

Sight, Sound, and News: Popularization in Fiennes's *Coriolanus*

Tilly Jackson

The genre of Shakespeare on film has caused much controversy over the years, with film critics and academics at once decrying it as “de-volution of Shakespeare” (Boose and Burt 18) and applauding it as a “site for innovation in the style, substance, and practice of modern performance” (Worthen 2). Over the past 25 years or so, however, this genre has proven itself all the more controversial by popularization, the technique of modernizing Shakespeare and casting movie stars instead of trained Shakespearean stage actors in an effort to break new ground with the centuries-old playtexts as well as bring the classic works to a larger, younger audience. This has been called the “Hollywoodization of Shakespeare in the 1990s” (Boose and Burt 8). Perhaps the most striking popularized film adaptations of Shakespeare’s works are the tragedies, reconstructed into sweeping epics with distinctly modern twists. Radical examples include Baz Luhrmann’s media-filled *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and Al Pacino’s theatre documentary, *Looking for Richard* (1996). Discussing such films in *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Works*, Mark Thornton Burnett remarks that

[...] contemporary versions of the tragedies contemplate the burdens of textuality and meditate self-consciously upon their own existence. At the same time, they push at the boundaries of the Shakespearean, feeding from their immediate contexts and from each other in generically variegated, visually arresting, technically versatile, and media-fashioned realizations of the dramatic originals. (Burnett n.pag.)

Indeed, these characteristics can be found in nearly all such popularized Shakespeare tragedies, from Julie Taymor’s *Titus* (2000) to Ralph Fiennes’s *Coriolanus* (2011). By examining the innovative use of camerawork, sound, and media as modes of communication, it is clear that Ralph Fiennes’s *Coriolanus* is a modern film intended for a popular audience, and that rather than having this popularization become a “vehicle for the transmis-

sion of subversive or transgressive recodings of Shakespeare” (Boose and Burt 2), what results is in fact an extremely effective and poignant adaptation of Shakespeare’s little-known tragedy.

From the very first shot, the film’s camerawork is noteworthy. The darkly-lit close ups on various menacing parts of a tanned and tattooed man sharpening a decorated blade promote a feeling of foreboding. Uncomfortable and quick shifts in angle also draw the audience in. By not allowing an entire view of the figure, his identity is at first a mystery and keeps the viewer in suspense. Throughout the film, quick jump cuts and swish pans carry the action, giving a chaotic feeling to the mob scenes and arguably emphasizing the changing views of the mob itself, as in the vote-begging scene. Varying perspectives of the camera are used to dizzying effect, most prominently in the protest at the grain depot; the camera begins the scene in a bird’s eye view, showing the size of the crowd, and gradually tilts until the viewer is right amongst the angry citizens, effectively immersing the audience in the action. As the shouts of the citizens escalate, so too does the shakiness of the camera, and “unsteady, hand-held camerawork keeps the viewer in a state of excited agitation” (Burnett n.pag.), imitating the documentary-like feeling of real-life news coverage. In her review of the film, Fionnuala O’Neill begins by saying that “*Coriolanus* is an intriguing but comparatively unpopular tragedy; audiences have frequently found both play and protagonist profoundly unsympathetic and alienating” (O’Neill 456), and certainly the first live-action shot of Caius Martius Coriolanus presents him as an unsavoury, almost villainous character. Coriolanus is first seen emerging from the line of riot police shields, his face set and his eyes meeting the camera dead on. William Rothman suggests a link between the camera and villainy, citing those instances when a “villain unmasks himself, or appears to unmask himself, by looking directly into the camera” (Rothman 79), and there is a definite aura of such villainy present in this scene as Fiennes radiates anger and goes on to insult and belittle the citizens. The analogy is not quite apt, however, as he is in fact looking past the camera at the mob, not breaking the imaginary fourth wall by acknowledging the camera. However, this straight shot helps establish a villainous first impression of the main character, and even the camera seems to back away from the warrior’s path, intimidating the audience and the crowd of citizens alike. Another interesting choice in camerawork involves the cross cuts between the battle at Corioles and the relatively peaceful scene back in Rome. While it is clear that violence has been nurtured both in *Coriolanus* (evidenced by the bloodthirsty nature of his

mother) and Young Martius (who is first seen shooting at cans in the front yard and later revealed to have nearly all military-themed toys), this unexpected connection is made all the more obvious by the juxtaposition of the shots. O'Neill makes reference to this specific juxtaposition, saying that the film "foregrounds the tension between these twin worlds: the savage masculine arena of war, and the more complex world of domestic politics and relationships" (O'Neill 457). This would be nearly impossible to produce as effectively in a stage performance without complete immersion in the sounds and sights of the two settings.

