From Cycles to Series—Shakespeare's History Plays Adapted to the Small Screen

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Introduction

The primary focus of this article is television adaptations of Shakespeare's history plays, more precisely the eight dramas which make up the two tetralogies (the First or Minor Tetralogy, comprising *Henry VI Parts 1*, *2* and *3*, and *Richard III*; and the Second or Major Tetralogy, comprising *Richard II*, *Henry IV Parts 1* and *2*, and *Henry V*), and are thus associated with the notions of continuity and interconnectedness. I will examine several attempts at filming one or both of the tetralogies, to see how the new medium—in this case, television, rather than the large screen of the cinema—uses or transforms, creates or recreates the elements that can reinforce cohesion among the individual units. The first series that I consider here is BBC's *An Age of Kings*, directed by Michael Hayes in 1960, which presents the two tetralogies in a series of fifteen episodes of 60–75 minutes each. Broadcast between April and November 1960 in the UK and in the following year in the US, but inaccessible outside of archives and occasional screenings by the National Film Theatre and later the British Film Institute (Fiddy 226) until the DVD version issued in 2009, *An Age of Kings* has received considerably less attention than it deserves. At the other end of the article's timeline is a recent serialization of the Second Tetralogy in four episodes under the title *The Hollow Crown*, directed by Rupert Goold ("Richard II"), Richard Eyre ("Henry IV" Parts 1 and 2) and Thea Sharrock ("Henry V") in 2012. It is also inevitable to consider the history plays as presented in the BBC Television Shakespeare Series, mostly the First Tetralogy directed by Jane Howell (1981–83). At the same time, as a consequence of my focus on cyclicality, I will not deal with the best-known film adaptations of the history plays, the independent feature films based on *Richard III* by Laurence Olivier and Richard Loncraine, *Henry V* by Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh, or *Chimes of Midnight* by Orson Welles.

With this investigation my intention is partly to shed new light on plays and adaptations that are rarely in the limelight of critical attention either in Hungary or in the Anglo-Saxon world, but mostly to attempt to understand the ways the notion of cyclicality and sequencing may be preserved, enhanced, created or re-created through adapting the plays into a new medium. In the course of this enquiry we may not only observe the role of textual editing, creation of setting and casting decisions, but also find some explanations for the relative (un)popularity of certain adaptations, the main cause of which I believe is not a lack of background research or even professional expertise, but mostly the productions' inability or unwillingness to adequately embrace the requirements of the new medium, television.

The Historical Cycle in Text and Performance

When passing judgment on the relative or absolute value of individual items in the Shakespearean corpus, the earliest plays, especially the histories, and most particularly the three parts of *Henry VI*, do not often fare well, either with critics or readers. Elizabeth Schafer goes so far as to begin her discussion of the history plays with the following judgment: "Shakespeare's English history plays are not 'good' history. Shakespeare took action packed stories from his chronicle sources, appropriated them and usually gave them a contemporary political slant." She goes on to explain her harsh judgment by the diversity of approaches to history that the plays represent: "The English history plays are a very heterogeneous group: *Richard II* is a lyrical piece; *Richard III* mixes morality play with melodrama; *Henry IV Parts 1 and 2* are best known for the rumbustious character of Falstaff; *Henry V* is poised and theatrically self-conscious; *Henry VI* can seem like a ramshackle soap opera" (162). At the same time, we cannot fail to see the significance of what the plays truly are, which is in Maurice Charney's words: "Shakespeare's first determined venture in the English theatre," and it is hard to deny that "there is something clearly grandiose in projecting an interrelated, four-part unit" (116). Charney goes on to claim that "the Minor Tetralogy is remarkable for its careful and complex construction, its close attention to intertextual details among the four plays" (116), and this is the view that seems to be at the core of H. R. Coursen's judgment as well: "These plays are very 'unified' for apprentice work" (205).

Even the more mature of the histories (called the Second or Major Tetralogy, or sometimes the Lancaster Tetralogy) is often accused of failure to offer the universality of scope and interest that either the tragedies or most of the comedies and romances possess, but many critics already find in the Second Tetralogy signs of a mature dramatic genius, including "interconnections, echoes, and anticipations" (Charney 161). Thus we may conclude that this marked interconnectedness, which on the one hand seems to manifest the development of Shakespeare's dramatic art, at the same time also appears to be a generic feature, as in no other genre in the Shakespearean dramatic oeuvre do we find plays whose plots are connected in a similar way (not even *Antony and Cleopatra* picks up the thread that was dropped at the end of *Julius Caesar*).

