Heroes, Villains, and Balkans: Intertextual Masculinities in Ralph Fiennes’s "Coriolanus"

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LAURA GRACE GODWIN
Heroes, Villains, and Balkans: Intertextual Masculinities in Ralph Fiennes’s Coriolanus

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Rather say, I play / The man I am.
—(Coriolanus 3.2.15–16)

Occupyng the borderland between high and low art, filmed Shakespeare reinvents the poet’s drama by appropriating popular representational devices such as stunt-casting, altered period setting, and mise-en-scène recontextualizations while simultaneously trading on the prestige of the material that it renovates. One technique, intertextual referencing set in motion through casting and updated setting, provides a crucial but ontologically unstable means by which the adapter of Shakespeare heightens relevance and increases popular appeal. Filmmakers, both deliberately and inadvertently, ring intertextual reverberations by means of their casting and setting choices, but cataloging, quantifying, and tracing those echoes of referential inference prove a herculean challenge. Placed in a recognizably accessible contemporary context, the Shakespearean text not only acquires an even more diffuse interpretive range but also a freshly dense ethical problematic. Such artistic choices prompt two related questions: how does filmed Shakespeare shape meaning through its casting, and how does a distinctly identifiable contemporary setting pose ethical problems even as it markets the relevancy of the Shakespearean work?

Ralph Fiennes’s 2011 adaptation of Coriolanus (1607–08) instantiates the vexed layers of association generated by means of intertextuality. By casting himself as the titular Roman general and Gerard Butler as his Volsc nemesis Aufidius, Fiennes shorthands a range of filmic intertexts—specifically the Harry Potter oeuvre and 300—that shape a viewer’s interpretation of the Roman play. On the one hand, these references access

film idiom to confront mythologies of masculinity grounded in violence and to explore such myths both as self-defining and self-annihilating. However, complicating the movie's critique of masculine identity is Fienne's choice to film in Serbia and Montenegro as well as to utilize found news footage from the 1990s Yugoslav Wars. Fienne's recontextualization of the Roman-Volscia conflict unleashes a raft of stereotypes of the Balkan male as brutally violent and uncontrollable that problematically yoke an entire European region to the patterns of self-destruction manifested by Coriolanus and Aufidius. Thus, Fienne's filmic and historical intertexts inadvertently impress the seal of Shakespearean approval on dubious European stereotypes of the Balkan Other. We see in Fienne's film that as adaptive alterations strive to render the canon relevant and accessible, they simultaneously provoke new interpretive and ethical considerations.

Film adaptation by its very nature warrants an interpretive methodology that pursues the ethical impact of the invoked and related material available to director and audience alike. As critics, we naturally employ such methods when we consider filmed Shakespeare in relationship to its early modern source texts, history, and culture, but intertextuality goes far beyond such filial relations (Barthes 160). Perhaps because the broader referential implications threaten to produce interpretive anarchy and an ever-widening ring of interconnections, the critic might understandably shy away from the dizzying number of potential popular culture and media intertexts of any one Shakespeare film adaptation. In a searching reflection on the nature of adaptation, Thomas Leitch points out the unsettling tendency of adaptation to question the distinctiveness and independence of art forms (novel, drama, film, for example) as separate categories: "Adaptation is the mode of intertextuality that has been defined from its beginnings as a problem child, a mode whose definition has focused on its challenge to the binaries on which both it and its critical discourse have depended" (101). Even as adaptation pays homage to the past and an originary site or sites, it inherently and even brazenly disrupts categorical distinctions of priority, filiation, hierarchy, and taste. By reimagining and reworking a source text, adaptation launches an assault on the preeminent standing of the original work and establishes wider fields of reference in dialogue with that source. Thus, as an art form, adaptation requires methods that consider not just its relationship to an ostensible source but also its interdependence upon a range of signifying fields gestured to by decisions such as casting or historical appropriation.

Let me distinguish what this study claims as "intertextuality" from Gerad Genette's "hypertextuality," which posits a more direct kinship between an earlier text (hypertext) and a later text (hypertext) (5). Genette's hypertextuality is predicated upon a multi-text, often intentional, chronology that the resonances of Fienne's Coriolanus do not necessarily follow. Fienne does not deliberately set out to imitate or respond to the Harry Potter series or 300, nor does he adapt the history of the Yugoslav Wars in a systematic fashion, though his adaptive strategies invite viewers to make connections from those reference fields onto the narrative of Shakespeare's Roman general. Those references echo not in any originary way but via the interpretive agency of the viewer who selects the traces to be considered and through which to filter the experience of watching and interpreting Coriolanus. The intertextual spaces in filmed Shakespeare thus prompt a negotiation between the creative agency of filmmaker and the interpretive agency of film-viewer. Pursuing intertextuality in the Shakespeare film adaptation can correct the camera lens and film editor's pervasive control over meaning-making by expanding interpretive foci. Such a move returns drama to the multiplicity of focal points endemic to theater, in which the viewer's gaze largely determines who and what are seen. In the case of Fienne's adaptation, celebrity film oeuvre and historical mise-en-scène spotlight cultural myths of masculinity that are as problematic in the twenty-first century as in the seventeenth.

**Myths of Masculinity**

As a proving ground for the masculine, Coriolanus reflects the contested ways in which early moderns conceived of gender identity. Imaging a world in which gender difference exists as essentialized fact, Shakespeare's eponymous hero "tragically equates manliness with absolute autonomy" (Stockholder 232), a fact underscored by his repeated deployment of "alone" as an adjective or adverb describing himself or his actions: "O, me alone" (1.6.76); "Alone I fought in your Corioles walls" (1.8.8); "I go alone, / Like to a lonely dragon" (4.1.29–30); "Alone I did it" (5.6.116). Coriolanus fantasizes a walled-off impenetrability that is bedrock to his self-concept as male but is troubled by the omnipotence of his mother, Volumnia, and by the traces of performative language running throughout the play text. The abundant scholarship of masculinity in Coriolanus centers on the contradictions inherent in the titular character's self-concept—supreme independence undermined by a plenipotent mother and a non-compliant body politic. Even in the culminating supplication of Volumnia in act five, Coriolanus claims to stand "As if a man were author of himself, / And knew no other kin" (3.3.36–37), revealing that
to the end, as Janet Adelman has expressed it, “his entire sense of himself depends on his being able to see himself as a self-sufficient creature” (150). Of course, that final solipsistic utterance will be contradicted some 150 lines later when, indeed, Coriolanus cannot withstand the pressure of his mother’s pleas and capitulates to her demands.

