

# The Contemporary Shakespearean Actor as the Site of Adaptive Encounter.

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N.B. Part of the chapter on Kenneth Branagh will be published in the forthcoming edition of *Critical Survey*, Vol. 25, Issue 3 (2014). This article is entitled: “Yes, I have gained my experience” (*As You Like It*, 4.3.23): Kenneth Branagh and Adapting the “Shakespearean” Actor’.

## Abstract

This thesis investigates the cultural uses and implied signifying practices of the work of actors who are popularly and frequently described as 'Shakespearean.' Though ubiquitous figures within culture, there is a dearth of criticism which questions what qualities are invoked in the use of the term 'Shakespearean' and what implicit judgements of value or taste, class or cultural function are at work in its attribution. Although works such as Carol Chillington Rutter's *Clamorous Voices* have analysed the figure of the female Shakespearean, moreover, the male Shakespearean remains largely an unexplored site of meaning and definition. It is this focus on the body of the actor which represents my original contribution to knowledge. Indeed, despite the preponderance of actor-based studies in Film Studies or, indeed, Theatre Studies, Adaptation Studies has been slow to locate the body as an adaptive site; concentrating instead upon themes, authors, the work of directors or, more recently, the influence of production factors.

My thesis argues for the Shakespearean actor as a site of adaptation, positing it as a conduit for the transferable commodity value which is 'Shakespeare' and thereby considering the differences which may occur in the production of meaning as the Shakespearean actor moves between cultural hierarchies: from 'high' to 'low', or mainstream culture. An essential part of this thesis and an aspect which further argues for its contribution to this field is, therefore, analysis of popular cultural texts which have largely been ignored by adaptation critics. Although figures such as Richard Burt have recognised the value of popular or counter-cultural texts for an understanding of Shakespeare's far-reaching and often surprising influence, the more tangential work in the Shakespearean actor's filmography provide equally valuable ground to mine. An understanding of a Shakespearean actor's cultural function is

thus served by critiquing their mainstream films as well as their more documented Shakespearean oeuvre. By focusing on the implicitly multidirectional possibilities of adaptation as a process, I explore what values the ‘Shakespearean’ holds in contemporary culture and whether these maintain a popular perception of the Shakespearean actor as a representative of conservatism, elitism and ‘high’ culture. Or, whether the Shakespearean actor contains the potential for subverting some of the associations which Shakespeare’s legacy has accrued over time.

# Table of Contents

<b>List of Illustrations</b>	1
<b>Introduction</b>	
Part I: Presenting the Shakespearean Actor	
(i) Introduction	2
(ii) Structure and Rationale for Case Studies	18
Part II: Critical Framework(s)	
(i) Introduction	29
(ii) The Star-Body	31
(iii) The Shakespearean	36
(iv) The Body in Performance	45
(v) Adaptation Studies	54
<b>Chapter One: Ian McKellen, the Established Shakespearean</b>	
Introduction: Defining a Shakespearean	62
Monsters on Film: McKellen in the Nineties	69
McKellen in Hollywood: <i>X-Men</i> and <i>The Da Vinci Code</i>	84
‘Real Shakespeare’: Returning to <i>King Lear</i>	111
McKellen and Popular Culture	128
<b>Chapter Two: Kenneth Branagh, Adapting the Shakespearean</b>	
Introduction: Kenneth Branagh’s Shakespeare	144
Branagh in the Mainstream	174
Interpreting <i>Thor</i> : Taste, Cultural Hierarchies and the Shakespearean	187
The London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony: Kenneth Branagh, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Caliban	215

## **Chapter Three: Tom Hiddleston, the Beginnings of the Shakespearean Star**

Introduction: ‘Quintessentially English’	227
<i>Thor</i> and Loki	233
The Rising Shakespearean: <i>The Hollow Crown</i>	247
The Afterlife of a Character: Memes, Loki and Hiddleston Online	278
Celebrity and the Body: <i>Coriolanus</i>	300
<b>Conclusion</b>	317
<b>Bibliography</b>	
Books and Journal Articles	329
Newspaper and Magazine Articles	339
Internet Resources	345
Archival Material	348
Other Material	348
<b>Filmography</b>	349
<b>Appendix</b>	
Published Article: ‘Adapting <i>Coriolanus</i> : Tom Hiddleston’s Body and Action Cinema’, <i>Adaptation</i> , Vol. 7 Issue 3 (2014).	352

N.B. ‘Adapting *Coriolanus*’ is currently available online to view as the winning selection for the 2014 *Adaptation* Essay Prize. The journal edition will be published on December 1, 2014.

## List of Illustrations

0.1 <i>Last Action Hero</i> (dir. John McTiernan, 1993)	2
1.1 <i>Othello</i> (dir. Trevor Nunn, 1989)	72
1.2 <i>X2</i> (dir. Bryan Singer, 2003)	88
1.3 <i>X-Men</i> (dir. Bryan Singer, 2000)	95
1.4 <i>X-Men: The Last Stand</i> (dir. Brett Ratner, 2006)	98
1.5 Screen capture of Twitter @IanMcKellen	108
1.6 <i>The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring</i> (dir. Peter Jackson, 2000)	117
1.7 <i>King Lear</i> (dir. Trevor Nunn, 2008)	122
1.8 Title page for <i>Vicious</i> (TV, ITV, 2013-)	138
2.1 <i>Hamlet</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1996)	169
2.2 <i>Hamlet</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1996)	172
2.3 <i>Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back</i> (dir. Irvin Kershner, 1980)	172
2.4 Promotional photograph of Gilderoy Lockhart, <i>Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets</i> (dir. Chris Columbus, 2002)	180
2.5 <i>Thor</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011)	210
2.6 <i>Hamlet</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1996)	214
2.7 Kenneth Branagh in the 2012 London Olympics Opening Ceremony (TV, BBC, July 27, 2012)	217
3.1 <i>Suburban Shootout</i> (TV, Channel 5, 2006-7)	230
3.2 <i>Thor</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011)	240
3.3 <i>Thor</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011)	241
3.4 <i>The Hollow Crown: Henry IV, Part Two</i> (dir. Richard Eyre, 2012)	255
3.5 <i>Thor</i> (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011)	257
3.6 <i>The Hollow Crown: Henry IV, Part One</i> (dir. Richard Eyre, 2012)	259
3.7 <i>The Hollow Crown: Henry IV, Part Two</i> (dir. Richard Eyre, 2012)	262
3.8 <i>The Hollow Crown: Henry V</i> (dir. Thea Sharrock, 2012)	273
3.9 Meme. Nelson Fraizer, ‘Odin are you sure Loki is the adopted one? Hannibal.’	291
3.10 Meme. Elska Nott, ‘How do I even begin to describe Loki Laufeyson...,’	293
3.11 Meme. The King Himself, ‘So I Made A Thing.’	295
3.12 Screen capture of Twitter @TWHiddleston	297

## Introduction

### PART I: Presenting the Shakespearean Actor

#### Introduction

A young boy, Danny Madigan (Austen O'Brien), slopes late into his English classroom after skipping school to watch the third in a series of blockbuster films of his favourite action hero, Jack Slater (Arnold Schwarzenegger). His teacher (Joan Plowright) introduces a clip from Laurence Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet*, telling her class that some of them might recognise the actor from the Polaroid commercials or, with slight resignation, 'as Zeus in *Clash of the Titans*.' Despite his teacher's assurances that Hamlet was one of the first action heroes, however, Danny quickly grows impatient with Olivier's Hamlet and as the Dane shies from murdering Claudius at his prayers, hisses: 'Don't talk, just do it!' The camera cuts from its close-up on Danny back to the film, but this time it reveals his personal fantasy of *Hamlet* as a bombastic piece of action cinema, complete with the genre's conventional explosions, spectacular violence and Schwarzenegger's typically deadpan delivery.



Fig. 0.1 Schwarzenegger contemplates Hamlet's most famous meditation, deciding 'To be or not to be... *Not to be.*'



With the voiceover for Danny's action *Hamlet* intoning parodic appropriations of the text such as, 'Something's rotten in the state of Denmark... and Hamlet's taking out the trash', *Last Action Hero* dramatises some of the issues relating to Shakespeare's use in popular culture. Danny's imagined film relies upon its visual similarity to Olivier's *Hamlet* in order to function as a parody. The same monochromatic, dark blue colour palette is enhanced by sudden sparks of colour, however, which arise from the play's newly interpolated action scenes, such as the match lighting Schwarzenegger's cigar (see above), bomb explosions and the shards of glass as Claudius is pushed through a window. Similarly, the familiar image of Hamlet's graveside philosophising is undercut by Schwarzenegger hurling Yorick's skull as a weapon. That the Shakespearean actor as an individual is determined as much by their frequent movements between 'high' and mainstream culture as it is by their high cultural cachet is also suggested by the film. This is present in Plowright's English teacher and her attempts to popularise *Hamlet* for her students, the description of Laurence Olivier of the Polaroid commercial and *Clash of Titans* fame and a later cameo in which Ian McKellen, implacably blank, stalks nineties New York as Death from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957). With its recurrent and playful subversion of the expectations surrounding acting, blockbusters or classical music, *Last Action Hero* serves as a useful introduction to the permeability of cultural hierarchies and those texts and individuals who are characterised by their frequent movements between 'high' and 'low' culture.

This thesis explores the significance, signifying practices and cultural reception of the figure of the British male Shakespearean actor in Anglo-American culture post-1996, with special reference to the perception of the Shakespearean in popular culture and representations of masculinity. The three case studies that structure this work focus on the actors Ian McKellen, Kenneth Branagh and Tom Hiddleston as — respectively— examples of the late, mid- and

early-career Shakespearean performer. Although there are other British actors who might have been chosen in each case, I will argue that the careers of McKellen, Branagh and Hiddleston lend themselves particularly to the concerns of this thesis. Each chapter begins by considering the way in which my case studies have established their reputation as a Shakespearean (or, in the case of Hiddleston, began to create a performer identity conducive to Shakespeareanism). I continue in close critical analysis of their work, exploring in particular how their relationship to Shakespeare has developed this reputation, or, in the case of McKellen and Branagh, consolidated the cultural cachet attached to their star persona. Essential to this and a fundamental aspect of my contribution to original knowledge is thus outlining the way the Shakespearean actor as a concept is established discursively in culture, by dint of their acting style, professional theatrical background and their personal manner (such as a perceived intellectualism or grandiloquence). A hitherto unquestioned descriptor, these apparent constituent elements of the ‘Shakespearean’ actor can be perceived in their acting but also the wider way in which their reputation and the idiosyncrasies of the ‘Shakespearean’ are perpetuated by the journalistic and critical establishment.<sup>1</sup>

In order to examine the adaptability of this quality I use these case studies as a way of testing the reach of the ‘Shakespearean’: what meaning persists in connection to it and what meaning may be adapted when an actor, whose reputation has been primarily founded upon their theatrical career, moves between ‘high’ and mainstream cultural performances. By considering the transferable commodity value which is ‘Shakespeare’ outside of its traditional confines of the theatre, educational establishments and highbrow cinema, I am

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that at varying points throughout this thesis I will use the term Shakespearean in inverted commas and at others times will not. This depends upon the nature of the situation I am describing. In much of my introduction, for example, ‘*Shakespearean*’ will be utilised in order to flag up the arbitrary and unquestioned nature of the term. At other points, however, purely *Shakespearean* will suffice as it refers to the familiar and recognisable phenomenon of the Shakespearean actor. In this case my use will reflect precisely the unquestioned and unspecified but broadly identifiable tropes attached to the name — associations such as ‘high’ culture or intellectualism.

able to examine its presence in (arguably) the most ‘mainstream’ example of popular culture: the Hollywood blockbuster.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the Shakespearean actor has a cultural function as a conduit through which the transferable commodity value of ‘Shakespeare’ may be relayed, adapted and reasserted.<sup>3</sup> In order to interrogate this I explore the Shakespearean actor’s appearances within Hollywood blockbusters in the following ways: how the Shakespearean star-body is viewed and type-cast; what processes of signification and what meanings are attached to the actor’s performances *as a Shakespearean*, as opposed to as a ‘generic’ Hollywood star; and the influence which the actor’s past work (formative in terms of their Shakespearean billing) has upon the continually shifting and developing projection of their star persona.<sup>4</sup> This includes examining whether this persona is compatible or at odds with the differing generic requirements of Hollywood blockbusters, with particular attention paid to how both modes represent the male body. As I will continue to elucidate, contemporary popular culture and the excessive visual aesthetic of the action blockbuster genre is characterised by the value it places upon the muscularity of its male leads. With an

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<sup>2</sup> The definition of ‘blockbuster’ employed in this thesis has been informed largely by Julian Stringer’s accurate summation of the difficulties the blockbuster has encountered in academia. Describing the term as ‘a key word of contemporary culture’ and ‘something of a moving target,’ he argues that ‘its meaning is never fixed or clear, but changes according to who is speaking or what is being said.’ Instead, it is a phenomenon whose definition is contingent on a range of industry discourses, periods and contradictory beliefs. Stringer’s strategy for organising discussion of the blockbuster is to organise it thus as a ‘complex notion for categorizing and thinking about certain kinds of film. In short [...] the blockbuster as a genre.’ This particular taxonomy invites the ‘constant struggle’ of generic definitions which, especially in the case of the blockbuster, are often subject to differing determination between fans, mass audiences and industry requirements. In mind of this, the most representative aspect of the blockbuster as a generic type is Sheldon Hall’s argument that the blockbuster’s possibility for epic success (a ‘tall revenue feature’) and its ability to ‘bomb’ (the etymology of the term lies in its destructive capability as a World War Two aerial bomb) is complementary rather than contradictory. Within this thesis the blockbuster — regardless of its ultimate success — is defined by its *capacity* in terms of the narrative and the scale of production. Julian Stringer, ‘Introduction’ in *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), 1. Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 101; Sheldon Hall, ‘Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster’, *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: BFI, 2002), 11.

<sup>3</sup> It should be stated that my use of ‘commodity’ refers simply to the process of transferral rather than carrying any specifically Marxist connotations.

<sup>4</sup> There is no one single direction of traffic between Shakespeare and Hollywood: just as many actors go from mainstream, popular culture to Shakespeare — whether on stage or in filmed adaptation — as Shakespeare to Hollywood. A point of particular interest in this project, however, is the movement of an established Shakespearean *to* the Hollywood mainstream. I maintain this directional flow in particular will be productive for reasons which I hope will become apparent throughout the project.

established tradition of British Shakespeareans appearing in Hollywood often as villains, my thesis will thus interrogate the relationship between their bodies and the genre's equation of physical strength as an expression of heroism. The relevance of this, and the productiveness of a direct comparison between Hollywood and Shakespeare centred upon this theme, is especially apparent when considering the lead roles the male Shakespearean typically undertake. Characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth or Henry V are similarly characterised by their dramatic exploration of masculine agency.

An important aspect of examining the relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture is considering the phenomenon of the theatrical British actor 'selling out' to Hollywood, moreover, and the changing of attitudes towards this occurrence in recent decades. A common practicality of acting since the beginnings of film, Laurence Olivier's career has, arguably, most famously evinced the shock and horror that can arise in such instances. Dominic Shellard details the indignation of one individual for whom Olivier's 'ignominious' decision to endorse Gallaher Ltd.'s new brand of 'Olivier' cigarettes was 'inconceivable' and 'besmirch[ed]' Olivier's good reputation; a reputation recently conferred by no less person than the Queen herself.<sup>5</sup> Olivier's decision to advertise Polaroid for one million dollars represents a distinct turning point in the movement towards the greater acceptance of an actor as an individual with the capacity to cross genres, modes and even media, furthermore. Even for an actor with Olivier's reputation such an act posed risk to his popularity, however. As he acknowledged in his autobiography — stating that he took great pains to ensure the advert was not released in Great Britain— Olivier was cognisant that

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Lieutenant-Colon C.J. Barton-Innes to Laurence Olivier cited in Dominic Shellard, 'Stability, renewal and change: Gielgud and Olivier in 1957,' *The Golden Generation*, ed. Dominic Shellard (London: British Library, 2008), 69.

while the American and European audiences would recognise his commercial shrewdness, Britain would be offended by a perceived slight to his reputation as a classical performer.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of Olivier's significance for the perception of actors' cultural mobility and function, the kind of fluidity which characterises Tom Hiddleston's career, for example, has only been achieved relatively recently. Both McKellen's and Branagh's careers are representative of their respective generations' experience of the acting profession and demonstrate the persistence of a more traditional model, in which their grounding as a performer was attained in theatre and then, perhaps, their star was later consolidated in film. Indeed, it is important to recognise that, as Branagh personally details and as I explore in greater depth in my chapter on the actor, this process of development by which the theatrical actor also became a television or film star is by no means as inevitable as it may appear according to current convention. Describing his early career, Branagh notes that theatre actors were subject to an implicit limitation on what they were expected to do. The same limitations on Olivier and 'previous generations' resulted in a 'sort of division' between those individuals who were theatre actors, film actors or television actors. And although Olivier was 'one of the first people to bestride the two [the distinction between the classical and popular]', such an aspiration still appeared 'impossible' and 'fairly exotic' to the young performer.<sup>7</sup> Even such now-prominent figures as Michael Gambon and Judi Dench subscribed to this very methodical acquisition of success, slowly attaining larger and larger roles within a repertory theatre system, in which the actor's fame was second to the complex working of the company, before finally attaining lead roles and sufficient star appeal to cross into popular culture. As Laura White observes in her interview with former repertory actors, it was an environment in which the 'professional' would 'inevitably thrive, but one in which

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<sup>6</sup> Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 298.

<sup>7</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh: A Life in Pictures,' November 19, 2011, Video [PDF also available], accessed May 1, 2013, BAFTA, <http://guru.bafta.org/kenneth-branagh-life-pictures-video-interview>.

the scope of an actor's input was limited.'<sup>8</sup> One interviewee, Alfred Burke, opines 'nowadays you're more responsible for yourself as an actor. You are expected to take responsibility for yourself and you do.' He continues, in the past '[y]ou did what you were told or what was suggested to you.'<sup>9</sup>

Shellard's recognition that 'unpredictability' has been the 'leitmotif' of post-war British theatre is indeed accurate. Both the practises and the public perception of twenty-first century theatre have demonstrated clear signs of divergence from the post-war period, in what Shellard describes as a process of 'reorientation.'<sup>10</sup> Particularly significant has been the waning of the repertory tradition by which stars such as McKellen or Derek Jacobi honed their talents. Although the complex relationship between the actor and theatrical company is still evident today, it is negotiated in a much different way. As my chapters on McKellen and Hiddleston will particularly explore, it demonstrates a more powerful influence from star performers. Potentially freed from a lengthy service climbing the ranks within a theatre company, the contemporary British actor is expected to gain their fame through a combination of theatre, television, film and commercial work; and although the media perception of some stars' careers may prove more resistant to their transitioning between 'high' and 'low' culture, this is acknowledged as an ever-increasing constituent of the profession. The case studies which bookend my thesis thereby evince the implications of the ambitions of Olivier and subsequent stars who have aspired towards success both within popular and 'high' culture and whose theatrical work subsequently often displays a visibly reciprocal relationship with their popular image. The British theatrical performer has taken a

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<sup>8</sup> Laura White, 'Smashing open the French windows: the acting profession and British theatre in the 1960s and 1970s,' *The Golden Generation*, ed. Dominic Shellard (London: British Library, 2008), 183.

<sup>9</sup> Kate Harris, 'Interview with Alfred Burke,' *AHRC British Library Theatre Archive Project* (24/10/07), cited in White, 'Smashing open the French windows,' 183.

<sup>10</sup> The changes Shellard details includes the growing lack of distinction between the Fringe, the subsidised sector and the West End, with off-West End venues increasingly providing 'vital training grounds for the subsequent Young Turks'. Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, 227.

progressively more active role in determining their careers, therefore, and, as in the case of Hiddleston (whose career I would argue offers a template for many future young actors), often forged their Shakespearean identity contiguously to their popular cultural roles. This process invites recognition of the actor as professional, moreover, as an individual subject to market forces. By recognising the implicit connection forged in the popular imagination and in the minds of Hollywood casting agents between Shakespeareanism and blockbuster villainy, for example, I will consider not only the thematic congruence between such performances but potential reasons behind their happenstance. As Simone Murray urges, ‘adaptations constitute not discreet *sui generis* artefacts but outcomes of an encompassing economic system’. While there is compelling evidence for the contiguity between such actors’ Shakespearean and mainstream roles, they are, nonetheless, results of an overwhelming tendency in casting and thus often result as much from economic fact and industry convention than as from any kind of thematic significance.<sup>11</sup>

An overarching aim of the thesis is, therefore, to access the fully multidirectional interplay of adaptation and posit the actor as a transferable site of Shakespearean meanings, values and commodities. My interrogations are thus not merely limited to the Shakespearean in Hollywood, but the Hollywood and mainstream in Shakespeare. Douglas Lanier states, ‘one of the very few literary figures who have a double life in contemporary culture’, Shakespeare serves ‘important iconic functions in both canonical and popular culture.’<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as Lanier notes, for those critics ‘willing to embrace the post-modern tiger’ our conception of Shakespeare should be, rather, ‘Shakespeares, a series of culturally specific, multiply-mediated historical events to which any given Shakespearean text is an incomplete

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<sup>11</sup> Simone Murray, ‘The Business of Adaptation: Reading the Market,’ *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*, ed. Deborah Cartmell (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 122.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18.

and certainly not a regulatory guide.’<sup>13</sup> Terence Hawkes’ methodology expounds on this configuration of the playwright’s authorship and is similarly instructive here. There is, he argues, no ‘essential’ meaning to Shakespeare’s texts; although we may continue searching for one and trying to make it ‘mean’ for our purposes, there is ‘only and always the business of “meaning by”’.<sup>14</sup> Hawkes thereby advocates an attitude which privileges multiplicity of meaning and acknowledges that, rather than conveying a singular truth, Shakespeare’s significance within culture represents a moveable feast, representing various and varying things according to the situation in which it is appropriated.

In the spirit of Hawkes and Lanier, this thesis does not represent an effort to discern the ‘essential’ truth of the Shakespearean actor but to offer an original contribution to the knowledge and understanding of his functioning within a particular historical moment. It will do this through exploring an aspect of adaptation and Shakespeare studies which is conspicuous by its omission: the diverse and changing meanings which are reproduced through interactions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture; and most significantly, how these shifting values result from and are influenced by the work of the Shakespearean actor. Rather than only asking what the Shakespearean aspects of an actor are, I will be asking what is meant by them culturally. An integral part of this questioning will be as Lanier maintains, moreover, recognising the way in which popular culture uses Shakespeare to create meaning and ‘not merely as an inert decoration or simple-minded token of prestige’ but as part of a complex interplay between ‘two bodies of reference, sets of cultural institutions, canons of aesthetic standards’ and ‘modes of constructing cultural authority.’<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Lanier, ‘Drowning the Book: Prospero’s Books and the Textual Shakespeare’, *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, ed. James C. Bulman (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 188.

<sup>14</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

<sup>15</sup> Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 16.



The time frame I have chosen for analysis (post-1996) has been influenced by Deborah Cartmell's identification of 1996 (the year of release for Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*) as the beginning point of a period in which Shakespeare adaptations become 'looser': 'reduc[ing]' Shakespeare to intertext rather than Ur-text or as a vehicle to uplift their cultural status.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Thomas Cartelli references texts from the late nineties to the present day as typically representing the diminishing legibility of 'original-language Shakespeare'; an occurrence which has subsequently implied to some parties 'the death of Shakespeare itself'.<sup>17</sup> In the words of the title of his essay, it is this quality of divergence or 'doing it slant' that he identifies as the key mode of expression in contemporary Shakespearean adaptation after this point (although, it should be noted, there are notable examples of irreverent Shakespearean adaptations from 1929 onwards). Cartelli is scornful of the playful attempts to popularise Shakespeare such as on YouTube; however, I maintain that such smaller occurrences and the general trend towards films on Shakespeare (to borrow Cartmell's reconfiguration of 'Shakespeare on film') which challenge ideas of an authoritative text are worthy of critical consideration. Although the style of Shakespearean adaptation Cartmell and Cartelli describe began to peter out in the early noughties, it is this period's overall mood, engaging with issues of authorship and contending with traditional chronologies and trajectories between Shakespeare and the adaptor, which has been instructive in creating a methodological starting point for my thesis. Moreover, though I recognise the validity of such critical attention to end of the century Shakespeare adaptations and their characteristic irreverence to their source material, I do not take it — as Cartelli, Richard Burt and others have — as the harbinger of the Shakespeare-apocalypse. Instead, in the spirit of this creative irreverence, I would like to question the possibilities of the

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<sup>16</sup> Deborah Cartmell, 'Film as the New Shakespeare and Film on Shakespeare: Reversing the Shakespeare/Film Trajectory,' *Literature Compass*, Vol. 3, Issue 5 (2006), 1155.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Cartelli, 'Doing it Slant: Reconceiving Shakespeare in the Shakespeare Aftermath,' *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 38 (2010), 27.

Shakespearean actor's body as the site of adaptation (rather than the text itself) as a way of conserving and conveying the meaning of Shakespeare in the future. This constitutes an antidote to the bleak negativism of the 'post-Shakespeare' world, proposing that the Shakespearean actor is a figure who, through the meaning invested in the body and through performance, is potentially able to continue signifying Shakespeare's physical and textual cultural attributes, all the while engaging with multiplicity of meaning, intertextuality and artifice.<sup>18</sup>

On a practical level, a post-1996 timeframe usefully encompasses the tail-end of the resurgence of Shakespeare film adaptations and a period at the beginning of the century which saw the creation of numerous high profile roles for British theatrical actors within popular culture. The early twenty-first century witnessed the commencement of several large blockbuster franchises, such as *Harry Potter* (dir. various, 2001-11), *The Lord of the Rings* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001-3) and *X-Men* (dir. various, 2000-14). Despite finance coming largely from Hollywood these franchises offered plentiful opportunities for British actors.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, this period saw an influx of big name actors to London's West End. Demonstrating the versatility of British actors who may have gained fame through roles in Hollywood, this phenomenon represents a desire for the actors to return to their 'roots' in a geographic and performative sense, with the test of theatrical performance becoming almost a pre-requisite for validating established stars and emerging talents alike. The more vigorous and instantaneous quality of theatre, which necessitates that a star cannot retake a scene and is immediately surrounded by their audience, presumably appeals to an actor's vanity by

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<sup>18</sup> In this use of 'intertextuality' I refer to Julia Kristeva's conceptualisation of it as that which replaces the notion of intersubjectivity: that meaning is not transferred directly from writer to reader but instead is mediated through, or filtered by 'codes' imparted to the writer and reader by other texts. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 69.

<sup>19</sup> Their popularity in casting, it must be assumed, derived largely from the necessity of specific accents, with the British setting of the *Harry Potter* series or the equivalency of Tolkien's Middle Earth with a roughly European map, for example, as well as a tradition of British actors as blockbuster villains

fulfilling a notion of a more traditional and essential ‘back to basics’ conception of acting (even if their movement to theatre does not constitute an actual, professional return). And although actors such as Olivier, Charles Laughton, Leslie Howard and John Barrymore prove that this is not a recent occurrence, stars who more recently have partaken in this phenomenon include Jude Law, Daniel Radcliffe, Keira Knightley and, lately, Tom Hiddleston (while others such as Ian McKellen and Kenneth Branagh made noticeable returns to the stage after a significant absence).

The Cultural Olympiad in 2012 also saw a renewed interest in a British Shakespearean tradition with adaptations such as *The Hollow Crown* (TV, dir. various, 2012). Alongside the prominent use of Shakespeare in the Olympics Opening Ceremony, this series demonstrated the increasingly active relationship between mainstream popular culture and the theatre during this period. With their frequent returns to Shakespeare occurring in tandem with their involvement in large scale film productions, the timeframe I will study thus represents my case study actors at a high point of cultural proliferation: the popular cultural success of individuals such as McKellen drawing attention to their wider work potentially for the first time — especially for international and American audiences. Importantly, this timeframe also considers the continuing evolution of the Shakespearean’s star persona. Up-and-coming actors such as Tom Hiddleston, for instance, have received wide critical and public attention only relatively recently. As my chapter on his career will explore, his nascence as a star invites a greater degree of flexibility in terms of the attributes associated to his career by the media and Hiddleston’s own career decisions, with the qualities of his star persona still being determined. This should be viewed in contrast to more established actors, such as Branagh, who have experienced greater difficulty integrating new or — in the media’s eyes — more surprising aspects of his career.

The potential plasticity of a performer's identity, as in the case of Hiddleston, is further apparent when considering the inherent instability of determining that which is 'Shakespearean'. As their title indicates, the Shakespearean's prestige as an actor comes from performing Shakespeare's most famous characters. These are characters which — performed by an ever-increasing legion of famous and non-famous Shakespeareans alike — are diachronic and synchronic in nature, constantly accumulating meaning and performative references. With each new performance, therefore, the Shakespearean quality of their star persona is in flux: contested, affirmed or altered. Judith Buchanan's re-formulation of the interplay between character and the actor is instructive here. Buchanan claims that in the cinema 'we read character through the determining filter of the specificity of the star who intimately and self-exposingly inhabits a role.' Buchanan continues, in relation to performances of characters of the 'dimensions and legacy' of — for example — a Hamlet or Othello, 'both screen actor *and* character have a prior existence' and so are both simultaneously visible within the composite nature of the screen performance.<sup>20</sup> Marvin Carlson describes a similar process occurring within theatre in his extended metaphor of the stage as a haunted space. Carlson writes,

Everything in the theatre, the bodies, the materials utilized, the language, the space itself, is now and has always been haunted, and that haunting has been an essential part of the theatre's meaning to and reception by its audiences in all times and all places.<sup>21</sup>

The theatrical space for him is, therefore, a 'repository of cultural memory' but as such does not just accrue new phantoms (to continue Carlson's imagery) and is instead subject to 'continual adjustment and modification' as memories of past performances are recalled in

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<sup>20</sup> Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 224.

<sup>21</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 15.

‘new circumstances and contexts’.<sup>22</sup> The ghosts that inhabit the theatrical space, the accoutrements of performance and indeed, the actors themselves are continually ‘shifted’ in a process of ‘recycling and recollection’ and each new performance by an actor (especially, Carlson argues, as their reputation grows) requires a fresh ‘renegotiation’ of those memories.<sup>23</sup>

As an actor whose very identity (whether ascribed or deliberately self-cultivated,) highlights the continual immediacy of this potential haunting, the ‘Shakespearean’ thus occupies a complicated position within this performance transaction. The resultant Hamlet of the 1996 film production, is thereby a stimulating melange of Kenneth Branagh, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Kenneth Branagh as Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Branagh’s past roles (including the Hamlet-like Henry V) and even past Hamlets (Olivier, Gielgud, Jacobi and more). This brief configuration of the numerous references which could be read onto Branagh’s *Hamlet* only lists relevant Shakespearean intertexts, moreover; the influence of the actor’s popular work must also be considered. My thesis aims to scrutinise the levels of interplay and intertextuality which occur *across* the Shakespearean actor’s filmography and how their star persona affects a reading of character be it King Lear or Magneto. A resulting site of dynamism, constantly accruing references, performativity, trans-cultural references, parody and self-consciousness, the Shakespearean actor (in reality rather than intent, perhaps) can never be attached to an entirely reverent or singular vision of Shakespeare.

A further original aspect of my thesis lies in the fact that, in spite of important work on their female counterparts by scholars such as Carol Chillington Rutter, the male Shakespearean star-body is a subject which has received comparatively little analysis. Indeed, Jonathan Holmes notes the paradox that in spite of Shakespeare’s uniqueness as a playwright

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<sup>22</sup> Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 2, 8.

—actors can construct whole careers from playing his works — little critical attention is focused upon this phenomenon.<sup>24</sup> This is a surprising occurrence given the turn in critical studies (especially within Renaissance studies) to a focus upon the body as a source of meaning. The significance and popularity of this development cannot be overstated, described by Keir Elam as the ‘early modern body boom’.<sup>25</sup> My study is, therefore, heavily influenced by recent critical work on the body and gender performance, supported by influential work on the star-body by figures such as Richard Dyer and Yvonne Tasker. An under-researched area that is pertinent to my thesis, moreover, is the apparently uncontested use of ‘Shakespearean actor’ as a phrase which, fulfilling an unwitting Foucauldian author function, invites careful consideration.<sup>26</sup> Although there are a number of studies dedicated to compiling responses from Shakespearean actors, little thought has been paid to how this term is used: what implicit judgement values are being employed, what ideological work is being performed and what contradictions are being excised?

The multi-volume *Great Shakespearians* (2010-) edited by Peter Holland and Adrian Poole would, on first impression, appear to rectify this problem, with each volume dedicated to four individuals who are deemed to possess the titular greatness. The series examines the work of academics, philosophers, directors and actors, with volume sixteen, for example, look at the careers of John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier, Peggy Ashcroft and Judi Dench.<sup>27</sup> In the series editors’ preface Holland and Poole define the pre-requisites of their selections as figures ‘who have had the greatest influence on both the interpretation, understanding and

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Holmes, *Merely Players? Actors’ accounts of performing Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Elam subsequently dryly labels the Shakespeare critical industry as the ‘Shakespeare Corp’ [my emphasis added]. Keir Elam, ‘“In What Chapter of his Bosom?”: Reading Shakespeare’s Bodies,’ *Alternative Shakespeares 2*, ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 1996), 144.

<sup>26</sup> See page thirty-six for a closer reading of Foucault’s work ‘What is an author?’ and its influence upon the thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Other foci include the auteurs Orson Welles, Akira Kurosawa, Grigori Kozintsev and Franco Zeffirelli in volume seventeen or the literary figures James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden and Samuel Beckett in volume twelve.

reception of Shakespeare, both nationally and internationally.<sup>28</sup> Similarly to the objective of this thesis, they then qualify that their contributors have been asked to describe the ‘double impact’ of Shakespeare on their chosen person and of the person on the ‘understanding, interpretation and appreciation of Shakespeare.’<sup>29</sup> Beyond this brief introduction, however, the series appears to make little effort to qualify or define the nature of the ‘Shakespearean’, or to note any similarities in class, race or performative style between its actor candidates.

Russell Jackson’s introduction goes slightly further in distinguishing the actors as offering ‘invaluable insights into changing approaches to the actor’s craft, the aims and methods of the theatre, [and] the institutions presenting productions’ and as having ‘influenced the methods of Shakespearean performance’.<sup>30</sup> But again, he stops short of describing any social or cultural function which the Shakespearean may fill or any implicit ideological work at hand in the naming of actors *as* Shakespeareans. Instead, he simply describes his volume’s subjects as ‘representative’ — least of all specifying what constitutes ‘greatness’. Richard Schoch goes furthest, perhaps, towards identifying the series’ methodological absences:

... [T]he authors of the chapters in this volume recognize that they have constructed the object of their own inquiry by virtue of the questions that they asked and the assumptions and theoretical biases that shaped those questions in the first place. Such a perspective necessarily calls into question the very notion of a ‘great’ Shakespearean. All the contributors to this volume agree that Shakespearean greatness, far from being the unfolding through time of a pre-ordained master narrative, must instead be understood, if not ironically, then certainly as the product of local and topical engagements involving artists, audiences and critics.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Peter Holland and Adrian Poole, ‘Series Editors’ Preface,’ *Great Shakespeareans: Gielgud, Olivier, Ashcroft, Dench*, ed. Russell Jackson, Vol. 16 (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), vii.

<sup>29</sup> Holland and Poole, ‘Series Editors’ Preface,’ viii.

<sup>30</sup> Russell Jackson, ‘Introduction,’ *Great Shakespeareans: Gielgud, Olivier, Ashcroft, Dench*, ed. Russell Jackson, Vol. 16 (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1, 13.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Schoch, ‘Introduction,’ *Great Shakespeareans: Macready, Booth, Terry, Irving*, Vol. 6, ed. Richard Schoch (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2011), 12.

Schoch recognises the arbitrariness of his material and the need to counteract this with a high level of self-awareness and emphasis on the local and topical routes by which meaning is formed, rather than affirming any master narratives about Shakespeare's creativity. In spite of Holland and Poole's call to understand the 'most important figures in our understanding of Shakespeare's afterlives', the series focuses resolutely upon the past, however. With the exception of Judi Dench and Franco Zeffereilli all the 'great' Shakespeareans are deceased and, as in the case of Zeffereilli, have not contributed any new material in the last twenty years. Though this naturally serves a useful historical function, any effort to detail the influence of these 'Great Shakespeareans' must also question any continuing impact they have on subsequent generations of performers and interpreters. This, surely, is an essential constituent of Holland and Poole's call to chart Shakespeare's continuing 'afterlives'.<sup>32</sup> Throughout my project I thus seek to deconstruct and question the implications of a 'Shakespearean' label upon an actor, while simultaneously interrogating the cultural impact of the individual actor upon the continually evolving legacy of 'Shakespeare'. These aspects of my work are supported by consideration of critical thought in the fields of adaptation and performance theory, especially with regards to cultural representations of masculinity.

## **Structure and Rationale For Case Studies**

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first (the introduction, which follows below), explores the various areas of critical work which are relevant to my investigation of the Shakespearean performer and how my thesis will build upon them. This introduction is followed by three chapters offering case studies of individual Shakespearean actors: Ian McKellen, Kenneth Branagh and Tom Hiddleston. At this point it is necessary to establish the

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<sup>32</sup> Holland and Poole, 'Series Editors' Preface,' vii.



rationale behind the selection of my case studies and why their careers are conducive to a productive exploration of the Shakespearean actor within contemporary culture.

Ian McKellen's seniority and respected theatrical work have established his importance as a Shakespearean performer and his commitment to interpreting Shakespeare for a broad demographic. At the same time McKellen has enjoyed unrivalled success and recognition amongst actors of his generation through involvement in two of the largest continuing popular film franchises: *The Lord of the Rings* (and its prequel series, *The Hobbit* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2012-14)) and *X-Men*. In the frequency of his movements between Shakespearean theatre and more popular cultural forms McKellen is not unique amongst older British actors. Frequent co-stars such as Patrick Stewart or Sylvester McCoy have similarly well-established theatrical reputations and simultaneously contribute to popular culture (Stewart in *X-Men* and *Star Trek* and McCoy most recently in *The Hobbit* but also memorably in *Doctor Who*). Distinguishing him from both, however, as well as other older actors who have moved between 'highbrow' and popular culture, McKellen consciously engages with what it means to be a 'Shakespearean' in a manner that has often involved a high degree of irony and self-awareness. Utilising his capacity as both a Shakespearean and his crossover success within the mainstream, moreover, McKellen's star persona is frequently invoked in his work as a gay rights advocate. This aspect is especially relevant for an exploration of McKellen's movements between differing cultural modes because of his repeated tendency to portray outsiders or individuals who are physically, socially or sexually Other. This point suggests a potential connection between McKellen's personal and political identity and the roles he has been drawn to in theatre and popular culture alike.

My second selection, Kenneth Branagh, also has well-established Shakespearean credentials as a writer, producer, director and actor. Amongst his generational peers Branagh

is distinctive not only for having enjoyed success as a Shakespearean performer but having led a resurgence in popular film adaptations of Shakespeare during the nineties and early noughties. Indeed, as Samuel Crowl argues, in many ways Branagh's early success with adapting the playwright established the viability of later Shakespeare films such as *O* (dir. Tim Blake Nelson, 2001).<sup>33</sup> Branagh's significance lies in his knowing engagement with the evolving history of Shakespeare on screen and the role of the Shakespearean actor. To borrow Judith Buchanan's description of Stephen Berkoff, Branagh has always been explicitly aware of the ghosts he is 'boxing with', and never more so than in adapting *Henry V*.<sup>34</sup> The first film adaptation since Laurence Olivier's wartime epic, *Henry V* is filled with respected (older) Shakespeareans such as Judi Dench, Derek Jacobi and Paul Scofield. To paraphrase George Bernard Shaw's maxim, Branagh taught his ghosts how to dance.

The visibility of Branagh's persona has not always been to his advantage, though, and his tumultuous relationship with the press during the height of his fame in the nineties offers a valuable case study in the media's representation and engagement with the concept of the 'Shakespearean'. With Branagh's increasing critical and commercial success in popular culture, directing films such as *Thor* (2011), *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (2014) and acting and executive producer credits on *Wallander* (dir. Philip Martin and Niall MacCormick, 2008-12), this is a discussion that has only increased relevance. The media consider that these texts necessitate his Shakespearean prestige being brought into conflict with the (stereotypically) commercialised, culturally unsophisticated needs of the mainstream. It is his consistent tendency to traverse genres, modes and traditional hierarchies in spite of this that

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<sup>33</sup> 'Branagh's unique contribution to the Shakespeare film genre is to have found in Hollywood movies a film language that allowed Shakespeare to break free from the elite art-house audience to find a broader public, especially among the young.' Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Years* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 11.

<sup>34</sup> 'Stephen Berkoff describes the experience of assuming a dramatic role that the greats have inhabited before you as a constant process of 'boxing with ghosts,' the ghosts of past inhabitants of the role seeming reluctant to cede place for the newcomer. For Branagh, however, these ghosts are substantial beings.' Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), 207-8.

argues for the importance of exploring his star persona, however. Unlike McKellen and Hiddleston, Branagh is a common subject of adaptation studies criticism with monographs by Samuel Crowl and Sarah Hatchuel dedicated solely to his work and recurrent study by figures such as Courtney Lehmann, Judith Buchanan, Deborah Cartmell, Mark Thornton Burnett and Richard Burt. These texts offer valuable points of analysis and comparison for my thesis but also one of divergence as consideration of the effect his popular work has upon his Shakespearean reputation is — currently — still largely absent.

It is partly this relationship to Branagh and Shakespeareanism which I intend to research in my third chapter on Tom Hiddleston. Indeed, it is thanks to their shared history that Hiddleston was catapulted into fame as Loki, the chief antagonist of Branagh's *Thor* and a recurrent character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, including *Avengers Assemble* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012) and *Thor: The Dark World* (dir. Alan Taylor, 2013). Hiddleston's Shakespearean credentials were meanwhile established by his starring role in the BBC's *The Hollow Crown*, the adaptation of the second tetralogy of the history plays, and by his portrayal of Coriolanus on stage. This free movement between canonical 'high' cultural texts and the mainstream illustrates Hiddleston's relevance for exploring the multidirectional nature of adaptation. His characters demonstrate clear overlap and while his involvement in *Thor* was founded upon his classical theatre training and ability to convey intelligence, his subsequent Shakespearean performances have been similarly inspired by the visual culture of action blockbusters. It is Hiddleston's relative newness as an actor which is of particular interest to my thesis: I examine the processes at work as a star persona is established in the media's eye and how his Shakespearean identity has been constructed by discussions surrounding ideas of Englishness. Despite still being an emerging talent and having yet to lead a large scale film production, Hiddleston has accrued a large fan-base and it is this, and

his familiarity and engagement with internet culture, which has further determined his inclusion in the thesis, moreover. Individuals such as David Tennant, Chiwetel Ejiofor and Benedict Cumberbatch present similar profiles as (relatively) young British actors who have had critical and commercial success in Britain on television, stage, in Shakespeare (Cumberbatch due to achieve this in 2015) and as actors in large scale Hollywood productions. Hiddleston is distinguished by his level of involvement in curating his star persona, however. The rapidity of his rise to fame and the youthfulness of his audience has ensured his popularity as the subject of internet-based phenomenon and though this is a common occurrence for contemporary celebrities, Hiddleston is unique in the level of his interaction with these memes and his conversance with the popular cultural tropes they signify. His star persona thus represents a productive interplay between the established values of his Shakespeareanism and ‘Englishness’, and his participation in popular culture. Indeed, Hiddleston’s future filmography increasingly testifies to his desire to challenge audience expectations with recent casting in a biopic as country music star Hank Williams in *I Saw the Light* (dir. Marc Abraham, 2015), demonstrating a clear movement away from previous roles.

It is important to acknowledge at this point the wide scope of potential case studies I could have selected for this thesis and that other critics could draw up an entirely different list of Shakespeareans who would prove equally stimulating to explore. Indeed, chapters on the careers of Patrick Stewart and David Tennant were initially part of my proposed study; these were cut from my final structure, though, due to the constraints imposed by both time and word count. The selection of Branagh was perhaps inevitable given the visibility of his Shakespearean identity and his popularity as a subject of adaptation studies. The choice of McKellen and Hiddleston over Stewart and Tennant, however, was due to them more abundantly fitting the criteria I explain below and thereby the particular kind of acting I

analyse throughout the thesis. Both actors demonstrate an awareness of the increasingly hypermedial environment in which their star personas are forged, moreover. And it is their active engagement with their fan base — on social media platforms such as Twitter and, in McKellen’s case, on his personal website — that has permitted a further, original aspect of my thesis: my analysis of a wider set of texts than would be typical in both Shakespeare and adaptation studies, including popular cultural works, commercial paratexts, journalism and internet materials (such as tweets, YouTube videos and memes).

To return to my rationale, the focus on male Shakespearean actors (as I will further expound) represents a conscious decision to analyse through their works a theme common to Shakespeare and the action blockbuster: self-conscious performances of masculinity. Each chapter is a reading of the actor’s Shakespearean star persona, split equally between close critical analysis of the actor’s post-1996 filmography (inclusive of both Shakespearean and blockbuster films) and an interrogation of how these films’ epitexts and the general critical reportage of the actor contribute to the creation of ‘Shakespearean’ meaning.<sup>35</sup> For each actor there is, therefore, at least one high profile instance of their work post-1996 as a central Shakespearean text.<sup>36</sup> This will include the following productions: *King Lear* (dir. Trevor Nunn, 2008), *Hamlet* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1996), *The Hollow Crown* (dir. Rupert Goold,

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<sup>35</sup> It is worth stating that my use of the term ‘critical’ here is — while inclusive of academic depictions and interrogations of the Shakespearean actor within adaptation studies — also concerned with the media establishment and the representations of the actor seen in magazines, newspapers, entertainment television and in social media. It is my awareness of the importance of all forms of critical voice (including academic ones) in shaping and constructing an actor’s star persona, which has determined my use of ‘critical’ rather than merely ‘journalistic’. Indeed, with the exception of watching these individuals perform on stage or on screen, the media is the often chief way in which we experience and process an actor’s star persona. The press is thereby useful for demonstrating how the Shakespearean is viewed by society and how they view themselves. And often, as in the case of Kenneth Branagh for example, this representation may be strongly biased in favour of one opinion of their character and career. Consideration of social media and internet sites, moreover, permits a greater understanding of the actor’s involvement in this process and texts such as internet memes offer valuable sites of interpretation which contribute to an understanding of the Shakespearean actor’s role in popular culture, beyond that which can be viewed in their performances alone.

<sup>36</sup> It is for this reason that I have largely had to avoid focusing in performances too far before 1996, such as those of a still-emerging Ian McKellen; there are brief references made to performances in the early nineties, such as Trevor Nunn’s *Othello* in 1989 and *Richard III* in 1995, however, as a way of situating my Shakespeareans’ early work.

Richard Eyre and Thea Sharrock, 2012) and *Coriolanus* (dir. Josie Rourke, 2013); with analysis of the three actors' work also considering how these actors' performances of Shakespeare on stage may have influenced any subsequent adaptations on film, as well as perceptions of their own career.

This representative Shakespearean case study for each actor is supplemented by criticism of their popular work, with particular focus on the central examples of *X-Men* in the case of Ian McKellen, Kenneth Branagh's *Thor* and Tom Hiddleston's performance as Loki in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. A further criterion for my case studies was thus that they were as well known for their involvement in these mainstream films as for their theatrical work. It is for this reason that Hiddleston was again a more representative case study than Tennant, who has attained a high degree of success in popular culture but has struggled to achieve international recognition. McKellen, similarly, demonstrates more abundant instances of Hollywood film roles with his involvement in not only the *X-Men* franchise but also *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. In comparison to their peers both actors are, I would argue, the most relevant examples of contemporary Shakespearean actors for my thesis, due to the sheer extent of their simultaneous involvement in popular culture. Indeed, it is the apparent conflict between their involvement in Shakespeare and the frequently critically derided blockbuster form which I find productive, with the subsequent potential incongruence to be generated by viewing *King Lear* and *X-Men* in association. I wish to test the extent of the interplay between Shakespeare and the mainstream by examining the divergent points of the Shakespearean's career. Their popular films (and their paratexts) will be read for evidence of the (im)permeability of the actor's Shakespearean identity, therefore. Throughout the thesis I will draw attention to the language used to describe the Shakespearean actor and used by the Shakespearean to describe their work, moreover. The

highly figurative style employed by the media when writing about these performers draws upon the same quasi-mystical reverence afforded Shakespeare in culture, affording the performers gravitas and a high degree of educational, philosophical and cultural cachet.

In terms of the overall structure of my thesis, the chosen sequence of actors is deliberate, moving as it does from the most established and mature Shakespearean, McKellen, the middle-aged Branagh, concluding with the newest and youngest performer, Tom Hiddleston.<sup>37</sup> This organisation also represents a broader grouping according to the processes involved in the construction of their Shakespearean persona. In consideration of McKellen and Branagh my discussion will consciously call upon —and question — the traditionally perceived trajectory of pedagogic, moral and dramatic influence from Shakespeare to an individual (the actor). These case studies thereby invoke questions such as: what does Shakespeare bring to the actor? Why Shakespeare? What is it to be a Shakespearean? In contrast with Hiddleston, McKellen and Branagh's reputation as Shakespeareans have been founded primarily on their early fame as theatre actors, which have later been consolidated in Hollywood. Hiddleston's career, however, demonstrates how a Shakespearean persona can be forged in tandem with a popular cultural identity and how the reciprocity between these cultural modes exemplifies the possibility of the Shakespearean body for the post-Shakespeare world (a critical concept discussed below, see page fifty-six). The overall project of this thesis is to thus interrogate the relationship between Shakespeare and the mainstream, as evinced in the multidirectional interplay of meaning as the Shakespearean actor moves between media and genres.

Before continuing to contextualise the work of my thesis it is worth acknowledging and specifying how I will engage with some of the criticisms laid against my case study

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<sup>37</sup> The structure of my thesis evinces a further reason why the excision of Stewart and Tennant was necessary, as their involvement would have led to the duplication of the examples of periods within an actor's career.

actors as performers and adaptors of Shakespeare. Hiddleston has yet to face much criticism but McKellen and Branagh have both been the targets of critique (personal and professional) by the academy and the press. In both cases this has originated from their perceived investment within the ‘establishment’ and their alleged adherence to traditional structures of government. It has been claimed, for example, that McKellen’s career as an activist for gay rights is undermined by having accepted a knighthood from Margaret Thatcher, under whose leadership the gay community suffered active social censorship. The alternative filmmaker and Early Modern drama adaptor Derek Jarman, expressed his indignation at such assimilationist politics. As Pascale Aebischer details, the group Jarman was working with, OutRage!, proposed aggressive tactics that ‘challenge[d] homophobic and political discrimination in a retaliatory fashion.’ McKellen’s actions and his willingness to work with the conservative government clarified Jarman’s feeling that Shakespeare was associated with the cultural and political establishment. Indeed, Jarman drew the following symbolic distinction between himself and McKellen through an imagined caricature of Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, the latter whom the director identified with: ‘I suspect if Elizabeth I was dishing out knighthoods, Shakespeare would have been at the front door with a begging bowl, Marlowe would have run a mile.’<sup>38</sup> As I will continue to explore in the chapter on McKellen, his supposed complicity with Thatcher through his acceptance of a knighthood and his association with Shakespeare thus established McKellen’s conservatism in the eyes of at least some contemporaries, including more radical gay activists, such as Jarman.

Branagh, too, has been accused of conservatism, both politically and aesthetically. His film adaptation *Henry V*, in particular, is a useful example of why he has faced such criticism. James N. Loehlin describes the film as a ‘compelling illustration of the way an ostensibly

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<sup>38</sup> Pascale Aebischer, *Screening Early Modern Drama: Beyond Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 42-3.



revisionist, ‘secret’ version of the play can be both challenging and conservative.’<sup>39</sup> Although both Branagh and the film invite the expectation that his *Henry V* will offer a critique of nationalism and war, he seemingly endorses Henry’s militarism in a manner that accords with the frequent charges of political conservatism laid against Laurence Olivier’s 1944 film adaptation.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Donald K. Hedrick states that ‘neither anti- nor pro-war’ Branagh’s *Henry V* ‘studiously maintains [...] a conservative rather than critical ambivalence, progressive merely in the weakest sense of its openness towards some undecidability.’<sup>41</sup> This point, which I concur with and return to later in the thesis, is especially evident in the heroic tone adopted at the end of the adaptation, which works to undercut Branagh’s ‘gritty’ realism. Detailing Branagh’s lengthy and productive relationship with Charles, the Prince of Wales, Curtis Bright extended this interpretation, arguing that Branagh had ‘construct[ed] a film ideologically conducive to Thatcherism’, and that his ‘careerism and need for patronage’ ultimately subordinated any supposed leftist critique about war to ‘dubious overlapping ideologies’ about the responsibility of leadership and militaristic brotherhood.<sup>42</sup> Discussing Branagh more broadly as a representative for the ‘heritage Shakespeare’ films of the 1990s, furthermore, Aebischer describes his and others’ work during this period as ‘mainstream in their popular appeal, ‘faithful’ and reverential in their relationship to their literary source’ and ‘conventional in their film grammar and narrative approach’.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>James N. Loehlin, *Henry V: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 128.

<sup>40</sup> ‘I feel the play is about a journey toward maturity. It is about a young monarch who at the beginning is burdened with guilt because his father has unlawfully seized the crown, who has a sometimes precarious relationship with his men but who, at the end, has learned about true leadership’. Michael Billington, ‘A “New Olivier” is taking *Henry V* on the screen,’ *New York Times*, January 8 1989, n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Donald K. Hedrick, ‘War is Mud: Branagh’s Dirty Harry V and the Types of Political Ambiguity,’ *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.

<sup>42</sup> Curtis Bright, ‘Branagh and the Prince, or a “royal fellowship of death”,’ *Critical Quarterly* 33, No. 4 (1991) 95-6.

<sup>43</sup> Aebischer, *Screening Early Modern Drama*, 5.

Additional to these ideological grounds for criticism are objections to Branagh's popular success and his personal ambitions; a reaction which, though also implicitly disparaged by Curtis Breight, is most characteristic of the media's response to Branagh's career. Kenneth S. Rothwell notes that for many of his countrymen Branagh had not only sold out to the Thatcherites but had 'committed the unpardonable sin of being too successful too young...': 'When this novice director's work [...] turned a handsome profit for its plucky backers, his success became unbearable.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Samuel Crowl argues that as a direct result of the two famous British film adaptations of *Henry V*, 'Olivier became a monarchist, Branagh a market capitalist.'<sup>45</sup> Branagh's overwhelming desire to popularise Shakespeare has ironically, at times, left the impression for critics that Branagh doubts the comprehensibility of his material, moreover, relying instead on spectacular visuals and big names to draw customers in. A reviewer of *Hamlet* thus writes,

Branagh seems terrified that the Elizabethan language might sail over heads. Every line – and this is the complete play – is enunciated with the kind of clarity suited to people hard of hearing. And if the text offers a chance for an illustrative glimpse or flashback, Branagh leaps in.<sup>46</sup>

In a similar tone, Alexander Walker comments that the film has 'almost an over-supply of great ones, stars who have been shoehorned into even the bit parts [...] that don't exist in the play Shakespeare wrote. That's chutzpah for you!'<sup>47</sup>

Many of these arguments for Branagh's conservatism are valid and the connection between his desire to celebrate Shakespeare's language (especially evident in the uncut

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<sup>44</sup> Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246.

<sup>45</sup> Concurring on this point, Russell Jackson writes of Branagh's 'whole-hearted participation in the market place'. Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, 33; Russell Jackson, 'Introduction,' *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>46</sup> Geoff Brown, 'Ken's Lust Action Hero,' *The Times*, February 13, 1997, n.p.

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Walker, 'Ken and his Elsinore All-Stars,' *Evening Standard*, February 13, 1997, 26.

*Hamlet*) and a level of aesthetic and formal traditionalism is an immediate and obvious one. The conflict between McKellen's gay advocacy and his relationship with Thatcher is similarly and inevitably problematic. For all three actors, however, I will consider whether such charges of conservatism (aesthetically or politically) have arisen as a direct result of their work in or with Shakespeare and how this Shakespeareanism situates them within a wider cultural or social context. That these actors should be associated with more traditional values is perhaps unsurprising given the continuing tendency within western culture to elevate Shakespeare to a position of quasi-spiritual inviolability and to appropriate him as a representative of British traditionalism. My thesis will test, nonetheless, whether it is wholly fair or precise to 'label' McKellen and Branagh as culturally 'conservative'. Are such labels always accurate descriptors and, particularly in the case of Branagh, is their engagement with Shakespeare more complex and/or less conservative than their detractors might suggest?

## **PART II: Critical Framework(s)**

### **Introduction**

It is the trans-cultural focus of my thesis which I argue marks it out as an original contribution to knowledge within the field of Shakespeare and adaptation studies. Studies such as Sarah Hatchuel's *A Companion to the Shakespearean Films of Kenneth Branagh* are dedicated to the work of individual actors. These texts offer close critical readings of their filmography and at times (although infrequently) suggest the influence of more mainstream experiences on their work. They engage with the actor as star and develop a picture of some of the particularities and impacts of the actor's star persona; they do not do this in consideration of the term 'Shakespearean', however. Similarly, collections of interviews with

‘Shakespeareans’ such as Carol Chillington Rutter’s *Clamorous Voices*, Julian Curry’s *Shakespeare on Stage*, Jonathan Holmes’ *Merely Players* and John Barton’s *Playing Shakespeare*, though offering valuable insights into the actor’s mind during performance, do not usually introduce the rationale behind their selections. The absence of this can be explained simply: the nature of the Shakespearean is not these texts’ main focus. Instead, they explicate the act of performance in a specific way, pertaining to language, movement and characterisation, for example. Nonetheless, the selection of actors in such texts *is* purposeful and behind it lies questions such as, who can be a Shakespearean, what is it to be a Shakespearean and what makes a ‘great’ or successful Shakespearean and are these different abilities? Whether engaged with consciously or not, or simply the dictates of practicality and availability, there are implicit judgement values at work that thus determine why, for example, Curry interviewed Patrick Stewart on the role of Prospero rather than the focusing on the cross-gendered casting of Vanessa Redgrave or Helen Mirren? And why Prospero or why is the stage prefigured as the site of Shakespearean interpretation when Shakespeare has a burgeoning history of adaptation on film or radio? Although an in-depth exploration of what the Shakespearean is may not suit such texts, the absence of *any* criteria behind their work suggests that the status of Shakespearean actor is inherent and unconscious rather than a deliberate performance with its own associated meanings and traditions. In both cases there is thus a clear absence of criticism in a key area which I seek to address.

By exploring the multidirectional interplay of influence between Shakespeare and the mainstream I will extend analysis of Shakespearean performance beyond its usual realms of theatre and adaptation, moreover. What further distinguishes my thesis is its sustained, comparative work on the blockbuster form. This is an area relatively under-researched (although this is being steadily remedied), with many studies on the genre tied to the action

films of the 1980s and 1990s. On a practical level my thesis will bring criticism on the blockbuster and, indeed, Shakespeare adaptation up to the current moment, exploring case studies as recent as 2014. By also linking my study of the blockbuster and Shakespeare's plays through a discussion of masculinity and male heroism, I will interrogate the body as site of performance. It is this somatic reading (further explicated from page forty-four onwards), by now a staple of performance studies and an increasingly influential aspect of Shakespeare studies, which lies at the foundation of my thesis. By focusing directly upon the actor (rather than the film) as the transferable and adaptable conduit of meaning, I intend to step beyond existing criticism on Shakespeare adaptation. The remainder of the introduction will provide an overview of the critical methodology which I will both utilise and which has been influential on a broader level in determining the objectives and practice of my work. I will also detail current academic work in the fields relevant to my research and how my thesis will engage with, draw upon and further contribute to it.

## **The Star-Body**

Adaptation and star theory, though connected by their shared location underneath the wider umbrella of film studies and their recognition of mainstream culture as a valuable area of critical exploration, are traditionally distinct and often dealt with separately.<sup>48</sup> In this thesis,

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<sup>48</sup> A brief survey of collected editions in adaptation studies is instructive of the way in which the field typically selects material for analysis. Although one of the most recent publications, *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation* (ed. Deborah Cartmell, (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012)) contains examinations of the intersection between 'high' and popular culture with chapters dedicated to *Othello*, *Hamlet*, heritage drama but also *X-Men*, the superhero and *Harry Potter*, it is largely focused on author, text or genre-based study. Similarly, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film* employs sustained analysis on individual plays or themes such as the 'tragedies of love'. And *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Film* (ed. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)) situates adaptation in cultural periods such as modernism and postmodernism and focuses on canonical authors. Actors, with the exception of actor-directors such as Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles or Kenneth Branagh, are rarely the exclusive focus in adaptation studies. Instead, analysis of performance is used in order to primarily explicate adaptations of the plays or Shakespeare more generally, not as a topic in its own regard. It is worth noting, moreover, that the actor's performance will only be regarded on that occasion, and rarely will their wider

however, I wish to unite the two areas, arguing for the star-body as the site of Shakespearean adaptation. This is a body which, in keeping with star theory and performance studies, is a series of unconsciously iterated, culturally constructed meanings. It is simultaneously a particular set of meanings unique to that 'persona', self-consciously forged through performance in the theatre, on film and in the public eye. Both sets of meanings thus contribute to the creation of the actor's identity as a whole and are potentially invoked in future performances and brought to bear upon all subsequent work. My project is to begin unravelling this complicated accrual of meaning and to decipher some of the distinct, individual facets of the Shakespearean star persona. I will do this by reading the Shakespearean as a corporeal point of adaptation: a locus of points from which all subsequent, divergent performances result. As such my critical reading has been informed by the desire to work through criticism on adaptation and star theory in a concurrent manner with a mind to identifying points of compatibility and adapting my own *mélange* of theory.

Indeed, the Shakespearean actor, I maintain, complicates some of the literature that has already been produced within star theory. Christine Geraghty's break down of the 'star' into three different types — celebrity, professional and performer — is instructive here. The 'star-as-professional' would accord for many with their mental image of the Shakespearean as a trained, theatrical professional in an industry independent of certification; as Geraghty states, someone whose star persona 'makes sense' in a very particular context.<sup>49</sup> The 'performer' appears to me more characteristic of the way in which the Shakespearean is viewed, however:

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filmography also be considered as part of their screen presence. On the other hand, film studies texts such as *British Stars and Stardom* (ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001)) and Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) utilise actor-based studies in order to explore wider social and thematic concerns.

<sup>49</sup> Christine Geraghty, 'Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance,' *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 188.

[The performer is]...associated with work and the public element of the star duality rather than the private life of the celebrity. In this category though, unlike that of the professional, skills and performance elements are not hidden but drawn attention to and the emphasis is on the showcasing or demonstration of skills.<sup>50</sup>

Geraghty qualifies her threefold formulation of the star, stating that ‘the more actors are known only for their performance, the more cultural value they are likely to be given’. Conversely, the ‘further’ an actor strays from performance ‘into the duality of the star, the more cultural value is lost’.<sup>51</sup> Though Geraghty offers Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson’s acrimonious split as an example, the usefulness of this point deserves further elaboration. The Shakespearean is an individual whose persona is developed upon and through the public showcasing of their skill; whether this skill is seen by the majority of the public is somewhat a moot point as a great deal of their reputation is established by critical reportage. Indeed, if not seen to be involved in productions with high associated cultural capital the Shakespearean may risk losing their particular cachet as a star. I will explore this particular point during my chapter on Branagh, examining the effect the decision to establish himself within the mainstream, directing Marvel superhero caper *Thor* had upon his Shakespearean billing.

Star theory in general has recognised this possibility for dynamism on the level of the star persona, with critics emphasising the instability of the star and the construction of their identity both intertextually and extratextually. Like much postmodern, post-structuralist criticism, avoiding a singular definitive configuration of its chosen subject, such work characterises the star as caught between binaries, challenging analysis. For Christine Gledhill, a topic of note is thus the star’s transgression of disciplinary boundaries, resisting the

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<sup>50</sup> Geraghty, ‘Re-examining Stardom’, 186.

<sup>51</sup> Geraghty, ‘Re-examining Stardom’, 187.

divisions between individual, creative agency and homogenizing commercialism. She defines the star as a ‘product of mass culture but retaining theatrical concerns’, ‘an industrial marketing device but a signifying element in films’, a social sign carrying ‘ideological values’ which also expresses ‘the intimacies of individual personality’.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Edgar Morin depicts the star as the embodiment of contradictory desires: a ‘unique synthesis’ of physical beauty and mask, personality and automaton; the star system itself both accessible and inaccessible.<sup>53</sup> Most famously for Richard Dyer in the field-defining *Stars*, the star as site of contradiction is also a possible space of resistance. For Dyer star images function in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies; these they seek variously either to resolve, or sometimes even to expose and embody.<sup>54</sup> Star theory’s discussion of the actor’s ambivalent position is pivotal to my own formulation and discussion of the Shakespearean actor as a star persona founded in contradictory states of being, therefore. The Shakespearean is at once independent producer of meaning *and* subject of authorship; participant in a literary phenomenon limited to a small, appreciative group *and* purveyor of its gift-shop commercialised, mass cultural meaning; critically lauded theatrical actor *and* spectacular blockbuster star.

I intend, therefore, to explore the significances of such multiplicity, examining the Shakespearean actor as the locus of varying and often contradictory cultural modes, practices and meanings. With regards to this, Dyer has also proved essential for his configuration of the processes by which numerous texts accrue to form a particular image of the star persona in the public mind. It is ‘misleading’, Dyer argues, to think of texts ‘combining cumulatively into a sum total that constitutes the image’. Rather, the image is a ‘complex totality’ — a

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<sup>52</sup> Christine Gledhill, ‘Introduction,’ *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), xiii.

<sup>53</sup> Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (BFI: London, 1998), 34.



‘structured polysemy’.<sup>55</sup> This multiplicitous way of conceiving the star persona is crucial, focusing as it does upon a constantly accruing series of images that make up the star rather than a single sum total. I sustain, however, that Dyer’s formulation of the distinction between the ‘*authenticity* of his [the actor’s] own life’ and the ‘*authenticated* life of the character he is playing’ is complicated in the case of the Shakespearean; a point which needs to be taken into consideration when placing the actor as the site of adaptation.<sup>56</sup> Dyer argues that stars collapse the distinction between the *actor’s* authenticity and the authentication of the *character* they are playing. In some cases this collapse may end by ‘root[ing]’ the character in the real ‘true’ self of the star, while in others the distinct gap between the actor’s ‘self’ and the character of performance becomes part of those stars. The Shakespearean as an actor, though, is a figure far more knotty in terms of what his ‘authentic’ self is. As I will continue to explicate, the Shakespearean — a term which, it must be stressed, is not only applied when or to an actor performing Shakespeare but in other situations, including their personal life — is already invested with meaning, not merely those associated with the character they are about to inhabit. This process imbues their performance of character *and* actor in a subtle, shifting and multidirectional interplay that belies the apparent simplicity of Dyer’s ‘collapse’ between actor and character and is more akin to the complex nature of his structured polysemy.

Further to this point, as Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe propose, within what is in many respects still a nascent critical environment, it is necessary to be circumspect and self-conscious regarding the vocabulary of adaptation.<sup>57</sup> It is thus worth noting the rationale behind my use of ‘persona’ in summation of the actor as that which refers to an identity in constant re-definition, negotiated through the star’s public reception, critical standing,

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<sup>55</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> Dyer, *Stars*, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe eds., *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

performance history and numerous other aspects. Barry King configures the term ‘persona’ to mean the conversation of the body, the person and the image; in which the person represents the pre-coded physical presence of the actor and the image indicates their visual representation, on and off-screen. King’s definition of ‘persona’ is thereby placed at the ‘intersection of cinematic and filmic discursive practices in an effort to realise a coherent subjectivity.’<sup>58</sup> Indeed, his work is intensely aware of the implication of stardom as a concept defined within the limits and desires of an industry, marketed simultaneously as a sign of success and artistic independence. For King stardom is, therefore, a ‘strategy of performance’, an adaptive response to the limits and pressures of mainstream cinema, and a response to three distinct systems of control: the cultural economy of the body as a sign, the economy of signification in film, and the economy of the labour market for actors.<sup>59</sup> It is this concept of stardom as a *performed* act which I develop through my thesis, particularly in relation to the performativity of gender and the specific commodity value of British Shakespeareans within (particularly American) popular culture.

## **The Shakespearean**

Bearing in mind the limits, processes and complications involved in the Shakespearean star-body, it is essential to establish the particular issues of contention in question when regarding the Shakespearean’s performances (be them professional or persona) as an embodied site of adaptation. Michel Foucault’s work, ‘What is an author?’ is formative in constructing my critical approach to the Shakespearean. Foucault argues that the author is a ‘certain functional principle by which in our culture one limits, excludes and chooses’. The author is the ‘principle of a certain unity of writing’ in which all differences have to be ‘resolved’ and

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<sup>58</sup> Barry King, ‘Articulating Stardom,’ *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 175.

<sup>59</sup> King, ‘Articulating Stardom’, 167.

through whom all ‘contradictions are [...] tied together’.<sup>60</sup> Though Foucault’s argument is a highly influential one and a useful point of summary of current critical attitudes towards issues of authorship, I would like to test the premise it establishes.

Acting, as Barry King argues, is based upon ‘some concept of intentionality or authorship’ and that, although frequently taken for granted, the author is consciously performing.<sup>61</sup> For the Shakespearean actor, however, the idea of intentionality or authorship is more complex, as is indicated by the implications of his nominal status. The Shakespearean carries a kind of embodied authorship, played out through their public persona and performance style. Specifically, the actor’s performances are already pre-determined by the particular set of cultural meanings, educational functions and *author*-ity attached to the term ‘Shakespearean’. What makes the Shakespearean a distinct phenomenon in terms of performance is the uniqueness of the playwright’s status: his ubiquity in Western culture is such that his works are often invoked unconsciously, or can be referenced without in-depth knowledge of the plays — his name functioning simply as a shorthand for drama. Allusions to Shakespeare or the Shakespearean may conjure associations of high culture and a particular performance style even in the minds of those who have not read his works, therefore. This cultural proliferation is matched, moreover, by the historical fact that — with a brief interruption during the Interregnum — his plays have been performed for over four hundred years and with greater frequency than those of any other playwright. In relation to this, the Shakespearean only temporarily claims ownership of the text he performs in and yet, as his title implies the text, the ‘author’ and the Shakespeare canon retains ownership of him in future performances. As Michael Anderegg observes on the influence Orson Welles had in America, in the public eye to be a Shakespearean ‘was nearly the same as being a

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<sup>60</sup> Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, 209, 204.

<sup>61</sup> King, ‘Articulating Stardom’, 167.

Shakespearean character'.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, when discussing the naming of particular texts as adaptations, Margaret Jane Kidnie argues that in the instance of *Return to Forbidden Planet*, describing it as an adaptation 'falls only just short of describing it as its own work' and yet 'as an adaptation it remains locked in an uneasy tension with *The Tempest*'.<sup>63</sup> To employ Kidnie's distinction, the adapted nature of the 'Shakespearean' actor and their embodiment of Shakespearean authorship thus functions in a Foucauldian sense by shaping the way in which the actor is viewed critically, his performance style and, to some extent, his choice of future projects and his casting.

What ultimately resists Foucault's concept of a limiting, excluding authorship, however, is the simple fact that the Shakespearean actor is never limited to Shakespeare. It is here that Kidnie's qualification between *being* an adaptation and being named as an adaptation can be questioned. In contrast to more traditional adaptations, even Kidnie's example of *Return to Forbidden Planet*, the Shakespearean performer as an adaptive site is a participant in the on-going performance history of Shakespeare, but they still simultaneously and independently possess and produce meaning. My reading of the Shakespearean as an intertextual space is significant in determining not only the argument of my thesis but in shaping my methodology and the kind of texts and textual approaches I adopt. Barbara Hodgdon's configuration in *The Shakespeare Trade* is instructive here. Hodgdon states that her method is to move away from reading performances through the myth of the definitive text and author, to one where 'performances figure as cultural productions or even commodities'.<sup>64</sup> Such a reading of the processes by which Shakespeare's meaning exists within culture is valuable: Hodgdon is aware that the creation of meaning is embedded within

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<sup>62</sup> Michael Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999), 8.

<sup>63</sup> Margaret Jane Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 65.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), xi.

processes of circulation and borrowing but also firmly dictated by economic situations and the particulars of production. Douglas Lanier's engagement with a Foucauldian reading of authorship is similarly productive. Lanier observes the similarity between the concept of branding and the critical operation by which the name of Shakespeare 'becomes a byword for a set of qualities that have been attached to an astonishing variety of texts and products'. He identifies the significance of a brand name not as a result of a single marketer or critic, but as the consequence of interactions between producers, consumers and various cultural intermediaries and contexts.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Lanier argues that 'like all brand icons' the Shakespeare trademark is an 'open signifier', with the particular associations of the brand open to 'appropriation, rearticulation, extension, even negation and parody'. The Shakespeare brand is always dependent upon the needs of the user and always open to rebranding 'should the need arise.'<sup>66</sup> Lanier and Hodgdon's recognition of the importance of economic and other contextual pre-conditions for a dynamic and adaptable concept of authorship has shaped my consideration of the meanings attached to the Shakespearean actor. Rather than possessing a single, pre-defined relationship to the playwright, the Shakespearean should be viewed in remembrance of the nature of acting as an occupation. This is one which is driven and shaped by economic conditions and which is not — as memory suggests — distinguished by a couple of stand-out performances but by a career of different roles within an industry.

By working outside of the purely and traditionally 'Shakespearean', the cultural meanings and legacy attached to the Shakespearean actor are brought into an new, stimulating environment, therefore. Judith Buchanan's succinct and accurate identification of the interconnected, twofold implications of this process is again essential here. In cinema (perhaps more than on stage) we read character through the 'determining filter' of the star.

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<sup>65</sup> Douglas Lanier, 'Shakespeare™: Myth and Biographical Fiction,' *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 93.

<sup>66</sup> Lanier, 'Shakespeare™', 94.

Through this and other cinematic conditions (direction, music, etc.) we are invited to consider what Buchanan calls the ‘textual penumbra’. The ‘penumbra’ is the extra-textual information surrounding a film which can ‘seep irresistibly’ into our reading because of the associations which come inextricably attached to the actor, compromising any notion of textual autonomy. The text thereby constantly gathers accretions, ‘some diversionary, some pertinent’ by means of the ‘shared information’ which circulates around it.<sup>67</sup> Gérard Genette’s five transtextual relations — intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality — is similarly instructive in demonstrating the potential reach of the adaptation critic.<sup>68</sup> To demonstrate the benefit of this approach, consider Anthony Hopkins in *Titus* (dir. Julie Taymor, 1999). His performance fulfils the rage, eloquence and violence expected of his character. Considering Hopkins’ other roles at the same time as reading *Titus*, however, complicates our reading of both this adaptation and the other performances. Hopkins’ portrayal of Titus the mad butcher is indelibly inflected by his prior role as Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991). Later incarnations of Lecter in *Hannibal* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2001) and *Red Dragon* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2002) can too be read with the taint of Titus on them. The potential for the audience to read Lecter’s personality alongside Hopkin’s Titus creates a sense of awful inevitability about the violence the play dissolves into and, most obviously, foreshadows the cannibalism of its end.<sup>69</sup> Hopkins is a relevant example for my thesis, moreover, with his prominent role in both *Thor* and its sequel; indeed, his performance as Odin accesses distinctly Shakespearean qualities and

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<sup>67</sup> Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Gérard Genette, *The Architext: an Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> The extent to which the concept of the textual penumbra invites the creation of a dense network of intertextuality is further evident through the character of Hannibal Lecter. *Red Dragon*, the final performance by Hopkins in the role, is actually the second adaptation of the same novel by Thomas Harris. Bearing the name *Manhunter* (dir. Michael Mann, 1986), the first attempt at adapting the series starred Brian Cox as Lecter (Cox, who had famously performed *Titus* in Deborah Warner’s critically acclaimed 1987 production). This serendipity goes further, however: during the production of *Manhunter*, Anthony Hopkins was playing *King Lear* on stage at the National Theatre. Five years later, during the production of *The Silence of the Lambs* as Hopkins took over the role of Lecter, Cox played *King Lear* also at the National Theatre.

alongside the Lear-esque aspects of his characterisation, possesses some recognisably Titus-inspired attributes. Through the agency of the Shakespearean actor and both the multiplicity and inter-cultural diversity of the texts with which they involve themselves, they can thus subvert traditional trajectories of influence (i.e. from Shakespeare to popular culture) and complicate our reading of films or plays.