This careful and complex construction, one would think, makes the history plays prone to treatment as parts of their respective larger units, rather than as self-standing entities, but the theatrical tradition seems to defy this interpretation, with rather few and only comparatively late attempts at presenting the history plays in cycles, whether one or two. This may partly be explained by the fact that the cyclical presentation of the history plays is a concept that was apparently unknown in Elizabethan theatre, and therefore, as Stuart Hampton-Reeves argues, "the notion of a history play cycle is strictly speaking anachronistic" (231). There is reason to believe that the order of the plays' writing, not to mention the order of their first performances, was different from the chronological arrangement presented by Heminges and Condell in the First Folio. Moreover, since most of the Henry plays are referred to under different titles in contemporary documents, it seems evident that they were conceived and perceived not as parts of cycles but as independent units. Nonetheless, the fact that the editors of the First Folio decided to list the plays in the chronological order of their contents, rather

than their creation, confirms that even Shakespeare's contemporaries could perceive at least some sense of conceptual continuity in the way the plays approach and present English history.

For some reason, though, the theatre was not too keen to embrace this notion of the cyclical presentation of the plays, and even when it did, in the 1864 tercentenary celebrations "it was not in England ... but in Germany, that Shakespeare's history plays were first played together in the sequence suggested by Heminges and Condell" (Hampton-Reeves 232). The German tradition soon became extremely popular, but the British followed suit only in 1902, with Frank Benson's "Historical Cycle (or, as it was dubbed locally, the 'Week of Kings')," which even managed to broaden the appeal of the Shakespeare festival and drew nationwide audiences, as Hampton-Reeves describes (233). After the success of these early twentieth-century history cycles in the theatre, which indelibly influenced the interpretation of both individual plays and our understanding of Shakespeare's vision of English history, it was inevitable that the new medium of television, which by nature relies on regularity and repetition to attract and keep its audiences, would also be quick to embrace the idea of a serialized presentation of the history plays.

Shakespeare's Histories on Television

The 1960 BBC series *An Age of Kings*, and the most recent, four-part *The Hollow Crown* from 2012, together with the BBC Television Shakespeare Series from the early 1980s, share most of all their attitude towards the presentation of historical authenticity when it comes to their setting and costume design, as all of them chose to display the Middle Ages in its outward appearance through the commonly accepted visual conventions, whether presented in a symbolic or a more realistic manner. This marks all of these series as different from a few recent televisual and cinematic performances of Shakespeare's plays, including Gregory Doran's 2009 television *Hamlet*, Rupert Goold's 2010 television *Macbeth* or Ralph Fiennes' 2011 cinema *Coriolanus*, but also from performances which use a modernized setting, or at least emphasize current social-political-historical allusions. Orson Welles' *Five Kings*, for instance, served as a mouthpiece for the director to "speak to the contemporary experience of war, and [to draw] explicit parallels between Shakespeare's battlefields and the battlefields of modern Europe" (Hampton-Reeves 234). Laurence Olivier's 1944 *Henry V*, produced partly for propaganda purposes during the Second World War–in spite of its medieval costumes and sets–emphasized the nationalistic message of the play, and has subsequently often been criticized "for its clearly patriotic line and for some of the excisions from Shakespeare's text which result in a film which tends to glamorise war and romanticise the English victory" (Davies 166). As Deborah Cartmell shows, Kenneth Branagh's 1989 new adaptation of the play was made "seemingly in an attempt to rescue *Henry V* from its status as propaganda" (101).

No such visual modernization characterizes the television series examined here, although we can clearly observe tendencies of representation that result in slightly updated visual conventions. These include the characteristic bowl-cut of *Henry V*

(known from a contemporary painting, found in the National Portrait Gallery), which both Olivier and Branagh retained, and which can also be seen on Robert Hardy in *An Age of Kings*, in contrast with Tom Hiddleston's golden locks in *The Hollow Crown*. The latter decision may be based on the recognition that however historically accurate, such a hairstyle would work as an obvious alienating effect for twenty-first century television audiences, who may find it harder to identify with a military hero sporting such a childish/ridiculous haircut.

