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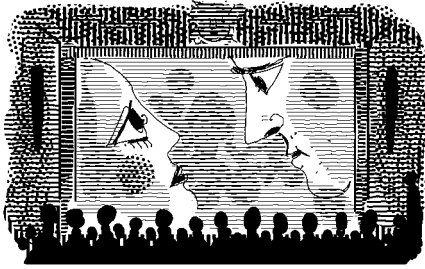


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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Streaming Shakespeare

SYLVAN BARNET, THE BELOVED TUFTS University professor and scholar who brought Shakespeare to life for countless students and readers, thought it a mistake to relate the playwright too closely to his age. In his editor's introduction to *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, Barnet writes that the plays should not be "taken too seriously as historical documents," and that "Shakespeare's ideas were not commonplace." But he admits that "a few large ideas of the period do recur," in particular that of a cosmic "order or degree" in which "everything except God has a superior." This idea is central to the plays, because "drama is concerned with conflict, with the disruption of order...and its ultimate restoration."

By "ultimate" Barnet means the ending of a play or series of plays that depict a particular cycle of disruption and restoration, not steady progress in human affairs. That William Shakespeare was not an optimist is evident in his eight English history plays, which begin in 1399 with the usurpation of a legitimate king (Richard II), proceed to the troubled reign of the usurper (Henry IV), capture the brief glory of his son (Henry V), trace the eruption of civil strife under a weak-willed successor (Henry VI), and culminate in 1485 with the death of a bloody-minded tyrant (Richard III). Even when order is restored, the crookedness of human nature remains.

Of these eight plays, the least accomplished are *Henry VI Parts 1, 2, and 3*, which focus on the bitter internecine Wars of the Roses (1455-87). The reason for this is simple: they were written when Shakespeare was still an apprentice. The fourth play, *Richard III*, is about the villainous king whose bloody rise and fall marked the restoration of order under the Tudors. (Or so the Tudors claimed.) *Richard III* was Shakespeare's first hit and is still

popular, no doubt because of its shock value. But it lacks the depth of the later tragedies.

Far more accomplished are *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2*, and *Henry V*, set amid the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). Here again, the reason is simple: these plays were written when Shakespeare's poetic genius was in full flower. To state the matter plainly: the

Discussed in this essay:

The Hollow Crown, developed and directed by Rupert Goold, Ben Power, Richard Eyre, and Dominic Cooke.
BBC

four plays written *later* about the *earlier* period are superior artistically to the four plays written *earlier* about the *later* period. This raises a problem when all eight are performed in chronological sequence: the first batch cannot help outshining the second.

Stumbling from Stage to Screen

WHICH BRINGS US TO THE BRITISH series *The Hollow Crown*, which premiered a decade ago but remains available on Amazon Prime. The eight English history plays have been made into seven feature-length films (with the three parts of *Henry VI* condensed into two), all produced with great skill. Yet because the films are presented in chronological order, the aforementioned problem crops up: the first four are totally absorbing, and the second three bring a slight falling-off. This problem is inherent in the works themselves, so it cannot be eliminated. But it can be mitigated, when a production is as excellent as this one. Watch-

ing this series, it never once occurred to me to turn it off. From beginning to end, *The Hollow Crown* is the finest screen adaptation of Shakespeare I have ever seen.

And that is saying something, because the British are the world's best screen adapters of novels, biographies, and histories. But for a variety of reasons, they have long been reluctant to transfer their beloved Shakespeare from his natural habitat in the theater to the radically different medium of film. In the early days of cinema, the main reasons were technical. But as film technology evolved, other concerns came to the fore. Chief among these are worries that the poetry, with its eddying cascades of images, will be eclipsed by the visual spectacle made possible by the movie camera, and that the subtle emotions evoked by the actors will be swamped by the musical soundtrack.

These worries were far from assuaged by Sir Laurence Olivier's costly, elaborate film of *Henry V*, released in 1944. It opens with a slow-moving shot of a tabletop diorama of 16th-century London, accompanied by a mercilessly ponderous Wagnerian score. The camera pauses at a miniature Globe Theater, then shifts to a life-sized mockup of the Globe's interior, where scores of jolly Elizabethans mill about. The Chorus mounts the stage and begs us to imagine "this cockpit," "this wooden O," filled with "the vasty fields of France." But we needn't, because after several rather wrenching shifts between realistic, fanciful, and just plain weird settings, we arrive at a real-life vasty field, where the Battle of Agincourt is re-enacted. The shifts continue until we are back in the Globe watching the groundlings cheer King Henry V's triumphant final speech.

