

THE HOLLOW CROWN, AN EXPERIMENTAL ADAPTATION OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA

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Abstract:

This paper presents a series of experimental adaptations developed by Sam Mendes for BBC in 2012, The Hollow Crown, as it was called covers an essential part of the Shakespearean drama. Every episode has lasted for more than two hours, ratings have been great, taking into account that we are talking about historical Shakespearean plays that are not expected to be the most appreciated reality shows all over the world. A series that brought to the stage the best actors who offered representations and interpretations that proved their indisputable talent, also proved the indisputable value of the Shakespearean text.

Keywords: *adaptation, authenticity, impact.*

Stage and screen director, Orson Welles, stated: “Shakespeare would have made a great movie writer” (quoted by D. Brode, 2000:3). This assertion takes us back to the supposition that Shakespeare wrote for the audience, for the spectators, the viewers, not for the reader, which can be considered as a possible source of its success in the world of adaptation. It is impossible to ignore the experimental adaptations series developed by Sam Mendes for BBC in 2012. *The Hollow Crown*, as it was called covers an essential part of the Shakespearean drama, the *Henriad*, formed of the four famous plays: Richard II, Henry IV, Part 1, Henry IV, Part 2 and Henry V. Discussing the issue of the Shakespearean conversion to the screen, Russel Jackson tries to clarify some aspects in his study *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*: “In fact the number of films made from Shakespeare’s plays is relatively small although the ‘Shakespeare factor’ in cinema has been enhanced by the numerous ‘offshoots’ – films, like *Shakespeare in love* that draw on Shakespearean material without claiming to perform any one of the plays. In the first century of moving pictures, Shakespeare’s plays played an honorable but hardly dominant role in the development of the medium. Some forty sound films have been made of Shakespearean plays to date, but it has been estimated that during the ‘silent’ era – before synchronized dialogue complicated the business of adapting poetic drama for the screen – there were more than 400 films on Shakespearean subjects. These took their place in an international market unrestricted by considerations of language and (consequently) untroubled by the relatively archaic dialogue of the originals” (R. Jackson, 2000: 18). This analysis shows the real situation when it comes to movie adaptation. Jackson’s

example underlines the fact that most of the popular Shakespearean adaptations manipulate the original text, using only some parts of it in order to create new stories, more appropriate for spirit of time and for the expectations of the public. The detail that at the beginning of the cinematographic history there was a huge development of the film adaptation process, highlights that Shakespeare cannot be reproduced to screen than under the condition of a release of this connection between the original and the new.

Producers had the brilliant intuition that this was a perfect marketing opportunity, taking into account the distribution and the plays chosen, some of British public favorites. Actors are divided into those who were in the centre of the public focus for a long time and the beginners, who had the occasion to display their hidden talent on stage (Ben Whishaw, Tom Hiddleston, Joe Armstrong). The central idea was the evolution and decay, the immense pressure of the crown on the shoulders of the monarchs. The producers relied a great deal on the talent and the passion of the actors involved in the project as well as on the theatrical atmosphere created by the costumes and the music. Another important support for the confidence of those who believed in this project was the interest of the viewers in this film series. An important part of the public hadn't had the interest or the curiosity to discover the original plays of Shakespeare before watching the Hollow Crown. The curiosity to see the evolution of the favorite actors in these movies, triggered the impressive audience of BBC during the four weeks, in the evening of Saturday. It was a bet won not only from the point of view of audiences, but as well as in respect of the quality of the plays adaptations. Actors elected invested passion and energy, proved their talent and this was felt beyond the screen.

