Working With English
medieval and modern language, literature and drama

‘An Ever-Fixèd Mark’?: Performing Identities in Postmodern Shakespeare

Sinead Larkin
Queen’s University Belfast

Adam Hansen
University of Northumbria

Recent scholarship and productions have invested performance, and the study of it, with broad and vital significance. Allain and Harvie’s *Companion to Theatre and Performance* usefully identifies ‘at least five relevant meanings’ for the term ‘performance’. These include ‘the live event of presenting something usually pre-prepared before an audience’; ‘all social behaviour’; ‘success or achievement’; ‘a synonym for performance art and body art’; and, lastly, ‘deconstructive performance distinguished primarily by its distinction from acting in theatre’ (181-182). By this necessarily capacious definition we all now perform: at work or play (in companies social, theatrical or corporate), in power or out of it, staged for paying punters, splayed before the intensive scrutiny of CCTV, or broadcast to millions via the blurred medium of ‘reality’ TV.

Comprehending performance is therefore vital for understanding the world we live in and how we live in it. Yet such a broad scope, and such significance, invites and demands focus. One example of such focus might be found in Baz Kershaw’s introduction to his *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard.* Here, Kershaw articulates a series of paradoxes and paradigm shifts relating to the function of performance in contemporary Western societies. Not the least of these paradoxes circulates around the fact that as ‘the place of the theatre in post-industrial societies seems increasingly marginalised’ so ‘performance has emerged as central to the production of a new world disorder, a key process in virtually every socio-political domain of this mediatised globe’. Kershaw surmises: ‘The *performative* quality of power is shaping the global future as it never has before’ (5).

This collection seeks to offer comparably nuanced readings of performances in a mediatised, globalised and politicised context, via the lens of specific concerns. It originated as a result of a one-day postgraduate symposium held within the School of English, at Queen’s University Belfast, in October 2006. The symposium – *‘Shakespeare, Renaissance, Performance: Early Modern and Postmodern Perspectives’* – featured a broad range of work by staff and research students occupying the diverse field of Renaissance performance. The three papers anthologised here, by Kate Wilkinson (Sheffield Hallam University), Sinead Larkin (Queen’s University Belfast), and Stephen Kavanagh (NUI Galway), implicitly acknowledge Kershaw’s sense of Western theatre’s status as a ‘marginal commodity’

(5) to examine aspects of performance in filmic appropriations of Shakespearean texts.

Given Kershaw's articulation of the relations between power and performance, Shakespeare seems an appropriate subject. Since New Historicism re-shaped Renaissance scholarship, Shakespeare studies has been a site for potent analyses and interrogations of the power *of* performance, as critics sought to reintegrate literary texts within a diverse range of historical contexts, in order to address issues of agency, repression and resistance in the past and present (see Greenblatt, and Ryan). Moreover, as Kathleen McLuskie argues, 'Shakespeare is both denigrated as the last Dead White Male and at the same moment rescued with the lifeline of enduring culture and the potential for these values to be continually renewed' (242): engaging with Shakespearean performance allows a dialogue between pertinent issues affecting both the past and the present.

With this focus, these papers explore what Pavis terms the sometimes 'embarrassing filiation', and 'incestuous relationship', between theatre and film (128). In so doing these papers also situate themselves in relation to recent academic criticism in the field of performance studies that has examined the place of Shakespearean film in current, media-dominated and power-sensitive cultures. Yet they also re-think some of the assumptions of such criticism. The diverse essays collected in Diana E. Henderson's anthology, for example, consider filmic appropriation in relation to terrorism and tolerance, which dominate postmodern media. Henderson suggests that there has been a 'bracketing' of history in regards to performance studies. In other words, if it seems that connections between Shakespearean film and significant cultural events have been downplayed by such studies, we should not overlook a consideration of Shakespeare from the perspective of these international events. Such a perspective prioritises filmic appropriation of Shakespearean tragedy, perpetuating the idea that the big-screen reflects shocking events dominating the small screens of our TVs and computer monitors. It could be suggested that such a strong focus on dramatic and tragic devastation is perhaps classically cathartic, or, in more modern terms, therapeutic. Indeed, Larkin's paper illustrates the power of dramatic catharsis, exploring the ways in which the adoption of disguise allows a character to escape, both literally and metaphorically, from personalised trauma (for example, bereavement). This enables expulsion of emotional turmoil and, consequently, facilitates psychological renewal. Viewing screened Shakespearean tragedy, and its effect upon dramatic characters may, in turn, afford the audience their own form of cathartic escapism by establishing a connection between the viewer and the performance, shaping (to connect with Kershaw's argument) the audience's own future.