The importance of casting in this process should briefly be raised here, furthermore, with the significance which can be derived not only from who *is* cast, but who isn't. Thomas Leitch states, as an 'inescapably performative medium' both film and theatre (although to a lesser extent) witness the simultaneous existence of what the character is doing and how the actor performing. One result of this, Leitch argues, is to making casting 'quite apart from either the economic impact of well-known performers and the performers they actually give, essential to discussion of movies.'<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Jack Boozer maintains that 'adaptations also typically have more limited options in the casting of lead characters' because of the 'expectations of audiences relative to the given character profiles in the source text.' To return to Hopkins, Boozer uses the actor as an example of the success of 'close matching', with the 'definitive performances' of leads Hopkins and Jodie Foster in *The Silence of the Lambs* mirroring the physiognomy of their characters and 'convincingly project[ing] their traits'.<sup>71</sup> Though aware of the impossibility of satisfying all readers and audiences, Boozer's recognition of their expectations is noteworthy, nonetheless. Casting demonstrates the very real implications of Buchanan's penumbra: the complex negotiation of aesthetics, particular class, cultural or national valences, performance history, industry standing and other elusive,

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<sup>70</sup> Thomas Leitch, *Adaptation & Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), n.p.

<sup>71</sup> Jack Boozer, 'Introduction,' *Authorship in Film Adaptation*, ed. Jack Boozer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 8.

entirely serendipitous aspects, all of which contribute to the decision to appoint one actor over another.

Keith A. Reader also too makes this aspect of the screen actor explicit, writing: '[t]he very concept of the film *star* is an intertextual one, relying as it does on the correspondences of similarity and difference from one film to the next'.<sup>72</sup> This creation of an intertextual web of references, as Sarah Hatchuel argues, also clearly advertises the film as a 'cinematic product'.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it is this point which must be stressed. As Buchanan, Hatchuel and Reader all state without elaborating, the intertextual links created by the actor, their past performances, their star persona and personal reference points, are most visibly demonstrated and maintained within film. Despite an increasing number of filmed theatre performances and the influence of DVD extras on promotional websites, theatre remains a largely singular experience.<sup>74</sup> By contrast cinema, thanks to the ever-increasing speeds between theatrical release and DVD production and the ready availability of DVDs or digital content, can be viewed over and over. Sly cinematic references missed the first time can be seen again: the viewer can develop personal interpretations over time as the smallest moment of cinematic intertextuality can be paused and meticulously dwelt upon. Meanwhile, ever more generous extras reveal personal insights from the cast and crew and even chart less 'glamorous' aspects of film development in sound recording, editing and cinematography. These releases are in turn accompanied by an abundance of print and online media interviews alongside what more candid or spontaneous information can be gleaned from actors', directors' and producers' personal Twitter accounts and personal websites (this is especially evident in McKellen's and

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<sup>72</sup> Keith A. Reader, 'Literature/Cinema/Television: Intertextuality in Jean Renoir's *Le testament du Docteur Cordelier*,' *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), 176.

<sup>73</sup> Sarah Hatchuel, *Shakespeare, From Stage to Screen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 113.

<sup>74</sup> The Globe is currently one of the few theatre companies that release DVDs of their live, filmed productions. The National Theatre are releasing an ever increasing number of their shows for cinema audiences but these are very limited runs and are marketed more as theatrical 'events' than easily accessible films.



Hiddleston's online engagement with their fans, as I will demonstrate). These all mean that audiences are provided with vast amounts of information about not only the intimacies of their favourite actors' lives, but many details of film production. My central argument that the Shakespearean actor is the point of the adaptive encounter is thus ideally served by the methodological focus of this thesis upon the inter- and extratextual extent of their star personae. I intend to employ an awareness of the increasingly multimedia nature of film and theatre intertextuality as a strategy of differentiation between previous studies of the Shakespearean actors, moreover. My third chapter on Tom Hiddleston, for instance, will consider his performances on stage and screen, the intertextual meaning generated by these and the way his star identity has been subsequently discussed and established within the media. It will also consider his internet persona and interactions with meme culture as a further site of performance.

Of equal importance with regards to the Shakespearean on film is Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, a concept which has proved essential to criticism on figures such as Kenneth Branagh.<sup>75</sup> Branagh in particular is popular amongst adaptation critics, with work by academics such as Nick Cox and Courtney Lehmann exemplifying the complex and rewarding analysis which can be achieved through a discussion of a star's cultural capital. Though working on Branagh alone, Cox's description of the star's relationship with cultural capital is applicable to my other Shakespearean case studies. Cox argues that Branagh's classical background and association with Shakespeare means that his identity as a film actor

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<sup>75</sup> Bourdieu revised the definition of cultural capital throughout his lifetime, making an attempt to provide only one explanation of his interpretation difficult. Lamont and Lareau, who documented these revisions, provide a useful framework for the term and its wide range of functions arguing that, 'cultural capital is alternatively an informal academic standard, a class attribute, a basis for social selection, and a resource for power which is salient as an indicator/basis of class position'. They thus define it as: 'institutionalized, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion, the former referring to exclusion from jobs and resources, and the latter, to exclusion from high status groups.' Michele Lamont and Annette Laureau, 'Cultural Capital: Allusions, Gaps and Glissandos in Recent Theoretical Developments,' *Sociological Theory*, 6 (2), 1988, 156.

‘has been caught in a contradiction’, occupying a ‘radically ambivalent space’.<sup>76</sup> His filmic persona is imperilled by the potential charge of vulgarisation from those who locate exclusive cultural capital in Shakespeare or comparable theatrical works, but also risks being associated with a narrowly English or culturally elitist set of concerns. This is a position common to the Shakespeareans I will be discussing, who have similarly forged careers by performing works traditionally invested with cultural capital, but who have simultaneously established themselves as popular stars. The significance of Olivier’s decision to advertise Polaroid, for example, lay in being seen to cross a line not crossed before, by moving from a perceived ‘high’ artistic mode to a commercial one.

Despite positing that Branagh manipulates his cultural capital in order to gain entry into the Hollywood star system, however, Cox views a rift between the two cultures.<sup>77</sup> Douglas Lanier interrogates this apparent irreconcilability. He argues that in the postmodern age Shakespearean cultural capital has undergone a ‘recuperative transformation’, with capital now moving freely from investment to investment, value accruing from a process of ‘reciprocal legitimation’.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Mark Thornton Burnett believes that Branagh is largely responsible for enabling this process to begin, praising his films for ‘reclaim[ing]’ Shakespeare and promoting the playwright beyond a ‘narrow selective constituency.’<sup>79</sup> The conflict Cox sees in the competing aspects of Branagh as Shakespearean and film star is for Lanier the complementary, edifying process which revitalises both Shakespeare and popular culture. Shakespeare’s association with mass cultural products lends them a moiety of depth, authority and seriousness, while in return the association with mass culture attributes

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<sup>76</sup> Nick Cox, ‘Kenneth Branagh: Shakespearean Film, Cultural Capital and Star Status,’ *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Andy Willis (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2004), 143.

<sup>77</sup> Cox, ‘Kenneth Branagh: Shakespearean Film, Cultural Capital and Star Status’, 144.

<sup>78</sup> Douglas Lanier, ‘Recent Shakespeare Adaptation and the Mutations of Cultural Capital,’ *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 38 (2010), 104.

<sup>79</sup> Mark Thornton Burnett, ‘“We Are the Makers of Manners”: The Branagh Phenomenon,’ *Shakespeare After Mass Media*, ed. Richard Burt (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 95.

Shakespeare credibility and broad intelligibility. Though presenting opposing arguments, both critics are useful, nevertheless. Cox's work on Shakespearean cultural capital (similarly employed in criticism by Donald K. Hedrick, Courtney Lehmann and Ramona Wray amongst others) offers a valuable model for understanding the values attached to the Shakespearean in cultural and educational establishments. Nonetheless, I ultimately agree with Lanier's contention that the Shakespearean cultural capital is not without the possibility of adapting and merging with the mainstream, as will be illustrated by my interrogation of the Shakespearean actor's star body within popular culture.

## **The Body in Performance**

It is necessary to establish in greater depth the way in which the body —and the unique processes it is involved in through performance — has been viewed critically over the period characterised by Keir Elam as the 'corporeal turn'.<sup>80</sup> Of special significance in charting the body in modern critical thought are four main figures: Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Joseph Roach. Prior to Bourdieu's work, however, there was already what Colin Counsell neatly summarises as a 'theorised understanding of the body as vehicle for extant cultural meaning' with work by Marcel Mauss demonstrating the relationship between corporeal practices and a wider '*habitus*'.<sup>81</sup> Bourdieu later argued more specifically that actor and observer exist in a perceptual relationship, functioning within the same inherited frames so that their behaviours establish a form of corporeal remembering.<sup>82</sup> It is this which Michel Foucault developed through his work on surveillance in *Discipline and Punishment*. Foucault attributes behaviour a mnemonic status and while much of the text's focus traces the episteme through discourses on education and penology, its impact is upon the body. Knowledge for

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<sup>80</sup> Elam, "In what chapter of his bosom?", 143.

<sup>81</sup> Colin Counsell, 'Introduction,' in *Performance, Embodiment and Cultural Memory*, ed. Colin Counsell and Roberta Mock (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 1; Marcel Mauss, 'The Techniques of the Body' in *Economy and Society*, 2/1 (February 1974), 70-88.

<sup>82</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Algerians* (New York: Beacon Books, 1961).

Foucault is always ‘power/knowledge’ with social control heavily implicated in the corporeal.<sup>83</sup> Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* further interrogated the politics of the body and its apparently natural meanings. Inverting traditional Cartesian models of selfhood which dismissed the body as mere automaton — expressing what lies beneath in the far more valuable and ‘essential’ mind — Butler argues that ‘essential’ selfhood is a ‘chimera’. Instead, subjects enact identity via existing corporeal codes, by ‘stylised acts’ that possess societal value.<sup>84</sup> It must be stated, though, that Butler’s anti-essentialism does not preclude the possibility of a mind that drives performance. Indeed, if the call to arms of *Gender Trouble* is for the recognition of the performativity of gender, Butler must acknowledge the existence of a mind that moves bodily iterations. Similarly to Butler, therefore — and in contrast to the negativism of Foucault’s embodiment — Joseph Roach postulates that memory is generated and negotiated by particular bodies and specific acts. Performance thus forms the very substance of cultural life: it is the process by which the terms of collective existence are made and remade.<sup>85</sup> This drawing out of Butler’s premise along with Roach’s, in particular, is a reading of the body in relation to performance which I seek to practice throughout my thesis. Through my analysis I will highlight the ways in which the stars’ bodies are mindfully involved in performance and the attribution of interpretive meaning to them — both by themselves but also by the productions in which they are involved. I will also, however, comment upon the bodily meanings which may escape the actor’s control or deliberate performance, but which are evident through a corporeal articulation of ideas surrounding class or national identity.

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<sup>83</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>84</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 140.

<sup>85</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

This thesis will thus explore how memory *and* meaning is generated and negotiated by the body of the actor and how his body contributes to or contests the particular associations and cultural capital attached to the commodity which is ‘Shakespeare’. Laurence Senelick writes that the body is a ‘variable charged with protean potential’ and because of this potential requires continuous re-examination and reassessment.<sup>86</sup> It is exactly this protean potential (and its need for continuous analysis) which I endeavour to expound upon, opening up the Shakespearean actor as an embodied site of adaptation: one with the opportunity to traverse traditionally oppositional cultural modes and, by carrying often disparate meanings, able to create a multi-directional interplay between these modes. The body, as Peter Novak argues, not only ‘incarnates language and reincarnates both memory and texts through performance’<sup>87</sup> but it ‘*re-members*’ beyond individual performances, constantly accruing meaning.

In contrast, however, Martin Buzacott argues that actors are ‘bodies corporeal, Shakespearean characters are bodies politic’: the one ‘transient’, the other moving with the times. He contends that the Shakespearean character is ‘self-sustaining, possessing a hieratic constitution whose identity acquired through history has the capacity to intimidate and oppress’. On an imaginative level, he writes, ‘the body politic always wins.’ Buzacott asserts, moreover, that the Shakespearean character is so historically established that it ‘permits no mortal interpretation’ beyond that which has already been achieved: ‘Its plenitude of meanings are pre-existing and independent of individual theatrical realisation.’<sup>88</sup> While I recognise the discourse of sanctity which surrounds Shakespeare culturally, I cannot help but

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<sup>86</sup> Laurence Senelick, ‘Introduction,’ *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts* (London: University Press of New England, 1992), ix.

<sup>87</sup> Peter Novak, ‘Shakespeare in the Fourth Dimension: *Twelfth Night* and American Sign Language,’ *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*, ed. Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche and Nigel Wheale (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 22.

<sup>88</sup> Martin Buzacott, *The Death of the Actor: Shakespeare on Page and Stage* (London: Routledge, 1991), 27-8.

question at what point Buzacott believes the plenitude of meaning surrounding character was established; at what point in the lengthy history of Shakespearean performance were the limits of interpretation settled? This aspect of Buzacott's work sits uneasily within a great deal of performance theory and opposes the main thrust of my argument. This is that — although sometimes hindered by the associations that gather around the term 'Shakespearean', particularly within the media — the actor is able to reverse the traditional trajectory of influence and through the diverse elements of their filmography create new and surprising influences upon Shakespeare's legacy. The Shakespearean character is thus never entirely closed down or unable to accrete new meaning and associations. Nor can the actor only hope to leave a 'little graffiti' at best.<sup>89</sup> As James C. Bulman writes, the 'radical contingency of performance' destabilises Shakespeare and makes theatrical meaning a 'participatory act.'<sup>90</sup> In contrast to Buzacott's negative, closed language Bulman emphasises unpredictability, playfulness: the image of the text as a network of signs, expressive means or actions all woven together. Similarly, Ralph Berry urges the awareness that with regards to Shakespeare and performance 'there is no master key.' Rather, one has to accept that the play is an 'infinitely complex set of possibilities, not a logical grid'.<sup>91</sup>

There is, therefore, a wealth of performance theory which will support this thesis and its exploration of the Shakespearean actor's body within performance, through engagement with critics such as those discussed above and others including Carol Chillington Rutter, Pascale Aebischer, Anthony B. Dawson, Keir Elam and W.B. Worthen. It must be stressed, however, that debates surrounding what the body performs and conveys culturally do not operate in an ideological vacuum. W.B. Worthen argues, contrary to the common image of

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<sup>89</sup> Buzacott, *The Death of the Actor*, 132.

<sup>90</sup> James C. Bulman, 'Introduction: Shakespeare and Performance Theory,' *Shakespeare, Theory, and Performance*, ed. James C. Bulman (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 1.

<sup>91</sup> Ralph Berry, *Shakespeare in Performance: Casting and Metamorphoses* (Basingstoke: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 8.

the actor as a ‘blank page’<sup>92</sup>, the body is ‘not so much a *tabula rasa* but a script itself, the repository of apparently “natural” physiological, psychological and gender attributes.’<sup>93</sup> Of particular interest to the project of this thesis are not only the ideological implications of an embodied Shakespearean cultural capital (in comparison to the capital of popular culture alone) but an embodied reading of gender. As Jill Dolan has suggested, not only the staging of violent bodies but *any* representation of bodies is ‘ideologically marked; it always connotes gender, which carries with the meanings inscribed by the dominant culture.’<sup>94</sup>

Carol Chillington Rutter serves as a particularly strong influence with texts such as *Clamorous Voices: Shakespeare’s Women Today* and *Enter the Body: Women and Representation* eloquently demonstrating the connection between the gendered body and performance, furthermore. For Chillington Rutter the body bears the brunt of performance as the material Shakespeare’s text ‘works *on* and works *through*’.<sup>95</sup> Critically and methodologically — *Clamorous Voices* was structured through case study interviews with noted female Shakespeareans — Rutter is simultaneously a point of connection and divergence for this project. Her work on the body is informed by a strong feminist commitment to restoring the often marginalised figure of the female Shakespeare character and female Shakespearean, by demonstrating the body as a politicised discursive nexus — an inscriptive surface. It is here that my thesis represents a distinct departure from this valuable work done by Chillington Rutter and Aebischer, amongst others, as my focus is exclusively on the male Shakespearean. This act is a conscious and deliberate one, unlike some collections on Shakespearean actors which appear unintentionally exclusionary; while Rutter

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<sup>92</sup> Pascale Aebischer, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 5.

<sup>93</sup> W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 112.

<sup>94</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1991), 64.

<sup>95</sup> Carol Rutter, *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage* (London: Routledge, 2001), xii [my emphasis added].

and Aebischer study gendered bodily performance from a position of female marginalisation I will be analysing the self-conscious performance of male power through concepts such as the 'heroic'.

Despite exploring a widely varying range of historical periods, texts by critics interested in masculinity such as Mark Breitenberg, Roger Horrocks, Michael Mangan and Peter Middleton are united by their acknowledgement that male power is a performance as artificial and self-conscious as anything portrayed on Shakespeare's stage. Breitenberg asserts that within the Early Modern period the performance of masculinity is characterised by a mood of anxiety: anxiety which is 'both a negative effect that leads us to patriarchy's own internal discord' and an 'instrument' of its perpetuation.<sup>96</sup> It is this work inspired by Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as simultaneously illusory and *constitutive* of subjectivity, which is most instructive. For Breitenberg masculine anxiety reveals the contradictions of patriarchal culture but also the ways in which culture smooths over these contradictions. Breitenberg relates this anxiety to the stage, recognising that theatre suggests the 'alarming possibility in a world of at least theoretical absolutes' that 'to be male means only to manifest the outward signs of masculinity.'<sup>97</sup> Performances of masculinity on stage in Shakespeare's time are thus extremely productive sites of investigation, especially given that some of Shakespeare's most celebrated male characters are involved in issues which, at the time, were the sole dramatic province of masculinity: sexual jealousy, dynasty, inheritance, land and kingship. As Graham Dawson argues succinctly, 'masculinities are lived out in the flesh but fashioned in the imagination.'<sup>98</sup> Culture provides us with a way of exploring the fragile and artificial construction of masculinity, therefore. Both the stage and the screen

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<sup>96</sup> Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 2.

<sup>97</sup> Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity*, 10.

<sup>98</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 1.



form a fantasy space in which a popular configuration of masculine identity is displayed, with the performances of the male Shakespearean, in particular, articulating the hidden neurosis of masculinity both in the past and in our own historical moment.

Such anxiety has not disappeared within modern day popular culture and, indeed, appears to have found another outlet: the action film genre's depiction of the male body as erotic object. Yvonne Tasker argues that the relationship between the action film's characteristic scenes of violence and the display of the male body as spectacle is inextricable, describing 'Hollywood's production of action *as display*'.<sup>99</sup> What is common to criticism in this field is the fact that the performance of masculine power on screen is also, paradoxically, the demonstration of masculine anxiety. This is the same curious contradiction of abundance and lack, presence and absence which Breitenberg notes on the Early Modern stage and Richard Dyer also observes in the phenomenon of body building: muscles function as a 'naturalisation of male power and domination' but simultaneously are proof of the labour that has gone into producing such an effect.<sup>100</sup> Within action cinema we are viewing the male body at its most powerful but also its most artificial. As Mark Simpson distinguishes, however, anxiety is not created merely from the feeling of being 'exposed'. Uniquely, the action blockbuster provides us with the passive male body subject to the 'undifferentiated' gaze of the audience in a way that previously only the female had been. Traditional male heterosexuality insists that it is 'active, sadistic and desiring'; film, though, presents us with bodies that are 'passive, masochistic and desired.'<sup>101</sup> The action film basks in demonstrations of the male star-body as sex object, its rippling torso either brazenly revealed or coquettishly glimpsed through strategic gashes in clothing and a pornographic, sexualised relationship with phallic weapons. Indeed, Lisa Purse describes the action genre's relationship to

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<sup>99</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

<sup>100</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 71.

<sup>101</sup> Mark Simpson, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994), 4.

representing the ‘exerting’ body of its male stars as ‘persistent’ (a generic tendency which I will explore in greater depth in my work on Tom Hiddleston’s performance in *Coriolanus*). Stephen Neale characterises this representation of the male body as ‘erotic’, furthermore, and in agreement with Richard Dyer’s work on the male pin-up, suggests that such eroticism focused around the male body must be displaced: the requirements of active definitions of masculinity generate the need to compensate for this apparent passivity of the body. For Dyer the pin-up must ‘promise activity by the way the body is posed’<sup>102</sup>, while Neale posits that in film this eroticism cannot be explicitly acknowledged and in the action-based genres must be transposed into ritualised scenes of conflict.<sup>103</sup>

Roger Horrocks states that the male body is a ‘*dumb body* that cannot speak fluently in words’ but can only speak through its musculature.<sup>104</sup> Tasker notes that Western action cinema’s traditional lack of eloquence is also apparent in its lack of critical praise, and — relatively speaking— academic attention, moreover. Being a ‘good’ actor, she argues, centres on the ability to develop a sustained portrayal of a complex character; set against such standards neither action cinema nor its performers have ‘fared very well.’<sup>105</sup> While I acknowledge the validity of this interpretation of the action film body, the Shakespearean actor is a body determined by its capacity for eloquence and for juggling with syntax and language that may resist incorporation into popular cultural parlance. I thus intend to explore what the Shakespearean as action star means in terms of corporeal representation and what their body communicates in a cinema that is so often belittled as ‘dumb movies for dumb people’, as Yvonne Tasker puts it. In recent years the increasing valence of popular culture

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<sup>102</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 110.

<sup>103</sup> Steve Neale, ‘Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,’ *Screen* (1983), 14-15.

<sup>104</sup> Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 170.

<sup>105</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 75.

studies within academia and the critical validation of cinematic genres including horror and the blockbuster form has similarly sought to complicate critical understanding of mainstream films. Chief among the traditional denigrations of the blockbuster, for instance, is the idea that narrative is displaced by a focus instead on spectacle. Andrew Darley, for example, argues that in this genre of films ‘elevation of the immediately *sensuous* constituent vies with our means of entry to symbolic meaning, i.e. narrative.’<sup>106</sup> Critics including Geoff King refute such interpretations, however, positing that far from working in opposition, the blockbuster’s employment of narrative and spectacle is at once contiguous *and* complementary. King points out that spectacle only gain its ‘*full impact*’ at moments of narratively heightened tension. Darley’s argument that spectacle disrupts our entry into symbolic meaning is contested by popular critical consensus upon the fact that the blockbuster’s spectacular violence is ultimately symbolic and implicitly political or social.<sup>107</sup> Spectacle thus contributes meaning comparable to the function of narrative, an attribute persistently valued over spectacle; a hierarchy of importance which, it should be noted, mirrors the traditional valorisation of literature over film.

Indeed, essential to my purpose is what King describes as the blockbuster’s ‘contemplative’ brand of spectacle. Though in this example King writes chiefly on more traditional forms of action spectacle, referencing the employment of special effects, his conceptualisation of a tendency in which ‘time is permitted for a certain amount of scrutiny

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<sup>106</sup> Andrew Darley, *Digital Visual Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres* (London: Routledge, 2000), 103.

<sup>107</sup> Included is a small sample of some of the work done on this topic and its varying social and political implications: John G. Cawelti, *Mystery, Violence and Popular Culture* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Mark J. Lacy, ‘War, Cinema and Moral Anxiety,’ *Alternatives*, 28, 2003; Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1990); Stevie Simkin, *Early Modern Tragedy and the Cinema of Violence* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

of the image' is equally applicable.<sup>108</sup> I wish to thereby both explore and mimic this phenomenon by focusing my critical gaze upon the male Shakespearean's body (both when performing Shakespeare and in popular culture) and utilise the genre's body-as-spectacle logic in order to view their representations of masculinity. The body of the male Shakespearean is worth investigating throughout this thesis not only as a star-body, as the site of performance and adaptation and the locus of multi-directional interplay between various intertexts, but as a site of spectacle in itself.

## **Adaptation Studies**

As well as demonstrating my critical response to ideas surrounding the Shakespearean and the star-body, it is finally necessary within this introduction to outline the way in which my thesis will interact with and contribute to criticism on adaptation. Despite the wishes of its practitioners, adaptation criticism has often been occupied with the issue of fidelity. Michael Anderegg articulates the tendency of adaptation studies to mire itself (sometimes unintentionally) within traditional debates surrounding fidelity, arguing that the fate of Shakespeare on film is 'always to fall short of ideal, whether it be fidelity to Shakespeare or fidelity to the cinema'.<sup>109</sup> Equally provocatively, Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan contend that 'faithful' adaptations are bound to 'disappoint', whereas reading intertextually or dialogically can help the critic to ascend the aporias of fidelity by working to a model which includes the importance of supplementary texts.<sup>110</sup> Any consideration of fidelity to a text within adaptation studies presupposes that within the comparison of the two there is one idealised, complete and objectively better text, hence Cartmell and Whelehan's description of the inevitability of disappointment. By exploring the text in dialogue with other adaptations

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<sup>108</sup> Geoff King. 'Spectacle, Narrative and the Spectacular Hollywood Blockbuster,' *Movie Blockbusters*, ed. Julian Stringer (London: Routledge, 2003), 115.

<sup>109</sup> Michael Anderegg, *Cinematic Shakespeare* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 28.

<sup>110</sup> Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 73.

as well as any Ur-texts, though, adaptation studies need not be restricted to issues of origin. As my thesis is not limited to Shakespeare adaptations and instead configures the Shakespearean *as* adaptation, this methodology is instructive in promoting other means of exploring adaptations and films generally, freed from tired concerns with fidelity.

Indeed, I would argue that this critical approach, which prioritises both the openness of the adaptive text and of the critic in choosing their texts, is essential. Throughout *Screen Adaptation* Cartmell and Whelehan promote a cross-fertilising, intertextual and cross-cultural approach to adaptation studies through judicious critical analysis of Christine Geraghty, James Naremore and Gérard Genette amongst others. Of especial note are Genette's five transtextual relations (intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, architextuality and hypertextuality), which display the possible reach and directions in which the adaptation scholar can take his/her analysis of a particular text. Also of significance is Naremore's urge to bypass a current impasse in adaptation studies by moving beyond classic literary texts to popular culture.<sup>111</sup> This approach argues for the validity of the popular culture text as an object of analysis in its own right, with as much credence as classic literary texts; indeed, as recent and relatively un-researched texts they are especially ripe for critical interpretation. Although by working on the Shakespearean actor and engaging with some classic texts of adaptation studies I am working within the canon, much of my critical focus is upon popular culture. Not only popular culture, moreover, but the particular phenomenon of the Hollywood blockbuster, which is an emergent but still relatively small area of film studies despite notable efforts by individuals such as Yvonne Tasker, Stephen Neale and Will Brooker (as noted above). Exploring the meaning created by the involvement of the Shakespearean actor within such unexpected texts will thus enable a fuller examination of the extent of

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<sup>111</sup> James Naremore, 'Introduction: Film and the Reign of Adaptation,' *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (London: Athlone Press, 2000), 15.

Shakespeare's cultural cachet and his work's reach within popular culture. I will, furthermore, disregard traditional hierarchies in which the Shakespearean — the text, theatrical performance or the performers — is viewed as culturally 'higher' than the intertexts and adaptations I will be exploring. Robert Stam succinctly dismantles the illogic of this occurrence within adaptation studies, arguing that far from the 'auratic prestige of the original [...] run[ning] counter to the copy', in fact 'the prestige of the original is created by the copies, without which the very idea of originality has no meaning.' Indeed, 'the "original" always turns out to be partially "copied" from something earlier.'<sup>112</sup> In this spirit, I aim to contrast, compare and question both aspects of my thesis — the Shakespearean and mainstream popular culture — without any prior hierarchical values attached, mindful of Laurence Levine's argument that within a 'world of adjectival boxes' and 'crude labels' things 'cannot truly be compared because they are rarely laid out horizontally'.<sup>113</sup>

The persistent concern with value judgements that dogs Shakespeare and adaptation criticism *is* responsible for motivating one of the central contentions of my thesis, however. Surveying the field in 2000, Richard Burt perceives 'the end of the Shakespearean' or what he terms the 'Shakespeare apocalypse'. Burt contests that the breakdown he charts is 'of the specifically Shakespeare': those characteristics that can be said to 'define his writings'.<sup>114</sup> He believes that mass culture's appropriation of Shakespeare does not affirm his cultural authority either as author-function or cultural icon; rather that these 'mass culture spin-offs' have a post-hermeneutic relation to Shakespeare's plays and that they are so far from the original (with no interpretive or dialogical relation) as to 'not be interpretable as

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<sup>112</sup> Robert Stam, 'Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation,' *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 8.

<sup>113</sup> Levine, Lawrence L. *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>114</sup> Richard Burt, 'Shakespeare in Love and the End of the Shakespearean: Academic and Mass Culture Constructions of Literary Authorship,' *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle*, eds. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 227.

Shakespearean at all'.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, Thomas Cartelli (although arguing for a productive means of protecting that which is 'Shakespearean') has articulated the diminishing of that which is *legibly* Shakespearean on film and prophesied a dire outlook for Shakespeare on film in the future.<sup>116</sup> This conception of a Shakespeare apocalypse is, to my mind, symptomatic of over-adherence to Shakespeare in terms of a dedication to representing his language on film. The lament about the waning of that which is 'specifically' or 'legibly' Shakespearean in post-1996 adaptations argues for the necessity of prioritising Shakespeare's words (and specific words), rather than broader representations of theme, plot or setting. As Michael Anderegg notes, though, such fidelity to Shakespeare's language on films is potentially both counter-productive and outdated. Anderegg observes that we typically identify a Shakespearean film by its language, however little or much that is, and that the Shakespeare film is unique in its reverence for the source text. This occurs even at the risk that large sections of the audience will be unfamiliar or confused by the syntax and language no matter how carefully the adaptation is executed. As Anderegg questions, though, why should such unquestioning reverence be accorded to these adaptations? 'Why should a film be a definitive interpretation of the text, assuming we even know what definitive means?'<sup>117</sup>

In agreement with Anderegg's acknowledgement that Shakespeare on film has traditionally been linguistically conservative, I will argue for the Shakespearean actor as a point of possible resolution between the current critical movement declaiming the end of Shakespeareanism *and* an attitude to the playwright that questions more traditional values. My thesis will explore the Shakespearean as a site of embodied adaptation and performance: a conveyor of that which is Shakespeare culturally. By that, I mean a representative for Shakespeare's continued presence in culture: the traditional values and theatrical modes

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<sup>115</sup> Burt, 'Shakespeare in Love and the End of the Shakespearean,' 226.

<sup>116</sup> Cartelli, 'Doing it Slant,' 27.

<sup>117</sup> Anderegg, *Cinematic Shakespeare*, 2, 3, 49.

ascribed to his performance and the embracing of what makes Shakespeare potentially hazardous in adapting for the mainstream but what also characterises his work — their language. Simultaneously, however, I will posit the Shakespearean actor as a site of irreverence: a trans-cultural figure who avoids single, authoritative meaning and who, in doing so, can potentially bring new, surprising or irreverent associations to Shakespeare's legacy in contemporary culture. I will do this by emphasising the plurality and dynamism of the star persona, as the actor accrues meaning — magpie-like — from all aspects of culture. Through existing as a physical rather than textual embodiment of Shakespeare's work, the actor thereby sidesteps the pitfalls of a blind adherence to Shakespeare, the dangers of which include the emphasis on arbitrary aspects of his work over others; instead, the Shakespearean engages with the playwright's legacy in consideration of the possibilities of reinvention, editing and change.

The Shakespearean actor, far from being mired in overly stylised, anachronistic modes of performance and language, is thus potentially a Jamesonian postmodern subject. Unable to organize their past and future into coherent experience, the Shakespearean is caught in the eternal present of commodity culture.<sup>118</sup> We may be able to visit *The Internet Movie Database* and see an actor's filmography but the fact remains that their persona is formed by a melange of works not by a descending chronology. Indeed, the Shakespearean is a contemporary figure even as their work is haunted by the past inhabitants of roles. Stam's configuration of the adaptation as a grid through which a source work is reinterpreted is enlightening here: 'Each grid, in revealing aspects of the source text in question, also reveals something about the ambient discourses in the moment of reaccentuation.'<sup>119</sup> The timeliness of the Shakespearean actor — evidenced in the relationship between him or her as site of

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<sup>118</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981).

<sup>119</sup> Stam, 'Introduction,' 45.



adaptation and the contemporary social and cultural context within which he or she enacts adaptation — is simultaneously also his or her timefulness. They inhabit their own moment but through intertextuality and Jameson’s eternal present, also that of their previous characters, other actors’ interpretations and historical facets of performance. Although it is this aspect – the potential for ‘the site of adaptation [to keep] getting entangled in the work’s ongoing development’ – which Margaret Jane Kidnie argues presents one of the ‘problems’ of adaptation, it also presents an intriguing and challenging prospect for critical work.<sup>120</sup>

It is this continual process of engagement and the changing iterations of Shakespeare and the Shakespearean through the actor’s body which I maintain answers Mark Thornton Burnett’s call for a more ‘affirmative’ critical response to the future of the Shakespeare canon: a consideration of ‘the creative valences embodied in a series of post-millennial acts of appropriation and re-invention.’<sup>121</sup> To wit, in discussing traditional critical representations of the relationship between Shakespeare and the mainstream, Douglas Lanier argues that the ‘and’ in ‘Shakespeare and popular culture’ marks ‘not just a link but a distinction’. In this, popular culture is viewed as ‘aesthetically unsophisticated, disposable, immediately accessible, and therefore shallow’ and conversely Shakespeare is ‘refined, timeless, complex and intellectually challenging’.<sup>122</sup> Lanier maintains that even as popular culture has created a broader audience for Shakespeare, ‘it is not always clear whether the audience’s interest really is in *Shakespeare*, or what ideas about Shakespeare pop culture purveys and whose interests they serve.’<sup>123</sup>

It is precisely this formulation of the nebulous nature of the relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture, characterised by Lanier as a sense of ‘ambivalence’ –

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<sup>120</sup> Kidnie, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, 9.

<sup>121</sup> Mark Thornton Burnett, *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 129.

<sup>122</sup> Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 3.

<sup>123</sup> Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 4.

‘simultaneous attraction and tension’ – which I will explore throughout the thesis, charting the points of contiguity but also opposition. Indeed, in spite of the media’s assumptions about the impermeability of cultural hierarchies (as I will explore in greater depth in my chapter on Kenneth Branagh), the Shakespearean actor has the freedom to move between modes and genres and the precedence of more varied acting roles, so that their careers often create surprising cultural bedfellows. My analysis of the three Shakespearean actors’ careers will thereby work to displace Lanier’s concern that the critical distinction between Shakespeare and popular culture is doubly enforced, by both the lament that ‘popular culture has been displacing our cultural heritage’ and by those who ‘champion popular culture as the people’s literary canon’.<sup>124</sup> After all, the contemporary Shakespearean’s star persona may be derived as much from their work in theatre as from television or film; science fiction as well as tragedy; YouTube song parodies as well as soliloquies. To acknowledge *only* their theatrical work, or *only* their television performances would be tantamount to viewing only half the actor. And as Angela Amber Keam argues, in ‘this era of celebrity’ the meaning attached to the Shakespearean ‘star-body’ often ‘outweighs the cultural importance placed on written and filmic texts’.<sup>125</sup> A more loose adaptive relationship that follows the Shakespearean actor’s trajectory across culture, rather than dictating a single aspect of their work as focus, thereby prioritises broader concepts, themes, or dramatic tropes: aspects of Shakespeare’s work which may permit greater scope for interpretation than a to-the-letter attitude, and thus contain far more potential for subverting or challenging some of the conservative baggage Shakespeare has accrued.

To conclude this introduction, the following chapters of the thesis are dedicated to exploring the recent careers of Ian McKellen, Kenneth Branagh and Tom Hiddleston; three

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<sup>124</sup> Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 3.

<sup>125</sup> Angela Amber Keam, ‘Corporeal “Shakespeare”’: The Politics of Embodied Adaptation in Fin de Siècle Shakespeare Films’ (doctoral thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006), 4.

British actors whose reputations have been founded largely upon their theatrical performances but who have attained (varying) degrees of success by performing in, and/or directing large scale Hollywood productions. Each chapter establishes the Shakespearean associations that surround the particular performer, particularly with regards to the types of masculinity these roles express or challenge, and then examines the relationship between these values and the star's engagement with mainstream culture. In the case of McKellen, the chapter thereby examines the cultural and political resonances of his tendency to perform characters who exist outside of societal norms, be them physical, sexual or even moral, as well as the relationship between his more widely known roles as Magneto, for example, with similar earlier villainous archetypes from his theatrical career. If McKellen's characters are linked by their alterity, Branagh's career frequently returns to the figure of the soldier in texts — both within 'high' and popular culture — that interrogate the responsibilities associated with power. His directorial works, moreover, demonstrate a conscious deployment of his Shakespearean identity in order to subvert the values placed on different genres or modes by traditional cultural hierarchies. Finally, Hiddleston too utilises his Shakespeareanism in a manner that works to cohere the conventionally disparate elements of his star persona: the upper-middle class associations of his upbringing and education, as well as his understanding of contemporary internet culture and confident identification with the mainstream. All three case studies thus contribute to a greater understanding of the multidirectional relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture within the twenty-first century. This thesis explores the cultural cachet of the Shakespearean and how it operates within the mainstream: whether the values of 'high' and popular culture are compatible or whether the appearance of the Shakespearean within the world of popular culture serves to reify traditional distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture.

# Ian McKellen: Establishing a Shakespearean Actor

## Introduction: Defining a Shakespearean

In his profile of the actor Ian McKellen, Peter Holland asks, ‘What defines the Shakespeare actor? Perhaps it is no more than a list of roles’. Holland continues, ‘[a] list maps out a framework, a territory that was first taken as given to the young actor and then carefully chosen by the star.’ For the young McKellen, perhaps unsurprisingly, his early career was thus dominated by classical theatrical roles, predominantly Shakespearean parts.<sup>1</sup> By his own (and frequent admission), however, McKellen’s tastes as an actor are ‘catholic’ and the framework ‘carefully chosen by the star’ has since involved a broad diversity of genres, media and cultural modes. His career has been consistently peppered with diversions into not only modern theatre — playwrights such as Stoppard, Ayckbourn and Shaffer — but popular culture. But first it is worth establishing the associations of McKellen’s Shakespearean persona. Having established himself in the seventies and eighties in four of the most iconic roles available for younger male actors — Hamlet, Macbeth, Romeo and Iago —, performing with the RSC from 1976-8 and as part of the National Theatre Company at the Old Vic and in the West End, McKellen was already being mentioned in the same breath as Olivier, Scofield and Richardson by critics. Indeed, Michael Billington described the actor as being capable of ‘enormous distinction’.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, he observed of McKellen’s performance in Trevor Nunn’s *Macbeth* (1976), ‘if this is not great acting, I don’t know what is.’<sup>3</sup> This production, in particular, (filmed and still available on DVD) has attained lasting fame as a record of the

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Holland counts of these parts, ‘seven in the 1950s, nine in the 1960s, seven in the 1970s, two in the 1980s, three in the 1990s and once since the millennium.’ Peter Holland, ‘Sir Ian McKellen,’ *The Routledge Companion to Actors’ Shakespeare*, ed. John Russell Brown (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Billington, *One Night Stands: A Critic’s View of Modern British Theatre* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2007), 8.

<sup>3</sup> Billington, *One Night Stands*, 87.

early careers of two major British stars: McKellen and Judi Dench. Although McKellen continued to receive popular and critical acclaim during this period, especially for his role as Salieri in *Amadeus* (1980) for which he won a Tony and four other awards, it was his Shakespearean roles which garnered him the most praise. The 1976 *Macbeth* won him the *Plays and Players*' London Theatre Critics' Award for Best Actor. As Coriolanus in Peter Hall's 1984 National Theatre production he won the *London Evening Standard* Award for Best Actor and he received it again, as well as the London Critics' Circle Award for Best Actor in 1989, for his Iago in Trevor Nunn's *Othello*.

Also indicative of the close relationship between McKellen's star persona and his Shakespearean identity was his one-man show, *Acting Shakespeare*. Developed from a previous Edinburgh Fringe Festival show — *Words, Words, Words* — McKellen elaborated on the show's 'chat' about Shakespeare to create a production which recognised 'that side of Shakespeare' [emphasis added]: 'not Shakespeare the National Poet, or Philosopher, but Shakespeare the theatre-struck boy.'<sup>4</sup> The result was a series of performed speeches and explanations of how language and rhythm worked to help the actor. As I will return to in greater depth, in this McKellen was clearly indebted to his working relationship with John Barton, then Associate Director of the RSC, and Barton's typically forensic attention to language (as seen in his television series *Playing Shakespeare* and accompanying book). A telling example of McKellen's artistic explication is thus his description of 'accept[ing] the challenge of his [Shakespeare's] words by going back to the text and mining it for all its jewels, its subtleties, all its ambiguities'. McKellen continues, 'I can then filter it through my actor's imagination, and present the thoughts and feelings to you in [...] a real way.'<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Ian McKellen, 'Words from Ian McKellen,' August 28, 1977, Webpage, accessed August 27, 2013, *Ian McKellen*, <http://www.mckellen.com/stage/00258.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Ian McKellen and Johnny Handy, *Acting Shakespeare US Touring Script*, 1987, JPG, accessed August 27, 2013, *Ian McKellen*, <http://www.mckellen.com/stage/aws/script/index.htm>, Act 2, 41.

semantic field of exploration McKellen employs — the analogy of mining for jewels — is accompanied by one that is predicated on the intricacy of the task he creates. *Subtleties, complications, ambiguities*: this Shakespeare is one whose language contains pitfalls and sudden contradictory messages that could ensnare and embarrass the reader. Reading Shakespeare for the purpose of performance (there is no other kind of consumption in *Acting Shakespeare*) is an act that requires an expert interpreter and, not only knowledge of meaning, but the ability to creatively imagine. McKellen's phrase 'filter it through my actor's imagination' at once gestures towards the openness of Shakespeare's language to adaptation and new meanings and doubly bars it. First, the possessive 'my' reduces the audience's possibility of collaborating in the production of meaning and second, the pointedly qualifying inclusion of 'my actor's imagination' [emphasis added] creates an experiential, professional monopoly on interpretation. What the quotation and *Acting Shakespeare* in general exemplify is McKellen's desire to act as a conduit for the exegesis and consumption of Shakespeare's work within society and popular culture. Although his effort to disseminate Shakespeare for the mainstream is undeniably laudable, implicit in such an act is the belief that an intermediary is necessary and that McKellen fits this role. As my later work on Branagh will also explore, such thinking has frequently attracted charges of presumption and an attitude towards Shakespeare that at best patronises the abilities of a popular cultural audience and at worst enforces a rigid hierarchy of readership in which the actor occupies a privileged position as interpreter.

This is a mode of performance which McKellen has continued to espouse, nonetheless, consciously aligning his star persona with a perceived role as Shakespearean interpreter in further productions such as his charity tour, *Ian McKellen On Stage With Shakespeare, Tolkien and You*. This role is only one of a diverse career, however, as

McKellen himself acknowledges when discussing his performer identity in a meta-performative moment in interview:

.... He then has an engaging conversation with himself, about himself.  
'Is Ian McKellen a star?' he asks.  
'Well now, define your terms,' he answers.  
'Is he an actor?'  
'Yes, he's an actor.'  
'Is he a classical actor?'  
'Well, he's been in the classics, yes.'  
'Is he a Shakespearean actor?'  
'Well he acts in Shakespeare.'  
'Is he Chekhovian?'  
'He's done Chekhov as well.'  
'Is he a stage actor?'  
'Yeah, oh yes.'  
'So he's not a film actor?'  
'Oh, he's done films, too.'  
'So what does he do, this guy?'  
'He does what he wants to do, basically.'<sup>6</sup>

If in this encounter McKellen is playfully unwilling to over-determine the nature of his star persona, one quality which he has consciously cultivated since 1988 has been his public advocacy of gay rights, through frank acknowledgement of his own experiences as a gay man. Along with his Shakespeareanism, it is this central aspect of his star persona through which I intend to view McKellen's performances and the recurrent theme of his post-1996 career: monstrosity and alterity.

The decision to 'out' himself was made predominantly in reaction to Section 28 of the Local Government Bill, which was under consideration in parliament. This amendment stated that local authorities were prohibited from promoting homosexuality as a viable family lifestyle, limiting what could be taught in schools and the attribution of funds to support

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<sup>6</sup> Simon Garfield, 'The X-Factor,' *Observer*, April 30, 2006, accessed August 4, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/apr/30/theatre>.

groups. McKellen remained a vociferous opponent of Section 28 and consciously brought his popularity as a performer to the campaign, stating:

My own participating in that campaign was a focus for people [to] take comfort that if Ian McKellen was on board for this, perhaps it would be all right for other people to be as well, gay and straight.<sup>7</sup>

In spite of this, however, both McKellen's person and his representations of gay men have faced criticism. As referenced in my introduction, Pascale Aebischer's extensive work on Derek Jarman details the antipathy the filmmaker held for McKellen's politics and most significantly, the actor's acceptance of a knighthood in 1991 (recommended by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher). Given Thatcher and the Conservative government's active suppression of gay lifestyles, McKellen's acceptance flew in the face of Jarman's more radical politics. Indeed, Jarman created the parodic character Sir Thespian Knight in *Pansy* as a direct challenge to McKellen's perceived indifference towards the gay rights struggle. McKellen's career evinces his strategy of appealing for change from within mainstream culture and his occupation of a more moderate political position (for example, demonstrating reluctance to lobby on more controversial issues). Jarman, though, viewed working with the establishment as a negation of McKellen's potential political cachet as a popular gay figure.<sup>8</sup> As already mentioned, Jarman thus imagined the two men as Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare: the former representing radicalism and political progressiveness, the latter social adherence and conservatism. The sentiment in Jarman's dismissal has been mirrored recently with British actor Damian Lewis's statement that he feared becoming 'one of these slightly over-the-top, fruity actors who would have an illustrious career on stage [...] and

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<sup>7</sup> Bruce C. Steele, 'The Knight's Crusade,' *Advocate*, December 11, 2001, 36–38.

<sup>8</sup> McKellen has expressed his reluctance to lobby on other issues that he supports such as the anti-nuclear weapons movement, critics of institutionalised religion, capital punishment and AIDs support fund raising, for fear that this might 'dilute' the 'impact of addressing my most urgent concern; legal and social equality for gay people worldwide.' Ian McKellen, 'Activism,' July 2008, Webpage, accessed August 15, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/activism/index.htm>.



then start playing wizards.’<sup>9</sup> The particular choice of the adjective ‘fruity’ by Lewis — typically referring to a rich voice — here draws upon a pejorative association with gayness and, more specifically, a theatrical, camp iteration of male homosexuality. It is McKellen’s perceived lack of agency and seriousness of intent as an actor and advocate for alternative lifestyles — Jarman’s political objections and Lewis’s somewhat bathetic stereotype — which I will continue to explore throughout this chapter.

Certainly, whether the criticism McKellen has faced is justifiable, the fame he has experienced through his involvement in two enormous film franchises has placed him in a position of significant influence, especially for a youth-orientated market. McKellen’s original writing is demonstrative of how he has used this influence in order to popularise the continuing struggle for gay acceptance. ‘A Gay Gandalf: Homophobia is Everywhere’, for example, discusses the prevalence of homophobia in the military. By conflating one of his most popular characters with his own identity, McKellen is able to immediately secure a large audience for his personal politics.<sup>10</sup> A frequent device employed by the actor to encourage support for his causes (and the same logic evident in his reasons for coming out), it thus argues that if a film character with the power/coolness of Gandalf or Magneto is played by a gay man, ipso facto gay men can be cool. Indeed, the success of this approach is apparent in the numerous conversations McKellen’s blog engages in with young fans. The kindly paternalism of Gandalf, in particular, combined with McKellen’s openness about his sexuality and online presence posits him as a ready source of advice for gay youths, uncertain about coming out, and even for homophobic individuals who desire more information about what it is to be homosexual. This aspect of his star persona has come relatively late to the

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<sup>9</sup> Emma Brookes, ‘Damian Lewis: “The *Homeland* writers are desperate to kill Brody”,’ *Guardian*, October 12, 2013, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/oct/12/damian-lewis-homeland-kill-brody>.

<sup>10</sup> Ian McKellen, ‘A Gay Gandalf: Homophobia is Everywhere,’ January 2000, Webpage, accessed August 15, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/writings/000115.htm>.

actor, however, and perhaps there is some truth in Jarman's censure, with McKellen acknowledging his regrets that he did not involve himself in the gay rights campaign sooner, lamenting that he didn't 'engage' in the 'politicking.'<sup>11</sup> On the topic McKellen is eloquent, nonetheless, his affective and effectiveness as a performer and popular gay figure evident in invitations to speak at large scale gatherings such as the Gay Games (1994), Europride (2003) and Manchester Pride (2010) and his written forewords to collections on gay campaigns and individuals. In *Stonewall 25*, for example, McKellen contributes his thoughts on the developments in gay rights campaigning, detailing 'Before, Now and In Between.' His work, typically informed by his experiences as both a gay man and a gay actor, laments those performers still in the closet who may advocate AIDS charities but 'continue to disguise their sexuality even in their autobiographies.'<sup>12</sup>

McKellen's influence extends institutionally as co-founder of Stonewall, patron of LGBT History Month, Pride London, GAY-GLOS, The Lesbian & Gay Foundation and FFLAG (amongst others), furthermore. His political campaigning is also not limited to the realm of activism but — as evidenced in his blog — is present within the popular media. Article titles such as 'Closet Homophobes: Sir Ian McKellen attacks those who wish to maintain the present age of homosexual consent' printed in *The Times*, or 'It is a Question of Human Rights, Not Numbers', *Sunday Express*, demonstrate his provocativeness as a social commentator and unwillingness to tread more moderately for fear of losing popularity.<sup>13</sup> The emotive language used in such pieces evinces his desire to actively question the political status quo, as well as establishing himself as a positive role model for the gay community. As

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Mendelsohn, 'Ian McKellen,' *Bomb Magazine*, Fall 1998, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://bombsite.com/issues/65/articles/2189>.

<sup>12</sup> Ian McKellen, 'Before, Now and In Between,' *Stonewall 25: The Making of the Lesbian and Gay Community in Britain*, ed. Emma Healey and Angela Mason (Virago: London, 1994), 45-6.

<sup>13</sup> McKellen's articles include: 'This Age of Discrimination,' *The Times*, February 20, 1990, n.p.; 'Closet Homophobes: Sir Ian McKellen attacks those who wish to maintain the present age of homosexual consent,' *The Times*, December 5, 1991, n.p.; 'It is a Question of Human Rights, Not Numbers,' *Sunday Express*, January 23, 1994, n.p.; 'What's wrong with us? Should we not aspire to happiness?' *Independent*, February 22, 2012, n.p.

Steven Paul Davies observes, though, McKellen is one of a limited number of theatrical actors such as Simon Callow and Anthony Sher who have not suffered from being typecast after revealing their sexual preferences and the characters he portrays are as often heterosexual as they are homosexual. Indeed, his first major performance after coming out was the resolutely ‘manly’ figure of John Profumo in *Scandal* (dir. Michael Caton-Jones, 1989) who, as Davies notes, ‘demonstrated that [McKellen’s] own sexual orientation was immaterial’.<sup>14</sup> My case study of McKellen will thus focus on the reciprocity between the differing aspects of his career: his defining Shakespearean characteristics, but also his frequent diversions into popular culture and the influences of each on the other. Of significant interest is the way in which these varied texts contribute to a recurrent interest in performing alterity and questioning traditional representations of masculinity — a phenomenon evident throughout his works. As epitomised in his engagement with his fans, this is a productive way to think about both McKellen’s star persona and the depiction of his body, particularly because of the closeness of the relationship between his personal, political advocacy of gay rights and his public identity (both as Ian McKellen the actor and Ian McKellen as Gandalf, or Magneto etc.).

### **Monsters on Film: McKellen in the Nineties**

The nineties saw McKellen’s increasing involvement in film (in both American and British productions) and having earned critical respectability, this established the groundwork for his viability as a film star with leading roles in *The Lord of the Rings* and *X-Men* coming soon after.<sup>15</sup> Before elaborating upon the relationship between McKellen’s Shakespearean persona

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<sup>14</sup> Steven Paul Davies, *Out at the Cinema* (Harpden: Kamera Books, 2008), 147.

<sup>15</sup> Although *Gods and Monsters* failed to recoup its budget at the American box office it was a critical success earning Oscar nominations for Best Actor for McKellen as troubled, ageing horror director James Whale, and Best Supporting Actress for Lynn Redgrave as his long-suffering housekeeper, Hanna. It won director Bill

and his mainstream work (the latter franchise in particular) I wish to briefly discuss three texts which, I believe, were strongly influential in the casting of McKellen and his subsequent popular roles: *Othello* (dir. Trevor Nunn, 1989), *Richard III* (dir. Richard Loncraine, 1995) and *Gods and Monsters* (dir. Bill Condon, 1998). All three films (I am analysing the recording of *Othello* for the BBC) represent, moreover, the beginning of a sustained association across McKellen's work between his Shakespearean and popular cultural performances and his political activism — his desire to represent alternative bodies, sexualities and lifestyles.

Produced six years before *Richard III*, Trevor Nunn's *Othello* is a valuable analogue for reading McKellen's portrayal of the play's malcontent and, as I will return to, is demonstrative of McKellen's tendency to position his body as an index of difference during performance. With similarly compelling yet deceptive antagonists who charm their way into an often uncomfortable level of complicity, *Othello* like *Richard III* — and later Magneto in *X-Men* — emphasises the physical details and micro gestures of McKellen's performance. As a form of *mise-en-abîme*, Peter Holland describes this stagecraft as 'tricks' which 'obscure as well as illuminate', with small hand-props working to 'provide an objectification of the character's interiority'.<sup>16</sup> In such a way, Iago's stealthy pocketing of the cigarettes left behind by the Venetian war cabinet indicates the looseness of his personal ethics and, significantly, his ruthless opportunism; the appropriation of Desdemona's handkerchief is, after all, the central hinge upon which the play's narrative turns. His relationships are, without exception, exploitative, revealing not only his inherent misogyny but misandry in general. When Emilia

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Condon the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay, moreover. *Richard III* similarly suffered commercially but was well received by the press and the critical establishment earning a clutch of nominations at the Academy Awards and BAFTA (including Best British Film, Best Actor and Best Adapted Screenplay). Paying compliment to the high concept quality of the film, it won BAFTAs for Best Costumes and Best Production Design and director Richard Loncraine earned the Silver Bear for Best Director at the Berlin Film Festival.

<sup>16</sup> Holland, 'Sir Ian McKellen', 151.

(Zoë Wanamaker) gifts Iago with the handkerchief, McKellen dips her down into an unmistakably filmic clinch, but once the kiss has lasted a conventional amount of time pushes her away and returns to his usual coldly disdainful mien. Similarly, while comforting Desdemona (Imogen Stubbs), Iago embraces her from behind, tracing his fingers down her bare neck and placing light kisses on her skin in a gesture that veers swiftly from the paternalistic to the predatory. A ruthless manipulator like his future incarnation, Magneto, Iago's relationships are ultimately determined by expediency rather than affection.

Iago's exploitative and self-serving nature is thus evinced in the subtleties of McKellen's performance, unseen by the other characters but shared between him and the audience — even as his character pretends lip service to traditional performances of love and obedience. The pronouncement of Othello's name is thereby accompanied by a shake of the head and curl of the lip. His soliloquies are addressed directly to the camera delivered with an unblinking, sneering gaze and the maliciousness of his intent is veiled in conversation to Roderigo (Michael Grandage) by wreaths of smoke, or delivered in a tentative, hypothetical tone while reading or writing. Utterly contemptuous of those around him, Nunn's production disrupts a conventional reading of Iago as the ultimate insider: a man accustomed to his society's mores and able to use precisely this knowledge to serve his turn. Indeed, in many ways it is Iago, not Othello, who is distinct from the other characters with the shortened vowels and glottal stops of McKellen's native Lancashire accent contrasting with the smooth, Received Pronunciation tones of the rest of the casting, including Willard White's Othello. With the implied social difference in the North/South divide between the characters, White's proud physical bearing contributes to a sense that it is Othello who instinctively belongs to



Fig. 1.1 Iago (left) and Roderigo (right) ‘For when my outward action doth demonstrate / The native act and figure of my heart / In compliment extern, ‘tis not long after / But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve / For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.’<sup>17</sup>

the upper class Venetian court, in spite of Iago’s machinations. Unlike Branagh’s Iago who holds a deep (possibly erotic) love for the Moor, McKellen’s outsider is entirely motivated by his contempt and envy of Othello’s social integration.<sup>18</sup>

As a BBC production, though, *Othello* offered a limited viewership, reiterating McKellen’s already established career as a Shakespearean for its (predominantly) British audience, reinforcing his reputation for morally ambiguous characters as seen in his critically lauded *Macbeth*. Much the same as with *Henry V* for Kenneth Branagh, however, *Richard III* introduced McKellen’s viability to Hollywood. As an actor he was able to translate theatricality into convincing and suitably filmic performances, while — importantly — retaining the cultural cachet of the tradition he worked from and receiving critical (if not

<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, ‘Othello’ *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997), 1.1.61-5.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Q: Recently someone told me that he wouldn’t go see Othello because it had too many homosexual overtones going on between Othello and Iago. KB: Really? Well, you know, a rather distinguished critic said he was annoyed with my performance because I’d clearly played Iago gay. I had no consciousness of doing that at all, but I did play as though he loved Othello. But I don’t mean in a sexual sense. I just meant that he absolutely loved him. And frankly, that’s the way I am with my male friends: I say “I love you” when I feel it.’ Mark Huisman, ‘Prince of Players,’ *Advocate*, February 20, 1996, n.p.

always commercial) validation. Receiving top billing alongside Jim Broadbent and — in a conscious play for an American audience for a predominantly British produced film — Annette Benning and Robert Downey Jr., McKellen's Richard dominates the adaptation in bombastic fashion. In spite of his assertion that McKellen was prepared to explore Richard's humanity, 'rather than reducing him to an emblem of wickedness', however, his villainy is played relatively straightly and unsympathetically, if charismatically. Throughout Richard breaks the fourth wall and addresses his soliloquies directly to the audience, expressing his feelings non-verbally in coquettish winks and eyebrow raises. In one case this is even a literal breach with his tank bursting through a wall into the opening scene. He also moves beyond both his and Branagh's Iago with their direct address soliloquies, positioned as secretive asides to a complicit cinema audience in disregard of film convention. His speech 'Was ever woman in this humour wooed?' (1.2.215) brazenly reveals Richard's strategy in front of a crowded hallway of wounded veterans.<sup>19</sup> Rather than the monologue serving purely as the reification of his internal thought processes, though, Richard's gleeful openness in the scene also demonstrates his total mastery of the situation, including the audience and the filmic space. The tendency of the camera to stay in tight-close up, or to track Richard's movements during his soliloquies and shorter asides, means that even in such public spaces the cinematography indicates our shared occupation of his emotional narrative and chiefly, his ambition. The men and women clustered in the corridor appear as entirely passive objects, rather than participants in the diegetic world of the adaptation. Unresponsive even when addressed or touched by Richard, the disregard paid them by Richard evinces their utter insignificance to him and consequently, to the film. In an ironic parallel with their narrative importance and their status as non-speaking extras in comparison to McKellen's leading role, their appearance testifies to the brutal reality of the civil war in which they suffered their

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<sup>19</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard III (Arden Shakespeare, Third Series)*, ed. James R. Siemon (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 1.2.215. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

injuries: they are involved in a fight for the country that is not of their making but of a few, small dynastic units who operate on a level above and beyond their everyday life.

Richard and Anne's (Kristen Scott Thomas) conversation in the infamous wooing scene prior to this is further demonstrative of the self-reflexive quality of Richard's presentation. The scene is, moreover, also indicative of the powerful way in which McKellen's body is employed to iterate Richard's forceful and unsettling presence within the film. Ironically, for a play that has so (in)famously depicted severe physical disability, *Richard III* is a text that demands vocal and bodily eloquence from its lead.<sup>20</sup> When originally adapting the play for stage, (much of this material was later developed by McKellen and Loncraine for the film) McKellen and Eyre determined that *Richard III* was in fact 'a story about a soldier.... a professional soldier.'<sup>21</sup> Clad throughout in military uniform, Richard moves swiftly and powerfully and, indeed, the stagecraft McKellen demonstrated as Iago is evident in the nimble but unsettling ways with which he performs Richard's disability. Act One Scene Three has long been one of the most memorable, and problematic, moments in the history plays due to the audacity of Richard's behaviour (audacity only enhanced in the film by replacing the body of Anne's father-in-law, Henry VI, with that of her husband). In this scene the performance of Richard's body deconstructs both cinematic and romantic convention in a way that Stephen M. Buhler has identified as being particularly connected to the film's depiction of a 'camp sensibility'. By 'invit[ing] the detached mirth of camp', Richard's characterisation pre-empts the flamboyance and sexual ambiguousness of McKellen's performance as Magneto. It does this particularly through identifying the

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<sup>20</sup> Popular in recent high profile performances of Richard has been the effort to reconcile Shakespeare's 'bottled spider' (1.3.239) with the historical accounts of Richard as a vigorous military figure; from Anthony Sher's powerful and agile use of crutches, exhaustively detailed in *Year of the King*, to Aneurin Barnard's boyishly handsome and physically able Richard in the television adaptation of Philippa Gregory's historical saga, *The White Queen* (dir. James Kent, Jamie Payne, Colin Teague, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Ian McKellen, *William Shakespeare's Richard III: A Screenplay* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 47.



arbitrariness and artificiality of Richard's performance as a lover and, with his drooping face, sneering visage and physical incapacity, by subverting the 'marks of the screen hero'.<sup>22</sup>

Anne's spat retort that Richard is 'unfit for any place but hell' (1.3.109), for example, is met by McKellen turning to the camera, leering and muttering *sotto voce* 'your bedchamber', (1.3.113) before continuing in conversation with her. This aside exemplifies Richard's ambivalent sexual presence: at once his lasciviousness confirms his performance as suitor but the impish proximity between 'hell' and Anne's bedchamber also gestures towards Richard's enjoyment of manipulation, if not his actual desire for his future queen.

The means by which Richard overcomes the weakness on the left side of his body works similarly to demonstrate the grotesqueness of the figure he presents in supplication to Anne. Grotesque because of the comic incongruousness of his actions and their inappropriateness; but also, its grim humorousness and dark appropriateness given the nature of this seduction with its dimly lit, mortuary setting. McKellen's physically agile Richard also works to subvert a long cultural tradition — still evident in the kind of action genre Loncraine alludes to visually — in which leg injuries are symbolic of loss of phallic power. As Peter Lehman observes of this trope in action cinema in particular, 'men rely on their legs for their ability and strength in a life-threatening situation; a leg wound literally disempowers them.'<sup>23</sup> In the film's characteristically superlative tone, however, this scene not only refutes such inability but actively establishes Richard's sexual potency as a result of his handicap. In order to access the ring on his right hand he first pulls off his glove with his teeth and then sucks on his finger to place the ring in his mouth. There, he brings two fingers to his lips in a mime of cunnilingus and lathes the ring with his tongue before placing it straight onto Anne's

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen M. Buhler, 'Camp *Richard III* and the Burdens of (Stage/Film) History,' *Shakespeare, Film, Fin de Siècle*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett and Ramona Wray (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 47.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 68.

finger. On bended knee, proffering his ring to his future wife, this act demonstrates in full, lascivious glee what the scene as a whole represents: Richard's ability to perform and subvert the romantic conventions expected of him as suitor. Later, triumphant, Richard twirls and moves rapidly with joy, doing a jig up the stairs, all to the repeated refrain in the non-diegetic soundtrack of the jazz rendition of Marlowe's 'The Passionate Shepherd'. Even this, with its sultry invitation 'come live with me and be my love', subtly echoes the conventions of heterosexual romance which Richard's bodily performance undermines so drastically. With its inference of dressing of a young boy in the glamour of theatre costuming, the poem celebrates the materiality but also performativity of love-making. The titular passionate shepherd's request is not predicated on any degree of emotional connection between the two but on the potential pleasure he offers his lover: the music, food, clothing, beauty and dancing that will surround their union.

Indeed, Christopher Andrews's reading of the film contends that Richard's capable and witty wooing of Anne is superseded by a greater task: his seduction of the audience. What Andrews calls 'the courtship' is our realisation that we are Richard's 'chosen partners'. His flirtatious winks and asides are designed to reassure and comfort, to convince us of the justness of his cause. The jarring presence of these asides and their disruption of cinematic convention, maintained in the adaptation onto film, contain the same element of provocation and surprise as Richard's bombastic entrance into the film. His unsettling appeal and confident manipulation of the screen, moreover, ensures that rather than purely 'conquer us by force', McKellen's Richard can also 'persuades us with charm.'<sup>24</sup> As Andrews argues, the relationship between Richard and the audience is resolutely exploitative, as we are reminded after he has secured his power:

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Andrews, 'Richard III on Film: The Subversion of the Viewer,' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2000), 90-1.

Row upon row of soldiers hail him as their leader and we are smacked in the face with reality... Rather than demand our submission to his rule, he systematically ignores us, except for a brief glance [...] yet even then he only seems to say “What did you expect?”<sup>25</sup>

Though Andrews’s statement that this effect ‘reinforc[es] our feelings of isolation and betrayal’ casts the audience far more naively and passively than I believe is credible, he is correct in identifying this moment as a crucial turning point in our reading of his character. The mise-en-scène with its visual evocation of fascist rallies reminds us that Richard’s leering, outrageous comedy — though aimed at disturbing and amusing us and the characters within the play in equal turns — actually takes charge at a nation.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the uncomplicated, heterosexual physicality of both Tom Hiddleston and Kenneth Branagh’s Shakespearean characters, McKellen’s Richard and Iago thus exist in darkly subversive sexual worlds, given voice through the eloquent capacity of their bodies.

The control Richard exerts over those around him (including the audience) is similarly expressed through McKellen’s presence as both performer *and* writer, in a telling demonstration of the potential agency (and interpretive potential) of the Shakespearean actor during the adaptive process and in an uncanny echo between character and actor. Barbara Hodgdon argues that in the screenplay for *Richard III*, McKellen ‘turns himself into Bottom, plays all the parts.’ She notes that the screenplay is a ‘citational pastiche or collage’, conflating texts, various commentaries, production stills, outtakes and McKellen’s own critical gloss. All of which work to ‘reveal it as a text which no longer belongs to

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<sup>25</sup> Andrews, ‘Richard III on film,’ 91.

<sup>26</sup> In discussion of the original theatre production, Richard Eyre notes the ‘language of demagoguery in this century has a remarkable consistency’. He continues, Stalin, Mao Tsi Tung, Caeucescu and Bokassa ‘share a predilection for large banners, demonstrations, and military choreography.’ H.R. Coursen notes more instantly recognisable references to fascism in the production, such as images of ‘Mussolini jutting his jaw from a balcony as thousands cheered in the square below, or Hitler at the Nazi Party Conference at Nuremberg in 1934,’ or the figures of Nazi-sympathisers Oswald Mosley and Wallis Warfield. Certainly, Richard’s dictatorial grip over the play and his strategies of coercion and violence, find immediate and eloquent expression in the history of the twentieth century. Richard Eyre, *Utopia and Other Places* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 1993), 159; H.R. Coursen, *Reading Shakespeare on Stage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), 232-33.

“Shakespeare” — ‘Turning his own performance back into print, McKellen becomes its (thrice named on the screenplay’s cover) author.’<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as I will continue to argue, McKellen’s performance of Richard further aspires to unsettle and demonstrate the extent of his forceful subversive power by refusing the (at least superficial) measure of order, or sense of justice typically restored at the end of Shakespeare’s history plays. In the final speech of the play, Richmond invokes a sense of dramatic and national equilibrium, with his measured iambic pentameter placing repeated stress on ‘peace’ and the imagery of the stopping of a gushing wound. In the film, however, the final lines are Richard’s much earlier statement, ‘Let us to’t, pell mell – If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell’ (5.6.42): a battlefield invocation to his men-at-arms to defend his country from invading French soldiers.

The symbolic purpose behind these changes is quickly apparent. McKellen explains on his blog: ‘Richard’s laugh as he falls through the flames suggests his confidence that he will be back someday soon: when the next actor plays him, perhaps.’<sup>28</sup> This threat of evil returning is one that is familiar to both horror and action genre fans the world over. It also works with the logic of the adaptation’s totalitarian *mise-en-scène* and the play’s warning against ambition (see footnote number twenty-six). As Jared Scott Johnson maintains, if Shakespeare was commenting on how easily the public could be duped, ‘then ‘McKellen reminds us how twentieth-century audiences (particularly the citizens of Hitler’s Germany) *were* duped’ [emphasis added].<sup>29</sup> The broad applicability of Richard’s narrative and characterisation to a number of historical and contemporary figures beyond Nazism, moreover, argues that Richard’s possible return is not just that of the revenant body but that

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Hodgdon, ‘Replicating Richard: Body Doubles, Body Politics,’ *Shakespeare and Theatrical Modernisms*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (May 1998), 225.

<sup>28</sup> Ian McKellen, ‘The End,’ n.d., Webpage, accessed August 12, 2013, *Ian McKellen*, <http://www.mckellen.com/epost/r3/index.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Jared Scott Johnson, ‘The Propaganda Imperative: Challenging Mass Media Representations in McKellen’s *Richard III*,’ *College Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Fall 2004), 51.

of fascism in its multiple forms. The attribution of these lines as the last spoken in the film, the inclusive nature of their address and McKellen's hand outstretched in welcome as he falls, gesture towards a similarly dark meaning, furthermore. The arrival of Richmond (Dominic West) at the end of the film fulfils a recognisably Hollywood model of masculine heroism, with his conventionally handsome, youthful and athletic, square-jawed appeal especially apparent in contrast to McKellen's twisted features, camp mannerisms and lanky, uneven movement. Within the play, Richmond's speech before battle establishes a metaphysical dichotomy between the two combatants, with Richard representing the Devil and violence and Richmond as upholder of natural justice, peace and godliness. The end of Loncraine's adaptation and McKellen's enduring charisma, however, asks us to reconsider whether these lines can be so clearly drawn. Although Richmond fails to be the direct cause of Richard's death (the gun shots can clearly be heard *after* the fall begins), his willingness to perform this act makes him complicit in the same knowledge that Richard and many of Shakespeare's other kings share, from Claudius to Henry IV. As Andrew Marvell would write a century later about another civil war, 'The same arts that did gain/ A power, must it maintain.'<sup>30</sup> It is Richmond's victory but the film's climax refuses to allow his success to be couched in such easy terms. It is Richard's film throughout and it is McKellen's ending: in his final invocation Richard's monstrous seduction begins once more, having succeeded even in death as an agent of chaos and subversion.

Bill Condon's 1998 *Gods and Monsters* offers a final example of the conversation surrounding sexuality, monstrosity and disability present in McKellen's work during this period. An adaptation of Christopher Bram's semi-fictionalised biopic, *Father of Frankenstein*, the film takes many of its cinematographic, characterisation and narrative cues

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Marvell, 'An Horatian Ode: Upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland,' *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and John Stallworthy (New York: Norton, 2005), ll. 119-20.

from the genre of melodrama. Arguing that the concept of ‘social otherness’ has been ‘central’ to American films from the ‘earliest days of motion pictures’, Kylo-Patrick Hart notes that an essential generic constituent of melodrama is ‘deviant’ characters who ‘because of their noteworthy forms of “difference” produce fears and anxieties of the “other”’.<sup>31</sup> A dramatic imagining of the final weeks of gay horror director, James Whale, in which he battles with debilitating strokes before committing suicide, *Gods and Monsters* specifically realises its preoccupation with otherness through engaging with the recurrent motif of monstrosity. This occurs on a number of levels including Whale’s relationship to his most famous creation, Boris Karloff’s iconic performance as Frankenstein’s Monster, social alienation, sexual difference and physical deterioration. With its dense matrix of intertexts, metatexts and multiple adaptive frameworks, this theme also occurs on a structural level. The story of *Frankenstein* — both Shelley’s narrative and Whale’s own adaptations — gives utterance and a literalised form to the way that Whale’s memories oppress him throughout *Gods and Monsters*. Like Frankenstein’s Creature, they return to haunt him, filling him with disappointment at the failure of his works to create something meaningful (at least in his mind). Aside from the very real physical attacks he suffers —which often occur contiguously to moments of flashback — throughout the film we thus see a series of situations in which Whale is forced to encounter his past, be it in references to his cinematic progeny or reminders of his own mortality.

Whale’s interview with a young university film student, Edmund Kaye (Jack Plotnick) is telling of Whale’s apathy towards his most famous creations. In response to Kaye’s excited declaration that Karloff’s Frankenstein’s Creature is one of the most iconic images of the twentieth century — ‘more important than the Mona Lisa!’ — Whale chides

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<sup>31</sup> Kylo-Patrick A. Hart, *Queer Males in Contemporary Cinema: Becoming Visible* (Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 132.

him wearily, ‘Don’t be daft. It’s just makeup.’ The significance of Brendan Fraser’s character, Clayton Boone, works to undermine the impact of Whale’s remarks, however. Though Whale may view Frankenstein’s Creature as a novelty, undeserving of critical praise, Boone functions throughout as an abstracted symbol of the character and Whale repeatedly dreams/imagines either the Creature’s presence, or his own substitution within it. With his purposefully blockish haircut and square jaw, Boone offers a visual facsimile of the monster; albeit one whose horrific appeal is softened by Fraser’s *matinée*-style looks. So much so that in the final dream sequence of the film, as Whale walks over the battlefield to be reunited with his lover, Fraser is indistinguishable from Karloff’s lurching bulk in silhouette. Although Whale notes that it is Boone’s ‘open face’ which prompts his mind to flood him with memories and confess his personal history, it is perhaps rather Boone’s resemblance to the monster that enables their characters to play out the same Frankenstein/Creature dynamic. Indeed, Boone’s likeness emblematises the unwanted but persistent nature of the past memory to surprise, and like the other frequent references to *Frankenstein* — including direct footage from Whale’s iconic film adaptations, metatextual references to the films and their actors — thereby works to reiterate the significance of monstrosity to Whale’s narrative. His memories testify to the monstrosity of lived experience, furthermore, with his recollections of childhood and the First World War demonstrating the bleak humour that would later characterise Whale’s *Frankenstein* films.<sup>32</sup> And just as Boone’s function within the narrative

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<sup>32</sup> An early screenplay emphasises Whale’s alterity from his working class origins to a greater extent by dedicating more time to a representation of his father. In the film his father (Michael O’ Hagan) makes only the most fleeting of appearances, smiling benignly at his son, but the screenplay inserts another flashback to the turn-of-the-century English industrial heartland: Dudley in 1908. Working on the factory shop floor with his father James falls, dropping the mould that his father’s job was to beat into place. The accident causes a rush of terror in the young Whale, who, surrounded by the jeers of the other factory workers, looks up at his ‘singed, beast-like father’. A similarly significant and monstrous memory for Whale was the sight of his lover’s dead body: shot while going over the top of the trenches during the First World War, Barrett (Todd Babcock) fell onto barbed wire and could not be recovered. With the men unable to reach him safely, Barrett’s body was left to hang and so the soldiers would greet him every morning and remark on how he looked (even informing their later replacements of the ritual). *Film script for Father of Frankenstein (Released as Gods and Monsters)*, n.d.

is to trigger such moments of recollection, memory itself causes a monstrous transformation in Whale, with the violence of his strokes twisting and distorting his face and body.

It is in the contrast between the muscular vitality of Boone's body and Whale's illness, as in the contrast between Richmond and Richard III, moreover, that McKellen thus invites us to view the potential monstrosity of old age. The frankness with which the physical details of performance are revealed exhibits Whale's physical and mental deterioration. The director's impotence in the face of the attacks he suffers is emphasised through the contrast between the wild way he is moved by them and the affectedly precise manner of McKellen's speech and dress. Indeed, this willingness to demonstrate the potential weakness of his body is characteristic of McKellen's later performances from Gandalf, Magneto and Lear to Freddie in *Vicious*. As I will further explore, this openness is an effort to acknowledge the effects of old age and bear testament to the often unrepresented experiences of seniority. This effort should be negotiated with an awareness of a certain degree of vanity on McKellen's part, however. Certainly, moments when McKellen's characters are at the weakest are, paradoxically, also connected to surprising shows of strength; as evinced in the arresting sight of McKellen's naked Lear as I will later argue, for example. It is through the deliberate juxtaposition of these attacks and the mythic lightning birth of Frankenstein's monster, furthermore, that Whale is increasingly identified with the Creature. While retrieving his World War One gas mask for the portrait of Boone (which he in a rare moment of complicity agrees to sit for, clad only in the mask and a towel), Whale is illuminated by a lightning flash and a rapid cutaway that also reveals Frankenstein's monster. Unable to hear or see truly due to the darkened glass of the gas mask, Boone is subsequently assaulted by Whale who desperately gropes his body and genitals, telling him 'Make me invisible.' The reversal of

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[1997], Sir Ian McKellen Archive (1967-2007), V&A Department of Theatre and Performance, V&A Museum, GB 71 THM/357/1/23, 11.



roles in the dream sequence described previously thus foreshadows Boone's declaration in the struggle, 'I am *not* your monster!' This moment of anagnorisis — that like his Monster he is desperate for human affection — is devastating for Whale: he commits suicide the next morning.