Shakespeare counters Coriolanus’s self-begotten fantasy not only with maternal dominance but also with a body politic that provides the infuriatingly necessary defining context for his status as martial hero, double reminders of “the impossibility of achieving an absolute singular manhood” (Lowe 89). Cynthia Marshall articulates the paradox endemic to Coriolanus’s subjective self-assertion: “Martius is torn between dependence on others who will validate his existence simply by requiring his heroic services in combat, and his utter disdain for those whom he judges to be less worthy than himself” (461). Indeed, as Stanley Cavell notes, “The fact that he [Coriolanus] has both absolute contempt for the people and yet an absolute need for them is part of what maddens him” (254). For Shakespeare’s hero, violence and the act of war provide the primary mechanism by which his hyper-independent subjectivity articulates itself and masculinity takes form: “Coriolanus associates fighting and the kind of male bonding offered in battle with manhood, so that he fully endorses the equation of wounds with masculinity offered by his mother” (Sprengnether 99). Yet the agonistic competition of warfare undoes identity as verily as it constructs the masculine self, and Joo Young Dittmann points to the dismembered body of Coriolanus at the close of act five as a literalization of selfhood lost in war’s ferocity (670).

In his theorization of mediatized masculinities, Antony Easthope characterizes an understanding of the masculine ego at the heart of popular mimesis that could as easily describe Coriolanus’s subjectivity: “At present in the dominant myth the masculine ego is imagined as closing itself off completely, maintaining total defence” (42). Of course, the truth the masculine ego must constantly hold at bay remains the reality that external forces always impinge upon subjective freedom: “that it [the ego] depends on a process outside itself for its very existence” (44). Easthope associates the microcosm of the masculine ego with macrocosmic nationalism in much the way selfhood and nation interpenetrate in Coriolanus: “But it is not just that we and they are contrasted—it is rather that a really firm line is drawn between the two, a defended barrier, like the battlelements around the self or the hard edges of the male body. We are familiar, they are foreign; we are inside, they are outside” (56). This self-constituting agon relies upon violence as mechanism for survival: “The unity of the body is affirmed when the body of the other is destroyed” (Easthope 65). Thus, violence and the act of warfare essentialize categories of gendered identity otherwise a product of social formation. Easthope’s schema, in which the masculine ego and the nation function as related entities sustained by violence, finds correlative echoes in two of the celebrity intertexts to Fienne’s film adaptation of Coriolanus.

Michael L. Quinn identifies celebrity filmography as a crucial mechanism shaping cinematic signification: “Celebrities come equipped with an intertext that includes several levels, only the most obvious of which is the conjunction of art and life in a particular role. The intertext is an accretion, based on similar art/life connections in earlier roles, and also in the connections the celebrity provides between the roles themselves” (158). In the context of theatrical performance, David Graver dissects the “actor’s presence on stage,” characterizing that presence as an “ontological shimmer” comprised of seven component parts (221). Graver labels one component as “personage,” the “aura generated by the public circulation of stories about the actor” as well as the history of roles previously performed by the actor: “One might see in this body certain gestures repeated from role to role or the ghost of a particularly famous and successful earlier part” (226). Barbara Hodgdon pursues this in the context of Shakespearean film adaptation: “That phenomenon, where one role seems to shadow another, and where at times the performer’s presence or persona inhabits both simultaneously or even effaces the performer-character relation, has become increasingly familiar in recent Shakespeare films” (106). The sympathy of subject matter between Coriolanus and the recent filmography of its stars heightens such intertextual “shadows.”

The Harry Potter films, in which Fienne plays the nemesis Voldemort (2005–11), and 300 (2006), in which Butler headlines as King Leonidas, share plotting and characterization points with Coriolanus: a people under attack, the heroic savior figure, a villainous overreach, and violence as self-defining, Fienne’s casting choices thus appropriate these mythic narrative arcs so that the absolute and utterly aggressive autonomy of his Harry Potter Voldemort echoes in his Coriolanus. Similarly, Butler’s starring role in 300 frights baggage that constructs a concept of the masculine deeply rooted in violence and binary opposition to the Other, fetishizing the wounds of violence in its aestheticized, slow-motion ballet of spatter and choreographed movement. Rather than submerge the intertextual references of its stars’ oeuvre, Coriolanus invites such connections through hair and makeup choices. By electing to shave Fienne’s hair, the adaptation ensures that Voldemort remains an accessible touch-
stone, particularly when combined with a habit of oblique close-ups or tilted camera angle that echoes representations of Voldemort in the later films. Fiennes’s shaved head accentuates his deep-set eyes, also mimicking a tendency of the *Harry Potter* special-effects team to darken Voldemort’s eye sockets to enhance the villain’s reptilian features. Likewise, *Coriolanus* alters Butler’s look very little from his 300 persona—the same signature beard dominating his physiognomy—though Butler dons a few more layers of clothing in the process of trading his sandals for combat boots.

As the serpentine villain of the *Harry Potter* film franchise, Fiennes brings to his enactment of the Roman general traces of his Voldemort that manifest an unrelenting and yet crippling male autonomy. J. K. Rowling’s Voldemort aims at complete and utter wholeness, the impenetrable body of the deathless immortal capable of dominating all others (Pharr 64). Rowling’s villain does so, however, by means of a seemingly contradictory act of particularization; Voldemort fragments his being into horcruxes (material relics containing the soul), and the destruction of these occult objects forms the final quest of Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe) and his friends. Thus, Voldemort is both material and immaterial; his soul parcelled into the fetish objects that preserve an immaterial part or “essence” of his selfhood even as his material form wreaks chaos on the population of Rowling’s imagined world. Only by destroying each part of Voldemort’s nature, including that part that has adhered to Harry himself, can Harry Potter and the forces of good defeat the Dark Lord. In the Judeo-Christian framework of its mythlogy, the *Harry Potter* series must end with the act of supreme self-sacrifice. Once Harry recognizes that all Voldemort’s fragmentary selves must be destroyed, Harry offers himself up to the killing curse of his enemy. Rowling thus pits two forms of selfhood—maniacally insistent autogeneration and independence against the sacrificial interdependence of Harry, who lives by dying and saves his community in doing so. Such an intertext thus colors the sympathy Coriolanus generates when his rhetoric and Fiennes’s tight-lipped delivery inevitably reference the *Harry Potter* villain’s absoluteness; both characters—Fiennes’s Voldemort and his Coriolanus—punctuate their affectless manner with the singular note of rage. Maurizio Calbi memorably describes a Coriolanus who “continuously strives to approximate the hyperbole of himself” (80), and the palimpsestic layering of Voldemort onto Shakespeare’s Roman general by means of Fiennes’s body underscores that fantasized exaggeration of subjectivity.

Part animated comic book, part video game, *300* (directed by Zack Snyder) revels with unabashed delight in the articulated musculature of the male body and its capacity for aggression and domination over the Other. As King Leonidas, Butler leads his band of war-hardened Spartans to prevent territorial incursion by the Persian Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) and his army of “Asia’s endless hordes.” Based on the graphic novel series by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, *300* celebrates in strangely artificial and yet hyperreal technique every pierced body part and squelching penetration. The film begins with an incipit narrating the coming-of-age techniques (*agoge*) that school young Spartan men to acts of violence and normalize these activities as necessary for defense of a people. In contrast to the men of Sparta, King Xerxes, “a kind of ambiguously dark-skinned, tribal drag queen” (Martin 126), and his Persians embody a textbook Oriental Otherness straight out of Edward Said’s well-known formulation. Monstrously violent and yet simultaneously effeminate and otiose, King Xerxes is both an uber-male giant and a drag queen covered in gold jewelry, piercings, and makeup. Just as in the *Harry Potter* oeuvre, *300* crafts its central dyad of opposition—Leonidas and Xerxes—as one of competing masculinities. Leonidas ultimately sacrifices himself for the protection of his people, and the film records that death with overhead shots marking the fallen king as both Christ and St. Sebastian (Martin 138). Monica Silveira Cyrino defends the iconic presentation of Leonidas’s death, “in a pose reminiscent of artistic depictions of the crucifixion of Christ,” as a crucial film choice designed to heighten the “redemptive affect” of the Spartan’s sacrifice (33). However, that final cruciform representation of Leonidas caps the entire film’s magpie appropriation of images with a laughable tone-deafness to the dissonance between non-violent Christian martyrdom and the Spartan martial ethos.