The first play chosen for this experimental adaptive process has been Richard II. *Naive and conceited, the young man Richard starts his way to the head of the social pyramid and later to the decay torturing Henry Bolingbroke (Rory Kinnear), his cousin, together with Thomas, count of Mowbray (James Purefoy). Next, follows the forfeiting of his uncle's lands, John of Gaunt (Patrick Stewart), Bolingbroke's father to be able to finance the war against Ireland, a war he will lose. These actions of the young king attract the discontent of many courtiers, among them, the Duke of York (David Suchet). He will house Bolingbroke once returned to England. The young Henry will begin to eliminate all the nobles from Richard's court. Finally the King is arrested and in prison he is murdered. Bolingbroke, now king Henry the IV-th has remorse for the committed crimes and looks for the divinity forgiveness.*

Ben Whishaw plays a messianic role of Richard. A young man became king being surrounded by a vicious environment. Perceived frivolous and impulsive, he becomes the prisoner of his decisions that will mark the course of history. Any action, his life style become weapons against him and those who were once band to destroy him. After his return from exile, his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke will manage to defeat him and to win the power.

For Bolingbroke the murder of a king will follow him for the rest of his life, the crown once worn by Richard being a heavy burden that you will have to carry until his son will prove to be a worthy successor to the throne.

For two hours and twenty minutes we are witnessing to the decay of king Richard and the ascension of another Henry the IVth. Ben Whishaw played a great role; fragile, with a look of martyr, risking it all and eventually losing everything. He becomes aware of the consequences of his acts much too late, when he is no longer able to do anything about it in order to change something. With all the weaknesses, with all his mistakes, Richard manages to take the audience

into the universe of the intensive action and Whishaw delivers an emotional speech excited, the speech of a defeated king:

“I have been studying how I may compare
This prison where I live unto the world:
And for because the world is populous
And here is not a creature but myself,
I cannot do it; yet I'll hammer it out.
My brain I'll prove the female to my soul,
My soul the father; and these two beget
A generation of still-breeding thoughts,
And these same thoughts people this little world,
In humours like the people of this world,
For no thought is contented. The better sort,
As thoughts of things divine, are intermix'd
With scruples and do set the word itself
Against the word:
As thus, 'Come, little ones,' and then again
'It is as hard to come as for a camel
To thread the postern of a small needle's eye.'
Thoughts tending to ambition, they do plot
Unlikely wonders; how these vain weak nails
May tear a passage through the flinty ribs
Of this hard world, my ragged prison walls,
And, for they cannot, die in their own pride.
That they are not the first of fortune's slaves,
Nor shall not be the last; like silly beggars
Who sitting in the stocks refuge their shame,
That many have and others must sit there;
And in this thought they find a kind of ease,
Bearing their own misfortunes on the back
Of such as have before endured the like.
Thus play I in one person many people,
And none contented: sometimes am I king;
Then treasons make me wish myself a beggar,
And so I am: then crushing penury
Persuades me I was better when a king;
Then am I king'd again: and by and by
Think that I am unking'd by Bolingbroke,
And straight am nothing: but whate'er I be,
Nor I nor any man that but man is
With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased
With being nothing. Music do I hear?”

In the solitude of the prison, waiting for the final transformation, Richard reveals the innermost feelings and thoughts regarding this complex world, which prove to be the struggles of

any human being in the eternal fight against the hardship of life. His attitude is a modernist one, inclined towards the escape from the collective environment to the solitude of the self. This sorrow of this isolation is suggested through a wide palette of negative terms: “prison”, “vain”, “weak”, “slave”, “silly”, “beggar”, “misfortune”, “penury”. This way, Shakespeare draws the attention of the reader or of the spectator to the seclusion of the human being in front of the difficulties, which is exactly the condition of the modern character. Another aspect that emphasizes the same idea is the oscillation between the good and the evil, the highest and the lowest borders of social scale, represented in Richard’s interior monologue by “the King” and “the beggar”.

The second play brings to the focus of the BBC audience King Henry the IVth played by Jeremy Irons faces the revolts organized around Owen Glendower and rebel Henry Hotspur played by Joe Armstrong, the son of Duke of Northumberland, the two of them being dissatisfied because the king has not paid the atonement requested by Glendower for Mortimer, Northumberland's son-in-law. Henry has another problem regarding Hal played by Tom Hiddleston, his son, gusty and arrogant, influenced by Sir John Falstaff, an old man away from the good old times, who hides his bitterness behind the curtains of a dirty life. Hal joins his father in the battle of Shrewsbury where he manages to suppress the organized revolt of Hotspur, by killing him during a confrontation. The victory is short duration for now Henry and Hal must face the revolts organized by Glendower and Northumberland, supported this time by the cardinal of York.

