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The Trouble with Partial Continuity:
Close Reading and *The Hollow Crown*

All of Shakespeare's plays have source material, but in the case of the history plays, there is a depth and breadth of source material unmatched by other works. What this enormous amount of foundational materials means for performance is that there are ample opportunities to enhance – or to detract from – the action through attention, or lack thereof, to minute historical detail. One such example of using historical detail to enhance a performance occurred at the 2012 Stratford Festival of Canada's production of *Henry V*. During the Battle of Agincourt the famed longbows of the underdog English army were thrillingly shot on stage. A group of men stood downstage center and shot into the backstage area. The verisimilitude of that moment was incredible to witness live, but even more pointed is the attention to detail that the Stratford production demonstrated in that single set of arrows. The longbow won Agincourt, and Stratford's production acknowledged that historic fact better than any live production I personally have seen.

When one focuses her study on the history plays, one becomes familiar with meticulous historic details – not just those that Shakespeare chooses to highlight, but also details from source materials, historiography, and genealogies. Hall or Holinshed's *Chronicles*, *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, family trees, scholarly

works, and popular histories all play into the backdrop of how audience members might experience these plays in performance. Closely reading genealogical information about specific characters, for instance, can have a profound effect on interpretations of these plays. Unlike the 2012 Stratford production of *Henry V*, many productions fail to read history closely enough to exploit the richness of the details, such as, for instance, the familial relationships between the Lancasters and the Yorks, which, of course, predate the Wars of the Roses.

I would like to focus my attention in this essay on the BBC's 2012 miniseries production of the second tetralogy, series one of *The Hollow Crown*. While the cinematic quality of the series was unequivocally impressive, the failure to implement subtle historic details, such as familial relations, undermined the complexity of the plays. Without making use of the intricate details within chronicles and genealogies, the series was ultimately doomed to unevenness, at best, and mediocrity, at worst. Some might argue that expecting accurate historical detail in a film adaptation of Shakespeare's histories is a literary snob's lame attempt to argue for the supremacy of the text over production. A "trust-the-text" argument is not my aim, since Shakespeare most certainly adapted history himself. I do not object to streamlining with cuts or rearrangements of text. Such changes can have interesting rhetorical effects that reimagine the plays in a new light. However, changes still need to make logical sense in the context of the play.

Some of the choices made in *The Hollow Crown* series show a lack of understanding of the characters, history, and the plays themselves. In order to produce the histories as a cycle, close reading of the plays, historiography, and

genealogies of the nobility is essential if the tetralogical production as a whole is to have integrity. In this sense, *The Hollow Crown* was a missed opportunity, because it lacked a deep dramaturgical understanding of the histories, the characters, and their relationships. The result was that there was no unified vision in the series, and that lack of coherence made *Richard II* feel as though it did not fit with the other three films. Yet, although *Richard* was the oddball in the series, it actually was the most thoughtful and, though heavy handed, most successfully manifested film of the four-part *Hollow Crown*, series one.

The Hollow Crown starts promisingly enough with Rupert Goold's adaptation of *Richard II*, starring Ben Whishaw as the eponymous king. The tact Goold takes in the production is to present Richard as a martyr. The film begins and ends with a shot of the crucified Christ, and there is abundant Christ imagery throughout the film, even in Richard's appearance – his hair and beard call to mind popular images of Jesus, and in the deposition scene, he strikes an orans posture, as if in prayer. Richard wears pastels, white, and gold throughout the film, including bare feet in the deposition scene and a loin cloth when he is murdered. He frequently rides a horse, led by a servant, recalling Jesus's entrance into Jerusalem. In addition to the Christ imagery, there is also an invocation of Saint Sebastian during the opening credits. The character Bushy is portrayed as an artist, who paints two portraits in this rendition of the play, one of Saint Sebastian and another of the Queen. Richard sees Bushy painting Saint Sebastian from a model who is wearing patches with faux arrows attached in order to stand for the familiar image of the saint. Richard touches the patches holding on an arrow just below the nipple of the model. The

camera cuts to a low-angle shot of Richard that is more than half filled with the back of the naked torso of the model. The low-angle suggests that Richard is powerful, but Richard himself looks slightly upward to the model, which implies his subservience to his own desires. The model looks at Richard sensually, then averts his eyes; and Richard turns away. Richard goes to Bushy, the painter, and touches his shoulder affectionately.