The intertextual shadowing of Voldemort and Leonidas does not transfer in a straightforward manner to *Coriolanus*. Just because the body that plays Voldemort plays Coriolanus does not mean the titular character functions as unquestioned villain; neither does the fact that Butler enacts both the heroic Leonidas and the warrior Aufidius render the Volscce guerilla fighter the admirable protagonist of Shakespeare’s drama. Rather, these traces of other parts further confuse a tension inherent in Shakespeare’s drama over the distinction between protagonist and antagonist and over whose behavior deserves approbation and/or condemnation. In fact, these film references serve to remind the viewer of the robust cultural heritage that shapes masculine selfhood as oxymoronic contradiction: both supremely independent and utterly dependent. In other words, as Easthope argues, the masculine ego fends off attacks that would assert contingency and dependence, but that very defensive stance tacitly ac-
knowledges the reliance of the masculine self upon cultural consensus for its formation. The cinematic intertexts also suggest the possibility that the self/other binary thinly disguises a self/self confrontation; when the subject opposes the object it attacks the thing that mirrors identity back to the subject and thus self/other (subject/object) becomes self/self.16 In the parlance of the Harry Potter oeuvre, Voldemort's attack on Harry's nonviolent final stand entirely destroys the might of the Dark Lord, revealing the assault on Harry as nothing more than Voldemort's assault on himself. Violence promises the ultimate manifestation of masculine self-assertion—the self that kills the other—whilst simultaneously jeopardizing the very longevity and uniqueness of that subjectivity. The Harry Potter and 300 films thus provide an audience perhaps unfamiliar with Coriolanus readily available popular culture reference points to identify the mode of destructive masculinity interrogated by Shakespeare's text and the techniques of Fiennes's film adaptation.

**Autonomy or Auto-Annihilation in the Filmed Coriolanus**

Fiennes's stage performance of the play may well have influenced the decision to cast an Aufidius who brought to the screen a memorable turn as martial hero. Though not necessarily an interpretive lens available to the cinema audience of Coriolanus, the stage production of Shakespeare's play starring Fiennes and directed by Jonathan Kent (2000) fueled the actor's decision to adapt the drama to film ten years later.17 Under Kent's direction, Fiennes led the Almeida Theatre Company's cast—first at the Gainsborough Studios in London (14 June—22 July 2000) and then at the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York (6 September—1 October 2000). The unique circumstances of the Almeida staging in which Fiennes played the leads in a double-billed Coriolanus and Richard II stressed the competitive dyad founding masculine subjectivity in both works—Coriolanus vs. Aufidius and Richard II vs. Bolingbroke (BAM Stagebill 18). Writing about the productions for the *Observer*, Susannah Clapp characterized the interdependence of the leaders and their "second selves" in the twinned stagings: "Both plays deal with men who are ill-equipped for power; both these men have rivals who can be seen as echoes." Ben Brantley's review for the *New York Times* offered a critique of the theater production that Fiennes's later casting choices attempted to address when he returned to the play for his film directorial debut. Brantley observed: "Mr. Fiennes [...] never really conveys that essential love of warfare [...] it is hard to credit him as a [sic] inspiring, testoster-
a hue then mirrored in a close-up of Butler's eyes so that the enemies align visually with one another and their surroundings. In addition, the grey-green aura of their eyes deepens when framed by the army-issue camouflage designed to conceal the self and essentialize the male body as an instrument of violence. At this singular moment of self-assertion for each combatant, visual similitudes signal the loss of self that transpires in the pursuit of subjective primacy; these two figures strive for absolute agential freedom and yet continually manifest visual similarities that speak the dependent nature of martial masculinity. In his careful reading of the visual patterning in the film, John Garrison confirms that, “The two men are thus visually positioned as foils for each other and also as figures that obscure the boundaries of each other's singularity” (430).

The film's Coriolanus sequence builds to a hand-to-hand combat threatening auto-annihilation rather than triumphant autonomy. Perhaps since the use of guns would reduce the plausibility of the play's extended fight in its now contemporary context, Caius Martius and Aufidius deliberately hand off their machine guns and ritualistically elect upon daggers as weapon of choice. Though a prop decision driven by necessity, the resulting imagery heightens the contest over phallic primacy essential to Fiennes's exploration of masculine selfhood. As the scene builds intensity, the camera moves to ground level to record the two in face-to-face profile—Coriolanus lying atop Aufidius, the two fighters' heads touching. The camera angle enlarges Coriolanus's dagger in profile so that it traverses the picture plane in downward diagonal trajectory from the top left corner to the bottom midpoint of the screen, displaying the phallic potency and erotic attraction present in this combat to the death.

When at last Aufidius rolls over Coriolanus in a struggle to regain upright dominance, the two remain embraced. Breaking through a plate glass window and falling as a single mass of flesh and war gear down one story, the two arise from the debris to continue their contest—still entwined in one another's arms with the camera positioned so closely that only portions of the two faces and their grappling hands are visible. Another incendiary device explodes and the two again mirror one another in visual composition as they lie face down, arms before them in stunned incapacity, each then helped to shelter by his men. Logan's screenplay characterizes the conflict as desperate, interdependent, and without victorious gloss: “Grappling brutally. Tearing at each other. Twining together. Fingers grasping. Teeth snapping. Hands pulling. It is a bloody, terrible, graceless struggle” (25). Repeated shots of Coriolanus and Aufidius as one integrated and inseparable unit of force transform the self/other binary of combat again into a self/self unit in which opponents engage in contests that amount to self-defeating encounters. This sequence in which Coriolanus and Aufidius repeatedly reflect each other demonstrates that to kill the enemy would be to kill the self. In this moment, the intertextual backdrop of Harry Potter and 300 unite with filming techniques to speak the self-defeating ethos of martial masculinity—a series of contests in which the self confronts and threatens its mirror not its enemy.