More significant is the decision of the new series to somewhat tone down the military armour of *Henry V* as well. The blue and red patterns of fleur-de-lis and the lions of England, again seen in both the Olivier and the Branagh versions, but also on Richard Burton's Henry in the 1951 Stratford theatre performances (the costume on display in Victoria and Albert Museum) have been replaced by a simple steel breastplate (in reality, the whole armour was made of rubber, see Kessler). Apart from practicality, this moderation in the use of colours in *The Hollow Crown* may also be explained by the film series' general tendency to contrast the worlds of the tavern and the battlefield, the court and the outside world with the help of tinted lenses. Although *The Telegraph* reviewer Sarah Crompton refers to director Rupert Goold's tendency to overemphasize the muted pastel tones ("He might be slightly too in love with the picturesque pastel colours"), she also remarks on Goold's ability "to make every picture tell a story, filling the screen with images that enhanced and explained the appositions of the play." Particularly in the later episodes in the series, colour symbolism was used to refer not only to location and atmosphere but also to the opposing parties in the conflict. As the costume designer of the series, Annie Symons spoke of the creative decisions of the production team in an interview, she also made references to several contemporary popular genres (war films, football hooliganism, action films) that influenced her choices of colours: "We decided they were football teams and Alan MacDonald and I chose dark congealed bloods for England and beautiful blues, whites and golds for France" (Kessler). However simplistic this approach may sound on the surface, it in fact implies an instinctive understanding of the new medium itself: the necessity to identify the new product with the genre(s) of the adapting medium, here the television, in order to satisfy television viewers, while filling this generic frame of expectations with content drawn from however different a source. I believe this is the approach that may be at least one of the keys to the success of the series, and the lack of this televisual consciousness is what marred the success of the early 1980s BBC Series.

Textual Sequencing—Cohesion within the Tetralogies on Page and Stage

The brief introduction above has already referred to the fact that the Shakespearean theatre created connections between the plays primarily with the help of textual signifiers, since visual effects were scarce on the Elizabethan bare stage, which employed hardly any scenery and maybe a few props, if any. Nonetheless, as Maurice Charney remarks

[a]ll the plays in the tetralogy look backward and forward, and each of the *Henry VI* plays ends with an anticipation of the play that will follow. Despite

> these strong indications of sequence—Shakespeare's historical miniseries on the critical events of the fifteenth century—each play is separately conceived in relation to dominant characters and historical events. (116-17)

Shakespeare's conscious authorial efforts at creating continuity and cohesion both within and among the parts of both tetralogies include first of all the rearrangement of historical details, regularly sacrificing historical accuracy on the altar of dramatic consistency and plausibility (which may be the reason why critics such as Schafer label the plays bad history, as mentioned above). Such an alteration of chronology is that the death of Talbot and his son is moved forward to the end of *3H6* (act 4 scene 7), although in actual fact the great English hero died in 1453, in the battle of Castillon, where Joan of Arc, who in the play triumphs over his death, had been burned at the stake more than twenty years previously, in 1431; similarly, Talbot had been predeceased by the Duke of Suffolk, Gloucester, Cardinal Beaufort, and the Duke of Exeter. Still, Talbot's demise at the end of the play is significant as it reinforces the message that the bickering English lords undermine all the achievements by chivalric heroes such as Talbot, and can directly be blamed for wasting all the French territories gained by the greatest of English kings, Henry V. A similarly haunting presence in *Richard III* is Queen Margaret, whose appearance has no historical justification after the coronation of Richard, since she died in 1482, a year before Richard was crowned. However, her presence—she is the single character appearing in all four plays of the tetralogy—functions as a cohesive device that binds the plays together into a coherent whole.

Another type of textual sequencing that can be observed in the plays is the continuity on the level of imagery: besides the references to shepherds and their flock in *Henry VI*, we can find the complementary threat of Queen Margaret, the "she-wolf of France" (*3HVI*, 1.4.111), after which the change of imagery into the world of beasts and monsters in *Richard III* is equally remarkable and evocative of the pastoral world that seems no longer possible after the horrors of the Wars of the Roses. In the Second Tetralogy, the metaphor of the garden is a similar device that helps us follow the changes from the "sea-walled garden ... full of weeds" (*Richard II*, 3.4.43-44) to "the world's best garden" that Henry V achieves (*Henry V*, Epilogue 7) by his valiant chivalry. In the same way, Honor Matthews' *Character and Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays*, a classic account of the predominant imagery in several dramatic texts, identifies both the *Henry VI* plays and *Richard III* with the notion of "breach of degree" (15-25), while *Richard II*, *Henry IV* and *Henry V* illustrate her chapter on "the usurped throne" motif (26-43), showing how the two tetralogies are united within themselves by their imagery, but also making it possible to trace a development between their conceptual sphere through their images.