But while this collection acknowledges Henderson's argument about the importance of the tragedies, it also examines the ways in which the resolutions of Shakespearean comedies, or the chronological consistency of the histories, might likewise relate in significant ways to the vexed politics of identity (personal and national) – an aspect which is downplayed by Henderson. This may signal what a critic like Kershaw perceives as radicalism's reduction (to absurdity) to identity-politics in a postmodern age; yet it also accords with Kershaw's sense of power in a "*performative society*":

> Performative societies in the contemporary world are found particularly where democracy and capitalism meet. In such societies performance has gained a new kind of potency because multi-party democracy weaves ideological conflict visibly into the very fabric of society. It follows that, especially in highly

> mediatised societies, the performative becomes a major element in the continuous negotiation of power and society. (13)

By Kershaw's criteria, Shakespearean film is also a relevant subject for performance studies because such studies have been dominated by the impulse to consider Shakespearean film in relation to an international marketplace**.** Trivedi highlights the shift in Shakespearean performance criticism from the localised to the 'glo-calised':

> While in earlier days Shakespeare's name was a touchstone for an Englishness of language and literature, today it is not so much the 'English-language Shakespeare' that is making waves but a hybrid Shakespeare in sundry accents and hues. Shakespeare today exists throughout the world in a state of constantly reviewed 'otherness' (56).

Indeed, recent work by Burnett and Orkin stresses the importance of reading the prototypical English Bard in the conflicted contexts of these globalised, mediatised, and multicultural contemporary societies. Though mindful of such large-scale contexts, these papers try to offer readings that localise wider concerns, employing close, detailed analyses, paying attention to what is contained within the productions, and the importance of these themes.

Pascale Aebischer, a plenary speaker at the symposium, has elsewhere argued that there is a need for an exploration of the 'other' within performance criticism (both theatrical and filmic). In *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance*, she declares: 'It is the white male subject of tragedy who will be marginalised in this study and forced to make way for his gendered and racial Others' (5). This focus on alterity is particularly evident within Kavanagh and Larkin's papers, which place children and women at the centre of their discussion. Larkin's paper does examine 'white' masculinity, but only in the context of psychological identity – this subject has been considered within early modern criticism (for example, Mark Breitenberg's *Anxious Masculinity*), but has been much overlooked in filmic criticism.

Studies of Shakespearean films *have* been dominated by issues of femininity and, in particular, race and globalisation (as outlined earlier). Indeed, two years after Aebischer's groundbreaking work was published, her essay in Henderson's diverse collection – 'Shakespeare, Sex, and Violence: Negotiating Masculinities in Branagh's *Henry V* and Taymor's *Titus*' posited:

> In recent years, Shakespearean performance studies have benefited from a lively dialogue with film theory and gender studies, resulting in fascinating analyses of the representation of the female body on stage and screen. The same theoretical frameworks can be employed for a consideration of the male body (112).

What Aebischer's argument suggests is not only that performance studies as a whole is always in a state of flux, but that all aspects of this field of criticism have, at some point, already been richly explored. Yet as Peter Brook argued in 1968, 'life is moving, influences are playing on actor and audience and other plays, other arts, the cinema, television, current events, join in the constant rewriting of history and the amending of the daily truth' (16). Much is still up for debate. These papers assess concerns which have been examined in prior performance criticism, and formulate their arguments in light of previously examined theoretical frameworks. However, reflecting the change in influences suggested by Brook, they focus on alternative

issues, thereby providing original readings which cover a wide range of concerns, and re-evaluating long-standing contextual viewpoints.

Hence, Larkin's paper examines Richard Eyre's *King Lear* (1998) and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996), looking at how the performance of and in disguise relates to characterisation and psychology, the ostensible holism or fragmentation of the performed/performing body and self. Yet by modifying these potentially universalising models, Larkin also usefully historicises disguise in relation to early modern representations – and performances – of vagrancy, while invoking issues of gender and desire to reveal the performativity of identity in some filmic Shakespeares. Moreover, her paper moves beyond static definitions of genre, to correlate different types of genres, thereby exposing their problematic definitions.