This early scene indicates a thematic tract for *Richard II*. The king is effeminate, giggling, and uninterested in his queen. Richard's suggestive touching of the model – especially a model of Saint Sebastian, who is “the patron saint of soldiers, of homosexuals, of plague- and AIDS-sufferers”¹ – insinuates homoeroticism into the film. The adaptation goes to great lengths to make Richard's sexuality² front and center in order to make his murder into a sexually driven martyrdom that has more in common with Edward II's homoerotic downfall than it does power and politics. *Richard* is so heavy with sights and sounds³ of martyrs that it almost undermines its own motif, nearly seeping into the absurd. The film saves itself, though, by at least having a unified theme and a rhetorical point to make. Although the symbolism is heavy handed, it is clearly deliberate and thoughtful; it attempts to attach additional significance to the play and garner sympathy for Richard.

One fascinating innovation comes in *Richard* with the pardoning scene in act 5 and its aftermath, which emphasize Aumerle's relationship to the new King, his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke. The film focuses on the uncomfortable position Henry (Rory Kinnear) is put in by having to consider pardoning Aumerle for treason. When

Henry pardons Aumerle, he says, “Your mother well hath prayed, and prove you true”; there is no doubt that “and prove you true,” is interpreted in this production such that Aumerle, like the prodigal son, has become indebted to his pardoner for life (5.3.144). By sparing Aumerle’s life, Henry has ensured that Aumerle owes him a debt that no money can repay. But the emphasis on repayment doesn’t end there. In this production, Exton speaks NOT to a *servant* about murdering Richard, but to *Aumerle*. Aumerle, in turn, goes with Exton to Richard’s cell, where Aumerle shoots the first of three fatal arrows at Richard, a nod to the martyrdom of St. Sebastian. Later, when Richard’s death is announced, Aumerle drags in a coffin and reveals the martyred body of Richard. Henry is upset, but does not punish Aumerle, and Exton is nowhere to be seen. While this production takes liberties in this and other places, sometimes delving in to the melodramatic, this interpretation that Aumerle becomes personally involved in Richard’s death shows the depth of Aumerle’s indebtedness to Henry and his attempt to balance the scales.

In the other episodes of *The Hollow Crown*, *1 & 2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, there is little attempt to overlay symbolic substance onto the productions as is done in *Richard II*. Instead, these three films act as their own unit, completely forging their own autonomous path, as if *Richard II* did not exist. The trouble with leaving *Richard* behind is that, after the impressive weight of *Richard*, one feels cheated by the recoil. Of course, Shakespeare’s own version of *1 & 2 Henry IV* has a different feel and texture than *Richard*, if only in the fact that they separate the court and tavern, adopt prose, and settle into a two-tiered class structure with Prince Hal walking the liminal tightrope; however, there is still strong continuity of character when moving

from *Richard II* to the other plays in the tetralogy. Bolingbroke and Henry IV are clearly the same person in Shakespeare's characterization, and, obviously, in historic fact, and Henry's preoccupations throughout Shakespeare's depiction of his reign include obsession with the events of *Richard II* and the implications of Richard's murder. The problem in *The Hollow Crown* is that the latter three plays not only do not capture the same feeling of symbolic importance that *Richard* does, they pretend that *Richard* doesn't exist.

1 & 2 Henry IV have a different director and adaptor, Richard Eyre, than *Richard II*, which accounts for the different emphasis of the productions. The appearance of the cinematography is similar – the landscapes and interiors are beautifully set in period, and the costuming and lighting are gorgeous. In fact, all four of the films look very similar, but they do not feel very similar. If emphasis on religious symbolism were continued, it wouldn't be difficult to find ways to incorporate it into the following plays. The prodigal son, for instance, is evoked many times – both directly and indirectly. But there is no attempt to make the *Henry* plays about anything other than Prince Hal's pseudo-development – an unfortunate development, since as Norm Rabkin notes, "the meaning of each of the plays subsequent to *Richard II* had been enriched by the audience's recognition of the emergence of old problems in a new guise."⁴ Despite their interlocking meaning, in *The Hollow Crown's Henry* plays there is no larger stance, no advanced rhetorical point to make, no equivocation, which Shakespeare does so well. Rather, *The Hollow Crown Henry* plays want us to know the plot of Prince Hal's life, his triumph as king, and that is all. All the complexities that Shakespeare weaves into *Henry V* with minor

characters are excised with precision, as David Livingstone so thoroughly points out in “Silenced Voices: A Reactionary Streamlined *Henry V* in *The Hollow Crown*.”⁵ The production, Livingstone says, “reduces the rich tapestry of perspective provided by Shakespeare with the spotlight continuously on Henry, with a minimum of troublesome distractions.”⁶ *Henry V* in *The Hollow Crown* advances E.M.W. Tillyard’s view, Livingstone notes, “the popular/populist image of Henry,”⁷ rather than the equivocal view discussed at length in Rabkin’s “Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*.”

