



Childhood and War in Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* and Julie Taymor's *Titus*

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Throughout the twentieth century there has been a curious unwillingness on the part of scholars to explore Shakespeare's depictions of childhood in extended detail. It is only in the early twenty-first century that there are signs of greater interest in this area. This interest, however, relates mainly to children as an audience for - rather than a subject within - Shakespeare's work,¹ and a full-length, comprehensive monograph exploring the chronological development of Shakespeare's ideology of childhood remains to be written. Nonetheless, if we view the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays for film as a form of critical engagement with the Shakespearean text, we can - as I will argue - discover at least one branch of Shakespearean interpretation in which the figure of the child *has* been foregrounded. In this paper, I will discuss how both Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) and Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) subject the Shakespearean child to particular scrutiny. I will argue, however, that the emphases these films place upon the figure of the child reach beyond their source texts, and ultimately reflect more their directors' political agendas than Shakespeare's own concern with the politics of childhood. I will maintain, in other words, that these films replace Shakespearean ambivalence about the position of the child in cultures of war with contemporary perspectives regarding the horrors of military conflict and their impact upon childhood.

Writing in the 1990s, Neil Sinyard claims that 'there seems to be three main ways of doing Shakespeare on film' (69). He uses Branagh's full-length *Hamlet* (1997) as an example of the first type of Shakespeare film, a 'basically conservative and traditional [yet] exciting [and] comprehensive rendering' which emphasises 'reverence for the text, not relevance' (69). The second category is embodied by Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995) - a film which stresses the relevance of its source play to 1930s England. The third possibility is exemplified specifically by Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and is, according to Sinyard, 'the most radical', involving as it does 'the complete appropriation of Shakespeare's narrative and its total translation and transformation into the modes of modern media' (69). My sense is, however, that 'Shakespearean cinema' is more difficult to compartmentalise than Sinyard suggests. Where in Sinyard's analysis, for instance, is there a place for the American high-school comedies *Ten Things I Hate About You* (Gil Junger, 1999) and *She's The Man* (Andy Fickman, 2006), or for the revisions of *Henry IV Part 1 and 2* that we see in *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus van Sant, 1991)? Such films, after all, derive only basic theme suggestions from Shakespeare, and therefore cannot be seen to reinvent their source plays in the same

way as Luhrmann's film does. Likewise, Branagh's *Henry V* and Taymor's *Titus* – although in certain senses (outlined below) much more conventional Shakespeare adaptations than the high-school films or *My Own Private Idaho* – are similarly difficult to assimilate. *Henry V* retains most of the original Shakespearean text and locates its action within the historical context of fifteenth-century England, yet – and particularly in its use of children – makes every attempt to resonate with its late twentieth-century audience. *Titus*, meanwhile, engages with what Sinyard terms 'the modes of modern media' in a way that links it to Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, yet its use of the visual trappings of Ancient Rome and its studied fidelity to its source play make it appear similarly liminal in terms of Sinyard's analysis. There seems, then, to be a greater amorphousness to 'Shakespearean cinema' than Sinyard suggests, and I will explore now how the representations of childhood in *Henry V* and *Titus* contribute to a sense of these films as being simultaneously more and less than Shakespearean, in the traditional sense of the term.

Branagh's film clearly reflects post-Vietnam and post-Falklands disillusionment with military conflict, and so is generally ambivalent in its representation of war. For instance, it emphasises the highly dubious nature of the Church's involvement in pushing the king towards war. The film is also ambivalent about its depiction of Henry himself. Branagh presents an introspective, self-questioning Henry who is painfully aware of his soldiers' suffering and implicitly uncertain himself about the legitimacy of his cause. Yet Branagh's reverence for the original Shakespearean text causes him to retain most of the play's rhetoric regarding the God-ordained and just nature of the invasion, however much he attempts to undercut that rhetoric with sobering visual imagery. Furthermore, Branagh, in his introduction to the published screenplay, expresses the hope that whatever 'liberties' there are in his film are 'Shakespearean in spirit' (12). The film, then, appears to be divided between the impulse to reinvent and the impulse to faithfully reproduce the Shakespearean original. Branagh himself is candid about the compromised nature of the finished product:

I could possibly have been braver about the way I presented it... I think I was probably cautious/ nervous/ cowardly about doing something that might provoke the wrong kind of reaction to the character (quoted in Wray and Thornton Burnett, 172).