Visual Sequencing—Continuity on the Screen

The presence or absence of the above described elements that serve textual cohesion, however, depends on a whole range of factors when dramatic texts are turned into television scripts. Such influential cohesive forces may be rooted in varying degrees of reverence for the Shakespearean text, which defines for instance how we view the

1978–85 BBC Television Shakespeare Series today. The dominant feature of the series was its centralization of the text–the "project was to produce the Shakespearean canon, complete and unabridged" (Willems, "Verbal–Visual" 72). As a result, Jane Howell's First Tetralogy, whose "sprawling narratives ...–with their saga of the disastrous Wars of the Roses and the reign of Henry VI–are often cut radically in production" now remained mostly intact, since "the BBC series was geared to an educational market" and as such, could not allow heavy editing or cutting from the text (Schafer 169). This textual orthodoxy of the series resulted in films of 188, 203, 211 and 239 minutes in length (*Henry VI Part 1*, *Part 2*, *Part 3*, and *Richard III* respectively), which means that the physical effort they require from their viewer effectively renders them (together with many other items from the series) nearly unwatchable today, even if most critics and scholars emphasize that Howell's camerawork and the "metonymic mode of expression" she employs (Willems "Verbal–Visual" 80) mark out the First Tetralogy as among the most outstanding achievements in the whole of the BBC series.

When compared to the earlier *An Age of Kings*, it is remarkable to notice that the producers of the 1960 series had a very different approach to textual editing, and as a result, they consistently and consciously shaped the playtexts to fit the needs of a popular series. Thus they reduced *Henry VI Part 1* to a single episode of sixty minutes (all other plays were treated in two parts), cutting the whole Talbot line. It is true that, as Emma Smith remarks in her detailed analysis of the series, *An Age of Kings* displays very few of the "formal properties particular to television serials" (136). The series does use the cliffhanger device at the end of a number of episodes (e.g., Northumberland's angry gesture at the end of *Richard II* referring to his revolt in the next episodes, or George of Clarence's near drowning in the casket of wine at the end of *Henry VI*, which prophesies his imminent death in *Richard III*). At the same time, the series used no flashbacks, and no visual reminders of the events or characters that had been introduced in earlier episodes, as opposed to soap operas and other open narrative series.

In one respect, however, I believe that Emma Smith's comparison of *An Age of Kings* and *Coronation Street* or other television soap operas may be misleading: the fact that flashbacks are absent from this adaptation, together with its general "forward-looking rather than retrospective" (138) narrative movement may simply suggest that apart from the soap opera as a generic background, it would also be useful to see this series as a version of the televised/serialized novel, another genre of increasing popularity in the past two decades. Since these miniseries (based on novels by Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Charles Dickens and many others) are also presented with an open narrative–but in a limited sense of the word as their plots come to a conclusion within a foreseeable near future–and since their literary sources usually also display more or less overt elements of textual connections, their visually reinforced cohesive strategies need therefore to be less emphatic than in the case of soap operas, which–in an ideal case at least–like to present themselves as running on into an invisible future, without an imminent ending in sight.

Apart from the visual narrative links, the setting may also play a significant role in emphasizing a connection within the series. *An Age of Kings* is shot against a background whose simplicity evokes the Elizabethan bare stage: "a collection of steps, platforms, corridors, pillars, and window frames. The close-up shots of actors speaking

out of these windows proved to be one of the series' most effective visuals," as Patricia Lennox summarizes the technical features of the set (238). She also mentions how the over-abundance of close-ups was often a safety measure for the live broadcast when the director or camera crews felt that the inadequacy of lighting and zooming options had to be counterbalanced by the clarity of message associated with human faces. Jane Howell's playground-like setting for the BBC First Tetralogy had a similar effect, with a growing pile of corpses providing the most striking visual link throughout the series.