With his recognition of Whale's loneliness Boone thereby occupies a complex critical position that is strikingly reminiscent of that which McKellen's future audience for *King Lear* would enter into: at once torn between pity for an old man besieged by his memories but repelled by Whale's capacity for cruelty and manipulation. Certainly, while characters such as Richard (and later Magneto) demonstrate the strength that can be derived from alterity, Whale's representation foreshadows the pathos of McKellen's *Lear*. Hart argues that within melodrama, characters possessing 'otherness' are regularly 'forced' to 'restore the patriarchal social order' through either self-sacrifice or death. And, although Whale's final scenes sensationalise our understanding of his difference through explicitly displaying his likeness to Frankenstein's Monster, his suicide should not be viewed through melodrama's self-annihilating, socially restorative function. Indeed, unlike Richard, Whale's legacy is ultimately a positive one. Ironically, for all his anger and resentment at his career being shaped by the *Frankenstein* films and the Monster as a popular culture icon, Whale's original sketch of the Creature is still the most valuable possession he can leave to Boone. The film's epilogue, set in the future, depicts Boone's close relationship with his son, thereby reversing the fraught legacy of father-son relationship inherited by himself and by Whale. After carefully explaining the importance of *Frankenstein* to his son, Boone walks out onto the street and, in the pouring rain, imitates the Creature's lurching gait.

In contrast to both Richard and Iago, Whale's character demonstrates a tender but interrogative ekphrastic representation of the theme of monstrosity. Both Whale and his most

famous creation subvert traditional conceptions of masculinity in Hollywood in order to depict the cruelty of social exclusion and in the case of *Gods and Monsters*' protagonist, also the brutalities of ageing. Certainly, in spite of Steven Paul Davies's description of gay representation in the nineties as the 'decade of drag and quirky camp comedies', with 'outrageous queens and gorgeous leading men with gym-toned bodies [...reassuring] us that there was life after AIDS', *Gods and Monsters* has more in common with an earlier high profile melodrama, *Philadelphia* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1993).<sup>33</sup> With its analogous depiction of a gay protagonist, debilitating illness and with its serious dramatic tone, *Gods and Monsters* shares *Philadelphia*'s desire to communicate the experiences of the generations of men whose lifestyles had not been represented on screen and who, by choice or in the face of social, political and religious oppression, could not freely share their lives. The beginning of McKellen's career in Hollywood is noticeable, therefore, for the association it forges between his work as an actor and a particular type of dramatic filmmaking, contiguous to the gravitas and seriousness of purpose commonly attributed to the Shakespearean within culture. His roles as Richard, Iago and James Whale prefigure the significance of corporeality in McKellen's performances with all three characters contributing to a critique of masculinity in popular culture, presenting (variously) a male body that is incapacitated, socially unprivileged and sexually oppressed but capable of expression, creativity, humour, cruelty and surprising power.

### **McKellen in Hollywood: *X-Men* and *The Da Vinci Code***

Unlike his younger Shakespearean counterpart, Kenneth Branagh who (as I will later argue) employs a strategy of conforming to cultural hierarchies in order to deliberately subvert them, Ian McKellen's star persona resists such conformity. Indeed, McKellen makes little effort to

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<sup>33</sup> Davies, *Out at the Cinema*, 121.

hide his own agenda and while Branagh's schema is predicated on the cultural and the social (challenging the often class-based presumptions of generic and formal hierarchies), McKellen's is often upon using the cultural for political ends. In response to the question asked of him and Patrick Stewart why they should 'deign' to swap Shakespeare for Marvel — 'as if *Star Trek* and [McKellen's] own sorties into hoped-for blockbusters never happened' — is the hope that *X-Men* 'fulfils our confidence that popular culture need not be crude or shoddy'.<sup>34</sup> I wish to open up this statement beyond McKellen's assertion about the possibility of sophisticated meaning in mainstream texts, however, and argue that his involvement in the *X-Men* series and, to a lesser extent, *The Da Vinci Code* (dir. Ron Howard, 2006) typifies the closeness of the relationship between his performer identity and his personal politics; an attitude that is present throughout his career since he outed himself as a gay man in 1988 and which, in contiguity to his Shakespearean work, is predicated upon representing alterity (social, sexual, bodily or otherwise).<sup>35</sup>

Although to a large extent career decisions such as performing in *The Lord of the Rings* have been made with little apparent regard to McKellen's personal activism (though they have had positive side-effects in terms of this), others such as *Bent* have a distinctly political purpose to them.<sup>36</sup> Given the readily visible allegory of the *X-Men* comic series, the

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<sup>34</sup> Ian McKellen, 'Untitled Blog Post,' May 15, 2000, Webpage, accessed August 6, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/cinema/xmen/lair/01/000515.htm>.

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that the *X-Men* franchise includes *X-Men* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2000), *X2* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2003) and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2006). There have been since two Wolverine focused spin-offs (*X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (dir. Gavin Hood, 2009) and *The Wolverine* (dir. James Mangold, 2013) a prequel set at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis (*X-Men: First Class* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2011)) and an addition to this prequel series which takes place during the timeframe of the prequel and the 'present' of the first trilogy. This latest — *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2014) — will include both actors who have played Magneto for Marvel: McKellen and Michael Fassbender.

<sup>36</sup> A 1979 play by Martin Sherman, *Bent* dramatises the persecution of homosexuals during Nazi Germany, taking place during and after the Night of the Long Knives. The original West End production of the play starred McKellen as Max and ten years later he reprised this role in a one-night benefit for Stonewall that was directed by Sean Mathias, McKellen's former lover of ten years. Mathias then directed a full run of *Bent* in 1990 also with McKellen and directed a film of the play in 1997. An explicitly political play, Benedict Nightingale described Sherman's aim as to 'disinter an evil often swamped in our memories by the quantitatively still greater wrong done the Jews'. McKellen, too, states of the play that it is 'much more than a sensational documentary'

historical events which play a key part in certain character narratives and director Bryan Singer's own political affiliations as an openly gay man and practicing Jew, McKellen's interpretation of Magneto is, as he acknowledges, both political and personal:

When Bryan Singer first talked to me about X-Men he explained the Xavier/Magneto axis in terms of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. It's true that each civil rights movement splits between the integrationists and separationists — the proponents of non-violence versus violent activism. I have noted that amongst activists in the gay rights movement. Some of us move between the various approaches, me included. Any member of a minority facing discrimination can relate to the mutants' dilemma. So before I ever saw the comic, I knew what would be central to the film script — an ever-relevant political argument. That attracted me as a gay man and as an actor.<sup>37</sup>

The link McKellen posits between the civil rights and the gay rights movement is not the only one that exists between *X-Men* and a discussion of gayness, moreover. Although Magneto is a physically capable man in contrast to Richard, James Whale or Leigh Teabing, *X-Men* shares the preoccupation of McKellen's Shakespearean work in its discussion of difference through the bodies of its characters. In some cases this is a straight-forward iteration of monstrosity and the inability of these bodies to be viewed as anything other than ugly or shocking. But in the case of its superficially 'normal' looking mutants such as Magneto or Rogue (Anna Paquin), the theme of alterity functions more symbolically by exploring narratives of acceptance/ discrimination via the series' synecdoche of mutation as sexual or racial

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and argues that Sherman's characters 'embody the variety of problems gays universally have to deal with. In pre-war Berlin they were outlawed... Yet we can still recognise them as our contemporaries.' *Bent* thereby demonstrates the same keen interest and obligation McKellen feels in representing the lives of oppressed minorities as would partially motivate his involvement in the *X-Men* franchise. His performances as both Max and Magneto present a valuable opportunity to connect his professional identity with his personal activism. Displaying the moral and social importance of such texts, McKellen even proclaims proudly that *Bent* is 'our first job in the Gay Nineties'. Benedict Nightingale, 'Review,' *The New Statesman*, May 11, 1979, n.p.; Ian McKellen, 'Out With Your Lies,' *The Evening Standard*, January 4, 1990, n.p.

<sup>37</sup> Ian McKellen, 'Ian McKellen from the set of X-MEN: Fans have questions, Ian McKellen has answers,' January 21, 2000, Webpage, accessed August 6, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/cinema/xmen/lair/01/000121.html>.

difference. As Martin Zeller-Jacques argues, ever since the publication of *God Loves, Man Kills* in 1982 (the explicit inspiration for much of *X2*), the *X-Men* franchise has been used to comment on identity politics, with mutants acting as a ‘convenient parallel’ for race, gender, political affiliation or sexuality.<sup>38</sup> The first two films, *X-Men* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2000) and *X2* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2003), in particular, tackle the problems that face gay youths in finding acceptance amongst their peers, their families and within themselves. Bobby Drake’s (Shawn Ashmore) ‘coming out’ exemplifies the way in which Singer encourages the conflation of ‘mutant’ and ‘gay’ when representing his adolescent characters. It is with this age group of characters that Singer’s allegory is both most apparent and most successful, as it allows him to represent their struggle for acceptance at a time when they would conceivably begin engaging with the world around them and realising their own identities. With phrases such as ‘So... when did you first know you were a...?’, ‘We still love you’ and his mother’s concern that she is responsible for her son’s preferences, this scene borrows the phraseology of the ‘coming out’ trope — a popular one in mainstream culture. The emotionally unresponsive father, confrontational brother and kindly but ignorant mother — ‘Have you ever tried... not being a mutant?’ (Jill Teed) — all fill typical archetypes of the gay teen’s family unit. Seen in figure 1.2 (below), the framing of the family within their domestic space in an overhead establishing shot, moreover, reveals the awkwardly assembled tableau-like composition of the characters in this moment and underlines the fraught nature of the exchange.

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Zeller-Jacques, ‘Adapting the X-Men: Comic Book Narratives in Film Franchises,’ *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 152.



MADLINE DRAKE: We still love you Bobby, it's just this mutant problem is a little..

WOLVERINE: [Interrupting] What mutant problem?

MADLINE DRAKE: ... complicated.

Fig. 1.2 The Drake family residence, including naively supportive but concerned parents and disgusted brother (seen on sofa with folded arms).

The function of the term 'mutant' as synecdoche for 'gay' has also been appropriated by other directors in the franchise, demonstrating its overarching suitability as a device within the series. In the prequel *X-Men: First Class* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2011) Hank McCoy (Nicholas Hoult) is questioned by his co-workers at the CIA mutant base about why he never revealed his true identity and responds, 'You didn't ask, I didn't tell.' The significant word choice and sentence structure here explicitly reference the mandate of United States federal law Pub.L. 103-160, popularly known as Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT): the prohibition of homosexuals from active service in the US military. The *X-Men* trilogy is concerned with subverting the provocative term common to Christian and anti-gay campaigning that has sprung from the pathologising tendency of homophobic discourse, moreover: the *cure*. This concept has powerful resonance within the franchise as a recurrent motif serving to extend the analogous relationship between gayness and mutation. Importantly, it is also employed in a subversive way as part of Magneto's militancy. In the first film Magneto proposes his own 'cure' for the rest of humanity to liberate them from their everyday condition and share in

mutant existence. In the final film, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (dir. Brett Ratner, 2006), however, despite Magneto's statement that 'We are the cure — for the infirmed, imperfect condition called *homo sapiens!*' he ultimately falls victim to a manufactured serum that removes all of his powers. In his desire to enforce the same totalitarian uniformity as his enemies, albeit from the reverse perspective, Magneto's final fate is — ironically — to become just like everyone else: *normal*.

Indeed, ideas surrounding the treatment and management of alterity circulate throughout the trilogy and a consistent threat that the mutants face is institutionalised discrimination. *X-Men*'s plot begins with a government hearing entitled 'Are mutants dangerous?' in which Dr. Jane Gray (Famke Janssen), a mutant and teacher at Charles Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, argues against the conservative Senator Kelly (Bruce Davison). It is this act which Magneto opposes, observing sadly on the hearing: 'I've heard these arguments before...' A child at the time of the Holocaust, (the film begins with a prologue set in Poland 1944 as a young Erik Lensherr is removed from his mother by concentration camp officers) Magneto's tragic past represents a direct reference to Nazism and the historical oppression of difference realised in *Bent*. Such details of characterisation work to situate *X-Men*'s narrative within a real world context in which the franchise's mutation/homosexuality allegory is not only strikingly applicable but conceivably real. Similarly, although at great pains to reduce the links between his own life and Magneto's as discriminated against minorities, McKellen's acknowledgement that he has fed off his own feelings of persecution in performance recognises the closeness between his performer identity and his lived experience. McKellen details imagining that in responding to Senator Kelly's anti-mutant tirade he was being 'attacked by Senator Jesse Helms, the notorious

homophobe': 'out came my indignation and anger which, expressed through Magneto's voice, manner and character, seem to have been convincing.'<sup>39</sup>

To return to the first political framework Singer establishes, the parallels between Martin Luther King and Malcolm X play out within the film through the differing and conflicting approaches of Professor Xavier (Patrick Stewart) and Magneto towards dealing with the hostility caused by difference. Xavier espouses 'anonymity' as the best safeguard against the 'world's hostility' and in his academy works to guide students to control their powers — to be responsible models of mutant life. In contrast to Xavier's strategy of 'anonymity' — and in an ironic counterpoint to the differences between McKellen's own views as a gay rights campaign and the radical politics of figures such as Derek Jarman — however, Magneto encourages the defiant demonstration of power for his Brotherhood of mutants. Throughout the trilogy he makes statements that celebrate the mutant body as an advanced and powerful form, often employing a semantic field of divinity in order to emphasise the gap he sees between mutants and humanity. In *X2* he commands Pyro (Alex Burton), the latest member of his Brotherhood and one of Charles' former students, 'You're a god among insects, let no one tell you different.' Similarly, in *Last Stand* Magneto tells Jean Gray, 'I thought to myself, why would Charles want to turn this Goddess into a mortal?'<sup>40</sup>

The political differences between the two men are also literalised in the film through their physical presentation, especially with regard to how they are popularly depicted in the Marvel comic book series. Petra Kuppens argues that within this fictional universe, Xavier is

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<sup>39</sup> Ian McKellen, 'X-MEN THE MOVIE, 9 May 2000,' May 9, 2000, Webpage, accessed August 12, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/epost/x000509.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> The strength of Magneto's convictions and unflinching rigidity on this matter is articulated in a moment of rare pathos for the characters of the Brotherhood, otherwise identified as the franchise's villains. While defending Magneto, Mystique (Rebecca Romijn) is struck with a dart containing the anti-mutant cure and falls to the ground, her body transforming from its blue scales to pink, human flesh. Magneto states with some detachment, 'I'm sorry my dear, you're not one of us anymore', but while walking away from her, murmurs quietly and sorrowfully, 'she was so beautiful.'



an icon of ‘rationality and humanity’. For Koppers this centres on the point of his wheelchair as a ‘rhetorical sign-complex’, wherein even his immobility becomes a part of his ‘rational, mind-focused universe where bodies are troublesome.’<sup>41</sup> The depiction of Xavier’s wheelchair-bound body in the comics varies between series, from heavily muscled to more regular proportions; his face is consistently dominated by extremely angular, black eyebrows, however. Jagging upwards sharply at the corner of his eyes, these eyebrows lend a severe and extra-terrestrial cast to his features. In the film series, though, Patrick Stewart’s face retains the quiet authority which so endeared him to the public in his role as Captain Jean Luc Picard in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TV, dir. various, 1987-94). The effort to reduce Xavier’s more overt supernatural qualities in adaptation thus signals the films’ embrace of the character as the icon of rationality *and* humanity Koppers describes. His Xavier is unfailingly courteous and mild in manner: an embodiment of the warm, nurturing environment of the school. Xavier’s strategy of anonymity is extended into the visual representation of the X-Men, moreover. Zeller-Jacques argues that the more subdued nature of the X-Men’s filmic presentation represents the appeal towards two ‘competing forms of authenticity’. The films represent a desire to simultaneously recognise the series’ fanbase by representing some of the most important aspects about the source metatext (i.e. the uniforms), but also to conform to the less fantastical, “‘realistic” milieu of the contemporary action blockbuster’ and thereby to downplay the comics’ more outlandish qualities.<sup>42</sup> Though Zeller-Jacques focuses specifically on costumes, this statement is equally applicable to broader styling and makeup decisions. Indeed, I would argue that the working out of the compromise he identifies is located in the differing visual representation of the mutant characters and the dichotomy between Xavier and the X-Men, and Magneto and the Brotherhood.

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<sup>41</sup> Petra Koppers, ‘The Wheelchair’s Rhetoric: the Performance of Disability,’ *TDR*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Winter, 2007), 85.

<sup>42</sup> Zeller-Jacques, ‘Adapting the X-Men,’ 151.

Designed by Louise Mingenbach (who also worked on *X2*, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and *X-Men: Days of Future Past*), the X-Men's black and grey leather uniform in the original film trilogy works to disguise and normalise difference. Aside from obvious mutations such as Hank McCoy's lurid blue fur (Kelsey Grammer) or Angel's wings (Ben Foster), all the mutants look alike: there is nothing that personalises or details their identity. Unusually, moreover, with the darkness of their costumes, their leather rather than spandex or latex fabric and typically zipped-up collars, the uniforms are not overtly sexualised in the typical manner of superhero outfits. The way in which these uniforms work to understate the abilities of their wearers, to present the X-Men as a socially functional task force rather than a series of threateningly powerful individuals, is iterated throughout the franchise on both Xavier and Magneto's side, furthermore. In *X-Men Wolverine's* (Hugh Jackman) decision to put aside his solipsistic quest for revenge in order to work for the greater good is motioned symbolically by the removal of the markers of his individuality — the white vest and jeans which advertise Jackman's abundant muscularity — and by adopting the X-Men uniform. Throughout the franchise the return to Wolverine's personal narrative of self-discovery and revenge is thereby signalled by his movement from the uniform back to his 'everyday' clothes, in which his powers (particularly his strength) are more clearly visible. Similarly, Jean Gray's transformation in *Last Stand* from X-Man to violent antagonist, the Phoenix, is evident in her new dark red, lighter fabric 'costume': a reification of her newly dangerous and highly individuated status.

The difference between both groups' political strategies is bodied forth in their characters' surroundings, too. Magneto's island lair set offers the polar opposite of Xavier's recognisably domestic space. Comprised of chrome and exposed rock, Magneto's base offers no concession to comfortable inhabitation. The only pieces of furniture — a desk and two

chairs — are severely yet stylishly utilitarian, grandiose in their scale and entirely metal. Magneto's appearance is similarly predicated on this combination of practicality and theatricality. While Stewart is clad in muted colours and traditionally masculine clothing, with Xavier's striking features downplayed, the costumes of the Brotherhood celebrate the mutant body rather than trying to normalise it. As Zeller-Jacques identifies, like Jean Gray/Phoenix's red suit, which reflects her explosive powers, the half-man, half-wild cat mutant, Sabretooth (Tyler Mane), is dressed in a manner that emphasises his animalistic qualities. Natural materials such as fur, suede and leather reinforce his primal, uncivilised persona.<sup>43</sup> Magneto's clothing is distinctly costume-like in nature, too, as an external statement of his emotional characterisation. Magneto's colours of maroon and *metal* grey are thus worked throughout, from a shimmering red shirt to his superhero costume. As in the costuming of his performances as Iago, Richard and even at the beginning of *King Lear*, the uncompromising nature of Magneto's character is thereby expressed in the rigid uniformity of his wardrobe, with its utilitarian grey and flashes of sudden, violent red.<sup>44</sup> The explicitly military function of Iago and Richard's clothing and its similarity to Magneto's costume demonstrate, moreover, that — like these characters — the exertion of Magneto's will does not preclude the possibility of violence and the violent suppression of his enemies.

The extremity and, crucially, the alterity of Magneto's character is thereby iterated through the relationship between his aesthetic presentation, cinematography and McKellen's performance. Although fellow mutants, the franchise frequently reiterate the difference between Xavier and Magneto by identifying Magneto as a threatening and ambiguous

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<sup>43</sup> Zeller-Jacques, 'Adapting the X-Men,' 153.

<sup>44</sup> McKellen notes on his blog that he learnt to 'handle a voluminous cloak ages back in school stage productions of Shakespeare'. Ian McKellen, 'E-Post: Correspondence with Ian McKellen,' n.d., Webpage, accessed August 1, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/epost/x3/060830.htm>.

presence in contrast to Charles' (apparently) uncomplicated humanist values. In a 1999 screenplay for the first film, *X-Men*, McKellen's first appearance is invested with drama:

ERIC LENSHERR half-turns to Xavier across the distance, his face in the half-light. He is strong and vital for his years. He is more often called MAGNETO.<sup>45</sup>

The costuming choices for the film continue this air of mystery with Magneto dressed in a long black overcoat and dark trilby, tilted over his face to cloak it in shadow. The noirish quality of his appearance creates a tonal chiaroscuro between the partially obfuscated darkness of Magneto's attire and Xavier's lighter, more modern silhouette. The film's composition thus establishes a pre-vocal tension between the two men, one that is complicated by the levity of their exchange, which belying the seriousness of their conversation, identifies them as old friends. The original screenplay further details this encounter describing the violence of Magneto's rebuttal of Charles' attempt to read his mind, rising Xavier's chair 'as if suddenly gripped by the hand of a giant.'<sup>46</sup> The vehemence of Magneto's desire to stop mutant discrimination is also more evident in an early screenplay, including an extended conversation between him and Senator Kelly. In response to Kelly's attempt to explain the intention of the registration act, Magneto argues, 'We are not talking about intentions. We are talking about mankind. It's fear.' Although Magneto's experience of the Holocaust is mentioned throughout the trilogy and the prequel as being one of the key motivators of his resistance to the control of mutants, it is always alluded to in oblique terms or through purely visual reference to his identification numbers tattoo. Statements such as 'I've heard these arguments before' or 'I've been at the mercy of men just following orders before' gesture towards the nature of Lensherr's racial persecution without explicitly naming

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<sup>45</sup> Tom DeSanto, Bryan Singer and David Hayter, *X-Men Screenplay*, 11/04/99, Sir Ian McKellen Archive (1967-2007), V&A Department of Theatre and Performance, V&A Museum, GB 71, THM/357/1/24, Scene 14, 13.

<sup>46</sup> DeSanto, Singer and Hayter, *X-Men Screenplay*, Scene 13, 14.

it. His reply to Kelly in the early screenplay, however, predicts ‘it is only a matter of time before mutants will be herded into camps. Studied for weaknesses. And eventually wiped off the face of the Earth.’<sup>47</sup>



XAVIER: Eric, what are you doing here?  
MAGNETO: Why do you ask questions to which you already know the answers?

Fig. 1.3 Magneto and Xavier’s first encounter in *X-Men*:

The explicit reference to concentration camps and the notorious Nazi experimentation programmes heighten the sense of injustice and Magneto’s desire to stop history repeating itself. That the more overtly expressed formulations of Magneto’s motivation in the screenplay are removed from the resultant film, though, only adds to the ambiguity which surrounds his depiction within the series. That McKellen is interested in characters associated with monstrosity, moreover, is reinforced in young Magneto’s (Michael Fassbender) dire pronouncement in *X-Men: First Class* ‘[...] I am Frankenstein’s monster. And I’m looking for my creator’. The importance of this revenger archetype for Magneto’s characterisation is underlined throughout by composer Henry Jackman’s scoring of an urgent, strongly rhythmic, recurrent theme. Indeed, the relevance of this line as a statement of Magneto’s

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<sup>47</sup> DeSanto, Singer and Hayter, *X-Men Screenplay*, Scene 53, 50.

characterisation is immediate given his desire to find the man who unlocked his powers, Sebastian Shaw (Kevin Bacon). It also acknowledges the significance of the way in which the audience perceive Magneto and his actions. Although able to justify his beliefs and methods, and performed with McKellen and Fassbinder's intensity and charisma, Magneto is resolutely identified as the franchise's 'monster', whose violent political intent haunts the X-Men's desire to quietly live out their lives. The climactic moment of peripeteia in which Lensherr embraces his vengeful side, fully becoming Magneto — Xavier (James MacAvoy) and the X-Men's chief antagonist — is somewhat inevitable given the most rudimentary knowledge of the series. It is essential, nonetheless, in uniting both the narrative and Magneto's characterisation within the prequel and the original series.

It should be noted that despite this, however, in contrast to *First Class*, which sees large shifts in Magneto's allegiances, Magneto's unwavering loyalty to his ideals in the original trilogy actually downplays his quality as a stock villain.<sup>48</sup> This ambiguity recognises a central point of contiguity between McKellen's Shakespearean identity and his popular cultural roles: the difficulty of determining a clear response either in support or condemnation of characters that are narratively, cinematographically and morally identified as villains. Indeed, with his skilful use of rhetoric and outsider-position, Magneto appears as a revisionary role of Richard III — especially when viewed with knowledge of McKellen's film performance. Both ideologues with uncompromising methods for securing their desired aims and a way of securing followers based on charm and coercion, it is especially productive

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<sup>48</sup> It is worth stating that although Magneto is played by Michael Fassbender in *First Class*, it is still valuable to consider his performance when looking at Magneto's characterisation as a whole within the series; and, even as an interpretation of sorts of McKellen's own performance. Both Magnetos demonstrate the same character arc, motivation and even utter very similar lines. In *X-Men* Magneto (McKellen) asks Xavier, 'What would you have me do...? I've heard these arguments before.' While in *First Class* Magneto (Fassbender) notes, 'I've been at the mercy of men just following orders. Never again.' The most recent addition to the franchise and sequel to *First Class* — *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2014) — moreover, uses both actors to employ Magneto at different times in his life. This simultaneous casting recognises the fact that both men play, in essence, the same Magneto.

to compare the two characters given the similarity of McKellen's performance style in the roles. His delivery in the *X-Men* series is more akin to classical theatrical performance with its focused diction and clear signposting of significance through emphasis. A number of his blockbuster roles, including Gandalf and Teabing, locate power in McKellen's voice, moreover, in an inextricable link between authority and seniority, which demands his ability as a theatrical performer. This is particularly evident when considering the physical abilities McKellen demonstrates in these roles. Wolverine hurtles through the films, his frequent lunges or runs in the direction of the camera threatening to break the fourth wall; like his enemies, we, the audience, often feel only one swipe away from peril. But, especially in contrast to the original medium of the *X-Men* series, Magneto's movements are economical; like stage fighting they are not quick, but big, open and fluid. The use of his power is simply expressed through raising one hand and a look of intense concentration. Similarly, when Gandalf partakes in combat his movements are limited to elegant downward slashes rather than the fast, rough cut and parries performed by the majority of *The Lord of the Rings* cast. And although this fact can be explained by both McKellen's age and —importantly — that of his characters, which necessarily precludes a certain degree of agility, it recognises that their true command lies in language.

The forest camp speech scene in *X-Men: Last Stand* further exemplifies the way in which Magneto wields language as a second, equally powerful ability and how, through the nature of McKellen's performance and his star persona, the composition of this moment awakens some collective recognition of its similarities to *Richard III* and other Shakespearean texts. Only hours before the fighting begins, a charismatic leader surrounded by his followers, calling them to arms and reminding them of the rightness of their cause —



MAGNETO: They wish to cure us, but I say to you, *we are the cure*. The cure for that infirmed, perfect condition called *homo sapiens*. They have their weapons — we have ours. We will strike with a vengeance and a fury that this world has never witnessed. And if any mutants stand in our way, we will use this poison against them. We shall go to Alcatraz Island, take control of the cure and destroy its source! And then nothing can stop us!

Fig. 1.4 The Brotherhood ready themselves for war from their secret forest campsite.



this moment in *Last Stand* invokes any one of a number of Shakespearean battlefield addresses. Due to Magneto's function as antagonist, however, his speech accesses a similar situation to Richard's oration before his army on Bosworth Field. Richard's speech works by creating a rhetorical divide between the native Englishmen who make up his army and the Breton invaders, led by the long-exiled Richmond. His appeals to the soldiers (and the audience), like in *Henry V's* St Crispin Day speech, are predicated on a specifically nation-bound idea of honour: if they are to be conquered, 'let *men* conquer us/ And not these bastard Bretons' (5.6.62-3). Richard identifies the Breton army with images of weakness, physical and moral, describing them variously as 'milksofs', scoffing that they have 'never in his life/ Felt so much cold as over shoes in snow' (5.6.55-6) and iterating their military failures. The rhetorical efficacy of Richard's call on English men through insulting a historic common enemy is muted, though, by our understanding of his villainy as well as our —and Shakespeare's contemporary audience's — knowledge that Richard inevitably fails. Regardless of how convincing his language is, and has been, Richard's final speech is not enough to stop the inevitable progress of English history. Nor can Richard ultimately escape his own characterisation: vice, no matter how entertaining or alluring, must ultimately be punished. Similarly, in spite of the emotional and empathetic address Magneto makes to the Brotherhood, Wolverine's presence in this scene and his expression of fear and aversion reminds us that we are positioned to condemn Magneto rather than condone his actions. As one of the X-Men who fights against the Brotherhood in the climax of the trilogy, Wolverine's clear opposition to Magneto reiterates the Manichean moral divide on which blockbuster films are predicated.

Despite conventional dramatic characterisation which ultimately positions Magneto as 'bad' and Xavier as 'good', identifying the means by which the franchise reinforces this

moral divide between the X-Men and the Brotherhood is frequently challenging, however. It is at times hard to distinguish which side — Magneto or Xavier’s — we, the audience, are supposed to endorse. Indeed, the two characters who, superficially are meant to be opposites of each other, share overlapping ideologies or commit actions more characteristic of their enemy. Xavier’s Cerebro program, for example, which allows him to identify any mutant in the world, is especially problematic given its similarity to the authoritarian mutant registration act Senator Kelly endorses. Indeed, *X2* even dramatises the problems that can result in abuse of such a tool, to the extent that it becomes necessary for Magneto to help the X-Men rescue Charles. If the series’ gay allegory is extended to the personal politics that separate Magneto and Xavier, moreover, Xavier campaigns for the right to anonymity, while Magneto actively celebrates the gay/mutant lifestyle. Though the validity of both approaches is undeniable at times, the implications of what the two men practice are surprising. Charles’ desire to allow his mutants to live peacefully by integrating as best they can within the human world extends to active oppression in the case of Jean Gray in *The Last Stand*: he is unwilling to allow Jean to discover her ‘true’ self. Indeed, that the screenwriters altered the origins of Jean’s dark ‘Phoenix’ self from an alien entity to an essential part of her being further emphasises the explicitly repressive nature of this act. In contrast, Magneto states that he wants her to ‘be what you are — as nature intended.’ This sentiment is given all the greater pathos for McKellen’s own acknowledgement that ‘acting, like being gay, is about being secretive.’<sup>49</sup>

The closeness between this role and McKellen’s performer identity further highlights the potential arbitrariness of identifying the X-Men as heroes and the Brotherhood as villains, therefore. Both Magneto and McKellen’s Shakespearean characters — such as Iago or Richard — share a darkly ironic worldview, their humorousness able to charm the audience

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<sup>49</sup> Lawrence O’ Toole, ‘Sympathy for the Devil,’ *New York Times*, April 5, 1992, 28.

into near complicity; something especially made apparent in McKellen's film performance through Richard's intimate asides and soliloquies. Both Richard and Magneto are played by McKellen, furthermore, with a knowing archness and campness that complicates the characters' totalitarian politics by necessitating that, in spite of their dedication to the cause, they remain one of the few characters whose dialogue can move between dramatic and lighter, more humorous registers. This is achieved in part by McKellen's ability to embody the seriousness of Magneto's dedication to his cause, but also to acknowledge the necessity of certain levity, expressed in Magneto's archly camp sense of humour. Throughout the series he offers bitchy commentaries variously on the X-Men's youth, inexperience and appearances, such as his laconic comment to Rogue, 'We love what you've done with your hair'. His human enemies are also not spared his sardonic wit. His explanation to Senator Kelly of what he is about to do (encourage his body's ability to mutate) is pithily encapsulated in the line 'let's just say that God works too slowly'. There is a dark humour behind the vengeance Magneto carries out, moreover. The same coin Shaw asks him to move as a boy, coercing Magneto's powers through the threat and eventual murder of his mother, is ultimately shot through Shaw's brain. In the literally-minded logic of the revenger there is a similarly fitting irony that Senator Kelly is forced to become a victim of his own body's mutations as the bigot who is unable to bend dissolves utterly into a gelatinous mess. This is one aspect of Magneto and McKellen's performance that encourages viewer identification with his character and increases his characterisation from that of the simplistic function of antagonist. Along with Wolverine, his character thereby offers an often humorous counterpoint to the earnest and emotionally-heavy narratives of the X-Men.

Indeed, McKellen has stated that 'perhaps Magneto had to be pure villain but he didn't feel like that, playing him' and this sentiment is typical of McKellen's approach to the

often unlikeable characters he has played. As Peter Holland writes, ‘Coleridgean dictates of motiveless malignity are [for McKellen]... effectively unplayable’, and ‘as always, McKellen resists [...] abstract symbolism.’<sup>50</sup> Like his Shakespearean antagonists, the villains McKellen has portrayed on film have consistently subverted common expectations or prejudices of a British actor playing ‘baddies’ in Hollywood. He not only takes unlikeable characters and makes them humorous or enjoyable to watch, but through the associations of his star persona, often instils them with a greater degree of complexity than might otherwise be anticipated. This fact could be influenced by his own experience and, potentially, an interest in roles that encourage more tolerance: the parallels between Magneto’s desire for civil rights and the work of gay rights campaigners are sufficient to warrant a more nuanced performance from an intelligent actor. Equally, however, it could simply be just commercial necessity — the British villain has been a reliable figure in Hollywood blockbusters, even after the archetype began to parody itself.

What is certain, though, is that McKellen nurtures the ambiguity of his villains, at once making them often sympathetic or entertaining figures, while flagging up the dangers of ideologues. As Zeller-Jacques argues, the opening of the first *X-Men* with its focus on a young Magneto and present-day adolescent Rogue requires the audience not to ‘identify with the costumed heroes and villains of the story, but with the potential victim in the midst of the conflict.’<sup>51</sup> Above all, that we are permitted to see the tragic situation in which Magneto gains both his powers and his determination to resist persecution by any means, invites understanding; even if ultimately we are unable to sustain sympathy for his violent actions. As McKellen states regarding his performance as Iago, ‘I wouldn’t have known how to play the critical cliché of the man as the embodiment of all evil’; his character instead is driven by

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<sup>50</sup> Holland, ‘Sir Ian McKellen,’ 148, 153.

<sup>51</sup> Zeller-Jacques, ‘Adapting the *X-Men*,’ 152.

his own jealousy at the thought of Othello having ‘leaped into my seat.’<sup>52</sup> Indeed, echoing Holland’s observation, he has expressed his frustration at the claim laid at him that his characters are ‘the embodiment of all evil’, stating:

It’s not enough to say Hitler was evil. Or Satan. Or the “evil empire” of Russia. How can you stop relating to evil? You have to start relating to humanity, to people, who are doing evil things. The people themselves. They’re human beings.<sup>53</sup>

Richard, Iago and Magneto are thus morally complex individuals whose intelligence and eloquence frequently invites complicity from their audience and, potentially, understanding.

McKellen has stated, furthermore, that although he drew upon his personal experiences for Magneto’s characterisation, ‘this does not of course mean that I play him as [a] gay man’. Certainly, the actor has speculated widely that Magneto has a relationship with Mystique and such an interpretation could be argued in the affection, tenderness and physical intimacy displayed on screen by the couple. This does not lock down Magneto’s sexual identity, however, and does not make him become a heteronormative character within the film canon (as Magneto is in the comics) but only increases his fluidity. Mystique is, after all, a shape shifter; she can not only be *anyone* but *any* gender. His character does not ascribe to a tradition of Hollywood action villains who are often characterised by their extremely predatory attitude towards women, moreover — rape is an all too common threat of the action genre. As Mark Gallagher writes, American films that feature female protagonists ‘routinely subject these figures to sexual violence’, almost always ‘[fending] off a group of sexual predators or a single, rapine villain.’ Even in more ‘PG-13’ films Gallagher notes an

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<sup>52</sup> Ian McKellen, ‘Words from Ian McKellen,’ n.d., Webpage, accessed August 13, 2013, *Ian McKellen*, <http://www.mckellen.com/stage/othello/>.

<sup>53</sup> Alex Simon, ‘Sir Ian McKellen: A Knight Out in L.A.’, *Venice Magazine*, May 1997, n.p.

‘implicit rather than explicit rape threat’.<sup>54</sup> On the one occasion in which he is responsible for the abduction of a young woman — Rogue — it is in order to harness her power, though. Magneto is even wryly apologetic, telling her ‘Your sacrifice will be our survival. I’ll understand if that won’t be a strong consolation.’

Even when McKellen has not selected films for such explicitly political reasons he has often been guided by personal motivation and a desire to understand his characters, moreover. The contrast drawn by McKellen in interviews of his experience starring in *Apt Pupil* (dir. Bryan Singer, 1998) and *Gods and Monsters* is particularly indicative of his preferred mode of engagement with film. McKellen has spoken regarding the latter of his relief at playing a role with not only his own accent, but some points of commonality between his own life and his subject’s. Often frank and unromantic about the nature of casting in Hollywood, McKellen lamented the fact that for an Englishman of his age (then in his late fifties) the only parts are ‘elderly scientists or villains with foreign accents.’<sup>55</sup> It was for this reason that the character of Whale appealed and, as a gay man, McKellen found the part ‘convincing, which isn’t always true.’<sup>56</sup> In contrast, while the role of Kurt Dussander in *Apt Pupil* professed to offer McKellen the chance to enter into the kind of dark characterisation he had already occupied in *Iago* and *Richard III* (and would again in *Magneto*), he was unable to connect with his character:

[...] I didn’t like my character. He didn’t seem very deep. He just seemed like a representative of evil. I couldn’t believe in the house he was living in. I didn’t like that the reference to his wife was cut out. All my efforts were put into the accent. After that disorientated experience, *Gods and Monsters* was like coming home.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Mark Gallagher, *Action Figures: Men, Action Films and Contemporary Adventure Narratives* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 204.

<sup>55</sup> David Miller, ‘A Knight at the Pictures,’ *Shivers*, No. 64 (April 1999), 52.

<sup>56</sup> Tom Dawson, ‘Ian McKellen,’ *Total Film*, No. 28 (1999), 25.

<sup>57</sup> Dawson, ‘Ian McKellen,’ 25.

Though both films were released in the same year (1998) and both were preoccupied by their often dislikeable, ageing protagonists' struggle to escape from their past, McKellen 'emphatically' denied any connection between the two beyond both being buddy movies 'of a kind.' For McKellen, Dussander's 'huge amount of makeup and padding' was 'all about disguise and deception'; in contrast, 'there was no disguise in Whale. It [was] all about revelation.'<sup>58</sup> The laboriousness but also riskiness implicit in McKellen's description of Dussander thus contrasts sharply with his use of 'revelation' for his performance of Whale, with the word's association of communicating an often religious purpose. And although this statement pertains to the differing characterisation of Dussander (secretive) and Whale (provocatively open), it is strikingly applicable as a statement of McKellen's preferred intent in filmmaking: to reveal a certain aspect of 'truth' about his characters, and when possible, to derive this truthfulness from his own life.

The connection between McKellen's performer and personal identities is further evident in his description of experiencing a general realisation about the nature of film acting (as opposed to theatrical performance) as a direct result of publically coming out. Coming out, he states, 'freed up [his] emotional life' and meant that he was 'finally ready to act for the camera.'<sup>59</sup> While he previously comprehended of acting as 'understanding the script, and then giving it to the audience', the movement from theatre to cinema necessitated reconsidering this. In cinema, his job of presenting the material to the audience was no longer necessary — a task taken up by directors, cameramen and editors — and, instead, his job was purely to be the 'raw material': to 'tell', not to 'be'. As a consequence of this McKellen realised that acting on camera required him to 'root the performance in [his] own feelings, so

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<sup>58</sup> Miller, 'A Knight at the Pictures,' 54.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Farber, 'Truth and Consequences,' *Movieline*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (1998), 63.

that it was as true and as real as I could make it.’<sup>60</sup> Indeed, as I will continue to explore, this effort to represent his characters ‘truthfully’ is both a recurrent feature of McKellen’s gentle, self-mockery in *Extras* and *Vicious* and an evident part of his interpretive process.

The relevance of McKellen’s coming out as a gay man to his formulation of onscreen acting is strikingly apt in the case of *X-Men* with its explicitly allegorical narrative, therefore. This is particularly apparent given that McKellen’s political leanings as an individual are not limited to his personal experience but can be read within his star persona. His Twitter account, for example, is instructive of the method, also evident in his blog, by which he uses his high profile to promote charity groups or his stance on political issues. His Twitter handle simply states: ‘Actor and Activist.’ With 1.48 million followers (as of October 2014), the large part of whom are presumably younger cinema-goers introduced to his work through *The Lord of the Rings* and *X-Men*, McKellen’s twitter account provides him with a large, interactive audience. While the majority of his feed is dedicated to promoting his current productions, McKellen’s voice is evident throughout. Alongside advertisement of television appearances or studio promotions are more idiosyncratic posts which express McKellen’s opinions, sometimes in direct opposition to the mute loyalty traditionally demanded of an actor by their production. His retweet of a link to the Screen Junkies’ *Honest Trailer* for *X-Men*, for example, shows his willingness to sustain a certain (if mild) level of criticism towards Hollywood films. *Honest Trailers*, parodying the hyperbolic quality of mainstream film marketing, thus intones humorously: ‘You’ve seen the prequels, sequels and spin-offs... But before you see the prequel-sequel-hybrid-reboot, revisit the triquel that started it all.’<sup>61</sup> This levity is also evident in McKellen’s own posts which include a series of photographs with Patrick Stewart in promotion of their repertory performances of *No Man’s*

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<sup>60</sup> Farber, ‘Truth and Consequences,’ 63.

<sup>61</sup> Screen Junkies, ‘Honest Trailers — *The X-Men* trilogy,’ May 20, 2014, Video Clip, accessed June 5, 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvkCv5cCD5Y#t=19>.



*Land* and *Waiting for Godot*, entitled: #gogodididonyc. Clad casually but wearing the iconic bowler hats of their roles as Estragon and Vladimir, Stewart and McKellen were photographed at a number of famous New York landmarks, the humorousness of their poses and the obvious affection between the two men bodying forth the companionship of their Beckett characters.

Fans of the actor are thereby gifted with the opportunity to see behind the scenes of McKellen's work and experience a sense of his working relationships — especially with Stewart, also a user of social media. At the same time, however, McKellen employs Twitter as part of his charity and political advocacy. Figure 1.5 (below) demonstrates the level of attention McKellen draws to his charity associations. Not only does he post a personal statement regarding the work of the Albert Kennedy Trust but also retweets a similarly positive message from a follower and an article by the Trust on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kennedy's death. With its aim to increase the safety of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in crisis, the Trust is indicative of the kinds of charities McKellen has involved himself in and publically supported through his Twitter account. Recent activity has included endorsing Natural High's bid for funding to create an anti-drugs film for vulnerable young people and vocal criticisms of Russia's homophobic attitudes under Vladimir Putin's presidency and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. The visibility of McKellen's advocacy on such prevalent social media platforms thus necessitates reconsidering the influence of the star's intertexts on their performances and the inevitability of the associations he brings to characters such as Magneto, with whom such political parallels are not only immediate but relevant and productive.



Fig. 1.5 A screen capture of McKellen's Twitter feed.<sup>62</sup>

If Magneto represents the deliberate cultivation of transparency between character and actor, connecting that aspect of Ian McKellen's star persona which relates to his work as a gay rights activist, his role as the upper-class, fundamentalist Christian Sir Leigh Teabing in *The Da Vinci Code* (dir. Ron Howard, 2006) represents the direct opposite. McKellen has long been a vocal critic of the Catholic Church, describing those 'remnants of the patriarchal order' who decide to forgo sexual relationships with others, yet who still have the power to talk about and shape those of others', as 'farcical.'<sup>63</sup> As such, his involvement in the film is unsurprising, perhaps. With its premise undermining the divinity of Jesus Christ by arguing for his marriage to, and child born by Mary Magdalene, the release and subsequent

<sup>62</sup> Ian McKellen (@IanMcKellen), April 29, 2014.

<sup>63</sup> TIME, 'TIME: 10 Questions for Ian McKellen,' n.d., Video Clip, accessed December 1, 2012, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOE0vAtax0E> [no longer accessible].

mainstream popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* engendered a powerful reaction worldwide from the Catholic Church.<sup>64</sup> Teabing is a historian whose initial assistance of Professor Langdon (Tom Hanks) and Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou) in the grail quest belies his true identity as the Teacher, a murderous obsessive after the Grail. With his knighthood, his grand French château and plummy *bon vivant* mien, he references a class-specific vision of Englishness. In both film and novel Teabing thereby symbolises the corrupting influence of privilege and the murderous lengths he goes to in order to claim the Grail gives voice to the bigotry inherent in the rigid maintenance of social hierarchy. McKellen resists caricaturing the fanaticism of his character, however, and instead demonstrates a recurring aspect of his career: a desire to imbue ‘evil’ or ‘bad’ characters with a sympathetic level of emotion or motivation.

Indeed, comparing Dan Brown’s visual introduction to Teabing with that of screenwriter Akiva Goldsman, McKellen notes on his blog approvingly, ‘There is a slight shift in tone which I welcome.’ Although Brown employed a mixture of typically gothic and horror conventions to heighten the tension of this moment — ‘a form moved in the shadows, only his silhouette visible’ — Goldsman’s script is, in McKellen’s words, ‘more matter-of-fact’ about its character introduction.<sup>65</sup> McKellen’s endorsement of this change in the adaptive process reiterates the point that, despite the exaggerated affectations of his character,

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<sup>64</sup> This response was first led by the Vatican’s condemnation of the ‘shameful and unfounded errors’ contained within the book. The urgency of their need to repudiate the claims of the book was evident in the subsequent appointment of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Archbishop of Genoa, as an official debunker of the novel. Leading a series of public debates Cardinal Bertone’s function was to re-establish the lines between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’, which had apparently been blurred by Brown’s interpretation of the grail myth. The film adaptation proved similarly inflammatory, with a number of religious officials suggesting their congregations should consider boycotting the film as ‘one way to let the world know the story offends and defames the church’. Archbishop Angelo Amato, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith meanwhile stated that had the ‘slander, offenses and errors’ contained in the book and film had been written about the ‘Quaran or the Shoah (the Holocaust), they rightly would have provoked a worldwide uprising...’. Cindy Wooden, ‘Vatican Official Suggests Catholics Boycott *The Da Vinci Code*,’ *Catholic News Service*, May 1, 2006, accessed November 13, 2013, <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0602483.htm>.

<sup>65</sup> Ian McKellen, ‘A Knight’s Tale: Chapter 1,’ July 12, 2005, Webpage, accessed August 6, 2013, Ian McKellen, <http://www.mckellen.com/cinema/davinci/journal/050712.htm>.

he is unwilling to portray Teabing in a manner that pantomimes religious extremism. While at the beginning of *The Da Vinci Code* Teabing's camp, aristocratic eccentricities offer light, amusing contrast to the earnest and serious tone of the film as a whole, when the true nature of his character is revealed it is neither exaggeratedly comic nor hysterical. Indeed, the detail of Teabing's disability as a result of childhood polio, (the metal callipers on his legs causing him to walk stiffly and with the aid of sticks) is downplayed both by the film and by McKellen from the 'gothicky flourish' it is given in the novel.<sup>66</sup> Teabing moves with obvious difficulty, McKellen's laboured, lurching movements demonstrating the effort of walking; and yet he is capable of sudden speed and, like Whale, his precise manner of dressing and speaking evinces his alertness and capability. In subversion of traditional representations of 'monstrous' bodies, Teabing's villainy does not originate in his disability but rather from his murderous self-interest; a trait, the film suggests, not exclusive to its secular or religious characters. In fact, the climax of the Grail chase and the revelation of Teabing's true identity demonstrate the character's dexterity, both mentally as his machinations are exposed and physically as he attacks Langdon and Sophie.

It is this quality which links McKellen's performance of Teabing with Magneto, who, despite contributing to the function of *X-Men* as a gay allegory, demonstrates a fundamentalist quality that jars with McKellen's own espoused liberalism. This is also apparent in the totalitarian politics associated with his roles as Richard and Kurt Dussander, the former SS officer in *Apt Pupil*. It is in large part due to the outspoken nature of McKellen's activism that this surprising correlative is present in his work; and indeed, I would argue, actively encouraged by his career choices. His characters' fascist attitudes, violent rejection and — at times — suppression of difference, stand in contrast to McKellen's personal politics and his active career campaigning for greater legal and societal freedoms for

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<sup>66</sup> McKellen, 'A Knight's Tale: Chapter 1'.

the gay community. His tendency to show great curiosity for fleshing out his character's emotional lives (a throwback to the techniques of John Barton and Patsy Rodenberg) extends comprehensively, therefore, even into those figures that hold religious or political views antithetical to his own. McKellen's unwillingness to accept traditional characterisation of such individuals as simply 'evil' springs, perhaps, from a desire to better know his 'enemy' and an acknowledgement of the complexity of intolerance. But importantly, it is in keeping with his own personal attitude to critiques of homosexuality (on both religious and secular grounds), which demonstrate a lively and creative aspect of his activism.<sup>67</sup>

### **'Real Shakespeare': Returning to *King Lear***

The 24<sup>th</sup> March 2007 saw Ian McKellen begin an eleven-month tour of *King Lear* with the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Trevor Nunn (with a filmed version of the production released in the UK on Channel 4 in 2008, on PBS in America and on DVD the next year). It marked McKellen's first return to Shakespeare since playing Richard III in 1992 and to the RSC since *Othello* in 1989. With the exception of a successful production of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* alongside Helen Mirren in 2001 and his pantomime debut as Widow Twankie in *Aladdin* for the Old Vic in 2004-5, it more broadly symbolised McKellen's return to the stage after a successful decade in Hollywood. As an actor of newly

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<sup>67</sup> In one characteristic article McKellen refutes Janet Daley's argument against the lowering of the age of consent for gay sex, dismissing her admission of 'Some of my best friends are gay' as one of the 'oldest openings of the homophobe'. He proceeds to deconstruct the assumptions on which her beliefs are founded by demonstrating the scientific facts that work against her statement that girls mature sooner than boys and so boys must be protected legally for far longer. McKellen frequently takes target at religion as a root of homophobic sentiment, moreover. A characteristic response, for instance, is McKellen's statement in *The Los Angeles Times*: 'I increasingly see organized religion as actually my enemy. They treat me as their enemy.... Not all Christians, of course. Not all Jews, not all Muslims. But the leaders. . . . Why should I take the judgment of a declared celibate about my sexual needs? He's basing his judgment on laws that would fit life in the Bronze Age. So if I'm lost to God, organized religion is to blame.' McKellen's forthright attitude to institutionalised religion is further evident in his provocative assertion, in answer to a question on the similarities between Gandalf and God: 'I don't believe in God, but I know Gandalf exists.' Ian McKellen, 'Closet Homophobes,' *The Times*, December 5, 1991, n.p.; Matea Gold, 'McKellen's crisp clarity in autumn,' *Los Angeles Times*, November 14, 2009 <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/nov/14/entertainment/et-ian-mckellen14>; @TheHobbitMovie, December 6, 2012, 7:08PM.

increased fame and mainstream appeal, it is worth establishing some of the values McKellen's other popular cultural roles brought into association with his star persona during this period, immediately prior to returning to Shakespeare. Most significant to a reading of his performance in *King Lear* a year later is McKellen's episode in Ricky Gervais' comedy series for the BBC, *Extras*. Released in 2006 at the same time as *The Da Vinci Code* and *X-Men: The Last Stand* and three years after the release of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the episode captures McKellen at the height of his popularity as a performer. In many ways despite its ironic tone it also gestures towards some truths about McKellen's star persona and his 'method' approach to preparing for a role. In this it seizes upon the shift in McKellen's performer identity at the time towards a more self-parodying quality, evident in his pantomime role and his guest appearance on *Coronation Street* in 2005. His involvement in the long-running soap opera was highly praised and, unlike the immediately negative reaction to his casting in *X-Men*, the suitability and productivity of this role was acknowledged by the British press. Rupert Smith states that 'after four decades of intensity, [McKellen] deserves a few laughs' and that 'a voice trained by a lifetime of Shakespeare and Chekhov can bring unexpected depths to the words "Eeeeh, Lancashire hotpot"'.<sup>68</sup> India Knight notes that the casting is 'odd' until you realise that McKellen 'has a well-developed sense of camp', congruent with the tone of the programme. Recognising his movement further into popular culture as a challenge rather than a lessening of dramatic effort, she continues, 'scaling the heights of Shakespeare represents only one kind of glory' for the 'truly ambitious British actor'.<sup>69</sup> Tom Cole argues that the casting coup represents 'one in the eye for any snobs who'd call soap operas vulgar or trashy'.<sup>70</sup> Finally, Mark Lawson observes the increasing

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<sup>68</sup> Rupert Smith, 'Lord of the Rovers,' *Guardian*, May 5, 2005, n.p.

<sup>69</sup> India Knight, *The Sunday Times*, March 13, 2005, n.p.

<sup>70</sup> Tom Cole, 'Stellar Street: Robert Vaughn and other famous faces in Corrie,' *Radio Times*, January 27, 2012, accessed August 19, 2013, <http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2012-01-27/stellar-street-robert-vaughn-and-other-famous-faces-in-corrie>.

trend for cultural ‘promiscuity’ amongst truly successful stars, with a taste for popular culture indicating a refined palate. He posits that McKellen’s role offers the pleasure of ‘crossover’ acting and that the success of this experiment would likely be followed by ‘switching on *EastEnders* to find Dame Judi [Dench] chin-wagging with Dot Cotton.’<sup>71</sup>

In *Coronation Street* McKellen’s character, the conman Mel Hutchwright, pretends to be a popular novelist, struggling with completing his final work. The success of his guest role, and the pleasure of ‘crossover’ acting that Lawson describes, lies in the fact that Hutchwright’s characterisation is predicated upon the same values associated with the Shakespearean actor as a bastion of high cultural cachet. The surprising nature of McKellen’s appearance is not disguised in any way and, rather, he plays an exaggerated version of himself and in particular, both his own and the Shakespearean actor’s stereotypical florid verbosity. In one theatrical monologue Hutchwright meditates upon his new surroundings:

Inhaling the Northern air; these dusty cobbles... Norris, you are failing to open your writer’s eye. Where you see only litter and dirt, I see the history of generations. What countless shoes have worn these cobbles down? What were their owners’ thoughts and passions?... This paper that rolls in the wind: what could it tell us about the hands that held it?

Through Hutchwright’s ‘writer’s eye’ the familiar territory of *Coronation Street* itself becomes a new space, rich in history, symbolism and interpretive possibility. Walking down the street with Norris (Malcolm Hebden), however, the contrast between everyday reality and the grandness of Hutchwright’s imagination is visibly ludicrous. It is not merely the depth of Hutchwright’s interpretations that signal the alterity of his cultural affiliations from the working class world of *Coronation Street*, however, but the specific language he uses. McKellen muses, ‘there’s something distinctly Laurentian about you’ to a nonplussed Ken

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<sup>71</sup> Mark Lawson, ‘Street credibility,’ *Guardian*, March 12, 2005, accessed August 17, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/comment/story/0,3604,1436054,00.html>.

Barlow (Bill Roache). His use of a critical vocabulary offers some of the most jarring, meta-textual but also humorous moments within the character's arc: Barlow's characterisation is dismissed by Hutchwright as being 'tragic if it weren't so bathetic' and his column for the local newspaper is similarly snubbed with the sardonic comment that 'it's like a dog walking on two legs; it's not done well but one's amazed it's done at all.'

Hutchwright's description of a passing pigeon as a 'noble bird... [a] symbol of the working class struggle' thus encapsulates the comic valence of casting McKellen in this role. Comedy is derived at once from the incongruity between Hutchwright's intellectualising of the Street, its inhabitants and the cultivated mundanity of its existence, but also from the absurdity (plainly visible in McKellen's ironic performance) of placing one of the most famous living Shakespeareans in an ITV prime-time serial. The intense emotional conflicts of the stage or the scale of the Hollywood blockbuster condensed to the small, domestic spaces of Weatherfield; the famed eloquence and cultural sophistication of the Shakespearean actor utilised to describe a pigeon, or for a conversation over a quick one at the Rovers Return Inn. In much the same way as Hutchwright's intellectualism invites the audience's derision comedy is therefore derived in *Extras* from deconstructing the highbrow mystique surrounding McKellen as Shakespearean actor. Written by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, the comedy series centres on the continuing struggles of actor Andy Millman (Gervais) to move beyond extra work and into the role of leading man. Each episode features one (or more) guest stars of established fame from the world of mainstream culture and theatre, from Samuel L. Jackson, to Daniel Radcliffe and Patrick Stewart. These stars then perform 'twisted' versions of themselves.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> In his episode, Stewart — in an ironic twist of Professor Xavier's powers of telekinesis and telepathy — is writing a screenplay for a film in which his character 'controls the world with his mind... I see a beautiful girl and I think "I'd like to see her naked" and all her clothes fall off.' His repeated explanations of this one scenario



In McKellen's episode Millman despairs at the news that Robson Green will be starring in *King Lear* on stage and despairingly tells his agent, 'Get me some *real* Shakespeare.' Cognisant of Shakespeare's ability to simultaneously reinvent and legitimise an actor's career — particularly that of a failing sitcom star — Millman tells Darren, 'The play's the thing: get me a play.' His quotation of *Hamlet* here demonstrates precisely the cultural cachet ascribed to theatre and theatrical actors which *Extras* parodies so effectively. In the second series, now a sitcom actor by trade and famed for his catchphrase 'Are you 'aving a laugh?' Millman aspires to a style of acting and emotional intelligence, symbolised for him by McKellen as a purveyor of 'real Shakespeare'. Leading the auditions for a role in his play McKellen is surrounded by sycophantic theatrical actors and crew members and on being addressed as 'Sir Ian' tells Millman with true luvvie *bonhomie*: 'Please, no titles in the workplace.' In contrast to Millman's uniform-like black and white outfit of t-shirt, jumper and leather jacket, McKellen's flowery shirt, open at the chest, and his beaded necklace gives a sartorial expression to a cliché of theatrical performers; a cliché which the rest of the episode continues to parody (for more on this relationship between clothing and actor personae see my chapter on Tom Hiddleston).

This scene also lampoons the critical respect McKellen is afforded by the public, media and commemorative bodies alike, dramatising his explanation of the question he asks Andy *a propos* of nothing: 'How do I act so well?' Speaking with exaggerated slowness and deliberate annunciation, McKellen explains to Millman, 'What I do is pretend to be the

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in varying circumstances — stopped by a policewoman, meeting Victoria Beckham — are punctuated with the same lascivious comment, 'It's too late. I've seen everything.' The moral rectitude of Stewart's most famous incarnation, Picard, and the cultural cachet he possess as a Shakespearean actor are thereby subverted in the fictionalised Stewart with his lowbrow, exploitative tastes. Similarly, Kate Winslet subverts her star persona as an actress of serious dramatic worth, stating 'I mean, I don't think we really need another film about the Holocaust, do we? It's like [...] We get it. It was grim. Move on.' She notes that her involvement in the film is only in order to earn herself an Oscar. Ironically, Winslet would do precisely this and go on to win an Academy Award for Best Actress for her performance as former Nazi concentration camp officer, Hanna Schmitz in *The Reader* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2008). Alana Lee (2005-03). Alana Lee, 'Interview: Ricky Gervais,' n.d., Webpage, accessed August 17, 2013, BBC, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/03/18/ricky\\_gervais\\_valiant\\_interview.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/03/18/ricky_gervais_valiant_interview.shtml).

person I'm portraying in the film or play.' When Millman responds blankly, McKellen tells him patronisingly, '... You're confused.' His increasing perplexity at the self-evidence of the statements only increases McKellen's determination (and contiguously, the obviousness of what he is saying) to explain his 'method':

Peter Jackson comes from New Zealand and says to me, 'Sir Ian, I want you to be Gandalf the wizard.' And I say to him, 'You are aware that I am not a wizard?' And he says 'Yes, I am aware of that. What I want you to do is to use your acting skills to portray a wizard for the duration of the film...' So I say to myself, 'Hmm... how will I do that?' And this is what I did:

I imagined what it would be like being a wizard and then I *pretended* and acted in that way on the day. And how do I know what to say? The words were written down for me on the script. How did I know where to stand? People told me. If we were to draw a graph of my process, of my 'method', it would go something like [raises his hands upwards slowly] *Sir Ian, Sir Ian, Sir Ian* — ACTION! [Shouting] Wizard! *YOU SHALL NOT PASS!* [Lowers hands again] *Sir Ian, Sir Ian, Sir Ian...*

The humour of this scene is derived from McKellen's painfully laborious explication of what Andy Millman and the audience are willing to accept as self-evident and simply 'acting'. Indeed, the redundancy of 'Sir Ian's' explanation is only matched by the hubris of its occasion. His expression of satisfaction in his own creative genius is not simply self-founded, but encouraged by the awed deference paid him by his colleagues and reinforced through his repeated attribution of '*Sir Ian*', in spite of his claim of theatrical egalitarianism.

Though this extended speech (through which the star's 'twisted' persona can be viewed, such as Kate Winslet's Oscar-hungry aspirations) is typical of each episode of *Extras*, McKellen's gestures towards a convention which has recognisably occurred in his career, increasing in recent years. With its low, intimate and distinctly mature tones his voice is used to great effect in film for moments of explication and emotional resonance. This is especially apparent in his characterisation of Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings*. One of the

final sequences in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2001) in which Frodo (Elijah Wood) stands, deciding whether to journey to Mordor alone, especially demonstrates the quietly authoritative, paternal quality of McKellen's voice.



Fig.1. 6 At a crossroads in the narrative and doubting his ability to destroy the Ring, Frodo is comforted by memories of Gandalf's wisdom.

The camera slowly moves in on Frodo, clearly in great emotional turmoil, moving down at his open palm and the One Ring and then settling on his face in tight close-up. The repetition of a line of Frodo's previous dialogue non-diegetically — 'I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened' — causes the temporality of the film to fracture

momentarily. Gandalf's response to Frodo's comment is introduced first as a voiceover, accompanied by the opening chords of the Fellowship theme. The flashback appears to enter the diegetic space of the present moment, however, as Frodo's head tilts upwards as if listening and the close-up of his features dissolves into that of Gandalf's, telling Frodo sagaciously, 'So do all who live to see such times; but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.' The emotional payoff of these lines is then signalled by Frodo's break from still contemplation to determined movement and the synchronous rising swell of the soundtrack fully into Howard Shore's Fellowship theme.

Such moments of exchange between Gandalf and the hobbits, particularly Pippin (Billy Boyd), recur throughout the trilogy. Both in terms of their size visually, and as representatives of innocence and inexperience, the hobbits readily fill positions traditionally occupied by children. Within this binary Gandalf thus orally and visually occupies a position of wisdom and experience. In *The Lord of the Rings* and even in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2012)/*The Desolation of Smaug* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2013) Gandalf's voice signifies understanding and surety. It is for this reason that his phrases are often repeated in voice-over at a later stage in the film, especially at moments of narrative crises, predicting his reappearance on screen and the subsequent resolution of the scene.<sup>73</sup> It is this same tendency to connect McKellen's voice (especially because of its maturity) with a truth-telling quality that *Extras* plays upon. In this way *Extras* mimics the same confidential potential McKellen's voice utilises in *Richard III*; although his success at drawing the audience into Richard's interior world is ultimately not matched, with Millman remaining unmoved by the demonstration.

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<sup>73</sup> In much the same way, for instance, the repeated voiceover line of 'Look to me coming, at first light, on the fifth day. At dawn, look to the East' pre-empt's Gandalf's arrival and the subsequent turning of the tide during a crucial battle scene in *The Two Towers* (dir. Peter Jackson, 2002).

Indeed, McKellen has commented on the ‘unnerving’ closeness of *Extras* to reality, describing the process of performing ‘Ian McKellen’ as ‘instructive’: ‘It was scary how I could land on those bits of myself that were all too appropriate for this pompous idiot.’<sup>74</sup> The lengthy process of transformation McKellen describes in this speech partially gestures towards the reality of his performative style, therefore. His endorsement of John Barton’s work with the Royal Shakespeare Company and Patsy Rodenburg’s influence on his careful imaging of characters’ psychological depths, are all testament to his status as a ‘Method’ actor; the result of which W.B. Worthen defines as ‘a single affective subject in which actor and character appear to be powerfully united.’<sup>75</sup> Bearing in mind the parody of the ‘Method’ technique that *Extras* presents, I wish to explore in *King Lear* the way in which McKellen deliberately creates a transparency of craft, creating points of entry into the performed text through his star persona.

The unity between actor and character, which Worthen defines as one of the essential characteristics of method acting, is abundantly apparent in McKellen’s attitude towards assuming the role of Lear. Describing it as ‘the summation of an actor’s career in Shakespeare, really’, McKellen is quick to disregard the possibility of performing other Shakespearean characters, saying ‘Falstaff? Not if you’re me’ and stating that aside from Prospero there’s ‘nothing after Lear.’<sup>76</sup> There is a degree of ambiguity in McKellen’s dismissal of Falstaff. It is hard to ascertain whether his refusal is predicated on an inability or unwillingness to mentally match Falstaff’s corpulent physicality with his own, sparser frame, or if it is on the grounds of the largely comic function of Falstaff’s character. The former certainly accords with his feelings towards the character of Dussander in *Apt Pupil*, as

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<sup>74</sup> Ian McKellen, ‘Ian McKellen,’ *Playing For Real: Actors on Playing Real People*, eds. Tom Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 107.

<sup>75</sup> W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Exclusive Interview with Ian McKellen,’ DVD extra, *King Lear* (dir. Trevor Nunn, 2008).

discussed earlier in this chapter; a role which, due in part to the heaviness of makeup, padding and costume, was not conducive to an emotionally grounded performance. If the latter, it is an odd statement to make given his tendency in recent years to turn towards lighter, more anarchic roles such as Widow Twanky or Freddie in *Vicious*. His Lear, too, despite the overwhelming bleakness in tone, is not entirely without humour. What is evident, however, is that the choice of Lear over Falstaff represents a familiar tendency present in performing Shakespeare, and much wider culturally, of privileging tragedy over comedy as a true ‘test’ of an actor’s ability and measure of their greatness. Indeed, in an echo of his interpretive analogy from *Playing Shakespeare*, McKellen describes Lear as a ‘big, big challenge’ and welcomes the lengthy nature of the RSC’s world tour because in a ‘one-off’ performance ‘you never mine deeply enough, there are always more jewels.’<sup>77</sup> There is a sense in his discussion, thus, that there is an inevitability about performing Lear as an actor of a certain age and possessing certain cultural cachet. In much the same way that a lauded performance of Hamlet is often used as the touchstone of promising greatness, Lear is viewed as the culmination of an older actor’s professional career: a final, challenging major role in which their theatrical skills can be showcased.

The connections McKellen forges between his star persona and Lear exist not only on this meta-performative level in the relationship between age and role, however, but within his extensive colouring-in of character. In Nunn’s production Lear wears two wedding rings. The first marriage — McKellen imagines — gave him Goneril and Regan; his second wife bore him Cordelia but died in childbirth. Solely responsible for her upbringing, he supposes that as a result Lear bears the greatest love to his youngest daughter and expects the same from her. McKellen also posits that looking into Cordelia’s (Romola Garai) face Lear would be struck by the image of her mother at a similar age. In a similar act of imaginative construction, the

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<sup>77</sup> ‘Exclusive Interview with Ian McKellen,’ *King Lear*.

opening scene of the adaptation prefaces the love test with a ceremonial entrance. The main characters enter to the cacophonous drone of organ music, the stage lit dimly apart from a spotlight at the centre focused upon Lear. Encircled by his court, with ornate gold robes, a mitre and holding his hands up to the sky in gestures of invocation, Lear the king is also Lear the priest. McKellen believes Lear's power is built in his mind on his relationship with 'the numinous, the gods': not only does he represent religion in the familiar historical sense of divine right, but he actively leads his community in celebrating god *through* him.<sup>78</sup> It is an artistic decision that powerfully conveys the symbolic and literal power Lear believes he occupies over the lives of his subjects, giving further credence to his wild outrage when this power is ultimately removed from him. This also dramatises the irony of the savagely empty world Lear is cast into, in which the only believable relationship between mankind and the gods is, in Gloucester's famous words, 'as flies to wanton boys [...] they kill us for their sport.'<sup>79</sup> It is ultimately an image of limited significance within the play and is not gestured towards again; this aspect of characterisation does, however, testify to the visibility and depth of McKellen's interpretive processes upon the resultant work of the play.

The extent of McKellen's emotional characterisation and openness about the process he undertakes as an actor is underscored by the striking continuity between Lear and previous villainous roles he has occupied, such as Richard, James Whale and Magneto (as I have previously argued). This is apparent both in the sense of their monstrous characterisation and in McKellen's continued interest in subverting expectations surrounding age, gender and disability. Although typically configured as a tragic figure, McKellen describes Lear as someone who 'hits people' and like Olivier's Lear who Harold Hobson pronounced as 'very old' but 'also strong', he is a man 'who by temperament is capable of being tortured: but he

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<sup>78</sup> 'Exclusive Interview with Ian McKellen,' *King Lear*.

<sup>79</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear (Arden Shakespeare, Third Series)*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1997), 4.4.41-2. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

is worth torturing.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, this production does not shy away from the implications of an abusive, violent Lear. McKellen's personal play script for the original RSC production of *King Lear* at Stratford-upon-Avon is peppered with telling comments such as 'bully', 'strong in control', 'still powerful'; there are also references made to a whip as one of Lear's props (although this must have been later discarded).<sup>81</sup> In the subsequent film of this production, the wizened twinkle so beloved of his Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* is present but it is darkened by a calculating quality, wheedling and flirting to get his way. In accordance with Jaques's famous formulation of old age as 'second childishness', he is quick to anger and childishly cruel, hissing 'nothing' in Cordelia's face as he jeers at her through the frame of the crown.<sup>82</sup>



Fig. 1.7 Lear mockingly tells Cordelia of her disinheritance.

Both Goneril (Frances Barber) and Regan (Monica Dolan) demonstrate little other than contempt for their father; their hostility towards him less fuelled by their and their

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<sup>80</sup> Harold Hobson cited in Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999), 16.

<sup>81</sup> William Shakespeare with annotations by Ian McKellen, *King Lear Playscript*, n.d. [2007], Sir Ian McKellen Archive (1967-2007), V&A Department of Theatre and Performance, V&A Museum, GB 71 THM/357/1/26, 17, 22.

<sup>82</sup> William Shakespeare, 'As You Like It,' *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus (New York and London: Norton, 1997), 2.7.164.



husbands' ambitions, than by the prospect that they can at long last usurp his control. The dynamic between the (mostly) unified Goneril and Regan and their visibly younger sister, even suggests that this is a side of their father from which they may have protected Cordelia. The curse Lear places on Goneril in Act 4 Scene 1 to 'never spring / a babe to honor her' (1.4.257-8) is spoken with utter venom by McKellen, stood behind his daughter, spitting each phrase into her ear. It is a speech that devastates, causing Barber's usually still and icy composure to fracture momentarily as she weeps. When Albany (Julian Harries) questions 'whereof comes this?' (1.4.267) upon Lear's exit, Goneril's responding statement of 'Never afflict yourself to know the cause' (1.4.268) is delivered with the resignation of one who has been in the same situation many times before. Indeed, far from the play charting the quick and sudden breakdown of his mental health, McKellen notes in his script that Lear's madness is an 'old problem'.<sup>83</sup> And, although during his later, more dramatic degeneration McKellen describes Lear as not being 'himself', Nunn's production locates tragedy within the familiarity and in-character nature of Lear's actions. His instinct towards violence, if anything, may only be increased by his deterioration. The audience's sympathy for Goneril is extended throughout Act One Scene Four, moreover, and is encouraged by the edited use of the text. After suffering another diatribe from Lear in which, once again, he tries to pitch daughter against daughter for his affection, Goneril notes bitterly, 'Safer than trust too far. I know his heart' (1.4.306-8). The lines 'Let me still take away the harms I fear, / Not fear still to be taken' (1.4.307-8) are excised from between the two sentences and so the edited script for the film production focuses our perception of Goneril's response less upon her agency (her determination to overcome and remove her fears rather than be consumed by them) and more upon her status as a victim.

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<sup>83</sup> King Lear *Playscript*, 28, 43.

When the same situation occurs later in the film adaptation with Regan, Lear's relationship with his daughter is equally and explicitly misogynistic in nature. Lear wipes his mouth with a handkerchief after kissing his daughters, as though scared of their femininity contaminating him. This gestural aspect of McKellen's performance anticipates several points in the play at which Lear conflates the feminine body with weakness, a weakness he superimposes onto himself as the cause of his fragility.<sup>84</sup> When cursing Regan and Goneril as 'you unnatural hags' Lear begins to unbuckle his belt as though to beat them into submission. The violence of his words, however, cannot ultimately be matched by the obvious frailty of his body. He is visibly and audibly distressed; the sounds of his laboured breathing evident even over other characters' dialogue. Indeed, interactions such as these are characteristic of McKellen's interpretation of Lear in general, with his sudden wild swings between happiness and aggressive accusation and the contrast established throughout between Lear's infirmity and the remaining vestiges of his virility.

Certainly, despite Lear's mental and physical weakness constituting an essential part of both the narrative and his characterisation, McKellen's on-stage physicality testified to his strength and spryness as a (then) 65-year old. This surprising youthfulness often appeared contradictory to the theme of *Lear*; indeed, reviewers of the theatrical production frequently took great enjoyment in remarking upon McKellen's undiminished manhood (in both senses of the word). Charles Spencer praises the production but states that this Lear was 'destined to be remembered' for the moment when 'the old wizard flashes his impressive wand'.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Michael Portantieri notes McKellen's 'tip-top physical shape' and control over his body, as well as a brief nude scene in which he 'amply demonstrates the truth of Lear's

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<sup>84</sup> 'Touch me with noble anger. / And let not women's weapons, water drops, / Stain my man's cheeks!' (2.4.276-8); 'O, how this mother swells up toward my heart! / *Hysterica passio*, down, thou climbing sorrow' (2.4.54-55).

<sup>85</sup> Charles Spencer, 'Sir Ian acts up a storm as Nunn plays the fool,' *Telegraph*, June 1, 2007, accessed May 27, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1553256/Sir-Ian-acts-up-a-storm-as-Nunn-plays-the-fool.html>.

statement that he is “every inch a king”.<sup>86</sup> In a slightly more appalled tone Quentin Letts bemoans McKellen as one of ‘those ageing thespians who loves to bare his dewlapped torso to national view’ and commented that ‘cometh the naked hour yesterday, eyeballs bulged...’.<sup>87</sup> This obvious show of McKellen’s enduring vigorousness only reiterates Lear’s physicality in the production overall, however, and encapsulates McKellen’s annotation that ‘He’s a show off’. Observing Lear’s ‘bravado’, McKellen notes simply on his script for the tempest scene ‘I [Lear] don’t give a shit.’<sup>88</sup> Although at times his gaze is unfocused, he is capable of sudden, threatening movement and his stature remains upright and taller than the majority of the cast. The same vanity and arrogance that causes Lear to demand proof of his daughters’ love and leads him to demand their shelter is thus demonstrated in his careless challenge to the storm to singe his white head and for the winds to not only strike his cheeks but buffet his naked, vulnerable body.

Although nonetheless contiguous to the production’s interpretation of Lear the decision for McKellen to perform this scene explicitly nude, rather than under-dressed — as is more typical — requires further consideration. That McKellen refuses to present us with a completely diminished Lear accords with other characters he has played in recent years. For example, McKellen’s eloquent physicality evinces Richard’s proficiency as a soldier, seducer and Machiavel in a manner which works to rapidly subvert audience pre-conceptions of both his villainy and his incapacity. Similarly, while Gandalf’s bearded, white-haired appearance testifies to his great age, his character frequently exhibits his physical and mental dexterity. And though affected by their social, sexual or physical difference, including the effects of

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Portantieri, ‘Review of Ian McKellen’s *King Lear*,’ *The Backlot*, September 12, 2007, accessed May 27, 2014, <http://www.thebacklot.com/review-of-ian-mckellens-king-lear/09/2007/>.

<sup>87</sup> Quentin Letts, ‘Laying his brilliance bare, McKellen the King of Lear,’ *Daily Mail*, November 28, 2007, accessed May 27, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-497014/Laying-brilliance-bare-McKellen-king-Lears.html>.

<sup>88</sup> *King Lear Playscript*, 43, 52.

disability or ageing, McKellen's characters, figures such as Richard, James Whale, Teabing or Magneto demonstrate strength, intelligence and masculine agency. In fact, their monstrosity or alterity is given expression through their bodies and through negotiating the confluence between ability and disability. His physically able Lear thus also inevitably serves as a statement of McKellen's own virility and a part-defiance of the play's association between old age and weakness. Underlying the production detail that McKellen would strip for *Lear* and the contiguity between his previous characters, as well as the connection between McKellen's political advocacy and the performances of difference and monstrosity which they afford him is a potential charge of vanity, therefore. As an active participant in a culture which places value on masculine beauty, both as a member of the gay community and as a prominent Hollywood actor, McKellen's refusal to portray a character like Falstaff but willingness to reveal himself on stage indicates the potency which he — and the production — wish to ascribe to his body. The surprised approval of the theatre critics is potentially exactly the kind of admiring reaction McKellen wanted to provoke; a confirmation of the strength of his masculinity and star persona alike. McKellen's vigorous and virile performance of Shakespeare's aged king suggests that perhaps his summation of Lear's character is most indicative of his own: he is a show off.