Yet Branagh's use of children – particularly 'Boy', played by Christian Bale – is anything except 'cautious/nervous/cowardly', and may represent one of the only areas of the film in which the Shakespearean original is deliberately subverted. In Shakespeare's play, the Boy speaks two soliloquies which demonstrate his insight into human nature and align him implicitly with a more adult perspective. He is not blind to the many faults of his 'cronies' Pistol and Nym, and shrewdly exposes them for what they are. Branagh, however, excises these soliloquies. This has the effect of rendering the Boy an altogether more conventionally childish figure (although he is grouped with Falstaff's friends earlier in the film), and rendering his death – alongside all the other 'luggage boys' who are left to guard the camp undefended – all the more shocking as a result. Branagh lays huge dramatic emphasis upon these boys' deaths in a way which seems at odds with Shakespeare's apparent ambivalence. In the play, the massacre is announced to us through the prosaic medium of a conversation between Gower and Fluellen – which almost immediately veers away towards discussion of where 'Alexander the Pig was born' (4.7.10-11). In the film, however, we are alerted to it much more viscerally by the 'terrified screaming of children' (Branagh, 108).

Comparably, the play leaves us with the possibility that Fluellen's indignant claim that the massacre is 'expressly against the laws of arms' (4.7.1-2) merely expresses a pedantic, pragmatist outlook. Yet, in the film we have no doubt that Fluellen is seeking to hide genuine emotion behind militaristic forms of expression.

Furthermore, in the play there is only an implicit connection between the King's furious 'I was not angry since I came to France/Until this instant' (4.7.47-48) and the boys' deaths. Branagh, though, focuses at length upon the devastated, disbelieving reactions of the king and his men, and concludes with a long tracking shot featuring the English army carrying the bodies of the dead children over the fields at Agincourt, with the king at the head of it carrying the Boy's corpse. A choir sings Patrick Doyle's 'Non Nobis' for further emotional effect. The procession culminates with the King bidding a tender farewell to the dead Boy, described in particular detail by the screenplay:

He gently lays the Boy down, kisses him gently on the head and then stands up... We cut close on his blood-stained and exhausted face, the dreadful price they have all had to pay for this so-called victory clearly etched in his whole being. His head drops as if in shame. (Branagh, 114)

So where the play remains largely ambivalent as to whether the massacre of the luggage-boys is really war's 'dreadful price', Branagh clearly intends for the King's shock and horror to be echoed by the audience. Arguably, in this way he almost overbalances the film, invalidating all its attempts to make us sympathetic to Henry and his cause; for what good that might come from the invasion can come even close to compensating for the deaths of defenceless children? Luckily, Branagh has the comedy of Henry's climactic wooing of Princess Katherine, played by Emma Thompson, to restore some kind of equilibrium. Yet the fact that Branagh concludes with this comic scene rather than with the deaths of the luggage-boys dilutes their tragedy much in the same way as Shakespeare does, and demonstrates the fundamental impasse which the film confronts. The film wants to be politically charged, it wants to condemn unequivocally the policy of involving children in war. Yet its respectful adherence to the Shakespearean text – and, ultimately, to Shakespeare's ambivalence about Henry and his cause – never quite allows it to function quite in that way.

In contrast, Taymor's 1999 *Titus* seems from the outset to push the boundaries of Shakespearean cinema. Instead of locating its action specifically within the theatrical context of Shakespeare's Roman plays, or purely within the historical milieu of Ancient Rome, Taymor takes every opportunity to highlight that the violence she depicts is not simply reflective of a bygone age, but is in fact endemic to any society. She does so by leaving us in a state of uncertainty regarding the precise historical period in which the action is taking place. One moment, we seem to be viewing a world which we can identify comfortably with our own. Characters play noisy computer games, drive fast cars, play pool, drink cans of Coke and take drugs. Yet, just when we seemingly get our bearings, the film suddenly thrusts us back into a world of Ancient Roman ritual, where iron clad armies march in rows of perfect military formation. Still more disconcertingly, the exterior of Emperor Saturninus' palace recalls Mussolini's EUR building, while its interiors similarly recall the decadence of Fascist pre-war Europe. Moreover, when we first meet Saturninus himself, lobbying for emperorship in the midst of his black-clad supporters, there seems little doubt that what we are seeing is a variation on a Fascist political rally.