The Hollow Crown, on the other hand, employs a markedly different strategy as regards its setting. As opposed to textual fidelity, the keywords to this production seemed to be visual authenticity, and thus it is the realistic (and authentic-looking) visual world that serves as the most powerful cohesive device between the episodes. The authentic locations take the viewer to different places, but the visual atmosphere, the pastel-coloured lights and the recurring costumes and interior scenes (particularly the Falstaff scenes) effectively replace the identical settings that *An Age of Kings* inherited mostly from the theatre, rather than from the world of contemporaneous television series.

Theatrical vs. Televisual Casting

One particular feature of television programmes is the regularity (and predictability) of scheduling, which allows viewers to follow serial narratives in such a way that continuity is hardly broken—gaps of a week or less only increase tension, without deflating it, and viewers can be relied on to perform the leaps of memory backward or forward while in the case of a longer hiatus, they would require emphatic visual reminders. This in turn influences not only structural elements, but has a significant role in casting choices as well, since the familiar face of an actor is the most effective flashback to an earlier episode.

Interestingly enough, both *An Age of Kings* and the BBC Television Shakespeare Series relies on a limited cast in double, triple, multiple roles to supply the approximately two hundred characters that appear in the two tetralogies combined (for a complete list of characters and their various references, see Tychonievich). Still, whereas *An Age of Kings* presents us with a whole range of age groups with its youthful cast of actors in creatively applied make-up, its conscious use of close-ups still focuses our attention on the central protagonists who are individualized, whose personal stories we are allowed to follow, and who are surrounded by a cast that is more a crowd than a group of individuals. In this way the re-use of the cast is less obtrusive or even noticeable than it first sounds.

In the BBC series, however, it is rather the Elizabethan theatrical practice of doubling that comes to our minds: the recurring actors' new roles cross-pollinate each other and colour the interpretation of the other appearances of the same actor, and thus for example Trevor Peacock, the actor playing Talbot, the English hero in Part 1, was allowed to reappear in Part 2 as Jack Cade, the rebel. Manheim (135) makes an interesting reference to the other characters some actors get to play in Howell's First Tetralogy, which creates a sense of interconnected lives, and thus helps to shape viewers' interpretation of various characters. At the same time, I am also convinced that currently, in the twenty-first century, television no longer accommodates these practices

easily, and they consequently work against audience identification with the protagonists: the recurrence of familiar faces in different roles functions as a clear alienating effect that the screen, a medium realistic by nature, avoids much more than does the stage.

No wonder therefore that *The Hollow Crown* steers clear of such alienating effects, and in this way it is closer in its casting choices to the television series of our times, where an attempt at realism would make it unthinkable to use the same actor in various roles (particularly if any of those roles was a central one). Quite the contrary: this series chooses to exaggerate the lapse of time between the ending of "Richard II" and the beginning of "Henry IV Part 1" by replacing Rory Kinnear (who plays Bolingbroke in "Richard II") with Jeremy Irons in the role of the aging King Henry IV. In line with this decision, the textual reference to the prince at the end of *Richard II* ("Can no man tell me of my unthrifty son?" 5.3.1) is dropped, with Henry Bolingbroke appearing as a family man only in the Henry IV plays.

Colour-blind Casting

It is not only the casting of the same actor in different roles, or different actors in the same role that influences audience identification and satisfaction, but also certain tendencies that are common to the theatre and the cinema. As will be discussed below, certain television genres still find these practices alien. In their article on prevalent attitudes to multiculturalism manifested in recent British televised Shakespeare productions, Susanne Greenhalgh and Robert Shaughnessy claim that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, "colour-blind casting and multicultural performance of Shakespeare are not just the everyday and unexceptional characteristics of amateur practice ... but increasingly normative on the professional stage and screen" as well, although they also remark that this was not always the case, and "generally broadcasters, especially the BBC, were even more tardy than the theatre industry in creating Shakespearean opportunities for black performers" (94). At the same time, in their analysis of a variety of television productions, they also observe that race is often "featured only to be ignored" in many so-called colour-blind performances, contrasting these with the "different dynamic [that] operates in the growing number of specifically Asian references, elements and actors" (98).

