Jane Howell and Subverting Shakespeare: Where Do We Draw the Lines?

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Shakespeare on Film

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By Linda Shenk

When Ralph Berry asks RSC director Bill Alexander to explain how a director chooses to do a Shakespearean play in a certain manner, Alexander replies: "For me, it all boils down to this: how best can I reveal this play, how best can I release my own perception of the play, my own feeling of what it's about, and what it says and why he wrote it" (Berry 178). To fulfill these goals, directors often choose to set a play in a different historical context, devise a thematic doubling scheme, and/or cut lines to emphasize a specific concept. Such decisions may reflect the director's wish to highlight certain ideas already present in the text; however, many directors have taken interpretive liberty too far and, as Jonathan Miller puts it, "denatured" the text (Berry 28). Because many of Shakespeare's plays carry with them long performance histories, directors often feel pressured to make their own mark on the tradition by providing a perspective that has not yet been explored, often at the expense of the text.

From Colley Cibber to Richard Eyre, the stage history of Shakespeare's Richard III traces a long line of directors who have made heavy changes in Shakespeare's text. BBC's Jane Howell, by contrast, has left the text comparatively untouched and shown that indeed the entire Henry VI/Richard III tetralogy does work, even through a television camera. Despite this faithfulness to Shakespeare's text, Howell, like her predecessors, leaves a distinctive mark that contradicts Shakespeare's thematic choices. For Howell, this change is the final image of the tetralogy. Instead of ending Richard III with Richmond's prayer, Howell extends her production to include an additional unit of action—a tableau that she calls a "reverse Piétà" (Cook 328). After Richmond's "amen," the scene shifts to a pile of corpses, and, as the camera slowly moves upward, the viewer finds Margaret at the top of this pile of bodies, cradling Richard's dead body and laughing in triumph. As a result of this ending image, Richmond no longer commands the final significant moment; Margaret has usurped his place. Despite this radical twist, reviewers have had surprisingly little to say about Howell's concluding image—a critical silence or evasion that suggests the fundamentally subservient nature of this ending.

To address the choices that are behind Howell's reverse Piétà, one must confront an issue that most scholars and reviewers have chosen to avoid: the question of how much a director can alter Shakespeare's text and still expect the resulting production to be considered Shakespearean. Commentators need to decide where directors are providing an interpretation and where they are, instead, rewriting the original to make their own "text." To apply these concerns to Howell's ending becomes an exceptionally difficult task because Howell has created a conclusion that requires one to choose between Shakespeare's ending and the feminist issues that Howell's tableau foregrounds. If reviewers criticize Howell for her conclusion, then they risk being labeled antifeminists. Since its gender orientation makes Howell's ending provocative, an effective way must be found to break the silence that has surrounded this tableau. With this aim, I mean first to discuss the subservience of Howell's Piétà and then to suggest guidelines by which to set the boundaries for altering Shakespeare.

Because Howell's ending differs from Shakespeare's, reviewers feel the need to mention the reverse Piétà but do not want to confront its implications. As if explaining a final step of the plot, they often describe the action the tableau depicts but not the choices that inform that extra piece of action. G. M. Pearce provides a typical example of this surface-level analysis in Cahiers Elisabéthains when he describes only the content of the image with Margaret, "hair wild in her frenzy, cackling like a hyena atop a pile of corpses" (82-83). By offering the reader a mere verbal snapshot of Howell's tableau, Pearce skirts the issues Howell's image raises. Similarly slipping around the ending, Hardy Cook, in his review for Literature-Film Quarterly, also begins with the action of Margaret holding Richard's weapon-studded body—an image John O'Connor describes as a "stunning coda" (33). This set piece "with the whole company bloodied and finally bowed" is, as Fenwick writes, "an image that encapsulates the butchery and horror of the long civil wars" (329).

Directly after this passage, Cook moves on to discuss the acting and never returns to the significance of the ending; therefore, he avoids making his own comment by switching to the words of O'Connor and Henry Fenwick. The strategy of such reviews acknowledges the difficulty these scholars are having in marrying Howell's overall faithfulness to Shakespeare's text to her subservient conclusion.