Released only months before the Allied victory over Nazi Germany, this film is clearly meant to celebrate the restoration of



order. Which is why it was dedicated to the “Commandos and airborne troops of Great Britain,” as an opening title card states. And why it omits the epilogue following Henry’s final speech, in which the Chorus gloomily reminds the audience that, after Henry V’s untimely death his infant son, the weak-willed Henry VI, was so badly “managed” by rivalrous dukes and princes that “they lost France, and made England bleed.” In 1944, this would have sounded a most unwelcome note.

At the risk of committing blasphemy, I confess to finding this iconic film as laborious to watch as it must have been to make. It is so crammed with gimmicks, fuss, and bother that even Olivier, the great declaimer of Shakespeare, strains to get the poetry across. It is telling that, in subsequent years, Olivier took his filmmaking in the opposite direction. In 1948 he made a black-and-white *Hamlet* intended to be as un-cinematic as possible. In 1955 he filmed *Richard III* in Technicolor but on a stripped-down set that strongly resembles a stage, and had it distributed on television.

No one knew better than Olivier that the Bard is at his best when performed live before a jostling crowd in a venue no larger than the Globe. But he also understood that movies and television are popular media, with a lot in common with the Globe. (For example, the Globe had to compete with several other Bankside venues that specialized in the grisly entertainment of watching a chained bear fight off a ferocious pack of dogs.) So, Olivier did his best to guide the transition, and encouraged others to take the next steps.

Among these was Kenneth Branagh, who as a teenager in drama school wrote a letter to Olivier seeking advice. To his astonishment, the great man wrote back, saying, “[H]ave a bash and hope for the best.” Branagh went on to make several celebrated Shakespeare films, and a few that were mostly bashes. But to judge by some of the latest offerings on Netflix, the audiovisual sewage coursing through social media, and the fact that it is now possible for an English major to graduate from an elite university without having read a word of Shakespeare, it is time to retire the hoary assumption that no filmed performance can hold a candle to a live one.

A Brilliant Unraveling

I MYSELF HAVE SEEN (AND PERFORMED) Shakespeare in small venues, and enjoyed every minute. But without *The Hollow Crown*, I would not be able to witness the transcendent art of Ben Whishaw as Richard II, Jeremy Irons as Henry IV, Tom Hid-

dleston as Henry V, Simon Russell Beale as Falstaff, Sophie Okonedo as Queen Margaret, or Benedict Cumberbatch as Richard III. And without the magic of digital streaming, which allows me to study these performances as closely as I can the texts themselves, I would not be able to appreciate them as fully as they deserve.

I cannot do justice here to all of these superb performances, so I will focus on the two most outstanding. First is Whishaw as King Richard II, a complex figure who was born in France and crowned king of England at the tender age of ten. A sensitive soul, Richard was a discerning patron of the arts, especially architecture. In 1393 he oversaw the renovation of the great hall at Westminster, including the magnificent hammerbeam roof that made it one of the largest such spaces in Europe. He also employed Geoffrey Chaucer in posts that gave the poet time to write some of his greatest works.

This aspect of Richard II is reflected in his elegant surroundings and somewhat eccentric costumes. And though the music in *The Hollow Crown* is disappointingly generic, it is mercifully unobtrusive, fading away whenever the actors speak. And speaking is what Ben Whishaw does best. In the opening scene, King Richard II is sitting stiffly and silently on the throne, as though posing for one of those dour medieval portraits that might as well be death masks. But in a few moments, his face comes to life, and he begins to speak the Bard’s language so fluently it will seem like your mother tongue.

Still, you may not warm to King Richard right away. He is fickle, fey, mercurial, and dissolute—the result, perhaps, of having been a “minority” (underage) ruler raised by princes, courtiers, councilors, and sycophants more concerned with their own interests than with his. The play focuses on the mature Richard, who has summoned the strength to assert his royal power against those who would control him, and learned very well not to trust a single one of them. But it soon becomes clear that what Richard *hasn’t* learned is that the same royal power, before which his enemies must bow and scrape, has definite limits.

Highly pertinent here is the doctrine, much debated during the reign of Elizabeth I, that a king has two bodies: a corruptible “body natural,” made of flesh and destined to die; and an indestructible “body politic,” made of spirit and destined always to rule. According to the medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz, the Elizabethans embraced this doctrine as both “a legal fiction” and a meditation on “the godhead and manhood of a king.”

In his magisterial 1957 book, *The King’s Two Bodies*, Kantorowicz devotes a chapter to *Richard II*, in which he argues that, although Shakespeare never cited this doctrine, it certainly jibed with “the live essence of his art,” which was “to reveal the numerous planes active in any human being, to play them off against each other, to confuse them, or to preserve their equilibrium.” “Equilibrium” is a good word for what Richard loses when his crown is usurped by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke (played by Rory Kinnear). Step by agonizing step, the play traces Richard’s struggle to hold his royal person together while his enemies try to tear it apart.