Yet the fact that Taymor locates events within a classical idiom, implies a certain reverence for the play's contextual origins, and her almost uncut rendering of the play indicates a deep regard for Shakespeare's language. As with Branagh's *Henry V*, then, *Titus* seems ultimately torn between the instinct to update or reinvent Shakespeare, and the instinct simply to render the original text as comprehensively as possible. I would argue, however – and again, as with Branagh – that the scenes involving children can be viewed as definite moments in which Taymor disturbs the delicate balance she maintains between subversion of and conformity to Shakespeare, and imposes an unequivocally modern sensibility upon her source text.

In Shakespeare's play, Young Lucius – grandson to Titus – does not appear until Act 3 Scene 2. He is absent from the Romans' triumphal procession home from the war against the Goths, and therefore witnesses neither the ritual sacrifice of the Goth Queen Tamora's son Alarbus, nor Titus' seemingly gratuitous killing of his own son Mutius. In Taymor's film, however, Young Lucius is our very first frame of reference. In the opening scene he is sitting in what appears to be a contemporary kitchen, and is surrounded by contemporary paraphernalia. The scene is then interrupted by a figure wearing a gasmask, who carries the child off to an Ancient Roman forum – and so the film begins. In this way, the three milieus which appear to be merged throughout the film – Ancient Rome, Fascist-occupied Europe and late twentieth-century America – are combined in one scene. But what do we make of the child's role in it? Is the child in the kitchen actually Young Lucius at all, or is he perhaps some sort of universal child who then becomes Young Lucius once he is transplanted from modern suburbia to classical Rome? Perhaps it is unwise to interpret this scene in too literal terms. Taymor is above all illustrating how the child's pretend version of violence – upending kitchen utensils and pouring tomato ketchup on to his toy soldiers in lieu of blood – becomes displaced and put into almost pitiful perspective by the incursion into the scene of adult forms of violence, which can cause genuine explosions and genuine deaths.² The child practices his limited form of violence in imitation of what he has learnt from the world around him, yet when he is confronted by the reality and not just the symbolism of military conflict, he cannot cope with it and bursts into frightened tears.

The scene, then, accomplishes two things. It sets in motion a theme which recurs constantly throughout the film: how does a child process and make sense of the apparently senseless acts of destruction adults bring to pass, and how is he influenced by witnessing these acts? It also establishes Young Lucius as a mediator between this strange, hybrid world and our own. The fact that his is the first point of view we gain access to indicates that we are, quite literally, going to see the world through a child's eyes. And, sure enough, the child is present at almost every subsequent act of carnage, and our sense of the horror of what we are seeing is heightened by our awareness that a child is seeing it too, and is even being encouraged to participate in it. Although Young Lucius' only active role in Titus' revenge plot is to deliver weapons to Chiron and Demetrius – his aunt Lavinia's attackers – in order to render them oblivious to Titus' intentions towards them, Taymor accentuates the amount of physical danger in which the boy is placed while fulfilling this task, presumably to make us question whether he should have been involved even to this extent.

Taymor, then, emphasises Young Lucius and his perspective in order to explicate how violence within any society inevitably filters down to and affects children. Whereas Shakespeare includes Young Lucius only in scenes in which he has a vocal part to play, Taymor renders him an almost omnipresent figure. Furthermore, Taymor goes beyond Shakespeare not just in this foregrounding of the

child figure, but in the overtly political context in which she places the child from the outset. Fittingly, she ends the film as she starts it: with children. The film closes with an image of Young Lucius striding off into the sunset carrying in his arms Aaron the Moor's baby son, whose life the Goths have agreed to spare. Whilst in the play we are left largely uncertain as to the baby's fate, there is a strong sense within the film that not only has he been saved but that he will join with Young Lucius in attempting to regenerate and harmonise his society in future years. Although this climax appears to parody the archetypal closing scene of a Western such as *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), and although the self-conscious use of 'happy ending' convention may reflect an awareness on Taymor's part that what she is depicting may be an impossible ideal rather than an achievable reality, the closing message of the film is undoubtedly one of hope. As Kenneth Rothwell notes, the Senecan bloodbath with which Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* concludes is replaced by the 'recuperative ending in most Shakespeare tragedies' (271). Taymor, then, uses children to express a pacifistic, racially and culturally inclusive anti-war alternative. In so doing, however, she arguably expresses her own liberal agenda rather than Shakespeare's disturbing ambivalence about whether children really can exist outside the cycle of violence, and whether they really can function as symbols of hope and regeneration.

