, it must work with Hollywood's international standards" (Higson 9).

In short, the cinema has caused Shakespeare's plays to become a site for the subversion and resistance of the ideologies of the British nation-state. If Shakespearean New Wave filmmakers such as Branagh, Lurhmann, and Loncraine continue to democratize and universalize Shakespeare's plays, the Bard will entirely cease to belong to a select group of people such as the "elite," or the "British," or perhaps even the Elizabethans. Shakespeare's plays will become

the ideological property of a mass, globalized imagined community.

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