The first of several memorable scenes dramatizing this struggle is in Act III, Scene 2, when Richard returns from a military venture in Ireland, giddy with the expectation that he will soon be leading a great army against “this thief, this traitor Bolingbroke.” On the page, Richard arrives with a couple of soldiers at a dreary castle in Gloucestershire. But in this production, someone must have decided “enough with the castles already,” and bid Whishaw wade ashore on a remote beach in Wales, accompanied by a single supporter.

The beach is bathed in sunlight, symbolic of divine kingship, but also swept by a stiff wind that keeps blowing Richard’s fashionable Turkish-style robes and headcloth away from his face and slender limbs. Three more supporters arrive, and with grim looks break the news that no armies are coming, their leaders being either dead or won over by Bolingbroke. Hearing this, Richard fusses more and more with his unruly garments—to less and less effect. It’s a simple thing, really, but if you’ve ever had your appearance go badly awry in front of important strangers, you may have an inkling of Richard’s state of mind when he quits fussing and says, “For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings.” Then he continues:

Within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a
king
Keeps Death his court, and there the
antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his
pomp,
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be feared, and kill with
looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life
Were brass impregnable; and humored
thus,



Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and
farewell, king!

I have heard other actors deliver these lines,
but never with the clarity, precision, and pen-
etration displayed by Whishaw here.

The Henriad at Its Finest

WHISHAW IS A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW. But in the next three plays, known as the Henriad, Tom Hiddleston, who plays the son of Henry IV, (the same Bolingbroke who usurped Richard II), does more than hold his own. In *Henry IV Part 1*, the king is aging, ill-starred, and guilt-ridden about having unseated a divinely chosen king. He is also disappointed in his oldest son and heir, Prince Hal, who spends most of his time drinking and carousing in the Boar's Head tavern in the rundown London neighborhood of Eastcheap. Among Hal's unwashed companions is the ebullient, great-hearted John Falstaff, whom Hal refers to affectionately as "this sanguine coward, this bed-presser, this horse-backbreaker, this huge hill of flesh."

In *Henry IV Part 2*, Hal and Falstaff grow apart. The prince inches toward reconciliation with his dying father, whose deep guilt is made deeper by such lasting repercussions as dissension, conspiracy, and rebellion among Richard II's remaining supporters, as well as by sleepless nights plagued by thoughts worse than nightmares. As for Falstaff, he morphs from the unforgettable boon companion of *Part 1* into a sad, devious, self-deluding seeker of advantage.

Reams of analysis have been written about these changes. But a point unique to *The Hollow Crown* is the wise and subtle use made of Hiddleston's good looks. A darling of the British media who achieved global celebrity

by playing the character Loki in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, he does something very difficult for handsome movie stars. He carries himself through all six hours of this performance without seeming to know, or care, that he is the object of all eyes, including that of the camera. This lends him an aura, or charisma, that serves a visible approximation of divinity.

In *Henry V*, the fourth and final play in this series, Hiddleston follows in the footsteps of Olivier and Branagh by taking on the role of the hero-king, and does more than justice to that character. But for me, one of the high points of Hiddleston's performance is a highly cinematic version of the famous speech in *Henry IV Part 1* wherein Prince Hal alludes, indirectly, to the "twinness" of his natural body, begrimed by the company he keeps, and his political body, which will shine forth when he is crowned king. Delivered as a voice-over (the film equivalent of a soliloquy), the speech plays over a tracking shot of the prince wending his way through the Boar's Head tavern and out to the dirty, crowded street:

I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humor of your idleness.
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious
clouds
To smother up his beauty from the
world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wondered
at
By breaking through the foul and ugly
mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle
him....
So when this loose behavior I throw off
And pay the debt I never promisèd,

By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;
And, like bright metal on a sullen
ground,
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,
Shall show more goodly and attract
more eyes
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.
I'll so offend to make offense a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least
I will.

The second season of *The Hollow Crown*, subtitled *The Wars of the Roses*, begins with a fast-moving aerial shot of the English Channel that pans upward to reveal a narrow path traversing the White Cliffs of Dover, where a powerful white horse is galloping with a knightly figure, clad in a billowing red cloak, on its back. Over this stunning spectacle we hear the voice of Dame Judi Dench, speaking a few lines from another play, *Troilus and Cressida*, which eloquently evoke the large idea we started with, of cosmic order continually disrupted.

The lines also evoke the fragility of the order achieved by Henry V, before his golden youth was cut short by dysentery. That particular evil was natural. But the evil that followed, civil strife between two branches of the same family, one wearing white roses and the other red, was moral, in the classical sense of arising from human ambition and cruelty:

The heavens themselves, the planets,
and this center
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season,
form,
Office, and custom, in all line of order....
*Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows.*

Words to heed amid the discord of our time.

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