This emulative mirroring of enemies stressed by the film's photographer continues throughout Coriolanus's defection to the Volscian army. Though much about the filming heightens similitude, extratextual business unique to the film in this sequence makes plain the means by which differentiation must be reinscribed between Coriolanus and Aufidius. By doing so, the film magnifies the artificiality of such differentiation as well as the psychic necessity of that distinction for self-identification. When Coriolanus first infiltrates the Volscian camp, the screenplay describes Aufidius dining “with some of his men, their wives and some children” (Logan 73). The film opts instead to place this confrontation in the relentless homosocial context of war and features only male soldiers and aides to the Volscian leader. In a shot reverse shot sequence, camera movement and proximity treat the two antagonists as parallel creatures; slowly, the camera zooms in on Aufidius then back to Coriolanus where the zoom in continues towards the Roman general. Carrying and guiding the affective weight of the moment, the camera movement echoes the underlying sympathy between these two enemies before their alliance is sealed officially. Shot framing continues to underscore likeness: the camera hovers with noticeable instability on a close-up of Coriolanus.
that tightly frames him by cutting off his forehead, and, again, the reverse
shot films a bounded Aufidius, his forehead hidden from view. The film
signals the passage of time between the exile of Coriolanus from Rome
and his arrival at the Volsc camp by means of hair growth, a beard and
long hair in place of the clean-shaven face and bald pate of the earlier
Coriolanus. This device not only visualizes time’s passage but also war-
rants the textual crux in which Aufidius does not immediately recognize
the man with whom he has previously grappled face-to-face in Corioles.
In addition, a hirsute Coriolanus now looks more like his bearded enemy
Aufidius, and low lighting combined with heavy shadows over the face
ensure that differentiating the two proves difficult, particularly when they
embrace and become one compositional unit on screen.

Aligned visually as like kinds both repelled by and attracted to one
another, Coriolanus and Aufidius trouble the cleanly delineated “Us” vs.
“Them” necessary to combat masculinity. Literally standing “beard to
beard,” Aufidius embraces his enemy with dagger to the throat echo-
ing visually the battle in Corioles in which Caius Martius wields the
weapon in virile diagonal across the picture plane. Not only does the
union of enemies at the Volsc camp reference shot configurations of
the earlier combat, but also the beard-to-beard profile provokes an aural
memory from the text. At Corioles, the frustrated Aufidius vows: “By
th’elements, / If e’er again I meet him beard to beard, / He’s mine, or
I am his” (1.10.10–12). Aufidius’s “He’s mine, or I am his” reworks the
lover’s adoration from The Bishops’ Bible Ballet of Balleteres of Solomon,
“My love is mine, and I am his” (2.16). The eroticism of the line and its
Biblical antecedent flower fully in Aufidius’s giddy welcome to the exiled
Coriolanus:

Know thou first,
I lov’d the maid I married; never man
Sigh’d truer breath; but that I see thee here,
Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart
Than when I first my wedded mistress saw
Bestride my threshold. (4.5.113–18)

Here Aufidius voices an affinity with his enemy akin to sexual discovery
and union, expanding on the visual closeness highlighted through film
technique. War’s work of differentiation has been undone by the words,
action, and representation of the moment.

Though the camerawork and lighting of the previous scene insist
on similitude, the business of differentiation takes prime place in the
subsequent action and thereby highlights the paradoxical structures of
masculine identity. When Coriolanus washes off the dust of exile, an old
woman proceeds to cut and shave his hair. However, Aufidius soon takes
over the task of grooming his enemy to characteristic baldness. Logan’s
screenplay describes the moment: “Aufidius continues to shave Coriolanus’
head himself. It is a deeply personal act, even intimate. [ . . . ] Yet Aufidius
employs the same methodical rhythms as when he was sharpening his
knife at the opening of the story” (77–78). In this action, Aufidius restores
Coriolanus to his “right” self and to his position as visual opposite of the
Volscian general, policing the boundaries of difference that fuel warfare.
Thus, though Coriolanus’s deflection and Volscian welcome appear at
first unalloyed, this “intimate” act of shaving bears a sinister threat—
the reestablishment of the distinctions that propel violence and ground
masculine subjectivity. Indeed, by likening the rhythms of shaving to the
film’s opening shot of Aufidius sharpening his dagger, Logan’s screenplay
associates the mechanism of differentiation with the means of violence.

The final confrontation between Coriolanus and Aufidius in Fiennes’s
film foregrounds the full cost of these self-constitutive and self-destroying
constructs of masculinity. Devoid of the cinematic trappings that paper
over such contradictions with grandeur and glory, the final moments of
the film proceed with an aural and visual economy that strips mytholo-
gies of martial masculinity of their potency. The scene opens as Aufidius
awaits Coriolanus’s return with terms of truce; in the no-man’s land be-
tween Romans and Volscs, Aufidius occupies a decayed and rusting way
station on an abandoned highway. Now in this last confrontation, Au-
idius enlists a gang of soldiers who circle and debilitate Coriolanus first
before Aufidius deals the final blow. The screenplay directs the deathblow:
“Aufidius steps to him [Coriolanus]. Takes his neck. Pulls him onto
the knife. Driving it into him. Cradling his head like a lover” (Logan 103).
The pacing of the attack and the screenplay directions that imagine hate
and love entwined echo viscerally the final moments of another of Shake-
peare’s Romans—Julius Caesar done to death by Brutus’s final thrust.
Extra-diegetic sound amounts to a stray percussive riff or two early in the
scene, but the Volscian execution of Coriolanus occurs with no scoring
and all diegetic sound (save an occasional faint whistle of wind) silenced
for the thirty-seven seconds when Aufidius delivers the final death thrust
(Production Sound Mixer, Ray Beckett; Supervising Sound Editor, Oliver
Tarney). Sound returns at last to record the noise of the knife pulled out
from the wound while Aufidius embraces Coriolanus one last time and
holds his head, kissing his cheek and laying him gently on the road tele-
graphing affinity and similitude despite opposition. The tight two-on-two camera focus repeats the earlier filming of single combat in Corioles and reunion in Antium and again highlights the emotive interdependence of these two martial figures.

Ackroyd even allows a warmly hued lens flare to transmute the drained coloration into a profoundly erotic attraction between the enemies.24 Another shot captures Aufidius looking at the body; he kneels at his enemy's side, and a longer shot displays all assembled in mute observation. But Fiennes's film does not permit the softening tones of lament to dull critique of a masculinity predicated upon violence.

The final images of the movie insist on the dangers of such self-constitution. The brief moment of elegy ends abruptly (Editor, Nicolas Gaster) as a rough cut reveals the bed of a truck and Aufidius's men dumping the brutalized body unceremoniously. An overhead shot displays Coriolanus's awkwardly inert body: "Sprawled ungainly in death. No ritual or ceremony. No honor" (Logan 104). The film closes on the limp and mangled body of the once complete unto himself Coriolanus. And, in contrast to its intertextual cousin, 300, which crafts the Golgotha iconography of Leonidas's end to resonate with Christian sacrifice and the "good" death, Fiennes's Coriolanus evacuates meaning or redemptive power from the titular character's death. And this is not just an end for Coriolanus; much as Homer's Achilles sees his own end rise before him even as he triumphs over a defeated Hector, so the filming underscores to the last that Aufidius and Coriolanus mirror one another—constituting for each other both the plenitude and penury of selfhood. By deflating so utterly the final combat for dominance, the film offers a critique of the modes of masculine identity and power typified by its celebrity intertexts—Voldemort and Leonidas. In so doing, Fiennes's Coriolanus not only expands market interest via its well-known stars but also deepens a thoughtful engagement with the original play text's unvarnished portrayal of masculine identity.25

