



## **‘An interwoven pattern of history and legend’: Shakespeare’s *Richard III* on Film**

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It is now generally acknowledged that Shakespeare’s history of *Richard III* is not historically accurate; in fact, we might fairly call it fictitious. Nevertheless, the play has become inextricably linked to impressions of the history of England. As Stuart Hampton-Reeves has written, Shakespeare’s English history plays have been seen as England’s, or perhaps more problematically, Britain’s, ‘national epic’, creating a sense of ‘national consciousness’ (Hampton-Reeves 229). The melding of fact and fiction can be seen in both theatre and film productions of *Richard III*. Bill Alexander’s 1984 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company stated that the play is largely based on fact, whereas Laurence Olivier’s 1955 film acknowledged the role of fiction within the narrative. However, in spite of such attempts to reference fact or fiction, Maria Jones has written that ‘the work of performance touches the social life of Shakespeare’s scripts’ (Jones 4). In this, Jones implies that the historical founding moment of the script is always present in performance regardless of whether or not it is acknowledged. Jones takes this historicist approach towards the recurring presence of Shakespeare’s historical context and culture and applies it to modern performances. As an apparent extension of this argument, Judith Buchanan states that the historicising of film productions is ‘one of the tasks of the critic’ (Buchanan 9). Therefore, we can assume that, should the two approaches merge together, the critic of Shakespearean performance should historicise both Shakespeare’s and the production’s context. However, this paper will challenge the notion that we should always find Shakespeare’s context within modern productions of his history plays. The modern development of film technology places it beyond the scope of Shakespeare’s early-modern culture; rather than referencing Shakespeare’s history, the films are more inclined to reference their own genre’s history as, for example, James Loehlin has written.

I will argue that, while the appropriations of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* in question here (the 1955 Olivier film and the 1995 Richard Loncraine production) are successful as pieces of enjoyable, self-contained drama, they do not access or make use of the play’s historical contexts. In fact, they either deliberately place themselves apart from that history or access new narratives, filmic or historical, unavailable to Shakespeare. In doing this these films do indeed become ‘interwoven patterns of history and legend’.<sup>1</sup> The main focus of my paper will be the films by Olivier and Loncraine; however, I will also discuss the RSC’s 2006 stage production of the *Henry VI* trilogy directed by Michael Boyd. Although Boyd’s theatrical production does not include a staging of *Richard III* at present, a discussion of his productions of *Henry VI* is relevant in this paper because it demonstrates how placing *Richard III* in its tetralogical context enables the pull of history to be felt.

Olivier's 1955 production opens with an extra-textual introduction which stresses the aspect of legend in the story of Richard III. Indeed, the film opens with the line which I have used for the title of this paper and goes on to discuss the positive presence and influence of legends in world history, stating:

The history of the world, like letters without poetry, flowers without perfume, or thought without imagination, would be a dry matter indeed without its legends, and many of these, though scorned by proof a hundred times seem worth preserving for their own familiar sakes.

The presence of this text, which is written in such a poetic manner, immediately suggests that the film is fictional and that there will not be a realistic historical setting or a historically accurate narrative. This is further emphasised after the *Dramatis Personae*: the beginning of the play is heralded with 'now begins one of the most famous, and at the same time, the most infamous of the legends that are attached to THE CROWN OF ENGLAND'. This encourages the audience to view the film as fiction from the outset thus characterising the film and (by extension) the historical Richard as myth. This in turn suggests a mythical epic, much in the vein of King Arthur or Robin Hood stories and perhaps even increases the imaginative power of the film because it is not constrained by specific time and setting concerns as the Loncraine film is. However, encouraging audiences to view the film imaginatively arguably removes the film from factual relevance or contextualisation. The distancing of the film from both the context in which it was written and the context of the history it writes about is further encouraged through the use of a unitary studio set. Although scholars have argued that the film set allows the film to mimic Elizabethan practices in the fluidity and flexibility of scene changes (Richmond 59), it is the case in the Olivier film that, along with the costuming, the set in fact creates an atmosphere of fairy-tale Medievalism rather than a realistic Elizabethan setting, thus further placing the film outside historical narratives. A result of setting the film in a mythical framework is that it focuses full attention on the character of Richard, and the audience is not encouraged to draw parallels with anything either contemporary or historical in the Olivier film.