McKellen's observation that there is 'nothing after Lear' recognises a dearth of leading roles for the older Shakespearean, therefore, and contains an implicit lamentation that, at only sixty five at the age of performing, McKellen's apparent final Shakespearean performance is necessarily a tragic indictment of old age. The resultant production is one which thus works hard to acknowledge Lear's remaining power, displaying the violence and misogyny which engendered Goneril and Regan's hatred while still emphasising Lear's tragic quality through the contrast between his physical ability and mental degeneration. Indeed, the

act of laying himself bare for the audience is an evocative symbolic gesture. As I will explore in my chapter on Tom Hiddleston and his portrayal of Coriolanus, the function of nudity in such a performance offers a spectacle to the audience which negotiates a complex relationship between vulnerability and virility: asserting strength even at a moment of apparent weakness. As argued above, it serves as a statement of McKellen's self-belief in his skills as a Shakespearean interpreter, moreover, stripping both metaphorically and physically before his audience, presenting his body and his performance for judgement. That this act of nudity is also linked to McKellen's provocativeness as a representative of, and advocate for alternative or non-homogenous lifestyles, however, is evident in the RSC's world tour of *King Lear*. When promoting the play's theatrical performance in Singapore, McKellen was unwilling to disguise his own homosexuality in spite of the Singaporean Penal Code Section 377A, which criminalises relationships between same-sex couples.<sup>89</sup> On a state-sponsored morning television programme in response to the question, what did he hope to do in Singapore during his free time, McKellen responded that he would be 'looking for a gay bar.'<sup>90</sup> Similarly, despite the RSC's tour having been greeted enthusiastically worldwide, it received censure in Singapore. With their strictly enforced legislation regarding immoral or corrupting cultural texts, Singapore's government arts body imposed an '18+' censorship on Nunn's *King Lear*, regarding the revelation of McKellen's genitals as a potential criminal offence if viewed by underage minors. The RSC were thus forced to remove the production's nudity (interestingly PBS too refused to broadcast McKellen in the nude and so the subsequent DVD of the production contains only partial disrobing).

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<sup>89</sup> Sebastian Tong, 'Ian McKellen wades into Singapore gay rights debate,' *Reuters Life!*, 19 July 2007, accessed August 28, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2007/07/19/us-mckellen-idUSSIN7694520070719>.

<sup>90</sup> 'Sir Ian McKellen on Channel NewsAsia,' July 17, 2007, YouTube video, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VE6ENgkR7M>.

## McKellen and Popular Culture

Brief reference is made to Ian McKellen's star persona in two recent American television comedy series, the American adaptation of *The Office* (2005-13) and the similarly mockumentary-formatted *Parks and Recreation* (2009- ). His mention in both series demonstrates not only the breadth of his cultural influence but the implicit audience recognition of his name and its immediate popular associations. *The Office* acknowledges McKellen's cachet as a gay rights campaigner. In 'Gay Witch Hunt' (Series 3, Episode 1) Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nunez), recently outed in his workplace, has his new, public gay lifestyle proclaimed by his colleagues as 'super cool' and responds in a wry aside: 'Yes I'm super cool, I'm an accountant for a paper company... I'm like Ian McKellen.' The episode 'Second Chunce' (Series 6, Episode 10) of *Parks and Recreation*, meanwhile confirms, albeit in a parodic tone, the high cultural connotations of McKellen's Shakespearean standing.<sup>91</sup> Councilwoman for the upper-class town of Eagleton, Ingrid de Forest (Kristen Bell) recounts McKellen telling her as she boarded Karl Lagerfeld's yacht, 'parting is such sweet sorrow'. De Forest, herself an ironic embodiment of upper-class taste — having studied opera and for a PhD at the Sorbonne — here conflates McKellen's 'high' cultural association with Shakespeare, with the conspicuous and socially exclusive level of wealth referenced in the mention of the yacht and Lagerfeld, head designer of the Chanel fashion house. The final section of this chapter on McKellen is dedicated to further detailing the kind of star presence alluded to in *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* and evidenced within recent popular culture; in particular, the London Paralympics Opening Ceremony in 2012 and his starring role in the ITV comedy series *Vicious* in 2013. With the significance of McKellen's casting as a representative of the British acting community in the Paralympics Opening Ceremony, and the broad appeal of *Vicious* as a sitcom with its prime time release on one of the largest

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<sup>91</sup> N.B. The misspelling of the episode name is intentional.

British television channels, these two texts encapsulate the frequently contradictory nature of McKellen's star persona at the present moment.

Though the casting of McKellen in the Opening Ceremony indicated his success as an immediately recognisable star and emblem of Britishness, functionally it represented a focusing on his star persona as a Shakespearean: the recognition of both his practical talents as a theatrical performer, but also of the values attributed to this persona within the media and popular culture. These included the association of 'high' culture with a more formalised mode of speech and moral authoritativeness, for example. It is those qualities of his 'Shakespeareanism' which Emma Brockes describes as 'those rich, round tones that could advertise Englishness and that [...] strike the audience with something like a moral force.'<sup>92</sup> Similarly, Bon Flynn comments on his voice 'flowing like vintage wine from a crystal decanter' and notes that McKellen 'makes a casual greeting sound like a Shakespearean soliloquy, while Mark Lawson marvels at his ability to bring 'otherwise unimaginable gravitas' to 'tosh'.<sup>93</sup> In acknowledgement of this quality, his role as Prospero in the ceremony was as guide to the audience, moving them (and their representative, Miranda, played by disabled actress Nicola Miles-Wildin) through the elaborate, symbolic performances that structured the show. The part comprised largely of intoning instructional statements to Miranda, asking her to 'go out into the world', 'understand the rights that protect us', 'look up, stretch your wings and fly.' In this, Prospero's appropriateness as a character model was apparent, with the pedagogical nature of his relationship with the unworldly Miranda drawn out through McKellen's paternalism towards Miles-Wildin. Rather

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<sup>92</sup> Emma Brockes, 'Every inch a king,' *Guardian*, November 24, 2007, accessed 1 August, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2007/nov/24/theatre.shakespeare>.

<sup>93</sup> Bob Flynn, 'Coming out as gay was the best thing I ever did': Gandalf star and theatre legend Ian McKellen on his bravest decision,' *Daily Mail*, 21 December 2012, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2251451/Sir-Ian-McKellen-Coming-gay-best-thing-I-did.html#ixzz2cPqd7oom>; Mark Lawson, 'Shakespeare with a tan,' *Guardian*, December 13, 2003, accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/dec/13/theatre>.

than the play's authoritarianism, however, McKellen's paternalism was founded upon a desire to liberate Miranda through self-knowledge and greater understanding of the world around her. Frequent references in Prospero's speech to a semantic field of flight and movement emphasised this, with its real-world possibility synchronously dramatised through the wide variety of situations Miranda was placed in — elevated high above the stadium in her wheelchair, dancing in mid-air and aboard a ship.

Miranda's narrative aspired towards a freedom, the ceremony sought to stress, that was also imaginative and intellectual. Prospero informed her that 'books are the engines of change.' Within *The Tempest*, Prospero's pursuit of knowledge blinds him to all else — 'Me, poor man, my library / was dukedom enough' — and it is the renunciation of his books that serves as a fraught gesture of repentance.<sup>94</sup> Within the ceremony, however, the book emblematised some of the most revelatory aspects of modern thought, including Isaac Newton's Universal Law of Gravitation, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Higgs Boson particle. Prospero's famous invocation in the epilogue to *The Tempest* for the audience to set him free through applause was addressed to Miranda alone, moreover. 'Will you take this journey for all of us, and will you set us free?' McKellen asked. Indeed, the conspicuousness of the age gap between Prospero with the vaguely historical nature of his costuming, seen in the quasi-liturgical cut of his floor-length gown, and Miranda's youthful, punky attire, with sequined jeans, shirt and red Doc Martins, was further indicative of the play's adaptation. McKellen functioned as a representative of the generation who had witnessed and fought for burgeoning civil rights for disabled people, racial tolerance, and gender and sexual equality (with his own prominent involvement in the struggle for gay rights). Miles-Wildin thus embodied the next generation of potential activists, beneficiaries of

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<sup>94</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest (Arden Shakespeare)*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 1.2.109-10.



these changes and who, through traditional and new forms of media, possess the power to continue challenging perceptions. This dynamic was also enhanced by the pronounced difference between the two actors' star power. McKellen's household name status contrasted sharply with Miles-Wildin's relative anonymity as a performer. Though his performance came with pre-existing associations, hers was a *tabula rasa* onto which meaning could be projected; while McKellen's symbolic potency as an actor lay in his experience, Miles-Wildin's lay in her potential. The ceremony was thereby structured around a series of exchanges between Prospero and Miranda which moved from his statements of hard-won knowledge to her apprehension of the world around her.

This section of the ceremony configured the character of Prospero in relation to McKellen's Shakespearean qualities as a performer, therefore. Lines such as '[...] guardians of the treasures of the mind, books are humanity in print' played to the oddly formalised mode of McKellen's speech in interview, but also to an imagined sense of what Shakespearean language is: evocative, emotional, florid and ceremonial. This style of dialogue recognised the similarly formal tones of popular cultural characters such as Gandalf, Magneto or James Whale, moreover. Those are characters who — in stark contrast to the younger figures surrounding them — intone their lines laden with gravitas and often ponderous, theatrical emphasis, demonstrating the clear relationship between McKellen's mainstream work and his Shakespearean background. While McKellen's manner of performance thereby acknowledged one aspect of his star persona, towards the end of the event his role as an activist also came to the fore interpretively. In the section entitled 'Empowerment', McKellen removed his ornate purple and gold magician's robes to reveal a black-and-white suit in newspaper print. Holding a banner emblazoned with 'EQUALITY', he then took centre stage with the Graeae Theatre Company (a theatre company with disabled

performers) and Orbital to perform 'Spasticus Autistic' by Ian Dury & The Blockheads. With its repetitive shouted chorus of 'I'm Spasticus, I'm Spasticus, Spasticus Autisticus', the song wears its provocativeness brazenly, the lyrics detailing Dury's struggle with polio equally as an appeal for understanding and as a call to arms against discrimination. As an aggressive statement of self-belief this moment was reminiscent of the associations of Magneto's character, with his eloquent but uncompromising campaign against mutant oppression. Importantly, it also represents a point of contiguity to McKellen's past performances of disability and the kind of power (intellectual and physical) demonstrated by figures such as Richard III, Whale and Teabing in spite of their bodily incapacity. This content matter, combined with the familiar association between activism and the visual paraphernalia of protest, sought to drastically resituate Prospero's character, therefore. So much so that by the final interaction between Prospero and his daughter, McKellen shouted his lines through a megaphone as he told her: '[...] Break that glass ceiling and set us all free.' The two aspects of McKellen's star persona — his theatricality and his activism — were united in this new image of Prospero as the political campaigner, urging his daughter to not only challenge inequality, but to destroy it.

ITV's *Vicious* (2013) demonstrates the same visibility of star behind character as the Paralympics Opening Ceremony but for comedic purposes and as a text further demonstrates the continuing interest and relevance of popular culture for McKellen. The mixed reception the programme received, however, testifies to the problems that continue to arise in determining what is a representative or appropriate mainstream iteration of gay identity (as seen in Jarman's opposition to McKellen's politics). In spite of being renewed for a Christmas special and a second series, *Vicious* was largely considered a failure by the majority of television critics, who acknowledged the worthiness of both its stars and its

central concern with ageing, but as Gabriel Tate argues, undermined itself through targeting ‘low blows and easy laughs’.<sup>95</sup> Benjamin Secher decided that the makers of *Vicious* had ‘squandered not only the estimable acting talents’ of its stars, McKellen, Derek Jacobi and Frances de la Tour, but also the combined ‘screenwriting welly’ of noted playwright Mark Ravenhill and Gary Janetti of *Will and Grace* fame.<sup>96</sup> Ian Hyland deems the programme a ‘particular letdown’ and Sam Wollaston more scathingly describes the characters as ‘caricatures’, ‘camped up to the max, actual drama queens’ with McKellen and Jacobi ‘acting with a capital A – thespian jousting. Take that darling, no you take that, ouch, you bitch.’<sup>97</sup> Indeed, despite McKellen’s belief that *Vicious* represents television having ‘grown up’, meeting his desire for writing in which characters just ‘happen to be gay’ rather than their gayness being an intrinsic part of their characters or being something which was ‘poked’ at for fun, a large proportion of the criticism received by the programme was targeted at its engagement with gay stereotypes.<sup>98</sup> Observing the surprising disconnection between the show’s promising screenwriting team and its disappointingly conservative representation of gayness as camp theatricality, Brian Sewell argues that the series is a ‘spiteful parody that could not have been made nastier had it been devised and written by a malevolent and

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<sup>95</sup> Gabriel Tate, ‘Vicious; The Job Lot,’ *Time Out*, April 22, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.timeout.com/london/tv-reviews/vicious-the-job-lot>.

<sup>96</sup> Benjamin Secher, ‘Vicious [ITV]: The least funny new comedy in recent memory,’ *Telegraph*, April 29, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10026311/Vicious-ITV-the-least-funny-new-comedy-in-recent-memory-review.html>.

<sup>97</sup> Ian Hyland, ‘Ben Elton’s The Wright Way latest in a wave of TV comedy letdowns,’ *Mirror*, April 30, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-reviews/ian-hyland-wright-way-how-1860777>; Sam Wollaston, ‘Vicious; Job Lot; Greggs: More than Meats the Pie,’ *Guardian*, April 30, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/apr/30/vicious-job-lot-greggs-tv-review>.

<sup>98</sup> McKellen’s belief that the most accurate representation of gay life lies in roles wherein sexuality is a secondary aspect of characterisation is evident elsewhere. Simon Callow recounts, for instance, receiving a letter from McKellen in which he explained how much more important *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (dir. Mike Newell, 1994) was ‘in gay terms’ with the slowly revealed nature of the relationship between Gareth (Callow) and Matthew (John Hannah), than the simultaneously released *Philadelphia* with its ‘welter of chaste histrionics’. Daisy Wyatt, ‘Will new ITV sitcom Vicious starring Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Derek Jacobi prove a watershed for gay relationships in TV drama?’, *Independent*, April 29, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/will-new-itv-sitcom-vicious-starring-sir-ian-mckellen-and-sir-derek-jacobi-prove-a-watershed-for-gay-relationships-in-tv-drama-8595198.html>; Simon Callow, ‘Foreword,’ *Out at the Cinema*, 10.

recriminatory heterosexual.’ Sewell continues, ‘ordinary old homosexuals, if they ever step into such caricature, do so in a self-mocking joke’ and ‘ordinary old homosexuals live lives, not as noisy luvvies... but as quietly and peaceably as heterosexuals in their dotage’: ‘We are not hungry for applause.’<sup>99</sup> Other prominent gay figures similarly decried *Vicious*, with Barry Cryer declaring it ‘positively homophobic’ and LBC radio presenter and gay political commentator Iain Dale noting that its ‘dire’ repartee and gay stereotypes ‘almost turned me into a homophobe.’<sup>100</sup>

And yet the programme itself seems to have been relatively well-received by the gay community, with research from the BBC finding it the most popular show amongst 16-34 year-old gay men.<sup>101</sup> This mixed attitude towards *Vicious* is epitomised in Ben Summerskill’s description of the programme. Summerskill, the chief executive of Stonewall (the same charity McKellen helped to co-found), praises *Vicious* lightly. He notes that the ‘world has changed’ since chief among representations of gayness on television included the ‘flouncing’ Mr Humphries in *Are You Being Served?* whose character confirmed ‘every historic prejudice about homosexual men.’ He continues, ‘a mainstream audience is now laughing with, rather than at, two grandes dames of British theatre’ and while acknowledging that *Vicious*’s ‘campy’ is far from ‘radical’, he also describes those who have been outraged by its caricatures as ‘autopilot activists’.<sup>102</sup> Writing in a series review of *Vicious* for the So So Gay website, moreover, Jon B. argues: ‘Does it accurately portray every gay relationship? Of

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<sup>99</sup> Brian Sewell, ‘*Vicious* is a throwback to far darker gay times,’ *London Evening Standard*, May 7, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/brian-sewell-vicious-is-a-throwback-to-far-darker-gay-times-8606142.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Scott Roberts, ‘Barry Cryer Brands ITV’s *Vicious* Homophobic Television,’ *Pink News*, June 18, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2013/06/18/barry-cryer-brands-itvs-vicious-homophobic-television/>; Iain Dale, ‘*Vicious* It Is, But Funny It Ain’t,’ *LBC*, May 8, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.lbc.co.uk/iain-dales-blog-30195/entry/120/9528>.

<sup>101</sup> Matthew Hemley, ‘ITV sitcom *Vicious* most popular show among young gay men,’ *The Stage*, October 31, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.thestage.co.uk/news/2013/10/itv-sitcom-vicious-ranked-watched-show-young-gay-men/>.

<sup>102</sup> Ben Summerskill, ‘Does *Vicious* mark the end of gay TV characters being invisible?’, *Guardian*, April 29, 2013, accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2013/apr/29/vicious-end-gay-tv-characters-invisible>.

course not. *Could* it accurately portray every gay relationship? Again, of course not — it doesn't have to.<sup>103</sup> The ambivalence apparent in even this brief survey of *Vicious*'s critical reception makes it difficult to draw any lasting conclusions about the show's overall perceived failure. Although older individuals such as Sewell or Cryer appear to openly reject Freddie and Stuart as potential self-images, the show has been viewed more positively in terms of what it represents as a primetime television representation of a homosexual lifestyle. Certainly, a distinction that can be drawn among those reviewers attributing praise or censure lies between those willing to recognise what the show does, rather than how it does it.

The nature of McKellen's performance also raises consideration. Although publicly frank about his sexual identity and displaying an element of campness in performances such as Richard or Magneto, his roles have — thus far — avoided straying into more operative gay stereotype. In fact, characters such as Lear or Gandalf these have largely upheld a normative form of masculinity. It should be questioned whether there is thus an unconscious degree of homophobia present even in concerns with the unrepresentative quality of *Vicious*'s characterisation: is this is a role we do not wish to see McKellen in? Is there something embarrassing about the conflict between his reputation as a critically lauded dramatic actor and the kind of effeminacy and potentially un-politically correct humour demanded of by Freddie's character? And does this unease lie in our inability to imagine McKellen occupying disparate cultural positions, even as his characters demonstrate clear contiguity in spite of the different modes and genres they represent (a phenomenon I will also explore in my chapter on Kenneth Branagh)? Or simply and more worryingly, are we uncomfortable with more overt forms of homosexuality? What is evident, nevertheless, is that having premiered with a promising audience of six million, the show's viewing number more than halved on

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<sup>103</sup> Jon B., 'Vicious: a depiction of gay love?', June 6, 2013, Webpage, accessed August 27, 2014, *So So Gay*, <http://sosogay.co.uk/2013/monthly-theme-vicious-a-depiction-of-gay-love/>.

subsequent nights, thereby demonstrating the potential draw of *Vicious*' star leads and its concept, but its ultimate failure to connect on a meaningful level with its audience.

Aside from the complex debate surrounding the programme's reception, *Vicious* — like the Paralympics Opening Ceremony — is a valuable case study by which to conclude my chapter on Ian McKellen. It offers a demonstration of the productiveness of exploring McKellen's popular cultural work and the continuing relevance of these roles upon a wider understanding of the associations of his Shakespearean persona. Situated almost entirely in their Covent Garden flat, the sitcom details the life of an ageing couple — Freddie (McKellen) and Stuart (Derek Jacobi) — their lovelorn friend, Viola (Frances de la Tour), and their handsome neighbour, Ash (Iwan Rheon). Its title refers to the nature of Freddie and Stuart's relationship and their frequent caustic exchanges, including the savage 'Aren't you dead yet?' Both McKellen and Jacobi play upon the exaggerated mannerisms of gay stereotype, with the flamboyance of their gestures and the acerbity of their put downs. This is especially seen at times when Freddie and Stuart's actions mirror each other on screen, speaking at once of their forty-eight years living together but also of the highly performed nature of their character identities. When presented with a problem by Viola or Ash both men co-ordinate their movements, turning in their seats, crossing one leg and then assuming an exaggerated position of 'listening'. As alluded to above, this archly camp behaviour at once appears to refute popular expectations of what a Shakespearean actor is — of their seriousness of purpose and function of moral and cultural edification — but also play upon the associations McKellen has cultivated as a gay actor and activist. He has performed a greater degree of campness within the gay community than is evident in his mainstream appearances, after all; for example, employing Stephen Fry's nickname for him when he announced at the closing ceremony for the 1994 Gay Games: 'I'm Sir Ian McKellen, but you

can call me Serena.’<sup>104</sup> This moniker, popular within the gay community ever since Fry’s invention in commemoration of McKellen’s knighthood, draws humour from the incongruity but also contiguity it imagines between the staidly establishment ‘Sir Ian’ and ‘Serena’, his drag queen counterpart. Indeed, when commenting on the original working title of *Vicious – Vicious Old Queens* – McKellen’s response has simply been ‘I am not old.’<sup>105</sup>

With the recurrent plot feature of Ash or Freddie trying to get an acting job, the series’ references to performance are not only to the ties between gayness and theatricality, or McKellen’s employment of camp, moreover, but lie in cultivating a high level of self-reflexivity and self-consciousness in the way that McKellen’s star persona is deployed. The setting of the series prefigures the associations of quality and classicism that are associated with the careers of both its stars. The walls of the apartment are covered in playbills including *Twelfth Night* and the distinctive orange spines of the original Penguin Classics can be seen on their bookshelf. The Covent Garden setting is further indicative of the close relationship between the series and theatricality, as an area of London popularly associated with entertainment (including within it the Royal Opera House, The Theatre Royal on Dury Lane, some thirteen other theatres besides functioning as a gateway to the West End more generally). There is a certain staged quality about the set, furthermore, with its sofa placed centrally facing out onto the audience and the winding staircase at the back allowing for swift, dramatic entrances. The dark wallpaper, dim wall-mounted light features and red velvet curtains also contribute to the theatrical mise-en-scène; something which extends even into the paratextual.

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<sup>104</sup> Steele, ‘The Knight’s Crusade,’ 38.

<sup>105</sup> Ruben V. Nepales, ‘From Gandalf to “Vicious Old Queens”,’ *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, December 14 2012, accessed May 27, 2014, <http://entertainment.inquirer.net/72203/from-gandalf-to-vicious-old-queen>.



Fig. 1.8 The title page for *Vicious*

The handwritten credits, with the splashes mimicking the frequent misfires of a fountain pen, gesture towards a form of artistic production frequently utilised in period dramas, in which authorship is aligned with the physical act of writing. Curiously, *Vicious* thus situates itself within a culture of producing and consuming ‘quality’ or ‘classical’ texts. This is somewhat at odds with the broadness of its situational comedy but aspired to both in the programme’s casting and Freddie’s desperate desire to — ironically — match the cultural cachet possessed by McKellen, Jacobi or de la Tour.

As in *Extras*, McKellen’s performance parodies his Method as an actor. In *Vicious*, however, this is imbued with bathos because, unlike ‘Sir Ian’ the character or the reality of McKellen the performer, Freddie is a failed actor, with little work to suggest that his approach has ever been successful. His ‘master class’ for the first-time actor, Ash, is equally patronising in tone to that delivered in *Extras* and the same humour is derived from the refusal to grant the audience’s expectations of what McKellen should pronounce according to his Shakespearean persona — measured, wise observations. Instead, Freddie’s observations on acting veer between the banal, obvious and the absurd. When auditioning for a role in his ‘favourite’ television show, *Downton Abbey*, Freddie looks for what his character ‘wants’ by



reading the script. He decides to elevate the role from ‘Cook Staff Number 4’ by naming him ‘Thomas’ and when it is pointed out that there is already a Thomas on the cast, Freddie triumphantly announces that he will use this to create ‘conflict’. He then proceeds to analyse the single line he is given — ‘I just wanted to put these potatoes away’ — to create an in-depth character profile for ‘Thomas’. Similarly, Freddie also boasts that he and Judi Dench once starred as ‘young lovers’ in a Smarties advert that was ‘described as Hitchcockian’.

The comedy derived from Freddie’s character thus lies in the juxtaposition of his aspiration towards high art and classical acting (co-starring with Judi Dench and preparing methodically for a role) and the mundanity of his existence (a Smarties advert and one line in *Downton Abbey*). The reference to *Downton Abbey*, in particular, encapsulates the distance in *Vicious* between desire and fulfilment. With its highly respected British cast, including Maggie Smith, and its stylistic aping of period film generic conventions, *Downton* gestures towards a Merchant Ivory-esque evocation of period and a nostalgic representation of the upper classes. Freddie’s line about potatoes, however, indicates his placement within the less sophisticated, bawdier ‘under the stairs’ half of the piece. When he does recount engaging with the much admired Maggie Smith — a representative of the same high cultural values McKellen possesses but deliberately subverts in his performance of Freddie — it is only to receive a compliment on his jumper and not to connect with her on an artistic level. Freddie’s camp hauteur is defeated on numerous occasions by his *younger* counterpart, moreover. Despite Freddie’s arch dismissals — ‘you can’t even convince me that you’re sitting on that sofa’ — Ash successfully gets a part in an independent film on his first attempt at auditioning for a role. The irony derived from juxtaposing classical acting with commercial television is also reinforced in the casting of McKellen himself. Although both he and Jacobi occupy popular cultural positions in addition to their statuses as well respected theatrical actors,

McKellen in particular has been largely absent from the small screen since the late eighties. His recent television appearances in *Coronation Street* and *Extras* have, furthermore, functioned through the relationship they reference to McKellen the Hollywood star, with even Hutchwright appearing as a thinly veiled parody of the actor. Despite *Vicious*'s small domestic setting it is, nonetheless, in many ways a fitting point to conclude my examination of McKellen's career and can be viewed as a culmination of his prior roles. Urbane, witty, smartly attired and armed with an even more succinct, sharp and frequently wicked vocabulary, Freddie confirms precisely the kind of character archetype we are accustomed to seeing McKellen portray. And with his investment in camp theatricality and loving (if tempestuous) relationship with Stuart, Freddie can be aligned with both McKellen's personal politics and his belief in the importance of performing difference and, in the case of *Vicious*, a simultaneously under-represented and much stereotyped social group.

The relationship between Ian McKellen's Shakespearean persona and popular cultural work has been predicated on the contiguity between his evocations of alterity and their development of the kind of characterisation begun in theatrical performances such as Richard or Iago. Indeed, it could be argued that the majority of McKellen's popular cultural roles bear the imprint of this Shakespeareanism, whether it is in the obvious rhetorical similarities between Richard and Magneto, or the radical imagining of Prospero as an agent of social equality. With the expression of monstrosity frequently rooted in bodily difference, moreover, McKellen's performances subvert the value placed (particularly in gay culture) on male beauty. As Erick Alvarez details, in spite of the wide variety of gay archetypes with their specific body forms and their associated sexual preferences — such as bears, twinkles, leather men — the erotic potential of the body is 'central' to homosexuality and lies at the

‘core of gay identity.’<sup>106</sup> Alvarez argues that today the ‘body beautiful represents for the most part a superficial celebration of beauty’, but in the recent and ancient past ‘the same images represented symbolic and political statements.’<sup>107</sup> McKellen’s performances, however, indicate the potential of engaging with definitions of beauty and the pertinence of this to gaining wider political, social and cultural representation. Cognisant of the reciprocal relationship between cultural depictions and prevalent social attitudes, McKellen thereby recognises the importance of films such as *Gods and Monsters* on a political level, observing that there has been a ‘considerable revolution in the treatment of gays and lesbians in plays and films’ and stating his pride at being associated with a film that ‘boldly treated homosexuality as a fact of life, worthy of the same serious approach as any other aspect of human nature.’<sup>108</sup>

Like Lear’s defiant nudity, McKellen’s career thus places increasing emphasis on the bodies of his characters as a locus of their meaning and characterisation. Disabled, elderly or camp, McKellen’s portrayals force us to attend to the very physical presence of his characters and to interpret such difference in a more sophisticated manner than instinctively rejecting or ignoring it. In more recent years this includes often purposefully subverting our expectations regarding the representation of old age, or challenging our understanding of what Ian McKellen the Shakespearean represents. His *King Lear*, for example, in turn affirms and radically undermines the popular representation — and Lear’s own self-configuration — of the King as a man more sinned against than sinning. Even when portraying morally exceptional characters or totalitarian figures, McKellen thereby works to invest his performances with nuance and understanding, reducing the potential villainy of characters such as Magneto and Richard by emphasising their charisma and humour. And while popular

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<sup>106</sup> Erick Alvarez, *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture* (New York: Haworth Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>107</sup> Alvarez, *Muscle Boys*, 9.

<sup>108</sup> Davies, *Out at the Cinema*, 130.

cultural engagements such as his recurring role on *Coronation Street*, *Vicious* or his guest appearance on *Extras* consciously recognise and elaborate upon the high cultural associations of his Shakespearean persona, they often derive irony from refusing to situate him within the ‘appropriate’ cultural context. Instead, they place McKellen’s grandiloquent Hutchwright within Weatherfield’s grey, working-class terraces or having the failed actor Freddie profess to portray the ‘truth’ of Father Christmas for a part-time acting job.

That there is a high level of comparability across his performances also testifies to the clear and reciprocal relationship between his star persona and his personal political identity. In spite of the disparagement McKellen has faced for his more assimilationist practices as a gay activist, he has remained a vocal figure — even before coming out in 1988. His critique of Equity — the British trade union for acting professionals — for example, is demonstrative of the level of eloquence he brings to his work, as well as his belief in the importance of situating actors as participants in political conversations. As Laura White details, McKellen believed Equity’s conservatism ‘posed a threat to its existence’ and those who wished to keep the organisation as an ‘exclusive coterie, rather than a serious trade union’ upheld — in McKellen’s words — ‘that familiar caricature of The Actor [...] as infantile egoists of sub-intelligence.’<sup>109</sup> Certainly, whether the recurrent theme of his career — difference — has occurred because of the common and ready availability of villain roles for British actors in Hollywood, a broader form of typecasting, or a personal interest in investing traditional antagonists with a greater degree of moral complexity, this phenomenon has been undeniably

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<sup>109</sup> McKellen continues in his typically loquacious manner, ‘Shamefully, it is an impression which some actors seem to have of themselves. Witness the regret, still strongly felt, that Equity ever abandoned to its status as a professional association to become a union affiliated to the TUC, with all the implications of class struggle and party politicking. Hence, the continuing internecine scrapping as the Redgrave Far Left’s shocktroops fire their irritating arrows into the cottonwool bulk of Equity’s other 25,000 members.’ McKellen ‘Acting Together,’ *Author*, (Spring 1979) cited in Laura White, ‘Smashing open the French windows: the acting profession and British theatre in the 1960s and 1970s,’ *The Golden Generation*, ed. Dominic Shellard (London: British Library, 2008), 200.

conducive to McKellen's continued political activity. What is evident, moreover, is that the Richard-esque degree of control Barbara Hodgdon notes in McKellen's authorship of the play's adaptation is also observed by Hodgdon in his personal website. It is, I would argue, characteristic of his career in general and is a convincing argument for the contiguity across the numerous, disparate roles he performs in the public eye. These characters represent lives and ways of living which deviate from heteronormative identities, representing difference, whether it is in terms of sexual practices, age, social standing or a 'monstrous' physical appearance. McKellen's characters radically subvert conventional cultural content by presenting that which is Other to the images we typically see on screen, by virtue of not being youthful, muscular or heterosexual. The starriness McKellen brings to the roles as well as his frequent complication of the audience's instinct to oppose or condemn such embodiments of difference, thus reveals the same objective of his gay (and civil rights) advocacy: the worthiness of alternative lifestyles.

# **Kenneth Branagh: Adapting the Shakespearean Actor**

## **Introduction: Kenneth Branagh's Shakespeare**

This chapter explores the work of Kenneth Branagh in terms of both his acting and directorial career. It is structured by three main case studies from his post-1996 career, although it also considers some other roles during this period, which should be brought to bear upon a consideration of his star persona and Shakespearean identity. I begin by analysing his second Shakespeare film adaptation, *Hamlet* (1996), and establishing his characteristic mode of engagement with Shakespeare: his interest (and personal incentive) in broadening the appeal of the play through creating a dense network of allusion and popular cultural references. The chapter continues by setting this in contrast with his growing success in Hollywood and involvement in large scale mainstream productions such as *Harry Potter* and, in particular, his appointment as director of *Thor* (2011). The incomprehension this provoked from the British press evidenced the fact that, in spite of what remains a largely varied career, Branagh's reputation has largely been established on his function as a theatre actor and the further reinforcement of this fact present in his adaptive work. This section thus focuses upon *Thor* to demonstrate the way in which Branagh's star persona is inextricably tied to particular preconceptions, founded upon on the apparent impermeability of cultural hierarchies; and how Branagh utilises strategies which at once support these assumptions, but also challenge them. Finally, I will consider how the Shakespearean aspect of Branagh's star persona is viewed in the present moment in the immediate wake of his knighthood and a series of commercial and critical film successes.

Before I begin, I wish to detail an overarching interpretation of Branagh's career that I will continue to explore throughout this chapter. The postmodern critical and cultural milieu

is bound up with the task of dismantling and reassembling in new and surprising ways the traditionally disparate facets of what is characterised as ‘high’ and ‘low’ or mainstream culture.<sup>1</sup> As Fredric Jameson famously noted, one of the defining features of postmodernism is ‘the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinctions between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture.’ This act of bricolage is a chief characteristic of Kenneth Branagh’s work and has been identified in depth by adaptation critics such as Samuel Crowl and Courtney Lehmann. According to these critics, Branagh is the ‘product’ of the post-modern moment in which all sense of originality has been exhausted, the only avenue of creation through parody, pastiche and what Crowl describes as ‘intertextual echo.’ In the words of Crowl, Branagh is thus a ‘reconstructionist,’ creating out of the ‘bits and shards’ of postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> His 2000 adaptation of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, for example, practices this process of reconstruction on a structural level, as the play’s narrative is married with a soundtrack of 1930s Broadway hits in order to create the effect of a Hollywood musical. Both Branagh’s Shakespearean and popular cultural texts thereby adhere to a postmodern sensibility in their refusal to enforce the potentially arbitrary hierarchising of texts. I wish to explore this traditional explanation of his engagement with his cultural texts — his status as a postmodern auteur— in one particular direction, however.<sup>3</sup>

I want to posit a reading of Branagh’s professional identity — his numerous roles as Shakespearean, actor, director, producer, adaptor, media figure, interviewee, industry insider,

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, ‘Post-modernism and Consumer Society,’ *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>3</sup> I wish to use Courtney Lehmann’s configuration in particular of the ‘postmodern auteur’. Lehmann’s expression of the postmodern auteur is one who mobilises the schizophrenia of postmodernism aesthetically and reconstitutes ‘high’ modernist notions of artistic production within ‘low’ mass cultural reception. I believe this effectively describes Branagh’s mode of production and especially the importance of involving himself within consumer culture through both reference to popular cultural texts and knowledge of the means by which those texts are consumed. Courtney Lehmann, ‘Kenneth Branagh at the Quilting Point: Shakespearean Adaptation, Postmodern Auteurism, and the (Schizophrenic) Fabric of ‘Everyday Like,’’ *Post Script* (Fall 1997), 17.1, 6-27.

educator, the list goes on — as characteristic of the methods, practices and the ideological and social positioning of the fan. This is an argument, I believe, which is complimentary rather than antagonistic to the popular conception of Branagh as a postmodern auteur. The critical conception of fan-based creativity owes itself to a wider articulation of postmodern creative/commercial practices and postmodernism's interrogation of cultural hierarchies. Paul Booth's summation of the fan as an individual who does 'more than passively view media' and 'make[s] explicit what we all do implicitly' is instructive here:

[F]ans are representative of audiences like those book collectors: they do more than passively view media. Fans make explicit what we all do implicitly: That is, we actively read and engage with media texts on a daily basis.

Also useful is Booth's recognition of the importance of fan studies to 'treat the fan — in whatever respect they determine — as an active reader, one participating in a de Certeauan view of *productive consumption*'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Courtney Lehmann's and Timothy Corrigan's conception of the postmodern auteur as a figure removed from the 'textual *locus classicus* of authorship,' 'commercially conditioned' and situated along an '*extratextual path*,' represents a movement towards such thinking.<sup>5</sup> For Lehmann the *bricoleur* (her interpretation of the auteur) attempts to resituate the 'high modernist notion of artistic *production* within a low postmodern mode of mass cultural *reception*.'<sup>6</sup> Though Branagh is both Corrigan's postmodern auteur and Lehmann's *bricoleur*, I believe fan creativity offers a model of practice which is more telling, indicative and suitable for his particular interests and his characteristic mode of engagement with cultural texts. It recognises the fan practices he engages in: the importance of pleasure, playfulness, cultural poaching and — if not the dismantling of cultural hierarchies — then using them as a playground. In the words of Henry

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010), 12, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam* (London: Routledge, 1991), 105.

<sup>6</sup> Courtney Lehmann, *Shakespeare Remains: Theatre to Film, Early Modern to Postmodern* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2002), 164.



Jenkins, fan culture ‘muddies’ those boundaries by employing ‘reading practices (close scrutiny, elaborate exegesis, repeated and prolonged rereading)’ traditionally reserved for works of serious merit and applies them to the “‘disposable’ texts of mass culture.’<sup>7</sup>

This model of production and criticism roots itself not in the sometimes obfuscating academic discourse of postmodernism but instead, within readings of consumption, reception, intertextuality and viewing pleasures. Importantly, moreover, it encourages a more comprehensive reading of Branagh’s recent work. Academic studies of Branagh tend to focus only upon his explicit engagements with Shakespeare, or other texts which can be linked to the canon, the ‘highbrow’ or academically validated adaptive forms. *My Week With Marilyn* (dir. Simon Curtis, 2011), for example, would presumably be of interest due to its status as an adapted text which is visibly meta-textual in its engagement with cinema. And, although implicitly popular cultural in subject matter and form, the film pertains to the noted Shakespearean Laurence Olivier’s career and a critically popular ‘Golden Age’ of Hollywood. By contrast, *The Road To El Dorado* (dir. Bibi Bergeron, 2000) would not offer itself to academic interest as an animated film for children with no obvious cultural referents or adaptive history. Yet, as this chapter will continue to demonstrate, *El Dorado* exemplifies the way particular aspects of Branagh’s identity persist in the mainstream. Furthermore, while there has been a distinct move in Shakespearean criticism to explore what has been defined in a variety of ways as ‘Schlockspeare’, ‘Bardcore’, ‘the Shakespeare trade’ and ‘Bardbiz’, (in all cases the decontextualised commercial appropriation of Shakespeare in a variety of media) academic work on less obvious adaptive trajectories is visibly absent.<sup>8</sup> By this I mean

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 17.

<sup>8</sup> These terms are the invention of the following respectively: Richard Burt, *Shakespeare After Mass Media*, ed. Richard Burt (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) and Richard Burt, ‘What the Puck?: Screening the (Ob)scene in Bardcore *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Transmediatic Technologies of Tactility,’ *Shakespeare on Screen: A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin (Rouen: Publications de

configuring the actor and their *body* of work (in both senses) as a site of adaptation and a continued conveyor of meaning across and within a disparate mass of unconnected films. As a result, there appears to be a gap in criticism reflecting the lack of Branagh's Shakespearean output within the last ten years, despite the fact that he has reached — I would argue — an unprecedented level of productivity and popularity (in comparison to the way he was viewed by the press during the nineties).

In this first section of my chapter I wish to focus my definition of what values Branagh embodies as a Shakespearean through the case study of his 1996 adaptation of *Hamlet*. I will read *Hamlet* as evidence of the process by which Branagh has established himself as a Shakespearean: what his characteristic mode of engagement with Shakespeare is and how he uses this to adapt Shakespeare for a popular audience. I will do this through a twofold approach. First, I will explore how Branagh is represented by press materials in publicity for *Hamlet* and also by the media in response to the film. Through this I will be able to ascertain which of Branagh's Shakespearean values are most readily apparent and, therefore, circulated in association with his star persona and what they reveal about the qualities and processes attributed to Shakespeare's legacy in popular culture. Secondly, I will explore *Hamlet* itself and consider how the editing, mise-en-scène, casting, intertextuality and other factors contribute to the consolidation of his Shakespearean identity; especially how these factors may work in relation to the attribution of Branagh's Shakespearean qualities by the press. I will thus read *Hamlet* as an exemplification of Branagh's adaptive process as actor and director and a model for his future work (both within Shakespeare adaptation and elsewhere). Of course, this is not to suggest that Branagh reached a point in 1996 after which his directorial and acting style failed to continue evolving. Rather, I suggest that given the

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l'Université de Rouen, 2004); Barbara Hodgdon, *The Shakespeare Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998); and Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992).

timeframe of this thesis and the point at which it comes within his career, *Hamlet* is a valuable starting point from which to move through Branagh's more recent work in the mainstream. It offers itself as a point of comparison by which to view if the star's popular cultural work has continued to consolidate his Shakespearean identity, or if there are notable points of departure.

The extent to which Branagh's Shakespearean identity is located as the adaptive point and interpretive force behind *Hamlet* is made especially apparent in Castle Rock's promotional film programme.<sup>9</sup> In common with other publicity releases for film or theatrical programmes, (and in contrast to the largely realist mode of the adaptations they result from) the programme works to dissolve the illusion of performance and to reveal the practicalities of cinematic or theatrical production. Short biographies of the central cast expose the gap between character and actor in a way that is actively subsumed in the performance itself, in order to achieve success as a form of fiction. Similarly, lists of crew or technological specificities dismantle the artificial reality of the cultural form and show the means by which it is achieved. Within the programme, a photograph of Julie Christie dressed as Gertrude thus shows her smiling directly at the camera; in reference to his film characterisation Rufus Sewell as Fortinbras scowls angrily but, similarly, is posed in the direction of the camera. The positioning of both actors to face the camera thereby recognises the act of filmmaking by acknowledging the *performed* nature of their characters. Branagh's cast photograph, however, is posed, contemplative, with Yorick's skull in hand. Unlike the other actors whose performed existence is visible, even the behind-the-scenes form of Branagh remains resolutely in character and assumes one of the most memorable visual quotations of Shakespeare's legacy. The photograph, moreover, is not a still from the film production but

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<sup>9</sup> Castle Rock Entertainment, *Hamlet Film Programme*, n.d. [1996], Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast, MS41/3/13/6, n.p.

from a previous theatrical production of *Hamlet*. It is as though the reality of ‘Kenneth Branagh’ behind the performed surface of Hamlet *is* Hamlet. Courtney Lehmann notes that Branagh’s self-identification with Hamlet is as a figure that ‘embodies all of his personal and professional doubts.’<sup>10</sup> The programme appears to take self-identification one step further, though. Indeed, Branagh does not merely identify *with* Hamlet as he does when he describes his bouts of depression as being ‘the recurrent Hamlet in me.’<sup>11</sup> Hamlet is not external to his identity but a central part of him. There is no sense that like Christie we could view Branagh smiling sunnily at the camera: the divide between actor and character, director and film is wholly subsumed within performance.

On the back cover of the programme is a quotation from Branagh himself (albeit in the carefully considered tone of a press release):

This film is the passionate expression of a dream. A dream that has preoccupied me since first watching "Hamlet" on British television. I was eleven years old. Sex, violence, sword fights, the ghost of a dead father, a journey into madness, the politics of a country and family at war - a quite extraordinary story.

For me, "Hamlet" still produces the feeling of excitement that overwhelmed me all those years ago, when I first saw the play. For audiences familiar or unfamiliar with the story, that's what I'd like to pass on.

Photographed and presented in 70mm format, with a unique array of international talent, it is my fervent hope that you enjoy our interpretation of William Shakespeare's most celebrated work — "Hamlet".<sup>12</sup>

In spite of its oddly anonymous tone the quotation is, nonetheless, a telling summation of how Castle Rock represented Branagh’s performer identity in order to promote *Hamlet*. The quotation, conveyed typographically through a handwriting style font, aspires to a quasi-historical and traditional representation of authorship that is surely familiar to many of us

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<sup>10</sup> Courtney Lehmann, 'Shakespeare the Saviour or the Phantom Menace - Kenneth Branagh's *A Midwinter Tale*,' *Colby Quarterly*, Vol. 37, Issue 1 (March 2001), 58.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Branagh, *Beginning* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 127, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Castle Rock Entertainment, *Hamlet* Programme, n.p.

from images of the ink-stained writer in popular culture, such as Joseph Fiennes in *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden, 1998). Branagh's voice is thus articulated via this unlikely anachronistic handwritten style, locating his creative identity outside the present in some nebulous, historical moment; whether it is intended to be the nineteenth-century setting of the film, or even early modern England. Indeed, the content of the quotation works to doubly locate Branagh as *Hamlet*'s author — it is not until the final line that Shakespeare is even mentioned. Instead, there is an effort to refute the idea that the film is simply an arbitrary or commercially-minded choice of Branagh's next project (although this is an inevitability that shapes even Branagh's ardent professing of his creative inspiration). The connection he draws to the text is a typically personal one and, as Douglas Lanier notes, for Branagh (as for his character, Joe, in *A Midwinter's Tale* only a year prior) 'Shakespeare serves as a point of emotional identification.'<sup>13</sup> The language employed creates a semantic field of oneiric inspiration, described as a 'dream' that has 'preoccupied' him since the age of eleven. 'Overwhelmed' by his immediate, visceral connection to the text, the twenty-five years it has taken to be made invites us to read Branagh as more than simply an adaptor or director but as an individual claiming a deep, personal authorship of the text.

The typography and sizing of the film's title on the poster for *Hamlet* further reveals the effect of Castle Rock's promotional strategy and its resultant re-attribution of authorship. The two most important names on the poster are *Hamlet*, of course, but second is Branagh's own. 'William Shakespeare' is the first name when reading the poster from the top downwards, but the larger and more impactful font is that of 'A Kenneth Branagh Film' and '*Hamlet*', so that the attribution of author appears as an afterthought. Rather, the relationship that lingers visually and that is iterated throughout the programme is that of Hamlet-Branagh or Branagh-Hamlet. This is not to argue that the ascription of Shakespeare's authorship is

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<sup>13</sup> Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 159.

consciously erased from the promotion of the text (it is still very much present), but that Branagh's identity is formulated as so inherently Shakespearean that any mention of Shakespeare himself is curiously redundant.

Production information thus first publicises the themes of the film as 'Murder and violence, revenge and intrigue, sex and desire, paranoia and madness.'<sup>14</sup> These common tropes are so general as to lend themselves to most genres, with a view to appealing to the broadest potential cinema audience. Shakespeare's own association with the film comes second to minimise audience pre-conceptions about what a Shakespearean adaptation may, or may not be. This is also evident in the recurring focus of *Hamlet*'s promotional materials upon the technical aspect of the production: the choice of using 65mm film.<sup>15</sup> A promotional booklet from Kodak praises the pedigree of the films *Hamlet* is brought into association with through the use of this particular film format. A feature on the 'Ingredients of a Classic Film' links *Hamlet* to films such as '*Gone With the Wind, The Third Man, The Godfather, Platoon and The Last Emperor*'; texts all linked by the 'common ingredients' of a good story, 'brilliant direction, outstanding acting and the best possible photography.'<sup>16</sup> A product from Kodak would naturally highlight the significance of cinematographic decisions to the creation of the film; indeed, the front cover of the booklet testifies to the blatancy of this act. A photograph of Ophelia (Kate Winslet) looking longingly at Hamlet has an image of two hands holding a film reel pasted onto it in crude approximation of where Ophelia's hands might be. The guide is — marketing whimsy aside —instructive, nonetheless, in explaining

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<sup>14</sup> Castle Rock Entertainment, '*William Shakespeare's Hamlet. A Kenneth Branagh Film,*' n.d. [1996], Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast, MS41/3/13/7, 2.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that on different occasions in promotional materials both 65mm and 70mm film are cited as being used for *Hamlet*. This is because it is 65mm film used in the cameras but then printed onto 70mm, with the extra 5mm accounting for four magnetic strips holding six tracks of sound, and so both are technically correct.

<sup>16</sup> Kodak Professional Motion Imaging, *Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet on 65mm* (original copy), n.d. [1996], Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast, MS41/3/13/8, 2.

the importance of the decision and, as I will later demonstrate, the opinions it represents are aligned with Branagh's own creative processes.

Producer David Barron states, 'we see our *Hamlet*, the complete *Hamlet*, as an epic film. An epic film demands an epic format.'<sup>17</sup> For him the choice of using a 'complete' version of the *Hamlet* play text is contiguous with the setting and tone of the film: they both contribute to the creation of an epic mise-en-scène, something enabled by the unique quality and cinematic referents of 65mm film. By drawing attention to the form of the film, the promotion of *Hamlet* again demonstrates the way in which it subtly shifts attention from Shakespeare's authorship to the selling points most in keeping with a broad, mass market appeal. Indeed, Mark Thornton Burnett argues that '*Hamlet* is conceived of as a vehicle for mass entertainment [...] *despite* its Shakespearean origins' [emphasis added].<sup>18</sup> The choice of monopolising on the 'epic' nature of *Hamlet* cannily offers the film to the cinema-going audience in a form which is less determined by generic convention — the 'Classic Films' selected for comparison are purposefully diverse, including romance, comedy, adventure and drama — than by its scale. It is this quality, furthermore, which establishes an early precedent for Branagh's work on blockbuster productions such as *Thor* or *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*. As briefly referenced in my introduction, the blockbuster shares with the appropriately titled 'epic' genre a defining relationship to size; while the epic is characterised by its scope in terms of setting or theme, the blockbuster is a 'tall revenue feature' earning more than \$10,000,000. The blockbuster is thereby characterised by its boundless potential to either meet this level of success or — in reference to its etymological origins — to 'bomb'.<sup>19</sup> Both forms thus demonstrate the operative tendency of Branagh's directorial work towards

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<sup>17</sup> Kodak, *Kenneth Branagh's Hamlet*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Thornton Burnett, "'We are the makers of manners": The Branagh Phenomenon,' *Shakespeare After Mass Media*, ed. Richard Burt (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 90.

<sup>19</sup> Sheldon Hall, 'Tall Revenue Features: The Genealogy of the Modern Blockbuster,' *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: BFI, 2002), 11.

epic grandeur (aesthetically and in terms of production size), as well as serving as a measure of his ambition.

Castle Rock's strategy of minimising Shakespeare's association with *Hamlet*, maximising other cultural reference points and re-attributing authorship to Branagh is in alignment with Branagh's own attitude towards the marketing of the film, moreover:

We want this Hamlet to be a big, big treat. We're trying for more epic sweep than is usually contemplated...there will be thousands of extras for some sequences ... The Ghost is going to be a lot scarier than some faintly benign old sort walking on stage in a white shirt. It ain't gonna be three-and-a-half hours of talking heads.<sup>20</sup>

Branagh's image of the 'faintly benign old sort' walking on stage in a 'white shirt' invokes and instantly criticises theatrical performance by rendering it ridiculous. This image of the Shakespearean actor in a white shirt is a visual shorthand that Branagh repeats later when in interview he acknowledges that he is often misapprehended by the industry: 'They think I'm going to turn up in black tights with a floppy white shirt and the complete works under my arm.'<sup>21</sup> It is an image that has potent symbolism despite Branagh's rejection of it, however. Judith Buchanan describes Mel Gibson receiving a 'white billowy shirt' on the set of Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 *Hamlet*; the shirt a 'version' of the one Laurence Olivier wore in his 1948 film of *Hamlet*. It was a gift, Buchanan writes, 'presumably intended to give Gibson a sense of the rich heritage in which he was now working'. This 'standard Hamlet garb' references a specific iteration of the play, though: *film Hamlet*.<sup>22</sup> The white shirt for Branagh, by contrast, appears to symbolise the too-weighty history of theatrical performance: it represents tradition, lethargy and both an assumed style of performance and an expected (low) level of dramatic suspense. Branagh's superlative comments that this *Hamlet* will be a 'big, big treat', that

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<sup>20</sup> Gary Arnold, 'Branagh Breathes New Life into Classics,' *Insight on the News*, January 15, 1996, 36-37.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Kaye, 'Alas, Poor Kenneth!,' *Esquire*, n.d., Vol. 127 (1997), Issue 7, 74.

<sup>22</sup> Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 1.



they are trying for ‘*more* sweep’, that the ghost will be ‘*scarier*’, that its ‘*ain’t* gonna be three and a half hours of talking heads’ [emphasis added] contains within it the assuredness of a man who, rightly or wrongly, has often been accused of hubris. It is worth noting, furthermore, how the deliberate informality of ‘gonna’ in this phrase demonstrates the urgency of Branagh’s desire to make sure that in the movement from text to screen *Hamlet* is relevant but also compatible with more ‘mainstream’ tastes.

Indeed, Branagh has in the past been accused of aesthetic conservatism, his Shakespearean identity viewed as a desire to immerse himself within history rather than in examining the present. One reviewer notes that as adaptor and director, ‘Branagh seems terrified that the Elizabethan language might sail over heads. Every line [...] is enunciated with a kind of clarity suited to people hard of hearing.’<sup>23</sup> This over-eagerness, which has been described elsewhere by critics as ‘tireless’, ‘typically ambitious’ and ‘can-do’ and explained by Ian Shuttleworth as ‘the Protestant compulsion always to be doing something’, is characteristic of the press’s contradictory attitude towards Branagh.<sup>24</sup> At once he is denigrated for continuing to create ‘highbrow’ texts (in response to a perceived lack of public interest) and for attempting to popularise those very texts and make them palatable for mainstream audiences. Certainly, the perception that Branagh sometimes tries too hard is evident even from the beginning of his career, with Shuttleworth recounting his encounters with Hugh Cruttwell at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Cruttwell ‘repeatedly criticised’ Branagh for ‘attempting too much’ and it was only when he forgot his lines that Cruttwell

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<sup>23</sup> Geoff Brown, ‘Ken’s Lust Action Hero – Review of *Hamlet* and other films,’ *The Times*, February 13, 1997, n.p.

<sup>24</sup> Quentin Falk, ‘Sword Play,’ *Flicks*, Vol. 10, February 1997, n.p.; ‘Top of the Town: Kenneth Branagh,’ *Variety*, December 16-22, 1996, 30; Ian Shuttleworth, *Ken & Em: The biography of Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson* (Reading: Headline, 1995), 37.

pronounced a breakthrough: 'he had unlearned enough of his painstaking preparation to be ready actually to work in the required manner.'<sup>25</sup>

The frequent labelling of him by the press as 'our Ken' is equally paradoxical. It is at once fond and celebratory, revelling in one of Britain's most successful cultural ambassadors. But it is also ironic, unwilling to believe that his just-call-me-Ken, salt of the earth attitude is congruent with the inherently class-bound nature of his 'high culture' associations as Shakespearean actor and adaptor. Branagh himself is frank about his interest in Shakespeare, though, and especially his desire to get the public using the 'muscles' that 'might do us a great deal of good.'<sup>26</sup> In this case the 'muscles' he refers to are our ability to use language as a tool of expression and thus an effective means of power. Shakespeare represents for Branagh the possibility of enhancing one of our greatest and most immediate assets: our vocabulary.<sup>27</sup> And yet, while this sentiment appears redolent of the argument for Shakespeare as a tool of edification, the means by which Branagh purports to promote Shakespeare is not through the maintenance of traditional cultural hierarchies.

It is easy to view Branagh through either a lens of arrogance or cultural elitism, but his greatest crime seems to be a willingness to challenge convention and a confidence in the necessity of this for the health of Shakespeare's legacy. Branagh states that 'I'm simply attempting [...] to allow Shakespeare to be seen without prejudice and without the implicit assumption I believe it will be good for you.' This appears to contradict the statements I've previously discussed and yet, the two sentiments are not incompatible. Though Branagh believes in the strength of Shakespeare as a tool for education, it is not a message that he is

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<sup>25</sup>Shuttleworth, *Ken & Em*, 54.

<sup>26</sup>'Top of the Town' *Variety*, 30.

<sup>27</sup> The 'muscles' Branagh speaks of could equally be our ability to think philosophically and poetically. 'For my money, what's important is the way in which Shakespeare unlocks that part of us which is currently rather bereft of poetry or mystery, something that is expressed with the ongoing obsession with New Age philosophies, or philosophical books...' — Kenneth Branagh. Gary Crowds, 'Sharing an Enthusiasm for Shakespeare: An Interview with Kenneth Branagh,' *Cineaste*, Vol. 24, Issue 1 (1998), n.p.

willing to dictate. In interview with Gary Crowdus he states simply, ‘a good film is a good film and a good Shakespeare film is a good Shakespeare film and people will go to see them.’<sup>28</sup> He continues that there remains a ‘sense’ that Shakespeare and his work is ‘something to fear and dread, something that will somehow expose their lack of learning or intelligence.’<sup>29</sup> With such pre-existing opposition to Shakespeare within the mainstream, the boldness of his claims and the confidence with which he can state that this *Hamlet* is bigger, better and *different*, is ultimately necessary. To achieve his aims of widening the popular appeal of Shakespeare, Branagh has to be able to persuade his future audience that any preconceived notions they have of what a Shakespearean film is are wrong. Or rather, that whatever assumptions they may hold will be challenged by what they will encounter with a Kenneth Branagh Shakespearean film. Castle Rock’s configuration of Branagh as not only adaptor but authorial presence coheres with this strategy: if the extent of Shakespeare’s cultural legacy is such that he cannot be individually rehabilitated to the mainstream then he can be via Branagh’s (relatively) less pre-determined Shakespearean identity.

In spite of this process and the nature of Branagh’s voice as it comes across in promotional materials, moreover, his attitude towards adapting *Hamlet* creatively is one which challenges the permeability of a Shakespearean identity and subsequently, preconceived notions about what a Shakespearean film should be. The most striking aspect about *Hamlet* — and something characteristic of both his Shakespearean and mainstream work after this point — is Branagh’s attempt to create a text that is open to the mainstream. As I will demonstrate, Branagh works on various levels within the film to encourage a multiplicity of meaning that is rooted in the openness of the text. For the audience, *Hamlet*’s dramatic significance is broadened by the creation of generic, historical, filmic and actor-

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<sup>28</sup> Crowdus, ‘Sharing an enthusiasm for Shakespeare,’ n.p.

<sup>29</sup> Crowdus, ‘Sharing an Enthusiasm for Shakespeare,’ n.p.

based intertexts which they can access either in complement to the text or as a parallel set of meanings. One of the most immediate examples of how this functions within the text is a trait of Branagh's films evident from *Hamlet* onwards: his use of casting in order to create different intertexts, each of which link outward from each individual actor and their star associations. As Keith A. Reader notes, the casting of such well-known actors and the audience's knowledge of their filmographies, has the result of revealing the film as a cinematic product, emphasising its potentiality and accessibility as a mainstream text, rather than a restricted, codified one whose allusions may be lost on some readers.<sup>30</sup> Branagh's cast is comprised of a mixture of established British theatrical actors and American Hollywood actors such as Jack Lemmon, Billy Crystal and Charlton Heston. This fact opens up Shakespeare as a text which can be accessed by all acting professionals, not only those with a classical repertoire or theatrical training. Indeed, the chief requirement for Branagh was not any degree of experience with Shakespeare but rather actors who were simply able to make the language feel 'natural' and who resisted 'arch, self-conscious "Shakespearean" acting'.<sup>31</sup> Branagh also relished the 'clash' of 'accents and sounds' so that Shakespeare's 'sound' is not a homogenised delivery, associated with the English accent and a particularised theatrical mode.<sup>32</sup> He stressed the importance of resisting a 'heavy-handed' approach to some of the more iconic characters and the tendency to 'fall' into traditional or clichéd performances.

The choice of these American popular actors has a specific logic, moreover, with their roles used to create a popular or mainstream iteration of the Shakespearean — even if the success of the resultant effect has been undecided by critics. Billy Crystal's casting as the First Gravedigger, for example, pairs his star persona as one of the most familiar comic actors

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<sup>30</sup> Keith A. Reader, 'Literature/Cinema/Television' in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 176.

<sup>31</sup> Castle Rock Entertainment, '*William Shakespeare's Hamlet*', 18.

<sup>32</sup> Crowdus, 'Sharing an Enthusiasm for Shakespeare,' n.p.

of the period with the Gravedigger's equivocating humour. Crystal's drawling New York accent, characteristic dry wit and laconic method of delivery lends itself well to the philosophical humour of the graveside scene. A similar logic is present in the casting of Robin Williams in the minor role of Osric. Whereas Crystal's strength as a comic actor lies in his wry delivery, Williams is a physically eloquent comic performer whose Osric jitters with nervous energy. The comedy derived from Hamlet's impatient, teasing attitude towards Osric is effectively realised in Williams' energetic responses and his somewhat hapless expression. Williams' 'nice guy' star persona is employed for emotional depth in the final scene, furthermore. While Osric's guileless expression and his desperate willingness to abide by courtly etiquette is a source of amusement earlier in Act Five Scene Two, his innocence is used to emphasise the senseless bloodshed of the ending of the play. Branagh made the decision to have Osric die despite his survival within the play text. His final lines, 'Young Fortinbras, with conquest come from Poland/ To the ambassadors of England gives/ This warlike volley do not then serve a purely explanatory purpose but presage the cause of the wounds he swiftly dies from.'<sup>33</sup> Osric becomes a victim of the same ambition that drove Claudius and through which Fortinbras claims the throne, his pathetic likeability emphasising, as with Gertrude's death, the all-encompassing consequences of violence. The instant recognisability of such actors — especially in the case of Crystal and Williams who speak with their native accents — thus opens up *Hamlet* to the mainstream audience in an immediate way. Their iconic styles of performance are matched to their Shakespearean characters in a way that makes sense on a very simple, visible level.

This is not to argue that such eclectic casting is merely an attempt to dumb down *Hamlet* for the audience, however. There is a crucial difference between ameliorating the

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<sup>33</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet (The Arden Shakespeare)*, ed. Harold Jenkins (Routledge: London and New York, 1989), 5.2.293-5. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

subtleties of *Hamlet* and broadening its mass appeal by presenting the material in a surprising way. Nor do I believe Branagh's use of international actors concur with Lehmann's assertion that the 'cynical logic' of Branagh's starry cast 'betrays the very fear [...] that Shakespeare is *not* a 'star' in and of himself'.<sup>34</sup> Or even Lynda Boose and Richard Burt's argument that British Shakespearean casting practices have 'changed to reflect the exigencies of market capitalism'.<sup>35</sup> Branagh himself acknowledges that you cannot assume that the casting of a star brings with them a particular audience. In fact, quite the contrary: their involvement often causes a lack of 'acceptance' and a 'knee jerk' reaction of suspicion.<sup>36</sup> If this practice was one carried out for purely commercial reasons, it would not necessarily remain a consistent point across his directorial career.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is something also present in his popular work and is evident in the nationality and colour-blind casting of *Thor*, an issue that caused consternation with the casting of the black, English actor Idris Elba as the Norse gatekeeper, Heimdall.<sup>38</sup> The choice of Elba is indicative of the same logic Branagh applied to the casting

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<sup>34</sup> Lehmann, 'Shakespeare the Saviour or the Phantom Menace,' 75.

<sup>35</sup> Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt, 'Totally Clueless? Shakespeare Goes to Hollywood in the 1990s,' *Shakespeare the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 14.

<sup>36</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh Talks *Hamlet* Casting,' [n.d.], video clip, accessed August 7, 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0IiFbpHi6w>.

<sup>37</sup> The same casting style can be seen, for instance, in *Love's Labour's Lost* as actors such as Alicia Silverstone and Matthew Lillard bring their own Hollywood associations to Shakespeare and thereby new sets of meanings can circulate surrounding a text. Silverstone, for example, who starred in the eminently quotable *Clueless* (dir. Amy Heckerling, 1995), famously corrected a misattribution of 'to thine own self be true' to Hamlet saying, 'Well, I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn't say that. That Polonius guy did.' *Clueless*, itself an adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, is an arch comment on the dissemination of popular culture in the 1990s and references to the film through Silverstone's star persona, therefore, attach ideas surrounding adaptation, the canon and the mainstream to the circulation and production of meaning to *Love's Labour's Lost*. Despite the commercial failure of the film, the same practice was continued in Branagh's next Shakespearean venture, *As You Like It* in 2006. Cast members vary from (then) emerging British talent such as Romola Garai, Adrian Lester and David Oyelowo, regular Branagh collaborators Brian Blessed and Richard Briers to established American stars including Kevin Kline and Hollywood scion, Bryce Dallas Howard.

<sup>38</sup> *Empire* magazine included the casting of Elba as Heimdall on their list of 'The Greatest Casting Controversies', detailing the reaction from the right-wing group, the Council of Conservative Citizens. The Council released a statement detailing what they viewed as a left-wing conspiracy on the part of Marvel to insert 'social engineering into European mythology' and encouraged their supporters to boycott the film (although both this website and the page criticising Elba's casting have since been removed). On a less extreme level, the choice prompted a degree of questioning amongst fans of the graphic novel who wondered whether Elba's appointment was a case of ethnic tokenism and, as in the case of James Trauben for *Pixelated Geek*, to what point historical verisimilitude should be upheld. Helen O'Hara, 'The Greatest Casting Controversies, [n.d.], Webpage, accessed August 6, 2014, Empire, <http://www.empireonline.com/features/casting-controversies/p1>;

of Crystal and Williams: a decision predicated on the desire to match actor and character in a way that would best benefit the text and not necessarily be bound by convention or what has traditionally been done. For Branagh the most essential method by which to open up *Hamlet*'s popular appeal and increase accessibility to Shakespeare is to reduce the restrictions he places upon himself as a director, therefore, as well as — ironically — any limitations resulting from his overwhelmingly Shakespearean identity. The subsequent casting of *Hamlet* thus includes a wide cross-section of actors from different styles of acting, genres, theatrical or filmic traditions and different career stages, all of which work to encourage the sense that there is no *one* way of performing Shakespeare.

The multiplicity of meaning encouraged by Branagh's characteristic approach to casting also functions on a self-referential or meta-textual level within *Hamlet*, as the adaptation knowingly engaging with its own filmic and theatrical performance past. Most conspicuously, Branagh courts his own reputation as the heir apparent (or heir presumptive) to Laurence Olivier, through physical affinity to Olivier's film-*Hamlet* with their close-cropped bleached hair. As one of the most prolific Shakespearean adaptors of his generation, Branagh's career has mirrored Olivier's consistently, and this relationship was particularly noted by the press in his decision to make the first film version of *Henry V* since Olivier's iconic 1944 production. In *My Week With Marilyn* Branagh even more explicitly embraced this irony by imitating the man during his time directing Marilyn Monroe in *The Prince and the Showgirl*.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, both actors can lay claim to the title of the foremost Shakespearean of

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James Trauben, 'A Black Heimdall? Thor Controversy and Ethnic Tokenism,' December 27, 2012, Webpage, accessed August 6, 2014, PixelatedGeek, <http://pixelatedgeek.com/2010/12/a-black-heimdall-thor-controversy-and-ethnic-tokenism/>.

<sup>39</sup> 'He is aware of the irony [playing Olivier, a man whose mantle he was meant to inherit], but "30 years into doing this, the idea that one is somehow obsessed with him, always trying to mimic, emulate, compete is daft, I think". He says he was attracted to the part because of the "Pirandello quality. I'm playing an actor who is directing a film in which he's directing himself. And I'm an actor who directs films in which I direct myself. There were weird layers. I understood. I had some experience of what it would be like.'" Elizabeth Day, 'Kenneth Branagh: the king of comedy,' *Observer*, Sunday 9 October 2011, n.p.

their time and, in many ways, Olivier paved the way for Branagh in terms of trying to create a popular Shakespeare and *be* a popular Shakespearean. Richard Burt adds Orson Welles to his comparison of the two actors, however, as another ‘box-office loser unable consistently to reconcile ‘high art’ and ‘low’ mass media’. Burt muses, it would ‘not be entirely surprising’ to find Branagh, like Olivier and Welles, ‘ending up doing television commercials’ by the end of his career.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, despite his feelings that film was inferior to theatre, Olivier had some success in Hollywood and throughout the seventies and eighties experienced a highly productive period working on television in Britain. As I will continue to demonstrate, like Branagh, though, Olivier’s roles in America evinced his difficulty in separating himself from his Shakespearean reputation. Period pieces such as *Rebecca* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *Pride and Prejudice* (dir. Robert Z. Leonard, 1940) and *The Hamilton Woman* (dir. Alexander Korda, 1941) played upon Olivier’s aristocratic bearing and crisp elocution. His experience on *Wuthering Heights* (dir. William Wyler, 1939) in particular indicated the potential incompatibility of Olivier’s method with Hollywood production; while Olivier viewed the film’s star, Merle Oberon, as an amateur, he was criticised for giving an overwrought performance and reminded that Oberon was the star and he was dispensable.

Unlike Olivier, however, Branagh’s work indicates his equal interest in popular modes of film and television and differing genres, an interest which I would argue moves beyond the purely commercial. Certainly, his career since the early noughties is more characterised by film or television performances than theatrical ones, whether purposefully or a result of happenstance. Branagh’s reference to Olivier in *Hamlet* is not entirely complimentary, moreover. Stephen M. Buhler notes, ‘there is a spectre haunting not only him

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Burt, ‘Introduction: To e- or not to e-? Disposing of Schlockspeare in the Age of Digital Media,’ *Shakespeare After Mass Media*, ed. Richard Burt (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 15.



but the Shakespearean stage more generally, the spectre of Olivier.<sup>41</sup> With Olivier's 1948 multi-award winning film version of *Hamlet* existent in the play's immediate performance history, it does not task imagination to posit Olivier, with his matching blonde locks, as a kind of intertextual Hamlet Sr., a ghost who can only be laid to rest by Branagh's performance as the revenger. This interpretation also suggests a further purpose behind Branagh's claim for a 'big, big' unedited version by viewing it in comparison to Olivier's heavily excised adaptation of the text.<sup>42</sup> Mark Thornton Burnett meanwhile argues that Branagh's frequent movements from popular culture back to the theatrical suggest that he has 'not found a clearly demarcated role' outside of that of 'Shakespearean'. Instead, however, perhaps it speaks on some level to a desire to not only supplant the memories of Shakespeareans such as Olivier or Welles, but also to achieve what they aspired to and had only moderate success in: becoming a performer who moves freely between 'high' and 'low' culture. His movements back and forth should then be viewed not as lacking purpose but as a distinct process. Certainly, as the rest of this chapter will discuss, Branagh's attitude towards the mainstream is one not only as a site of gainful employment but as a source of valid cultural work and valuable references with relevance for his Shakespeareanism and his Shakespeareanism for it, too.

Indeed, Branagh's desire to establish himself as the leading contemporary Shakespearean is apparent in his further use of intertextuality *within* the diegesis of the film, complementing the narrative of the play. Michael Anderegg notes that Branagh 'surrounds himself with paternal and maternal figures drawn from the great tradition of British Shakespeare.'<sup>43</sup> The casting of actors such as John Gielgud and Judi Dench in minor roles

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<sup>41</sup> Stephen M. Buhler, 'Double Take: Branagh Gets To Hamlet' *Post Script*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Autumn 1997, 43.

<sup>42</sup> Arnold, 'Branagh Breathes New Life into Classics,' 36-37.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 65.

serves a symbolic function within the film; like Olivier they represent a theatrical lineage into which Branagh writes himself as successor and heir apparent. This is especially apparent given the split that can be discerned in *Hamlet*'s dramatis personae between two generations of individuals (and actors): the contest between Claudius and Hamlet and Fortinbras and *old* Norway. This theatrical self-reflexiveness serves a very real purpose within the film.

Branagh's interpretation of Hamlet's narrative is a doubly inflected and doubly charged oedipal conflict. When in Castle Rock's promotional materials Branagh claimed a deep personal connection to *Hamlet* (see page one hundred and fifty), the dream that 'preoccupied' him was in part inspired by the actor he was watching: Derek Jacobi, the same Jacobi who would later direct Branagh on stage in the same role.

Aside from the deliberate visual reference to Olivier, the significance of this intertextual relationship between the two actors is encouraged by the similar styling of Jacobi and Branagh. Unlike Hamlet's father (Brian Blessed), both are slimly built and of medium stature with their hair dyed peroxide blonde to encourage a sense of genetic, familial similarity. Certainly, what little we do see of Hamlet Senior's character prior to his death appears to resemble Blessed's characteristic joviality and generousness of spirit. Jacobi's Claudius and Branagh's Hamlet by contrast share a depth of emotion and a politic ability to disguise their true intent (for Claudius it is with sincerity of affection and for Hamlet it is with his antic disposition). Judith Buchanan notes that for Branagh the ghosts of previous inhabitants of famous roles are permitted to be 'substantial beings' with whom he 'might thought to be "boxing"'.<sup>44</sup> And while Branagh has claimed his awareness and enjoyment of the 'sense of theatre being handed down through the generations' — giving the example of 'Irving, who was seen by Olivier, who was seen by Hopkins, who was seen by me' — there

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<sup>44</sup> Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 208.

is an undeniable air of competitiveness implicit in such a casting decision.<sup>45</sup> Branagh squares up against Jacobi in order to stake his claim as the Shakespearean interpreter *du jour*: the young challenger whose success — or rather whose iconicity — depends on dislodging momentarily from mind other historical Hamlets. Indeed, among *Hamlet*'s starry cast Michael Maloney in the role of Laertes represents Branagh's most immediate professional contemporary, an actor who Branagh even cast as Joe Harper/Hamlet in *In the Bleak Midwinter* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1995). The inclusion of Jacobi in this spirit, importantly, thus enhances the natural rivalry between Claudius and Hamlet as the (emphasised) physical, professional and personal similarities between the men suggests the discord that lies in their uncomfortable *kinship*.

The way in which Kenneth Branagh purposefully takes meaning from a wide range of sources that initially appear contradictory, anachronistic or surprising is also evident in *Hamlet*'s setting. The shooting script for *Hamlet* reveals Branagh's inspiration for particular moments of characterisation and general *mise-en-scène* which are notably anachronistic; not only for an early modern text but for the general period the adaptation is set in (the late nineteenth century). For Branagh, *Hamlet* is more than a self-contained family drama but a dynastic saga which, by virtue of the individuals involved, plays out across Europe. A production note — 'Politics: Where the Fate of the Nations may be decided... A mini Versailles. Our Elsinore' — thereby creates a multi-layered allusion.<sup>46</sup> The reference to Versailles provides a visual correlative in its baroque grandeur, (and that of the much smaller, actual Blenheim Palace setting) between artifice and power as a symbol of Europe's *ancien régime*. The phrase 'the Fate of Nations', however, makes a specific reference to Versailles' later function as the site of the signing of the 1919 treaty between Germany and the Allied

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<sup>45</sup> Shuttleworth, *Ken & Em*, 186.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Harvey, 'Artwork research for the film, *Hamlet*,' n.d., *Hamlet* Production material, Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast, MS41/3/13/2, unpaginated.

Powers. Other allusions in the shooting script are equally martial with references made variously to Chamberlain, Schwarzkopf and Churchill (the latter two ascribed exclusively to Claudius in a military semantic field that also describes him and Hamlet both moving ‘like a soldier’).<sup>47</sup> The three separate wars gestured to in the production notes and shooting script — the First and Second World Wars and the Gulf War — thus emphasise the scale of violence Branagh’s *Hamlet* engages with. A production note captions the film as the following: ‘— youth — a play of three wars: national, civil and domestic. And as always a generation laid to waste.’<sup>48</sup> In keeping with the epic tradition that the cinematographic style of the film gestures towards, the nature of violence alluded to in *Hamlet* is concurrent with the scale of the setting and the power of the individuals within. Jessica Maerz argues that to ‘correct this lack of specific reference to recognisable and shared history [...] Branagh frames his story in such a way as to make it *seem* historical’.<sup>49</sup> Maerz is correct in describing the fictive quality of the way in which Branagh assembles his historical composition, but to attribute this to a lack of ‘specific reference’ or to a ‘recognisable’ history is to ignore the markers evident in the film’s costuming and setting, as well as Branagh’s comments on the matter. In characteristic manner, the references to various periods, historical personages and locations are not linked by their immediate temporal relevance but by their thematic contiguity to his reading of the text and their contribution to a larger specific theme: war.

As I will continue to demonstrate, Branagh’s magpie technique of taking from disparate cultural modes, regardless of the dictates of hierarchies of ‘taste’ and conventional strategies of consumption, often plays itself out through a system of film references. These privilege the indiscriminate cultural viewer and their knowledge of a variety of media, genres

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<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Branagh, *First Draft: Hamlet by William Shakespeare*, September 1, 1995, Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen’s University Belfast, 13, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Harvey, ‘Artwork research for the film, *Hamlet*, n.p.

<sup>49</sup> Jessica Maerz, ‘Beyond Epic: Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet* and the Meta-Narrative Functions of Classical Hollywood Genre,’ *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2011), 129.

and star personae. Adding extra layers of significations and meaning to characters and situations, this functions by alluding to texts as disparate as *Robocop* and *The Magnificent Seven*. As Michael Pursell identifies, Henry the Fifth's first appearance in Branagh's 1989 adaptation of the play as a figure all clothed in black reads for the literary critic as 'a blank, a cipher, a mysterious and unknown force.' But, Pursell adds, 'anyone who's been to the movies [... will] take one look and see Darth Vader.'<sup>50</sup> Deborah Cartmell is equally determined that for a 1980s audience, the 'inhuman, black-masked figure inevitably recalls Darth Vader'; as are Samuel Crowl and L. Monique Pittman.<sup>51</sup> By focusing upon the power and drama of Henry's entrance — an entry amplified by the ominous thrum of the string section in what is, otherwise, Patrick Doyle's largely melodic orchestration — and by linking the viewer's mind with the arch-villain of the *Star Wars* franchise, Branagh gives us a Henry to be feared. This is deftly undercut within seconds, however, with the revelation of Henry's appearance: still glowering, but now rosy-lipped and school-boy fresh. Vader is not an allusion which is abandoned with the first scene, however: the associations and ideas which circulate around the original film trilogy are too pertinent. *Star Wars* is about not-so fond fathers and sons and the inheritance of a legacy of violence. And of course, *Stars Wars* is at its heart about the dangers of the misuse of power: an idea which has proven appeal to Branagh and occurs frequently, even definitively, in his films.