In an attempt to disarm the threat that Howell's added ending poses, some reviewers, such as Stanley Wells, have tried to dismiss the significance of her closing tableau. In the Times Literary Supplement, Wells dubs the ending "a melodramatically simplistic conclusion to a richly varied experience" (105). Although Wells devotes a paragraph to describing the theatricality of Howell's set, his failure to explain his opinion of the ending as "simplistic" suggests he wishes to downplay its importance but does not feel comfortable supporting that viewpoint. Like others, Wells creates a silence that asserts the disturbing issues that Howell's conclusion calls forth. Roger Warren expresses a similar uneasiness with the BBC finale, calling it a "rather forced ending, contradicting Shakespeare's own" (340). Howell's choice of conclusion, however, is not easily tagged as "rather forced" or "simplistic." It carries multiple levels of subversion that affect more than just the final scene of Shakespeare's Richard III. By placing Margaret in the reverse Piétà, Howell is undercutting the play's emphasis on the male historiographic enterprise, on Christ as the central divine force, and on language itself. To understand the extent to which Howell has redirected Shakespeare's Richard III, an analysis needs to explore the layers of subversion that Howell's ending presents.

On a fundamental level, Howell's closing image carries with it an undermining quality because it gives the central focus to a woman. In Stages of History, Phyllis Rackin examines the inherently subservient presence of women in Shakespeare's history plays. The few female characters who appear in these works "are typically defined as opponents and subverters of the historical and historiographic enterprise, in short, as anti-historians" (148). Early in 2 Henry VI, Shakespeare uses Gloucester as the vehicle to voice the threat that Margaret poses when, after King Henry exits with Margaret and Suffolk, Gloucester warns his fellow "pillars of the state" (1.1.75): "Fatal [is] this marriage, canceling your fame, / Blotting your names from books of memory" (1.1.97-98). Gloucester's prediction establishes Margaret as the eraser of history, and Margaret's domineering personality gives the impression that this queen is determined to write history as she would like to see it. Shakespeare proceeds, however, to deprive her of subservient power.

In spite of her earlier threat as an eraser of history, Margaret becomes, in Richard III, the voice who will not let the other characters forget the past. Instead of blotting out significant names, Margaret keeps them in use through repetition, which points to the cyclical nature of history. By redirecting Margaret's function, Shakespeare does not allow her to fulfill Gloucester's prophecy, a choice that denies this queen her earlier power of subversion. Although Shakespeare's unhistorical decision to include Mar-
garet in Richard III, the last play of the tetralogy, might appear as an indication of Margaret’s strength, Shakespeare has pulled Margaret out of her historical background in order to place her more firmly back within it. Margaret must undergo the change from anti-heroist to voice of history so that Shakespeare can remove her erasing threat and control her from both a dramatic and a socio-political standpoint.

To ensure that Margaret cannot exercise more control than either Richard or Richmond, Shakespeare shuffles her off to France in act four both before Richard begins showing real signs of weakening and before Richmond makes his first entrance. In Howell’s final tableau, however, the director rewrites Shakespeare by giving Margaret back her undermining force at the closing moment. This re-empowerment allows Margaret to eclipse both Richard’s and Richmond’s final significance. The image of Margaret’s words “Up with all, as all had never been!” (2 Henry VI 1.1.101)—another of Gloucester’s prophecies about Margaret—Howell’s deceased queen takes the concluding moment from Richmond, the man so crucial to English history as the restorer of domestic peace, and, in this usurpation, subverts the male history that he represents.

Although Howell bases her subversive, Margaret-focused tableau on prophecies that Shakespeare includes in his tetralogy, this director uses Gloucester’s predictions for her own ends, ends that contradict Shakespeare’s decision to leave Margaret’s potential destiny unfulfilled. By giving Margaret the final moment, Howell is placing this female character in a position of power that Shakespeare has denied her; Shakespeare’s Margaret is both the victim of the political plot and the beneficiary of the conclusion of the story. As Rackin points out, no female character is the protagonist in a Shakespearean history play (147), and Howell is trying to make a leap that is not in the text. Howell’s choice does not work with the rest of Richard III because she is not portraying Margaret’s position in the final tableau as the end product of a developing character. To make Margaret the final victor, Howell has to pull this subversive Margaret from 2 Henry VI and erase the Margaret of Richard III. By giving the deceased queen the last triumph, Howell has to “denature” Shakespeare’s Margaret in order to reintroduce her as the subverter of Richmond and the male historiographic enterprise. Howell also makes this decision to depose this character’s triumph. This decision gives an even greater subversive force to Margaret because the Pétia image erodes the foundation for history in the tetralogy—Providence and language.