Both these films, then, bring childhood to the foreground not just in a physical but in an emotional sense. In Branagh's *Henry V* the luggage-boys represent the dangers of being young and vulnerable in a brutally indiscriminating military setting, which makes no allowances and provides no safeguards for youth and vulnerability. The death of the Boy, in particular, becomes the film's emotional crux. Taymor, meanwhile, continues in Branagh's vein by focusing upon Young Lucius as a young boy caught up in and struggling to make sense of a cycle of cruelty and violence. Yet by making children central to her 'happy ending', she also identifies them with some sort of hope for the future, however vague that hope may be. I have discussed how these Shakespearean plays are considerably more equivocal in their representations of childhood – how, in the original text of *Henry V*, for instance, there is a sense in which the massacre of the luggage-boys is represented simply as one of the regrettable but inevitable by-products of war, and in the text of *Titus Andronicus* there are at least indications that Young Lucius and Aaron's young son will both grow up to become soldiers in their own right (4.1.106-111) and will not therefore endorse a pacifistic alternative to military life. In these films, then, the scenes involving children become the moments at which the Shakespearean perspective is most radically departed from. Equally, at these moments, the films seem to float somewhere in between the three modes of filming Shakespeare which Sinyard identifies, veering as they do between reverence for and subversion of the Shakespearean original. In so doing, they suggest that there is room for both conformity to and dissent from Shakespeare when it comes to adapting his plays, and that filming Shakespeare is a more complicated and conflicted process than Sinyard's analysis would indicate.

However, what these films perhaps reflect more than anything is our own sensitivity regarding childhood, our own reluctance to dispense with a modern understanding of the child as deserving of sanctuary and protection. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 – introduced as international law in 1990 – states that all decisions made on the behalf of the child should be in his or her best interests, and that children have the right to be protected from having to perform harmful labour, from being involved in armed conflict at least until the age of fifteen, and from being involved in prostitution or other sexual activities (<http://www.ispcc.ie/kun.htm>; accessed 28/05/2007). Furthermore, the United

Nations defines children as ‘everybody up to the age of eighteen, who has not yet reached the age of majority’ (<http://www.ispcc.ie/kun.htm>; accessed 28/05/2007). Such definitions and legislation are clearly in line with early twenty-first century Western understandings of what childhood means, but may seem anachronistic when we try – or, in this case, when Branagh and Taymor try – to apply them to Shakespeare.

Yet what makes these film-makers’ approach to the Shakespearean child so timely – and, perhaps, so problematic – is that, in spite of all the legislation put in place to protect the child, the exploitation and endangerment of children continues to be an everyday reality. The One World society reported in 2007 that more than 10% of the world’s 2.2 billion children continue to be involved in child labour – predominantly agricultural in nature and necessitating the use of heavy machinery – and that about ten million are ‘trapped in slavery, trafficking, prostitution and armed conflict’ (<http://www.uk.oneworld.net/guides/childlabour>. Accessed 28/05/2007). In one sense, then, Branagh and Taymor are entirely correct to emphasise the role of the child in a military setting, for they remind us that the involvement of children in war is not merely a Shakespearean but a universal phenomenon. In another sense, however, they are unable to be as objective as Shakespeare was about this phenomenon. They use the figure of the imperilled child to evoke emotions within us which may be just as irrelevant to early twenty-first century society as to Shakespeare’s. For Shakespeare – in depicting the child with a mixture of sentimentality and cool detachment, in demonstrating the impossibility of always protecting children from adult forms of violence – is not being cynical about childhood: he is being realistic. The fact that Branagh and Taymor hesitate to reproduce Shakespearean realism or objectivity about childhood in the stark terms it demands indicates that neither they nor their audiences are quite prepared to come to terms with it.

Endnotes

¹ For instance, in 2003, a seminar was conducted at the first British Shakespeare Association conference at de Montfort University in Leicester upon the theme of “Shakespeare - Children: Children, Shakespeare”, followed up by a cognate conference at Roehampton University in November of that year. Both seminar and conference aimed to explore not only Shakespeare’s various representations of childhood, but also how Shakespeare is in turn processed for and responded to by children, through film, animated television adaptations, or rewritings. In 2006, the Shakespearean journal *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespearean Appropriation* (Issue 2.1, Spring/Summer, 2006) dedicated a special edition, *Shakespeare for Children*, to these issues.

² This scene, of course, also functions in broader meta-narrative terms, creating an aura of late twentieth-century ‘kitchen-sink’ realism in order to alert us to the fictive quality of what we are about to see (while also indicating how fictive and ‘real’ violence can impinge upon one another).

Works Cited

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