The reappearance of this allusion within *Hamlet* further argues for its interpretive relevance in the earlier film and it is a striking example of Branagh's characteristic use of cultural references. The shooting script for Act One Scene Five of *Hamlet* notes that the

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Pursell, 'Playing the Game: Branagh's *Henry V*,' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1992), 269.

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Cartmell, *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 102; Samuel Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, 29; L. Monique Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare on Film and Television: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 25-6.

Ghost appears and the visor on his head is ‘Darth Vader-like’.<sup>52</sup> Though this is a cursory reference and while visually it is not immediately obvious, the logic of it is. The reference to the *Star Wars* series in Branagh’s *Henry V* works on two levels: first it creates tension through tapping into the emotional resonance of an iconic, popular cultural image. The extent of the franchise’s success culturally means that Vader functions as an identifiable and popular shorthand for menace and fantastical horror. With his body completely disguised, the only concession to a recognisably human form evident in his black skull mask, his tall, powerful frame and his artificially deepened and stilted voice, Vader’s presence is uncanny. At once human and robot he is unsettlingly recognisable and strikingly alien. Secondly, Branagh’s use creates a link to the same image through expounding on the same thematic issues that circulate in Vader’s appearance and characterisation within the series: the responsibility for power (he, too, is a father). In *Hamlet*, the Ghost thus also embodies the dark, violent possibility of revenge, his presence problematising Hamlet’s obligation to use violence in a way that is moral, just as Vader urges his son to misuse his Jedi strengths.

In the case of both the Ghost and Vader their largely silent characterisation purposefully places emphasis upon what they do eventually say and its significance for the narrative and key characterisation. With his slow movement, jerky gesticulation and great metal structure, the Ghost appears as a terrifying automaton. This de-humanisation is encouraged by the direction of the scene; the camera moves between Hamlet’s, Horatio’s (Nicholas Farrell) and Marcellus’s (Jack Lemmon) eye-lines, looking upwards, and the Ghost’s. While on Hamlet’s level the camera remains in tight close-up of the characters’ faces so that we are entered into their subjective experience of the scene through immediate access to their emotional states. On the Ghost’s level, however, the camera angle is aligned with his point of view and views the three men in a sentinel-like manner. There is no sense of

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<sup>52</sup> Branagh, *First Draft*, 42.

identification or recognition implicit in the Ghost's gaze, which remains at a distance, with Hamlet, Horatio and Marcellus grouped unevenly in the top right hand corner of the frame.

As the scene progresses the uncanny robotic stillness of the Ghost is exchanged for more traditional imagery of supernatural horror as Hamlet races through a gothic forest. With smoke rising from the ground, the setting accords with the Ghost's own conceptualisation of hell as 'sulph'rous and tormenting flames' (1.5.736), but also Hamlet's account of 'this witching time of night' as being when 'hell itself breathes out' (3.2.358-9). The Ghost's first seven lines in the scene are then delivered through a disembodied voice with reverberation and distortions placed on the words to further distance the sense of the Ghost having an identifiably human — or once human — form. The Ghost's true existence as a purgatorial spirit would have been anathema to the Protestant Hamlet and the film plays upon this knowledge to offer alternate explanations of what the figure of Hamlet Sr. is, building dramatic tension by delaying the moment of revelation.<sup>53</sup>



Fig. 2.1 Hamlet's library of supernatural tomes.

<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the Ghost is first of all interpreted by Hamlet as likely to be a demon. On learning of the watchmen's encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet retreats to his library and selects one particular book, turning it to the page titled 'of DEMONS, their number and nature'. In the shooting script at this point a 'grotesque illustration of a scorpion' even springs to life from the animation on the pages. Branagh, *First Draft*, 28.

The mood for Act One Scene Five on the whole is described in the shooting script as being ‘slow, menacing Hitchcock suspense’ with the production notes stressing that the Ghost’s appearances must ‘terrify’, citing influence from ‘Stephen King horror’.<sup>54</sup> These diverse images and cultural reference-points thereby work to disrupt our comprehension of what the Ghost is, and through presenting him variously as an automaton or as a demon, place the audience in Hamlet’s position of confused vulnerability.

Lutheranism dissolved the institutional practices which encouraged the persistence of the dead; it taught that not only was the concept of purgatory unbiblical but the futility of praying for the dead. The Ghost’s physical presence, however, not only visibly refutes such thinking but gives voice and menacing articulation to the terrifying prospect of life after death, warning Hamlet, ‘I could a tale unfold whose lightest word/ Would harrow up thy soul’ (1.5.15-6). The Ghost thus manifests the potency of a visceral connection to the afterlife; a dramatic, supernatural hinterland in which the dead may walk and communicate. It is for this reason that much emphasis is placed within the scene upon the Ghost’s declaration ‘I am thy father’s spirit’ (1.5.9) as admission of a very real paternal relationship. It is not until this moment that the Ghost’s face is seen in full detail, moreover, the camera finally detailing the points of a common humanity between father and son through (ironically) the fleshiness of the Ghost’s presence. The importance of this moment is further evident in the visual contrast between the frenetic quality of the scene up until this point. Editing is discontinuous with quick jump cuts moving the camera from tracking Hamlet’s progress through the forest to shots of supernatural eruptions coming from the ground, with dialogue overlaid in a sequence that purports to disorient and scare (despite directorial intention the efficacy of this can be questioned). The Ghost’s revelation, though, locks the narrative’s bolting momentum

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<sup>54</sup> Branagh, *First Draft*, 42; Tim Harvey, ‘Artwork research for the film, *Hamlet*,’ n.p.



into place momentarily. Hamlet is silenced and stilled, pinned to a tree by his father's supernatural agency but equally by the disturbing power of the knowledge he gains.

This moment of anagnorisis echoes the iconic revelation scene in *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (dir. Irvin Kershner, 1980) for its visual, thematic and narrative significance. In both scenes the revelation of the figure of horror and supernatural agency as not only human but the protagonist's father is so disruptive that it freezes the narrative in a point of extreme emotional tension. In both scenes, moreover, the father's knowledge of the truth of their relationship with the son and the power that this gives them is literalised by a height difference. The sons, dumbstruck by what they have learnt, are helpless, only able to gaze upwards at the figures that retain power over them. The visual correlation between the two scenes and their similar narrative function is further enhanced by their importance for Hamlet and Luke's emotional characterisation. The declaration of filial obligation causes the crisis on which both texts' plots are predicated and the subsequent films involve the dramatic working out of this problem: Hamlet is called to avenge his father's death and Luke is invited to join his father and embrace the dark side. Both characters are then obligated to consider the moral ramifications of what they are being asked to do and whether or not to access the violent potentiality of the power they are offered (through revenge and through accessing the dark side of the Force in *Hamlet* and *Star Wars* respectively).



GHOST: I am thy father's spirit (1.5.9).

Fig. 2.2 Hamlet is confronted by the Ghost of his father



VADER: Join me and together we can rule the galaxy as father and son.

Fig. 2.3 The iconic revelation scene between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*.

Branagh's use of cultural references in this way, employing them as a more potentially accessible framework for facets of thematic and characterisation, reveals his disregard for traditional cultural hierarchies and his willingness to reverse patterns of consumption. By alluding to *Star Wars* and demonstrating the contiguity between the two texts, Branagh is not arguing that *Star Wars* can be read as an adaptation of *Hamlet*, but rather that *Hamlet* can be read as an adaptation (of sorts) of *Star Wars*. The former interpretation is one which maintains Shakespeare's authority as a creator of cultural meaning, while the latter encourages the viewing of the inherent flexibility of Shakespeare's work and its compatibility with popular culture; indeed, its participation within popular culture. The links created to *Star Wars* demonstrate an example of how Branagh's Shakespearean texts thus contain within them a structured set of meanings, which attempt to reverse the traditional strategies of consuming Shakespeare. Rather than there being a single, privileged set of meanings, which the viewer can only access through knowledge of the text and understanding of its archaic language, there are secondary and even tertiary levels on which the text can operate. These may operate simply through providing a more immediate popular cultural example by which to understand a character's feelings and relationships at a particular moment (as in the case of Hamlet/Luke and the Ghost/Vader), or they may read simultaneously with the Ur-Text.

Significantly, it is in his provision of these alternative ways of reading that Branagh accords with a critical conception of an active fandom. The 'producerly' text, as John Fiske argues, opens itself to audience engagement so that the viewer is encouraged to construct their own meaning and not only to follow the lines of interpretation laid out by the director and to appreciate the construction of the text but also to actively create their own. This unwillingness to dictate a single path for the viewer is visibly congruent with the fan's desire

to disrupt traditional cultural hierarchies and challenge an authoritative interpretation.<sup>55</sup> Branagh therefore enables this freedom for the audience through the dense network of allusion he creates. They are invited to recognise the layers of influence that are at work, whether it is through the employment of a particular cinematographic style or casting choice. Equally, the audience are also able to view the text entirely free from allusion. Meaning can be as complex or as simple as the viewer decides. Contesting traditional hierarchies of taste, it is, moreover, the knowledge of the mainstream which rewards a deeper understanding of the Shakespearean. Whereas the mainstream is frequently read for examples of Shakespeare's influence, Branagh asks us to read his Shakespearean adaptations for evidence of popular culture's appeal and even, by demonstrating the similarity between apparently disparate cultural modes, demonstrates the pointlessness of cultural hierarchies.

## **Branagh in the Mainstream**

Before continuing with Branagh's function as a director in a further case study on *Thor*, I wish to elaborate on some of Branagh's more recent interactions with the mainstream as an actor and thereby establish the cross-cultural reach of his career and its significance for an exploration of his roles as Shakespearean *and* Hollywood star. His directorial work illuminates his practices with regards to how he views and engages with cultural hierarchies. Exploring his work as an actor, though, demonstrates how this works out practically in his performances and, in particular, argues for the importance of his body as a site of interpretation. Within this section I wish, therefore, to interrogate some notable examples of Branagh's popular work in order to demonstrate the relationship these have to his developing identity as a star. This strategy is essential for creating a fully-rounded representation of the complexities and processes at work in Branagh's ongoing Shakespearean identity. To

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<sup>55</sup> John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 121.

reiterate the point made in my introduction, Judith Buchanan states that the details of a film, especially mainstream films, ‘seep irresistibly’ into our reading so that a text constantly gathers accretions — some diversionary and some pertinent. For Buchanan these ‘details’ are what she calls the ‘textual penumbra’: that mass of extra-textual and paratextual information which surround any one film, ranging from previous performances of an actor to details surrounding production.<sup>56</sup> This information is at once entirely personal and dependent on an individual’s viewing practices and personal preferences, but can also be determined on a general level.

Buchanan’s formulation of the textual penumbra alone validates a critical reading of more surprising popular, counter-cultural texts or inter-medial cultural forms (such as interviews, internet resources and social media). Such films do not have influence merely because they reflect minor aspects of Branagh’s star persona but because they are as involved in the continually evolving creation of his star identity. They are constituent parts of the whole, impacting on our conception of Branagh-as-Shakespearean as surely as our knowledge of Branagh-as-Shakespearean shapes our responses to the popular cultural forms in which he features. In *The Road To El Dorado* (dir. Bibo Bergeron, 2000) Branagh’s Shakespearean credentials are apparent in his casting as the Miguel to Kevin Kline’s’ Tulio for instance. The two revolve around a simple yin and yang premise, with Kline’s Tulio as a wise-cracking but man-of-the-people character and the emotional heart of the central pairing, while Miguel is grandiloquent, flamboyant and unfocused.

An interchange between the two as they orchestrate a mock-duel illustrates the difference between the two characters.

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<sup>56</sup> Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 10.

Tulio: Let your sword do the fighting!

Miguel: It shall be loquacious to a fault.

While Tulio relies on a stock phrase of action film, Miguel's witty rejoinder demonstrates both his characteristic affectedness and his verbal dexterity. Out of the two men he relishes his role as performer and the emotional conflict at the heart of the film lies in his realisation that he must stop his performance as leader of El Dorado, returning to normal life with Tulio. His characterisation — its artifice, pompousness and eloquence to the point of pretentiousness — is recognisable shorthand for the popular cultural stereotype of the Shakespearean. Indeed, the production information for the film reveals the importance of both actors to the creation of their characters' personalities. Rather than following set scripts and recording their dialogue separately — which is traditional in animation — Kline and Branagh were encouraged to give their dialogue a more 'spontaneous feel' by improvising and 'throwing lines back and forth' while together. The subsequent characters emerged as a combination of the objectives of the producers to 'break the mould of the typical heroic leading men' and the personalities forged by their stars' who, 'like Tulio and Miguel, [were] something of an odd couple.'<sup>57</sup>

While the production information explains that this process came about so successfully by emphasising Kline's skills as a 'natural comedian', Branagh's contribution to the central pairing is more evident as a particular kind of dramatic expertise. The director Eric 'Bibo' Bergeron notes that Branagh 'could go to the mike and immediately give me 15

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<sup>57</sup> 'Producer Brooke Beton notes, "We brought them in together to record, which is unusual in animation and it was a delight. They had such a great time, and their energy and creativity elevated each other's performances.' DreamWorks Pictures, 'About the production: Paving *The Road to El Dorado*,' *The Road to El Dorado – Fold Out Press Kit*, Publicity material, Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast, MS41/3/21/1, 2-3.

separate interpretations of a single line... Any nuance we could possibly have needed.’<sup>58</sup>

Indeed, Branagh’s own attitude towards the creative process appears markedly different to his co-star’s. Although Kline ‘quips’ about the two characters barely forming ‘one entire half-wit’, Branagh describes Miguel and Tulio in conventional dramatic terms and explains the way that their characterisation lends itself to the themes of *El Dorado* and functions narratively. He even demonstrates awareness of the unique production circumstances of animation, noting that the dialogue’s desired improvisational, ‘off-the-cuff quality might be harder to achieve in an animated movie where the process is so technical.’<sup>59</sup> Continuity is thus apparent between texts which initially appear as dissimilar as *Hamlet* and *The Road to El Dorado*, through Branagh’s typical level of immersion in characterisation and comprehension of the material conditions of production upon performance. In spite of the lack of attention typically drawn to the vocal talents when promoting animated films, Branagh’s performer identity consequently comes across eloquently in the press kit and on screen because of the recognisably Shakespearean flourishes of his vocal performance as Miguel.<sup>60</sup> As Dave Brewster, the senior supervising animator for Miguel’s character commented in the press kit: ‘It’s actually easy to capture the outlines of the character when you have a voice talent like Kenneth Branagh... His performance [...] — facial expressions, attitudes... it’s all in the voice.’<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> DreamWorks, ‘About the production,’ 2-3.

<sup>59</sup> DreamWorks, ‘About the production,’ 3.

<sup>60</sup> Indeed, this is even more apparent in a film such as *El Dorado* because of the distinctive ways in which animated films are marketed. Unlike most other mainstream films which are sold on the box office appeal of their key stars or, perhaps a big name director, animated films usually trade on the strength of the studio name and their previous output. Rarely are posters decorated with the names of their voice talent (despite frequently possessing starchy and well respected casts). Instead, they proclaim as with *Toy Story 3*, ‘From the creators of *Finding Nemo* and *Up*’. The chief theatrical poster for *The Road to El Dorado* similarly proclaimed only ‘DreamWorks Pictures’ with an illustration of Miguel, Tulio and Altivo the horse and a cursory pronouncement of ‘Thumbs Up’ from critic Roger Ebert.

<sup>61</sup> DreamWorks, ‘About the production,’ 4.

Watching *El Dorado* at the time of release in 2000, however, Branagh's success as an actor would have been less immediately apparent. His most recent films had been the commercial failure *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Wild Wild West* (dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, 1999) — in which, in the honoured tradition of British actors in Hollywood, he played the villain of the piece — as well as a raft of relatively low budget films including *Alien Love Triangle* (dir. Danny Boyle, 1999) and *How To Kill Your Neighbour's Dog* (dir. Michael Kalesniko, 2000). Branagh's star status was far from the heights it has reached in subsequent years, when he secured the direction of big budget features such as *Thor* and the *Jack Ryan* franchise reboot (in which he also stars). This period on through 2001 and 2002 saw a steady increase in his star persona back to levels more concurrent with his fame in the nineties, nonetheless. High budget 'TV movies' such as *Conspiracy* (dir. Frank Pierson, 2001) and *Shackleton* (dir. Charles Sturridge, 2002) saw him take roles where he was once again the principal actor. The more intimate nature of television and the nature of his roles within these programmes offered Branagh an unprecedented level of screen presence, to an extent not seen since *Hamlet* in 1996. The largely unglamorous and — in the case of *Conspiracy* — unheroic characters portrayed in a naturalistic and more subdued mode of performance, therefore, represented a distinct movement away from the common perception of Branagh-the-Shakespearean. The mainstream films he had been involved in aside from his Shakespearean adaptations, like *Wild Wild West* and *El Dorado* had, after all, largely served to perpetuate the myth of Shakespearean identity as flamboyant, dramatic and tongue-twistingly eloquent.

In fact by 2002, the extent to which Branagh's Shakespearean caricature had been sloughed off for a more dramatic mode of performance was evident. What once would have been worryingly close to the bone became straight-forward parody and gently self-ironising.



This year saw Branagh return to Hollywood, entering the second film within the most iconic franchise of the noughties: *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (dir. Chris Columbus, 2002). Though the character he portrays, Gilderoy Lockhart, has a textual life prior to Branagh's interpretation, the casting is uncannily appropriate. The new Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, Lockhart is a vainglorious fop concerned with the accolade of winning 'Witch Weekly's Most Charming Smile Award' and promoting his latest book. With his immaculately coiffured strawberry-blond curls and fastidious personal appearance, Lockhart is styled like a wizarding Hollywood matinée star, akin to Errol Flynn or Branagh's own Flynn-like Hamlet (see page two hundred and two). And, aspiring to Flynn-like models of dashing Hollywood heroism, Lockhart stage manages situations in order to present himself in the most valiant and self-promoting way. Indeed, this characterisation lent itself readily to a costume design for Lockhart that made a virtue of his vanity. Costume designer Lindy Hemmingway notes that while most of the other characters in the series are dressed in 'dark, muted or sombre colours', Lockhart represented the opportunity to create outfits in 'green, blue, deep red and even gold.' Described by Branagh as part 'period dandy', Lockhart 'struts like a peacock, wears a different costume in every scene... and of course there's his hair!'<sup>62</sup> The resultant performance ensures that there is a strong visual correlative between the details of Branagh's embodiment of Lockhart — his costume, hair and physicality — and his characterisation.

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<sup>62</sup> Warner Bros Pictures, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets: Final Production Information*, n.d. Publicity Material, Sir Kenneth Branagh Archive, The McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast, MS41/3/24/1, 12.



Fig. 2.4 A promotional image of Gilderoy Lockhart, dressed for a duel.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, *The Chamber of Secrets* recurs with *mise-en-abîme* demonstrating Lockhart's narcissistic obsession with his self-image. Figure 2.4 (above), a promotional photo, neatly summarises the depiction of the character within the film. Lockhart is stood, wand raised in a heroic action, his hand outstretched, pulling his cloak to the side to give the illusion of movement, accompanied by his personally vaunted, five-time award-winning smile. Behind him is a portrait within a portrait: his first portrait-self stands facing the painter, hand on hip assuming a pose of refined nobility, while in the inner portrait we can see Lockhart's characteristic curls, his period dress perhaps referencing the famous portraiture of the Dutch golden age, such as the iconic work by Frans Hals, 'The Laughing Cavalier' (1624). And, indeed, it becomes apparent by the end of the film that such a flagrant act of creative imposture is entirely in keeping with Lockhart's character: his greatest skill is as a ruthless imitator of those with more talent. Lockhart's celebrated Defence guides — to which he owes

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<sup>63</sup> Warner Brothers, 'Promotional Image,' *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 2002.

his teaching position — are nothing more than fakes, their information stolen from actual professionals through his skill with memory charms. His jovial, plummy Shakespearean tones are instantly lost in harsh condemnation the moment his secret is discovered. Artifice, this depiction of Lockhart suggests, is another type of fraud.

The exaggerated nature of Lockhart's self-representation infiltrates Branagh's performance and, as Jason Isaacs (who plays the equally ostentatious Lucius Malfoy) commented: 'Chris's [Columbus, director] job consisted entirely of trying to stop me and Ken from trying to out-ham each other.' Noting the difficulty of trying to 'stay rooted in Method acting' when costumed and 'waving a giant wand around', Isaacs was frequently informed by Columbus that his performance could be seen in America 'without broadcast'.<sup>64</sup> Certainly, Branagh plays Lockhart entirely without subtlety, revelling in irony-laden lines in which he can tip a metaphorical wink to the audience. He thus solemnly informs Harry, 'fame is a fickle friend. Celebrity is as celebrity does. Remember that.' For the Branagh of the earlier nineties, though, such a comment would have been all-too close to the bone. The British press had turned against him, perceiving arrogance in his self-promotion and a try-hard attitude in his ambition, reporting with vicarious glee the tumultuous state of his career and personal life. Indeed, even articles on Branagh or reviews of his films that did not overtly signal their hostility towards him contained within them varying degrees of mockery, often situating his Shakespearean identity as the opportunity for punning and mocking humour. Garnet Currie's review of *Hamlet* — imaginatively titled 'To see or not to see? That is the question' — notes that Branagh the 'self-styled supremo thespian' already has two 'interesting' adaptations

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<sup>64</sup> Daniel Fierman, 'Harry Potter and the Challenge of Sequences,' *Entertainment Weekly*, November 22, 2002, No. 683, 27.

under his ‘codpiece’.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, Marianne Macdonald’s review for *The Independent* similarly takes the headline ‘Alas, poor Shakespeare: Branagh writes Hamlet’.<sup>66</sup>

Christopher Goodwin writing in 1997 commented on the paradoxical attitude the British press took to the actor who, by ‘any objective criteria... is the great British cultural success story of the past decade.’ Goodwin writes, ‘in his own land, Branagh is a prophet without honour’, with what has been touted as desirable qualities in America — ‘his hubris, his presumption’ — disparaged as faults in Britain.<sup>67</sup> Andrew Anthony is less able to identify how Branagh became ‘the man we love to mock’, other than accusing him of being ‘guilty of a can-do attitude’.<sup>68</sup> This argument bears validity, nevertheless, and is also recognised by the American press as being the key to Branagh’s unpopularity, with an article in *Variety* arguing that his ‘can-do attitude runs counter to the often negative British mindset’.<sup>69</sup> Branagh himself acknowledged the extent of the press’s hatred for him, stating, ‘I’ve been accused with Prince Charles and Andrew Lloyd Webber of being the reason why British culture is in such a mess’. He disputed the arrogance commonly attributed to the writing of his autobiography, *Beginning*, at the tender age of thirty, however, stating that his motivations were money: ‘simple as that. Very vulgar, I’m afraid.’<sup>70</sup> Despite self-knowledge of his motivations, Branagh ‘certainly feared’ that his career would be dogged with continual accusations that he was ‘hubristic, outrageous, competitive.’<sup>71</sup> By 2002, though, Branagh had

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<sup>65</sup> Garnet Currie, ‘To see or not to see? That is the question,’ *Daily News*, February 13, 1998, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Marianne Macdonald, ‘Alas, poor Shakespeare: Branagh rewrites *Hamlet*,’ *The Independent*, Friday 22, November, 1996, n.p.

<sup>67</sup> Christopher Goodwin, ‘Love Him, Loathe Him: Ken Divides Us All,’ *The Sunday Times*, January 19, 1997, n.p.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Anthony, ‘The Luvvie Some Find Hard to Love: The Observer Profile, Kenneth Branagh,’ *Observer*, November 18, 2007, n.p.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Top of the Town: Kenneth Branagh,’ *Variety*, 32.

<sup>70</sup> Andrew Duncan, ‘To be or not to be happy...,’ *Radio Times*, February 15-21, 1997, 15.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Actors that made an impact this year: Kenneth Branagh, *My Week With Marilyn*,’, n.d., WebPage, accessed March 1, 2013, LA Confidential, <http://la-confidential-magazine.com/personalities/articles/actors-hollywood-awards-season?page=7>.

started to win his way back into the graces of the media and had rehabilitated himself as a dramatic actor of note with a series of well-received performances.<sup>72</sup>

He is thus curiously qualified to play a man for whom celebrity is all. In fact, I would argue that in spite of Columbus' urging to both actors to 'shrink [the performance] down to camera size', Branagh was cast precisely for the fact that his performance as Lockhart brought with it a very particular and visible association between actor and character.<sup>73</sup>

According to Columbus, Kenneth Branagh was the only man for the job. 'Ken is one of the great stage and screen actors of our time and a great filmmaker,' Columbus attests. 'He's a perfect fit for our all-British ensemble, and he's one of the few younger actors who can hold their own against the likes of Richard Harris, Maggie Smith and Alan Rickman.'<sup>74</sup>

Columbus's comments demonstrate the fact that Branagh was chosen by virtue of the strength of his star persona and already prominent position within a perceived cinematic and theatrical elite. It was essential for Lockhart's narrative agency within *Chamber of Secrets* that, as a new character within the franchise, his entry was not subsumed by the established character actors: that on screen he could 'hold [his] own' against the fan-favourite older

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<sup>72</sup> Branagh's performance as Reinhard Heydrich in the television dramatisation of the Wannsee Conference in which the Nazi party devised the Final Solution earned him three nominations during the award season in 2001 and won him an Emmy for Lead Actor in a Miniseries or Movie. He received plaudits for the role, with the Washington Times describing it as his 'most commanding' performance yet and Branagh as an 'invaluable and versatile' figure. *Shackleton* in early 2002 saw Branagh receive a further three nominations for leading actor awards at BAFTA, the Golden Globes and the Emmys. As the eponymous explorer, Branagh was described variously by critics as having delivered a 'blazing performance,' 'exudes [...] a strength of personality' and is 'utterly convincing'. Indeed, Max Davidson who states a personal caveat that he has a 'problem' with the actor, 'ever since he got delusions that he was Laurence Olivier... punching way above his weight,' acknowledges that in *Shackleton* Branagh has 'found a part commensurate with his talents: a down-to-earth hero without a trace of bombast'. Gary Arnold, 'Branagh shines in *Conspiracy*,' *Washington Times*, n.d., accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jan/11/branagh-shines-in-conspiracy/?page=all>; Hal Boedeker, 'Kenneth Branagh's Dynamic Performance Breaks the Ice...', *Orlando Sentinel*, April 7, 2002, n.p.; Christopher Matthew, *Daily Mail* [webpage unavailable]; Janet Devlin, 'Television Branagh Superb in this Chilling Drama,' *Belfast Telegraph*, January 5, 2002, n.p.; Max Davidson, 'At Last I've Warmed to Branagh the Heroic Iceman,' *The Mail on Sunday*, January 6, 2002, n.p.

<sup>73</sup> Fierman, 'Harry Potter and the Challenge of Sequences', 27.

<sup>74</sup> Warner Bros Pictures, *Final Production Information*, 7.

generation actors — such as Maggie Smith and Alan Rickman — whose characters both preceded and succeeded Lockhart's appearance within the series.

Before exploring how Branagh's Shakespeareanism functions in relation to his directorial work within the cultural mainstream, I wish to conclude this section by briefly looking at his involvement as the eponymous Swedish police detective in the BBC series, *Wallander* (dir. Philip Martin and Niall MacCormick, 2008-12). In her configuration of the *bricoleur*, Courtney Lehmann argues that the postmodern auteur is a fragmented subject who disperses themselves amongst trailers, commercials, interviews and the other commercial paratexts of their products, 'getting down and dirty in the unauthorized terrain of consumer culture.'<sup>75</sup> Branagh, appearing in most scenes as Kurt Wallander, also functions as executive producer for the series (he was one of four individuals named as nominated recipients for the series' win of the Best Drama prize at the British Academy Television Awards in 2009). It is noticeable, moreover, that his approach to *Wallander* is just as evocative of Lehmann's description as is his directorial work. It is particularly in interview (one of Lehmann's 'unauthorized' terrains) that the scope of Branagh's interaction with the text becomes apparent and, rather than simply appearing as a star turn, that he demonstrates the comprehensiveness of his work on *Wallander*.

I call Wallander a detective poet. He is existentialist philosopher by chance... He asks these big questions in a great big flat landscape [...], it's an arena for introspection and philosophical thought, lots of listening. Swedes are quick to get into a big-deep conversation... Very quick to ask enormous questions — very personal questions early into a relationship. Wallander has that peeled away, open, direct quality — almost innocent in a strange way although he lives in a very dark world of murder and police work. He's just unafraid of the poetic and the philosophical and he [Mankel] puts it in a landscape that is dramatic and appropriate - you're allowed big thoughts if you're in a big landscape... Mankel makes introspection and isolation sexy.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Lehmann, 'Kenneth Branagh at the Quilting Point,' 7.

<sup>76</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh Interview "My Week with Marilyn"', Video clip, Dec 22, 2011, accessed August 01, 2012, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLto\\_mci9vI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLto_mci9vI).

Branagh postulates that the current flooding of Scandinavian novels, popularly adapted into film and television serials, has to do with a characteristic tendency of the Scandinavian people to be unafraid of asking big, often philosophical questions about humanity and violence. An aspect which surely appeals to the actor who has famously commented on the ‘recurring Hamlet in me’ is thus Wallander’s dour, Swedish introspection.<sup>77</sup>

With his typically dark uniform and equally glum demeanour, Branagh’s Wallander stands outside and apart from his fellows, haunted by his knowledge of the violence surrounding him. Especially in comparison to the tall and vigorous Rolf Lassgård or Krister Henriksson’s interpretations of the detective for television and film, Branagh’s Wallander is visibly wearied, his scruffy suit and pale, unshaven face symptomatic of melancholy. His Wallander easily courts a Hamletian reading and can be imagined lamenting to Horatio, ‘I could be bound in a nutshell...’ (2.2.245-5). Indeed, Branagh believes our fascination with this part of the world and its dark crime output lies in our vicarious enjoyment of these vast landscapes and the even vaster questions being posed; even as, he argues, as a nation we [British people] are more contained and concerned about the possibility of being embarrassed

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<sup>77</sup> The series noticeably courts the Shakespearean expectations or associations of Branagh’s involvement. The first series in particular is dedicated to depicting a fully-realised and rounded emotional characterisation of the central character and it does this chiefly through exploring Wallander’s relationship with his father, Povel (David Warner). Warner’s presence interpolates a secondary level of Shakespearean identity within the series. Though an actor known for his varied work across a range of media and genres (including his own Hamlet), in recent years he has seen a career renaissance largely generated by his starring role in the enormously successful Chichester theatre production of *King Lear* in 2005. And certainly, this is a productive analogue for *Wallander*. Warner portrays Povel Wallander, an artist struggling with the horrifying reality of Alzheimer’s disease; he depicts with an unglamorous physicality the rage and impotence which come with the slow decay of physical and intellectual power. His combative relationship with his inattentive son, Kurt, brings Lear’s fury powerfully to mind while his granddaughter Linda (Jeany Spark) appears a final act Cordelia-surrogate with her filial obedience and gentle care. The darkness and shocking savagery of Lear’s world, characterised vividly by Albany’s image of humanity preying on itself ‘like monsters of the deep’, is also powerfully evoked especially in the first episode of the series. The violence of *Wallander* is less concerned by the psychopathic efforts of unique individuals but a general sense of humanity turning upon itself, tearing itself apart and devouring in concordance with that image which haunts *Lear*: omophagia. Kenneth Branagh, *Beginning*, 127. William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (*Arden Shakespeare, Third Series*), ed. R.A. Foakes (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1997), 4.2.2394.

by such introspection.<sup>78</sup> His discussion of the current receptiveness to Scandi-noir demonstrates not only awareness of the cultural and commercial phenomenon, moreover, but an attempt to explain it and *Wallander*'s part within it. In Little Bird's adaptation of *Wallander* the more rural side of Sweden is emphasised and the camera lavishes the viewer with numerous wide-angle shots and lengthy establishing shots, which present the flat, expanse of coastal Southern Sweden as a central spectacle of the program. It is these vast open landscapes identified by Branagh in his analysis of the drama which are established by the programme's cinematography as the central site of drama. The first episode of *Wallander* (Sidetracked) begins with a wide expanse of vivid blue sky and the bright yellow of a rapeseed field in full bloom. As the scene unfolds, a young girl dashes through the field chased by Wallander before stopping, pouring petrol over herself and setting herself on fire. Branagh notes in interview that in this aerial, wide-angle shot, the juxtaposition of the entirely shade-appropriate blue and yellow with this act of self-immolation makes it appear as though the Swedish flag itself is being lit on fire, consumed by the darkness of the violent act.<sup>79</sup> It is Branagh's awareness of how such spectacles function thematically *and* technically in such instances that thereby reveal an engagement with the text which goes beyond simply the character-driven narrative, but an understanding of how cinematography, soundtrack, setting and production all merge to create the full meaning of a text.

Branagh's acting roles in mainstream texts such as *Harry Potter*, *The Road To El Dorado* and *Wallander* demonstrate the contiguity between his Shakespearean and popular work; in fact, a reading of these texts and paratexts contribute to an evolving sense of what Branagh the Shakespearean actor represents. Judith Buchanan argues that Branagh's uniqueness as a star lies in his enjoyment of the process of fusing his 'immediate self with the

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<sup>78</sup> 'The Andrew Marr Show,' Video clip, Nov 20, 2011, accessed August 01, 2012, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2-4wTX-8I8>.

<sup>79</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh Interview "My Week with Marilyn"', YouTube.



character and allowing a composite person to emerge from the engagement.’ It is, therefore, little surprise that we ‘detect something about Branagh in the roles in which we see him. That seeming transparency is something he nurtures’.<sup>80</sup> I concur with Buchanan’s assessment of Branagh’s knowing self-disclosure of his professional identity. Branagh’s characters in *Harry Potter* and *El Dorado* in particular are testament to both his ability to productively body forth his Shakespearean identity as a tool for characterisation in popular culture and his recognition of the function and perception of such Shakespeareanism. His work on *Wallander* as both lead actor and executive producer demonstrates, furthermore, Branagh’s awareness of the numerous levels on which a text is required to operate: thematically, narratively, in its subscription to the cultural and commercial milieu of a particular genre (the Scandinavian crime genre in the late noughties in this case) and its openness for critical interpretation. It is Branagh’s recognition of the importance of the paratextual and commercial aspects of film or television-making that I will continue to explore in the next section of this chapter on Branagh’s largest directorial production to date, *Thor*. I will consider whether the interconnectedness between star and Shakespeare can, as well as being a useful device, impose limitations on the way his star persona is viewed publically.

### **Interpreting *Thor*: Taste, Cultural Hierarchies and the Shakespearean**

In December 2008 Kenneth Branagh confirmed after two months of speculation that he was directing the Marvel comic book adaptation, *Thor*.<sup>81</sup> Over the next year the principal cast were announced, including the relatively unknown Australian actor Chris Hemsworth as Thor and former co-star of Branagh’s from *Wallander* and the Donmar Warehouse’s 2008 production of *Ivanov*, Tom Hiddleston, as Loki. Established Hollywood actors Natalie

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<sup>80</sup> Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, 188.

<sup>81</sup> Josh Horowitz, ‘Exclusive: Kenneth Branagh Breaks Silence on *Thor*,’ December 13, 2008, Webpage, accessed May 28, 2013, MTV, <http://splashpage.mtv.com/2008/12/13/exclusive-kenneth-branagh-breaks-silence-on-thor-says-casting-talk-is-premature/>.

Portman, Anthony Hopkins and Rene Russo took the remaining lead roles as Jane Foster, Odin and Frigga respectively. Principal photography took place from January to May 2010 in California and New Mexico and the film was released worldwide in the following spring. *Thor* tells the story of the crown prince of Asgard, who is exiled to Earth by his father and king, Odin, for his hubris in starting a war. Powerless and estranged from his family and his people, Thor forms a relationship with a scientist, Jane Foster, and begins to learn about the true meaning of power and sacrifice. Meanwhile on Asgard Thor's adopted brother Loki — the Trickster god of Norse mythology — seizes power and threatens to finish the war his brother was tricked into starting. Though it can be regarded as a standalone film with its own tone, characters and thematic concerns (and, indeed, extra-terrestrial settings) *Thor* is the fourth film released since 2008 under the Marvel Cinematic Universe title.<sup>82</sup>

As of 2008, Branagh's career was still moderately successful but somewhat understated. His only cinematic release that year was a relatively small part in the Tom Cruise vehicle *Valkyrie* (dir. Bryan Singer, 2008), as well as his starring role and executive producer position on *Wallander*. His three most immediate films and directorial projects were all adaptations of considerable canonical pedigree but only limited success: *As You Like It* and *The Magic Flute* both in 2006 and *Sleuth* in 2007. Indeed, *As You Like It* was the first Shakespeare film Branagh had directed for six years after the critical and commercial failure of *Love's Labour's Lost* in 2000 and it suffered a similar fate. The announcement that he was

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<sup>82</sup> *Thor*'s release has been preceded in chronological order by *Iron Man* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (dir. Louis Leterrier, 2008), and *Iron Man 2* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2010), and succeeded by *Captain America: The First Avenger* (dir. Joe Johnston, 2011), *The Avengers* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012), *Iron Man 3* (dir. Shane Black, 2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (dir. Alan Taylor, 2013) — which I will discuss in more depth in the Tom Hiddleston chapter — *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (dir. Anthony and Joe Russo, 2014) and most recently, *Guardians of the Galaxy* (dir. James Gunn, 2014). These films all share a timeline and characters with Iron Man, Thor and Captain America's disparate narrative threads converging in *The Avengers*, before diverging again to their respective sequels (with their anticipated reunion again, as well as with narrative threads from *Guardians* in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* scheduled for a 2015 release).

to be at the helm of a multimillion-dollar blockbuster project thus came as somewhat a surprise to many individuals and commentators on his career. The press reaction to this creative decision, however, presents itself as a valuable recent case study in exploring not only Branagh's attitude towards the blockbuster as a cultural form but the ways in which his star persona is contested throughout the media and what this process has to reveal about attitudes towards Shakespeare as a cache of 'high culture'.

Though an actor may resist a definitive interpretation of their career, the media often reduce the multiple aspects of their professional identity into a single, characteristic facet. In the case of Branagh, this is overwhelmingly that of the 'Shakespearean'. There are a few main ways in which this rigidity of identity is apparent and expressed in the media. The most fundamental of these demonstrates an unwitting exercise of Foucault's author function.<sup>83</sup> Characteristic of reportage on Branagh's decision to direct *Thor* was thus the expression of astonishment and bafflement, most succinctly put by Jenelle Riley in her interview with Branagh for *Backstage*: 'you're the Shakespeare guy.'<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth Day, in *The Observer*, shrewdly notes that Branagh is 'forever suspended in the public consciousness as a Shakespearean actor, a classic luvvie who spends his life in breeches and periwigs.' Her awareness of this phenomenon, however, does not prevent her from perpetuating the same belief in the singular nature of Branagh's career, later on in the article, stating that directing *Thor* is a 'baffling move for a man who made his name with period drama and classical oratory.'<sup>85</sup> Despite Day's acknowledgement that she has a blinkered version of what Branagh is, she remains incredulous that his work on *Thor* could ever be reconciled with his previous involvement in Shakespeare and adaptations in general, 'even if he insisted in publicity

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<sup>83</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author,' *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London and New York: Longman, 1988).

<sup>84</sup> Jenelle Riley, 'Kenneth Branagh takes on a legend – again,' *Backstage*, Vol. 53, Issue 5 (2012), 12-4.

<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Day, 'Kenneth Branagh: the king of comedy,' *Observer*, October 9, 2011, n.p.

interviews that he'd loved Marvel superheroes as a child and aimed to bring out *Thor*'s Shakespearean parallels.<sup>86</sup> It should be questioned why she believes that the two must marry together in the first place: diversity, it seems, is not the prerogative of the successful Shakespearean.

This attitude towards Branagh is best explained by the fact that in these articles the apparent tenor and high cultural status of his Shakespearean work is conflated with his personal identity, so that he is viewed not merely as *a* director or *an* actor but *the* pre-eminent theatrical adaptor. Indeed, throughout journalism on Branagh this dictum keeps on recurring as though with fresh surprise at the prospect of an actor and director known for their theatrical and Shakespearean work ever desiring to do anything else. Instead, the media seem to act under the assumption that a career predominantly in the theatre must stay that way because of the 'overweening weight of British theatrical tradition.'<sup>87</sup> Joe Queenan, for example, writes scathingly in *The Guardian*: 'Whatever the common touch is, he lacks it.'<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Day scoffs at the prospect that a young Branagh ever enjoyed reading comic books, asking 'Really, Ken?'<sup>89</sup> Chris Lee is similarly sardonic in an article that parodies Branagh's insistence that *Thor* is a classically dramatic tale, commenting: 'A prodigal-son story with ice lasers.'<sup>90</sup> This muted sense of derision takes as its target the idea of Branagh ever fully integrating himself within popular culture; instead, painting him as a figure locked within the modes of a theatrical, Shakespearean world. He can, despite his frequent urging, never be just 'Ken' for the media. When he is called such it is not a mark of acceptance but rather an ironic indictment of his apparent failure to represent mainstream taste. Whether this is an

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<sup>86</sup> Day, 'Kenneth Branagh: the king of comedy,' n.p.

<sup>87</sup> Goodwin, 'Love Him, Loathe Him,' n.p.

<sup>88</sup> Joe Queenan, 'Kenneth Branagh: The Star Who Forgot How to Shine,' *Guardian*, March 31, 2011, accessed June 5, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/mar/31/thor-kenneth-branagh-olivier-wallander>.

<sup>89</sup> Day, 'Kenneth Branagh: the king of comedy,' n.p.

<sup>90</sup> Chris Lee, 'Branagh Meets Comic-Book Hero,' *Newsweek*, Vol. 157, Issue 19 (2011), n.p.

accurate judgement or not, to regard him in such a way denies the intrinsic importance of popular culture to his directorial work and his star persona in general, as seen in my examination of *Hamlet* earlier in this chapter. Indeed, the aim of his Shakespearean adaptations has never been to cater exclusively to a 'highbrow' audience but rather to bring (more) challenging texts to the mainstream by presenting them in a popular, cinematic vernacular that the multiplex-going audience are already conversant with. To do otherwise would demonstrate a contradiction between belief and practice; after all Branagh believes that Shakespeare is 'the great populist of his time'.<sup>91</sup> Denying his immersion within the mainstream ignores the fact that he has regained public and critical approval through the enormous success of recent productions such as *My Week With Marilyn* and *Wallander*, moreover. And though these examples are not related to the superhero blockbuster in terms of tone and targeted audience, they *are*, nonetheless, popular cultural texts whose references to Shakespeareanism exist implicitly or subtextually.

What is apparent, furthermore, is that the patronising disdain and jaded amusement demonstrated for Branagh's desire to legitimise the blockbuster reveals an explicit value judgement placed upon the form, especially relative to Shakespeare as a representative of 'high culture'. Patrick Goldstein expresses the view that the appointment of Branagh as director was a 'shocker' and references *Entertainment Weekly's* Owen Gleiberman's amusement that it was 'as if you'd told me that [...] Jane Campion was going to try for a change of pace by signing on to make *Fast Six: Furious in Moscow*.'<sup>92</sup> Sara Vilkomerson's question, 'How in the name of Norse gods did Kenneth Branagh wind up directing *Thor*?' is equally indicative of the general attitude on the inappropriate pairing of director and cultural

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<sup>91</sup> 'Marvel's THOR interviews,' Dec 10, 2010, Video clip, accessed August 28, 2013, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chXpv5TnkaE>.

<sup>92</sup> Patrick Goldstein, 'The Hollywood Risk Equation: Would You Have Hired Kenneth Branagh To Direct Thor?', *Los Angeles Times*, 2 June 2011, n.p.

form. She ponders whether placing the Shakespearean actor-director with *Thor* ‘might be like pairing peanut butter and caviar.’<sup>93</sup> The implications of her food simile are all too evident: popular culture is the mundane stuff of everyday consumption while that which is related to Shakespeare is prohibitively luxurious and exclusive. It is not merely that these critics view Branagh’s career as being shaped by a singular tendency towards the theatrical, therefore, but that this tendency is explicitly Shakespearean and should remain Shakespearean alone. The comments of Day, Lee and Queenan et al demonstrate an explicit evaluation of the cultural worth of the respective genres and a judgement of taste. Pierre Bourdieu states definitively that concepts of ‘good taste’ or aesthetic merit are rooted in social experience and reflect particular class interests. These are often made to seem ‘natural’ because they are shaped by our earliest experiences, reinforced and rationalised through education and other such institutions which reward taste.<sup>94</sup> Henry Jenkins elaborates upon this point, arguing that taste thus becomes one of the important means by which ‘social distinctions are maintained and class identities are forged.’ Those who ‘naturally’ possess appropriate tastes ‘deserve’ a privileged position within the institutional hierarchy and reap the greatest benefits, while those whose tastes do not fit this mould are seen as ‘underdeveloped’.<sup>95</sup> Simone Murray in her acknowledgement of the benefit of a Bourdieusian reading of culture particularly stresses the relevance of such a framework for adaptation studies, with its ‘central premise that cultural value is not innate in any work, but is socially constructed, perpetuated or challenged.’<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Sara Vilkomerson, ‘From Hamlet to Hammers,’ *Entertainment Weekly*, 20 May 2011, 16-7.

<sup>94</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 466.

<sup>95</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 16.

<sup>96</sup> Simone Murray, ‘The Business of Adaptation: Reading the Market,’ *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation*, ed. Deborah Cartmell (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 125.

As a Shakespearean actor and director, Branagh is thus able to access the cultural cachet that comes from being intimately associated with a canonical writer, one whose worth is established by its dominant place in the educational curricula and perpetuated by a reverential method of teaching, which rewards understanding but punishes incomprehension or contention. His employment in the mainstream is viewed then, not as representing ‘underdeveloped’ tastes but, because of his original placement *within* the institutional hierarchy, as an active refutation of ‘good’ taste. Queenan states: ‘*Thor* is beneath his talents. It’s beneath anybody’s talents.’<sup>97</sup> The implications of Queenan’s article are that the attribution of a ‘Shakespearean’ identity is mutable. It can be lost if the actor is judged to have not performed consistently in texts of cultural merit or conversely can be strengthened through performance in the *right* productions. In Branagh’s case, working on a film of the tenor of *Thor* would thus be a metaphorical last nail in the coffin of his formerly respected career as a Shakespearean. Restoring his star appeal, therefore, would only be possible through once again occupying these canonical characters. To return to my earlier configuration of Branagh’s creative practices, this response accords with a common sentiment expressed towards fans as individuals whose creative practices dare to transgress established cultural borders. The ‘sacrilegious’ nature of this reuniting of tastes and associated practices of consumption which cultural hierarchies dictate should remain separate is, Jenkins argues, made all the more ‘damning’ because fans as a group cannot be dismissed as intellectually inferior.

[T]hey often are highly educated, articulate people who come from the middle classes, people who ‘should know better’ than to spend their time constructing elaborate interpretations.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Queenan, ‘Kenneth Branagh: The Star Who Forgot How to Shine’.

<sup>98</sup> Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 18

Indeed, the phrase ‘should know better’ epitomises the media reaction to Branagh’s work on *Thor*. Their implicit disbelief originates from viewing someone who, having worked so successfully within the culturally prized and institutionally validated realms of ‘high’ culture, apparently willingly ‘lowers’ themselves to the mainstream.

The same contempt is demonstrated not only for the film, however, but the industry at large. Even journalists who supposedly support Branagh’s work in Hollywood are acerbically critical towards its functioning. Christopher Goodwin, for example, writing for *The Sunday Times*, is quick to mock Joe Queenan’s disparaging attitude but equally quick to dismiss Marvel executive Craig Kyle. Quoting Kyle, who said of Branagh, ‘It was just, like, woohhh. So articulate [...], so clear-minded’, Goodwin responds drily with ‘I’m sure.’<sup>99</sup> As the media responses testify, the voice of dominant cultural hierarchies inform us that (no matter how entertaining or commercially successful these blockbusters are) it is Shakespeare as ‘high culture’, which ultimately has value. What is clearly so confusing to the journalists cited is that Branagh’s Shakespearean identity places him firmly within a privileged institutional hierarchy and yet he willingly and excitedly chooses to immerse himself within popular culture — and not even for purely commercial reasons. Entertaining, perhaps, the journalists concede; but never of the same value as Shakespeare (although, it should be noted that this view is chiefly shared by the British press).<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, Branagh relishes the

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<sup>99</sup> Christopher Goodwin, ‘If I had a hammer’: Interview with Kenneth Branagh’ *The Sunday Times*, Culture, April 04 2011) 4-5.

<sup>100</sup> The American press took a strikingly different perspective on the choice of Branagh as *Thor*’s director which, instead, is largely characterised by their willingness to imagine what their transatlantic counterparts are not: how Branagh’s Shakespearean past would contribute to creating a blockbuster.

You would think that Mr Branagh with his pop-Shakespearean credentials would be just the man to tease out the sombre tones [...] implicit in the situation of his hero...

Director Kenneth Branagh *draws* on his Shakespearean roots to fill the tale with loads of palatial pride, envy, rivalry and resentment that drive the action.

It takes a director known for his Shakespearean acumen to make a spectacular summer action movie filled with epic battles and familial struggles.



unique challenges of both the form he produces and adapts from. For him, the blockbuster form has as much value as a Shakespearean text (albeit, a different stylistic way of communicating this), as can be seen in his reasoning that ‘a good film is a good film’.<sup>101</sup> Branagh appears to actively engage with the British press’s construction of taste, moreover, and does not passively accept their hierarchising of the value of his work. Cognizant of this fact and the significance of his history of adapting canonical (institutionally validated) works — Shakespeare, Mozart, Shelley — Branagh focuses on these associations when defending *Thor*. In promotion of the film he thus constructs an exegetical framework with knowledge of which film and academic critics can view the film. This framework prioritises *Thor*’s cultural connections by emphasising its dramatic content. I do not believe it is possible to argue that Branagh entirely disregards the precepts of taste, nor blurs the lines between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture to the extent that they seem indistinguishable. He does, however, seem to deliberately manipulate the paradigms of good taste and bad taste in order to work towards the democratic

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As with the British press response, Branagh’s Shakespearean identity is still an essential part of their reading of *Thor*, but in this case it does not limit the American media’s comprehension of what might occur as a result. Rather than voicing the opinion that Branagh’s Shakespearean past is incompatible or that his skills are being wasted somehow on a blockbuster, their response is characterised by an understanding of how the two may be merged successfully. Whereas British journalists stated their confusion, that Branagh should *know better*, the three quotations above are united by their belief that he *does*, in fact. Described variously as his Shakespearean ‘credentials,’ ‘roots’ and ‘acumen,’ they all ascribed to his experience creating *Thor* in a manner that implies a productive relationship. In the case of one American article which appears to mirror the British press’s attitude towards Branagh, its concerns are revealed ultimately not to be over the unsuitability of the blockbuster form but rather the lack of commercial sense behind the casting, as Branagh’s ‘career as a bankable filmmaker was in the deep freeze.’ This difference in response could be attributed to a number of subtle cultural differences between America and Britain and would benefit from much longer analysis than I can afford it within this thesis. What is evident, however, is that since the beginning of his career, the American press have viewed Branagh with a great deal more equanimity than their British counterparts. At the time of *Hamlet*’s cinematic release, Christopher Goodwin recounts reading some of the more ‘fetid quotes’ about Branagh to a studio executive who responded in horror, ‘My God... not even O.J. Simpson gets that bad a press.’ His personality — his ambition and enthusiasm, in particular, denounced by the British press as hubristic and vulgarly ‘can-do’ — appear more palatable to the American character. Branagh’s refusal to let his professional identity be shaped just by his Shakespearean work, moreover, appears comprehensible to the American press who view it as a constituent part of interpreting *Thor*; but, nonetheless, only one aspect of the film. A.O. Scott, ‘Have golden locks, seeking hammer,’ *New York Times*, May 6, 2011, C.18; David Germain, ‘Thor: Movie Review,’ *Cincinnati Enquirer*, May 6, 2011, E.8 [emphasis added]; Claudia Puig, ‘Thor brews potent storm of action and 3-D effects,’ *USA Today*, May 6, 2011, E.D; Patrick Goldstein, ‘The Hollywood Risk Equation: Would You Have Hired Kenneth Branagh To Direct Thor?,’ *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 2011, n.p.; Goodwin, ‘Love Him, Loathe Him...,’ n.p.; Anthony, ‘The Luvvie Some Find Hard to Love,’ n.p.

<sup>101</sup> Crowds, ‘Sharing an Enthusiasm for Shakespeare,’ 34-42.

cultural ideals he first articulated in the Renaissance Theatre Company's creed 'to fulfil [...] life-enhancing populism.'<sup>102</sup>

Essential to this project is the necessity of setting *Thor* within a long cultural tradition of placing family conflict at the heart of drama. Beyond all else this is the emotional centre of the film for Branagh and it is the filmic realisation of the dynastic relationship between father and son(s), which propels the narrative, lends it emotional resonance and places it within a continuum of dramatic history. Branagh states, 'It's an archetypal and mythical ideal... [A] classical structure'.<sup>103</sup> He also says of the film: '[it's this] sort of family, dynastic story that's about fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, sibling rivalry, ancient feuds... [It's] the best kind of cross-genre movie.'<sup>104</sup> It is these narratives, defined by Branagh as 'dynastic' or 'family', that communicate the high cultural connotations he uses in promotion to validate *Thor* as a text. And it is the audience's 'familiarity' and 'recognition' of these classical dramatic motivations which legitimises what may otherwise be seen as a space adventure and which argue for *Thor*'s contemporaneity despite its heightened language.

This 'dynastic' theme is the central hinge upon which *Thor*'s characterisation rests. It is apparent in several of Branagh's films, moreover, with their preoccupation with what he describes in a likening of *Thor* with *The Magic Flute*, as the 'acquisition of masculinity

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<sup>102</sup> In 1985 Branagh left the Royal Shakespeare Company and joined fellow actor, David Parfitt, to work on his first independent production, *Romeo and Juliet* (1986). Branagh took the lead role and also directed the production. The Renaissance Theatre Company was then established on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 1987 by Branagh and Parfitt. Early productions included original pieces of work such as Branagh's own *Public Enemy* (1987) and *Life of Napoleon* (1987) by John Sessions. In 1988 Branagh invited three high profile actors to make their directorial debuts — Judi Dench, Geraldine McEwan and Derek Jacobi — with *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* respectively. These productions toured the UK and Ireland, including a two-week stop at Kroneberg Castle, Elsinore. Later plays included *Look Back In Anger* (1989), *King Lear*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* (both 1990) and *Coriolanus* (1992). The RTC dissolved in 1992 with Branagh's increasing film career and the forming of the Renaissance Films PLC in 1998 (under whose auspices Branagh's Shakespeare adaptations were made). Many of the actors from the RTC would appear in these films, such as McEwan, however. Branagh, *Beginning*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Lee, 'Branagh Meets Comic-Book Hero,' n.p.

<sup>104</sup> 'Thor - Kenneth Branagh interview,' May 4, 2011, Video clip, accessed August 25, 2013, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=puOhV45B4A0>.

through loss, through maturity which is gained at a price.’<sup>105</sup> In an interview from 1997 we again see the broad applicability of this theme and its importance for emotional narrative as he describes the characterisation of *Henry V*:

[It is] a journey towards maturity [...A ] young monarch who at the beginning is burdened with guilt [...] but who, at the end, has learned about true leadership.<sup>106</sup>

Intriguingly, this same description is almost equally applicable to the story of *Thor* and in the interpretive framework Branagh establishes, it is the dramatic relationship between Prince Hal, King Henry IV (and the alternative father figure, Falstaff), which is most useful for reading the film. Indeed, as Curtis Bright details, Branagh’s interest in the responsibility of power is not only explored through his works but is present historically within a professional and personal capacity in his relationship with Prince Charles, in a further influence upon his representation of this theme. Branagh obtained an audience with the Prince for the purpose of gaining insight into his characterisation of Henry V. Questioning Charles on the nature of royal duty and concluding that the royal had developed ‘a more useful but painful wisdom’ and that he bore ‘the inevitable bruises’ of his position, Branagh declared an ‘instant rapport’ with the Prince and proclaimed that he had ‘never encountered such extraordinary and genuine humility’.<sup>107</sup> His admiration for the Prince is certainly evident in the resultant adaptation, with Branagh’s generous interpretation of Henry as a leader acutely aware of his responsibility but also led by religious conviction. Charles’ influence on Branagh continued during this period and as patron he attended a production of *Henry V*, a ‘Royal Gala Preview of *Twelfth Night*’ for the Renaissance Theatre Company, a performance of *Hamlet* in

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<sup>105</sup> ‘DP/30: My Week with Marilyn, actor Kenneth Branagh,’ Dec 21, 2011, video clip, accessed August 25, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CS4P84ADjD8>.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Billington, ‘A “New Olivier” is taking *Henry V* on the screen,’ *New York Times*, January 8, 1989, n.p.

<sup>107</sup> Kenneth Branagh cited in Curtis Bright, ‘Branagh and the Prince, or a “royal fellowship of death”,’ *Critical Quarterly* 33, No. 4 (1991), 96-7.

Denmark, visited the set of *Henry V* and, in turn, Branagh provided a programme of ‘Shakespearian entertainment for a private party at Windsor’.<sup>108</sup>

Branagh’s professional connection to these plays thereby open up the possibility of his Shakespearean identity functioning as a site of adaptation. Having performed as the character on stage and self-directed in film, Branagh is intimately associated and familiar with Henry, and, as his relationship with Prince Charles demonstrates, desirous of fully engaging with the unique obligations of royalty. His film adaptation of the play, moreover, does not posit itself as a singular event but acknowledges the sequential chronology of the Henriad, borrowing from *Henry IV* Parts One and Two in order to demonstrate a more in-depth characterisation of Henry than the events of *Henry V* alone would permit. An example of this is evident in Branagh’s adaptation of Act Three Scene Four from *Henry V*: Bardolph’s hanging. As the camera moves between Henry, who has just approved the order for execution and Bardolph in tight close-up, it cuts to a flashback of Act One Scene Two from *Henry IV Part 1*. The revelry of the Eastcheap characters subsides and Bardolph says to Henry solemnly, ‘Do not thou, when thou art king, hang a thief’ to which he replies gravely ‘No; thou shalt.’ The interpolation of these lines, originally spoken between Falstaff and Bardolph, heightens the emotional tension of the moment as it deepens the audience’s understanding of the relationship between Bardolph and Henry. By positing the men as one-time social acquaintances in the alternative ‘court’ of the Boar’s Head tavern and demonstrating the joyfulness of the scenes they shared, the sudden reversal of Bardolph’s fortunes becomes even more coldly shocking. The newly realised difference between the two men’s status and its implications — Henry’s obligation to punish a thief — infiltrates even the un-aristocratic world of Eastcheap as the transference of the line from Falstaff to Bardolph lends an eerie prescience to the scene. The inclusion of this scene is thus an attempt to explain in part

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<sup>108</sup> Breight, ‘Branagh and the Prince,’ 99.

Bardolph's execution but chiefly to deepen Henry's characterisation: his warring obligations as ruler, his relationship with his men and his ambivalence towards violence. It is a non-play-specific realisation of Henry's personal narrative that we can recognise in the film in general and transposed onto the character of Thor. Over the course of the film, the young warrior learns the true meaning (and true cost) of leadership in terms of sacrifice and the need for diplomacy.

This particular character type — the soldier — is, I would argue, the most enduring image of Branagh's professional career, moreover. The broadness and variety of possibilities for characterisation which the character type of the soldier permits — violent or hesitant, aristocratic or arriviste — explains its persistence across Branagh's work despite the disparate genres of his films. Commenting on *Thor's* central story, the same repeated sentiment appears in his description of emotional characterisation:

Superheroes who have great strength have the challenge of how to use their power well... People who are involved in war or are martial need to understand what it is like to use the potential threat of might for good, and I think that's a continual internal dialogue amongst characters who command troops or are in military situations.<sup>109</sup>

The recognition of this need to check military power is also overwhelmingly reminiscent of Branagh's adaptation of *Henry V*. A stark reaction to Olivier's colourful and frequently propagandist film, his central protagonist is both culpable of war-mongering, rhetoric and Machiavellianism but (as seen above) also swiftly aware of the physical cost of violence, containing Branagh's personal core of 'Hamletian doubt'.<sup>110</sup> Though positioned by Branagh as an anti-war film, I believe *Henry V* resists such a coherent or comprehensive interpretation. Rather, it argues for the necessity of *certain* kinds of violence. Henry is acutely aware of the

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<sup>109</sup> 'With Great Power – Extended Interviews,' May 7, 2012, video clip, accessed August 23, 2013, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58EmQ7QsecY>.

<sup>110</sup> Branagh, *Beginning*, 127.

problematic legitimacy of his inherited kingship and turns to institutionally sanctioned bloodletting to prove his right. Indeed, Donald K. Hedrick characterises the film by its ‘conservative rather than critical ambivalence’. Its progressiveness lies, Hedrick argues, ‘merely in the weakest sense of its openness towards some undecidability.’<sup>111</sup> Branagh’s desire to acknowledge the complexity of the play and its potentially anti-war sentiment is thereby rendered void by the adaptation’s failure to sustain a simultaneous critique of violence or militarism (this is a point I will return to in my chapter on Tom Hiddleston and Thea Sharrock’s similarly conservative valorising of Henry).

As Samuel Cowl notes, furthermore, many of Branagh’s major Shakespearean roles have been soldiers, including Henry V, Benedick, Iago, and Coriolanus. Even the two Shakespearean characters he has played in films who are not soldiers —Hamlet and Berowne—were ‘transformed into military figures.’<sup>112</sup> Berowne, for example, is ‘transformed’ by Branagh’s decision to situate the play in the months leading up to World War Two; the play’s promised reunion after twelve months is adapted to the six-year span of the conflict, with the lovers brought back together in time to commemorate Victory in Europe Day. Rosalind’s instruction to Berowne that he should ‘visit the speechless sick’ is thus juxtaposed with authentic war footage and scenes of Berowne in a field hospital.<sup>113</sup> In Branagh’s adaptation the news of the death of the Princess’s father and the subsequent test of the lovers’ year-long separation in the play thereby serves as an abrupt interruption of the play’s emotional fantasy. His decision to give this a further historical precedent only emphasises the sharpness of the dénouement’s delineation. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* ultimately suffers from the same romanticising of war as in *Henry V*, however. The courtiers’ wartime service is intended to

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<sup>111</sup> Donald K. Hedrick, ‘War is Mud: Branagh’s Dirty Harry V and the types of political ambiguity,’ *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV and Video*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.

<sup>112</sup> Cowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, 37.

<sup>113</sup> William Shakespeare, ‘Love’s Labour’s Lost,’ *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al (New York: Norton, 2009), 5.2.827.

sharpen the edges of Branagh's comedy by indicating the random violence of Shakespeare's world. But by permitting the lovers a V-Day reunion — a reunion not specified in the play — Branagh subscribes to traditional representations of the heroic soldiers returning home, having demonstrated their worth as suitors through their military sacrifice.

It is strikingly appropriate and somewhat inevitable that Branagh's long-awaited return to Shakespeare for the 2013 Manchester International Festival was thus in the role of Macbeth. In 1998 Branagh's Shakespeare Film Company signed a three-picture deal with Intermedia Films and Miramax for the production of *Love's Labour's Lost* to be followed by film adaptations of *As You Like It* and *Macbeth*.<sup>114</sup> After the commercial failure of *Love's Labour's Lost*, however, the deal was shelved and the projected film of *Macbeth* never made. Thematically, *Macbeth* suits Branagh's interest in exploring questions of masculine agency and the responsibility of power. His performance, too, emphasises the character's physicality, both in battle and in his roughly assertive relationship with Lady Macbeth. Rob Ashford's production repeatedly accentuated *Macbeth*'s visceral nature; the long and thin galley-like Church space at the original Manchester show was fully utilised by the cast to demonstrate the frenetic, messy quality of battle, with characters running up and down, churning the mud floor and often covering the audience members in stage blood and muck. On a personal and professional level it made sense that Branagh returned to more dramatic territory such as *Macbeth*, furthermore — territory with proven commercial and critical success for him — and he expressed hopes that the success of the stage production could lead to the revival of the film project.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Benedict Carver, 'Miramax doth get rights,' *Variety*, October 6, 1998, accessed May 28, 2013, <http://variety.com/1998/film/news/miramax-doth-get-rights-1117481084/>.

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Dickson, 'Kenneth Branagh answered your questions – as it happened,' July 17, 2013, Webpage, accessed August 7, 2014, *Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jul/17/kenneth-branagh-live-q-and-a>.

*Hamlet* is further evidence of the importance and unceasing relevance of this debate to Branagh. As Crowl notes, Hamlet is transformed into a military figure of action and power — a far cry from the common decision to emphasize his bookish nature.<sup>116</sup> Slight but compact, vigorous and with a certain Errol Flynn-like panache for acrobatics, his Hamlet has an eloquent physicality that more than matches the character's agile mind. Indeed, the film vividly actualises the theoretical sexual relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. As discussed already, the adaptation also emphasises the martial setting of the play, a state protected through the violent capability of its former leader but now again teetering on the brink of war. The grandiose scale of the Blenheim Palace setting is well served by the establishing shots which locate narrative action not merely on an interior level — within the urgently and hotly debated conversations of Hamlet's mind — but on a grand, national scale. The play is, after all, not merely about the actions of a few individuals but those of the ruling class whose decisions determine the fate of the state. Branagh's directorial epics — *Henry V* (1989), *Hamlet* (1996) and *Thor* (2011) — are all united, therefore, by this desire to work through on a grand scale and consider the moral and ethical implications of power. Viewed in this way, *Thor* is open to interpretation as the belated final part of a trilogy of Shakespearean dramas invested in the playing out of the moral dilemmas of violence: a brighter, more redemptive alternative to the *Macbeth* Branagh failed to bring to screen but finally performed on stage at the Manchester International Festival.

It is not merely within these paratexts of *Thor* that this semi-Shakespearean configuration is evident, though: it is apparent within the film text itself.<sup>117</sup> The dramatic importance of the central fraught father-son relationship with its *Henry IV* reference point is demonstrated by the sheer level of screen time it receives. It is a relationship which is only

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<sup>116</sup> Crowl, *Shakespeare at the Cineplex*, 37.

<sup>117</sup> It is necessary to note that this relationship of influence between *Thor* and *Henry IV* is one that has not necessarily originated in the Marvel comic series but is my interpretation of the culmination of Branagh's handling of the relationship in the film and his personal experience of performing and adapting the plays.



rivalled in attention by the romance between Thor and Jane. Loki's characterisation is explained by both Branagh and Hiddleston in explicitly Shakespearean terms, moreover, with both men acknowledging theatrical analogues such as Edmund in *King Lear* and Cassius in *Julius Caesar*. This point will be expanded upon in greater detail in my Hiddleston chapter with regards to how his performance and star persona helps shape this interpretation, but it is worth noting briefly that Branagh creates Loki's Shakespearean quality through (ironically, perhaps) focusing upon the subtle, non-verbal aspects of Hiddleston's performance.

Branagh thus offers those reluctant to take a superhero blockbuster 'seriously' a method of entry into the film, which confirms his Shakespearean identity as a site of adaptation, and a locus of meaning from which the multiple decisions of the film originate. This is a valid interpretive method for both the audience and the critic, which bodies forth the productive interplay Douglas Lanier notes when Shakespeare and popular culture combine. Commenting on the free movement of Shakespearean cultural capital between 'investments', Lanier argues that value is accrued by a process of 'reciprocal legitimation'. Shakespeare's association with a mass-cultural product lends that item a 'moiety of highbrow depth, "universality", [...] or seriousness of purpose, while at the same time the association with mass culture lends Shakespeare street credibility, broad intelligibility and celebrity.'<sup>118</sup> This reciprocity is certainly apparent within Branagh's working relationship with Marvel. Branagh was chosen precisely for the skill he'd demonstrated as a director with Shakespearean adaptation, as Marvel executive Kevin Feige noted:

We had a lot of people on our director lists who'd handled spectacle, special effects and stunts, but we kept coming back to Ken... There are things you can do together with a filmmaker, like the special effects and the costumes, but when it came to having a brilliant gift for working with actors, only Ken could do that.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Douglas Lanier, 'Recent Shakespeare Adaptations and the Mutations of Cultural Capital,' *Shakespeare Studies*, Vol. 38, (2010) 104.

<sup>119</sup> Goldstein, 'The Hollywood Risk Equation,' n.p.

Indeed, Marvel's quest for a director who could draw out the emotional depth of the plot indicated their desire to make sure that the largely extra-terrestrial setting of *Thor* did not detract from audience identification. Feige, in particular, saw the necessity of choosing a director who wouldn't get 'lost' among costumes, spectacle and a quaintly formalised language style but who would be able to 'humanise' the characters. It was essential for Marvel to keep the human touch that had proved so successful to the recent *Spider-Man* and *Iron Man* series when adapting their decidedly super-human hero.<sup>120</sup> The Shakespearean associations that came attached to Branagh within the popular mind would thereby enable those factors which could otherwise detract from *Thor*'s popularity as a possible franchise to become viable dramatic aspects of the film.

But the question remains: why should *Thor* be read for literary counterparts in order for it to be worthy of our attention? Though the ultimate goal of Branagh's strategy of media performance is to challenge traditional cultural hierarchies by suggesting that *Thor* has as much worth as any other text he has worked on, it still functions through maintaining these hierarchies. The necessity of this framework and its functioning does not posit *Thor* as a text of independent value, but one which is good because it is built on things traditional cultural hierarchies inform us are culturally valuable. Although ultimately unconvincing this, perhaps, is the only way in which Branagh could possibly redeem *Thor* for critics by playing within their own rules, as it were. He invites them to read *Thor* in terms they more usually associate with his work and which, consequently, they value more. The critics reject *Thor* as a piece of mainstream culture because they view it as meaningless in comparison with his 'high' cultural work; he thus amplifies the points of contiguity with his Shakespearean work in order to give it some 'meaning' within the terms they set.

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<sup>120</sup> Lee, 'Branagh Meets Comic-Book Hero,' n.p.

It should be noted, moreover, that although Branagh conforms to cultural hierarchies by encouraging the lines of association between his Shakespearean identity and *Thor*, on a stylistic level it also demonstrates his democratic approach to employing a dense network of cultural and literary allusion. In interview Branagh stresses that we should not oversophisticate the way in which we engage with the playwright's works, for instance.

Because of 400 years of scholarship, it's so easy to associate an experience of Shakespeare with something that has to be dominated by an intellectual response. Now, I'm not saying that that shouldn't be an immense and hugely rewarding part of it. But for me, it's that instant exposure to character, and story, and ambiance, and atmosphere that needs to work.<sup>121</sup>

Rather than allowing our responses to be determined by the pressing weight of academic history and to enter into the same passive roles we occupied when learning Shakespeare by rote in primary or secondary education, he emphasises the importance of recognising simply character, story and atmosphere. By removing Shakespeare from a tradition of consumption that can be marred by a tendency to over-intellectualise, it is possible to view the plays free of obfuscation. Although articulated differently, they contain within them the same characters and plots we can recognise world over. Indeed, talking with *The Times*, Branagh states that '*Thor*, Shakespeare, they're all from 'the same tool box'.<sup>122</sup> It is this attitude that represents the potentiality of Lanier's 'broad intelligibility': that which mainstream culture is able to lend to the Shakespearean by association.<sup>123</sup> By employing reference to Shakespeare within the framework of comic book adaptation, Branagh is thus able to argue for the broad appeal of the author and demonstrate his mass applicability through compatibility with situations and themes as initially disparate as Norse gods in space.

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<sup>121</sup> 'The Culture Show' December 15, 2007, video clip, accessed November 16, 2012, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wzz5j8pfddg>.

<sup>122</sup> Stefanie Marsh, 'The Conversation,' *The Times*, June 23, 2012, 8 (Saturday Review).

<sup>123</sup> Lanier, 'Recent Shakespeare Adaptations and the Mutations of Cultural Capital', 104.

In the commentary for the DVD Branagh even places Shakespeare *within* an evolving history of dramatic archetypes: not the progenitor of these stories but an active participant in adapting them. He notes that the Shakespearean aspects of *Thor* are ‘only there because Shakespeare nicked some terrific ideas from the past’ and also because Stan Lee’s original series heavily employed classical mythology — an important source for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, too. This somewhat facile comment disguises the purposefulness with which Branagh works, creating a dense network of allusion and cultural references to deepen understanding and reveal more resonant thematic concerns. But it also acknowledges the truth of his attitude towards the choosing of these references. The allusions present in *Thor* are parts of Branagh’s tool box: the sometimes recognisable, sometimes esoteric or personal network of references plucked from an indiscriminate variety of media and genres. References can vary from the biblical, mythical, historical and the pop cultural. Thor’s banishment from Asgard is thus reminiscent for Branagh of the Fall of Man, while the visual image of his epaulettes refers to the infamous cashiering of Alfred Dreyfus. The spell placed on Mjölnir so that no one may lift it unless they are ‘worthy’ is an adaptation of the Arthurian legend of Excalibur: an aspect evident in the Marvel comic universe of *Thor* but not contained in the original mythos of the weapon. Striving for visual simplicity in order to demonstrate the heroism of Thor’s sacrifice, moreover, the stand-off between Thor and Loki’s weapon — the Destroyer — is influenced by the visual iconicity of the Western and, in particular for Branagh, the 1952 genre classic *High Noon*.<sup>124</sup>

In fact, Branagh’s willingness to embrace popular cultural texts is evident in an instructive interview for *Entertainment Weekly*. Answering the frequently (and variously worded) question of how a director more commonly associated with ‘feather quills than

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<sup>124</sup> All these references are noted and elaborated upon by Branagh in his director’s commentary to *Thor*. ‘Director’s DVD Commentary,’ *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011).

mystical hammers' could relate to *Thor*'s subject matter and blockbuster form, Branagh repeats his configuration of the story as a classical maturation narrative. He continues, stating that 'In fact, you could say that I sort of made a version of *Thor* with my first picture *Henry V*.'<sup>125</sup> This is a familiar interpretation; what is unusual, though, is the reversal of the chronology of influence, which Branagh had previously utilised in order to legitimise the making of *Thor*. The phrasing and emphasis placed in such a claim has only marginal difference to previous statements and its tone is somewhat glib, but its significance for interpretation should not be understated. Elsewhere in interview Branagh encourages the popular identification of his star persona as purely Shakespearean by positing it as a point of entry into what could otherwise be a surprising directorial choice. He reduces the possibility of a poor match between director and film by acknowledging the points of continuity between his Shakespearean work and *Thor*. *Thor* thus becomes a blockbuster form of Shakespeare's Henriad (with some other Shakespearean references thrown in for good measure). In this example, however, Branagh actually reverses the chronology of influence from one which supports the maintenance of traditional cultural hierarchies (i.e. by implying the lesser mainstream work is legitimised by its relationship to the past 'high' cultural text) to one in which *Henry V* can be viewed as a proto-*Thor*.

Branagh continues by describing the similarity between the two texts in their 'high stakes, heightened language and people in exotic costumes', but notes that the difference lies in their budget:

[On *Thor*] I could avoid the moment I sometimes have on a Shakespeare film when I say 'It'd be great if this could look like...', [and they say] 'Oh, but we don't have the money,'" Branagh admits. "Here, you can have the rainbow bridge in outer space and not only know they're going to pay for it, but *demand* that you put it in."<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Vilkomerson, 'From Hamlet to Hammers,' 17.

<sup>126</sup> Vilkomerson, 'From Hamlet to Hammers,' 16-7.

The superlative budget of the blockbuster form thereby enables a more abundantly realised version of the directorial vision. This is not to argue that smaller, independently financed films are always unable to convey the intent of their makers, but rather that traditional hierarchies of taste view independent cinema as more in line with a perceived creativity and honesty of artistic production, while damning blockbusters as driven largely by commercial necessity. Branagh's comment, however, argues for a more generous view of creativity within the blockbuster form and it is not a unique sentiment from him, moreover. In one interview on YouTube, Branagh recounts a conversation with Natalie Portman in which he asked her about the frustrations of repeatedly filming the same scene. Her response was that if *Thor* was the kind of 'independent film that we'd all much rather be doing' she would have to have finished the scene 'by ten in the morning.' But, surprisingly, working on a blockbuster set means that 'the thing that would potentially overwhelm one' — the time and money dedicated to such enormous commercial ventures — actually 'gives you a chance... give[s] you more time for performance.'<sup>127</sup> Branagh's own statement and his recounting of Portman's opinion are further evidence of the strength of his conviction that mainstream culture — and in particular the blockbuster form of production — offers itself as a valuable alternative and counterpoint to perceived 'highbrow' culture.