The film language of sound is influential in making an impression on a film's audience. Royal S. Brown discusses the subtle power of film music in his book *Overtones and Undertones*, saying that "music by and large remains one of the two most 'invisible' contributing arts to the cinema" (Brown 1). The music in Fiennes's *Coriolanus* is predominantly percussive, lending a certain tribal element to the tense preliminary scenes involving the Volscians. The escalating music combined with the careful costuming in these scenes make Shakespeare's "marauding Volscians become guerrilla fighters embroiled in an ancient and bitter border dispute" (O'Neill 456), a familiar situation to contemporary audiences. Just like the changes in camerawork, the sound is often sudden, exploding into existence during the battle scenes and all but disappearing in the more serene domestic settings that are interspersed within. Even the dialogue between Volumnia and Virgilia back in Rome is quiet, their conversation so close to whispers that the viewer is forced to increase the volume to hear what is being said, only to be shocked by the next scene's aural intensity. This creates a striking distance between the two worlds and subsequently between the characters living in them, unlike the cutting camerawork that brings them together. In his introduction, Brown proposes an interesting theory of the so-called "mythic moment", using an example from Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) to clarify his meaning. As Brown points out, every appearance of the massive shark is accompanied by the famously ominous two-note theme, while "in the sequence where a pair of boys create general panic with a phony shark fin, the music track remains silent, unconsciously cueing in the audience that this is not a mythic moment" (Brown 10). This would seem to suggest that a moment without music is not as powerful as one with a swelling crescendo. At the end of Fiennes's *Coriolanus*, however, the tragic protagonist's murder is not accompanied by any music, allowing the audience to completely focus on the event being played out on the screen. Though there are a few warning chimes as Coriolanus's truck

drops him off alone to face the Volscians on a deserted highway, the music ends as the dialogue begins, and only crickets can be heard under the voices. As the Volscians begin to attack Coriolanus, even the crickets are silenced, and there is an almost gruesome amplification of sound effects: knives squishing into flesh, heavy footsteps thumping towards their target, and animalistic grunts of exertion all serve to make the murder disturbingly hyperreal. Aufidius's deathblow is dealt in complete silence. This conspicuous lack of music, lack of Brown's "mythic moment," emphasizes the senselessness of Coriolanus's tragic end, and the last shot of the film is of his body being unceremoniously dumped onto the pavement like so much garbage. O'Neill notes that the body is "thrown down with a thump," saying that it is "an appropriate closing image for an adaptation so irredeemably bleak in its assessment of the damaging human sacrifice made by a world intensely invested in military violence and aggression" (O'Neill 459). This "thump," which might have been covered up by mournful music in another production, is important in O'Neill's reading of the film as a whole; the scene becomes "mythic" because the very lack of music makes it realistic instead of clichéd, communicating to the audience the graveness of the ending.

Effective communication is an essential feature when adapting a Shakespearean text into a film and especially when modernizing it. As the audience will be much wider and diverse than that of a stage production, and not necessarily academic, the screenplay must be a shortened and simplified version of the text, while still delivering the basic aspects of the story. Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* is a play driven by messengers, anonymous characters who bring both good and bad tidings to the central figures. In a brilliant adaptive move, Fiennes abolishes the archaic form of the messenger in his film, using instead contemporary news media to communicate such messages to the audience. M.G. Aune examines a similar technique in Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard*, saying that Pacino uses a "hybrid form to address elements of the play that are difficult for modern audiences" (Aune 353). Pacino's film was more of a documentary about staging a production of *Richard III* than an actual adaptation of the play, but the idea of making Shakespeare more accessible to a modern audience is the same as in Fiennes's film. Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, as discussed by Burnett, is perhaps a more comparable analogy; this earlier film also uses news media as a mode of communication:

[...] a frenetic media industry is constructed as holding sway over the course of the narrative. A television screen

is privileged throughout as a conduit of information; headlines of Shakespearean snippets are flashed before the viewer; shots of helicopters, flames, and general mayhem evoke the breakneck reportage of popular news programs. (Burnett n.pag.)