In Richard III especially, the role of Providence takes on great significance. Shakespeare provides the dream sequence in act five, many of Margaret’s curses, and the medieval trial by combat to emphasize the idea that God judges the world of the characters and ensures that the chosen man will triumph in the end. On the conceptual level, Providence is a male tri-entity that watches over the workings of a male history. The Pétia, on the other hand, focuses on the grieving Mary, shifting the emphasis away from the destiny of the political plot to the personal. The Pétia’s image has its own intrinsic subversive quality, because in it Mary is the survivor and Christ is, at least on Good Friday, considered to be dead. Howell does not term this ending “a Pétia,” however, but “a reverse Pétia.” The original concept of the Pétia indicates how Mary’s presence moderates Christ’s significance, but, because Mary is weeping, the focus of the image remains holy in its longing for the central figure in the Christian faith. Mary weeps because she is thinking of Christ. Howell turns this grief into laughing mockery, giving her viewer not a woman thinking of others but a woman triumphant in herself. The reverse Pétia no longer carries its religious significance, for now it mocks Providence by celebrating the individual, human female. The mortal Margaret has stolen the victory from the man that God and Shakespeare have chosen; she has the last laugh at Providence’s and Shakespeare’s expense.

By contravening the role of Providence in Richard III, Howell’s laughing Margaret disarms the male historiographic enterprise. God uses men as vehicles to realize his map of history, and men, in turn, use language to record this series of events. Howell’s reverse Pétia undermines this symbiotic relationship by subverting both God and language. Rackin describes how women exert an opposing stance to that of men and their language because women are stereotypically connected to physical reality—the body (151). A similar sense of the body in Howell’s Margaret atop the pile of corpses subverts the significance of Richmond’s final words through her laughter, a choice of inarticulate sound over words. Her force becomes the antithesis of the spoken word, rejecting language and subverting the playwright who creates his art through language. Although Howell’s tableau makes Margaret the subverter of history and of Shakespeare’s words, this closing moment most directly eclipses Richmond’s language. After killing Richard, Richmond reconfirms the Providential forces at work on the side of righteousness by tying together history and God in the prayer with which he ends the play. When Howell refuses to give Richmond and his prayer the final moment of the production, she follows this play’s performance tradition of diminishing Richmond’s, and therefore Shakespeare’s, ending. But what makes her action revolutionary is how she redirects the emphasis. By giving the end to Margaret and not to Richmond or to the play’s central character, Howell’s production subverts, on a theatrical level, the male-focused stage history of Richard III.

Traditionally, in the performance of Richard III, stage-time has been taken away from the other characters to devote a greater percentage of that time to Richard. Few Richards have “wished to share the stage for long with a Richmond who is liable to steal their thunder as he triumphs in their fight to the death” (Colley 5). In attempts to dethrone this new presence, most productions find some method of diminishing Richmond’s importance. Some productions, such as the Bill Alexander/Anthony Sher collaboration, trim the number of lines in Richmond’s part, while others, like the recent Richard Eyre/Ian McKellen production, transform the king into another Richard after Richmond puts on the crown. According to Janis Lull, in her unpublished review of this 1992 production, “Richard, previously a boyish contrast to Richard, executed a spidery imitation of Richard’s movements over the body of the fallen king” (6). Howell’s predecessors have thus sought methods to decrease Richmond’s importance for the same overall diminishing effect as the BBC tableau accomplishes. While Howell’s choice places the extra emphasis on the leading female actor by featuring Margaret, other Richard III have “traditionally been exploited to display the male-dominated court” (6).

In his review of Laurence Olivier’s acclaimed film production of Richard III, in The Observer, C. A. Lejeune writes: “Olivier may have savaged the play’s text, but he has cut deep and true to the play’s spirit” (quoted in Cottrell 271). Margaret Morley, in The Films of Laurence Olivier, similarly nods to this integrity of “spirit”: [Although the film] begins with a passage from Henry VI, Part III, Lady Anne follows the wrong body, her wooing is split in two, fragments from Colley Cibber are introduced, and it completely cut out Queen Margaret, it was nevertheless considered, according to reviewers, to be a first-class production.