What’s even more puzzling than the symbolic feel, or lack thereof, of the subsequent films is that the casting is different in the three *Henry* plays from the casting in *Richard*. In *Richard*, Rory Kinnear plays Bolingbroke, but in *1 & 2 Henry IV*, Jeremy Irons plays the king. Additionally, Northumberland, who in the *Henry* plays is so crucial to the rebellion, both in its planning and in his absence, is played by David Morrissey in *Richard*, while Alun Armstrong takes on the role in *1 & 2 Henry IV*. The lack of continuity leaves an unaware audience member to believe that none of these men are the same as the nobles in *Richard*, especially considering the tradition of casting continuity that was perfected by *An Age of Kings* in the 1960 production of the full cycle of history plays, starting with *Richard II* and ending with *Richard III*. Since Jeremy Irons (Henry IV) and Tom Hiddleston (Prince Hal/Henry V), as well as Julie Walters (Mistress Quickly), Simon Russell Beale (Falstaff), Tom Georgeson (Bardolph), among many others, maintained their roles through the three later plays of the cycle, it’s puzzling that there was no attempt to link casting choices from *Richard II* to the rest of the cycle. Despite the fact that new adaptors (Ben Power and Thea Sharrow) and a new director (Thea Sharrow) take over the

helm in *Henry V*, the cast is basically maintained, with the above familiar characters maintaining their roles from *1 & 2 Henry IV* within *Henry V*.

One casting continuity error in *Henry V* emblemizes the lack of close reading and genealogical awareness of the adaptors – the role of the Duke of York in *Henry V*, formerly the Duke of Aumerle in *Richard II*. In real history, Aumerle's title is taken from him as a result of his allegiance to Richard, and he becomes the Earl of Rutland; however, under Henry V, Aumerle is restored to his father's title, and becomes the Duke of York. Few productions maintain continuity between *Richard II* and *Henry V* when casting Aumerle, who shows up as York to lead the vanguard at Agincourt. The only production I know of that does maintain that continuity is *An Age of Kings*, which as I said, maintains basically perfect casting continuity. John Greenwood plays Aumerle in *Richard II* and York in *Henry V*. However, *The Hollow Crown* demonstrates its lack of close reading in casting Patterson Joseph in the role of York, instead of Tom Hughes who played Aumerle.

There is a significant reason why the Aumerle/York casting discontinuity is striking, and it stems from a change to the end of *Richard II* that Rupert Goold makes in his adaptation. In Goold's version, when Exton is plotting to kill Richard, he is talking not to an anonymous extra, but to Aumerle. Aumerle has recently been chided, but pardoned, by the king for his conspiracy to kill him. The scene in 5.3 with York, his wife, the Duchess, and Aumerle pleading before the king is kept in the film – although Harry Percy and the mention of Prince Hal is not – and the newly installed Henry is eager to appear to be a just king. Thus, he pardons his cousin, Aumerle, and urges him “...and prove you true” (5.3.143). But Henry has the other

conspirators executed. Exton seeks Aumerle out, seeming to suggest that Aumerle could “prove [himself] true” by betraying Richard and conspiring to kill *him* instead of the new king. Convinced by Exton, Aumerle and a company of men shoot Richard with arrows, recalling with fine detail the Saint Sebastian painting from the beginning of the film. The fact that Aumerle, not Exton, kills Richard in *The Hollow Crown* is an interesting change, since through the murder, Aumerle attempts to prove his loyalties to Henry.

Shakespeare’s version of Richard’s death follows one of two possible explanations given in Hall’s *Chronicle*, neither of which involves Aumerle or arrows. Hall is less certain of how Richard died, but he writes: “But howe so euer it was, kyng Richarde dyed of a violent death, without any infection or naturall disease of the body.”⁸ He goes on to say that Richard was likely starved to death – given food, but forbidden to eat it. Paul Strom remarks upon the death-by-starvation narrative, pointing out that the official word was that Richard starved *himself*, but in fact, Adam of Usk, “the staunchly pro-Lancastrian ... says that Henry’s lieutenant Swinford starved Richard to death at Pontefract.”⁹ Hall describes Exton’s murder plot after the starvation narrative, and it is this, more dramatic narrative that Shakespeare employs for Richard’s demise – historically accurate or not – using swords rather than bows.