Balkan Masculinities

In contrast to the provocative speakings of the film's celebrity intertext, the deliberate resituation of Shakespeare's plot in the context of the 1990s Yugoslav Wars by means of on-location filming and found news footage results in less searching interaction with related stereotypes of masculinity. By placing Coriolanus's zero-sum contest for masculine supremacy in the identifiable Yugoslav Wars, Fiennes runs the risk of diluting the interrogative possibilities of his film, allowing viewers to project those destructive cycles of violence onto a distant and foreign Other outside their cultural confines. In so doing, the film inadvertently perpetuates stereotypes that associate "cruelty, boorishness, instability, and unpredictability" with the Balkans (Todorova 119). Maria Todorova asserts that the Balkans play an essential role in European self-construction—serving as the violent Other distinct from the Western European world of "cleanliness, order, self-control, strength of character, sense of law, justice, efficient administration" (119). Milica Bakic-Hayden offers a complementary nomenclature of "nesting orientalisms" to describe both Western Europe's relationship to Eastern Europeans and intra-Balkan self-differentiations (917); like Todorova, she examines the casual racism that assumes "violence in the Balkans has been not only a description of a social condition but considered inherent in the nature of its people" (918).26 In her study of the media war that not only paralleled but also fueled the Yugoslav Wars, Dubravka Zarkov argues that the ethnic differences justifying violence in the Balkans derived from carefully appropriated tropes of gender and sexuality: "Bodies were vested with gendered and sexualized meanings that made ethnicity appear transparent and unambiguous; that treatment reified ethnicity, turned it into an empirical fact, or obscured it altogether" (8). Coriolanus taps into these troubling constructs of a violent and sexualized Balkan identity packaged as fact thanks to the 1990s media coverage of the Yugoslav Wars. Furthermore, in order to establish an aura of authentic "realness" to the film's depiction of war and martial subjectivity, Fiennes's production team raids and redeploy the very footage responsible for entrenching the broadly drawn outlines of the Balkan sexual and violent aggressor.
Much of the promotional material and many of the film reviews associated with *Coriolanus* trumpet the appropriation of the Yugoslav Wars. In his *Time* review, Richard Corliss notes the on-location filming in Serbia “whose ravaged landscapes make it an ideal location for a war movie.” Stephen Greenblatt opens his review essay for the *New York Review of Books* with an anecdote from a Yugoslavian friend and the observation that, “Ralph Fiennes’s new film of Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* conjures up a Balkan world of jostling murderers.” Likewise, Andrew Pulver’s review for the *Guardian* casually announces the film’s modern context “as a study of a modern Balkan-type state, racked with factional warfare and all the attendant cruelties.” In his screenplay notes, Logan explains the reference points for the film’s approach to war: “We studied pictures from the Balkans, the Iraq War, Northern Ireland, Somalia, and other modern conflicts” (106); though those varied resources influence aesthetic approach, the on-location work in Serbia and archived news footage ultimately pin the action of the narrative with considerable specificity to the Balkans. At the same time, the film does not differentiate between the various participants in the 1990s Yugoslav Wars, not acknowledging, for example, the distinct ways in which Croats and Serbs fought and defended territory throughout the conflict. The Balkan location is appropriated, and nuances of ethnic difference and wartime strategy glossed over as the conflict simply provides the “look” and fresh context to make Shakespeare’s play relevant once again.

On the DVD commentary track, Fiennes repeatedly notes when the film switches to found news footage from the 1990s Yugoslav conflict. Most often, the footage facilitates a transition in time or place and offers expositional or summative material to orient the uninitiated viewer. As a visual chorus at narrative interstices, the news footage appears both as diegetic and non-diegetic—occasionally on television screens within the scene but also as full-screen reports for the benefit of the film audience exclusively and featuring the usual news outlet graphics and informational crawl. In his commentary, Fiennes identifies material taken from the Yugoslav Wars: shots most often depicting soldiers in camouflage riding atop tanks or running with weapons raised through a village, military vehicles crossing highways, or homes bombed out, abandoned or on fire. Quite frequently carrying left-to-right/right-to-left horizontal movement, the footage creates visual energy underscored by the film’s urgent percussive motif. When used as full-screen transitional material, the archival footage shifts to the fictional representations of the film subtly, blurring the line between the veracity of history and the verities of art.

In a variety of diegetic and extra-diegetic ways, the film advertises its use of the Yugoslav Wars as suitable context for an updated treatment of Shakespeare’s play. Early in the film, the camera follows a young activist identified in the screenplay as Tamora and intercuts the urban landscape with news footage offering exposition. Tamora traverses a setting dotted with communist-era tower blocks and English graffiti that reference both Yugoslavia’s communist past and 1990s dissolution: “Fuck the Rules” shouts from the wall of a staircase, and Tamora passes a scrawled “Heroes 1994.” Throughout the DVD commentary, Fiennes also notes locations specific to the Belgrade environs. As he verbally annotates the battle in Corioles, Fiennes repeats material found in Logan’s screenplay notes, stating that he “wanted to reflect contemporary warfare.” Fiennes’s commentary repeatedly drives from the Balkan to the universal though he admits: “of course shooting in Belgrade, you have a feeling of something Eastern European.” In addition, he identifies as “one of our star locations” the National Parliament of Serbia, standing in for the Roman Senate and made available to the crew over an Easter weekend.

During the mob uprising against Coriolanus’s elevation to Consul, the film intercuts archived footage of a protest against Slobodan Milosevic outside the parliament building. In its selection of footage, the film conflates historical contexts by conflating the Yugoslav Wars with protests against the Milosevic regime that took place first in 1996/97 (in response to election fraud) and again in October of 2000, uprisings that resulted in the ouster of Milosevic from rule in Serbia (Landry 6). This confusion can be directly seen in a visual reference to the Otpor movement against Milosevic. Otpor protested non-violently by means of stenciled and graffitied symbols including an upraised fist, a stenciled image that actually appears in the film during the grain riots of the opening confrontation between the Roman populace and Caius Martius (Landry 3). The film thus elides the particularities of history in the service of “authentic” *mise-en-scène*.

The danger, then, in appropriating the Yugoslav Wars for *Coriolanus* is, in part, its seeming aptness, which provides an escape hatch for the interrogative provocations of the play. As a northern European, Fiennes distances the destructive dynamics of Shakespeare’s warrior-men by pushing them into an Eastern European context—a rogue territory long-identified as the “Other” to Western Europe’s civilized “Self.” The very kind of introspection prompted by the film’s unadorned portrayal of self-destruction violence may well be truncated by an ideological exit strategy that locates the “reality” of such practices in a stereotypically “dangerous” place—the outlier Balkans. Though Fiennes’s selection of the Yugoslav
Wars as updated context continues a well-established adaptive trend to heighten Shakespearean relevance through transplanted scene and set frameworks, such a choice unleashes unintended interpretive implications—that only in the Balkans can a suitable contemporary parallel be found to the self-destructive ethos of Coriolanus’s martial masculinity. Thus the ailing post-imperialists of Great Britain or the United States need not apply the drama’s searing, deconstructive lessons to themselves.