Olivier's use of Colley Cibber's script, which makes significant alterations and cuts the character of Margaret completely, further removes the play from its historical narrative. During the last century the play was increasingly performed as a part of a cycle, in the context of the tetralogy, as the culmination of the Wars of the Roses (Hampton-Reeves 230), thus reinstating the place and power of the role of Margaret. This is especially true now with a number of recent high profile cycle productions, such as Northern Broadsides' touring production (2006) and Boyd's at Stratford (2006 – 2008). By cutting the character of Margaret, as Olivier and Loncraine do, the function of the play as a providential conclusion to a large cycle of plays back to *Richard II* is lost. As a consequence the importance of the play as a propaganda tool for Elizabeth I is also lost, therefore the films arguably lose the connection to the past that allows for Jones's 'pull of history' to be felt.<sup>2</sup> Boyd's *Henry*s were clearly intended to be viewed as an historical cycle: the 2006 productions are being played as part of the Complete Works season, under a general title of 'The Histories'. The audience is therefore immediately asked to consider the plays as history. The productions are played on a bare thrust stage in medieval-style costumes which gives a sense of history being played out in front of the audience. Because the cycle comprises three full productions of the *Henry VI* trilogy rather than an adaptation, the focus is on the historical build up to the Wars of the Roses and, consequently, the full

story and impact of characters such as Joan la Pucelle and Queen Margaret is seen. The frequent repetition of claims to the throne, through whose line, and the usurpation of Richard II, emphasises the factual history and the productions act as a chronicle. Mortimer wears a paper crown throughout his discussion with York in *Part One* (II.5), in which York and the audience are acquainted with the Yorkists' claim. The crown suggests the idea of kingship and foreshadows York's later humiliation by Margaret in *Part Three* (I.4). After his encounter with Mortimer, in *Part Two* York reinforces the claim by using rocks to draw the family tree across the stage in order to help Warwick and Salisbury understand it: the visual effect reinforces the spoken claims. On a superficial level, staging the tetralogy offers the audience a chance to be familiar with who each character is in *Richard III*, but it also places the final play in context, both theatrically and historically. Boyd's theatrical production uses all four of Shakespeare's scripts and characters to place the story within their context, and to perform them as medieval history, consequently granting them a pull of history.

The films work differently, however. That Olivier used a text other than Shakespeare's refutes Jones' argument of the historical pull to Shakespeare's cultural context (Salmon). Hugh Richmond sets Cibber's script and Olivier's film apart from Elizabethan-style productions, stating that it was only 'the breaking of [Olivier's] domination...which...could open up the option of a truly Shakespearian rendering' (Richmond 64). In his emphasis on the value of Shakespearian productions, Richmond historicises the play (63). However, when he does draw attention to more recent theatrical productions which have used Shakespeare's text, Richmond highlights how critics disliked the productions because of their familiarity with a 'ready-made Richard III' which was based on Olivier's performance of the Cibber script (64-66).

Although also based on a screenplay that is arguably not Shakespeare (Ian McKellen states that 'We were not making a film of the play, we were making a film of a screenplay from the play' - quoted in Hatchuel 127), the Loncraine film differs greatly from the Olivier. The setting of the Loncraine production is much more recognisable to a twenty-first century audience, especially an English audience. Filmed on location around England, the sets include Brighton pavilion, London's St. Pancras station, and Battersea Power Station. Costuming, vehicles, interior detail and general evocation of atmosphere place the film firmly in the 1930s (Hopkins 52). Consequently, McKellen's Richard III is presented as a 'Hitler' figure: the 1930s setting, combined with Richard and his cohorts' military costumes and his own little moustache, suggest this parallel. H.R. Coursen gives detailed examples of these parallels (105) and, further, Peter Donaldson provides more specific accounts of the links between McKellen's Richard and Hitler, stating that 'the use of the microphone and the sudden arrest of enemies - or even witnesses - evoke Hitler' (Donaldson 248) and highlighting how the sets of the film suggest other darker parallels; notably reading the bathhouse of the tower, in which Clarence is seen bathing before he is murdered, as reminiscent of gas-chambers at Auschwitz (251). McKellen's Richard is a violent military man: the audience's first encounter with him presents him as such. This takes place during the extratextual opening scene: here, a tank blasts through the walls of a private library; soldiers scuttle around it as a single, gas-masked face comes forward to shoot the man in shirt-sleeves who had been the single occupant of the room. This is ostensibly Henry VI, with the gas-masked face, complete with menacing Darth Vader-like breathing, belonging to Richard, Duke of Gloucester. It has been argued that the heavy breathing of this moment presents the scene from the perspective of Richard: the breathing the audience hears being what he hears inside

his mask (Hopkins 49). This suggests that the audience is brought into a kind of intimacy and therefore possibly sympathy with his character from the earliest point of the film. However, contrary to this argument for intimacy between Richard and viewer, this scene is shocking and frightening and Richard is presented as being the creator of, and therefore central to, that fear. In fact this moment actually distances the audience from Richard through horror at the events of the scene.

The reference to *Star Wars* in this brief account of the opening scene is not misplaced here because Loncraine's *Richard III* is more concerned with referencing early twentieth-century film than any real history of Richard III. Perhaps this is intended to appeal to a wider, possibly a younger, audience. However it is also a result of the play being treated as a thrilling story rather than history or even Shakespeare: it is telling that in the featurette extra on the DVD edition McKellen states that his film is more *Godfather* than *Batman*, thus speaking to a contemporary film audience rather than a theatre or play-reading audience. The film is placed in a contemporary film-history context rather than a historical play-history context. Loehlin writes extensively on the use of heritage costume drama and gangster film conventions, particularly seeing references to James Cagney's *White Heat* in the final moments of both films (Loehlin 76). It is also possible to see references to Orson Welles' *1984* in the imposing, grey buildings of Richard's dictatorship years and the Tower, and Donaldson writes about how the film references both silent cinema and Hitchcock films (Donaldson 247, 248). Interestingly, although so firmly a 1930s setting, the strongest references to support parallels between McKellen's Richard and Hitler are filmic and obviously so. For example, the scene of Richard being announced as king to the populace visually refers to Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film of the 1934 Nuremberg rally, *Triumph of the Will*, with primary red flags and row upon row of supporters calling Richard's name, complete with near-but-not-quite Nazi salutes. The use of these references to other films and film genres by Loncraine demonstrates how the film draws on more contemporary narratives in its storytelling, which goes beyond the historical and play context.