This aspect of casting practices noticeable in recent British television Shakespeare adaptations is relevant to our discussion here because the single most controversial element that appears to have divided (otherwise generally satisfied) viewers in connection with *The Hollow Crown* is the appearance of coloured actors in the series. In the first episode, "Richard II," the Bishop of Carlisle is played by Lucian Msamati, while Lord Ross is played by Peter de Jersey, and in the last episode of the series "Henry V," we can find Paterson Joseph in the role of York. All three are actors of colour, although born on British soil, and all of them had made their names both in the world of television and Shakespearean theatre before joining the cast of *The Hollow Crown*. It is therefore clear (and also obvious by all critical comments as well) that it is not their acting skills which are under debate, or the justification for their presence in a prestigious BBC production that was to be part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad.

What most commenters found at odds with their general perception of the concept of the series as a whole was the historical inaccuracy of employing any coloured actor to play medieval English nobility, and many commenters criticise the channel's all-too-eager sense of political correctness, which does not have anything to do with the plays' representation of British society, then or now. As one disappointed medievalist blogger remarks, what is particularly disturbing is the fact that the Duke of York, played by Paterson Joseph in the "Henry V" episode, is historically the same person as the Duke of Aumerle, played by the very white Tom Hughes in "Richard II," where we can even see his father, Edmund, first Duke of York, played by David Suchet (The Lady of Winchester). Therefore it is slightly confusing to notice that in the time elapsed between two episodes, the young Duke has not only aged remarkably but has also become significantly darker in hue. This separation of the two characters by casting such clearly non-identical (even non-related) actors in the roles may be explained by the fact that in *The Hollow Crown* the roles of both the Duke of Aumerle in "Richard II" and the Duke of York in "Henry V" are considerably expanded, to include psychological depths and conflicts that their theatrical sources never did. Most conspicuously, it is the young Duke of Aumerle who undertakes the murder of Richard II, to mollify his cousin Bolingbroke after Aumerle's father, the Duke of York discovers his son's involvement in a planned conspiracy against the King. In "Henry V," the Duke of York also advances from a side character and the highest ranking casualty of the Battle of Agincourt to a constant companion of the King before and during the battle, and his death is also elevated from simply being narrated by the Duke of Exeter to full visual presentation. Falstaff's boy, who witnesses York's death—in contrast with Branagh's moving scene with the dead boy, and in contrast with the textual references of the French murdering the English boys who guarded the camp—survives, and preserves the memory of the great Duke of York, elevated to a metadramatically marked position, since his voice becomes the voice of the Chorus who looks back on the events of his youth from his old age.

Colour-blind casting, as quoted from Greenhalgh and Shaughnessy above, is no longer a concept alien to Shakespearean filmmaking; it is sufficient to mention Kenneth Branagh, one of the most popular film directors of Shakespeare's plays, who has also used actors of colour in practically all of his cinematic adaptations (but not in *Henry V*, conspicuously, possibly because the history play as a genre prefers a realistic, almost documentary style of casting choices). At the same time, the kind of colour-blind casting that characterizes *The Hollow Crown* seems to me a rather cautious, or even cowardly solution, since neither in numbers (three coloured actors among more than a hundred), nor in positions (none of the three in central roles) can they be perceived as a significant presence. What I find even more troubling in the way *The Hollow Crown* employs coloured actors for these particular roles is the fact that all of them can in some indirect way be associated with treachery and betrayal—the Bishop of Carlisle is publicly punished in "Richard II," but even the title of the great and loyal Duke of York will pass on to his nephew, Richard, Duke of York, who will go back on his oath of loyalty and turn against Henry VI, the son of Henry V, by this rebellion, starting the long decades of bloodshed known as The Wars of the Roses. As a result, the colour-blind casting in this particular film may be counter-productive, reinforcing the most conservative racial stereotypes by implying how people of colour cannot be trusted. This is all the

more painful as the coloured actors involved in *The Hollow Crown* have not been type-cast as simply evil or villainous characters in their earlier careers, and therefore their personal acting history would not justify such casting here either. What is more, even the planned subsequent season of *The Hollow Crown* (under the subtitle *The Wars of the Roses*) appears to maintain the same attitude to colour-blind casting: based on available data, the single actor of colour cast in the next three episodes is Sophie Okonedo, who will play Queen Margaret, again not the most likeable of Shakespearean heroines.