Richard’s death is only one example of how Shakespeare selectively ignores and/or rewrites history to produce a more compelling story. The question is – should we? In the case of *The Hollow Crown*, Aumerle murdering Richard may be a more logical and a more significant choice for Aumerle’s character development if it

were followed through in the other three films with casting continuity observed. The problem is, Shakespeare drops Aumerle/York out of the tetralogy until *Henry V* – unlike in *The Famous Victories*, in which Aumerle/York serves the Lancasters in both Henry IV and Henry V's reigns. In *The Hollow Crown*, York is given more prominence throughout *Henry V*, giving him some of the other noble's lines and responsibilities – for instance, Pistol tells Fluellen that York, not Exeter, has condemned Bardolph to death for stealing a “lute of little price.”¹⁰ Several reaction shots focus on York, including when Henry threatens Harfleur and when Henry reacts to Bardolph's hanging. Henry also mentions York by name in the St. Crispin's Day speech.¹¹ York's death, off the field of battle, in the forest where he is stabbed in the back, ends with him dying in the boy's arms, reimagining York as a protector of the boy, and a faithful servant to the end. How much more meaningful would that moment have been if Tom Hughes had played the part instead?

I suppose it's impossible to tell. For audience members to understand the significance of York's death, a well-placed flashback to *Richard II* would have been helpful, but without casting continuity, the flashback would make no sense. In instances like Bardolph's hanging, there are times when *The Hollow Crown* does use flashbacks to give continuity to the narrative that unfolds post-usurpation. The only reason the flashback works is because the same actors are playing the same parts. If *The Hollow Crown* were determined to give York's death significance, casting Tom Hughes as York, with a well-placed flashback, would have been the easiest way, instead of conflating other characters to boost York's role. With *Richard II* being so

much an entity on its own in the series, though, it is unsurprising that director Thea Sharrow did not take the easy way.

This paper only barely starts to cover the importance of close reading for the history plays and how essential continuity is for cycles to make sense in production. The fact of the matter is that without close reading of both the plays and some historical sources, and without genealogical awareness, the histories can be more confusing than they should be. But not only does the audience lose connections when they are confused about characters, they can also lose out on significance that comes with following many characters' development throughout a series of plays. The serial histories are special because of that grand-scale development that makes the characters so rich and so worthy of being called "star[s] of England." In the case of *The Hollow Crown*, the hollowness, instead, is the star.

¹ Matt, Fetz, and Wien's *Saint Sebastian : A Splendid Readiness for Death* (2003), p. 8. Saint Sebastian is frequently pictured as having been shot with arrows; however, he actually survives this attempt on his life. He is later killed by stoning after returning to the emperor, Diocletian, to convince him not to persecute Roman Christians. For an array of images of Saint Sebastian and a discussion of his association with homoeroticism, see Matt, Fetz, and Wien's *Saint Sebastian : A Splendid Readiness for Death* (2003), Richard A. Kaye's "'Determined Raptures': St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27.1 (1999): 269-303; and Cynthia Lewis's "'Wise Men, Folly-Fall'n'": Characters Named Antonio in English Renaissance Drama." *Renaissance Drama*, New Series 20 Essays on Dramatic Traditions: Challenges and Transmissions (1989): 197-236.

² For an overview of Richard's posthumous reputation, including rumors about Richard's sexuality and fluctuating views of Richard in Walsingham's *Chronicles*, see George B. Stow's "Richard II in Thomas Walsingham's *Chronicles*" *Speculum* 59.1 (Jan. 1984): 68-102; and Christopher Fletcher's "Manhood and Politics in the Reign of Richard II," *Past & Present* 189 (Nov. 2005): 3-39.

³ The soundtrack to the film, composed by Adam Cork, presents itself as sacred-themed music, often in a minor key.

⁴ Norman Rabkin, "Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V.*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 28.3 (Summer 1977), p. 281.

⁵ David Livingstone "Silenced Voices: A Reactionary Streamlined *Henry V* in *The Hollow Crown*", *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, Vol. 12 (27), 2015, p. 89-100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁸ *Hall's Chronicle: Containing the History of England, During the Reign of Henry the Fourth, and the Succeeding Monarchs, to the End of the Reign of Henry the Eighth, in which are Particularly Described the Manners and Customs of Those Periods*, Web. Accessed 31 Jan. 2016. archive.org. See pages 19-20.

⁹ Paul Strohm, *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422*, New Haven: Yale UP (1998): p. 243, note 16; see also p. 103-4.

¹⁰ Many productions change "pax of little price" (3.6.40) to another, supposedly more familiar object. The 2012 Stratford Festival production mentioned above changed the line to "chalice of little price," for instance. The change, of course, removes the pun from the line – "pax," Latin for "peace," is an ironic thing to steal in the midst of war. What Bardolph really steals is, according to the *Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, "a small tablet with a crucifix stamped on it" (1512). It could also be that "pax" is a malaprop for "pix" or "pyx," which in the Catholic church is a small receptacle for carrying the Eucharist.

¹¹ In *The Hollow Crown's* St. Crispin's Day speech, Henry mentions Salisbury, Exeter, Erpingham, Westmorland, and York instead of Bedford and Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester.