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Expos 20.043

31 March 2015

Elizabeth as America:
The Victor in McKellen's Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the villainous Richard slaughters his way through his friends and family to become king of England. Knowing that his brother, King Edward, is on his deathbed, Richard begins a bloody quest for the throne. His crown comes at the cost of the lives of his brother Clarence, his nephews, and his right-hand man, to name just a few. Fortunately, the play concludes on a hopeful note: the young Earl of Richmond slays Richard in battle, claims the throne, and gives a noble speech promising "smooth-faced peace" (5.5.33) in the time to come. While we see Richmond as the victor of Shakespeare's play, Ian McKellen and Richard Loncraine's 1995 film adaptation of *Richard III* places less emphasis on his role, cutting his speech and ending the play at the death of Richard. At the same time, McKellen and Loncraine play up the role of Elizabeth, Edward's wife and thus the former queen of England. They portray her, as McKellen writes in his notes on the screenplay, as "the principal survivor in the film." McKellen's adaptation of *Richard III* changes which character the audience views as the victor of the drama.

Note that I write "victor" to mean not just the character who achieves the greatest objective success in terms of power, money, or happiness, but also the character who the audience finds themselves rooting for by the end of the drama. The "victor" of a text is the character with the greatest combination of personal success and audience support by the work's conclusion. To examine why McKellen would present Elizabeth as the victor of his film, it is

important to first understand the historical context that led Shakespeare to establish Richmond as the victor of his play.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* tells the story of the Wars of the Roses, a series of wars between two branches of English royalty, the House of Lancaster and the House of York, vying for the throne (Pollard). These wars ended when Richmond won the final battle against Richard III. Richmond went on to take the name Henry VII and become the first king in the Tudor dynasty. Shakespeare wrote his play *Richard III* at the end of the 16th century, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who just so happened to be the last Tudor monarch (Bjork). Thus Shakespeare had ample reason to portray Richmond as the heroic figure in *Richard III*: writing during the Elizabethan era, it was wise to portray the Tudors in a positive light.

McKellen's adaptation takes *Richard III* away from its original historical context and places Shakespeare's drama in the setting of a more recent war: World War II. McKellen relocates the play to a fascist version of 1930s England, imitating the aesthetic of the Third Reich. McKellen's Richard wears a uniform similar to Hitler's, soldiers march around in helmets, and battles are fought with tanks. Like Shakespeare, McKellen authored his work a few decades removed from the events he portrays: his film version of *Richard III* was released in 1995.

Knowing that Shakespeare made a Tudor monarch the victor of his play when a Tudor was in power, we can posit a guess as to why McKellen made Elizabeth the victor of his play by looking at who the current world power was in 1995: America. For much of the 20th century, America was the world's dominant economic, military, and cultural force. In fact, America's emergence as a global power was closely tied to its role in World War II. In the 1920s, America enjoyed a time of economic prosperity known as the "Roaring Twenties". In late 1929, the stock

market crashed and America, along with much of the rest of the world, fell into the Great Depression. When Hitler rose to power in Europe in the 1930s and World War II began, America remained largely uninvolved for the early years of the war. It was the Japanese bombing of the naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 that prompted the United States to enter the war (Koppes). The participation of the United States helped to propel the Allied Forces to victory in World War II. After the war, a shift to a wartime economy and the retention of military bases around the world set the United States well on its way towards becoming an economic, military, and cultural world power.

The rise to power of the United States may not have been possible without its close ties to Britain. In 1946, Winston Churchill gave a speech calling for a partnership between the two countries: "Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States." Indeed, the United States and Britain remained close partners throughout the 20th century, sharing military bases, nuclear weapons information, and intelligence, and investing heavily in each other's economies, for the mutual benefit of both countries (Khong).

In light of the historical contexts in which Shakespeare's *Richard III* and the McKellen and Loncraine film adaptation were created and portrayed, we can explore the relationship between Shakespeare's and McKellen's approaches to history. Shakespeare, living under the reign of the last Tudor monarch, emphasizes the victory of Richmond in the Wars of the Roses. McKellen, living at a time when America is the dominant world power, adapts Shakespeare's play to emphasize the victory of Elizabeth in a World War II setting. Thus the natural extension of McKellen's World War II metaphor is that Elizabeth represents America, and that America is

the true victor of World War II. Hence both Shakespeare and McKellen make their works relevant by catering to the current power at their respective points in history. I would argue, furthermore, that McKellen offers a criticism of the role Britain plays in its special relationship with America following World War II.

In Shakespeare's play, Richmond is portrayed as the heroic victor of the War of Roses who will be the savior of England. If Richard is a creature of hell, Richmond is a man sent from heaven. As Richmond tells his men, "God and our good cause fight upon our side" (5.5.241). Before battle, ghosts visit Richmond telling him that he is "virtuous and holy" (5.5.129) and that "good angels guard thee" (5.5.157). Shakespeare ends the play with a valiant speech from Richmond, who promises to unite the two branches of the English royalty and marry young Elizabeth so that their heirs will live in prosperous and peaceful times. This heroic, almost divine portrayal of Richmond makes sense since Shakespeare wanted to appeal to the Tudor dynasty currently in power. However, it might be less relevant in a different historical setting, and we see this in McKellen's adaptation, where the heroic role of Richmond is downplayed. In the film, Richmond does not give a gallant speech to end the play; in fact, he gives no great speech at all. A few of the lines from Richmond's closing monologue are retained in the film, but they are spoken by the priest who marries Richmond and Elizabeth. Even in Richmond's own marriage scene, a scene notably absent from Shakespeare's original play, he is not the character that grabs the attention of the audience. Instead, this scene presents a new and different hero: Elizabeth.

McKellen innovates the portrayal of Elizabeth in a number of ways in order to portray her as the victor of the film. In the play, Elizabeth comes across as shrill, but in the film, she comes across as strong. The Elizabeth presented in Shakespeare's play does not enjoy her position as queen and is reliant on the men around her. She tells Richard that he will not be

happy as king, just as she is not happy being queen: “As little joy you may suppose in me/ That I enjoy, being the queen thereof” (1.3.153-154). After the death of her husband Edward, she wallows in her despair, displaying obsequious sorrow: “Ah, who shall hinder me to wail and weep,/ To chide my fortune, and torment myself?/ I’ll join with black despair against my soul/ And to myself become an enemy” (2.2.34-37). Elizabeth declares that she will cry enough at the death of her husband to flood the earth in her tears: “That I, being governed by the watery moon,/ May send forth plenteous tears to drown the world” (2.2.69-70). Elizabeth comes across as a weak character in this scene, one we feel annoyed by rather than sympathize with. Only near the end of the play does Elizabeth potentially redeem herself, exchanging verbal barbs with Richard for an extended period of time as he tries to convince her to marry his daughter. At the end of the scene, Elizabeth tells Richard that she will let her daughter marry him, and this is the last we see of her. Shakespeare later lets us know that Richmond is due to marry the younger Elizabeth, but leaves ambiguous the extent to which the elder Elizabeth played a role in making this marriage happen, or if she had a role in it at all.

McKellen’s adaptation presents a much stronger Elizabeth, one who we root for and who emerges as the ultimate victor of the film. Elizabeth as presented by McKellen and Loncraine appears happier in her role as queen; she dances lovingly with her husband and sweetly entertains her son at the beginning of the movie. After her husband’s death, Elizabeth sobs and utters words of grief, but gone is the over-the-top lamentation from the play. Elizabeth’s finest moment in the film comes after the death of her two sons, when she goes to confront Richard. Loncraine uses powerful imagery to portray Elizabeth as a brave hero. She strides into Richard’s military camp with her daughter, two finely dressed women amidst a sea of soldiers in helmets and uniform, and brazenly screams out to Richard about his crimes against her family. Richard

threatens that she still has family left, and brings Elizabeth inside to try to convince her to let her daughter marry him. While the lines in this scene remain largely unchanged from the play, Loncraine's directions place a particular emphasis on how strong of a fight Elizabeth puts up. Many of the lines Richard uses are reminiscent of his conversation with Anne, who he swayed to marry him without much trouble. Richard tempts Elizabeth, offering: "Again shall you be mother of a king/ and all the ruins of distressful times/ Repaired with double riches of content" (4.4.317-319). But the film demonstrates that Richard has significantly more trouble convincing Elizabeth. The scene begins with Richard confronting Elizabeth in front of his officers, confident that he will easily persuade her. Realizing that he is having little success, Richard closes the doors of the car, separating himself and Elizabeth from his soldiers in order to distance himself from his audience and try a more intimate approach. As in the play, Elizabeth resists Richard until the very last moment, and Richard dismisses her as a "shallow, changing woman" (4.4.431), convinced that he has turned her to his side. But in the film, this is not the last we see of Elizabeth: instead, she appears at the wedding of her daughter to Richmond, having deceived Richard and married her daughter to the man who will end up becoming king of England. In the moment that the camera pans over to Elizabeth, we see her as the true victor of the film: despite her many losses, she stood up to Richard, tricked him, and obtained the power he promised her through her own means.

The final significant difference regarding Elizabeth and her family's characterization in the film versus in the play is that Elizabeth and her brother are American in the film. In an early scene, Elizabeth's brother Rivers steps off a Pan Am flight. Later, he sits at the table reading the Wall Street Journal, and plays cowboys and Indians, a game referencing the American West, with one the young princes. Both Elizabeth and Rivers speak with American accents. In

Shakespeare's play, it is also suggested that Elizabeth is somewhat of an outsider, but only through Richard's disdain. Richard suggests that the Queen and her friends do not belong in court: "great promotions/ Are daily given to enoble those/ That scarce, some two days since, were worth a noble" (1.3.80-82). Thus Elizabeth's role as an outsider in British court is played up in the movie, specifically, her role as an American.

The film's elevation of Elizabeth as a character is McKellen's way of adapting Shakespeare's play so that his new historical context has an appropriate victor. If we review Elizabeth's trajectory in the film, we see that her losses and subsequent rise to power parallel America as it becomes involved in World War II. Elizabeth starts out as queen of England, dancing happily with her husband as jazzy music plays at the beginning of the film. Her brother is a stylish American playboy: the two epitomize the spirit of the Roaring Twenties in America. When her husband dies, Elizabeth falls on hard times: In late 1929, America and the world fall into the Great Depression. Now the metaphor continues as the war begins: As Elizabeth struggles with the death of her husband, Richard gains power and incites the deaths of people around him. In the 1930s, as America continues to struggle through the Great Depression, Hitler rises to power and begins his conquest of Europe. Finally, Elizabeth experiences her Pearl Harbor: the tragic death of her two young sons. Elizabeth confronts Richard; America joins the war. Elizabeth orchestrates the marriage of her daughter to Richmond, and America and the Allies win World War II. Elizabeth gains power as the mother of a queen; the American economy booms, setting the stage for America as a world power, with Britain as its partner.

Thus we see that McKellen's portrayal of Elizabeth as the ultimate survivor of the film shows how America is the ultimate victor of World War II. Just like Shakespeare writes his play so that the first ruler of the Tudor dynasty currently in power comes out to be the hero of the

play, McKellen portrays the currently powerful America as the victor in his story, albeit with a twist. If Richmond and Elizabeth's marriage represents American victory, then we expect a positive suggestion of what is to come, some omen of a "smooth-faced peace" brought on by American leadership, with Britain as its partner. Yet McKellen's unexpected ending of the film has Richard jump backwards, smiling, off a tall structure into the flames below, as Richmond shoots at him. Richard extends his arm out towards Richmond right before he falls, telling him, "If not in heaven, than hand in hand to hell." And then we see something truly unexpected: Richmond looks at the camera and smiles evilly, much like Richard has been doing throughout the film. McKellen and Loncraine suggest that Richmond will not be the force of good he is portrayed as in Shakespeare's play. Instead, Richmond may continue the violent cycle; Britain may continue a violent cycle in its partnership with America, committing some of the same atrocities it condemned during World War II. Viewing young Elizabeth's marriage to Richmond as the American victory of World War II, this approach to history suggests a critique of Britain once it becomes a partner in America's rise to power.

One might ask why McKellen chooses to offer a critique of Britain, instead of critiquing America more directly. McKellen's decision to criticize Britain likely has to do with the fact that McKellen and Loncraine are themselves British, and therefore are more invested in the role of their own country in recent world history. Or, they simply may want to pay homage to the fact that Shakespeare's original play is set in Britain by offering a commentary on Britain in the present day. Either way, we can see McKellen's film as taking Shakespeare's approach to history one step further: both authors make their works relevant by portraying the current world power as the victor. However, McKellen's shocking ending offers a more modern take on the

idea of a victor by suggesting that Britain, who maintained a particularly close relationship with America following World War II, committed its own evils after defeating Hitler and the Nazis.

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