Branagh's recognition of the differences between creating an independent film and a large-scale Hollywood production also testifies to his awareness (and willingness to discuss) the material pre-conditions of filmmaking. Rather than cultivating an air of mystery around himself in his various roles as actor, director or adapter, he is frequently frank in interview about the practicalities and financial implications of his work. This occurs even when, as in the case of his acknowledgment that he wrote his autobiography for money, this comes at the

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<sup>127</sup> 'Kenneth Branagh: Reel Life, Real Stories,' May 18, 2011, Video clip, accessed July 25, 2012, YouTube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_rwn8IUoRM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_rwn8IUoRM).

cost of potentially puncturing his own reputation. It is for this reason that it is worth acknowledging an alternative, if more prosaic, explanation for his strategic explanations of his work: market necessity. While Branagh's engagement with a wide variety of cultural sources is characteristic of his personal attitude and his responses to the media represent an attempt to explain his process and its value, it also serves an undeniably beneficial function in promotion. His careful explanation of the references that influenced his making of *Thor* validate his involvement in the franchise on two levels. On a broader level Branagh's presence as a Shakespearean extends the film's potential appeal outside of its traditionally younger audience. But it also reassures this expectant fan base that Branagh is capable of working with a text of *Thor*'s genre, tenor and, most importantly, popular cultural standing.

A final point relevant to this strategy of mainstream immersion is apparent in exploring Branagh's relationship to the original comic book form of *Thor* and the creation of a complementary style of filmmaking. Commenting directly on the charge laid at him that he has moved in his career from 'high' culture to 'low' culture, he states that he does not 'regard it that way at all.' Instead, he argues that the comics are 'unbelievably sophisticated' – all the more so for the fact that they are created in a medium where the 'challenge' is to 'reduce and make simple.'<sup>128</sup> This is a challenge Branagh believes is incredibly hard because the result must not just be 'simple', but rich and layered while being economic and maintaining narrative momentum. The answer he sees is thus 'condensed, impactful filmmaking' which mirrors the need of the comics to convey simple messages powerfully.<sup>129</sup> As an example of this *Thor* employs Dutch angles (the technique in which the camera is placed at an angle to the ground, rather than horizontally) throughout the film.

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<sup>128</sup> 'Marvel's THOR interviews,' December 10, 2010, Video clip, accessed 1 July 2012, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chXpv5TnkaE>.

<sup>129</sup> 'Director's DVD Commentary,' *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011).



Fig. 2.5 Jane Foster's (Natalie Portman) scientific laboratory in New Mexico

A deliberate, jarring piece of cinematography, it is not configured along 'realistic' lines of vision. The dynamism of this angle is chosen by Branagh to visually replicate the energy and impact of the comic book panels that he remembers reading from childhood.<sup>130</sup> Similarly, *Thor* is distinctive for its bright visual palette which, particularly when set on Asgard, utilises warm golds, reds and twilit pinks and in New Mexico frequently takes advantage of wide angle establishing shots which encompass the wide expanses of blue sky. With his careful placement of characters (as I will further explore in my chapter on Tom Hiddleston), moreover, Branagh's scene composition often has a tableau-like feel. This references not only his own Shakespearean background but the implicit theatricality of the Asgardian world as well as the curiously static-but-moving quality of a comic book panel. This technique is testament to a practice Branagh acknowledged first as a performer, writing: 'a really good actor will put [...] borrowings into his own soil and make them his own.'<sup>131</sup> In adapting *Thor*, his desire to represent the energy of the comic book thereby represents not a desire for fidelity, but to create a strategy of filmmaking borne from the unique complications of the

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<sup>130</sup> 'Director's DVD Commentary,' *Thor*.

<sup>131</sup> Branagh, *Beginning*, 75.



adapted form: an admiration of the comic book's success in doing what it does and so a method of adaptation that similarly best serves the blockbuster.

Though Branagh thus appears to initially uphold the conservative rendering of his Shakespearean identity by the media, by associating *Thor* with his past works in order to legitimise the action blockbuster, the reality of his project is far from the exclusivity Nick Cox associates with the Shakespearean. Rather than standing as a guardian against the 'inclusion' of performers whose methods carry connotations of 'popular pleasure', Branagh welcomes the mainstream as a mode in its own right and a point of influence within his typically 'highbrow' productions.<sup>132</sup> Indeed, even a Bourdieusian argument for a strategy of condescension could not wholly or successfully be made.<sup>133</sup> It is not only emblematic of his work, moreover, but characteristic of a wider postmodern setting; a cultural movement within which his work is frequently considered and employed in academic discussion. Though critics cited here such as Cox and elsewhere Lehmann, Crowl and Hatchuel write on Branagh's Shakespearean adaptations in the period approximately 1989-2006, it is evident in his work on *Thor* that he still holds to the same cross-cultural practices already exemplified in my discussion of his adaptation of *Hamlet* in 1996. The tendency for Branagh's involvement in *Thor* to be viewed negatively by the press as 'beneath' him in contrast to the 'high' cultural work he has previously produced configures these practices in alignment with those

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<sup>132</sup> 'Branagh's function (along with Thompson, Jacobi and Briers) is to prevent the translation of Shakespeare from stage to screen and the inclusion of performers whose very names carry connotations of popular pleasure and sensation from radically disturbing the cultural hierarchies that are intrinsic to the habitus of the middle class.' Nick Cox, 'Kenneth Branagh: Shakespearean Film, Cultural Capital and Star Status,' *Film Stars: Hollywood and Beyond*, ed. Andy Willis (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004), 147.

<sup>133</sup> Bourdieu's concept of 'condescension' occurs when someone at the top of a social hierarchy adopts the speech or style of those at the bottom. In such an act, the dominant actor seeks to profit from the inequality that he or she ostensibly negates. I would argue that Branagh's employment of popular culture references is less about a coherent drive to co-opt mainstream audiences for commercial reasons, than it is to demonstrate that there are no reasons why these audiences should be disparate to begin with, however. Bourdieu's definition of condescension necessitates that the strategy is employed for the benefit of one particular group within the social hierarchy, even as it employs the language of another. The way that Branagh works, though, is to move between 'high' and 'low' to benefit both at their respective times. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Price Formation and the Anticipation of Profits,' *Language and Symbolic Power*, eds and trans. John Thompson, Gino Raymond, and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 66-90.

of the fan, furthermore. It is precisely the emphasis placed on his inappropriateness and his apparently absent knowledge ('he should know better...'), which Branagh-the-fan engages with. It is the fan's knowledge of the way in which cultural hierarchies function that allows them to skilfully co-opt them, manipulating the paradigms of 'good' and 'bad' taste and the respective methods of consumption in order to create new cross-cultural products. And it is this knowledge that permits Branagh to create multivalent cultural products which can be read conservatively to promote the superior cultural cachet of 'high' texts, or can be read more diffusely to promote a democratic approach to forms, modes and genres.

There is one final complication apparent in analysing *Thor*, however. Branagh's interview responses suggest that he is all too aware of the rigidity with which his star persona is constructed by the press. In response he employs two different strategies (which overlap at times). The first, in keeping with his democratic approach to culture in general, engages with and demonstrates an exhaustive immersion in a wide variety of media and genres. Branagh interacts with these cultural texts in different ways in order to make the most of the unique successes of that particular form, rather than conforming to a hierarchized view of them. The second is to construct a framework in which his Shakespearean identity and the cultural capital attached to it can be read as a site of adaptation for his mainstream work. For Branagh such a democratic strategy enables entry into a text by stimulating useful and productive allusions; it is for him, nevertheless, only one point of entry of many. In spite of Branagh's egalitarian approach to cultural hierarchies, though, the inflexibility with which his Shakespearean identity is regarded by many critics is also somewhat self-perpetuated. His Shakespearean identity is synonymous with serious dramatic intent, despite the fact that his directorial works are characterised by their operatic, comic flourishes. Indeed, to be a Shakespearean is viewed as being a *serious* actor, despite the fact that comedies, of course,

make up an equal bulk of Shakespeare's most popular work. The common claim for the greatness of Shakespeare's works lies in their ability to convey universal truths is often aligned with the drama's philosophical depth.

Branagh's *Hamlet*, obviously an intensely philosophical and meditative film, is not above an easy laugh from the audience and plays Hamlet's madness to great comic effect. Especially evident in the nonsensical exchanges with Polonius (Richard Briers), Hamlet's 'antic disposition' is apparent in Branagh's exaggerated facial expressions, flamboyant vocal delivery and boundless energy. Branagh's readiness to attribute Shakespearean qualities to *Thor* does not occur in connection to the fish-out-of-water comedy of the middle of the film, however, but only occurs in reference to moments of great dramatic upheaval. This in spite of the fact that, as one critic shrewdly observes, it was precisely Branagh's knack for comedy and his failure to take himself too seriously that made his 'Shakespearean adaptations Hollywood fare'.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, this is something Branagh himself recognised as being essential to adapting *Thor*'s potentially problematic mythological setting: 'The glue was humour [...], that's how you make him contemporary on Earth, you make him funny.'<sup>135</sup> Nonetheless, in the DVD commentary Branagh's comment that Thor's and Odin's relationship mirrors that of Hal's and Falstaff's is not a reference to the carnivalesque world of Eastcheap. Rather, it alludes to the similar dramatic potency between Thor's rejection of Odin — 'And you're an old man and a fool!' — and the newly crowned Henry's agonising rejection of his former life: 'I know thee not, old man'<sup>136</sup>. It is seemingly only tragedy which is able to access the institutionally validated cachet of its Shakespearean associations: comedy arguably remains a culturally less valued form.

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<sup>134</sup> Scott Bowles, 'Hemsworth thunders in: It's hammer time for 'Thor' and the film's Australian star,' *USA Today*, Wednesday 4, May 2011, (D1-2), 2D.

<sup>135</sup> Bowles, 'Hemsworth thunders in,' 2D.

<sup>136</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV: Part Two (The Arden Shakespeare, Second Edition)*, ed. Arthur Raleigh Humphreys (London and New York: 1967), 5.5.43



HAMLET: You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more / willingly part withal — except my life,  
except life, except my life' (2.2.212-3).

Fig. 2.6 One of Hamlet and Polonius's more fraught conversations.

## **The London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony: Kenneth Branagh, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Caliban**

The majority of this chapter has focused upon the cultural work Kenneth Branagh has effected through the self-conscious employment of and engagement with his Shakespearean persona, both as actor and director. To conclude the chapter and to consider the current status of his star identity, however, I wish to present an example of how, in turn, mainstream culture uses Branagh as a representative of British Shakespeareanism: his performance as Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the 2012 London Olympics Opening Ceremony. Entering the stadium at the beginning of the movement entitled ‘Pandaemonium’, a dramatic representation of Britain’s industrialisation, Branagh was frequently misrecognised by the public as Abraham Lincoln, in spite of his role being advertised in the media guide to the ceremony.<sup>137</sup> The choice of Brunel for this particular dramatic function had been inspired by his placing second in the BBC’s *100 Greatest Britons* poll of 2002 (in which he was beaten only by Churchill, who also appeared in the closing ceremony). The reality of the moment, though, revealed Brunel’s lacking visual iconicity, with Branagh in an undistinctive costume of top hat and three piece suit that could have equally alluded to a number of notable male Victorians. The media guide suggests some logic behind the ceremony’s use of historical personages, nonetheless:

Arrival of the Calibans:

Caliban’s speech from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is spoken by the character of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Britain’s most revered engineer, played by Kenneth Branagh. Then 50 ‘Brunels’ representing the technological genius of the Industrial Revolution enter.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Lucas Renney (@LucasRenney), ‘Why is Kenneth Branagh dressed as Abraham Lincoln?’ July 27, 2012, 9.08PM, Tweet; Kel (@Latinoreview), ‘Funny to see Kenneth Branagh dressed as Abe Lincoln,’ July 27, 2012, 9.25PM, Tweet; Laura Eve (@LauraEve), ‘Is that Kenneth Branagh in an Abe Lincoln outfit?’ July 27, 2012, 9.09PM, Tweet; Mike Ryan (@ryaninteractive), ‘Why is Kenneth Branagh dressed like Abe Lincoln: Vampire Hunter? #london2012,’ 28 July 2012, 1.27AM, Tweet.

<sup>138</sup> *London Olympic Games Opening Ceremony Media Guide*, [http://www.london2012.com/mm/Document/Documents/Publications/01/30/43/40/OPENINGCEREMONYGUIDE\\_English.pdf](http://www.london2012.com/mm/Document/Documents/Publications/01/30/43/40/OPENINGCEREMONYGUIDE_English.pdf), 21. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

The use of ‘character’ to describe Branagh’s performance of Brunel is instructive here in signalling the importance of the ‘Brunels’’ fictive possibilities. As the uniting name for the fifty-strong group of dancers who entered at the same time, as well as that of Branagh’s speaking part, the ceremony’s configuration of the ‘Brunels’ recognised the importance not of the specificity of person, but the broad mood of Victorian invention that they represented.

In the case of Branagh, the self-evidence of his character was also supplanted by the visibility of the star performer. As with the other-non-musical stars, his role in the ceremony had not previously been advertised, so that as the camera panned onto him in medium close-up amongst the other ‘Brunels’’, the audience were asked to recognise the actor, and only then to identify the character (if they could). In some cases this exercise was simple. Timothy Spall reprised his popular caricature of Winston Churchill from *The King’s Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, 2010) and with Churchill’s unmistakable vocal rhythms and distinctive personal uniform, both star and character were immediately identifiable. The difficulty in identifying the character of Brunel, however, meant that one conventional measure of a ‘successful’ performance was not possible: the subsuming of actor into character. This interpretive resistance thus compounded the visibility of Branagh as star, rather than Branagh as Brunel, and so located his Shakespearean identity as the most obvious interpretive locus for the performance.



Fig. 2.7 Kenneth Branagh/Isambard Kingdom Brunel/Abraham Lincoln

The impact of Shakespeare's legacy upon Britain's culture was evident throughout the ceremony, appearing frequently in performance and in the staging. Newspaper columns forged out of play quotations, for example, presented Shakespeare's work as familiar, de-contextualised phrases and as evidence of his cultural proliferation. Like Branagh or Spall's star turns, the presence of the quotations enacted a kind of cultural spotting, with pleasure afforded from recognising a 'high' cultural reference embedded within a mainstream event, and accessing the cultural cachet attached to said reference. According to traditional cultural hierarchies, the audience are rewarded for their 'good taste' and thereby gain admission to privileged secondary levels of meaning. Culture spotting thus gives the viewer an illusory sense of ownership through interpretation of both the Ur-text, and mastery over the text in which the reference was 'spotted'; illusory because, like Shakespeare's function within the ceremony as a whole, these quotations are manipulated to suit a particular use. This

occurrence is not negative in itself; indeed, to cling to the hope that Shakespeare is always quoted correctly, within dramatic context and in awareness of theatrical and academic traditions of interpretation, is a naïve and unproductive wish. The implications of Shakespeare's preponderance as a participant in such encounters only emphasises the flexibility and durability of his legacy, moreover. Certainly, with the abbreviated phrasing of modern-day vernacular and text-speak, the constantly rolling headlines of contemporary media, or the brevity required of social networking platforms such as Twitter, quotation and paraphrasing is a dominant mode of contemporary address. Such instances of Shakespeare's use and, in particular, the diversion between these quotations and their 'appropriate' context are as valuable for analysis as sites of ideological work as any other recognisable adaptive form. As Douglas Lanier argues, such popular citations 'reject the fidelity and decorum that govern "proper" Shakespearean interpretation' and while their 'impertinence' is a source of fun, as I will continue to demonstrate, their use is 'not necessarily politically progressive.'<sup>139</sup>

To demonstrate the applicability of this mode of cultural adaptation, Shakespeare's use in the ceremony was imbued with dramatic potential appropriated anew from the original themes of the play. Branagh performed Caliban's speech ('Be not afeard...') amidst a cacophonous scene in which the towers of nineteenth-century industry forged the Olympic rings (indeed, this act symbolised the ceremony's representation of British identity as a creative culmination of the contemporary moment and the actions, ethics and events of the past). Caliban's warning was an appropriate — and kind — gesture towards the audience as the pandemonium developed in urgency and volume, with the wordless iterations of the chorus line conveying the thrilling brutality of mechanisation. Throughout, the Brunels surveyed the scene, conferring and gesturing towards the workers as the authors of industrialisation; indeed, Branagh performed his speech from a ledger. Rather than a Caliban

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<sup>139</sup> Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 53.



entrapped by the colonist's stick, however, Branagh was a Prospero who conjured vast and terrifying spectacle for the audience. This was a display made all the more bewildering for the triply layered performance of Branagh as Brunel as Caliban: the prototypical voice of post-colonialism filtered through Brunel's white, Victorian entrepreneurism and Branagh's middle-class Shakespearean respectability.

The incongruity between Brunel and Caliban in this scene was further compounded through Branagh's performance of the speech, which, alongside the particular values attached to his Shakespearean persona, evinced a wider recurring conflict in the ceremony between the event's theme — 'This is for everyone' (11) — and its dramatic representations. 'Be not afraid', though a bittersweet musing on the illusory promise of dreams, was performed by Branagh in a manner that cohered less with *The Tempest's* mood than with a rousing call to arms. Accompanying the speech was a performance of Edward Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Variation IX, popularly known as 'Nimrod'. This evocative piece of classical music is associated particularly with military remembrance in the public consciousness due to its annual performance at the Cenotaph in London on Remembrance Day. Indeed, musicologist Bill McGlaughlin has likened its function in British music to Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* for the American public with its similarly contemplative, swelling emotional climax and even a similar association with military remembrance.<sup>140</sup> It is the choice of 'Nimrod' which is particularly instructive on how to read Branagh's performance. His overemphasis of a dramatically low-key speech and shouting delivery could be explained as by-products of struggling to hear himself over the general noise of the ceremony. The orchestration of this particular section of 'Nimrod', however, was matched so that it drove the progression of the

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<sup>140</sup> Bill McGlaughlin, 'Edward Elgar: Part 2 of 5,' *Exploring Music*. April 6, 2004, n.p.

speech to its end at ‘I cried to dream again’.<sup>141</sup> It moved towards a concurrent climax with the music and facilitated a mode of theatrical delivery which over-emphasised what the text’s structure and language suggests. The co-ordination between text and musical accompaniment thereby suggests that Branagh’s reading was a deliberate interpretation of the speech rather than an accident of over-excitement.

This kind of delivery promoted a reading of the text which altered the direction of its speech, creating an inclusive mode of performance that spoke to the ensemble on stage but also beyond, to the audience. In keeping with director Danny Boyle’s imperative that ‘There are no spectators. Everyone in the audience will be part of the magic’ (11), Branagh’s performance adapted the more emotional, interior narratives of *The Tempest* into the conscious rhetoric of plays such as *Julius Caesar*, as well as referencing his own *Henry V*. As I’ve briefly referred to earlier in this chapter, Branagh’s 1989 adaptation consistently locates community within a military unit joined by their belief in the sacrificial necessity of violence: the ‘royal fellowship of death’<sup>142</sup> Most indicative of this is Henry’s famous iteration of transnational inclusion: ‘we band of brothers; / for he to-day that sheds his blood with me / shall be my brother’.<sup>143</sup> Despite gathering Exeter (Brian Blessed) and Westmoreland (Paul Gregory) to him exclusively by name, for the majority of the speech Henry is surrounded by the common soldier; close-ups of him speaking cut with responding shots of members of the army of all social strata. With his steadily escalating and uncomplicated delivery of the St Crispin’s Day speech — just as with his performance of ‘Be not afeard’ — Branagh thereby invites the permeability of the separation between players and

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<sup>141</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest (Arden Shakespeare)*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 3.2.138.

<sup>142</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V (The Arden Shakespeare, Third Edition)*, ed. T.W. Craik (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1995), 4.8.95.

<sup>143</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 4.3.60-2.

played to by promoting audience identification through the provocative themes of patriotism and duty.

Posited as the author of British nationhood and culture, Shakespeare was thus central to Boyle's utopian imaging of the ceremony. The meanings attached to Branagh's body as a site of adaptive encounter complicated the event's inclusive and democratic ethos, however. A last minute replacement for Mark Rylance, the casting of Branagh and Rylance is revealing. Their presence, as opposed to a non-explicitly Shakespearean performer, indicated the impossibility of performing Shakespeare without a hierarchy within which certain individuals and texts were prioritised as possessing knowledge. Both Branagh and Rylance represent the interpretation of a very specific form of the Shakespearean — white, middle-class and male — a fact which makes the performance of Caliban all the more incongruous.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, although the delivery of Branagh's Henry-like address invited the audience to join him in fellowship, the staging resisted such communality and like *Henry V* only enforced the presence of hierarchies, even as it claimed to deconstruct them. Branagh's elevated position enabled him to perform the speech not as a peer but as a leader: the modest hill from which he spoke, an isolated focal point on the stadium floor. In contrast to the democratic, everyman stage of the floor, this platform served a very real function within the ceremony as the cynosure of the literal and symbolic representative powers of the Olympics; a logical staging choice in a venue the size of the Olympic Stadium, perhaps, but also a heavily symbolic one. The weighty ledger Branagh cradled while performing enhanced the authoritativeness of his position, moreover. In synchrony with Nimrod's epic theme, Branagh appeared to be speaking exegetically as a celebrant of Shakespeare the national poet, divining his message and interpreting it through performance for the audience. Implicit in Branagh's

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<sup>144</sup> Rylance, with his relatively lesser-known performer identity, however, might potentially have been a less obtrusive presence.

casting was the suggestion that Shakespeare's works required deciphering in order to reveal their essential truth, therefore.

Shakespeare may be a national author whose legacy the population can lay claim to in a general sense, but his use within the ceremony remained codified and restricted to a specific social group. This is, of course, not to implicate Branagh or Boyle in any conscious social or racial politics, but to illuminate the issues that will necessarily present themselves in any situation where one text or one individual is chosen to represent national identity. In fact, both the opening and closing ceremonies were founded on a relationship to the past based on effacement: the judicious rubbing out of events and anachronous pencilling in of others. Caliban's speech was decontextualized, its eloquence divorced from the anger of the oppressed subject who knows 'how to curse'.<sup>145</sup> If *The Tempest's* function in the ceremony is taken as a model for the event in general, moreover, it was a representation of Britain that walked a fine line between fantasy and reality: a reality which was only ever moments from revealing itself and its uncomfortable history of colonial, imperial, gender and sexual oppression. Ironically inclusion became the signpost to exclusion as imperial history in particular was carefully excised. Privileged historical moments instead were ones which deliberately celebrated community and the kind of multicultural and progressive communities which, although now evident and largely accepted within British society, were not always so: the Jarrow Marchers, the Suffragettes, the 'Windrush generation' of Caribbean immigrants. A black dancer amongst the Brunels, however, highlighted the necessary question: what would a young black man's relationship to the industrial progress of Britain truly have been?

Jatinder Verma writing on similar multicultural theatrical productions argues that postcolonial Britain is in 'an ironic act of symmetry [...] undergoing the same uncertain

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<sup>145</sup> Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.517.

groping towards defining itself as are the countries that were once colonised by Britain.’ This desire to self-define ‘Britishness’ and the necessity of this in an internationally broadcast ceremony was evident. While the ceremony included a moment of silence for ‘the fallen of two world wars and many other conflicts’ (23), it failed to commemorate any other forms of brutality, be them imperial, sexual or class-based. Indeed, in accordance with what Verma terms the ‘hidden texts of modern multi-cultural Britain’, the less acknowledged or deliberately brushed-over aspects of history remained obscured.<sup>146</sup> Despite the efforts of the ceremony to celebrate multiculturalism and inclusivity, the version of British history that was represented was in the most homogenised and traditional mode. Within the fictional, representative space of the stage, Boyle’s utopian dream of a Jerusalem ‘for everyone’ thus revealed itself ultimately as nothing more than Gonzalo’s naïve dream of commonwealth: incoherent and based upon the deliberate obfuscation of certain, indisputable truths. This was most apparent in the reliance of the ceremony upon Caliban’s speech as a recurrent motif. The Northern Irish-born Kenneth Branagh, descendent of French immigrants and upholder of English theatrical tradition may be viewed as a symbol of successful integration. The speech he performed, however, was far from the invocation of peace and harmony it professed to be according to its dramatic function within the ceremony, instead occurring at a point in the play when Caliban plans to have Prospero’s power over him violently usurped. The kind of social unity endorsed by the ceremony is never quite achieved in *The Tempest* and it is certainly never heralded by Caliban: the play narrativises the conflict between individual desires and personal ambition and the resultant violent consequences. Resolution, when it comes in the play, is uneasy; hardly a reassuring prospect for postcolonial Britain, especially if Caliban is the model of the postcolonial subject.

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<sup>146</sup> Jatinder Verma, ‘The Challenge of Bilingual: Analysing Multicultural Productions,’ *Issues of Performance*, ed. Patrick Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 196.

Characteristic of Kenneth Branagh's star persona is the location of his Shakespearean identity as the site of adaptive encounter as both actor and director, therefore: his Shakespearean identity remains the overriding and determining quality of his professional career. This is something especially apparent given the time elapsed since his last sustained foray into adapting the playwright and yet the consistent references made to this period by the media and within mainstream culture. Indeed, the Shakespearean is largely pre-determined by various forces, such as memories of famous previous Shakespearean performances, or immediate cultural attitudes towards the playwright's work. It was this latter force that was evident in the ultimate failure of Branagh's performance in the Olympics opening ceremony. This performance was essentially conservative in its appointment of Branagh as a representative of the Shakespearean and an interpretation of Shakespearean which, in opposition to Boyle's desire to create a utopian and democratic vision of British culture, remained codified and only accessible to those chosen interpreters with access to the appropriate social and cultural cachet.

Although capable of restricting and limiting his persona Branagh's Shakespeareanism is, nonetheless, conducive to a certain degree of flexibility and plasticity. Consistent across the texts I have explored is the presence of Branagh's authorship and his conscious engagement with the pre-existing associations of his Shakespeareanism; in the case of *Thor*, for instance, Branagh's creation of an exegetical framework for the film that works *within* the media's presuppositions of what a Shakespearean should do. He interprets *Thor* in a way that amplifies its Shakespearean connections and explains the plausibility of the decision, therefore. The necessity of this process for encouraging the commercial and critical success of the film does not detract from its viability as a purposeful interpretive strategy on

Branagh's part, however.<sup>147</sup> His Shakespearean identity *can* be located as a locus of adaptation and *can* be used productively to extrapolate meaning and characterisation. Indeed, *Thor* demonstrates very close thematic congruence with Branagh's previous works, especially in the recurring figure of the soldier within *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and a narrative preoccupation with the morality of violence and the responsibility of power.

Branagh as a Shakespearean actor represents the possibility for an adaptive force characterised and invigorated by its mercurial, contradictory nature, bringing new and surprising associations to Shakespeare through his career choices. As is typical of fan practices, his distinctive directorial agency is notable for its embrace of that which is traditionally oppositional. Although he does not dismantle cultural hierarchies, his democratic treatment of texts from disparate cultural hierarchies highlights the arbitrariness of the appointment of one artefact to 'high' culture but another to 'low'. He moves beyond the cultural mishmash of postmodernism (which revels in its ability to disturb expectations) to fan-based creative practices, which emphasise the worthiness of the 'disposable' texts of mainstream culture, through employing strategies of consumption, centred on close scrutiny, interpretation and creative extrapolation. His attitude towards Shakespeare is thereby as reverent as to any popular cultural text and his ability as an actor, director and producer lies in his willingness to disregard the traditional practices that would treat 'high' and 'low' differently. Indeed, this is a long-standing quality of his directorial work, evident in cross-cultural allusions, engagement with generic conventions such as the epic form and the casting

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<sup>147</sup> This strategy is at once in keeping with Branagh's overall attitude towards cultural hierarchies and a canny way of expanding his potential market. It represents his acknowledgement of the commercial and practical conditions of creativity (whether in Hollywood or Britain). Recognition of the more applied qualities of Branagh's persona is also in line with the growing move in adaptation studies towards a consideration of the material conditions of a text as most notably called for in Simone Murray's 2011 *The Adaptation Industry*. It is thus worth noting that Branagh is frank in interviews about any constraints that may be placed onto a work by budgetary limitations, and conversely, has spoken about the possibilities that are opened up by working on a project with the funding of, for example, *Thor*. His attitude towards his directorial works, in particular, is both aspirational but also accepting of the material conditions which inevitably shape his films.

of actors from theatrical and popular cinematic backgrounds alike. It is for this reason that for Branagh, unlike his British critics, the decision to be involved in *The Road to El Dorado* or *Jack Ryan* is as productive as playing *Macbeth* and why such films, though traditionally ignored by adaptation critics, are valuable as sites of exploration. These popular texts interact with and help develop a definition of Branagh-as-Shakespearean as surely as Branagh-as-Shakespearean shapes them. The persistence of exploring only this aspect of the relationship between Branagh-as-Shakespearean and mainstream culture only perpetuates a further cultural hierarchy in which academic exploration of the mainstream is only validated by its function as part of a 'high' cultural text. This critical absence should thus be addressed and mainstream culture understood for its points of interest, complexity and contradiction. Whether these texts react against his Shakespearean identity, employ it in certain strategic ways, adapt from it or even disregard it, one thing is evident: the best way to ascertain the flexibility and durability of Branagh's Shakespeareanism is to read popular culture.



# Tom Hiddleston: The Beginnings of the Shakespearean Star

## Introduction: 'Quintessentially English'

In contrast to the previous chapters on Ian McKellen and Kenneth Branagh, the final section of this thesis is dedicated to exploring the beginning stages of a Shakespearean actor's career, focusing on Tom Hiddleston whose appropriateness as a case study lies precisely in his nascence as a star.<sup>1</sup> Unlike Branagh or McKellen who have seen their cultural cachet as respected theatrical performers consolidated by their later work in popular culture (and then vice versa), Hiddleston's star persona has been forged simultaneously by his Shakespearean work and his mainstream success. In his role as Loki Hiddleston has starred in both films within the *Thor* Marvel series — *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011) and *Thor: The Dark World* (dir. Alan Taylor, 2013) — and also been the chief antagonist of *Avengers Assemble* (dir. Joss Whedon, 2012). This has happened in spite of a warning from his agent at the beginning of his career that he would be frequently cast in period dramas.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, an exploration of Hiddleston's early career adheres to Martin Shingler's statement that the individual's attainment of stardom 'rests on being pigeon-holed'. This is something which happens in spite of the star possessing 'several different kinds of identity', their own multifaceted character and those they portray.<sup>3</sup> This chapter will continue, therefore, by discussing how Hiddleston's star persona — those qualities upon which he has been pigeon-

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<sup>1</sup> Within the period of study undertaken by this thesis Hiddleston has seen his career accelerate drastically from minor parts in television drama and some critically acclaimed, but still supporting roles on stage, to considerable involvement within one of the largest Hollywood franchises of all time: the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As briefly outlined in the previous chapter, the Marvel Cinematic Universe is the title of the media franchise and shared fictional universe which is the setting of a number of superhero films, all independently produced by Marvel but with references between films and overlapping character appearances. *Avengers Assemble* was the first occasion on which Marvel united its four franchises (although this number will expand throughout 2014-5 with the addition of *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Ant-Man* respectively), and their eponymous superheroes: *The Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *Thor* and *Captain America*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Tom Hiddleston Industrial Scripts Interview,' Jan 16, 2013, audio clip, November 1, 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTnJIW-IuO8>.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Shingler, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide* (London: BFI, 2012), 121.

holed — accords with John Gaffney and Diana Holmes' observation that stars can 'restate, often in new and modern forms, old identities and values, as well as calling a society towards newer and perhaps confused, emergent values'.<sup>4</sup> I will explore how Hiddleston's choice of roles and public persona contribute to an on-going discussion about Shakespeare, Englishness and class and the compatibility of these values with Hollywood and contemporary internet culture.

Hiddleston graduated from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in 2005 and shortly after joined theatre company Cheek by Jowl for their productions of *The Changeling* in 2006 and *Cymbeline* in 2007, playing Alonso and Posthumus/Cloten respectively. This was followed in 2008 by *Othello* and *Ivanov* at the Wyndham theatre, playing opposite Kenneth Branagh. Although not a commonly known performer at this point, it was his working relationship with Branagh, begun only months before on the British television adaptation of *Wallander*, which would prove ultimately the most fruitful in determining the course of Hiddleston's career. His performance in *Othello*, nonetheless, marked the success with which he had started to establish himself as a theatrical performer, earning both the Ian Charleson Award (Third Prize) and the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Newcomer in 2007 for his role as Cassio. It is these early flourishings and recognition as a successful Shakespearean actor which, I would argue, were instrumental in his casting as Loki and the subsequent Shakespearean associations which both Branagh and Hiddleston worked into his characterisation. Hiddleston's early television career similarly tended towards period pieces and more traditional dramatic roles, with his first credit playing Randolph Churchill in the acclaimed BBC/HBO production *The Gathering Storm* (2002). He had a small part as John Plumtre the would-be suitor of Fanny Austen in the ITV series *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008)

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<sup>4</sup> John Gaffney and Diana Holmes, 'Introduction', *Stardom in Postwar France*, ed. John Gaffney and Diana Holmes (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 1.

and a minor role as William Buxton, the young romantic lead, in a two part special of the popular BBC serial *Cranford - Return to Cranford* (2009). These three roles all positioned Hiddleston in a very similar way as a representation of a gentlemanly ideal: upper-middle class, earnestly intelligent and with enough boyish, self-deprecating charm to situate him as a viable romantic interest.

The boyish ingenuousness and earnestness of both Mr Plumtre and William Buxton are also seen in Hiddleston's contemporary television roles during this early stage of his career, including Bill Hazeldine in *Suburban Shootout* (2006) and Magnus Martinsson in *Wallander* (2008). In the case of the latter, Magnus's youthfulness is predominantly expressed in contrast to the eponymous Wallander's (Kenneth Branagh) weariness, and his frequent exasperation at being treated as an errand boy by the rest of the office, while in the comedy *Suburban Shootout* Bill's boyishness is expressed through his naivety. With his ethnic beaded necklace and bracelets, the tan fresh off his gap year travels in Africa and his place secured at university to study theology, Bill is a stereotype of the modern, middle-class male teenager. Hiddleston's performance in comedy noticeably trades most of all upon his appearance. His frequent open and round facial expressions of astonishment and innocent confusion place him in visual contrast to the vulpine Jewel (Ruth Wilson), who engineers his seduction. When Bill tries to pull himself up to Jewel's bedroom in a pastiche of *Romeo and Juliet*'s famous balcony scene, he is unable to lift his own body weight, causing Jewel to huff: 'I thought you had biceps.'



Fig. 3.1 Bill Hazeldine in his parent’s comfortable, middle-class home.

Indeed, in all of these earlier roles Hiddleston’s youthfulness is compounded by his physicality, with his height and slimness lending to a sense of lankiness, especially in comparison to the muscular power he conveys later in his career. The carefully coiffured, shorter (and frequently darker) haircut that characterises his personal style, moreover, would not appear until after *Thor* and in its place Hiddleston sports an unruly head of blonde curls with no facial hair, further iterating his juvenile aesthetic.

James Davidson Hunter argues that mass media ‘actually define reality in a society — by selecting which events “deserve attention” and are, therefore “important”.’<sup>5</sup> This statement is especially true of Hiddleston with his personal aesthetic and star persona — described by Ben Beaumont-Thomas as a ‘brand’ of ‘guileless old-school grace’ — frequently situated by

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<sup>5</sup> James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 174.

the press as originating within a particular social milieu.<sup>6</sup> Educated first at Eton (boarding at the same time as Prince William), then at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge, Hiddleston's upbringing testifies to his upper-middle class status and the world of privilege and tradition still evidenced in such institutions. Indeed, the media's fascination with these biographical facts, demonstrated in their superlative and romantic descriptions of the actor, extends almost to the self-parodic with one journalist noting drily, 'Hiddleston, as it is compulsory to note in all interviews, was educated at Eton.'<sup>7</sup> Despite the exclusivity of the establishment, James Mottram thus writes that, 'with his Eton education, [Hiddleston] seems quintessentially English.'<sup>8</sup> Giles Hattersly observes that Hiddleston is 'spookily perfect... as if designed by committee' and declares his CV, with his double first from Cambridge, RADA qualification and Olivier award, a 'study in overachievement'. Hattersly continues, locating the actor's photogeny within a model of 1940s and '50s masculinity with its ideals of restraint and formal sophistication. He describes Hiddleston as 'costume drama fodder', 'backlit by the pale afternoon light, with his navy suit and perfect posture... [looking like he is] straight out of a Rattigan play'.<sup>9</sup> Such associations between Hiddleston's social class and his appropriateness for particular kinds of roles is demonstrative of the same narrowly deterministic attitude displayed by the media in their engagement with Branagh's Shakespearean billing. And similarly, the press's nostalgia for the high-class world they believe Hiddleston occupies endures even when self-aware of the myths they perpetuate.

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<sup>6</sup> Beaumont-Thomas continues that it is 'small wonder' he is placed as 'an emblem of the lost generation, fated to be sent off to war' or an image of the 'sweet, sad decline of the landed gentry. Ben Beaumont-Thomas, 'Tom Hiddleston's Thor PR antics are a lesson in mischief as marketing,' *The Guardian*, Nov 20, 2013, accessed 21 January, 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/nov/20/thor-tom-hiddleston-publicity-social-media>.

<sup>7</sup> John Naughton, 'Major Tom,' [British] *GQ*, November 1, 2013, n.p.

<sup>8</sup> James Mottram, 'Soldier of fortune: Tom Hiddleston is set to become 2012's hottest new star,' *The Independent*, Jan 8, 2012, accessed January 21, 2014,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/soldier-of-fortune-tom-hiddleston-is-set-to-become-2012s-hottest-new-star-6284844.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Giles Hattersly, 'Kneel, for I shall be lord of the multiplex,' *The Sunday Times*, November 3, 2013, 5.

There is value, nonetheless, in recognising what they identify, especially in terms of the kind of ‘Englishness’ which are prized (particularly by the middle and upper classes).

In the case of Hiddleston’s career the media’s insistence on reiterating these biographical details recognises a distinct connection between his class and the kinds of characters he plays at the beginning of his career. This can be further exemplified by considering the nature of his education, particularly his BA in Classics from Cambridge. With its study of ancient civilisations’ literature, language, philosophy, art and history, Classics requires a high level of erudition from its students and typically demands both exemplary admission standards and specific secondary education.<sup>10</sup> Hiddleston’s attendance of a highly selective university and his choice of an intellectually rigorous and restricted degree confirm this popular ‘posh’ conception of him — as seen in the media — while also demonstrating his personal intelligence. It is not unimaginable, moreover, that Hiddleston’s Classics education would also have informed his knowledge of myth while preparing for *Thor* and, later, his understanding of the historical setting of *Coriolanus*; indeed, this would accord with his tendency to intellectualise his responses as an actor.

Bruce Babington argues that British actors ‘give things to home audiences that Hollywood luminaries cannot — reflections of the known and close at hand.’<sup>11</sup> Although undeniably the nature of Hiddleston’s education casts him away from many in contemporary British society, his portrayal by the press and his early acting roles establish the values he embodies as an idealisation of gentlemanly values: an aspirational image, in which his Shakespeareanism represents a point of connection between this archetype and an essential, constitutive characteristic of high cultural sophistication. Like Leslie Howard’s career in

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<sup>10</sup> Possession of Greek and Latin A Levels has only recently been removed as a pre-requisite for studying Classics at Pembroke College; A Levels which are more commonly offered at independent schools.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Babington, ‘Introduction: British Stars and Stardom’, *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 8.

Hollywood in the thirties before him, Hiddleston represents a class-bound vision of white, male Englishness predicated upon qualities of eloquence, restraint and social privilege. As Ian Shuttleworth observes, since the ‘heyday of Ronald Coleman and Sir Cedric Hardwick in the 1930s’, an English accent in an American film has been used as an ‘easy shorthand to denote a certain kind of ‘class’, whether romantic, intellectual or villainous.’<sup>12</sup> The rest of this chapter will continue to discuss what values Hiddleston thus personifies as a British and, most particularly English, actor working in Hollywood and their relationship to his Shakespearean persona: how these qualities are expressed, negotiated or contested by the media, his fan base and Hiddleston himself.

### ***Thor and Loki***

After playing across from the actor in *Wallander* and *Ivanov*, and becoming officially attached to the latest Marvel Studios project as director, Kenneth Branagh invited Hiddleston to audition. Originally he auditioned for the titular role on the grounds that he was ‘tall and blonde and classically trained, and that seemed to be the mould for what Thor was’: ‘he was to be a classical character.’<sup>13</sup> After having considerably bulked up for the audition, putting on twenty pounds of muscle to transform himself physically, Hiddleston was eventually turned down for the role and Chris Hemsworth was cast. Branagh urged Hiddleston to re-audition for the role of Loki, however. According to Hiddleston’s recollection, he explained that every actor has ‘something for free’; in the case of Jack Nicholson, according to Branagh, this is irreverence; Anthony Hopkins majesty; Idris Elba gravitas. For Hiddleston this was that he couldn’t ‘turn off’ his intelligence, and so the role of the ever-watchful and scheming

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<sup>12</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, *Ken & Em: The biography of Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson*, (Reading: Headline, 1995), 242.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Leader, ‘Tom Hiddleston interview: The Avengers, modern myths, playing Loki and more,’ April 25, 2012, Webpage, accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/19100/tom-hiddleston-interview-the-avengers-modern-myths-playing-loki-and-more>.

Loki was much more up his 'street'.<sup>14</sup> As previously discussed, Branagh was chosen to direct *Thor* because his Shakespearean adaptations evinced his simultaneous engagement with a more formalised or antiquated mode of speech and with popular cultural referents, with the latter utilised to overcome any off-putting qualities of the former for a mainstream audience. Hiddleston's casting can very easily be explained through applying the same logic. While in the figure of Thor the need for eloquence comes second to the sheer impression given by his physicality, Loki's character in both mythology and the Marvel comics is predicated on the significance of what he says, or often doesn't say. Loki's skills lie in communication and misdirection, his 'silver tongue' as Volstagg (Ray Stevenson) drily observes.

It is worth further considering the reasons why Hiddleston may have been unsuitable for the role of Thor. Though Hiddleston demonstrably bulked up for the audition, displaying that he could alter his usually slim physique to a build more appropriate for the Norse god, I would argue that the (super)hero conforms to more traditional, physical markers of masculinity and is typically lower class (with some exceptions). For instance, consider Spider-Man's humble Queens, New York home with his widowed Aunt or Steve Rogers/Captain America and his impoverished Irish migrant parents. The Hollywood superhero, after all, represents a dramatisation of the American dream in which an individual can aspire to greatness, with even wealthy characters such as Tony Stark/Iron Man demonstrating the ambition, drive and democratic potential at the heart of the national mythos. Meanwhile, within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Thor, though an Asgardian Prince, is characterised by his adherence to a stereotype of Viking primitivism and a coarseness which is conventionally represented as lower class. See, for instance, the humour derived from transposing his more abrasive social etiquette from the Norse mead halls to

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<sup>14</sup> Amy Raphael, 'Tom Hiddleston: From theatre to Thor,' *The Guardian*, April 24, 2011, accessed February 13, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/apr/24/tom-hiddleston-thor>.



modern day New Mexico and Thor's bellowed demand of 'ANOTHER!' coffee, smashing his cup to the floor. Or the similarly unsophisticated nature of his emotional displays, overturning the feast tables when upset. Indeed, Thor's characterisation recognises what Peter Lehman describes as a 'central cultural assumption about power, masculinity and the male body':

Powerful men frequently hold language in reserve, not because they are excluded from it, but because they do not need it. Moreover, they literally embody their power as reflected by stature and masculinity; to be powerful is to be able to exert yourself physically over others.<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, though capable of eloquence, Thor's narrative function is determined by his actions rather than his words. With regards to the raid on Jotunheim that causes Thor to be expelled, Loki murmurs insinuations, his brother simply attacks. In adherence to the strong, silent type model of action cinema masculinity, when Thor does speak his dialogue is characterised by its brevity with purposefully and humorously declamatory statements. These accord with Lehman's argument that the men's silence 'stems from their excess of power; they do not talk much because their actions speak louder than words.'<sup>16</sup>

It is perhaps this connection between Thor's muscular physicality and lack of sophistication that also contributed to Loki being more appropriate for Hiddleston. Loki, unlike Thor, Sif and the Warriors Three, is never shown partaking in his people's rowdy festivities and is ultimately not only racially but socially and culturally different from the Asgardians. Instead, Loki, as I will continue to demonstrate, is associated with restraint, eloquence, intellectualism and reading, while his contempt for the intelligence of those

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 66.

<sup>16</sup> THOR: [walking into a pet shop] I need a horse!  
PET STORE CLERK: We don't have horses. Just dogs, cats, birds.  
THOR: Then give me one of those large enough to ride.

Lehman, *Running Scared*, 64.

around him mirrors the class snobbery associated with the idea of ‘poshness’ (a concept frequently connected with Hiddleston by the media). As the soubriquet of ‘silver tongue’ reveals, Loki’s strength lies not in physical prowess but in his skill with language. With this apparently inextricable connection between his intelligence and his acting, his theatre training at RADA and subsequent work in predominantly period and classical drama, Hiddleston thus answers Marvel’s need for performers comfortable in a more formal style of speech and capable of conveying Loki’s emotional complexity and sense of social and intellectual superiority.

The significance of Hiddleston’s conversance with a particular mode of acting lies not only in this pre-textual stage, however, but is apparent throughout *Thor*. As the previous chapter demonstrated, Branagh’s adaptation of the superhero is threaded throughout with references as broadly reaching generically, temporally and culturally as the Western genre and the British myth of King Arthur. Unsurprisingly though, the persistent touchstone of Loki’s characterisation and placement within the film’s central emotional narrative — the conflict between Thor, Odin and Loki — is Shakespearean. It should be stated at this point that Hiddleston was not widely regarded by the public as possessing a Shakespearean persona until later in 2012 with the release of *The Hollow Crown*; indeed, he was a relative unknown both within the industry and in the public’s consciousness until *Thor*. In his performance as Loki we cannot, therefore, expect the same implicit audience understanding of how his performer identity contributes to characterisation as we could with more well-known figures such as Anthony Hopkins. Nevertheless, the purpose revealed by Marvel’s casting of Hiddleston for Loki and Branagh’s specific involvement in this process — his recognition that Hiddleston could not ‘turn off’ his intelligence — demonstrate the functional value of his theatrical background to characterisation. Although the potential of Tom Hiddleston the

Shakespearean actor was not fully embodied until a year later, Branagh repeatedly and distinctly positions Loki as a Shakespearean character and Hiddleston as a Shakespearean actor. Indeed, both Branagh and Hiddleston have confirmed that in developing Loki's character they talked about the film as a dynastic drama and in discussion likened Loki to figures such as Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*. For example, Hiddleston stated that he had to keep a strict diet before the start of filming because Branagh wanted 'Loki to have a lean and hungry look, like Cassius in *Julius Caesar*.'<sup>17</sup> This reference to Cassius is instructive, inviting us to refocus the rationale behind Loki's treachery: both men usurp the existent power structures of their society supposedly in order to protect it. Loki is well aware of Thor's unsuitability to rule — at the beginning of the film he is arrogant, proud and quick to anger and as a result starts a war. With his patience and intelligence Loki views himself as the more suitable heir to the throne. As with Cassius, however, the audience's ability to view the purity of such beliefs is inevitably compromised by our knowledge of the characters' darker personal motivations.

This dramatic *raison d'être* is, furthermore, shared with Edmund in *King Lear*. Even though Loki is not afforded the same opportunities to soliloquise, his emotional characterisation in *Thor* mirrors the sentiment behind Edmund's famous musings on the arbitrary nature of 'legitimate' and 'bastard.' The abandoned offspring of the Jotun king (a race of frost giants), Loki is raised as Odin's younger son and Thor's little brother. His true physical appearance of blue skin and red eyes is hidden through Odin's power and revealed only by accident. When Odin finally reveals the truth of his ancestry, Loki recognises that his adopted father was keeping him for political expediency's sake, likening himself to 'another stolen relic, locked up here until you might have use of me.' Loki believes he is finally able

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<sup>17</sup>Baz Bambigboye, 'A strict diet for six months? That is a Thor point,' *Daily Mail*, May 29, 2009, accessed August 1, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1189315/BAZ-BAMIGBOYE-Weisz-words-philosophy.html>.

to explain why all his life Thor has been favoured over him, why he was never groomed to rule in the same way: ‘because no matter how much you claim to love me, you could never have a Frost Giant sitting on the throne of Asgard.’ His lament to Thor that ‘I never wanted the throne, I only ever wanted to be your equal’, recognises Edmund’s central complaint that in form and intelligence he is more than a match for his brother and yet, because he is not ‘*Legitimate* Edgar’ he will not receive the same power.<sup>18</sup> Branagh’s addition of ‘classically trained’ actors such as Hiddleston or Anthony Hopkins (Odin) in this way to the cast of *Thor* thereby enables him to bridge the gap between the spectacle of the film (as a superhero blockbuster) and the potentially distancing formal language in order to represent what is, at essence, a family drama. This strategy seeks to reduce the alterity of the science fiction world the characters inhabit and minimises the flamboyance of the Marvel rendering of Asgard, by focusing upon familiar, classical narratives and emotional characterisation.<sup>19</sup> Hiddleston’s performance is distinguished, moreover, by the way in which it allows the camera to

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<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear (Arden Shakespeare, Third Series)*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1997), 1.2.16 (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> Just as Branagh consciously manipulated his Shakespearean identity in order to promote his viability as a director for *Thor*, so Marvel have been aware of the importance of retaining a human touch to the more overtly science fiction texts within their Cinematic Universe. Indeed, media response to the release of the most recent franchise to be released under the Marvel Cinematic Universe — *Guardians of the Galaxy* (dir. James Gunn, 2014) — exemplifies the concern that blockbusters set in space do not typically perform well at the box office. Trent Moore, for instance, writes ‘It [*Guardians*] looks like the unapologetically freaky lovechild of *Farscape*, *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars*, and with Gunn at the helm, it’s not backing down. That’s a risky move. As Ryan Reynolds’ *Green Lantern* flop showed a few years ago, an intergalactic adventure is a tough sell for mainstream audiences — and *Green Lantern* brought a lot more name recognition than *Guardians of the Galaxy* could ever dream of having.’ Indeed, *Green Lantern* (dir. Martin Campbell, 2011) made a worldwide profit of \$219,851, 172 with *The Hollywood Reporter* stating that it needed to have made at least \$500 million to be considered financially solid, thus earning it the ranking of the thirteenth biggest box office bombs in history. As explored in my previous chapter, it was precisely this concern about the accessibility of science fiction to a mainstream audience that impelled Marvel executive, Kevin Feige, to appoint Kenneth Branagh as director: a man who could engage with the potentially off-putting Shakespearean quality of the Asgard space world. In a similar way *Guardians* ultimately capitalised on its humorousness, as an off-beat kind of buddy movie, shaped by the casting of Chris Pratt — a comic actor who has typically portrayed sweet but dim losers in television series such as *Parks and Recreation* (2009-). Trent Moore, ‘Why *Guardians of the Galaxy* is the most important Marvel movie to date,’ February 24, 2014, Webpage, accessed August 14, 2014, <http://www.blastr.com/2014-2-19/why-guardians-galaxy-most-important-marvel-movie-date>; Pamela McClintock, ‘Movie Report Card: 10 Biggest Flops of 2011 (So far),’ *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 22, 2011, accessed August 14, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/movie-box-office-biggest-flops-205951#6>; ‘Green Lantern Box Office,’ n.d, Webpage, accessed August 14, 2014, <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=greenlantern.htm>.

explicate his character's personal narrative without loss of the distinctive spectacular visual style of the superhero blockbuster.

With its use of special effects content and staging of spectacular events as an essential part of the narrative, the superhero blockbuster demonstrates little in the way of structural experimentation. With the exception of frame narratives such as in the *Spider-Man* series or *Iron Man 3*, it does not offer us insight into characters' personal motivations and instead operates in a largely realistic mode, utilising traditional continuity editing and maintaining the fourth wall. As Martin Zeller-Jacques argues in his analysis of the *X-Men* franchise, 'in many aspects of their presentation, the need for superhero adaptations to compete with other blockbuster action films supersedes their relationship with their sources.' Consequently, 'films have tended to appeal to a discourse of "realism" which has not often troubled superhero comic books...' <sup>20</sup> Though Loki is thus built in the same archetypal mould as Iago, Edmund or a number of other Renaissance malcontents, we are only permitted brief snatches of character insight. <sup>21</sup> Hiddleston's performance compensates for this lack of dialogue by investing in the eloquent physicality of Loki's body and in particular, his facial expressions. While he is initially a background character in the scenes on Asgard, the camera lingers upon his reactions so that the audience gain a sense of the way in which quietly, he mentally manipulates a situation to his advantage.

In the ending of the banishment scene, for example (see figure 3.2 below), Odin throws the hammer Mjölnir into the wormhole, inviting a seamless dissolve and segue into the next scene. The camera does not immediately follow, however, and cannot resist pulling back for a reaction shot so that, before it cuts away to the next scene, we can see Loki's

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Zeller-Jacques, 'Adapting the X-Men: Comic Book Narratives in Film Franchises,' *A Companion to Literature, Film and Adaptation* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 148.

<sup>21</sup> 'Director's DVD Commentary,' *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011).

expression and the subtle look of satisfaction that passes across his face at the knowledge that his greatest rival, Thor, has been removed.



ODIN: Whosoever holds this hammer, if he be worthy, shall possess the power of Thor.

Fig. 3.2 The banishment scene from Loki's perspective

The point is that, like Iago — described by Branagh as ‘the great actor’ — Loki's words and actions are a disconcerting mixture of truth and lies, masking ambition with caring obedience; the most telling evidence of his deception being in Hiddleston's non-verbal performances.<sup>22</sup> Branagh's composition frequently locates Loki within, or narrowly outside the conversation being framed; his placement indicating not only his alterity and outsider status but, as in

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Director's DVD Commentary,’ *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011).

figure 3.2 and 3.3 (below), revealing the truth of his machinations: his purposeful manipulation of Thor's pride in order to undermine Odin's trust in his son.



Fig. 3.3 During Thor's banishment the camera cuts from the tight, reverse angle close-ups of Odin and Thor to Loki: one of the 'loved ones' Thor has supposedly betrayed.

Indeed, with his wide, guileless eyes and respectful silence, Loki performs obedient deference to both his father and his elder brother throughout the film. His crooked eyebrow and slightly pursed lips, though, give subtle gesture to the complicated emotions at work underneath Loki's deceptively mild surface. The focusing of direction and Hiddleston's subtle performance thereby slowly reveals his characterisation not as the loyal brother, but the malcontent of the piece. The cinematographic rendering of Loki thus gives the audience a language with which to interpret the character without relying on his silver tongue, the visual asides speaking just as eloquently as a monologue through Hiddleston's expressive face demonstrating Loki's silent inner narrative.

Loki's status as antagonist and the distinct values attributed to his character through Hiddleston's performance are not only apparent in these smaller gestures but in his physicality as a whole. When presenting her Reith Lecture, Marina Warner argued for a trend

towards ‘defining male identity and gender through visible, physical, sexualised signs of potency rather than verbal, mental agility.’<sup>23</sup> Indeed, this is a cultural and social phenomenon that has rightly merited a productive critical attention in studies by influential figures such as Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. As the casting of Hemsworth as Thor testifies, popular cinema still abounds with the image of the muscular heroic lead. It is worth noting, however, that the action blockbuster or superhero blockbuster offer alternative images of masculinity which, in recent years especially, have centred on the antagonist as trickster. Although this deserves much greater depth than I can afford it here, there is a distinct trend in blockbuster villains for male characters whose strengths lie not in the abundance of their physicality but in their intellectual superiority. Characters in recent Hollywood franchises such as Silver (Javier Bardem) in the James Bond film *Skyfall* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2012) or the Joker (Heath Ledger) in Christopher Nolan’s 2008 *The Dark Knight*, espouse the same mythological and folkloric archetype as Loki. Importantly, they also depict more ‘everyday’, un-muscled male bodies, especially in contrast to the protagonists they oppose. Often, as in the case of Silver or the Joker, this is articulated through a contrast between the ‘uncomplicated’ masculinity of the heroes and a degree of effeminacy in these antagonists. Indeed, while Loki’s presentation, though highly theatrical, largely avoids such campness, the Marvel Cinematic Universe consistently establishes the virility of its heroes through juxtaposition with images of effeminacy.

Although this is an image which I will return to later in this chapter (see page two hundred and ninety-five), the American poster for *Thor: The Dark World* (dir. Alan Taylor, 2013) reifies this masculine-feminine contrast through the positioning of Jane Foster in relation to Thor. Looking backwards over her shoulder with one hand placed on Thor’s chest, this coquettish stance underlines her vulnerability as a female character and thus her reliance

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<sup>23</sup> Marina Warner, ‘Lecture 2: Boys Will Be Boys,’ *Reith Lectures 1994: Managing Monsters*, Transmission: 2 February 1994, BBC Radio 4.



on Thor's physical strength within the violent world of the comic series. This exact pose is also present in the poster for *Iron Man 3* (dir. Shane Black, 2013), with Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) clasped to Tony Stark's (Robert Downey Jr.) chest. The international poster for *The Dark World* further exaggerates the stereotypically gendered dynamic between its leads, with Thor's arm curved around Jane, Mjölnir held aloft in readiness and Jane raising a hand in an expression of fearfulness. This gendered visual hierarchy, with Thor as the definitive example of strength and Jane as the weak damsel to be saved, thus positions Loki midway on this scale through visual indicators of his difference. That he is less overtly masculine than his brother is conveyed physically through the differences in the fighting styles employed by both characters. Hiddleston prepared for Loki's role by learning capoeira, a Brazilian martial art which is a mixture of dance, acrobatics and dance and, like many martial arts, is characterised by its speed, mobility and practice of non-resistance through evasive, rather than overtly aggressive movements. Indeed, stressing Branagh's decision to keep Loki 'lean and really flexible' rather than muscular, Hiddleston commented that 'If Thor was a big rock then Loki was like the wind'.<sup>24</sup> Both Hiddleston's slimmer physicality and the cunning intellectualism of his character is thereby apparent in Loki's fighting style which is visually smaller on screen, utilising speed, smaller weapons such as knives, deceptive feints and, in a much imitated and reproduced moment, demonstrates Loki's sinuousness by showing him spinning around a pole. In contrast, Chris Hemsworth had to prepare for his role by gaining twenty pounds in muscle mass, achieving this through bulk eating and high intensity weight training.<sup>25</sup> Thor's fighting style thus complements Hemsworth's powerful muscularity and the imagined task of wielding a hammer as a weapon, with large, sweeping gestures and dynamic downward blows that are explicitly aggressive rather than defensive.

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<sup>24</sup>Josh Wilding, 'Tom Hiddleston talks Loki, Thor and The Avengers!', July 29, 2010, accessed June 30, 2014, Webpage, <http://www.comicbookmovie.com/fansites/joshw24/news/?a=20858>

<sup>25</sup>Lara Rosenbaum, 'Chris Hemsworth's Workout,' *Men's Health*, Webpage, October 7, 2011, accessed August 14, 2014 <http://www.menshealth.com/celebrity-fitness/chris-hemsworth-workout>.

In terms of costuming, Loki's apparel, with its long outer coat, also emphasises the importance of flexibility and movement, as a way of referencing his character's elusiveness and moral ambiguity. This is something especially apparent in comparison to the solid, metal-detailed features of Thor's armour, which clings more tightly to his torso and alludes to the pronounced muscularity of Hemsworth's body. In *Avengers Assemble* and *Thor: The Dark World*, moreover, Thor on occasion wears his breast plate without accompanying chain mail so that the size of his biceps is even more immediately apparent. Loki's costume is similarly slim fitting, emphasising Hiddleston's height and slim build, but with its more sombre black and dark green tones, less revealing, multiple layers and more subtly ornate detailing it is synecdochal of the same complexity that characterises his personality. This effect and the contrast between the two men is also translated into their dress while on Earth: while Thor embraces modern casual clothing wearing (some equally snug) jeans and a t-shirt, Loki carries forward his distinctive colours and wears a dark overcoat, suit trousers, shirt, tie and a green chequered scarf. The difference between the two men further reifies their embodiment of very different class qualities, too (as discussed earlier).

Indeed, with his plain, functional and distinctly casual clothing, including a plaid shirt and worker boots, Thor adheres to an almost blue-collar aesthetic. His initial appeal for the female characters lies in his muscularity, with a gratuitous topless scene revealing the extent of Hemsworth's impressive physique and positioning him as an object of the female gaze. In reference to a familiar archetype within popular culture — that of the hunky labourer/workman — Darcy (Kat Dennings) remarks admiringly, 'You know, for a crazy homeless guy... he's pretty cut'.<sup>26</sup> Within this trope the working-class body, which shows the

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<sup>26</sup> In his monograph *The Working Class in American Film*, Robert A. Marcink describes this filmic archetype as the 'rugged individualist'. A working class figure, on 'prominent display' from the studio era of film through into counterculture and beyond, the rugged individualist served a role in 'protecting existing communities, usually white and working class, or forging new ones.' Distinguished particularly by their 'desire to dream of a better life,' these individuals can occupy a wide spectrum of potential employment. Thor's abundant physicality

effort of its employment visibly (muscles straining from physical labour), is fetishised and sexualised. Loki, however, retains the upper-class connotations of his characterisation with the formal quality of his overcoat and suit. The two men are thus located at polar ends of a stereotypical class binary in which Thor represents the rough and ready, physical lower class and Loki the intellectualised, socially and culturally sophisticated upper class. A social reading of Thor's and Loki's representation within the film creates parallels between their distinctive physical characterisation and Pierre Bourdieu's argument on the relationship between sport and class, moreover. For Bourdieu, middle-class tastes are more suited to sports which involve the development of skill, while working-class tastes are more aligned with high-risk sports which place a premium on bodily strength.<sup>27</sup> The subtlety of Loki's movements compared to Thor's brute power thus iterates the crucial distinction between the two characters within the framework of popular class stereotypes, further detailing their characterisation on a subconscious level.

This dichotomy in terms of emotional characterisation is also evidenced aesthetically in Loki's hair, which is tidily slicked back at all times, only appearing in disarray during moments of utmost emotional or physical turmoil. Thor's hair, unsurprisingly perhaps, is similarly indicative of his characterisation, with his long, loose waves gesturing towards his impetuosity. It is worth noting, moreover, that with the exception of the opening throne room scene Loki only wears his distinctive golden horned helmet when he has revealed himself as the antagonist of the film. Otherwise, he goes bareheaded and when stood on screen next to his brother, one is able to get a sense of the slight but distinct height difference between Hemsworth and Hiddleston. This is emphasised by the former's sheer physical bulk

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thereby ascribes to the 'rugged' quality of Marcink's classification, as does the role of protector he assumes on a number of occasions: working to defend Asgard and, most crucially, the inhabitants of small town America (in a typically Hollywood representation of gender Thor has to protect some of its most 'vulnerable' individuals: two young women and an older, intellectual man). Robert A. Marcink, *The Working Class in American Film* (New York: Cambria Press, 2011), 35.

<sup>27</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, 'Sport and social class,' *Social Science Information*, 17, 6 (1978), 819-40.

and the flared jut of his cape over his shoulders, which further iterates his broadness. On screen Loki looks noticeably smaller and slimmer than Thor, his darker hair and paler colouring also contributing to a sense of weaker physical prowess (as does the contrast between Hemsworth's deeper, rougher tones with their occasional native Australian inflection and Hiddleston's quieter, received pronunciation voice). The dramatic chiaroscuro that occurs between the good, light-haired, muscular Thor and the villainous, dark-haired, slimly built Loki is thus visually underlined throughout the film.<sup>28</sup> Branagh's conscious development of *Thor's* Shakespearean qualities thereby continues to cultivate the transparency and contiguity between Hiddleston's performance and Shakespeareanism (with its associated high cultural and upper-class connotations). This is a relationship which is further utilised within the Marvel Cinematic Universe to characterise Loki's function and the unique values he represents. Loki's depiction within the series is, furthermore, increasingly representative of Hiddleston's own star identity and a shared ambivalence towards more traditional models of masculinity. As I will continue to explore throughout this chapter, Hiddleston (and his characters) are defined by their eschewal of conventional Hollywood definitions of male actors as muscular, aggressive, of limited and intuitive or functional intelligence; instead, they are emotional, eloquent and nimble. Indeed, his observance of an intellectual and sophisticated public persona (in which his Britishness is emphasised) has garnered a large fan following. And yet, it is Hiddleston's performances of Shakespearean figures such as Henry V and Coriolanus which, ironically, reveal a partial desire to occupy

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<sup>28</sup> It should be noted that in Loki's earlier comic book incarnations it is not entirely possible to judge the colour of his hair as it is hidden under his golden horned helmet and as is typical of earlier superhero artwork his costume is comprised of luridly bright yellow and green. As time progresses, however, the colours of his costume tend to darken slightly and his facial features, though still monstrous, flatten to more recognisably human proportions rather than the goblin-esque qualities he has on occasion. The four volume series *Loki* with artwork by Esad Ribic, for instance, has a more muted, almost pastel-shaded palette. More recent appearances have also contained a dark-haired Loki, especially evident in his Lady Loki or Kid Loki incarnations. The contrast this physical detail draws between the dark, pale Loki and the typically golden-haired, tanned Asgardians underlines the racial, cultural and moral differences between the him and his adopted people. Indeed, *Thor: Son of Asgard #8* (November 2004) details Loki's jealousy of his brother's warrior companion, Sif, and her golden locks: he cuts her blonde hair off, replacing it instead with black hair.

the kind of leading man model of modern masculinity that was evident in his audition for the role of Thor. What Loki desires most, after all, is to be just like his brother.

### **The Rising Shakespearean: *The Hollow Crown***

Before exploring Hiddleston's return to Shakespeare, I wish to briefly detail Hiddleston's work in the intermediate period between *Thor* in 2011 and *The Hollow Crown* in 2012. This short period saw the release of three further films in which Hiddleston plays roles which reiterate the tendency of his early career towards period drama and confirm an association in casting (whether conscious or not) between his star persona and upper-middle class characters. The notable point of these films' starry directors, moreover, recognises Hiddleston's growing popularity as an actor and his increasing prominence within the industry. They are: *Midnight in Paris* (dir. Woody Allen, 2011), *War Horse* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 2011) and *The Deep Blue Sea* (dir. Terence Davies, 2012); the latter two being of particular interest in the way they represent a very similar configuration of early twentieth-century masculinity. Initially thus, the character of Captain Nicholls in *War Horse* appears as a paean to British militarism with the soft sepia tones of Spielberg's cinematography capturing Hiddleston's blonde coiffured hair, lightly tanned skin and bright blue eyes in an image of matinee-style good looks and refined elegance. Sympathetic to Albert's (Jeremy Irvine) distress at the prospect of losing Joey — the titular war horse — Nicholls invokes an almost chivalric sense of duty, promising to return the boy his horse at the end of the war. Along with his social counterpart, the equally patrician Major Stewart (Benedict Cumberbatch), Nicholls demonstrates youthful exuberance, enjoying the speed and grace of his new mount in a race against the other officers. Nicholls' and Stewart's swaggering confidence is their downfall, however. An early morning raid on the apparently undefended

German artillery camp at Quiévrechain ends in defeat, with Nicholls killed and Stewart surrounded by German soldiers, one of whom admonishes him ‘Look at yourself! Who do you think you are?’ In the reality of warfare the officers’ boyishness is a poignant reminder of their youth, inexperience and naivety. Nicholls and Stewart emblemise a form of English upper-class masculinity which, already by 1914, was becoming fast outdated and, in its continuing belief in the primacy of British imperial might, entirely inappropriate. Though playing only minor roles in the overall narrative of *War Horse*, their presence contributes to a criticism of the English upper classes: figures whose values, founded upon abstract concepts such as honour, are shown to be divorced from reality and estranged from everyday social experience.

Freddie Page in Terence Rattigan’s *The Deep Blue Sea* represents a similar iteration of upper-class Englishness, as a former RAF officer, participant in the Battle of Britain and current gentleman of leisure. If Nicholls embodies the waste of war, Page characterises its tragic afterlife, at once doomed to repeat its horror as a survivor and mournful of the opportunities and extremes of feeling it created. His air of cultural sophistication and genial *bonhomie* barely disguises the extent of insincerity and discontent beneath; as his married lover and subject of the play — Hester (Rachel Weisz) — notes, Freddie’s life ‘stopped in 1940. He’s never really been happy since the war.’ Like Nicholls’, Freddie’s way of living is entirely inappropriate for the practicalities of peacetime. His (somewhat forced) lust for life has no place in the restrained, austere environment of post-war Britain; he seeks but is unable to replicate the same thrill he experienced in battle. The play’s famous maxim, ‘Beware of passion’, serves as an admonitory statement to Hester on infidelity, but it also acts as a warning against that aspect of Freddie’s personality which is so seductive: his fervour. Hester’s mother-in-law (Barbara Jefford) instead advises ‘a guarded enthusiasm. It’s safer’;

but, as Hester retorts, 'Much duller.' Indeed, while Collyer (Simon Russell Beale) offers muted but constant love for his wife, Hester's relationship with Page threatens not only to consume herself but him also. During their final exchange, Freddie states that they are 'lethal' together and warns her, 'you'll start talking and I'll be lost.' Though Page and Collyer represent the same upper class of Englishman, the latter's discreet and controlled way of living allows him to live comfortably within the austerity of 1950s society. As a high court judge, moreover, Collyer is integral to the continued running of the country and the protection of a safe moral order; by contrast, as a demobbed RAF pilot with no obvious profession until the very end of the film, Page represents instability and indulgence.

The two independent films Hiddleston did with director Joanna Hogg (*Unrelated* in 2006 and *Archipelago* in 2010) at the beginning of his career also discuss middle-class anxiety. *Archipelago*, in particular, details the excruciating politeness of a middle-class family and their inability to communicate their true emotions to each other. Hiddleston's character, Edward, contains an almost Hamletian streak of doubt and pathetic boyishness, frustratingly inept in the face of his overbearing family. The cumulative effects which these roles, with their very obvious class similarities, have upon Hiddleston's star persona are thus worth interrogating. Are the consistent references within the press to his Eton education and double-first from Cambridge a symptom of contemporary British ambivalence regarding the upper-middle classes? The press' focus upon these details of Hiddleston's upbringing is a phenomenon which has also occurred in reportage of actors who have come from similar backgrounds and who have risen to fame within a similar period of time, after all, such as Eddie Redmayne or Dominic West.<sup>29</sup> Does Hiddleston's personal background shape the way

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<sup>29</sup> One *Daily Mail* article reports, 'Eton's motto, 'Floreat Etona' ('Let Eton flourish'), has never seemed more apt as former pupils such as Hugh Laurie, Dominic West, Damian Lewis, Eddie Redmayne, Tom Hiddleston and Harry Lloyd dominate our stage and screens' and notes that with its current reputation for cultivating future stars of film and television, it has been described as an 'alternative RADA' by casting agents. *GQ* even

in which we view his performances and the type of characters he portrays? Certainly, that Hiddleston's early career is marked by such roles is of no surprise, as was predicted by his agent. The qualities which Hattersly, Beaumont-Thomas and Brooks (amongst others) identify are recognisable and these early film and television roles demonstrate the persistent connection made by both the media and the industry between Hiddleston's star persona and the articulation of a quintessentially English 'gentleman' archetype. This model of masculinity is predicated upon values such as eloquence, emotional and aesthetic restraint, a high degree of education and discerning cultural tastes (expressed and epitomised through Hiddleston's Shakespearean associations).

This occurrence is evident even when such characters are involved in an implicit critique of the upper-middle classes (Nicholls' and Page's narratives testify to their vulnerability and incompatibility with modern life in both a social and a very real sense), through Hiddleston's public persona and, in particular, his personal aesthetic. Hiddleston's

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pronounces its invention of the phrase 'Doing a Dominic' which, in their interview with Eddie Redmayne, they describe as the phenomenon by which an 'upper-class thespian — à la old Etonian and *The Wire* alumni [...] Dominic West — manages to dodge being typecast in costume dramas and Richard Curtis films by perfecting an American accent, escaping across the Atlantic, and telling casting directors they're ready for anything.'

Of particular and recurrent interest to the press in their imagining of the influential relationship between Eton and the successfulness of male British stars are actors, such as Redmayne and Hiddleston, who were year mates with Prince William. In an interview on preparing himself for the intensive singing in *Les Misérables*, Redmayne is also asked to comment on William and admits, 'I don't think singing was his thing.' A throwaway, one-line comment at the very end of the interview, even this non-knowledge of the Prince guarantees a prominent position in advertising the article, however. Certainly, Dominic West, an actor who — as the *GQ* article suggests — has worked hard to eschew the more expected period drama associations of his upbringing and class, acknowledges the difficulty of removing himself from Eton and the ambivalence with which such details are represented. Stating provocatively that 'old Etonian is a stigma that is slightly above 'paedophile' in the media gallery of infamy,' West described it as a 'label that sticks with you.' On preparing to meet the actor, 'a member of some gilded elite,' Andrew Anthony thus notes with surprise, 'I was prepared to meet a man who sounded like a mixture of Donald Sinden and Henry Blofeld. But, in fact, his voice is not really posh at all'. Lottie Moggach, 'Next Big Thing: Eddie Redmayne,' *GQ*, November 28, 2011, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2011-11/28/eddie-redmayne-week-with-marilyn-birdsong>; Andrew Wilson, 'Eton's class act,' *Daily Mail*, July 14, 2012, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/moslive/article-2172578/Etons-class-act-renowned-school-turning-new-generation-actors.html>; Jen Yamato, 'Eddie Redmayne on 'Unlearning' *Les Misérables* & Prince William's singing,' *MovieLine*, December 18, 2012, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://movieline.com/2012/12/18/eddie-redmayne-les-miserables-prince-william-michael-ball/>; Andrew Anthony, 'Way Out West,' *Guardian*, October 26, 2008, accessed September 15, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2008/oct/26/dominic-west-the-wire-television>.



photogeny and his phonogeny reinforce his appropriateness for such roles, with his clear diction, Home Counties accent and measured eloquence conforming to familiar class stereotypes. Similarly, his tendency to dress smartly on most occasions, for example wearing a shirt, tie, navy suit trousers and matching waistcoat to Wimbledon in 2013, as well as the classical rather than trendy cut of his hair, contribute to an impression of poise and seriousness of intent. These personal qualities invoke more traditional masculine values, without the nostalgic leanings of ‘classic’ modishness. Hiddleston’s appearance on *Newsnight* (28 May, 2012) further evinces the nature of this self-presentation. Clad in a black three-piece suit, with navy tie and his hair gelled back off his forehead into a tidy coiffure, Hiddleston is more formally attired than any of the contributors, including Simon Schama, whose shirt is unbuttoned at the neck and presenter Jeremy Paxman, with the bold fuchsia colour of his tie. But this difference is most acute when viewed in comparison with his fellow guest: actor and famous Shakespearean Mark Rylance. Though a doubter of Shakespeare’s exclusive authorship of his plays, Rylance is still frequently associated with Shakespeare, thanks in part to his work as Artistic Director of the Globe from 1995-2005 but chiefly due to a long career of performing Shakespeare on stage (most recently in alternating productions of *Richard III* and *Twelfth Night*). In his personal style and photogeny Rylance — unlike Hiddleston — embraces the stereotype of the (theatrical) actor as ‘arty’ or ‘bohemian’: the very aesthetic Ian McKellen’s appearance parodied in *Extras*. On *Newsnight* he is thus dressed in an open-necked, loose shirt, dark trousers, brown sandals and pork pie hat. With his hair of longer-than average length according to current men’s fashions and an ear piercing, Rylance’s personal aesthetic is entirely antithetical to Hiddleston’s formal restraint. This characteristically more ‘classic’ way of dressing recognises the fact that the associations drawn between Hiddleston and a model of English masculinity are built upon gentlemanly ideals which are not only constructed by the press but purposefully cultivated by the actor.