According to the commentaries of Lejeune and Morley, changing Shakespeare’s text becomes acceptable so long as some nebulous notion of “spirit” remains upheld. Olivier’s film rejects the theme of Providential history, for example, yet this change is allowed because of its “spirit.” The main “spirit” that Olivier leaves untouched, or rather intensifies, is the presence of the theatrically central Richard. Because of this emphasis, reviewers such as Paul Dehn of the News Chronicle applaud Olivier for repairing a faulty script wherever it “was loose-jointed or ill-fitting,” making Olivier “its tinker and its tailor—but never once (as so often happens with other films) its butcher” (quoted in Morley 116). So long as this male-dominated play retains the proper gender-color, then most adaptations will come across as clarifications of what Shakespeare really intended.

Another case in point is Stein Winge’s 1982 production of Richard III. Like Howell, Winge created an extra unit of action to end the play that subverts Richmond’s final moment. After the curtain went down to “end the production,” in the succeeding blankness, Richard’s figure remained dimly visible at the front of the stage. Slowly, it rose. Naked, blind, smeared with dirt, Richard pulled himself to his feet and stretched one hand upward—still striving. (Sherry 357)

Winge, too, changed Shakespeare’s ending by giving Richard the last moment and thus diminishing Richard’s victory. Despite this undermining conclusion, reviewer Ruth Sherry believes that “The vision at the heart of [the production] is probably at least as true to the spirit of the play as those which inform other productions that are more respectfully literal” (357). Winge’s interpretative liberty received praise because, like Olivier, this director remained true to the male “spirit” of the play. By giving Margaret the final triumph, however, Howell’s production contradicts the traditional male-focus and, therefore, defies the acceptable “spirit” of Richard III. Past reviewers like Morley, Dehn, and Sherry have backed their contemporary counterparts into an uncomfortable position. Noting that the BBC has often “completely rejected the performance context necessary to declare it irresponsible does not exist. As Scott Colley says, “the play has been so frequently altered that extreme adaptations have come to seem as legitimate as Shakespeare’s text” (3). To denounce Howell’s ending would be inconsistent with the treatment her equally guilty predecessors have received. Interpretations such as Olivier’s and Winge’s have altered or added to the text and have swept by not only unblamed but praised. Shakespeare’s text does not provide for the interpretations that Howell, Olivier, or Winge present; each of these approaches subverts Shakespeare, and each should trigger equal uneasiness in review-
Although reviewers may disagree with a director’s altering of Shakespeare’s text, few directors are held accountable for taking too much interpretive liberty with Shakespeare. Since artistic freedom is vital to theatre, reviewers hesitate to define boundaries. Yet the profession needs to begin to establish guidelines for handling that freedom responsibly. Shakespeare’s plays already depart the director from classic literary latitude; texts of such richness and complexity elude a singular, definitive interpretation, and the lack of detailed stage directions allows the director to determine most of the stage action. This inherent flexibility, however, gives directors of Shakespeare so many options in shaping their own productions that directors often feel they can let their production concepts overflow these interpretive spaces to obscure what is there—the text. Unlike performances—art without text, as it were—Shakespeare’s text provides the necessary foundation for distinguishing an adaptation from a performance. This fidelity to the script encompasses not only presenting the lines of dialogue but maintaining the sequence of actions played out by a specific balance of characters. When directors redefine this framework, they create their own text and make an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play rather than a production of it. Alternatively, to emphasize certain tensions in a play, directors may cut particular passages or choose lines from a quarteto or version over the corresponding wording in the Folio. Each of these methods works within the parameters of Shakespeare’s text to produce, in a sense, another Shakespearean text.

On a conceptual level, directors may devise doubling schemes and/or set a play in a time and place different from Shakespeare’s original. Whereas most scholars will agree that doubling is an acceptable form of interpretive choice, the question of altering the setting provokes controversy. Jonas Barish, in his article “Is There ‘Authenticity’ in Theatrical Performance?” strongly opposes setting plays in a setting different from the original, believing that “we have embarked on a quest for ‘relevancy,’” mostly through deliberate anachronism, the violent transplantation of the settings of the plays into other times and other climes than those intended by their authors” (823). Like Barish, I believe that certain setting choices can clash against text. But if the text remains “unambiguously Shakespeare, unambiguously literal,” then the text holds the director accountable because setting choices that conflict with the text cause unwarranted friction between word and situation. Howell’s production does not raise this issue of setting because he sets the tetralogy in period, choosing instead to implement her concept through doubling and cutting choices—decisions that shape Margaret’s character into the hard, self-serving woman who stands apart in importance from the rest of the tetralogy’s cast. The Howell who makes these subtle decisions is working with Shakespeare’s text from within to emphasize certain aspects of Margaret’s character. But, in adding the final tableau, Howell oversteps acceptable boundaries.