Most assuredly, such interpretive possibilities run counter to the inclusive approach to Shakespeare articulated by the profoundly well-intentioned Fiennes in publicity interviews and DVD commentary. For example, Fiennes rightly abandons the tired practice of adapted Shakespeare in which all major roles are assigned to Caucasians and minor roles parceled out to persons of non-White descent. When describing on the DVD commentary his casting of John Kani as General Cominius, he explains: “I very much wanted to have a black actor playing the most high status part. And again you will see there are other faces of ethnicity, diverse ethnicity, throughout the film. It was important for me that the elite of Rome was not predominantly a white man’s government.” The problem is, however, that while colorblind casting has enhanced the ethnic diversity of his adapted Shakespeare, Fiennes’s recontextualization of the Roman-Volscian conflict accesses a fleet of Balkan stereotypes that impinge upon the stated intent of the film and that raise an important question for interpretation of adapted Shakespeare. When time period settings and locations are updated in adaptation, how exact are those analogies? How far can the associations be read? What are the responsibilities of doing so? How are viewers coded to explore paratextual associations and when are they signaled to release them?

As ever in filmmaking, financial exigencies pressure artistic signification and thus interpretive practice. When Fiennes and Logan sought funding for their proposed adaptation of Coriolanus in 2008, production financing disappeared suddenly or proved decidedly elusive. Fiennes reflects: “There was no confidence in the market at all, let alone ‘Coriolanus’ [. . .]. It was 2008, the toughest time, and I had no experience of what it is to pitch a film” (qtd. in Sulcas). The budget of $8 million needed underpropping, and one producer, Gabrielle Tana, herself of Serbian descent, landed “a substantial investor” in that country. According to Roslyn Sulcas’s New York Times profile, Fiennes had already been considering Belgrade, Serbia, “as a possible location.” Tana and the production team welcomed the “extraordinary support from the government and the army” of that country; and in the Sulcas profile, Tana vaunts the impact the Serbian special forces soldiers made in heightening the “production values and the sense of authenticity” of the film (qtd. in Sulcas).

That so many reviews of Fiennes’s truly provocative and thoughtful adaptation mentioned the twin intertexts of celebrity film oeuvre and Balkan history highlights the critical obligation to follow up those interpretive resonances. For example, Corliss closes his review of the film for Time by directly calling out the reference points conjured by Fiennes’s body and screen history: Francis Dolarhyde in Red Dragon, Anton Goth in Schindler’s List, and Voldemort (the last, Corliss marks as obvious with an “of course”). Greenblatt takes time not only to identify the shadow of the previous films but also to link acting techniques common to Fiennes’s performances, arguing the actor renders Coriolanus “in the spirit in which he plays Voldemort in the Harry Potter movies.” In the case of Coriolanus, two intertexts most likely capitalized upon to work in felicitous tandem ultimately compete with one another. While the filmed encounters between Coriolanus and Aufidius culminate in an evacuation of the martial masculinity embodied by the two actors’ recent film roles—Voldemort and Leonidas—the reliance upon the Yugoslav conflict as contemporary mise-en-scène threatens to undo that work. The Balkan context grants the audience members permission to leave the screen confident that such extreme patterns of masculine identification exist only in movie-making myths or in the far-away worlds of a Balkan land perpetually troubled by interneic conflict and wholly unrelated to the power plays and aggressions of the civilized West.

Reading Intertexts/Reading Shakespeare

In his masterful discussion of ghostly presences in performance, Marvin Carlson characterizes the range of intertextualities that can both enhance and complicate the dramatic work’s meanings: “The invisible but inevitable ghosting of previous roles in the theatre as well as in television and films has certain parallels to the phenomenon of intertextuality in reading and, like literary intertextuality, may be a source of distraction, a valuable tool for interpretation, or a source of enrichment and deepened pleasure in the work” (72). Similarly, Greer acknowledges that his related concept of “personage” is “the most volatile because it can be established in such diverse ways” (227). Triggered by the presences of “ghosting” or “personage,” the shadows of Voldemort and Leonidas provide the audience with popular culture references that shroud the kind of martial masculinity to be questioned by the play and film. The cinematic
techniques of the adaptation further the Shakespearean text’s skepticism about the viability of modes of masculine identity that twin self-formation and self-destruction in the oppositional crucible of combat. While such referencing facilitates application of the playtext’s interrogations to more immediately accessible contemporary icons of masculinity, the Balkan “ghosting” threatens to accept as a priori given the very stereotypes much of the film is at pains to deconstruct and expose as toxic to individual and social equilibrium. In other words, as one set of contemporary icons (the aggressive self/other constructs of a Voldemort or Leonidas) are invoked to be profoundly problematized, another set of references to the Balkan or Eastern European male remain uniconized by the film’s deployment.

Scholarship of filmed Shakespeare has moved vigorously beyond the fidelity criticism that shackled its early days to probe the interpretive complexities catalyzed by the process of adaptation itself. Policing the ethical dimension of adaptation may impinge upon the freedom accorded to artistic expression yet it remains a responsibility of the interpreter and cultural critic bound to unpack the ideological freight of popular mimesis; indeed, Julie Sanders argues that, “Adaptation studies are, then, not about making polarized value judgements, but about analysing process, ideology, and methodology” (20). Intertextual echoes bring their own ideological burdens that redefine, expand, or constrain what the Shakespearean text can mean. No doubt, pursuing such lines of reference involves a series of what might seem like arbitrary decisions. In the case of this study, Voldemort and Leonidas prove most fruitful nodes of intertextual connection, but could Fiennes’s roles in Schindler’s List (1993) or The English Patient (1996) and Gerard Butler’s stable of romantic comedy roles not be viable candidates for an interpretive approach investigating the intertextual significations of the filmed Coriolanus?28 And when an intertextual interpretive methodology is deployed, how does one account for the very different audiences of the films directly or indirectly referenced? Some may argue that the overlap between Fiennes’s role as Voldemort and his embodiment of Caius Martius may be neutered by the significant difference in the film audiences. However, in a very practical economic way, one suspects that the Harry Potter series makes a film starring Fiennes as Coriolanus even possible, warranting an acknowledgment of the referential potentials that extend beyond financial interdependence. Furthermore, the corpus of film reviews demonstrates that the intertextual references cluster into loose patterns or peaks for certain audience members; indeed, this study relies upon film reviews as a mechanism for narrowing the field of referential speaking and as a sampling of intertextual reading strategies.