Jeremy Irons has the main role of the old king Henry the IVth. He finds himself in the middle of revolts, weak under the pressure of his throne and the burden of the past; Henry sees in Hotspur, the rebel young man, the son he wanted. The promises made in the eve of Richard's abdication were never fulfilled. Those who are waiting for answers are blocked by the absolute silence of the monarch. Considering himself betrayed, Henry Percy 'Hotspur' joins the rebels. In addition to the court intrigue and the riots in the country, Henry has the deal with his son Hal, influenced by the promiscuous life of Falstaff. The young prince prefers the company of simple people rather than the courtiers but not for long. Becoming aware of the duties of a heir, Hal joined his father at the battle of Shrewsbury where he lead the army to victory.

There are many exciting moments in this first part, such as the shooting and the decors of Eastcheapside, the fellowship of ordinary people. Hiddleston and Russell Beal make a credible duo that sends humor beyond the border of the screen, especially in the scene in which the two imitate king Henry the IVth.

Jeremy Irons, Tom Hiddleston and Simon Russell Beal create very good roles in this first part. Irons and Hiddleston offer interpretations full of passion and emotion which pass beyond the screen, one of the most exciting moments being the confrontation between father and son.

This first part also offers a revelation, 42-year old actor Joe Armstrong, known from the BBC series Robin Hood, in the role of Henry Percy Hotspur. Armstrong has not so far played in plays of Shakespeare, in comparison to the other experimented players from the distribution. This does not represent an impediment, as Armstrong proves that he can face the complexity of his character.

The story goes on with part II of King Henry the IVth. Northumberland swears to revenge his son's death, Hotspur and gathers allies around him to organise a new battle against the King. Falstaff has to gather an army in the name of Henry, but the old soldier is not quite pleased at this, and as he prepares to leave his mistress, Doll Tearsheet, he starts to criticize and to insult on Hal

without knowing that he was hidden, listening to him. In the meantime Henry the IVth is dying. Hal believing his father is dead, takes the crown and sits on the throne. There is a touching dialogue between the father and the son, culminating when Henry puts the crown on his son's head. Henry the fifth is assigned new King of England and his first commandment is to banish Falstaff from the court, as a sign of maturity, a break between him and the frivolity of youth.

This episode brings out the deep change of Hal. The future monarch becomes aware that he has to fulfill his responsibilities and he assumes the difficulties that come with the title and the crown. Director Richard Eyre emphasized the actors' charisma and talent. Hal is shown as a playboy of those times. Jeremy Irons, a dying man, fragile, pathetically remorseful, fearful in the role of Henry, wins the compassion of the audience.

The manner in which the plays are adapted creates a product available to the public, in a classical presentation, but with popular actors, actors familiar with the text, actors that offer more than just a recitation. The dedication and the passion behind this project are two elements to be found in the game of actors, that attracted the interest of the public. Not only the emotional scenes between Hiddleston and Irons have been effective, but also the separation and the banishing of Falstaff have aroused sympathy.

The last example for this series is dedicated to King Henry the Vth. Falstaff died and Hal has become a responsible monarch. Being informed that he is entitled to the throne of France, Henry the Vth makes a series of offers to the Dolphin but receives a humiliating reply, a gift representing several tennis balls. Henry is preparing for war. He shows clemency to the inhabitants but authorizes the execution of the soldier Bardolph for the robberies committed. When the King of France refuses a new round of negotiations, Henry is getting ready for the battle which takes place at Agincourt. The battle is gained by the English and Henry marries the princess Catherine of Valois, becoming the lawful successor to France's throne. At the age of 35 years, Henry the Vth dies and his son, Henry the Vth will lose the French territory during his reign.

When you're thinking of the play Henry the Vth what comes to one's mind are the famous speeches told by the monarch. The fact that people who have never before had any interest in the work of Shakespeare discovered his plays, is the merit of the actors, filmmakers and producers, the merit of BBC and is the visible evidence that William Shakespeare will be read, will be rediscovered and will never be forgotten.

References

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