Here Howell becomes not just director but creator. Additions or deletions of characters or units of action disrupt both the sequence of events and Shakespeare’s balance of characters. Such changes do not acknowledge that Shakespeare deliberately crafted each play. He has Richard woo Anne in one scene; he does not include Mistress Shore as a character; he does not allow the audience to watch the murder of the two princes in the Tower and has Tyrrell, rather than Dighton and Forrester, describe the scene. Sequence and balance of characters are purposeful. Yet many directors who claim they do not want to make drastic changes in Shakespeare’s text follow statements of this aim with a “but” from their own directing experience. Michael Kahn, for example, says that he is “unsure less and less. I’m terribly aware that if you cut Shakespeare, you immediately edit out the things you don’t think fit and so you’re immediately doing exactly what I disagree with” (Berry 99). Despite this belief expressed in a 1989 interview, three years later Kahn made a major thematic alteration in his production of Hamlet by cutting the character of Fortinbras. Although directors like Kahn may have the most faithful-to-the-text intentions, they demonstrate that they want to do more than cut a few passages and dated references. They instead make major changes that upset the fundamental framework of the play, a tendency that should be especially disturbing to Shakespeareans.

Directors justify changing Shakespeare by appealing to a modern perspective. Shakespeare depicts situations that audiences no longer want to accept. Although Shakespeare is admired for his language and his complexity in portraying individual experience, directors seem to believe that what he gives the modern reader/playgoer no longer is enough. In Richard III, they frequently choose to reduce Richard’s significance because, in part, they feel uncomfortable with the Providential destiny that he represents. Individual choice and the shaping of one’s own future better suit today’s audiences—audiences that include many who also want to see the modern focus on gender issues, in particular, played out with a modern outcome. Shakespeare does not give us the answers we are seeking, but an admiration for Shakespeare’s work might go deeper than the desire to free the production of the constraints of contemporary society. We still want to claim Shakespeare’s mastery as a part of who we are, but, by rejecting parts of a piece, we are indicating that we wish to claim Shakespeare only on our own terms.

While I find Howell’s and Olivier’s interpretations interesting as choices, I have trouble applauding their adaptations of Shakespeare’s text, especially in light of the large audiences that film and video reach. Most libraries will carry the BBC series; therefore, many Shakespeare teachers will employ Howell’s production as a pedagogical tool. If students see only Howell’s and Olivier’s productions, then they encounter no performance that preserves Shakespeare’s text. Although teachers want their students to catch the light of excitement and adventure they experience while working with a Shakespearean piece, they are sending these student mixed signals when in one breath they urge the relevance of Shakespeare to our experience and in the next moment show a film that rewriting the text so as to help create that relevance.

I am not suggesting that Shakespeare provides twentieth-century spectators/readers with an alien xperience on expectation, but I feel that we need to recognize that Shakespeare does dramatize issues in a manner that occasionally tempts us to change the outcome. Many of Shakespeare’s plays contain situations that are disturbing to modern audiences because of the slavery issues that are so important to our society. In Hamlet, the title character dies, and the rarely-familiar Fortinbras ends the play; Valentine forgives Proteus after a brief six-line apology at the end of The Two Gentlemen of Verona; Shylock, after the trial scene in The Merchant of Venice, does not reenter to be embraced by the Christian world of Belmont; when the Duke proposes to Isabella in Measure for Measure, Isabella never responds verbally to his offer but remains silent for the rest of the final scene. All of these situations point to issues without resolving them, and this open-endedness attracts directors because it leaves room for interpretation. But, so often, directors do not want to conclude their productions and leave the play’s unresolved issues untouched. They want to fill in these gaps with their individual agendas, providing their own answers instead of confronting the ambiguities and leading the audience into more questions. Shakespeare is not our contemporary, as Patrick Cruttwell believes (Berry 15), and, by rewriting Shakespeare, directors prove that this difference cannot be accommodated without amendments that “fix” the plays and make them comply with what we take to be our superior modern perspective.

Works Cited