Hiddleston's part in *The Hollow Crown* in 2012 thereby represents the continuation but also the realisation of the cultured and specifically Shakespearean aspect of his star persona: the associations alluded to in Branagh's adaptation of *Thor*, his frequent reprisals of upper-middle class archetypes as well as in his self-presentation in the public eye. A series of television films produced for BBC2 as part of the celebration of the Cultural Olympiad, *The Hollow Crown* adapts the four plays in Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy, the Henriad.<sup>30</sup> The series is as follows: *Richard II* (dir. Rupert Goold), *Henry IV Part 1* (dir. Richard Eyre), *Henry IV Part 2* (dir. Richard Eyre) and *Henry V* (dir. Thea Sharrock). Initially Hiddleston was only secured to play Hal and was not contracted to take the lead in *Henry V*. With official production starting on the tetralogy as early as 2010 (Sam Mendes signed up as executive producer of all four plays in September 2010) it can be safely assumed that the casting of Hiddleston as only Hal recognised his relatively obscurity at this point. Indeed, *Henry V* has a famously starry history in terms of both theatrical performance but also noticeably in film adaptation. It is (with the exception of *Richard III*, perhaps) the only other Shakespeare history play that invites such star casting (and age-specific casting) as dramas such as *Hamlet* or *King Lear* (although the recent success of the RSC's production of *Richard II* with David Tennant may represent a new addition to this list). In directing *Henry V*, Sharrock's film thereby inevitably positions itself against the two other major British film adaptations, both intimately associated with their actors-directors, Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh: individuals who have been recognised as the pre-eminent Shakespearean performers and interpreters of their generations. With the worldwide release of *Thor* in the spring of 2011, its immediate commercial success, the critical praise levelled at Hiddleston's

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<sup>30</sup> Though each play is produced under the helm of a different notable theatrical director (Eyre directing both parts of *Henry IV*), with its own tonal idiosyncrasies, style and particular focuses, on the whole it represents a sustained, concentrated look at the representations of medieval power in Shakespeare's history plays. This is encouraged through the coherence of the cycle as a contained unit, with all four plays released onto UK television over as many weeks, as well as the close historical contiguity of the series in which the presence (and impact) of characters such as Bolingbroke/Henry IV extends throughout.

performance as Loki and the distinctly Shakespearean quality of Branagh's film, however, the possibility of continuing his involvement beyond *Henry IV* must have presented itself. Congruent with the Henriad's rich symbolism is, thus, the potential to read the conclusion of the Second Tetralogy, *Henry V*, as a figurative crowning and coming-of-age for Hiddleston as a Shakespearean actor.

*Thor*'s influence upon Hiddleston's Shakespearean cachet is not only present in his elevated significance as an actor to *The Hollow Crown*'s casting directors, however. Certainly, in spite of the genial affability demonstrated by Hiddleston's star persona and also evident in characters such as Captain Nicholls or William Buxton, *Thor* provides more apposite basis for his characterisation of Hal. Concerned with the young prince's journey to maturity and responsible governance, *Henry IV* offers striking parallels to both Loki and *Thor*'s narratives in a series which, as Robin Headlam Wells reminds us, is 'consistently sceptical' of 'heroic masculinity'.<sup>31</sup> Commenting on *Henry V* in particular, Hiddleston draws attention to the theme of accountability within the plays: 'take responsibility for who you are and what you stand for.'<sup>32</sup> By *Henry V* this responsibility of leadership, while still problematic and being negotiated, is largely in place and in a literal sense is evidenced in Henry's ascension to the throne. Both parts of *Henry IV*, though, dramatise Hal's maturation. Hiddleston's Hal is deliberately insolent and arrogant; his youthfulness is apparent at times, but with the onscreen presence of his brothers (both of whom are visibly teenaged) against whom we are invited to contrast him, the surly rudeness with which he treats his father appears inappropriately immature. It is as though in his frequent clashes with his father (Jeremy Irons), Hal is cast into the undeveloped emotional behaviour of his childhood. This is

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<sup>31</sup> Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare on Masculinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 24.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Billen, 'Once more unto the breach with Shakespeare's kings,' *The Times*, June 23, 2012, 4-5.

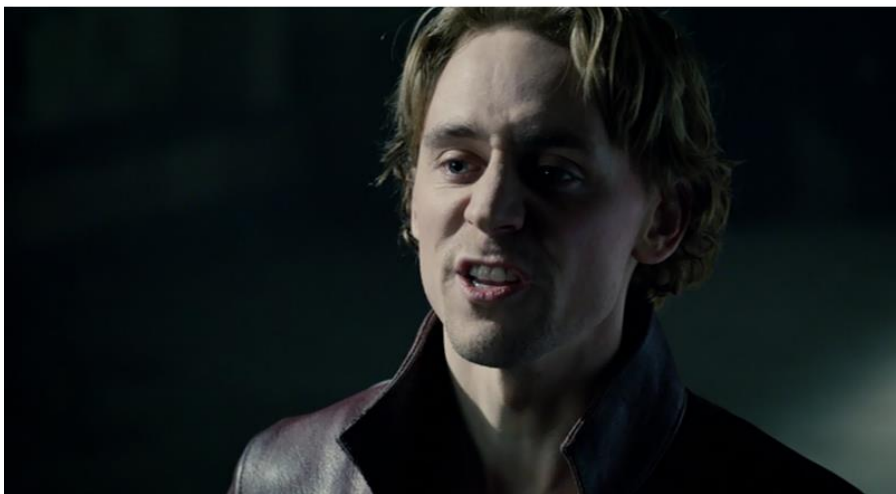
especially evident in contrast to the more relaxed assertion of his identity seen in the Eastcheap scenes, in which Hal is charming, sexually confident and mischievous rather than juvenile. Act Three Scene Two of *Henry IV Part One*, for instance, evinces the combative relationship between Hal and his father in a scene which is strikingly comparable to Branagh's characterisation and composition of the relationship between Odin and Thor. Indeed, analysis of the scene in *The Hollow Crown* and its counterpart in *Thor* also demonstrates the means by which both texts convey their Shakespearean quality through mise-en-scène and costuming.

Dismayed by his son's continued association with individuals of a lesser and unbecoming rank, Henry warns his son direly, 'the soul of every man / Prophetically do forethink thy fall'.<sup>33</sup> Representing the King's Westminster Palace, in *The Hollow Crown* this exchange takes place within the cavernous expanses of Gloucester Cathedral; an unforgiving and cold environment, dimly lit with the same cool colour palette that characterises the cinematography of both *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. In stark contrast to the vibrant golds, azure blues and warm tones which saturate Rupert Goold's *Richard II*, and which are particularly utilised to depict the king and his environs, the bleakness of Henry's palace underlines the heaviness (and uncomfortableness) of royal duty: the eponymous hollow crown Richard describes and Henry's later realisation that 'uneasy lies the head that wears a crown'.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV: Part One (The Arden Shakespeare, Third Edition)*, ed. David Scott Kastan (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2002), 3.2.37-8. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text, signalled by the prefix 'Pt. 1:' where not self-evident.'

<sup>34</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV: Part Two (The Arden Shakespeare, Second Edition)*, ed. Arthur Raleigh Humphreys (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1967), 3.1.31. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text, signalled by the prefix 'Pt. 2:' where not self-evident.'



KING HENRY: Thou that art like enough, through vassal fear,  
Base inclination, and the start of spleen,  
To fight against me under Percy's pay

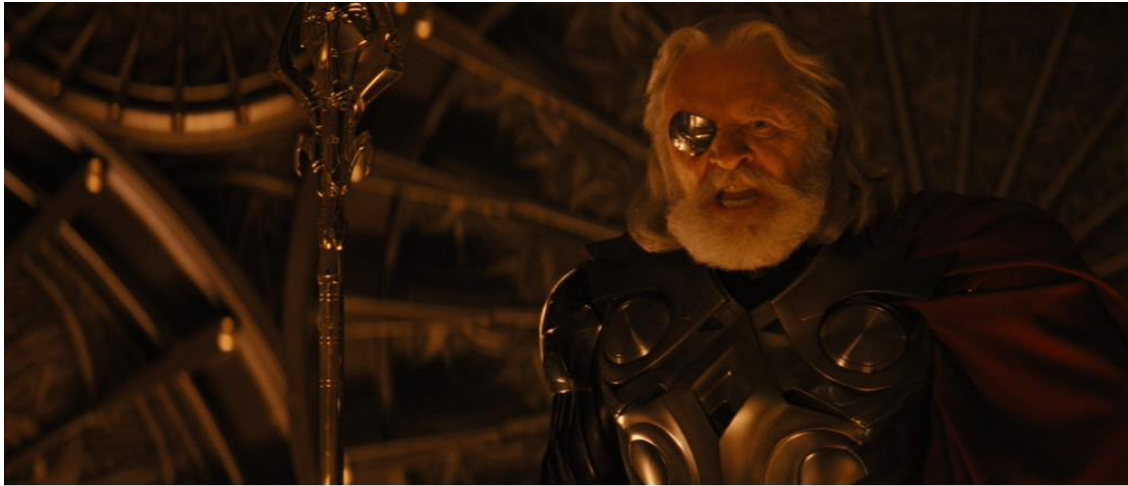
PRINCE HARRY: .... I will redeem all this on Percy's head,  
And in the closing of some glorious day  
Be bold to tell you that I am your son (3.2.124-34)

Fig. 3.4 Act Three Scene Two of *Henry IV, Part One* in *The Hollow Crown*.

With his haggard, wan appearance and often laboured, husky delivery, Iron's Henry is a man visibly weighed down by his responsibilities as a monarch and by his (at once prideful but also guilty) remembrance of the audacity and violence of his youth. After establishing the scale of the setting both cinematically and thematically, the camera remains in medium to tight close-ups in a series of reverse angle shots of, alternately, Hiddleston and Irons as they perform. In both cinematography and characterisation this moment evokes the banishment

scene in *Thor*, as I have already described in this thesis. A central hinge of the film's narrative, Odin and Henry's reactions to their sons are founded on the expression of a similar sentiment. The striking visual parallels in the depiction of this father-son relationship demonstrate both the relevance of *Henry IV* as an analogue for *Thor*, as Branagh argued, but also the relevance of reading Thor's character onto Hiddleston's performance of Hal.

Sharply gestured into the royal chamber by a steward, Hal's entrance into the scene demonstrates his clear absence of haste. Hiddleston's gestures, moving swiftly from the jocular to the bored, convey his character's disinterest in fulfilling his princely duties and, instead, his visible desire to occupy the informal, democratic settings of the Boar's Head. Arriving with an ironic snap of his heels, Hal moves towards his father with a shake of his head and an exasperated sigh. Increasingly insolent and oblivious to the seriousness the encounter holds, Hal sighs again, placing his hands on his hips, assuming a pose of adolescent insouciance on hearing his father recount the wonder with which the people viewed the newly returned Bolingbroke. This boyish posturing is reminiscent of Thor's own physical exuberance. The gravity and ceremony of the event dedicated to his ascension to the throne of Asgard is disrupted by his desire to perform for the assembled Asgardians, winking, cheering and hefting his hammer, Mjolnir, in vigorous displays of strength.



ODIN: You are a vain, greedy and cruel boy!

THOR: And you are an old man and a fool!

ODIN: Yes, I was a fool to think you were ready... You have betrayed the express command of your king. Through your arrogance and stupidity, you've opened these peaceful realms and innocent lives to the horror and desolation of war! You are unworthy of these realms, you're unworthy of your title, you're unworthy... of the loved ones you have betrayed!

Fig. 3.5 Odin casts Thor out for his act of warmongering.

Like Thor, ultimately deemed too irresponsible to rule, Hal, too, is rebuked for his lack of seriousness. Visibly confident in his ability to charm and evade his father's latest effort to rein him in, Hiddleston's glibly promises, 'I shall heereafter, my thrice-gracious lord, / Be more myself' (Pt. 1: 3.2.91-2). His accompanying self-deprecating smile and laugh is met with a slap, however. In both texts the conflict between father and son thus originates from an

ageing and ill king confronted with not only a disappointing son but the realisation that his heir, required immediately to assume responsibility, is not fit to rule.

Indeed, this concern is voiced by both monarchs in provocative statements which explicitly imagine their sons' inadequacy as not only a personal betrayal but a national one. Odin's banishment speech with its increasing tension through use of anaphora — the repeated refrain of 'You are/you're unworthy...' — indicts Thor for his failure to obey his king, to protect his country and finally, as a result of both of these, the endangerment of his loved ones. Similarly, Henry views his son's disobedience as negligence tantamount to treachery and in a complicated speech imagines Hal first as Richard II — a man born to rule but with only a 'shadow of succession' (Pt. 1: 3.2.99) — and then as a collaborator of Henry Percy. In spite of the fact that Thor's banishment was caused by his instinct towards aggression rather than caution, moreover, both Thor and Hal prove their worthiness to inherit the throne through symbolic acts of violence. In this act their bodies become a physical representation of their dedication: their wounds and blood emblemise their readiness as a potential site of sacrifice but also the fierceness with which they engage. The symbolic gesture by which Thor demonstrates his selflessness is thus his willingness to fight Loki's weapon unaided, in his attempt to save Jane and the other inhabitants of the New Mexico town from his brother's machinations. The means by which Hal upholds both his placement within the domestic and the dynastic, national unit is, perhaps, more straightforwardly with his participation in the battle at Shrewsbury and his killing of his family's enemy and his own dramatic counterpart, Hotspur. Notably, battle is the first time in which Hiddleston's performance of Hal is attached to any significant indicators or accoutrements of his rank or family loyalty.





Fig. 3.6 Henry, Hal and the army before the battle at Shrewsbury.

Indeed, in a comparable manner to *Thor*, much of the ‘Shakespearean’ quality of *The Hollow Crown* is induced through casting and its mise-en-scène. Witness, for example, the same steely authoritarianism and traditionally patriarchal quality of actors such as Anthony Hopkins and Jeremy Irons. Generic medieval-style costuming, which is recognisably historic but non-specifically so, with emphasis placed on tactile fabrics such as leathers, furs and velvets and coarse homespun cloth, is similarly evocative. The outfit which Hiddleston wears for much of *Henry IV* thereby accords with this loose, but significant evocation of period and the functional manner of clothing to denote rank: costumes which, operating as a form of mise-en-abîme, reflect the basic nature of the protagonists (as I explored in my section on *Thor*). For much of the first part of Part One Hal’s brighter costume of dark red, long-sleeved jerkin, black shirt and thick leggings evinces a recognisably modern and less structured silhouette. This is especially seen in contrast to the formal, highly structural doublet and hose which his brothers wear, who, despite the luxuriousness of the fabrics they wear, are repeatedly dressed in dark, sombre colours with only small ornamentation. Their

stricter and more visible adherence to the rigorous class hierarchy of medieval England and its system of simultaneous sartorial expression and enforcement, demonstrates the comparative appropriateness of their behaviour as royal princes. This visual statement reinforces the inappropriateness of Hal's behaviour, seen in his more informal garb and its ability to transition from Eastcheap to Westminster. As seen in figure 3.6 (above), clad in full plate armour and with the same russet cloak as his father and the rest of the army, however, Hiddleston's battlefield costume at last indicates Hal's desire to prove his suitability as heir. Removed of the distinctive markers of individuality (and unpredictability), Hal is finally dressed in a manner befitting of his rank and which communicates his family allegiance. It should be noted, moreover, that although Hal returns to his stock tavern-crawling uniform of dark red leather in *Henry V*, it no longer indicates his impertinence. Rather, through the consistent dressing of Hiddleston in subtle variations of this colour — and particularly in contrast to the dark tones which characterise the rest of the cast (with the exception of Katherine) — it appears as a consistent and now appropriate statement of his exceptional, majestic status. As he reminds his bride-to-be, after all, the royalty are the 'makers of manners'.<sup>35</sup>

To return to *Henry IV*, however, in contrast to Thor, whose arrogance is largely used against him, Hal's cognisance of the deliberate nature of his rebellion against his father is emphasised in this production through his skill in performance. It is here that the parallels between Loki and Henry as Machiavels present themselves. Loki, described as possessing a 'silver tongue', derives his power within the Marvel canon and Norse mythology in general from trickery, deception and confusing the lines between truths and lies. His carefully stage-managed encounters signal the constructed nature of language, its insidiousness and its

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<sup>35</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry V (The Arden Shakespeare, Third Edition)*, ed. T.W. Craik (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 1995), 5.2.252. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

potential use as a weapon. Meanwhile, as Graham Holderness argues, Henry is a king ‘who seems to rule more by the accomplished deployment of theatrical techniques than by statesmanship or good government.’<sup>36</sup> Hiddleston’s performance as both characters is thus predicated on recognising Henry and Loki’s intelligence and adroitness as actors. Tellingly, Hal’s soliloquy ‘Yet herein will I imitate the sun’ (Pt. 1: 1.2.174) is relocated from its textual setting in the Prince’s London apartments to delivery in voice-over as he walks through the streets of Eastcheap. This speech, described by Holderness as Hal ‘deliberately and punctiliously construct[ing] his own historical legend’, is then not performed in isolation but as he walks past the lower-class inhabitants of the alternative court at the Boar’s Head.<sup>37</sup> The effect of the subjective camerawork and confidential quality of the interior monologue on this relocation is surprisingly unsettling. Hal’s obvious comfort in this environment and his rapport with the people within it in this scene, and they with him, is undercut by the sentiment expressed in his speech. When delivered in the context of the means by which he will ‘falsify men’s hopes’, Hal’s metaphor of imitating the sun, ‘who doth permit the base contagious clouds / To smother up his beauty from the world’ (1.2.176-7) borders on the manipulative. The mildness of his outward appearance as Hal smiles and nods at the Eastcheap commoners only enhances the sense that this behaviour is as much a performance as is his role as dutiful son to his father. Neither of the Hals we see in the Boar’s Head nor within the court are ‘natural’ or uncomplicated. Indeed, this performative detail hints that Hal’s relationship with the commoners has always been pre-meditated and that he is acutely aware of the true power balance between them, even if he is currently unwilling to exploit it.

*Henry IV Part Two* further demonstrates the Loki-esque qualities of Hiddleston’s performance as Hal, with another example of his calculating mischievousness targeted

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<sup>36</sup> Graham Holderness, *Visual Shakespeare: Essays in Film and Television* (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 2002), 109.

<sup>37</sup> Graham Holderness, *Shakespeare: The Histories* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 163.

against Falstaff (Simon Russell Beale). Bearing the same impish grin which has become a significant part of Loki's trademark villainy (and which has been used with increasing effect throughout the *Thor* and *Avengers* series), Hal's relationship with Falstaff functions as a useful indicator of the prince's progressively complex characterisation in the plays. Conflicted by his recurrent desire to escape the court and his father's expectations, but also aware of his responsibility and Henry's ill health, Hiddleston's smile has a strained quality. While Part One of *Henry IV* evinced Hal's light-hearted boyishness and his (largely) affectionate relationship with Falstaff, his pranking in Part Two represents a more malicious desire, born from an urgent need for distraction. Like Loki's increasingly maniacal grins in *Avengers Assemble*, the brittle veneer of Hal's laughter and smiles do little to disguise the calculating purpose behind his actions.



Fig. 3.7 Hal and Poins (David Dawson) hatch their plan to see 'Falstaff bestow himself / tonight in his true colours' in *Henry IV Part Two* (2.2.147-8).

Indeed, if the contrast between Thor and Loki is played out in the differing aspects of Hiddleston's performance, it is also recast in the distinction between Hal and Hotspur. The casting of real-life father and son — Alun and Joe Armstrong — as Northumberland and Hotspur respectively, utilises the geographically apt, North-Eastern tones of Alun Armstrong's native County Durham accent. Maintained by Alun Armstrong and adopted by his London-born son, their Northern brogue positions their family unit against Irons' and Hiddleston's more languid, Southern English tones. This regional division, appropriate to a representation of the conflict, plays upon the same instinctive divide between Thor's rough, quick way of speaking and Loki's measured delivery. Armstrong's vigorous performance of the overly-fierce Hotspur — 'He apprehends a world of / figures here, / But not the form of what he should attend' (Pt. 1: 1.3.207-8) — thereby contrasts sharply with Hiddleston's more calculating prince.

With the self-consciousness of his roles as Prince Henry and the explicit association of Loki with the art of manipulation, Hiddleston's performance thus expresses the recurrent theme of this tetralogy: the artificiality and theatricality of power.<sup>38</sup> Although King Henry IV strives for legitimacy, the history plays are conscious of the perilous closeness of politics and performance. This is a legacy which Henry attempts to disguise and to prevent his son from inheriting but, nonetheless, he laments by the time of his death, 'For all my reign hath been but as a scene' (Pt. 2: 4.3.325-7). Within *Henry IV* this threatening pervasiveness of theatre

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<sup>38</sup> Within the tetralogy, Bolingbroke's deposition of the eponymous king in *Richard II* creates a tradition of kingship rooted within performance. The battle at Shrewsbury and the repeated challenge posed to Douglas of Henry's counterfeit kings exemplifies the potential encroachment of the theatrical into the political; a realm easily brought into crisis by questions of authenticity. Who is the king, what is their right to rule, how far should one go to uphold divine right? The dressing of Blunt in the King's robes is an action intended to protect Henry's life, but it also highlights the theatrical nature of Kingship. It becomes a mere guise which can be assumed or cast off like a costume (as similarly occurs in the camp scene in *Henry V* 4.1). In an ironic conflation of past and present, furthermore, Henry IV is accused by Douglas of being one who has 'counterfeit' st the person of a king' (5.3.27). This idea of counterfeiting is especially pertinent to Bolingbroke's assumption and performance of kingship, with its connotations of imitation, transformation and representation echoing the potential inauthenticity of his right to rule a usurped throne.

within politics is emblematised in the Eastcheap environs, the mirror-form of the court in which Falstaff is the carnivalesque mock King. Falstaff conforms to Bakhtin's idiom of carnival as a character who revels in the 'inside out', acting as parody of reality and lived experience.<sup>39</sup> He is, however, only one of 'multiple misrule lords' within the play; another being Hal, of course.<sup>40</sup> Instead of merely being a carnivalesque form of the court, moreover, Eastcheap acknowledges and celebrates the inherent stagecraft of politics. Falstaff mirrors Henry in performance of kingship: 'This chair shall be my state, this/dagger my sceptre, and this cushion my crown' (Pt. 1: 2.5.244-5); the paraphernalia here once more highly symbolic of the theatricality of politics, representing the simple props that can articulate a position of power. Indeed, Eyre's episode explicitly celebrates the metadramatic quality of this moment, positioning Russell Beale's Falstaff on his chair atop a table. Attended by a helpful stagehands who furnish his performance with a bronze cooking pot for a crown and bottle for his orb, Falstaff's miniature stage is surrounded on all sides by the Boar's Head patrons as a cheering, expectant audience.

Hiddleston's Hal/Henry is thus also able to co-opt carnival's frequent concern with 'crownings and uncrownings'.<sup>41</sup> On the arrival of the Sheriff (John Ashton) at the Boar's Head after the Gadshill robbery, its inhabitants attempt to hide Falstaff. Hal deliberately positions himself in the middle of the tavern so that he is caught in a passionate clinch with Doll Tearsheet (Maxine Peake). In the exchange with the Sheriff, Hal's initial role as louche

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<sup>39</sup> 'We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (à l'envers), of the 'turn-about-, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.' Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Rabelais and His World,' *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 687.

<sup>40</sup> Falstaff describes his court as 'Diana's foresters,' 'gentlemen of the shade,' and 'minions of the moon'. This semantic field of cultural and mythical images establishes what Sandra Billington calls his 'night-time reign of misrule'. The dark, moonlit realm stands in parodic contrast with traditional imagery of the king as sun. She also argues that aside from Falstaff, other lords of misrule are 'a king with no right of succession, nobles in revolt and one robber baron [...]' Sandra Billington, *Mock Kings in Medieval Society and Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 149.

<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, 'Rabelais and His World', 687.

lothario is exchanged for an assertion of his rank, with Hiddleston's posture straightening and his tone growing colder and more clipped as the conversation continues, however. For the first time within the Eastcheap environs, Hal expresses the reality of his rank to those surrounding him and assumes the kind of role expected by his father.

SHERIFF: Good night, my noble lord.

PRINCE HENRY: I think it is good morrow, is it not?

SHERIFF: Indeed, my lord. I think it be two o'clock.

*Exeunt* [SHERIFF and CARRIER] (Pt. 1: 2.5478-80).

His steely determination and unwillingness to allow the Sheriff to treat him in the way appropriate to Hal rather than Prince Henry is evident in Hiddleston's icy dismissal and is demonstrative of Henry's skilful ability to act according to the demands of a situation.

Indeed, by *Henry V* his admonishment of Falstaff — 'Presume not that I am the thing I was' (Pt. 2: 5.5.54) — is largely self-evident in the new, sober leader Hiddleston presents. The commencement of the film seeks to remind us, though, not only of the character's youth, but of his continuing boyish appreciation of fun. The retaining of this quality of his personality is legitimised by the first scene in which the Chorus's prologue introduces 'Warlike Harry' via the sight of his coffin, covered in the English flag (Prologue 5). By prefixing the action of the play with the same statement of mortality that appears again in the Chorus's epilogue, we are reminded of the brevity of Henry's rule. The image of Henry's grieving wife (Mélanie Thierry) and his son further frame our understanding of the poignancy of this moment. This flash-forward is swiftly undercut, however, as Hiddleston's eyes, closed in the repose of death, blink open and a cut restores us to the present moment of the play, as Henry grins broadly and gallops his horse towards the castle. The opening minutes of Sharrock's *Henry V* thereby already work towards the conservatism of the adaptation and its lack of interest in questioning Henry's politics and his potential chicanery. As Henry runs

through the corridors of the castle, stopping before the throne room to visibly gather himself and transform his boyish exuberance to a more suitably royal pace, we are reminded of Hal's ability as an actor and reassured that the old mischievous prince is still present in parts. Nevertheless, this interpolated moment does not contribute to establishing any sustained (potential) critique of power.

The playfulness of Hiddleston's performance appears to refer back to Hal's youthful japes in *Henry IV* Parts One and Two, as well as creating an intertextual association with Loki's skilful deceit and masterful use of language. Unlike both, though, evidence of Henry's able chicanery is not permitted for long in *Henry V* and the more varied characterisation seen in *Henry IV* — with Hal's makeup referencing *both* the more traditional, masculine values of Thor and Loki's charisma and villainous Machiavellianism — appear subsumed in the series' progression to the more iconic text. Indeed, neither Sharrock's direction nor Hiddleston's performance invite us to question the purity of Henry's motives at any point. His performance of the King is instead inflected with only Thor-like heroic masculinity and is no longer complicated by Hal's Loki-esque traits. Although both episodes of *Henry IV* abundantly demonstrated the difficulty with which Hal found sufficient responsibility to rule, we are thus no longer required to question his appropriateness. Any old Hal-like qualities become evidence of Henry's masculine vigorousness rather than proof of his irresponsibility. His less-than monarchic behaviour, as displayed in the opening scene, is excused by our awareness of the poignancy of his death. Similarly, the moments in the adaptation when we see the self-conscious performance of Henry-the-man as Henry-the-King (and vice versa) are not intended to reveal something about the artificiality of power, or the power of the performer. Instead, their inclusion serves to validate his rule by endearing him to us. As Katherine is wooed by Henry's self-deprecating charm, we are only required to



believe on the whole in the justness of his cause, by trusting in his boyish earnestness. As the stakes at play escalate from successfully tricking Falstaff to the governance of a country so, ironically, Henry's characterisation lessens in complexity.

He is largely a cautious leader in much the same way as Branagh's Henry, moreover: both seriously consider the preconditions for war against the French and appear morally unsettled at the prospect of violence without due justification. Once decided on the matter, however, Hiddleston's Henry displays extreme conviction in his cause, and in demonstration of this fact the camera moves from Hiddleston upon the throne to a tapestry hanging on the wall of a knight on horseback. This visual reference to the chivalric code appears to affirm his decision and — along with the elegiac quality of the opening funeral scene — elevates Henry to an idealised representation of gallantry. Significantly, the visual correlative between the two images renders Sharrock's characterisation of Henry as a medieval iteration of the same aspirational, English 'gentleman' quality Hiddleston has embodied in film and television and according to the media. Indeed, Michael Mangan argues that for the audiences of *Henry V* at the time of Shakespeare's writing, the masculinity which Henry represented was 'distanced', in much the same way in which the cowboy hero of the Western enacted a 'distanced and romanticized masculinity for office and factory workers in the 1940s and 1950s.' Mangan continues that the stage is thus a 'fantasy area in which [...] both masculine and nationalist ideals are displayed and largely affirmed.'<sup>42</sup> The inherently fantastical quality of Henry, as a form of national wish-fulfilment for the audience, is apparent in Sharrock's adaptation which moves throughout between gentle criticism of war and valorisation of Henry as king and leader. The visual reference to knighthood thereby accords with

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Mangan, *Staging Masculinities: History, Gender, Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 70.

Hiddleston's personal statement that he believes in Henry's 'piety' and 'chivalric code'.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, the film repeatedly asks us to believe in the depth of Henry's conviction and the justness of his cause by framing central narrative events in a way that contribute meaningfully to his characterisation. The violent speech at Harfleur, for example, is included in the film, but Hiddleston's eyes are visibly moist as he delivers it; his tone is aggressive but his face conveys his obvious distress. Similarly, unlike Branagh's interpolation of Henry's tacit involvement in the act, Bardolph's death is an act which occurs without Henry's knowledge and causes instant sorrow in him. When Henry prays to God before battle, the camera focuses in upon his clasped hands, revealing the mismatched gloves as evidence of the promise made to Williams (Gwilym Lee) in Act Four Scene One. At all points this Henry recognises his responsibility for his men's lives and the tragic cost of violence that necessitates that his soldiers' deaths are meaningful.

Writing on the way in which the cinematography in the penultimate scene, Patrick Doyle's epic score and the excision of the massacre of the French prisoners undermine the potentiality of Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* as an anti-war statement, James Loehlin maintains that 'Branagh's *Henry V* is the official version of the play disguised as the secret one.'<sup>44</sup> Loehlin's argument, previously referenced in the thesis, posits that while an 'official' version, like Olivier's 1944 adaptation, celebrates the heroism of its protagonist, a 'secret' *Henry V* is a production that recognises the ambiguity, violence and cruelty at the heart of the play. Although it should be noted that Olivier's adaptation engages with its own artificiality in a productive manner, both it and Branagh's production, which sought to adapt *Henry V* in the immediate social and cultural context of the Falklands War, ultimately fails in its critique

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<sup>43</sup> *Times* Talks Madrid, 'Tom Hiddleston,' August 6, 2013, Video, accessed June 1, 2013, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ID-E-ddTp8E>.

<sup>44</sup> James N. Loehlin, *Henry V: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 145.

of violence and militarism. Similarly, Sharrock and Hiddleston are ambiguous in their account of the way they have chosen to interpret the play's themes. Hiddleston, for example, acknowledges 'there are brutal speeches in there that are not pretty' and states somewhat cryptically: 'I must be careful.'<sup>45</sup> Whether the implication is that Hiddleston wishes to take 'care' with the violent misogyny and brutality of the Harfleur speech by acknowledging Henry as a rhetorician *and* tactician, or performing it in a sympathetic manner as a man reluctant to carry out his threats (as in the film), it is not clear. The uncertainty of this statement is revealing, nonetheless. At times in their descriptions of the adaptation, Sharrock and Hiddleston appear to adhere to a configuration of Loehlin's 'official' version of *Henry V*. But at other points they seem to gesture towards the potential for one that is more sceptical about its engagement with rhetoric and violence. Hiddleston thus observes that the film does not critique Henry's war, stating that Sharrock has 'not made an anti-war film'. Simultaneously, however, he argues that the text 'is certainly a pro-peace film': an 'exhortation to accountability.' This latter point agrees with the sentiment expressed by Hiddleston, who, in the same conversation with Sharrock, concurred on the fact that contemporary political leaders only ever 'reveal themselves after a time' — making speeches and promises and then years later break them.<sup>46</sup> And yet — like Branagh's adaptation — in spite of the implication that the adaptation will potentially critique leaders such as Henry, the resultant text is surprisingly conservative in its contribution to Henry's (real and imagined) cultural afterlife.

I would argue that this tonal inconsistency is largely derived from a desire to present Henry in a realistic, but largely sympathetic light. The film acknowledges *some* of the difficulties of leadership and war when they are conducive to enhancing the character's

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<sup>45</sup> Billen, 'Once more unto the breach with Shakespeare's kings,' 4-5.

<sup>46</sup> *Times* Talks Madrid, 'Tom Hiddleston'.

heroism (thereby also positioning Hiddleston as a ready action star, in the same manner as his later role in *Coriolanus* will). Certainly, that *The Hollow Crown*'s representation of monarchy is fundamentally positive is conducive to the spirit of the Cultural Olympiad in which it partook with its celebration of British culture and society. It is perhaps for this reason that Eyre's adaptations of *Henry IV* permit a more complex and more morally ambiguous presentation of Hal's character than Sharrock's *Henry V*, with its iconic assertion of Englishness, frequently patriotic usage and its function as the climax of the tetralogy. As Danny Boyle's direction of the Olympic Opening Ceremony demonstrated, the Cultural Olympiad *could* be political. His tribute to the National Health System and inclusion of the Jarrow Marchers, for example, made a pointed comment on the practical and social necessity of such institutions. It could not, however, be explicitly critical; to do so would be to work against the affirmative purpose of the yearlong cultural gala.

That Hiddleston's performance also celebrates the industriousness and old-fashioned allure of the monarchy, moreover, reflects the positive upswing in popular attitudes towards the British royal establishment in recent years. With the marriage of Prince William to Kate Middleton in 2011, Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee celebrations (including a national holiday) at the same time as the Cultural Olympiad and only a month before the Olympics commenced, the birth of William and Kate's first child, George, in 2013 and a further child expected, such high-profile events have led the way for a mood of national pride. The fact that Hiddleston's success has occurred during this period is, perhaps, further suggestive of the international popularity of the British upper classes. But it may also suggest an expression of nostalgia for a perceived British social *and* cultural ideal founded upon restraint, cultural sophistication and moral rectitude. In striking symmetry with Branagh's *Henry V*, with its characterisation shaped by Branagh's relationship with Prince Charles, Hiddleston's

performance of the English monarch bears its own royal likeness, furthermore. Like his fellow former-Etonians, after all, he is persistently reported in connection to Prince William, despite acknowledging in interview that the Prince feels ‘as remote from or as close’ to him ‘as you do’.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, like Branagh’s *Henry V*, Hiddleston and Sharrock’s interpretation works to de-politicise Henry’s characterisation. In further resemblance to Branagh and his admiring description of Prince Charles, Hiddleston argues that Henry is ‘extraordinary’ because unlike contemporary leaders who only reveal their true purpose ‘after a time’, he is ‘actually there, leading the charge’. His rhetoric is, therefore, intended to inspire, whether it is his men to greater valour or the inhabitants of Harfleur to give up their town peacefully. And because — in Hiddleston’s words — he is on the ‘same level’ as his men, ‘on the ground at their side, also scared’, we are asked to view any potential rhetoric positively and not dismiss it as manipulation.<sup>48</sup> Although such chicanery is an inevitable part of kingship, Hiddleston’s stress on Henry’s ‘piety’ requests that we view even his deceptions or active performances as a kind of truthfulness. The visual reference to Williams’ glove when Henry prays and his eventual return of it to the soldier, for example, is framed as an implicitly positive act. Though a deception in part, in the adaptation the promise represents Henry’s desire to connect with his men and the seriousness with which he views their martial undertaking. And yet, such an interpretation of Henry and Williams’ relationship naively disregards the criticism Williams’ character offers within the play. In Gwilym Lee’s performance, instead, he is a mild and easily consoled presence. Although the games Hal played with Falstaff in *Henry IV* were heavily weighted in his favour, Falstaff was still able to secure some points and, at the very least, was able to persuade himself of his unjust victimhood through sheer force of

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<sup>47</sup> John Naughton, ‘Major Tom,’ n.p.

<sup>48</sup> *Times* Talks Madrid, ‘Tom Hiddleston’.

braggadocio. In the play Williams' sullen statement, 'I will none of your money' (4.8.62), reveals his dissatisfaction with the terms of the game; as his monarch, however, only Henry can ever win. Hiddleston's Henry thus offers a fantasy of hierarchical kingship, at times embodying the inclusive elements of the St Crispin's day speech, and at other times enforcing the exclusive means by which the play's definition of community is forged.

Henry's exhortation of 'Once more unto the breach' (3.1.1) is given on foot to a small group of common soldiers who surround him in a circle as he speaks. The intimate composition of this moment is emphasised by Henry's physical contact with those whom he addresses; he moves around the circle, gripping or shaking each man in turn, even cupping the cheek of one especially scared-looking soldier. He also kneels at one point during the speech, this gesture entirely inverting the conventional dramatic expression of the power balance between a monarch and his or her subject (both Olivier and Branagh perform from a position *above* their soldiers). And yet the St. Crispin's Day speech is exclusively addressed to a small group of the aristocratic members of Henry's army. Though this decision could be made to reduce the overtly jingoistic implications of the speech — which can be easily read (and indeed performed) as a piece of cynical bravado to motivate the troops — the lack of a large audience only lends the values in the speech social exclusivity. In spite of the promise of a cross-social military fraternity, evident in Henry's claim that 'he who sheds his blood with me / Shall be my brother' (4.3.61-2), the speech can only express the kind of greatness to be attained from fighting on St Crispin's Day through *social* mobility. The common soldier's aspiration to fame is expressed as an aspiration to class elevation, with Henry promising that fighting alongside him will 'gentle his condition' (4.3.63). The soldiers mentioned by name who are to become 'household words' (4.3.52) are, moreover, only the aristocratic members of the army: Bedford, Exeter, Warwick, Talbot, Salisbury and

Gloucester. Unlike the lower-class characters such as Pistol, Williams or Fluellen, the nobility of these individuals is enhanced by the relationship between their names and their status as landed gentry. Even the simple act of naming is thus recognition of their social status. This sentiment is enhanced by the fact that Henry's rage after the battle comes chiefly from the loss of his uncle York (Paterson Joseph); in Branagh's *Henry V*, by contrast, the King is motivated by the murder of the boys and personally carries the Boy's dead body over the battlefield.

Henry's reaction on learning of his victory at Agincourt further underlines the conservatism of Sharrock's adaptation. The scene is dimly lit in muted, grey colours and Henry and his men all bear upon them the signifiers of battle with their clothes and bodies muddied, scratched and bloodied and their expressions solemn but largely emotionless. The emotional restraint demonstrated in this scene thereby signals the poignancy of victory in the face of loss (on both sides). Hiddleston is moist-eyed when proclaiming the details of the French 'royal fellowship of death' (4.8.95), though, and falls to his knees in relief and divine supplication upon learning of the English triumph.



Fig.3. 8 Henry instructs his soldiers to sing 'Non Nobis' and 'Te Deum' (4.8.117).

Raising his clasped hands to the sky, this is a Henry who is less jubilant about the success of his army against the odds than the proof his victory offers that his actions were justified: that God's 'arm was here' (4.8.100). The soundtrack for this scene, though more sombre than the increasingly rising pitch and scale of Doyle's orchestration, is similarly contemplative and swelling in tone. The associations between the clear peal of trumpets and militarism underscore a non-diegetic correlative in this moment between Henry, military prowess and Englishness (Hiddleston's final battlefield address takes place with the English flag clearly visible in the background). The theatrical framing of Hiddleston's performance as he stands removed, facing away from his men towards the camera, ultimately invites a celebration of England as a nation chosen by God (a similarly and overtly patriotic representation was seen throughout the Olympics).

Sharrock and Hiddleston's desire to investigate the expediency of political language is forgotten, moreover, in a final wooing scene with Katherine which, again like Branagh's *Henry V*, revels in its own romanticism. Henry's apparent awkwardness as a soldier turned courtly suitor is not entirely convincing, nor are his explanations of his 'stubborn outside' and 'aspect of iron' (5.2.212). Hiddleston's gentle entreaties to Thierry, his sophisticated manner and conventionally handsome appearance refute the possibility that when he comes to 'woo ladies [he] frights them' (5.2.212-3). Meanwhile Katherine's reluctance is played by Thierry less as fearfulness at her country's conqueror than virginal timidity, swiftly exchanged for coy flirtatiousness. Indeed, because of Hiddleston's continued presence in *The Hollow Crown* from *Henry IV* Part One and Two into *Henry V*, Henry's louche and sexually confident manner with women is an already established fact. His interactions with the opposite gender at the Boar's Head, particularly the staged encounter with Doll Tearsheet described previously, stand in contradiction to his protestations — unless we are to consider that his



supposed nervousness, like that of Charles Marlow in *She Stoops to Conquer*, extends only to women of the same class. An alternative explanation is that Henry's awkwardness is feigned to engender greater trust from Katherine who, romance aside, is aware of her political importance to her father. Both the play and *The Hollow Crown*, after all, (though not always consistently) acknowledge Henry's skill as a performer, able to adapt his persona for the requirements of different social situations and individuals. Here, the text would thus represent the values of Loehlin's 'secret' version of *Henry V*, and dramatise the sexual politics necessary for rule.

This possibility too is undercut, though, by Hiddleston's performance, which is eager, courteous and displays no visual asides to suggest an element of chicanery behind his words. Henry's conversation with Kate is played, instead, as an increasingly lively exchange, their back-and-forth bantering mirrored on screen through their movement, with Kate's backward steps around the room matched by Henry's pursuit. The romanticism of their encounter is further emphasised by a sportive quality. Lines such as 'I have no strength in measure — yet a reasonable measure in strength' (5.2.133-4) and 'the elder I wax, the better I shall appear' (5.2.213-4) are delivered roguishly by Hiddleston with a Loki-esque mischievousness, winking and causing an ensuing giggle from Katherine. The former is delivered to her waiting woman, Alice (Geraldine Chaplin), whose alternately dour and scandalised expression positions her as an effective straight woman to Henry's dry humour. Her inclusion in this way softens the potential artificiality of the wooing by directly involving her in the humour and romance of the scene. Hiddleston's Henry also demonstrates his tenderness, with the imperatives peppering his speech to Kate played with greater ambiguity and hesitancy. Indeed, his viability as a romantic suitor is signalled by Henry's apparent lack of political authority in this moment and instead, his vulnerability. Henry's list of the nations Katherine

would rule is succeeded by the embarrassed admission of ‘...and Henry Plantagenet is thine’, delivered by Hiddleston with his head bowed and hand tentatively outstretched. Though possessing the power to take two separate nations to war, when Kate makes no reply, Henry lifts his head and utters ‘come’, inflected as a question rather than a command.

The final scenes of *Henry V* and their lack of interest in exploring the potential implications of Henry as a rhetorician thereby conclude the conservative bent of Sharrock’s adaptation which, despite its gritty representations of violence, ultimately valorises Henry’s as a fantasy of medieval kingship. Having followed his character’s maturation across the tetralogy, Sharrock’s celebratory *Henry V* offers a vision of the fully-fledged leader. Its heroic and romantic representation of Henry simultaneously establishes the validity and wide public recognition of Hiddleston’s Shakespearean persona, moreover. Hal’s crowning is Hiddleston’s, just as Katherine’s wooing is ours, too: a symbolic acknowledgement of his newly-minted Shakespearean fame as he vies for remembrance alongside other screen Henrys such as Olivier and Branagh.

Indeed, *The Hollow Crown*’s engagement with the history plays is on the whole largely conservative in its representation of Englishness and in its function as a symbolic text of the Cultural Olympiad. As both Olivier’s wartime *Henry V* and his involvement in the Old Vic company’s staging of *Henry IV* to mark Victory in Japan day testify, it is a cycle of plays which has in the past been utilised to assert a British identity which is vigorous, powerful and both culturally and politically significant.<sup>49</sup> Richard II, for example, remains a tragic figure, with the casting of Ben Whishaw in the role instructive in how we are to view his character.

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<sup>49</sup> Dominic Shellard details the Old Vic company during the immediate postwar period: ‘[it] quickly became an emblem of national consciousness second only to Shakespeare, and as the Old Vic’s historian, George Rowell, points out, its success was ‘partly due to the spirit of the times’ since there ‘was real hope for a nation that could mount *Peer Gynt* and *Richard III* concurrently with the return to Europe, and mark Victory in Japan (VJ) day by the two parts of *Henry IV*’. The production of the Henry plays again imbued many with hope for the future....’ Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1999), 4.

With parts in films such as *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (dir. Tom Tykwer, 2006), *Brideshead Revisited* (dir. Julian Jarrold, 2008), *The Tempest* (dir. Julie Taymor, 2010) and *Skyfall* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2012), Whishaw frequently portrays roles which subvert stereotypical gender expectations, with characters who are variously effeminate, fey, emotional and intellectual (as opposed to physical). Richard's capriciousness as a ruler is thus coded through Whishaw's performance of sexual ambiguity and the excessive luxuriance of his surroundings (including a pet monkey and a gold plated suit of armour). Moulding his character on figures such as Colonel Gaddafi and Michael Jackson, Whishaw views Richard as someone who sees themselves 'not really as a human being, but as a demigod'.<sup>50</sup> In contrast to this, Rory Kinnear's Bolingbroke, with his plain, doughy features, makes for a less complicated, stereotypical iteration of English masculinity. The physical difference between the two actors thereby epitomises the distinctions between their characters. With his heavier build, unkempt hair and beard and his more practical clothing Kinnear's Bolingbroke evokes an earthiness, while Whishaw's Richard is emotional and febrile but ethereal. Though a weak king Richard is, nonetheless, positioned by the *mise-en-scène* in *The Hollow Crown* as the rightful one; in contrast to the beautiful expanses of English countryside and the elaborate interior set pieces Richard occupies, Irons' beleaguered Henry IV testifies to the difficulty of maintaining the crown he usurped.

Eyre's adaptation of *Henry IV*, too, acknowledges the less heroic aspects of its young protagonist, engaging with Hal's more manipulative and Loki-esque qualities. By *Henry V*, however, the series returns to a more conventional definition of monarchism, with Hal's self-conscious performativity and Machiavellism subsumed within an assertion of his leadership

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<sup>50</sup> John-Paul Ford Rojas, 'Colonel Gaddafi and Michael Jackson inspired my Richard II performance, says Ben Whishaw,' *The Telegraph*, May 7, 2012, accessed June 25, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/william-shakespeare/9249663/Colonel-Gaddafi-and-Michael-Jackson-inspired-my-Richard-II-performance-says-Ben-Whishaw.html>.

as overtly, traditionally and ‘naturally’ masculine. With Hiddleston’s popular appeal, the violent capacity demonstrated by his character in *Henry V* and the uncomplicatedly romantic ending positing Henry as a conventional hero, moreover, he thus contributes to the series’ more conservative overtones with regards to masculinity and power. Hiddleston’s career has demonstrated a curiously delayed effect, therefore. Though deemed in effect too Shakespearean to play Thor — too educated, too ‘posh’, even potentially too English? — the high-profile role by which he has garnered a Shakespearean reputation has permitted him the opportunity to play a comparable character and indeed, by the end of *Henry V*, to be actively positioned as an action lead. This simultaneous challenging of expectations and confirmation of the more conservative usage of Shakespeare in contemporary culture is characteristic of Hiddleston’s work. Indeed, Hiddleston’s persona frequently invokes Richard Dyer’s configuration of the star as a site of contradiction and thereby also resistance.<sup>51</sup> The next section of this chapter will continue to negotiate the contrast between the Shakespearean aspects of his persona and the more democratic mass appeal of his internet persona, questioning how his engagement with social media frequently subverts the potential traditionalism of his Shakespeareanism.

### **The Afterlife of a Character: Memes, Loki and Hiddleston Online**

Though fast dated by the rapidity of technological developments, David Giles is still accurate in noting that the defining characteristic of celebrity is that it is ‘essentially a *media* production.’<sup>52</sup> Indeed, this statement is even more valid now than it was at the date of Giles’ publication in 2000. The growing scale and level of integration of social media platforms within the so-called ‘connective turn’ has steadily increased the amount of information

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (BFI: London, 1998).

<sup>52</sup> David Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A psychology of fame and celebrity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 3.

publicly broadcast by individuals, famous and otherwise. One of the founders of FaceBook, Mark Zuckerberg, is famous for his configuration of identity in the age of technological proliferation:

You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly... Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.<sup>53</sup>

Although this statement has been contested by academics in media and technology studies, it certainly recognises an aspect of celebrity identity that the internet increasingly challenges. Whereas previously an actor was only invited to share their private lives with the press, and could limit the extent of this, the internet provides celebrities with unparalleled opportunities to share confidences with their public. José van Dijck argues that platforms such as Twitter or Instagram are ‘pre-eminently’ exploited by stars and politicians who market their individual personalities as products: ‘their online personas equal their brands and the ultimate successful presentation of self is to have millions of followers.’<sup>54</sup> For those individuals who choose to make use of their opportunity, their online persona present readily accessible texts whose interpretation further contribute to understanding the functioning of their star persona on a macro and micro scale.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Zuckerbeg cited in José van Dijck, “You have one identity”: Performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn, *Media Culture Society* (2013: 35), 199.

<sup>54</sup> Van Dijck, “You have one identity”, 202.

<sup>55</sup> It is worth noting here the similarities between Hiddleston’s use of social media and that of Ian McKellen. Both men repeatedly use their Twitter accounts as platforms for their philanthropy. In the case of McKellen this is largely to promote Stonewall and charities supporting the gay community and, as discussed in the first chapter, to demonstrate his beliefs on political matters. Hiddleston, by comparison, is more circumspect regarding releasing his personal opinions but uses Twitter to advertise his work for Oxfam or to raise attention to their campaigns such as the #BelowTheLine movement. In spite of this, his Twitter account reveals a greater degree of information about his personal life than McKellen’s with photographs detailing his travels around the world and hosts online Q&A sessions. McKellen, instead, appears to restrict such insight into his everyday experience to his blogs in which he is afforded greater space to detail his thoughts. But while Hiddleston’s participation in memes based upon himself, or his characters, is less apparent on Twitter than it is on secondary

Aside from the obvious commercial possibilities of social media utilised by Hiddleston — as highlighted by van Dijck — these avatars offer a performance of private life in a way that is meant to appear natural and intimate. A recent tweet from Hiddleston thereby details his run around Regent's Park — 'A breath of freedom. Feeling so grateful' — and permits his followers (of whom there were 1.75 million in September, 2014) an insight into his 'everyday' life: his personal interests, pursuits and those institutions or individuals he supports.<sup>56</sup> With a swiftness of speed that print journalism cannot rival, programs such as Twitter purport to capture the actor in the precise moment, detailing the minute (and sometimes even location) of publication. And it is a moment which his followers can interact with, able to 'retweet', reply to Hiddleston directly, alert their own friends, or 'favourite' it and thereby add it to their personal history to be viewed again. Zuckerberg's formulation of the singular online persona thus recognises the fact that Hiddleston's Twitter avatar offers the illusion of private actions and thoughts, bridging the gaping between his public, professional and his personal life (access of which would be denied by more conventional means of viewing their star persona). Rather than reducing his identity to a single, integral self as Zuckerberg asserts, however, Hiddleston's visibility online argues for the necessity of a multiple, composite self, as well as demonstrating another site of performance. His persona, after all, is constructed through a number of contradictory values; something which is only compounded by the multiple, self-conscious, performative and multiply located aspects of his internet self.

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media platforms such as YouTube, McKellen increasingly engages with internet culture on his profile, both retweeting memes and inviting their creation through posting photographs of himself, and often Patrick Stewart.  
<sup>56</sup> Tom Hiddleston (@TWHiddleston), 'Run around Regent's Park in the sunshine' February 26, 2014, 4.10AM, Tweet.

Lewis Goodings and Ian Tucker argue that '[we] do not know online bodies from within, but as a projected body'.<sup>57</sup> It is this concept of the projected body, constructed multiply and variously which I intend to continue exploring through the character of Loki in *Avengers Assemble*, *Thor: The Dark World* and his online afterlife. I will do this by considering the developments in Loki's characterisation over these two films and how this might be informed by Hiddleston's emergent Shakespearean persona. How might an already Shakespearean-inflected character be further shaped by his more recent roles, particularly *The Hollow Crown*'s confirmation of Hiddleston's status in the public mind as a Shakespearean? And how might this reciprocal relationship even influence his performance as Coriolanus (and its reception) only a year later, for example?

By *Avengers Assemble* Loki occupies a more conventional antagonist role, motivated presumably by Hiddleston's rapidly accelerating popularity and the successful critical reception his first performance received.<sup>58</sup> With increased screen time and narrative built around a series of escalating conflicts between Loki and the superheroes of the *Avengers* team, the film emphasises Loki's villainy to a greater extent than in *Thor*, in which his emotional characterisation is largely built in response to his fractious relationship with Odin. Instead, he demonstrates the megalomaniacal purpose of the supervillain, pronouncing:

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<sup>57</sup> Lewis Goodings and Ian Tucker, 'Social media and the co-production of bodies online: Bergson, Serres and Facebook's Timeline,' *Media, Culture, Society* (2014: 36), 39.

<sup>58</sup> Tim Robey reviewing for The Telegraph wrote, 'If this was King Lear, he'd [Hiddleston] be a gaunt, insinuating Edmund to remember, nailing the part with just the right blend of cunning and pain. In the ever-more-crowded comic-book galaxy, he may be the dark star we've been waiting for.' Similarly, Megan Lehmann notes that Hiddleston 'handles the intimate scenes with particular aplomb' and James Hunt that he 'gives Loki a cerebral, deceptive ambiguity that means you'll be guessing about the character's true motivations and feelings to the last.' Finally, Vic Holtzman states approvingly, 'Asgard is where the movie really shines, and it is there that Tom Hiddleston, as Loki, steals the film. Director Kenneth Branagh coaxes a nuanced performance from him that is very far from a mustache-twirling villain. [...] He] will probably be a lot of folks' favourite character from the film.' Tim Robey, 'Thor, review,' *The Telegraph*, April 28, 2011, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8480627/Thor-review.html>; Megan Lehman, 'Thor: review,' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 17 April, 2011, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movie/thor/review/179283>; James Hunt, 'Thor review,' April 17, 2011, web page, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://www.denofgeek.com/movies/thor/7230/thor-review#ixzz38J8VuQfa>; Vic Holtzman, 'Thor review,' October 11, 2011, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://screenrant.com/thor-movie-review-vic-113534/>.

‘Freedom is life’s great life. Once you accept that, in your heart you know peace.’ An over-reacher like Edmund or Faustus, Loki is trapped by his ambition, too enmeshed by the violence of his desires and pride to extricate himself. While *Thor* referenced the theatricality and Shakespeareanism of the comic book mythos more implicitly through casting and cinematography, however, *Avengers Assemble* acknowledges this through forging a connection between Loki and ‘high’ culture.

Douglas Lanier argues that the association between Shakespeare and the ‘subjection to the tastes and values of a dominant educated elite’ is so ‘deep’ that popular appropriation of Shakespeare ‘partakes of the dynamics’ of popular culture in a particular way. ‘[P]opular audiences are not particularly respectful of Shakespeare’s intended meanings’, Lanier notes. They fasten on (and even embellish) some elements and ignore others; they fragment plays and reassemble what they select into something that speaks to their own sense of lived experience.<sup>59</sup> In the same way, *Avengers* adapts the pre-existing Shakespearean qualities of Loki’s characterisation and Hiddleston’s performer identity in order to create a new structured set of meanings. These complement his configuration in *Thor* but also work to alter the values he possesses, as Loki’s dramatic functions shift from the antagonistic to the outright villainous. It should be noted, moreover, that although Joss Whedon directed and wrote the screenplay for a film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* in the same year, in setting and tone *Avengers* bears a distinct departure from Branagh’s *Thor*. While the appointment of Branagh by Marvel purposefully sought to engage with the Shakespearean valences of the *Thor* universe, in *Avengers* the formalised and theatrical quality of the Asgardians’ characterisation is necessarily lessened in comparison to the overtly modern, popular nature of the remaining Avengers and the almost exclusive location of the narrative within America, particularly New York.

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<sup>59</sup> Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 52.



Loki's second appearance in the film is at a Stuttgart concert hall, disrupting a classical music event. The only non-American location in *Avengers*, the selection of Stuttgart suggests an association between Loki and Europe, or the Old World. This is a connection further enhanced by the *mise-en-scène* which conveys the tenor of the event, with the classical grandeur of the building, the upper-middle class connotations of the guests' and Loki's formal evening attire (complete with cane) and the musical accompaniment of Schubert's String Quartet in A Minor. In an ironic reference to the classical setting, it is Tony Stark who notes that Loki is a 'full tilt diva' and, in a crucial narrative detail, realises that — like Stark himself — Loki wants the biggest possible platform for his conquest: the highest building in the New York skyline. It is Stark, moreover, whose sardonic, forthright voice often articulates the unexpressed sentiments of other characters, who establishes a crucial distinction between the camp excess of the Earth superheroes and the Asgardians' overly formalised speech and dramatic costuming.

THOR: Do not touch me again!

TONY STARK: Then don't take my stuff.

THOR: You have no idea what you are dealing with.

TONY STARK: Uh, Shakespeare in the park? Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?

Stark's cod-Shakespearean phrasing and bantering reply of 'Uh, Shakespeare in the park?' identifies the tempestuous relationship between Thor and his brother as the stuff of Shakespearean dramatic convention. A potential in-joke in reference to Kenneth Branagh's involvement in the franchise, Stark's feigned anachronisms — 'doth', 'weareth' — continue the association between the Asgardians and high cultural values. The description of Thor's outfit as his mother's 'drapes' denigrates these values as old fashioned and obfuscated, particularly in contrast to the sharp witticisms and pop-culture infused vernacular of Stark (a quality of his narrative voice since the first *Iron Man* but also a characteristic of Joss

Whedon's personal directorial and writing style). In striking similarity to Captain Nicholls and Freddie Page, moreover, Loki's theatricality and its 'high' culture values are at odds with modern, contemporary existence and these cultural and linguistic differences are thereby used to reiterate his alterity. The reference to Stuttgart, furthermore, with its heavy casualties during World War Two — an emotional cost of 4,590 lives and 15 million cubic metres of rubble, which have shaped the city's very geography in its post-war years — and the overt references to Nazism in the dialogue posit Loki's 'high' cultural values as not only irrelevant but dangerously dictatorial.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, it is the same Manichean shading of characters in *Thor* which articulates Loki's villainy in a differential relationship to his brother's heroism through their contrasting lightness and darkness, muscularity and slenderness, physical power and intellectualism and which recovers Thor from Stark's jibe. His quick acclimatisation to Earth and modern American culture (including his relish for their food, clothing and his romantic relationship with Jane Foster, evidenced in the compatibility of their conceptions of the universe) positions him in stark contrast to Loki's continued Shakespearean parlance and desire to subjugate humanity. The way in which Thor's language alters during this confrontation with the other Avengers is indicative of this process.

BRUCE BANNER: I don't think we should be focusing on Loki. That guy's brain is a bag full of cats. You can smell crazy on him.

THOR: Have a care how you speak! Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard and he is my brother!

NATASHA ROMANOFF: He killed eighty people in two days.

THOR: He's adopted.

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<sup>60</sup> Loki's instruction to the public to kneel — 'You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel' — is met with an elderly German man getting to his feet and retorting, 'Not to men like you.' When answered by Loki's boastful reply, 'There are no men like me,' the old man states: 'There are *always* men like you.' This direct reference to Nazi Germany is further consolidated by Steve Rogers' appearance (an American super soldier resurrected from the 1940s) remarking, 'You know, the last I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everyone else, we ended up disagreeing.'

Thor's overly formal mode of language with its lack of contractions is thus instantly exchanged for the concise, informal admission, 'he's adopted', in acknowledgement of Loki's break from the upright moral values the Asgardians and Avengers represent. In general, although Thor's language retains its formal tone, his sentences tend towards short, functional statements which especially contrast with Loki's verbosity and long, dramatic declarations of intent.

Loki's grandiose manner of speaking thus places him in stark contrast with the superheroes whose violent capabilities are aligned with their virtue as defenders and upholders of simple, American values. His eloquence, instead, is indicative of luxuriance, moral ambiguity and ambition. Indeed, the convention for verbose villains in Hollywood blockbusters is a recognisable one, particularly in characters or actors with British accents, and is even imitated in Pixar's superhero parody *The Incredibles* (dir. Brad Bird, 2004).<sup>61</sup> At this juncture I should also note the point that Loki's eloquence is strikingly applicable to Hiddleston, too, whose public person is characterised by his readily personable, overtly sincere manner and his confident use of social media platforms. Loki's dialogue, however, is characterised by its dense formality, complex structure and use of aggressive rhetoric, as well as language which is sufficiently dated to lend an impression of an older time, but not so obsolete as to challenge understanding. His vernacular thereby confirms the old-fashioned, loosely Shakespearean and 'high' cultural sounding quality Tony Stark mimics; for example, during his conversation with the Black Widow, Natasha Romanoff, Loki spits 'you mewling quim'. Although in occasional use today, this coarse slang term originates from as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>62</sup> In its distinctness from more popular modern day parlance for

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<sup>61</sup> The antagonist, Syndrome (Jason Lee), pauses from explaining the deep-seated psychology of his need to conquer the world in order to exclaim, 'Oh, ho-ho! You sly dog! You got me monologuing. I can't believe it...'

<sup>62</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, "quim, n.", n.d., Webpage, accessed July 23, 2014, OED Online, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156564?redirectedFrom=quim&>.

female genitalia it contains precisely sufficient historical resonance to convey Loki's temporal, cultural and moral alterity without disrupting the audience's comprehension, while also expressing the vehemence of Loki's hatred without resorting to swear words in a PG-13 rated film.

Hiddleston's success in this role is further evidenced by Loki's increased presence yet again in *Thor: The Dark World*. This film, too, recognises and dramatises Loki's Shakespearean associations and in particular, his simultaneous ability for comedy and his dark and complex revenger characterisation, reminiscent of dramatic figures such as Hamlet. Indeed, the increased emphasis and relevance of the familial dynamic between Odin, his wife Frigga (Rene Russo), Thor and Loki for the plot, argues for the significance of *Hamlet* as a further analogue to Loki. With his dark clothing, intellectualism and barely concealed contempt for his 'King', Hiddleston's performance draws upon a typically Hamletian introspective quality in order to intensify his character's moral ambiguity; especially in contrast to Hemsworth's Thor, whose emotions are readily and easily interpretable. While situated in his cell (both in *Dark World* and *Avengers*), for example, Loki is framed by his isolation. In long shot, with the bare minimalism of his prison, these scenes' composition demonstrates his alterity and separateness from not only the rest of the Asgardians but from the audience, too. *Dark World* particularly extends the relationship between Loki and his adopted mother — which in *Thor* was limited to a brief moment of eye contact — moreover, by demonstrating their shared magical abilities; as Thor observes, 'you had her tricks'. Although her death serves as narrative impetus, giving the Asgardians motivation to fight against Malekith (Christopher Eccleston) and Thor and Loki the opportunity to work together once more, her kinship to Loki also serves to further complicate the dynastic drama which, as Branagh observed, lay at the heart of the series. Like Hamlet's close relationship to Gertrude,

Frigga's continued affection for her adopted son (in spite of his actions) offers a sharp contrast to Odin, whose personality, leadership and decisions are entirely incompatible with Loki's own, and whose leadership Loki feels a deep personal and ethical imperative to usurp. Certainly, the magical ties the narrative establishes between Loki and Frigga ask us to view the strength of the familial bond between mother and adopted son, while, in contrast, the antagonism of his relationship with Odin is heightened by the fact that — unlike with Frigga — there are no such shared traits to temper Loki's feeling of isolation and betrayal by his father.

Loki's presence thus adds a degree of emotional complexity to the narrative. This complexity and his subsequent unreliability as a character (he is distrusted as a result of his villainous actions in *Thor* and *Avengers*) is also mined as a source of comedy, however. A repeated comic refrain is the Asgardian characters' direct threats to Loki, met with the mild reply, '.... You'll kill me? Evidently there will be a line.' It is this tendency towards ironic understatement that characterises Loki's lines throughout and which demonstrate a level of contiguity between the character, Hiddleston and his Shakespearean associations. Exchanges such as,

LOKI: [tries to steer the boat into a tiny crevice in the mountain wall] If it were easy, everyone would do it.

THOR: Are you mad?

LOKI: Possibly.

evinced the association between a typically British sense of humour predicated on irony and wit and a tendency for Hollywood villains to veer between melodramatic megalomania and wryly comic self-parody. Hollywood villains are, after all, typically British and in this Loki conforms to a tradition of screen villains. This cultural phenomenon is most famously witnessed in Alan Rickman's mordant terrorist, Hans Gruber in *Die Hard* (dir. John

McTierman, 1988) and more broadly is characterised by an antagonist whose dry humour often works to undermine the macho heroism which they oppose. Loki, for example, observes sardonically after Thor accidentally crashes into the statue of his antecedent, Bor, ‘Well done, you just decapitated your grandfather!’ As explored in my first chapter, this kind of casting draws upon a stronger perceived theatrical tradition in Britain, with individuals such as Ian McKellen able to draw upon their Shakespearean work in order to portray film villains whose ironic tones share the characterisation of charismatic malcontents such as Iago or Richard III.<sup>63</sup>

The way in which humour is an integral part of these villains’ characterisation extends beyond the confines of their fictional worlds, moreover. The quiet subversiveness of Loki’s humour permits Marvel to present an intertextual caricature of *Captain America*. Attempting to rile his brother, Loki shifts into an Asgardian guard, turns Thor into Sif and then transforms himself into Captain America (Chris Evans). Boisterously Evans-as-Hiddleston then comments, ‘Oh, this is much better. Costume's a bit much... so tight. But the confidence, I can feel the righteousness surging. Hey, you wanna have a rousing discussion about truth, honor, patriotism? God bless America...’ This moment of *mise-en-abîme* is demonstrative of Loki’s importance in the series, as the only figure aside from Thor who traverses between the Shakespearean realm of Asgard and the pop culture infused world of contemporary Earth; a useful analogy for Hiddleston’s own work and persona. Indeed, Loki’s shape-changing

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<sup>63</sup> *Richard III*, in particular, demonstrates a very similar employment of humour that works to consistently destabilise the audience’s feelings towards the ‘villain’. At times emphasising the shocking nature of Richard’s actions, while at others potentially endearing him to us by offering us the opportunity to gather intimate knowledge of his feelings and motivation. His crowing claim on having successfully seduced Anne over the coffin of her husband, ‘Was ever woman in this humour wooed? / Was ever woman in this humour won?’ for instance, swiftly undercuts the apparent solemnity of the scene prior and demonstrates the darkly ironic, highly self-conscious nature of Richard’s performances. Christopher Andrews’s work on McKellen’s *Richard III* and the meme stating that Loki’s character possesses the greatest number of ‘fangirls’, both appear to acknowledge the same point that the villain’s sense of humour is key to their dangerousness and thereby their appeal: it is the tool by which they seduce and charm. As Andrews states, ‘Thus begins the courtship.’ Christopher Andrews, ‘Richard III on Film: The Subversion of the Viewer’, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 28, no. 2 (2000) 90.

ability serves an important function for the overarching narrative of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and he has been used on two separate occasions by Marvel in order to bridge the gaps between films: films which can be viewed in isolation, but which cumulatively contribute to a much larger coherent story and universe.<sup>64</sup> Loki's potential for subversion also recognises the familiar positioning of villains within blockbusters as figures who, by virtue of opposing the heroic world of his opponent, is able to critique it, expressing this critique within a humorous context through gentle irony and within the comfortably familiar framework of a filmic archetype.

A recent Jaguar advert explores the contradiction that thus lies at the heart of characters such as Loki, Magneto or even Richard III. The advert asks 'Have you ever noticed how in Hollywood movies all the villains are played by Brits?' Each of its stars (Mark Strong, Ben Kingsley and Hiddleston) then contribute a hypothetical answer and, in doing so, confirm the qualities of this popular stereotype. Sat in an open helicopter cockpit, Hiddleston proposes 'We're more focused. More precise. [...] And we're obsessed by power! [...] Stiff upper lip is key.' Contained within a microcosm of English gentility, Hiddleston is dressed in a three piece tweed suit, calmly sipping a cup of tea with a small lampshade incongruously placed next to his chair, even as he is buffeted by the wind. A later advert from the same campaign even more explicitly summarises the traditional qualities of the British 'baddie' and amplifies Hiddleston's upper-class Shakespeareanism.

They say Brits play the best villains... But what makes a great villain? Firstly, you need to sound distinct. Speak with an eloquence that lets everyone know who's in charge. [...] Our villains should have style; the suit should always be bespoke, razor-sharp... like your wit. It's important a villain has the means to stay one step ahead. World domination starts with attention to detail.

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<sup>64</sup> The post-credit sequence for *Thor* shows how Loki, through his control of Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgård), discovers the Tesseract pre-empts the events of *Captain America* and *Avengers Assemble*. Meanwhile, the revelation at the end of *Thor: The Dark World* that Odin has been exchanged with his son in disguise establishes the concept on which, presumably, the next *Thor* film will be founded.

Though ironic in tone, the villain's requisite 'razor-sharp' suit acknowledges the same personal aesthetic Hiddleston embodies. His subsequent performance of John of Gaunt's speech from *Richard II* ('This happy breed of men...') thereby reinforces a cultural association between Shakespeare as a representative of 'high' culture and formal sophistication.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, Brand Vice President for Jaguar, Jeff Curry, explains that Hiddleston's recitation of the 'classic words of England's most famous playwright' advertises the coupe in an 'unforgettable manner', demonstrating the importance of an idealised version of Britishness to Jaguar's brand identity and Shakespeare's relevance for this, as well as the immediate transparency of the connection between Hollywood villains and a British theatrical tradition.<sup>66</sup>

The popularity of this cultural trope and the fine line the villain walks between moral condemnation and complicity in their audience is evident in its evolution from theatre, film and into internet culture. In order to demonstrate Loki's online afterlife it is necessary to first briefly the importance of the meme, a term which originated from Richard Dawkins' configuration of the noun as that which 'conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.'<sup>67</sup> A unit of popular culture, the successfully reproduced meme is an effective tool for recognising what values circulate Hiddleston's body, star persona and on-

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<sup>65</sup> William Shakespeare, 'Richard II,' *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., (New York and London: Norton, 1997) 2.1.45-50.

<sup>66</sup> 'Jaguar continues British villains storyline...', April 2, 2014, Web page, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/jaguar-continues-british-villains-storyline-120000395.html>.

<sup>67</sup> Primarily used to explore genetics and evolution by Dawkins, the meme's use has since been expanded across multiple fields of study, such as translation studies, and has striking applicability for the phenomenon of internet culture and the rapid proliferation of images or concepts among a large audience. Susan Blackmore, for example, employs a loose definition of the meme as '[e]verything that is passed from person to person in this way is a meme. This includes all the words in your vocabulary, the stories you know, the skills and habits you have picked up from others and the games you like to play.' Dawkins has since distinguished the internet meme on the grounds that the cultural unit is one deliberately altered by human creativity, rather than the random mutation or Darwinian selection that would occur to aid the transmission of a particular biological meme. In practice the internet meme contains the possibility for a variety of different forms, including viral videos, image macros (an image superimposed with text for humorous effect), hashtags, or intentional misspellings. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 192; Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Olivia Solon, 'Richard Dawkins on the internet's hijacking of the word "meme"', *Wired* (UK), June 20, 2013, n.p.



screen roles. They are valuable adaptive sites in themselves, moreover, which contribute to his evolving star persona and the creation of new facets of his identity. Memes extend the dramatic lives of their fictional and non-fictional representations, positioning character as the result of conscious and artificial performance in a way that the film text mostly seeks to elide.<sup>68</sup>



Fig 3.9. The visual and narrative similarities between Loki and Anthony Hopkins' (Odin) most famous incarnation, Hannibal Lecter.<sup>69</sup>

As figure 3.9 (above) demonstrates, the meme derives wit from creating transparency between the actor and character. It invites us to consider Anthony Hopkins' 'textual penumbra' when viewing Odin's character and thereby to imagine that the humorous

<sup>68</sup> Like the realist novel, traditional film rests largely on the audience's complicity in its artifice and a significant aspect of this is our collusion in the actor's ability to be someone else. Moments when these lapses are evident and the *act* behind the acting is seen, either contribute to a postmodern sense of irony and self-reflexiveness, or they are indicators that the film/actor has failed to convince in its project of invention.

<sup>69</sup> Nelson Fraizer, 'Odin are you sure Loki's the adopted one? Hannibal,' n.d., Webpage, accessed July 27, 2014, <http://www.memes.com/img/85239>.

symmetry between Loki in *Avengers* and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (dir. Jonathan Demme, 1991) as an indicator of the real family secret in *Thor*.

Indeed, common to Loki's online representation is the effort to rehabilitate his character's villainous status and, recognising Hiddleston's popularity in the role, extend his relatively few on-screen appearances. In the characteristically succinct language of memes, [Hiddleston] 'Received lowest billing. Not even pictured on the poster. Has the most fangirls.'<sup>70</sup> Frequently configured in relation to other popular cultural text, one meme draws parallels to the teen comedy *Mean Girls* (dir. Mark Waters, 2004) and, in particular, the tyrannical Regina George. Her potent combination of sexual allure and high school cruelty is described in the following encapsulation of her mythos:

JANIS: Regina George... How do I begin to explain Regina George?

EMMA GERBER: Regina George is flawless.

MATHLETE TIM PAK: I hear her hair's insured for \$10,000.

AMBER D'ALESSIO: I hear she does car commercials... in Japan.

KRISTEN HADLY: Her favourite movie is Varsity Blues.

SHORT GIRL: One time she met John Stamos on a plane...

JESSICA LOPEZ: ... And he told her she was pretty.

BETHANY BYRD: One time she punched me in the face... it was awesome.

The format of these lines is then replicated in the meme, transposed into the setting and the characters of *Avengers Assemble*.

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<sup>70</sup> Reference unavailable, web page no longer accessible.



Fig. 3.10 *Avengers Assemble/Mean Girls* mash up.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Elska Nott, 'How do I even begin to describe Loki Laufeyson...', [n.d.], webpage, accessed June 27, 2014, <http://cheezburger.com/6584999424>.

This allusion aligns Loki with George's cultural cachet as one of popular culture's Machiavels: an eminently quotable and humorous figure but one whose lack of morality ultimately damns her. Such texts work to subvert the conservative associations surrounding Loki, Shakespeare and 'high' culture in the Marvel Cinematic Universe by reintegrating Loki (and Hiddleston also) into mainstream culture and offering alternative cultural analogues. Humour is thus derived from the juxtaposition of the two genres: action and teen comedy, the Norse trickster god and a teenage girl. Indeed, the meme's transition between genres is redolent of Hiddleston's own star persona and his ability to successfully bridge different modes, enabling comparisons between them, or demonstrating their contiguity. Memes such as these thereby acknowledge both the contradictions within and potential flexibility of Hiddleston's performer identity: Loki's framing as a villain but the inherent tragedy of his narrative as well as his appealing humorousness (and Hiddleston's own personable manner); Marvel's configuration of the Shakespearean as antiquated and obscure, but Loki's prevalence as a popular cultural figure; and, as I will continue to explore, Hiddleston's active engagement with internet culture, but the conservatism of his Shakespearean associations.

Hiddleston's online persona is characterised by a high degree of self-awareness and, in Ben Beaumont-Thomas's words, an 'innate understanding of what makes internet memes tick.'<sup>72</sup> An example of this is his involvement in the creation of the 'accidentally groping' meme. On November 8<sup>th</sup> 2013 YouTube personality Smooth posted an interview with Hiddleston in which he impersonated Natalie Portman's pose on the international poster for *Thor: The Dark World*.<sup>73</sup> The following day this coquettish pose was photoshopped onto the

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<sup>72</sup> Beaumont-Thomas, 'Tom Hiddleston's Thor PR antics'.

<sup>73</sup> 'Loki Interview Prank,' November 8, 2013, Video clip, accessed February 20, 2014, YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5K2AI44XI0s#t=380>.

poster itself (see below) by the Tumblr user, The King Himself, gaining 35,000 notes in the first four days of being online.<sup>74</sup>



Fig. 3.11 The first example of the ‘accidentally groping’ meme

This then spawned an internet phenomenon with Hiddleston’s pose pasted onto images from *Iron Man*, *The Lord of the Rings* and the BBC’s *Sherlock*. Similarly, after the enormous success of a fan-made parody of the 2013 Daft Punk song ‘Get Lucky’, Hiddleston sang his own version of ‘Get Loki’ for YouTube, demonstrating both his understanding of those

<sup>74</sup> The King Himself, ‘So I Made A Thing,’ November 9, 2013, Web page, accessed February 20, 2014, <http://the-king-himself.tumblr.com/post/66450388581/so-i-made-a-thing>.

values attached to his (and Loki's) online presence, and his willingness to sustain them.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, an essential part of his star persona is founded upon the contrast between Hiddleston's conversance with popular culture and perpetuating the kind of anachronistic English gentility which originates from his Shakespearean identity. Particularly when viewed from an American or international framework, Hiddleston's performance of these aspects of his star persona thus demonstrates his awareness of the expectations of 'Englishness', in accordance with Katherine W. Jones's conceptualisation of national identity as partially self-constructed. Identity can, Jones argues, 'almost be seen as more of a verb than as a noun': 'we use cultural practices in our daily interactions to negotiate our identities' and our identities then emerge from 'what we say, what we wear, how we act and how others interpret our actions.'<sup>76</sup> 'Dynamic and contested, contingent and provisional' with individuals creating, re-creating and challenging their identities 'as they live their lives', Jones' description of the self-constructed nature of the English identities displayed by her subjects in their adopted American homeland, is strikingly applicable to Hiddleston, therefore.

A previous Twitter handle – 'Actor. Prince Hal/Henry V. Loki. Capt Nicholls. Fitzgerald. Freddie Page. Edward. Magnus. Oakley. Also: brother, son, friend, runner, dancer, prancer, loon.' – is instructive of this process. With its etymological origins as early as the fifteenth century and Shakespearean employment ('The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!'), the term 'loon' cultivates a sense of Hiddleston's idiosyncrasies.<sup>77</sup> Its relative lack of use in modern-day parlance demonstrates his historical knowledge, while its employment simultaneously undercuts the implications of this understanding by creating a

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<sup>75</sup>'Tom Hiddleston sings Get Loki,' October 30, 2013, Video clip, accessed February 20, 2014, YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oU-MLOh6YME>.