Such an interpretive methodology renders the being-ness of the film adaptation heavily dependent upon the consumer-interpreter—with his or her popular culture facility and breadth of viewing knowledge. But this instability is always the subject matter of adaptation and its compulsion to repeat—the business of the art form to repackaged, update, excavate, undermine, and revisit anterior stories: “We retell—and show again and interact anew with—stories over and over; in the process, they change with each repetition, and yet they are recognizably the same. [...] In the workings of the human imagination, adaptation is the norm, not the exception” (Hutcheon 177). Furthermore, such methods place film adaptation’s range of significations closer to the freedoms of its theatrical precursor. Perhaps exploring the intertextual referentiality of filmed Shakespeare might be an advantageous way to resist the camera’s seemingly inevitable narrowing of audience interpretive agency. While film will never allow the freedom of visual focus enjoyed by a theatergoer who determines where to look and when, an intertextual interpretive method expands the territory of significations beyond the camera’s insistent frame. Rather than the bimodal options of film viewing—look or look away—an intertextual praxis offers the viewer the choice to look “elsewhere” to expand meaning-making agency and animate a thoroughgoing interrogation of the ideologies encoded in adaptations of Shakespeare’s art.

Acknowledgments

As always, I pay my first debt of gratitude to the circle of researchers with whom I meet weekly for critique and guidance: Karl Bailey, Vanessa Correderra, and Ante Jeroncic. My student assistants, Samantha Snively, Matthew Chacko, and Shanelle Kim likewise deserve thanks for their contributions. This article would simply not have been possible without the resistant reading of my friend Ante who reminded me that to appropriate a context is never a neutral act. I dedicate this article to Ante and Dubravka Jeroncic whose Balkan home has become my family’s “world elsewhere.”

Notes

1. Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin provide rich theoretical framing for an expanded discussion of the ethical in adapted Shakespeare.

2. A significant number of reviews of Coriolanus mentioned both the celebrity intertexts of the Harry Potter films and 300 as well as the Balkan setting, suggesting that experienced viewers such as film critics could not help but “read” the Shakespearean adaptation through the lens of the film stars’ recent work and
the history of the Yugoslav Wars. For example, Roslyn Sulcas describes Fiennes's career as featuring, "often simultaneously, the roles of serious stage actor, A-list movie star and, as Lord Voldemort in the Harry Potter series, top-notch villain"; the Manohla Dargis review for the New York Times observes: "Having created one brilliant villain with Voldemort in the Harry Potter series, Mr. Fiennes, his head shaved, summons up another [...] ." In his New Yorker review, Anthony Lane references Fiennes's turn in Schindler's List and Gerard Butler's muscle-bound role in 300; in addition, Lane notes the resonance of the on-location filming: "Fiennes shot much of ‘Coriolanus’ in Belgrade, a place that rang, all too recently, to the rousing of partisan crowds." Just as Lane's review identifies the filming terrain, it immediately moves to render neutral that location: "Not that Serbia itself is named; we are asked to think, rather, of any tinderbox that houses discontent." The Times promotional profile likewise begins with Fiennes's film credits including the Harry Potter films, The English Patient, and Schindler's List, then similarly characterizes the film as a "reboot" in the "modern day Balkans" and featuring "Gerard 300 Butler" (Maher). The repeated public association of the film with the past work of its stars and with the Yugoslav conflict demands an interpretive analysis that takes into account the ways in which those references work in dialogue with the Shakespearean text.

Reaching from M. M. Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva summarizes the far reaches of intertextuality: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). Roland Barthes describes text as "woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony" (160). In her expansive theorization of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon makes the case for an interpretive methodology sensitive to the echoes of intertextuality because adaptations "are directly and openly connected to recognizable other works, and that connection is part of their formal identity, but also of what we might call their hermeneutic identity" (21).

Joo Young Dittmann offers an especially strong articulation of the divided and contradictory understandings of masculinity prevalent in early modern England and manifest in the fissions of Coriolanus (659), and Lisa S. Starks-Estes locates the source of the play's fractured masculinity in an early modern clash between Galenic somatic theory and the new science of "bounded" selfhood (85).

Alone occurs seven times as a descriptor of Coriolanus; he describes himself as "alone" four times and others characterize him as such another three times.

Kent R. Lehnhof persuasively examines the antiatheutical ethos of Coriolanus who insists on a priori masculine selfhood despite the play's steady undoing of such claims: "Even as characters insist upon talking about manliness as if it were an inherent quality or native essence, the action implies that it is a fabrication, manufactured militarily. Of course, nobody experiences this tension as acutely as Coriolanus. Though he desperately wants his manhood to be essential and inalienable, the play persuasively hints that it is an accretion or overlay, arousing the insecurities that are expressed in his antiperformativity" (361).

Marshall articulates the subjectivity embodied by Coriolanus and problematized by the text: "As a character, Martius troubled the terms through which Western subjectivity has come to be defined. He would be separate, unique, godlike in his superiority, but the play undoes this dream of singularity by exposing his troubled quest for this position and by plotting his loss of it" (454).

Marilyn L. Williamson characterizes violence in Coriolanus as "heavily gendered" (154), and Coppelia Kahn observes, "War is a 'gendering activity' more stringent than most" (144).

Though Quinn and Hodgdon consider the celebrity intertexts of film, Marvin Carlson's work on "ghosting" in theatrical performance provides essential theoretical framing. Carlson explains the echoes of previous roles in staged productions: "The recycled body of an actor, already a complex bearer of semiotic messages, will almost inevitably in a new role evoke the ghost or ghosts of previous roles if they have made any impression whatever on the audience, a phenomenon that often colors and indeed may dominate the reception process." (8)

Indeed, in an interview for Entertainment Weekly, Deborah Snyder, "wife and producing partner" of 300's director, describes the visual effect as "a ballet of death" (qtd. in Daly).

Thomas Hibbs summarizes the moral world governing Harry Potter's heroism as one in which "the virtuous must be willing to die in the service of the common good, especially to defend the innocent" (96). Critics repeatedly place the Harry Potter universe in the same Judeo-Christian tradition as the fantasy novels of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, and Farah Mendlesohn makes a strong case that Rowling's narratives likewise mirror those of her predecessors in a similar social conservatism and nostalgia for the "greener and simpler world" of old England (166).

In her discussion of Harry Potter's heroism, Lena Steveker argues that these opposing forms of selfhood manifest in the series' titular character as well: "On the one hand, Harry's emotional capacity and his connections with other people suggest a concept of identity based on pluralistic relationality. [...] On the other hand, Harry's identity as hero establishes itself through a process of separation and eventually comes to depend on the liberal-humanist notion of a unitary, autonomous and knowing self" (69-70). In the logic of the heptalogy, Harry himself embodies the opposing modes of selfhood materialized in his agens with Voldemort. Tison Pugh and David L. Wallace also assert that as Harry matures, he acquires "solitary hero status" particularly as potential rival male authorities—Sirius Black and Albus Dumbledore—die in the fifth and sixth books (274).

Lena Roos summarizes the familiar Orientalist biases of 300: "In 300 it becomes clear that the Spartans are the defenders of Europe and of western values. They represent reason, heteronormativity, freedom and justice. They defend 'us' against the Asians and their allies, who represent monstrosity, perversion and religious superstition. A classic Orientalist image of the East, in other words" (par. 54).
Martin argues that the contradictory signification of Xerxes in 300 as a “hysterical gay villain” in a “hyper-masculine body” actually undermines the presentation of Leonidas as “heterosexual hero” (139).