Although the 1930s period was also the setting for Richard Eyre's stage production from which the film was developed, this was only so in a vague, suggestive manner: Loncraine made it much more explicit by paying close attention to period detail (Coursen 106, Loehlin 68). Olivier's film was also based on a stage production, his 1944 production; however, this had real resonance for its audience because, as Kenneth Tynan wrote, while Olivier was playing the tyrant 'there was Hitler across the way' (quoted in Coursen 106). This political currency is lost in Olivier's film, which was made ten years later, precisely because that historical moment had passed and the setting of the film does not encourage such alignments. Loncraine's setting of his film in Europe's recent and recognisable past suggests that the viewer is being encouraged to align the film with those times and that the play is being used to make a comment on them. However, McKellen is clear about his intentions in this respect in the published screenplay:

The historical events of the play had occurred just a couple of generations before the first audience saw them dramatised. The comparable period for us would be the 1930s, close enough for no-one to think we were identifying the plot of the play with actual events, any more than Shakespeare was writing about a real king. (McKellen 13)

Despite making such references to the past, this film does not interrogate that past or use it to discuss or speak to an issue contemporary to the film. Rather the film is deliberately set in the recent though finished and well-documented past in order to not be seen to be making a political comment on anything. Although some critics have inferred from this quotation that the makers of the film were implicitly identifying the play with actual events, I would suggest that McKellen is actually arguing for the play as a story rather than history with a political point to make beyond the plot. Indeed McKellen goes on to say that Shakespeare was creating history 'that never happened' (McKellen 13). As with Olivier's film, the moment has passed, and for a 1990s audience, the 1930s is so well documented as to mean that the film does not address issues surrounding that time. Lisa Hopkins has argued that McKellen is actually being rather cunning in these quotations and his film is in fact about the British royal family, the Windsors. Hopkins draws convincing parallels between the characters of the film and characters from the family's recent past, for example reading Annette Bening's Queen Elizabeth as Wallis Simpson, and Edward IV as Edward VIII. However, Hopkins' argument relies on McKellen assuming his audience are able to see through his diversionary tactics, and the audience ignoring other obvious parallels. For example, Hopkins writes that 'McKellen's Richard is no Hitler; he is not even, despite that black uniform, significantly like that nearest British counterpart Mosley' (Hopkins 53). Even if the audience does not see 'significant' parallels between McKellen's Richard and Mosley, the fact that this is suggested, however implicitly, does imply that the character can be read as such. Indeed, Donaldson argues that there are 'insistent parallels between Richard and Hitler [and] English fascism in the 1930's' and that 'McKellen's Richard has affinities with Hitler but also with Oswald Mosley' (Donaldson, 244). I would suggest that it is easier to read Richard as Mosley rather than a Windsor because, as I have argued, he is portrayed as a British Hitler.

In conclusion, we might reconsider Jones's ideas about the presence of Shakespeare's culture and the text's founding moments in performances of his plays. The two films which I have discussed here demonstrate that argument to be incorrect. Through its emphasis on legend, the Olivier film is presented as fairy tale. Despite the fact that Olivier's 1944 stage production was playing while Hitler was 'across the way' posing a real threat, this is not a theme that is present in the Olivier film. While Loncraine's film does focus on a 1930s dictatorship and calls this comparison to mind, his film also does not successfully speak to that or our historical moment. That it is so firmly set within the 1930s also distances the play from Shakespeare's context; moreover, Loncraine compounds this occlusion by referencing filmic form. Equally, both of these films take the play out of its tetralogical context, thus distancing it from its literary context and from its material, historical context: comparing these films with the Boyd stage production only highlights this issue. Whether this is true of just these films or if the nature of film adaptation has a similar effect on every film interpretation of Shakespeare's plays is something to be discussed beyond the confines of this paper. However, these films show that, contrary to Jones' argument, productions of Shakespeare's *Richard III* do not always experience the pull of history, but rather by removing the historical context they in fact become 'interwoven patterns of history and legend'.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This quote taken from extratextual text at the opening of the Olivier film, is what Peter S. Donaldson refers to as a “disclaimer of truth” (249).

<sup>2</sup> According to Hatchuel, Loncraine’s film is not providential either, as the ending is problematised by Richmond’s smirk into the camera whilst Richard dies, suggesting that he will take over the role of tyrant from Richard (Hatchuel 105-106).

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