Larkin avoids the potential difficulties associated with periodising the two productions at the centre of her argument. Instead, she concentrates specifically on the identities of the characters, as they are depicted within the films. She utilises psychoanalytic theory, which sheds new light on the function of and motivation behind the employment of visual disguise in two Shakespearean appropriations. These productions strongly vary in regards to genre, and a comparison of both texts could ordinarily pose problems: how does one draw such close parallels between a tragedy and a comedy? Elsie Walker, however, states that 'Movies are usually connected to a single, specific genre only retrospectively and, besides, genre boundaries are difficult to define' (24). This is not to say that Shakespeare's *King Lear*, or Eyre's visually pared-down appropriation of the play, are not tragic, but serves to emphasise the affluence of Shakespeare on film: the vast wealth of material which can be gleaned via a comparison of films which ordinarily would not be considered side-by-side. As Larkin illustrates, the parallels between Eyre and Nunn's films are numerous, particularly in regards to their depiction of personalised trauma, and the expulsion of this tragedy. By engaging with theorists such as Freud and Jung, Larkin draws psychological parallels between the characters of Edgar and Viola.

Kavanagh studies Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989) and Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) to revise tragedy, and introduces history plays in similar ways. Yet his focus is on the suffering and victimhood caused by military rather than psychological violence. To articulate this, Kavanagh carefully reveals the disjunctions between past and present performances of childhood, and how performances by or of children betray or render ambiguous the politics of films. This produces a cogent exposition of those often most disempowered by power.

Aebischer remarks that Olivier's version of the *Henry V* had a 'heavily edited screenplay [which] contained a whole host of lines in which Shakespeare stresses the violence of warfare, the threat it poses not only to the civilian population but also to the physical integrity of the soldiers' (115). Indeed, as Kavanagh argues, Branagh's depiction of war is less glorified than that of his predecessor (Olivier) and the king's motives are morally questionable. However, Kavanagh also interiorises his consideration of the depiction of war by considering how it affects children, thus providing a highly original (and relevant) reading of Branagh's film, as well as Julie Taymor's *Titus*. As much stimulating work by Aebischer has suggested, both films have, until now, been considered only in regards to brutalised representations of masculinity and femininity. Indeed, Samuel Crowl, writing in 1992, commented upon Branagh's 'emphasis on the killing of the boys' (168); however, Crowl connected this not with the concept of childhood identity, but with the psychological identity of Henry. According to Crowl, 'Branagh was interested in Henry's psychological complexity, his doubt and guilt' (169): the bloody and brutal denigration of childhood

presented by/within Branagh's film serves only, for Crowl, as a reminder that the king is not infallible. Yet 'in the aftermath of Vietnam and the Falklands' (Crowl 172) and in light of the recent and ongoing global conflicts, the relationship between violence and children is at the forefront of public concern: fears of the removal of innocence, combined with shocking televised pictures of child soldiers, pervade the media.

Where Larkin's and Kavanagh's focus tends to the individual, interpersonal and/or familial, Wilkinson's is national. She tackles the performance of putatively nation-building history via a detailed case-study of performance histories, with *Richard III* as her subject. Wilkinson's *Richard*/Richard is shown to exist in a variety of potentially interrelated forms: Olivier's 1944 stage production; his 1955 film; Bill Alexander's 1984 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company; the 1995 Richard Loncraine film production; and as part of Michael Boyd's "The Histories". Surveying this range, Wilkinson is able to evaluate how stage and film performances of history and historiography interact with and problematise each other, both playing with and experiencing the 'pull of history'**.** Barbara Hodgdon argues that 'performance is an ideological practice and...reproductions of Shakespeare's plays convey their relation to past as well as present social structures and historical imaginaries' (xi). A potential difficulty associated with updating and appropriating the history plays, especially on film, is that this genre of drama is deeply rooted in a particular historical context, and that it may be difficult to avoid this. Wilkinson, however, illustrates that films, such as Loncraine's appropriation of *Richard III*, not only recall their textual past, but re-produce others, thereby making this Renaissance play accessible to a postmodern audience. Indeed, Elsie Walker argues that 'recalling the past does not automatically mean sentimentalised nostalgia or the recovery of lost meaning and order associated with Shakespeare' (20). And where Larkin emphasised generic assumptions, here the focus alters to invoke the expectations of audiences raised on a diet of cinematic fare.