<sup>76</sup> Katherine W. Jones, *Accent on Privilege: English Identities and Anglophilia in the U.S* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>77</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth (The Arden Shakespeare, Second Series)*, edited by Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1997), 5.3.11.

sense of foolishness and mischievousness. ‘Prance’ similarly alludes to an antiquated idiom that is offset by the light-heartedness of its definition. Finally, as with the Jaguar advert parody, Hiddleston’s endorsement of the Twitter account VeryBritishProblems (@SoVeryBritish) exemplifies his self-conscious performance as an Englishman.



Fig. 3.12 Twitter screen capture from Hiddleston’s account.<sup>78</sup>

Part celebration, part satire of British values, Very British Problems epitomises the delicate balance Hiddleston strikes between earnestness and self-mockery. His promotion of the account, moreover, demonstrates his identification with and inclusion of these shared values (and the image they present of Britishness as restrained, eccentric, genteel and gently comic) within his personal identity.

Hiddleston’s performance of his online star persona has been equally involved in consciously encouraging the association between his Shakespeareanism and his cachet as a pop cultural figure. As Jones observes, however, although people may negotiate the meanings of their national identities and may assert or reject particular parts at different moments, ‘their actions ultimately are limited by the broader sociohistorical and structural locations within which they operate.’<sup>79</sup> Hiddleston’s engagements with Shakespeare within popular culture should be viewed thus, at once representative of his personal enjoyment and professional

<sup>78</sup> Tom Hiddleston (@TWHiddleston), RT, February 16, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Jones, *Accent on Privilege*, 8.

familiarity of the playwright, but also as the result of a much larger cultural receptiveness towards Shakespeare's works and the popular (in both senses of the word) association made in America between Englishness and perceived 'high' cultural knowledge. To demonstrate, a brief search on YouTube determines that a common feature of his encounters with the media and fans is the request for Hiddleston to give his favourite Shakespearean monologue, line or plays. Subsequent performances in response include Orsino's 'If music...', 'Once more unto the breach' from *Henry V* and sonnet 130. In one such conversation a similar question provokes a lengthy and detailed answer from Hiddleston who explains to the audience the beauty of *King Lear*'s language and the emotional complexity of *Othello* before settling on the line 'Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die!' from *Cymbeline*.<sup>80</sup> Prevaricating even after this selection between *Henry V* and *Coriolanus*, Hiddleston admits, 'that wasn't a very good answer, was it?' To which his American interviewer and former co-star, Zachary Levi, responds: 'it was a great answer. I've just never felt more uncultured in my life.' Hiddleston's clear enjoyment of interpreting and performing Shakespeare for the public appears to thus reify the cultural sophistication he possesses by virtue of being a young, attractive English actor. Also, it demonstrates the proven appeal of this particularly to Anglophilic American audiences who have celebrated the coltish physicality and upper-middle class diction of stars such as Hugh Grant or Colin Firth. Certainly, Hiddleston appears to play upon the 'sexiness' of his star persona, both in his English accent more generally and his ability to perform Shakespeare. His throaty instruction in the Jaguar advert to 'Brace yourselves' before beginning John of Gaunt's speech, for example, seems to reference the pleasure his fanbase derive from him reciting Shakespeare. Observing the erotic overtones of this moment and its concessions to a significant aspect of Hiddleston's allure in America, the

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<sup>80</sup> 'Conversation with Tom Hiddleston – Nerd HQ,' July 21, 2013, Video clip, accessed July 2, 2014, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLX-tdqEjUg>.



website Jezebel even remarked ‘this video is probably the closest any of us are ever going to get to a real-life sex date with Tom Hiddleston.’<sup>81</sup>

The overtly romantic nature of Posthumus’s reunion with Imogen as described by Hiddleston and his sympathetic and conservative interpretations of Henry V or Coriolanus (see below), therefore, not only confirm more traditional associations of Shakespeare with emotional sincerity and inspirational sentiment, but align his star persona with the same values. Indeed, as Jones observes in her study of English immigrants in America (and as for Russell Kirk and Alan Bloom), American Anglophilia is often used by both participants to ‘reinforce old distinctions between “high” and “low” culture’, as Hiddleston’s conversation with Levi indicates.<sup>82</sup> Hiddleston’s cultural cachet is at once self-cultivated and expected by his audience as a mark of national difference, particularly by his American fan base. The same high degree of probity is evident more broadly in his online persona, furthermore. In recent years Hiddleston’s Twitter account has been characterised by posts including song recommendations, a poem for the day, motivational comments or celebration of national achievements, such as Andy Murray winning Wimbledon in 2012. Shortly after the London Olympic Games in the same year, Hiddleston posted: ‘It’s easy to explode out of the blocks, and the finish line pulls us towards it with an almost magnetic force, but the hardest part...[Next tweet] The Olympics have repeatedly confirmed that in life, as in running, it’s all about the third bend. How deep you dig.’<sup>83</sup> The potentially trite nature of such a statement is typical of Hiddleston’s public engagement with his fans; and while such light philosophising is characteristic of modern celebrity, Hiddleston’s association with

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<sup>81</sup> Rebecca Rose, ‘Tom Hiddleston recites Shakespeare for you in latest Jaguar ad,’ *Jezebel*, April 7, 2014, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://jezebel.com/tom-hiddleston-recites-shakespeare-for-you-in-latest-ja-1559768182>.

<sup>82</sup> Jones, *Accent on Privilege*, 78. See also: Russell Kirk, *America's British Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 1993); Alan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New Yrk: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>83</sup> Tom Hiddleston (@twhiddleston), August 12, 2012.

Shakespeare bestows a degree of profundity onto such proclamations for his fans. It is worth noting, finally, that since 2013 Hiddleston's Twitter handle has indicated a slight change in the way he chooses to perform and present his online persona. Simply 'Actor', his current tag demonstrates a greater seriousness of purpose and an absence of the potentially effeminate, light-hearted connotations of 'dancer, prancer, loon', as well as the quasi-archaisms associated with Shakespeare and *Thor*. It is suggestive of Hiddleston's desire to progress his career beyond the models of masculinity he has already filled, potentially positioning himself as a leading man. His encounters with internet culture and memes thereby demonstrate his interest in challenging popular representations of the Shakespearean and increasing his presence within mainstream culture. The more conservative associations Hiddleston has also cultivated reveal his awareness of what is expected of him as a Shakespearean and an English actor, furthermore. The last section of the chapter thus explores an occasion on which Hiddleston was afforded the opportunity to recast his star persona and how both the popular cultural and Shakespearean valences of his body and performer identity contributed to the production of textual meaning.

### **Celebrity and the Body: *Coriolanus***

The Donmar Warehouse's 2013-4 theatrical production of *Coriolanus* serves as a statement of Hiddleston's current success and its significance as a *popular* cultural event, with both the show's three-month run and the NT Live Cinema screenings repeatedly selling out. His lead role reflects the recent vogue for high-profile actors to front stagings of early modern texts in a process that simultaneously tests their abilities as performers and reaffirms the established quality of their star persona. In her introduction to the screening the director Josie Rourke stated that this play, more so than any other by Shakespeare, expresses a 'visceral' nature

through its preoccupation with violence and its conjuration of the wounded and scarred body. Indeed, in this production the audience are frequently invited to study Coriolanus's body, a body and its wounds which, as Coppelia Kahn argues, are 'prismatic' and the 'ambivalent images' at the centre of the work.<sup>84</sup> This final section of the chapter on Hiddleston will thus explore the competing values attributed to his body in this production and how this performance draws upon and contributes to the development of his star persona. I will do this by acknowledging the relationship between his body and the associations forged by both his popular cultural and Shakespearean work, exploring how these qualities may compete or complement each other and the way in which this relationship is expressed physically in his performance by Hiddleston and Rourke.

Throughout the play Coriolanus is caught between imploration to demonstrate his greatness as a soldier and his natural inclination to keep the consequences of such prowess private. It is the play's great irony that the character at the heart of the plot and who, according to theatrical convention, can thus be expected to perform the greatest amount of speeches, is reluctant to the point of discourtesy. In Act One Scene Ten, in which Martius gains the 'addition' of Coriolanus, his enormous aversion to the praise being laid upon him is apparent. Describing his cheering soldiers as 'flatterers' and their admiration as 'false-faced soothing', the semantic field of deception he employs expresses his inherent distrust of their eulogising.<sup>85</sup> In contrast to and in spite of this recalcitrance, however, a commentary on the state of Coriolanus's body is offered throughout, most acutely expressed in his moments of pain and discomfort. This varies from precise stage directions stating Martius's entrance with his arm in a sling, to descriptions of his actual wounds or metonymic references to the body.

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<sup>84</sup>Coppelia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 1.

<sup>85</sup>William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus (The Arden Shakespeare, Third Edition)*, ed. Peter Holland (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 1.10.42-4. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

These include Menenius' famous allegory of the stomach or Cominius' dire threat that Coriolanus's ingratitude may cause his wounds to 'tent themselves with death' (1.10.31). For Coriolanus views his body purely as a practical thing and unlike his companions is unable to see the symbolic significance of his wounds; he can only experience them as they were originally intended — as injuries. Cominius by contrast understands the influence Coriolanus' body wields as both the tool and symbol of his violent power; his valour as a soldier is greater when bloody, fresh from battle, 'as he were flayed' (1.7.23), than when his blood has dried and his wounds have healed.

Robin Headlam Wells reminds us that 'the least sympathetic of Shakespeare's heroes, Martius is nevertheless capable of inspiring awe and admiration in friends and enemies alike'. He continues that Martius's 'greatest conquest' is not Carioli but 'the hearts of theatre audiences and critics alike'.<sup>86</sup> Though the relative youthfulness of Hiddleston's Coriolanus increases the sense of his behaviour as childish petulance, he succeeds at times in making his character a sympathetic figure. The horror of Cominius' description of Coriolanus like a flayed man was apparent in Hiddleston's dramatic entrance onto stage, entirely covered in blood. The drama of this moment was swiftly undercut, however, by his vulnerability, as he clutched at his arm in pain. Indeed, the extent of his unhappiness during the following scene was performed as an expression as much of Coriolanus's emotional discomfort as of his physical pain. Jubilantly boisterous, Cominius and Lartius pushed Coriolanus around the stage, manhandling him into a position in which he could address his troops, while forcibly placing the garland upon his head. With his body tensed, cringing at every forced moment, Hiddleston was visibly fatigued.

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<sup>86</sup> Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare on Masculinity*, 146.

The interpolation of a shower scene immediately after this, in which Coriolanus cleaned his wounds, only invited increased audience sympathy for his character. As with his earlier discomfort at being manipulated by the elder generals, this scene permitted a rare moment of vulnerability. This moment was cynically viewed by many critics as a lowest common denominator appeal to Hiddleston's celebrity as a newly-minted Hollywood star. In the *Daily Mail* Quentin Letts decided the scene had the 'same slightly desperate' air as the ubiquitous feature of 'stars cavort[ing] in their bikinis' while showering on *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!*<sup>87</sup> While recognising Hiddleston's female fan base, Dominic Maxwell was sceptical of his 'battle-hardened (OK, gym-hardened) waist' in a scene that 'will please the MTV viewers who have just voted Hiddleston the sexiest man in the world.'<sup>88</sup> The logic of such readings is immediate and, indeed, is permitted by Rourke's own admission of Hiddleston's obvious physical appeal. Indeed, as Pascale Aebischer and Nigel Wheale note, adaptation studies tends towards a perception of Hollywood (or the appropriation of Hollywood-esque models in this case) by critics as a 'mode of production that imposes simplifying and popularising structures... often in conflict with the Shakespearean texts it attempts to remake'.<sup>89</sup> As I will continue to demonstrate, however, it is not always productive to view the adaptive relationship between Shakespeare and the popular as an essentially combative one. To reduce the scene's significance to pure titillation is to ignore the thematic

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<sup>87</sup> Quentin Letts, 'Oh do put it away, dearie: Tom Hiddleston strips to his muscular torso on stage in Coriolanus,' *Daily Mail*, December 18, 2013, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2525568/Tom-Hiddleton-Coriolanus-Oh-away-dearie-Tom-Hiddleston-strips-muscular-torso-stage-Coriolanus.html>.

<sup>88</sup> Dominic Maxwell, 'Tragedy that is odd, intimate, compelling,' *The Times*, 18 Dec 2013, n.p.

<sup>89</sup> Pascale Aebischer and Nigel Wheale, 'Introduction' in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Culture* ed. Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche and Nigel Wheale, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 8.

congruence it has and the way in which this congruence functions through our implicit understanding of Hiddleston as a pin-up figure.<sup>90</sup>

Hiddleston has spoken about his ‘physical preparation’ for this role, noting that as Coriolanus is a soldier the ‘audience has to see that he’s been to war and can fight.’ He thus tried to make his body as ‘strong as possible’ by increasing his physical routine, running and working out.<sup>91</sup> The effect of these changes is certainly visible on stage. That Hiddleston bulked up for the role at all does invite questioning, however. Though Coriolanus’ skill as a soldier is a self-evident fact of the play and the wounded state of his body is a recurrent motif, he is never explicitly described in terms of muscularity. Performances of *Coriolanus*, moreover, have not dwelt upon this aspect of his characterisation traditionally, with modern performances by actors such as Ian McKellen, Charles Dance, Kenneth Branagh (who was the same age as Hiddleston when he undertook the role) and Toby Stephens characterised by their slimness and sinewy quality, rather than muscularity. However, it should be noted that in a point of contiguity between their careers, Laurence Olivier, too, made ‘fanatical use of the gym in order to give Coriolanus a warrior’s body’ in 1954.<sup>92</sup> Certainly, it is inviting to consider Olivier as a point of influence for Hiddleston and his aspiration towards a similar seriousness of artistic purpose, as well as an Olivier-level of artistic repute. Branagh too, after all, found Olivier an important role model and before his performances began to vie with the other actor’s in the public’s memory, wrote to Olivier for advice on portraying Dr. Ivan Chebutikin in *Three Sisters*. Whether Hiddleston was aware of Olivier’s preparation is not apparent, however, and beyond his explanation of making his body appropriate to

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<sup>90</sup> The potentially surprising casting of Birgitte Hjort Sørensen in the role of Virgilia, an actress more known for her television and film work than a theatrical career, further iterates the relevance of considering the Shakespearean body within the realm of popular culture. Most famous for her role as Katrine Fønsmark in *Borgen*, the series partakes in a recent popular trend of Scandinavian crime and political dramas in which the injured and murdered body is prefigured as the site of meaning.

<sup>91</sup> ‘National Theatre Live: Coriolanus Trailer,’ September 25, 2013, Video clip, accessed February 1, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VA3ZSaC2nU>.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Hall, ‘Laurence Olivier: Brilliant, Unpredictable, Heroic,’ *Lawrence Journal-World*, 23 July 1989, 2D.

Coriolanus's soldier status, there is little evidence on his part or Rourke's of the impetus behind this decision. I would argue that what is evident despite this absence of explanation, nonetheless, is the way in which Hiddleston's body becomes appropriate to the role through employing the logic of action cinema, becoming both a spectacle in its own right and possessing meaningful symbolism.

The defined nature of Hiddleston's body in *Coriolanus* thus sees him occupy the kind of action hero role that has, so far, been refused him in Hollywood. And yet, this is a model of masculinity which he has frequently been placed in conversation with through Loki's antagonism to conventional heroes such as Thor, Iron Man and Captain America. Significantly, although his involvement in Marvel helped qualify Hiddleston's physical appeal as an essential part of his star persona, in both *Thor* and *Avengers Assemble* Loki's power as a villain lies in his *mental* dexterity, especially in contrast to Thor's brute strength. And although his recent and upcoming filmography testifies to Hiddleston's desire to diversify his roles (such as Adam in the celebration of counterculture, *Only Lovers Left Alive* (dir. Jim Jarmusch, 2013) and gothic melodrama *Crimson Peak* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2015)) he has yet to take a conventional leading man role on screen or on stage. Although it is not clear if Hiddleston influenced the choice of play (Rourke's descriptions of preparing for the play are vague with regards to her rationale, beyond stating her desire for Hiddleston to take the lead role) it is possible to see why this role — amongst Shakespeare's many protagonists — might have appealed to him. *Hamlet* is, perhaps, too obvious a choice for a young, male actor and has in recent years seen a number of high-profile productions. A comedy would have played off his personal reputation for wit, as well as created intertextual links to his performances as Loki and positioned him as a romantic lead; but this may not have permitted sufficient opportunity for Hiddleston to flex his muscles, physically and

intellectually. *Coriolanus* thereby offers him the opportunity to reify his status as a Shakespearean actor and an intellectual performer with a production that is extremely timely politically and would have drawn upon his knowledge as a former student of classics, while the role of Coriolanus, crucially, prefigures the body of its star as the narrative and thematic heart of the play.

I would argue that at the same time as confirming Hiddleston's Shakespearean persona, however, his role in *Coriolanus* represents — on some level — a bid to be viewed as a more conventional male action hero in Hollywood and elsewhere. As his change on Twitter from exaggeratedly English comic valence to the simple statement of 'Actor' also indicates, Hiddleston's performance as Coriolanus represents a distinct movement from the kinds of characters he has been associated with so far in popular culture. These relatively minor roles are typically supplanted by more conventional models of masculinity. And, furthermore, although his starring role in *Henry V* represents a similar kind of character as Coriolanus and similar dramatic concerns (a nation and its representative individuals at war), Sharrock's adaptation chiefly depicts Henry as a leader, rather than a warrior; he is seen on the ground with his soldiers, but seldom engaged in battle. His Coriolanus, however, enacts violence on stage and even when at peace refers back to these acts through his physicality, his scars and his enemies' blood. The body he displays in *Coriolanus* thus accords with a more stereotypically Hollywood depiction of masculinity, one in which his physicality is his most distinguishing feature. Though he demonstrated a similar amount of violence when playing Loki, the tight-fitting material of his clothing as Coriolanus means we are permitted to see *more* of his body by viewing the physical fact of his muscularity, not only the outcome of his ability.



Indeed, whether it was for symbolic and/or more pragmatic commercial reasons, Hiddleston's decision to invest so much time in emphasising Coriolanus's physicality necessitates that the protagonist's body is key to his playing of the role. The meaning invested in Coriolanus's muscularity functions not only through the eloquence of the early modern body but, through the attention Hiddleston draws to his body and the processes of preparing it, aligns it with an understanding of the body in contemporary action cinema. Lisa Purse argues that action cinema is 'defined by its persistent attention to the exerting body', a focus present as much in audio-visual aesthetics as characterisation and narrative.<sup>93</sup> In an argument that exactly mirrors Coriolanus's narrative, Yvonne Tasker also highlights the powerful function of the 'spectacular bodies of the action cinema' in dramatising 'narratives of power and powerlessness, exclusion and belonging'.<sup>94</sup> Roger Horrocks affirms this eloquence by describing the male body as 'a *dumb* body, that [...] must speak through its musculature and its actions'.<sup>95</sup> As I will continue to argue, the scenes in Rourke's production which demonstrate Hiddleston's muscularity thus gain further valence within the play as a whole through an awareness of the wider cultural context of his blockbuster work.

But first it is worth demonstrating the applicability of this action cinema model for interpreting *Coriolanus*. Indeed, it is a play which recently has gained from conversation with the action genre; especially apparent is Rourke's most immediate point of comparison, the 2011 Ralph Fiennes film adaptation of the play. Its protracted combat scenes with their urban setting evoke the kind of modern warfare seen in action films such as *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2010). As Graham Holderness has noted in his work comparing the film with *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) and *Skyfall* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2012), with its

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<sup>93</sup> Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>94</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2000), 165.

<sup>95</sup> Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 170.

gun toting heroes in full combat gear, explosions, graphic violence and its two major stars — Fiennes as Coriolanus and Gerard Butler as his mortal enemy, Aufidius — *Coriolanus* speaks to conventional generic action tropes, situations and characters.<sup>96</sup> The extent to which this adaptation nurtured its aptness as a participant in the action genre is not only evident in the ‘textual penumbra’ supplied by our knowledge of its stars but within its commercial paratexts. Though most of the theatrical posters cultivated a more art-house feel with credentials praising the actors’ performances, the cover for the DVD release of the film is telling of the way in which the film was marketed for a mainstream audience. The review proclaiming ‘...BLOODIED, BRUTAL AND BRILLIANT’ accords with the sensationalist presentation of the promotional images. The dynamic quality of the stills advertises a specific interpretation of the play rooted in iterating a physically violent masculinity. Of the five images the cover is comprised of, three testify to the male characters’ ability with weapons (including the stereotypical image of the action hero casually wielding their firearm in a manner synecdochal of the genre’s naturalisation of male power). Even the non-military character, the tribune Sicinius (James Nesbitt), assumes a combative physical stance with his arm outstretched, as though on the brink of attack. This advertisement of the film, which prefigures the importance of the male body as a symbolically-laden spectacle, thereby promotes an adaptation of the text which satisfies the desires of a conventional action film audience *and* those conversant with the themes of the play.

This paratextual polysemy was also evident in the marketing of the Donmar production. Released midway through its theatrical run and six days before its first live cinema screening, the Donmar posted ‘Tom Hiddleston prepares for *Coriolanus* at the Donmar Warehouse’ on YouTube. Though Mark Gatiss (Menenius) is seen reading his script

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<sup>96</sup> Graham Holderness, *Tales From Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90-1.

on stage and the cast participate in a game of ‘Zip’, the video is largely dedicated to representing the physical preparations necessary for the performance. With its opening close-ups of wound make-up being applied to his torso, fight rehearsals and Hiddleston skipping, doing push- and pull-ups, this piece of promotion reiterates the fact that Rourke’s production capitalises on the physicality of its star. Hiddleston’s involvement in the production is, undeniably, a casting coup for the Donmar Warehouse and inevitably a significant aspect of his appeal for his fans is predicated upon his attractiveness. Willing to concede to the significance of Hiddleston’s good looks, Rourke is less forthcoming about the effect the starriness of her leading man would have upon tickets sales; though, in interview, she does stress his physical ability — his youthfulness and athleticism — as one of the reasons for the appropriateness of his casting.<sup>97</sup> Preparation for *Coriolanus*, the Donmar encourages us to believe, has more to do with the kind of physical transformation boasted of by action stars than it does with intellectual exercise.

The inclusion of a shower scene within the production further argues for considering the play within the aegis of action cinema, in a cultural context in which the *popular* iterations of the same archetype belongs to the muscular heroes of the action genre, be it Rambo, the Terminator or Thor. The interpolated scene could be seen as an exercise in the paradoxical nature of the muscled body, as articulated by Richard Dyer in his work on the male pin-up.<sup>98</sup> Dyer argues that the bodies of these men are caught between asserting the naturalisation of physical power (in which their bodies are the result of everyday labour) and signalling the artificiality of its construction through its over-abundant shape and hardness. Similarly, a number of critics on action cinema concur that the genre’s violent assertion of masculine power reveals a ‘profoundly anxious attitude’ regarding the possible loss of said

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<sup>97</sup> ‘Pre-screening interview with Emma Freud,’ *Coriolanus* (dir. Josie Rourke, 2013).

<sup>98</sup> Richard Dyer, ‘Don’t Look Now: The Male Pin-Up,’ *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 110-7.

agency.<sup>99</sup> In these texts which are, as O'Brien argues, 'literally *active*', the body is typically involved in acts of physical exertion that call attention to the strength of the body, but which narratively are often expressed as cathartic moments of reaction to injury and trauma.<sup>100</sup>

Such acts of injury in action cinema provoke even closer scrutiny of the hero's body by the camera and the audience (as Rourke's *Coriolanus* also testifies), moreover. The iconic image of the muscular action hero is thus problematised by the duplicity of its apparent power: both 'natural' and artificial, strong and wounded.

Hiddleston's toned physique displays both the strength and the 'work' of his fitness. In a point of noticeable contiguity to the conventions of the superhero blockbuster form in which Hiddleston gained his fame, his costuming invites the audience to view his musculature and body as spectacle (even when fully clad) — in much the same way that Chris Hemsworth's brawny physicality is still apparent in Thor's armour. Certainly, as a participant in many of the same tropes and narratives as the action film, the superhero film particularly exemplifies the genre's distinctive visual culture and its focus upon the excessive body of the hero at the heart of this. The complex nature of the meanings ascribed to the body of the muscular hero thereby demonstrates the reductiveness of the theatre critics' arguments and their unwitting subscription to the philosophy of the 'dumb' body. Within the dramatic context of the shower scene and with regards to characterisation, the purpose of revealing Hiddleston's vigorous body is to show his weakness. He does not assume movements that signify power, but rather, with his gritted teeth, sharp intakes of breath and slow gestures, injury.

Yet, the revelation of his body also inevitably invites admiration. In keeping with the paradoxical nature of the action body, we are invited to view Hiddleston's body

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<sup>99</sup> Harvey O'Brien, *Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back* (Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>100</sup> O'Brien, *Action Movies*, 11.

appreciatively because of — rather than in spite of — his injuries. With the rest of the stage darkened and a bright, white spotlight overhead, the scene exclusively directs our gaze onto his wounded torso. The positioning of the spotlight in the same direction as the downward force of the shower allows the water to catch in the light, illuminating and enhancing the sight of Hiddleston's wet body. The starkness of this image, with its chiaroscuro-like colour composition and the resultantly emphasised lines of his musculature, presents a complex erotic spectacle for the audience. His wounds signal his vulnerability, but their existence also functions as a visual reference to his violent capability, adding to his physical aesthetic of raw, muscular power. This image is further complicated in light of the previous scene — as well as with knowledge of Coriolanus' later absolute refusal to show the citizens his wounds in order to secure votes — by placing the audience in a voyeuristic position. We are invited to consume his body, to encroach upon the extreme privacy of this moment and in doing so disregard the boundaries Coriolanus stubbornly attempts to maintain. In spite of his wishes for privacy, Coriolanus' body is used as a constant public measure of his worth, triply by the actors on stage, who represent his soldiers, and the Roman public but also by us, the audience. What Rourke's inclusion of this private scene does is to draw out the tragic quality of the play by making us complicit in the Romans' clamour to view and possess Coriolanus's body. Coriolanus's hubris makes him an uncompromising and often unlikeable figure; but the production's sympathetic details also remind us of the poignancy of what is asked of him and what is ultimately taken from him.

It is worth stating that the articulation of this anxiousness could just as equally be evidence of the nature of male characters on the Renaissance stage (as has been effectively argued by critics such as Mark Breitenberg). While borrowing from the visual culture of action cinema, however, Rourke's production (even in promotion) also locates the body's

meaning within a decidedly modern framework. Through meshing Coriolanus' characterisation with our knowledge of Hiddleston's popularity, Rourke encourages a reading of the play as a comment on celebrity culture. Applying an etymological approach to the term, David P. Marshall describes the 'democratic sense' of celebrity, with *celebrem* carrying connotations not only of the famous but also that of the 'thronged': '[t]he celebrity, in this sense, is not distant but attainable —touchable by the multitude'.<sup>101</sup> It is exactly this prospect of being touched by the multitude which is so repulsive to Martius and yet is so integral to his success as a political figure. *Coriolanus* at once identifies this desire for the public to possess celebrities and problematises this by presenting the conflict between the citizenry's demands and Martius's unwillingness to subject himself to their demands. The citizens argue 'He should have showed us / His marks of merit, wounds received for's country' (2.3.151-2). This, which Brutus informs us is the 'manner' (2.1.221) of the time, is refused by Coriolanus. He beseeches Menenius to let him forego the custom of standing before the citizens in a scant robe, entreating them 'For my wounds' sake to give their suffrage' (2.2.135). The proprietary manner in which the citizens express their right to view Coriolanus' body, regardless of his personal feelings, has particular resonances for today's celebrity culture: an industry which has flourished through the philosophy that those who place themselves in the public eye can expect their personal lives to also exist within the public sphere. Most unsettlingly, though, as our gaze is directed on Hiddleston's body throughout the play, Rourke reminds us that this is a culture we are complicit in, rather than just observers of.

The unwanted nature of the attention Coriolanus receives is also further emphasised by our potential knowledge of Hiddleston's star persona — the contrast drawn between Martius's hostility towards those who demand something of him and Hiddleston's famous

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<sup>101</sup> David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 6.

affability and readiness to make himself available to the public. Meanwhile Rourke's production permits a reading of the ending of the play which is entirely damning of the public's need to consume the bodies they see on television, in film and in the media. Aufidius' murder of Coriolanus satisfies the repeatedly frustrated desire demonstrated by the citizens, the generals and even us, the audience, to gaze upon Coriolanus's body as a symbol of his prowess. In a visual allusion to Olivier's death scene, after killing him, Aufidius (Hadley Fraser) hangs Coriolanus's body by the feet from a chain, dangling above the stage. In the text Aufidius almost immediately laments his actions, commenting that he is 'struck with sorrow' (5.6.148) and vows that Coriolanus shall have a 'noble memory' (5.6.154). Coriolanus's body is borne off stage to a drum beat, a solemn procession with which he is afforded dignity even in death. The excision of these lines and the violent suspension of Coriolanus's body in the production, however, argue against Aufidius's claims that his rage has 'gone' (5.6.148). Indeed, Aufidius's gleeful brutality and the uncomplicated nature of his treachery make for a recognisably blockbuster interpretation of the relationship between the two men as a Manichean conflict of mortal enemies. Fraser's Aufidius punishes Coriolanus not only with his betrayal but by treating his body with complete lack of respect, hanging and butchering him as though he is a piece of meat. Coriolanus's body, which he had not wished to expose throughout the play, is finally shown as a passive, unresisting object.

When explaining *Coriolanus*, Hiddleston describes it as a play that 'dramatises the conflict at the heart of every public figure: what it means to serve in public office, and [...] the private war between personal integrity and popularity'.<sup>102</sup> Though in this comment he is referring to those who are 'public figures' in a governmental sense, it invites an obvious comparison to the same world Hiddleston occupies as a celebrity and thus figure of public

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<sup>102</sup> 'National Theatre Live: Coriolanus trailer,' September 25, 2013, Video clip, accessed November 1, 2013, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VA3ZSaC2nU>.

scrutiny. Coriolanus's struggle to mesh his personal desires with the duty and openness demanded of him by the community offers us an inverted vision of the famously affable Hiddleston. By regarding the body of its lead actor as a site of adaptation, we are enabled to read Rourke's production of *Coriolanus* through Buchanan's 'determining filter' of the star.<sup>103</sup> We are invited to view the character through the body-conscious aesthetic of the action genre, a mode which is integral to Hiddleston's star persona through *Thor* and *Avengers Assemble* and through his role as a popular pin-up. Robert Shaughnessy argues that when viewed on its 'broadest basis as a popular cultural phenomenon' Shakespeare loses its status of 'distinctive privilege and becomes subject to, and analysable within, the terms of popular film genres'.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, Rourke's insistent direction of our gaze, combined with the qualities Hiddleston brings to the production as both a theatrical and film star opens up the already richly symbolic nature of Coriolanus's body, reframing it in discussions surrounding modern celebrity and cultural performances of masculinity.

Hiddleston's future projects indicate a desire to further extend the values associated with his star persona. His casting as the lead in a biopic of country musician Hank Williams, for example, represents a large shift from the narrowly similar upper-middle-class British characters he has played thus far, to a performance of working-class American requiring — presumably — a musical performance from Hiddleston. As his role in *Coriolanus* appears to indicate, this decision is born of his aspiration towards more conventional leading man roles. The choice of a biopic is particularly telling in this right, as a film genre which is frequently regarded as Oscar bait with its characteristic pre-requisites of dramatic narratives, historical details and often, the physical transformation of its stars; consider Nicole Kidman's Academy

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<sup>103</sup> Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 224.

<sup>104</sup> Robert Shaughnessy, 'Introduction,' *Shakespeare on Film: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 5.



Award-winning turn as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* (dir. Stephen Daldry, 2002), for instance. As a test of a ‘great’ actor, such a film could be expected to establish the viability of Hiddleston as a star in his own regard, not merely as a supporting part. That he has reached this stage of potentiality in his career is testament to the values of his star persona which Hiddleston has cultivated. His success has come about because of his work in popular *and* ‘high’ culture, demonstrating himself as both an actor of dramatic weight and an individual with mass appeal.

Hiddleston’s appearances in popular culture thus far have drawn upon the associations of his Shakespearean persona in order to depict ‘high’ culture – values contiguous to his upper-middle class, gentlemanly identity and predicated upon intelligence, cultural sophistication and refinement. In both these popular cultural engagements with the ‘Shakespearean’ — his performances as Loki and early film roles such as *War Horse* and *The Deep Blue Sea* — and his leading role in *Henry V*, this process has functioned by adhering to a more conservative conceptualisation of the playwright’s work, founded upon an inherent incompatibility with and contrast to mainstream culture. This relationship is in turn confirmed by the photogeny of Hiddleston’s star persona. His self-presentation is characterised by a conscious eschewing of more typical stereotypes of theatrical actors as bohemian and, instead, embracing a more professional image that accords with the formalism and cultural sophistication associated with his upper-middle-class upbringing and education. In spite of this, however, the public persona he demonstrates in the media and in fan interactions undermines any preconceptions of traditionalism. His prolific use of social media, lively engagement with his fanbase and active involvement in the creation and development of internet culture all contribute to a repudiation of celebrity as either closed off from their audience, or fame for fame’s sake. As Beaumont-Thomas notes, like Jennifer

Laurence, he has an ‘unfiltered realness that is fast becoming the ultimate asset in post-Twitter, post-PR Hollywood’.<sup>105</sup> Whether real, a conscious performance or somewhere in between, Hiddleston’s overwhelming sense of eagerness, sincerity and Loki-esque mischievousness stands at odds with Shakespearean seriousness of purpose and worthiness suggested by his appearance. His apparent enjoyment of memes demonstrates both his awareness of the importance of such cultural objects in engendering a successful legacy for himself and his films, but also — like Branagh — an interest and pleasure in the workings of popular culture. Hiddleston’s desire to champion Shakespeare’s work on such occasions, moreover, displays a belief in the compatibility of these cultural modes. Finally, the critical and commercial success of *Coriolanus* indicates Hiddleston’s ability to diversify his career and determine those Shakespearean and popular cultural resonances which are read onto his performances; and, significantly, Rourke’s production demonstrates how Shakespeare can, in turn, also accrue new meanings through the bodies of the actors who perform him.

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<sup>105</sup> Beaumont-Thomas, ‘Tom Hiddleston’s Thor PR antics’.

## Conclusion

The Shakespearean actor is a living monument to Shakespeare's legacy within contemporary culture. By regarding the body of the Shakespearean actor as a site of adaptation, this thesis has explored what is 'meant' by Shakespeare in Anglo-American culture at the end of the twentieth century and beginning decades of the twenty-first.<sup>1</sup> This has involved analysing what qualities imbue their performances and star personae and, in order to view the visibility of these qualities, also questioning the media's representation of them. My research has thus revealed the persistent association of the British Shakespearean actor and, by inference Shakespeare, with 'high' cultural values predicated on wit, intelligence, a 'quintessential' Britishness and both 'poshness' and political conservatism. This process is not only evident in the press's depiction of the Shakespearean actor, which has a tendency towards an overly-determined reading of the values they embody, however. Indeed, the Shakespearean's performances and their star persona more broadly indicates an, at least partial, subscription to their popular stereotypes as actors characterised by their eloquence and seriousness of dramatic purpose but also, a level of self-awareness. Their grandiloquence is both an expression of the Shakespearean's theatricality *and* an ironic nod to cultural expectations; a reflection of their personal social and cultural affiliations *and* a conscious recognition of the specific economic potential of male British Shakespeareans, domestically and internationally.

In the case of Ian McKellen, his Shakespeareanism has been predicated upon his perceived intellect. Within both 'high' culture and the mainstream he has frequently occupied roles characterised by their eloquence and a Machiavellian understanding of manipulation and power. This quality has been reinforced by McKellen's status as a popular and

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<sup>1</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Meaning by Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 1992), 5.

recognisable British actor within Hollywood. Having attained a level of immediate recognition at a far later point than his fellow Shakespeareans, the humour derived from the parodies of McKellen in *Extras* and *Coronation Street* testify to our familiarity with the way his Britishness has been used, particularly in Hollywood. Characters such as Gandalf speak to a perceived connection between McKellen's clipped, English pronunciation, Shakespeareanism and a position of moral rectitude, wisdom and authoritativeness. That this tendency — and the audience's resultant trust in McKellen's characters — is frequently subverted in roles such as Magneto or Teabing only testifies to the strength of this connection.

Branagh's career is similarly typified by roles founded upon his articulacy, with characters such as Gilderoy Lockhart and Miguel playing upon popular stereotype of the Shakespearean 'luvvie'. Utilising a similar degree of grandiloquence to that evidenced in *Hamlet*, for example, Branagh's involvement in popular culture has originated from the crossover potential of his Shakespearean valences and his perceived eloquence as an actor and star (a quality resulting simultaneously from the particularly English resonances of his theatrical career and his Northern Irish 'gift of the gab').<sup>2</sup> Even more uncommunicative figures such as the Swedish detective, Wallander, thereby retain a distinctly Shakespearean quality, with the programme's themes of death and isolation evoking the philosophical tenor of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. For Branagh, however, the pre-determined qualities of his Shakespeareanism have not always been reinforced by of his performances but rather, frequently result from the British press's hostile attitude towards the actor. As a partial consequence of this and his adaptive work, his Shakespearean identity has often been represented as conservative and incompatible with popular culture – a charge which, though

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<sup>2</sup> Ian Shuttleworth, *Ken & Em: The biography of Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson*, (Headline: Reading, 1995) 37.

potentially applicable to the politics of his *Henry V*, for instance, is not always an accurate summation of his creative engagement towards different cultural modes.

The associations of Tom Hiddleston's Shakespearean identity have also developed in accordance with more conservative values and have been especially configured in contiguity to his Britishness and personal experience of English privilege. His star persona has been founded upon values of intelligence and cultural sophistication, while his personal aesthetic is inspired by older, more traditional and formal modes of masculinity. It is these aspects which testify to the frequent connection made between his Shakespeareanism and the implicit upper-class sophistication and acumen of his Eton and Oxbridge education – an association made in part by the media but also cultivated through his selection of roles. The allure of privilege which these establishments still convey to some is especially evidenced in the popularity Hiddleston has secured, particularly in America, as a romantic object. This is something no doubt also impacted by a tendency in casting towards placing Hiddleston in period pieces, as a nostalgic, idealised embodiment of English gentlemanliness. Indeed, the work of all three Shakespeareans considered here — McKellen, Branagh and Hiddleston — has involved an interrogation of what the male Shakespearean body is expected to be. In the case of the latter two actors, this has been evident in the recurrent performance across their Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean work alike, of typically gendered values such as heroism. Their roles, and Branagh's adaptations, thus represents their adherence to a conventional assertion of male agency as muscular, active and violent.

Branagh's work is notable for the recurring figure of the soldier, with his personal performances and directorial work (in and beyond Shakespeare) frequently interrogating the notion of power and, in particular, the responsibility associated with power. Films such as *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Thor* have thereby meditated on the appropriateness of violence. They

have, however, ultimately valorised the military unit (and the soldier within it) as a quasi-spiritual expression of fraternity and moral right. Hiddleston's engagement with masculinity has been similarly aspirational in nature, with his muscular, bloodied performance in *Coriolanus* clearly positioning him in the mould of the action hero. Ironically, this production affirmed a particular, conventional model of gender, which has so far been refused Hiddleston in film casting. Due to the cumulatively stronger valences of his Shakespeareanism and his upper-class, English persona, his performances have instead been characterised by roles in which intelligence has been privileged over brute strength, cultural sophistication over an 'everyman' heroism and sly immorality over uncomplicated rectitude.

The Shakespearean actor's frequent movements across and between popular and 'high culture' thereby demonstrates the value of my focus as a means by which to explore the relationship between Shakespeare and the mainstream. My three case studies represent not only individual instances of this multidirectional interplay but also demonstrate its occurrence on a broader scale. They should be viewed, therefore, as participants in a (reciprocal) exchange between 'high' culture and Hollywood, which has long utilised the British Shakespearean actor and will, presumably, continue to do so. Indeed, in their most common popular cultural function, blockbusters cast Shakespearean actors as villains who can provide antagonists capable of wit, pathos and depth. With the typically grandiloquent quality of these villains' characterisation, the Shakespearean actor is actively courted for involvement in such franchises due to his ability to body forth a perceived authority as a viable threat to the protagonist. The popularity of this is evident in the wealth of other male (potentially non-theatrical) actors who have similarly accessed the cachet of being a British performer — qualities such as a seriousness of dramatic intent, eloquence, class and cultural sophistication. Hollywood has thus been a productive employer for figures such as Ben Kingsley,

Christopher Eccleston, Michael Gambon, Ralph Fiennes, Alfred Molina, Bill Nighy, Jeremy Irons and Brian Cox. Indeed, the Shakespeareans' textual penumbra particularly reinforces this relationship through the contiguity between their villainous roles and their previous theatrical portrayals; for example, the obvious connections between McKellen's Magneto and his Richard III. The overriding impression of this process, however, is the identification of the Shakespearean (and thus Shakespeareanism) with luxuriance, self-service and moral relativism. The difference between the villain's formalised mode of expression and the popular cultural world of the heroes thereby positions the gap between the Shakespearean (as representative of 'high' culture) and the mainstream as illustrative of that between the villain's moral corruption and the hero's impeccable virtue. The association of the villain with the intrusion of 'high' culture, furthermore, equates their dictatorial intent with the perceived elitism and exclusionary values of their cultural affiliations.

And yet, by utilising irony, self-awareness and subversion in both their performances and in the self-cultivation of their star personae, the Shakespearean actors considered here have persistently worked to challenge this potentially conservative relationship between the Shakespearean and popular culture. Whether as a result of the kind of role readily available for an actor of his age or the nature of cultural representations of old age, Ian McKellen's work has frequently confronted the paradigms of masculinity expressed in Branagh and Hiddleston's performances. Indeed, McKellen's cultural function evinces Richard Dyer's formulation of the contradictions within an actor's star persona as a potential site of resistance. The Shakespearean actor is not only a site of affirmation — signifying Shakespeare's more conservative usage— but one of contestation and adaptation. McKellen's portrayals of alterity work to focus attention on typically under-represented social groups or 'unglamorous' themes such as disability, ageing and homosexuality. And while these

depictions argue for McKellen subverting the youthful, muscular ideals of contemporary culture, it is more accurate to state that his performances work towards a more generous definition of masculinity. Certainly, the implicit vanity of his refusal of Falstaffian physical archetypes and the vigour of characters such as Gandalf, Magneto, Richard or Teabing and – most visibly – Lear necessitates that even when these roles involve disability or otherness, they still accord with the emphasis placed on male beauty within gay culture. Significantly, these portrayals also bring together the disparate aspects of McKellen’s star persona with his personal political identity. Their complex representations of difference display the same appeal for inclusivity and understanding as his gay and civil rights advocacy.

The strategy by which McKellen has called for greater understanding of gay rights — playing upon the mass popularity of characters such as Gandalf or Magneto — is also evident in the implications of his continuing movement between ‘high’ and mainstream culture in recent years. The result of this has been to encourage a representation of Shakespeare (and Shakespeareanism) as accessible and popular. Indeed, the RSC’s *King Lear* sold out weeks before the beginning of the run and it does not task imagination to consider how many of those tickets were sold to McKellen’s new fanbase, reading Magneto’s cold fury or Gandalf’s mischievousness in *Lear*. Rather than maintaining an artificial divide between his more ‘classical’ performances and his mainstream ones, McKellen’s conscious engagement with his Shakespearean identity has thus ensured its cross-cultural function. Comedies such as *Vicious* and *Extras* or *Coronation Street* have utilised it as shorthand for pretentiousness, flamboyance and theatricality; meanwhile the Paralympics Opening Ceremony sought McKellen’s cultural authoritativeness, perceived moral rectitude but also his liberalism.

Branagh has similarly challenged some of the more conservative associations of his Shakespearean identity, even as out of my three case studies he has experienced the greatest



degree of stereotyping within the press. In spite of the media's belief in the rigidly 'high' cultural connotations of his Shakespeareanism, Branagh's directorial work (in particular) is characterised by its persistent disregard of cultural hierarchies. His adaptations are typified by an attitude towards the playwright which acknowledges the importance of his work, but which conveys this significance through demonstrating Shakespeare's broad applicability and mass appeal. Branagh's films thereby utilise a wide range of allusions, visual references and generic conventions in order to adapt Shakespeare's texts in a manner that prioritises multiplicity of meaning. And, most significantly, his films do this in a manner that works to demystify the plays and remove their elite cachet by situating them within frameworks more familiar to mainstream audience-goers. *Henry V*'s muddy mise-en-scène attempts to induce in the film the moral ambiguity and visual aesthetic of war films such as *Platoon* (dir. Oliver Stone, 1986) or *Full Metal Jacket* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1987). Later, the relationship between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* presents a means by which to further understand Hamlet's complex relationship with his own father. This willingness to employ a wide and cross-cultural range of references is indicative not only of his directorial career as a Shakespearean adaptor, moreover, but is present in Branagh's mainstream work. In the example of *Thor*, his creative engagement with the media's attempts to define his professional identity demonstrates the explicitly multidirectional interplay of cultural sources within Branagh's adaptive process. In an attitude evocative of fan practices, Branagh challenges the maintenance of traditional cultural hierarchies by carrying his Shakespearean values into popular art forms: employing the same complex exegetical strategies and dense network of allusions.

Tom Hiddleston's star persona has also embraced its contradictoriness as a means by which to dispel some of Shakespeare's more traditional values. The significance of Loki as a

popular cultural icon has ensured that Hiddleston's Shakespeareanism has been forged alongside a mainstream function, with both Loki and Hiddleston occupying a prominent position in contemporary internet culture. Indeed, in a subversion of more expected lines of influence, his performance in *The Hollow Crown* appears to reference the characterisation and mise-en-scène of *Thor*. That he was presented with the opportunity to perform in not only *Henry IV* but *Henry V* at all would appear to be a debt to the success of the blockbuster film, furthermore. Like McKellen and Branagh, Hiddleston's success in the mainstream has invested his subsequent Shakespearean performances with increased relevance, legibility and, importantly, popular appeal. And although director Josie Rourke stressed the modern political applicability of *Coriolanus*' plot, the most significant aspect of the production for interpretation lies in its representation of Hiddleston's star persona. The short period of his career which I have explored in this thesis demonstrates precisely the kind of cross-cultural, intertextual, and frequently circular, adaptive process embodied by the Shakespearean actor. Hiddleston's performance in *Coriolanus* locates him as the hub of an adaptive journey which has taken him from being rejected as Thor for possessing too much intelligence as an actor, to Loki's Shakespearean characterisation, Hal's impish Loki qualities, Henry's Thor-like heroism and finally, back to Shakespeare: a Coriolanus firmly indebted to the action blockbuster, with its body-conscious aesthetic and its emphasis on the muscular, wounded body of its hero as the site of meaning. And so back we go to *Thor*...

The form of Shakespeareanism which McKellen, Branagh and Hiddleston all perform is one which — far from the exclusivity imagined by the Hollywood blockbuster or the British press — is, therefore, compatible with internet culture, conversant with social networking, contiguous to the textual poaching of fan creative practices and also conducive to equal rights advocacy. Indeed, I would argue that in this respect McKellen et al. are

representative of a still-continuing broader cultural shift in attitudes towards the Shakespearean actor and his significance within the acting world. Hiddleston, in particular, has escaped the narrowly determined way in which Branagh's career has been described, and has moved successfully between 'high' and popular culture (even while the press's persistent references to his privileged upbringing work to emphasise the 'high' cultural qualities of his persona). Certainly, many actors are now coming to Shakespeare much later in their careers, so that instead of the theatre serving as a testing ground for their future career (as it was for McKellen and Branagh), it now appears as an opportunity to reify their star status and demonstrate their abilities. Martin Freeman's rapid ascent into fame as a result of the critical and commercial success of the BBC series *Sherlock* and *The Hobbit* has afforded him the opportunity to display a wider variety of skills. Like the aspect of wish-fulfilment in Hiddleston's action hero *Coriolanus*, Freeman has purposefully reversed the associations of his star persona from 'nice guy' to manipulative antiheroes such as *Richard III* or Lester Nygaard in *Fargo* (TV, dir. various, 2014). Similarly, having attained a profound level of success, Freeman's co-star, Benedict Cumberbatch, has confirmed his reputation as a respected dramatic actor by deciding to tackle two Shakespearean performances: the almost inevitable choice of *Hamlet* and, in keeping with his preference for darker protagonists, *Richard III* in the BBC's continuation of *The Hollow Crown*. Despite having worked on a number of occasions in the theatre, it is noticeable that Cumberbatch's first Shakespearean roles since attending Harrow School have come at this high point in his career. The relative swiftness with which Hiddleston moved from British theatre and television to Hollywood in comparison to McKellen and Branagh, moreover, recognises the diminishing sense that an actor has to 'prove' himself in the theatre before transitioning to popular culture. Instead, the careers of Hiddleston and his generation evince an ambition to attain renown more quickly

and on a much larger level – a desire that is, arguably, more easily served in an increasingly transnational and mediatised cultural industry.

These changing practices are potentially a result of the increasingly online, visible public presence of actors such as Cumberbatch: actors whose success has been driven in part by the vociferous support of their fan base — intelligent, responsive consumers with the ability to connect directly to their chosen star. Indeed, through their embrace of social media, actors such as McKellen and Hiddleston are significant for their integration within the mainstream and the seamlessness of the division between their characters and their performance of a ‘private’, personal identity. In contrast, Branagh, with his relative lack of ‘public’ social media use, has struggled to deconstruct his star persona and convince the media of his ‘just-call-me-Ken’ everyman quality. Faced with only the evidence of his films or television programmes and these press engagements, Branagh’s argument for the compatibility of his disparate cultural roles — his work in Hollywood and his career as a Shakespearean — has been less persuasive. As highly visible online presences, however, both McKellen and Hiddleston possess a greater opportunity to determine their identities and, if necessary, work against the press’s instinct to stereotype their class or performance style as Shakespeareans. The same movements between high and low culture which characterise their careers on a macro level are continued in their virtual lives, moreover. The unique forms of Shakespeareanism they signify can be disseminated on a daily basis in the new digital environment offered by networking platforms such as Twitter, FaceBook or YouTube, unfiltered by the media’s representation and in direct conversation with both their fans and critics.

The associations forged by an actor’s Shakespearean identity are thus apparent within a much wider and expansive adaptive terrain, in which their virtual representation is as

productive for analysis as films or theatrical performances. The wider proliferation of the star's persona beyond the limits of old media forms or traditional performance sites thereby invites the meeting of pre-existing associations with the actor's personal identity, as articulated by their online avatars (this 'personal' identity is, of course, as much a result of performance as it is the unveiling of any true or essential being). The meanings attributed to the contemporary Shakespearean actor arrive, therefore, not only through a complex matrix of personal and past performances — their own and other former incarnations, or literary, artistic or historical references created by the production — but also through their personal identity which, though always apparent to some extent in performance, can be made increasingly transparent according to their level of virtual self-representation.

This thesis signifies an effort to detail the complex, multivalent meanings attached to the figure of the Shakespearean actor in contemporary culture and to explore Shakespeare's continuing legacy and its compatibility with the mainstream. It also represents on a methodological level an invitation to critical practice which is best summarised by Judith Buchanan's succinct reminder of the 'simple putative divide' between the textual and extra-textual.<sup>3</sup> When regarding the body of the Shakespearean actor — or, indeed, any actor — as the site of adaptation, such divisions are even more arbitrary than in more typical book-to-film adaptation studies (or vice versa), given the elusive and often highly personal way in which their textual penumbra appears to us. A methodology which takes the actor's body as the object of critical study therefore necessitates an approach to the field which continues the work of dismantling the binaries and cultural hierarchies which have long persisted — and still persist — in the humanities. It questions the artificiality of distinctions between what is 'textual' and 'extra-textual' to move beyond recognised, canonical or highbrow works to the 'disposable' texts of mainstream culture. The figure of the actor thereby functions as the

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), 10.

locus of points for a critical practise that is implicitly interdisciplinary and can borrow and develop upon aspects of audience reception, performance studies, industry and production studies, textual analysis of film and photography, new media, and so on. My thesis demonstrates the value of this theoretical approach to the actor, opening it up as a rich site of critical potential for myself and other adaptation scholars. Although I have focused my study on the phenomenon of the *Shakespearean* actor, there are similarly visible trajectories of influence between actors and the adaptive process, which enable us to chart some of the subtle and constantly shifting interplays of meaning in texts. These vary from the relationship between the *Twilight* franchise and its surprisingly counter-cultural stars, Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson, to the influence of ‘slash’ fan-fiction on the representation of Holmes and Watson’s friendship in *Sherlock*, or the impact of Ben Affleck’s ambivalent media representation on the forthcoming DC Comics’ *Batman* reboot. By emphasising the complex, cross-cultural and intermedial nature of contemporary adaptation, I have thus argued for the importance of widening our critical scope. Indeed, it is essential that as adaptation critics we look beyond the canonical, into the mainstream and beyond into new paratextual virtual terrains, influenced by the growing significance and relevance of fan studies, media studies and the digital humanities.

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N.B. Film series are placed chronologically.

## Appendix

### **'Adapting *Coriolanus*: Tom Hiddleston's Body and Action Cinema', *Adaptation*, Vol. 7 Issue 3 (2014).**

#### **Key words**

Shakespeare, actors, body, popular culture.

#### **Abstract**

Despite a critical movement seen across the humanities described as the 'corporeal turn' in Shakespeare studies alone, adaptation studies has been slow to situate the body as a site of major interpretive possibility.<sup>1</sup> A constituent part of textual readings the body has, nonetheless, rarely been regarded as an adaptive site in and of itself; instead it is viewed as a participant in the process of adaptation. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, to demonstrate the validity of an actor-based approach to adaptation and secondly to further the call made by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan amongst others to ascend the 'aporias of fidelity' by working to an intertextual or dialogical model.<sup>2</sup> I thereby wish to explore Josie Rourke's theatrical production of *Coriolanus* and the importance of her lead Tom Hiddleston's body as a source of meaning, doing this through examining inter-related but frequently disparate fields such as star-theory and popular culture studies. As well as considering the qualities independently brought by the actor to character through physicality and intertextuality within the adaptive process. Through the presentation of Hiddleston's body and its function as an adaptive site we are thus able to view Rourke's interaction with the visual culture of contemporary action cinema and the resonances this creates physically and thematically for *Coriolanus*'s depiction of the soldier-hero.

2013 saw Tom Hiddleston's return to theatre as the titular character in the Donmar Warehouse's production of *Coriolanus*. With only a small amount of television roles and moderate success in theatre Hiddleston rose to fame as Loki in the superhero adaptation *Thor* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2011).<sup>3</sup> The appointment of Kenneth Branagh as director exemplified Marvel's recognition of the challenges of adapting the *Thor* comic series: interpreting its

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<sup>1</sup> Keir Elam, "'In what chapter of his bosom?': Reading Shakespeare's Bodies', *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Methuen, 1985), 143.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Hiddleston won both the Ian Charleston Award (Third Prize) and the Laurence Olivier Award for Best Newcomer in 2007 for his role as Cassio in *Othello* at the Donmar Warehouse.

formalised style and its classical dramatic preoccupations for a mainstream audience. Indeed, Hiddleston's performance as Loki was crafted by both actor and director in the mould of Shakespearean malcontents such as Iago, Edmund and Cassius. Partly as a consequence of this, Hiddleston's emergent star persona has been founded upon reinforcing the features of performance, class and Englishness conventionally tied to the 'Shakespearean' (this often in contrast to his active engagement with popular culture). Certainly, *Coriolanus*' high profile production serves as a statement of Hiddleston's current success and its significance as a *popular* cultural event; both the show's three month run and the NT Live Cinema screenings repeatedly sold out. His lead role also reflects the recent vogue for high profile actors to front stagings of early modern texts in a process that simultaneously tests their abilities as performers and reaffirms the established quality of their star persona. In her introduction to the screening the director Josie Rourke stated that this play, more so than any other by Shakespeare expresses a 'visceral' nature through its preoccupation with violence and its conjuration of the wounded and scarred body. Indeed, in this production the audience are frequently invited to study Coriolanus's body: a body and its wounds which, as Coppelia Kahn argues, are 'prismatic' and the 'ambivalent images' at the centre of the work.<sup>4</sup> This paper will thus explore the competing values attributed to Tom Hiddleston's body in this production (both that of the character and Hiddleston's own) and how these demonstrate the readiness of the actor's body as a site of adaptation and intertextuality, across high and low cultural modes.

Throughout the play Coriolanus is caught between imploration to demonstrate his greatness as a soldier and his natural inclination to keep the consequences of such prowess private. It is the play's great irony that the character at the heart of the narrative and who,

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<sup>4</sup> Coppelia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 1.

according to theatrical convention can thus be expected to perform the greatest amount of speeches, is reluctant to the point of discourtesy. In Act One Scene Ten in which Martius gains the ‘addition’ of Coriolanus, his enormous aversion to the praise being laid upon him is apparent. Describing his cheering soldiers as ‘flatterers’ and their admiration as ‘false-faced soothing’, the semantic field of deception he employs explicates his inherent distrust of their eulogising.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the repetition of the unvoiced fricative sounds in *flatterers*, *false* and *faced*, as well as the sneering sibilance of ‘When steel grows / Soft as the parasite’s silk’ (1.10.44-5) guide the performance of Coriolanus’s response as openly contemptuous. In contrast to and in spite of this recalcitrance, however, a commentary on the state of Coriolanus’s body is offered throughout, most acutely expressed in his moments of pain and discomfort. This varies from precise stage directions stating Martius’s entrance with his arm in a sling, to descriptions of his actual wounds or metonymic references to the body. These include Menenius’ famous allegory of the stomach or Coriolanus’s rebuttal ‘I will go wash / And when my face is fair, you shall perceive / Whether I blush or no’ (1.10.67-9). Aside from this comment, however, Coriolanus views his body purely as a practical thing and unlike his companions is unable to see the symbolic significance of his wounds; he can only experience them as they were originally intended — as injuries.

Cominius’ argument that not to proclaim Coriolanus’s achievements would be a ‘concealment / Worse than a theft’ (1.10.21-2), is repeatedly punctured by Martius’s rejoinders of the physical cost of the battle. Cominius’ appeal to speak before the army is met with ‘I have some wounds upon me, and they smart / To hear themselves remembered’ (1.10.27-8).<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Coriolanus’s diatribe against ‘praises sauced in lies’ (1.10.52) is

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<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus (The Arden Shakespeare, Third Edition)*, ed. Peter Holland (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2011) 1.10.42-4. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>6</sup> The same sentiment is repeated later in the play by Coriolanus who, on being told the senate will tell of his victory, responds: ‘I had rather my wounds to heal again/Than hear say how I got them.’ (2.2.65-6)



interrupted by the detail that he has not yet washed his bloody nose. Coriolanus' cynicism is somewhat rewarded, though. Cominius's commendation is more of a display for his army than it is reward for the man, evident in his disinterest in Martius' injuries but willingness to politicise them. Cominius manipulates the sentiment of Coriolanus' complaint that his wounds ache more for being talked about by arguing that if they were not discussed his wounds might fester from 'ingratitude' (1.10.30); his dire pronouncement all the more pointed through the dark humour of his pun that the wounds will 'tent themselves with death' (1.10.31). It is only when the blood on Coriolanus's face has started to dry, moreover, that Cominius finally relents, allowing Martius to retreat to clean and bind his wounds, as requested. Cominius understands the influence Coriolanus' body wields as both the tool and symbol of his violent power; his valence as a soldier is greater when bloody, fresh from battle, 'as he were flayed' (1.7.23), than when his blood has dried and his wounds have healed.

Robin Headlam Wells reminds us that 'the least sympathetic of Shakespeare's heroes, Martius is nevertheless capable of inspiring awe and admiration in friends and enemies alike'. He continues that Martius's 'greatest conquest' is not Carioli but 'the hearts of theatre audiences and critics alike'.<sup>7</sup> Though the relative youthfulness of Hiddleston's Coriolanus increases the sense of his behaviour as childish petulance, he succeeds at times in making his character a sympathetic figure. The horror of Cominius' description of Coriolanus like a flayed man was apparent in Hiddleston's dramatic entrance onto stage, entirely covered in blood. The drama of this moment was swiftly undercut, however, by his vulnerability, as he clutched at his arm in pain. Indeed, the extent of his unhappiness during the following scene was performed as an expression as much of Coriolanus's emotional discomfort as physical

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<sup>7</sup> Robin Headlam Wells, *Shakespeare on Masculinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146.

pain. Jubilantly boisterous, Cominius and Lartius pushed Coriolanus around the stage, manhandling him into a position in which he could address his troops, while forcibly placing the garland upon his head. With his body tensed, cringing at every forced moment, Hiddleston was visibly fatigued.

The interpolation of a shower scene immediately after this in which Coriolanus cleaned his wounds only increased our sympathy for his character. As with his earlier discomfort at being manipulated by the elder generals, this scene permitted a rare moment of vulnerability. This moment was somewhat cynically viewed by critics, though, as a lowest common denominator appeal to Hiddleston's celebrity as a newly-minted Hollywood star. In the *Daily Mail* Quentin Letts decided the scene had the 'same slightly desperate' air as the ubiquitous feature of 'stars cavort[ing] in their bikinis' while showering on *I'm A Celebrity... Get Me Out Of Here!*<sup>8</sup> While recognising Hiddleston's female fan base, Dominic Maxwell was sceptical of his 'battle-hardened (OK, gym-hardened) waist' in a scene that 'will please the MTV viewers who have just voted Hiddleston the sexiest man in the world.'<sup>9</sup> The logic of such readings is immediate and indeed, is permitted by Rourke's own admission of Hiddleston's obvious physical appeal.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, as Pascale Aebischer and Nigel Wheale note, adaptation criticism tends towards a perception of Hollywood (or the appropriation of Hollywood-esque models in this case) as a 'mode of production that imposes simplifying and popularising structures... often in conflict with the Shakespearean texts it attempts to

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<sup>8</sup> Quentin Letts, 'Oh do put it away, dearie: Tom Hiddleston strips to his muscular torso on stage in Coriolanus,' *Daily Mail*, December 18, 2013, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2525568/Tom-Hiddleton-Coriolanus-Oh-away-dearie-Tom-Hiddleston-strips-muscular-torso-stage-Coriolanus.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Dominic Maxwell, 'Tragedy that is odd, intimate, compelling', *The Times*, 18 December, 2013, n.p.

<sup>10</sup> Josie Rourke was interviewed by Emma Freud during the National Theatre Live screening. In response to the question why did she cast 'a man called by MTV the sexiest man in the world?' she laughingly stated: 'I can't possibly think what was going through my head... Well, he's a great actor as well as passing sexy....'

remake'.<sup>11</sup> As I will continue to demonstrate, however, it is not always productive to view the adaptive relationship between Shakespeare and the popular as an essentially combative one. To reduce the scene's significance to pure titillation is to ignore the thematic congruence it has and the way in which this congruence functions through our implicit understanding of Hiddleston as a pin-up figure.

The defined nature of Hiddleston's body in *Coriolanus* sees him occupy the kind of action hero role that has, so far, been refused him in Hollywood and yet which he has been placed in conversation with through Loki's antagonism to conventional heroes such as Thor, Iron Man and Captain America. Significantly, although his involvement in Marvel helped qualify Hiddleston's physical appeal as an essential part of his star persona, in both *Thor* and *The Avengers* Loki's power as a villain laid in his *mental* dexterity, especially in contrast to Thor's brute strength. Complementary to his character, Hiddleston's persona has also been founded upon his intelligence and wit (evident in what John Naughton describes as the 'compulsory' note in press interviews that he was educated at Eton and Cambridge University).<sup>12</sup> The body he displays in this production thus accords with a more stereotypically Hollywood depiction of masculinity, one in which his physicality is his most important feature. Though he demonstrated a similar amount of violence when playing Loki, the tight-fitting material of his clothing means we are permitted to see *more* of his body by viewing the physical fact of his muscularity, not only the outcome of his ability.

Hiddleston has spoken on his 'physical preparation' for this role, noting that as Coriolanus is a soldier the 'audience has to see that he's been to war and can fight.' He thus tried to make his body as 'strong as possible' by increasing his physical routine. The effect of

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<sup>11</sup> Pascale Aebischer and Nigel Wheale, 'Introduction' in *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Culture* ed. Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche and Nigel Wheale, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 8.

<sup>12</sup> John Naughton, 'Major Tom,' [British] *GQ*, November 1, 2013, n.p.

these changes is certainly visible on stage. The meaning invested in Coriolanus's muscularity functions not only through the eloquence of the early modern body, however, but through an understanding of the body in contemporary action cinema. Lisa Purse argues that action cinema is 'defined by its persistent attention to the exerting body', a focus present as much in audio-visual aesthetics as characterisation and narrative.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in an argument that exactly mirrors Coriolanus's narrative, Yvonne Tasker highlights the powerful function of the 'spectacular bodies of the action cinema' in dramatising 'narratives of power and powerlessness, exclusion and belonging'<sup>14</sup>. Roger Horrocks affirms this eloquence by describing the male body as 'a *dumb* body, that [...] must speak through its musculature and its actions'.<sup>15</sup> As I will continue to argue, the scenes in Rourke's production which demonstrate Hiddleston's muscularity thus gain further valence within the play as a whole through an awareness of the wider cultural context of his blockbuster work.

But first it is worth demonstrating the applicability of this action cinema model for *Coriolanus*. Indeed, it is a play which recently has gained from conversation with the action genre, especially apparent in Rourke's most immediate point of comparison: the 2011 Ralph Fiennes film adaptation. Its protracted combat scenes with their urban setting evoke the kind of modern warfare seen in action films such as *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, 2010). As Graham Holderness has noted in his work comparing the film with *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) and *Skyfall* (dir. Sam Mendes, 2012), with its gun toting heroes in full combat gear, explosions, graphic violence and its two major stars — Fiennes as Coriolanus and Gerard Butler as his mortal enemy, Aufidius — *Coriolanus* speaks to

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<sup>13</sup> Lisa Purse, *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2000), 165.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Horrocks, *Male Myths and Icons: Masculinity in Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 170.

conventional generic action tropes, situations and characters.<sup>16</sup> The extent to which this adaptation nurtured its aptness as a participant in the action genre is not only evident in the ‘textual penumbra’ supplied by our knowledge of its stars but within its commercial paratexts.<sup>17</sup> Though most of the theatrical posters cultivated a more art-house feel with credentials praising the actors’ performances, the cover for the DVD release of the film is telling of the way in which the film was marketed for a mainstream audience. The review proclaiming ‘...BLOODIED, BRUTAL AND BRILLIANT’ accords with the sensationalistic presentation of the promotional images. The dynamic quality of the stills advertises a specific interpretation of the play rooted in iterating a physically violent masculinity. Of the five images the cover is comprised of, three testify to the male characters’ ability with weapons (including the stereotypical image of the action hero casually wielding their firearm in a manner synecdochal to the genre’s naturalisation of male power). Even the non-military character (as tribune Sicinius (James Nesbitt) draws his power instead from language) assumes a combative physical stance with his arm outstretched, as though on the brink of attack. This advertisement of the film, which prefigures the importance of the male body as a symbolically-laden spectacle, thus promotes an adaptation of the text which satisfies the desires of a conventional action film audience *and* those conversant with the themes of the play. This paratextual polysemy was also evident in the marketing of the Donmar production. Released midway through its theatrical run and six days before its first live cinema screening, the Donmar released ‘Tom Hiddleston prepares for *Coriolanus* at the Donmar Warehouse’.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Graham Holderness, *Tales From Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90-1.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Buchanan formulates the argument that every adaptation contains a ‘textual penumbra [...] that body of information that, although not literally part of what is seen on screen, attaches to the film so closely as to become inextricably associated with it.... At its most innocuous, it might, more simply, include an awareness of an actor's previous roles, or knowledge of the shooting locations used’. Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Film*, (Harlow: Pearson, 2005) 10.

<sup>18</sup> ‘National Theatre Live: Coriolanus Trailer,’ September 25, 2013, Video, accessed February 1, 2014, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VA3ZSaC2nU>.

Though Mark Gatiss (Menenius) is seen reading his script on stage and the cast participate in a game of 'Zip', the video is largely dedicated to representing the physical preparations necessary for the performance. With its opening close-ups of wound make up being applied to his torso, fight rehearsals and Hiddleston skipping, doing push and pull ups, this piece of promotion reiterates the fact that Rourke's production capitalises on the physicality of its star. Indeed, in interview Rourke stressed Hiddleston's physical ability as one of the reasons for the appropriateness of his casting. Preparation for *Coriolanus*, the Donmar encourages us to believe, has more to do with the kind of physical transformation boasted of by action stars than it does as an intellectual exercise.

The inclusion of a shower scene within the production further argues for considering the play within the aegis of action cinema, in a cultural context in which the *popular* iterations of the same archetype belongs to the muscular heroes of the action genre, be it Rambo, the Terminator or Thor. The interpolated scene is an exercise in the paradoxical nature of the muscled body, as articulated by Richard Dyer in his work on the male pin-up.<sup>19</sup> Dyer argues that the bodies of these men are caught between asserting the naturalisation of physical power (in which their bodies are the result of everyday labour) and signalling the artificiality of its construction through its over abundant shape and hardness. Similarly, a number of critics on action cinema concur that the genre's violent assertion of masculine power reveals a 'profoundly anxious attitude' regarding the possible loss of said agency.<sup>20</sup> In these texts which are, as O'Brien argues, 'literally *active*', the body is typically involved in acts of physical exertion that call attention to the strength of the body, but which narratively are often expressed as cathartic moments of reaction to injury and trauma.<sup>21</sup> Such acts of injury in action cinema, moreover, provoke even closer scrutiny of the hero's body by the camera and

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Dyer, 'Don't Look Now: The Male Pin-Up', *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 110-7.

<sup>20</sup> Harvey O'Brien, *Action Movies: The Cinema of Striking Back* (Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien, *Action Movies*, 11.

the audience (as Rourke's *Coriolanus* also testifies). The iconic image of the muscular action hero is thus problematised by the duplicity of its apparent power: both 'natural' and artificial, strong and wounded.

Hiddleston's toned physique displays both the strength and the 'work' of his fitness. In a point of noticeable contiguity to the conventions of the superhero blockbuster form in which Hiddleston gained his fame, his costuming invites the audience to view his musculature and body as spectacle (even when fully clad). As a participant in many of the same tropes and narratives as the action film, the superhero film particularly exemplifies the genre's distinctive visual culture and its focus upon the excessive body of the hero at the heart of this. The complex nature of the meanings ascribed to the body of the muscular hero thereby demonstrates the reductiveness of the theatre critics' arguments and their unwitting subscription to the philosophy of the 'dumb' body. Within the dramatic context of the shower scene and with regards to characterisation, the purpose of revealing Hiddleston's vigorous body is to show his weakness. He does not assume movements that signify power, but rather, with his gritted teeth, sharp intakes of breath and slow gestures, injury.

In keeping with the paradoxical nature of the action body we are invited to view Hiddleston's body appreciatively because of — rather than in spite of — his injuries. With the rest of the stage darkened and a bright, white spotlight overhead, the scene exclusively directs our gaze onto his wounded torso. The positioning of the spotlight in the same direction as the downward force of the shower allows the water to catch in the light, illuminating and enhancing the sight of Hiddleston's wet body. The starkness of this image with its chiaroscuro-like colour composition, and the resultantly emphasised lines of his musculature, presents a complex erotic spectacle for the audience. His wounds signal his vulnerability but their existence also functions as visual references to his violent capability,

adding to his physical aesthetic of raw, muscular power. This image is further complicated in light of the previous scene - as well as with knowledge of Coriolanus' later absolute refusal to show the citizens his wounds in order to secure votes – by placing the audience in a voyeuristic position. We are invited to consume his body, to encroach upon the extreme privacy of this moment and in doing so disregard the boundaries Coriolanus stubbornly attempts to maintain. In spite of his wishes for privacy, Coriolanus' body is used as a constant public measure of his worth, both by the actors on stage who represent his soldiers and the Roman public but also by us, the audience. What Rourke's inclusion of this private scene does is to draw out the tragic quality of the play by making us complicit in the Romans' clamour to view and possess Coriolanus's body. Coriolanus's hubris makes him an uncompromising and often unlikeable figure; but the production's sympathetic details also remind us of the poignancy of what is asked of him and what is ultimately taken from him.

It is worth stating that the articulation of this anxiousness could just as equally be evidence of the nature of male characters on the Renaissance stage (as has been effectively argued by critics such as Mark Breitenberg in *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*, 1996). While borrowing from the visual culture of action cinema, however, Rourke's production (even in promotion) also locates the body's meaning within a decidedly modern framework. Through meshing Coriolanus' characterisation with our knowledge of Hiddleston's popularity, Rourke encourages a reading of the play as a comment on celebrity culture. Applying an etymological approach to the term, David P. Marshall describes the 'democratic sense' of celebrity, with *celebrem* carrying connotations not only of the famous but also that of the 'thronged': '[t]he celebrity, in this sense, is not distant but attainable – touchable by the multitude'.<sup>22</sup> It is exactly this prospect of being touched by the multitude

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<sup>22</sup> David P. Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 6.



which is so repulsive to Martius and yet is so integral to his success as a political figure. *Coriolanus* at once identifies this desire for the public to possess celebrities and problematises this by presenting the conflict between the citizenry's demands and Martius's unwillingness to subject himself. The citizens argue 'He should have showed us / His marks of merit, wounds received for's country' (2.3.151-2). This, which Brutus informs us is the 'manner' (2.1.221) of the time is refused by Coriolanus. He beseeches Menenius to let him forget the custom of standing before the citizens in a scant robe, entreating them 'For my wounds' sake to give their suffrage' (2.2.135). The propriety manner in which the citizens express their right to view Coriolanus' body, regardless of his personal feelings, has particular resonances for today's celebrity culture: an industry which has flourished through the philosophy that those who place themselves in the public eye can expect their personal lives to also exist within the public sphere. Most unsettlingly, though, as our gaze is directed on Hiddleston's body throughout the play, Rourke reminds us that this is a culture we are complicit in, rather than just observers of.

The unwanted nature of the attention Coriolanus receives is also further emphasised by our potential knowledge of Hiddleston's star persona — the contrast drawn between Martius's hostility towards those who demand something of him and Hiddleston's famous affability. Meanwhile Rourke's production permits a reading of the ending of the play which is entirely damning of the public's need to consume the bodies they see on television, in film and in the media. Aufidius' murder of Coriolanus satisfies the repeatedly frustrated desire demonstrated by the citizens, the generals and even us, the audience, to gaze upon Coriolanus's body as a symbol of his prowess. After killing him, Aufidius (Hadley Fraser) hangs Coriolanus's body by the feet from a chain, dangling above the stage. In the text Aufidius almost immediately laments his actions, commenting that he is 'struck with sorrow'

(5.6.148) and vows that Coriolanus shall have a 'noble memory' (5.6.154). Coriolanus's body is bore off stage to a drum beat, a solemn procession with which he is afforded dignity even in death. The excision of these lines and the violent suspension of Coriolanus's body in the production, however, argue against Aufidius's claims that his rage has 'gone' (5.6.148). Indeed, Aufidius's gleeful brutality and the uncomplicated nature of his treachery make for a recognisably blockbuster interpretation of the relationship between the two men as a Manichean conflict of mortal enemies. Fraser's Aufidius punishes Coriolanus not only with his betrayal but by treating his body with complete lack of respect, hanging and butchering him as though he is a piece of meat. Coriolanus's body which he had not wished to expose throughout the play is finally shown as a passive, unresisting object.

When explaining *Coriolanus*, Hiddleston describes it as a play that 'dramatises the conflict at the heart of every public figure. What it means to serve in public office, and [...] the private war between personal integrity and popularity'.<sup>23</sup> Though in this comment he is referring to those who are 'public figures' in a governmental sense it invites an obvious comparison to the same world Hiddleston occupies as a celebrity and thus figure of public scrutiny. Coriolanus's struggle to mesh his personal desires with the duty and openness demanded of him by the community offers us an inverted vision of the famously affable Hiddleston. By regarding the body of its lead actor as a site of adaptation, we are enabled to read Rourke's production of *Coriolanus* through what Judith Buchanan describes as the 'determining filter' of the star.<sup>24</sup> We are invited to view the character through the body-conscious aesthetic of the action genre; a mode which is integral to Hiddleston's star persona through *Thor* and *The Avengers* (in spite of the physical reality of Loki in the series) and through his role as a

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<sup>23</sup> 'National Theatre Live: *Coriolanus* Trailer'.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 224.

popular pin-up. Robert Shaughnessy argues that when viewed on its 'broadest basis as a popular cultural phenomenon' Shakespeare loses its status of 'distinctive privilege and becomes subject to, and analysable within, the terms of popular film genres'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Rourke's insistent direction of our gaze, combined with the qualities Hiddleston brings to the production as both a theatrical and film star opens up the already richly symbolic nature of Coriolanus's body, reframing it in discussions surrounding modern celebrity and cultural performances of masculinity. An actor-based approach to adaptation studies thereby allows us to refocus the critical gaze by considering how the actor shapes the adaptation, not only in their performance but through their intertextual physicality.

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Shaughnessy, 'Introduction,' *Shakespeare on Film: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 5.