John Ripley opens his performance history of Coriolanus by admitting that, “Perhaps no work of literature so mercilessly cuts the ethical ground from beneath our feet just as we feel we have found firm footing, so maddeningly shifts the balance of sympathy from one moment to the next” (13). Ralph Berry pinpoints that uncertainty of sympathy in the form of a question: “Whose side is the play on?” (178). Likewise, Marshall summarizes this quandary of allegiance: “The discomfort the play produces in its audiences derives from the absence of any obviously correct view of events” (454). The referencing of Fiennes’s casting thus expands on a difficulty rooted in the text and its stage history.

Adelman notes this play of opposition and similitude within Coriolanus: “For if Coriolanus has throughout defined himself by opposition, he has defined himself by likeness as well; from the beginning, we have watched him create a mirror image of himself in Aufidius” (156). Here the film credentials of Fiennes and Butler amplify a dynamic inherent in the play’s understanding of its central character.

Fiennes indicated his desire to revisit the role in a 2007 interview with Julian Curry for the Shakespeare on Stage series. When asked, “Would you change it [the stage performance] much, do you think, if you played it again,” Fiennes replied, “Yes, I would. But I’m reticent to talk about it, it’s too early.” Indeed, first determining to film Coriolanus after the staging in 2000, Fiennes engaged Gladiator screenwriter, John Logan, before funding had even been secured to craft the muscular and spare text of the film (Clarke). Though an utterly skillful reworking of the Shakespearean text, the screenplay makes significant cuts to the total running of the original. A line-by-line comparison of the published Coriolanus screenplay by Logan and the Riverside Shakespeare edition of the play text reveals that the adaptation deploys 30% of the Shakespearean source material. The Riverside edition of Coriolanus runs to 3,325 lines, and Logan’s script appropriates 1,006 of those. In his introduction to the screenplay, Logan notes that adapting Shakespeare’s “second-longest play” meant that the “first task” was “bringing the mammoth text down to a manageable length” (viii). With ingenuity and wit, the printed screenplay relies entirely upon language from the play text but edits, borrows, and shuffles scene order and content as demanded by translation to the cinematic medium and the time constraints of a viable box office release. Even invented scenes, such as one in which Aufidius interrogates a Roman soldier, take their language from reconstructed moments culled from the play text.

Robin Headlam Wells argues: “One of the most striking messages that Coriolanus has to offer is that, far from uniting people against a common enemy, heroic military values in their most exaggerated form are inherently divisive, setting citizen against citizen, and obliging warrior-aristocrats to assert their superiority over lower orders in the relentless competition for laus and gloria” (161). Highlighting how readily international conflict transforms into intra-national conflict, Wells’s argument lays the necessary groundwork for understanding that militarism’s targeting of an Other rebounds upon the self (as we see worked out vividly in the Coriolanus/Aufidius binary of the text and the film).

Morgan points out that, “It could be argued that war and the military represent one of the major sites where direct links between hegemonic masculinities and men’s bodies are forged” (168). Leo Braudy builds his history of masculinity and warfare on the premise that “the context of war [. . .] in the vast majority of human cultures has been the prime place to define oneself as a man” (xv).

Jason Edwards has noted that the play instantiates relationships, exemplified in the Coriolanus/Aufidius face-off, as “almost exclusively agonistic, contrary rather than inter-, subjectivity” (85).

In a witty reading of the promotional posters for the cinematic and DVD releases of Coriolanus, Peter Holland observes that the dual images of Fiennes and Butler position the film “as a buddy movie of an unusual kind,” bearing witness to the painful and destructive interdependence charted between these two characters. Holland elaborates: “Coriolanus and Aufidius become the beasts who know, by natural instinct, that they are friends, the two matched by their preference for war and their seeking of each other, even though on opposing sides” (134).

The playtext substantially intensifies the tone of welcome recorded in Plutarch’s account of Aufidius’s greeting: “Stand up, O Martius, and be of good cheer, for in proffering thyself unto us, thou dost us great honour: and by this means thou mayest hope also of greater things, at all the Volsces’ hands” (132). Fiennes’s adaptation heightens further the eroticism of Shakespeare’s imagined welcome through tight camera angles and mirrored close-up movement.

With more extratextual business, the film finds an efficient way to prepare audience members for Aufidius’s final turn to violence against his sometime ally Coriolanus. When Coriolanus’s visual distinctiveness inspires a Volscian cult of personality, the full peril of such destructive differentiation emerges. As Volscian soldiers line up for highly ritualized shaving that makes them “like” the newfound ally Coriolanus, Aufidius looks on and broods over his former enemy’s ascendancy in the camp, thus signaling that this friendship between rivals cannot last long.

In a short essay reflecting on the character of Coriolanus, Fiennes acknowledges the intentional eroticism of this final moment between enemies: “The end of the film is the closest there is to a homoerotic expression, and I wanted to show it through the murder, the closeness of the death and the way Aufidius holds Coriolanus, the way the knife, which is the opening image of the film, finally penetrates Coriolanus” (223). Garrison offers a more detailed reading of the queer attraction made evident in the previously discussed scenes between Coriolanus and Aufidius.

Coriolanus has long branded a vision of the virile, impenetrable masculine subject both essential to the polity’s survival and catastrophic to its longevity.
However, not all readers have registered the drama's ironized approach to martial heroism as demonstrated by the play's popularity in Nazi Germany (Garber 63).

28Bakic-Hayden explains: “The gradation of ‘Orients’ that I call ‘nesting orientalisms’ is a pattern of reproduction of the original dichotomy upon which Orientalism is premised. In this pattern, Asia is more ‘East’ or ‘other’ than eastern Europe; within eastern Europe itself this gradation is reproduced with the Balkans perceived as most ‘eastern’; within the Balkans there are similarly constructed hierarchies” (918).

29Holland characterizes the impact of the news footage: “Fiennes makes us see the events of the play as always a tension between the real and the mediated so that watching—what is seen and where it is seen—becomes a key means of the viewer’s consumption of the action and the perception of the characters through a mixture of television and film techniques of representation [. . .].” (139).

30Graver adds that “personage, of whatever type or provenance, can assert a visibility on the stage that competes with the visibility of the character, performer, interpreter, etc.” (227).

31Chronological proximity appears to drive quite strongly the “ghosting” of parts recognized by reviewers of theater and film. For example, in her September 2000 review of the Almeida Theatre Coriolanus, Lisa Hopkins noted echoes in Fiennes’s “clipped, ‘u’ tones and aloof demeanour” that stressed “Coriolanus as the spiritual brother of Amon Goeth [Schindler’s List] and Laszlo Almasy [The English Patient].” However, those references were less frequent in the reviews, just over ten years later, of Fiennes’s film performance.

Works Cited


Queer Shakespeare at the Citizens Theatre

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In a black and white photograph from a 1972 production of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra (codirected by Giles Havergal and Philip Prowse) at Glasgow's Citizens Theatre Company, Cleopatra appears lost in ecstasy (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. Cleopatra (Jonathan Kent) presents herself to the audience in the Citz's Antony and Cleopatra (Giles Havergal and Philip Prowse, 1972; copyright Citizens Theatre)