Over the past decade, the number of 'big screen' adaptations of Shakespearean drama has considerably waned, most particularly 'faithful' classical adaptations, which do not deviate sharply from what scholarly consensus decrees currently is the texts' 'original' plot or language. Shakespearean theatrical performance has, on the other hand, proved even more than usually prominent, most notably with the RSC's decision to stage Shakespeare's 'Complete Works' over the course of one year (2006-2007). Recent performance studies reflects this change: the majority of critical works and anthologies produced in the past five years now focus on theatrical productions and, in particular, current contextual issues which influence postmodern theatrical performance. This emphasis on staging registers here most pertinently in Wilkinson's paper, though all pieces evidently owe something to a sense of the theatre.

These, then, are three diverse but complementary pieces. All examine both 'classic' and contemporary filmic productions, many of which have at times been unduly neglected by scholars. Yet perhaps what unites all three papers most clearly is that they each emphasise the moral, material, physical and the emotional charges of performances, looking at gestures, poses, and players, and the contexts that frame their playing, on screen (or stage) and off. In so doing, they implicitly register and focus on the power of performances and the performance of power, or powerlessness. In personal correspondence between Peggy Phelan and Hodgdon and Worthen, Phelan remarks that 'Shakespeare matters because he predicted the muddle we are currently in: "All the world's a stage" and we are caught in the endless performance of our own self-conceptions as "players"' (7). These papers are important, then, because the representations (and performances) of identity contained within the productions which

Wilkinson, Larkin, and Kavanagh analyse, are relevant to our lives, as spectators, and can shape our own identities.

Works cited

Aebischer, Pascale, Edward J. Esche, and Nigel Wheale, eds. *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Aebischer, Pascale. 'Shakespeare, Sex, and Violence: Negotiating Masculinities in Branagh's *Henry V* and Taymor's *Titus*'. Diana E. Henderson, ed. *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare On Screen*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006. 112-132.

---, *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies: Stage and Screen Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Allain, Paul and Jen Harvie. *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Bate, Jonathan. *The Genius of Shakespeare*. London: Picador, 1992.

Breitenberg, Mark. *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968.

Burnett, Mark Thornton. *Filming Shakespeare in the Global Marketplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Crowl, Samuel. *Shakespeare Observed: Studies in Performance on Stage and Screen*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Henderson, Diana E. *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare On Screen*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006.

Hodgdon, Barbara. *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1998.

Hodgdon, Barbara, and W.B. Worthen, eds. *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Kershaw, Baz. *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Lanier, Douglas. 'Will of the People: Recent Shakespearean Film Parody and the Politics of Popularization'. Diana E. Henderson, ed. *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare On Screen*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006. 176-196.

Lehmann, Courtney. 'Book Reviews: Brave New Bard'. *Cinéaste* 26: 1 (2000): 62-66.

McLuskie, Kathleen. 'Unending Revels: Visual Pleasure and Compulsory Shakespeare'. Diana E. Henderson, ed. *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare On Screen*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006. 238-249.

Orkin, Martin. *Local Shakespeares: Proximations and Powers*. London: Routledge, 2005.

Pavis, Patrice. *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992 rpt 1995.

Phelan, Peggy. Personal communication, 3 April 2005. Quoted in Barbara Hodgdon and W.B. Worthen, eds. *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Ryan, Kiernan. Ed. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader*. London: Hodder Arnold, 1996.

Trivedi, Poonam. 'Reading 'Other' Shakespeares'. Pascale Aebischer, Edward J. Esche and Nigel Wheale, eds. *Remaking Shakespeare: Performance Across Media, Genres and Cultures*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. 56-74

Walker, Elsie. 'Getting Back to Shakespeare: Whose Film is it Anyway?' Diana E. Henderson, ed. *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare On Screen*. Malden, M.A.: Blackwell, 2006. 8-30.