Still, even if we disregard these indirect connections between betrayal and skin colour that the series may invoke with these casting practices, what appears to be clear is that even in Britain, where colour-blind performances are broadly known and accepted as reflective of contemporary multicultural society, *The Hollow Crown* as a series created expectations that clashed with this practice. The key may be in the scattered references in a number of reviews that identify the production with authentic representation of period costumes, locations, battle scenes, all of these supported by textual fidelity to Shakespeare's words—all in all, a nearly documentary-like representation of text and context, which allows modern psychological engagement with characters and conflicts, but whose authentic visual external appearance does not accommodate the external inauthenticity of the presence of coloured actors in these scenes.

Conclusion

All in all, I believe what these various attempts at filming Shakespeare's history plays for television have illustrated perfectly is that whenever television directors display an understanding of their medium and adapt their source material with this knowledge in mind, they can reach out to surprisingly large swathes of the audience. Such was the case with *An Age of Kings*, which may have sacrificed significant portions of the text, together with any attempt at cinematic realism, but which to make up for its limited technical resources emphasized connection and cyclicality, interconnectedness and cohesion in a sense that it became a true series, a story with internal links and a coherent story to tell. As a result, an average of three million viewers are believed to have watched it every fortnight, considerably more than the viewing numbers of the BBC Television Shakespeare Series in the early 1980s. Even the most laudatory of accounts admits that viewing numbers were somewhere between one and two million for the four parts of Jane Howell's First Tetralogy (Willems, "*Richard III*" 113), and when taking into consideration that the number of households with television sets must have multiplied during those slightly more than two decades, this can only be counted as a limited success. Even the increase in TV channels and viewing options during the past decades, or the different nature of TV programmes and audiences cannot serve as an excuse, since today, in the age of hundreds of channels in practically every household, successful (non-Shakespearean) series such as *Game of Thrones* or *Downton Abbey* are able to draw audiences of eight or nine million people on their first screening, even without repeats and on-demand viewings. The 1970s and 1980s were also decades of the television rather than the cinema, and therefore it would be reasonable to expect considerably higher viewing numbers if the series had indeed been popular. However,

it is undeniable that the mid-summer broadcast of *The Hollow Crown* fared even more poorly in July 2012, with no episode reaching a million viewers–at the same time, the timing of the Cultural Olympiad to accompany the London Olympic Games meant that Shakespeare competed against the most popular sporting events of a generation within the United Kingdom. Still, if the series failed to lure viewers away from the Olympics, it has more than amply made up for the failure by the commercial success of the DVD version and the series' continuous presence on online torrent and streaming sites.

The BBC Series and its low ratings illustrate that extra-medial criteria, such as textual fidelity, the best of educational intentions and a lack of expertise in the world of television may produce critical acclaim but limited popular success at best (such as it was the case with Jane Howell's First Tetralogy), or polite boredom and quick passage into oblivion at worst (in the case of David Giles's Second Tetralogy, and a considerable part of the whole series). The author's name itself does not create the sequential coherence necessary to keep audiences glued to their seats week after week, month after month; and if no allowances are made for the sake of the medium–call it dumbing down, or call it medium-specificity, it is a vital part of the adaptation process– then the programme will not be able to reach wider audiences, and will have no effect beyond the coterie of theatre enthusiasts or Shakespeare fanatics.

The Hollow Crown, on the other hand, addressed British audiences at precisely the moment when they were ready to feel proud to be British again (during the 2012 Olympic Games, as part of the Cultural Olympiad), when they badly needed to prove that they could deal with material more adult than *Harry Potter* or history more serious than *The Tudors*, and when they managed to assemble a star cast of the great names of film and theatre, from David Suchet and Patrick Stewart to Jeremy Irons and Julie Walters, and support it with the broad shoulders of young stars such as Tom Hiddleston and Richard Whishaw. As one critic on the Huffington Puff summarized the combined appeal of the plays and the television series:

> Comic turns are wittily funny in a sophisticated way, unlike the farcical humour of the festive comedies. There is as much personal conscience and hand-wringing done by the two King Henry's as by Hamlet, yet they provide more fulfilling endings, often with a nice bit of gore. And, in Hollywood terms, the plays are all marketably "based on a true story". *The Hollow Crown* is therefore providing the public a great service, by not only resurrecting abandoned history, but also promoting some of Shakespeare's most ignored, but arguably most rewarding plays. (Ferris)

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