In Fiennes's film, a television screen showing a news story about Coriolanus is one of the first images seen, in the same space as the ominous man with the knife. The man's reaction to the sight of the war hero is the first hint of a potential personal vendetta in the film, bringing the two into the same space even though they are in fact miles apart. The next few minutes are composed entirely of a montage of news clips showing the civil unrest in "A Place Calling Itself Rome," which effectively tell a backstory without any dialogue. Menenius appears to the rowdy citizens in the first scene through a television broadcast, making his first speech much more generic and establishing him as a member of the bureaucracy which the citizens oppose. By not having Menenius in direct discourse with the citizens, Fiennes establishes that distance between the common people and the patricians that Shakespeare represents so clearly in his original text. O'Neill says that "the film highlights Shakespeare's focus upon the importance of popular political image, while drawing attention to the way in which today's media filter such images" (O'Neill 456), and the way that the citizens carry large signs with crossed-out images of Coriolanus's face suggest that they do not see him as a person but as a political scapegoat. This distance created by the news media also promotes a kind of character expansion, as Virgilia is allowed to ignore the less pleasant aspects of her family life, such as the televised reports of the war at Corioles, which she pointedly switches off. For Coriolanus, though, the involvement of the media shrinks the distance he would prefer to maintain with the citizens of Rome, leading to his eventual political downfall and physical demise. In Fiennes's film, every angry outburst by Coriolanus is recorded, either by journalists at a press conference, by citizens on their cellphones, or by professional news companies in a worldwide broadcast. This advantage of a mass audience seeing the worst side of Coriolanus makes the citizens' reaction to him more understandable, if not excusable; their view of Coriolanus is mediated by the media, as is their view of every celebrated contemporary figure.

Popularization of Shakespeare, then, can be very effective and still respectful of the playtext. O'Neill says that "Coriolanus's aggressively un-subtle approach leaves him bewilderingly out of place in a political environment dominated by media image" (O'Neill 458), a situation not only

extremely relevant in today's society but an updated version of Shakespeare's original message. Perhaps the most significant part of *Coriolanus's* tragedy is the injustice of being a man who served all his life for his country, only to be cast out in shame. Contemporary political figures are forever being cast in and out of the light of popularity, and Fiennes clearly took an opportunity to remake a story that he thought would appeal to the masses, chancing the risk of "the oscillation between the drive to (re)popularize Shakespeare by 'modernizing' him and the imperative to preserve those qualities that mark Shakespeare as a traditional icon of cultural authority" (Lanier 177). As this is the "first serious film version to have been made" (O'Neill 456) of *Coriolanus*, the filmmaker was not constrained or judged by any previous traditions and was free to make of the story what he would. For both the inexperienced viewer and the Shakespeare lover, Fiennes's film represents "a pared-down yet faithful version of [the] play" (O'Neill 456), employing inventive and original techniques including camerawork, sound, and media to make the tragedy all the more powerful.

Works Cited

- Aune, M. G. "Star Power: Al Pacino, 'Looking for Richard' and the Cultural Capital of Shakespeare on Film." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 23.4 (2006): 353-367. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. March 16, 2013.
- Boose, Lynda B., Richard Burt, eds. *Shakespeare, the Movie*. New York: Routledge, 1997. *MyiLibrary*. Web. March 14, 2013.
- Brown, Royal S. *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1994. *EBSCO*. Web. March 19, 2013.
- Burnett, Mark Thornton. "Contemporary Film Versions of the Tragedies." *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume I: The Tragedies*. Eds. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. *Blackwell Reference Online*. Web. March 16, 2013.
- Coriolanus*. Dir. Ralph Fiennes. Perf. Ralph Fiennes, Gerard Butler, Brian Cox. BBC, 2011. Film.
- Lanier, Douglas. "Popular Culture: Will of the People: Recent Shakespeare Film Parody and the Politics of Popularization." *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Ed. Diana Henderson. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. *Blackwell Reference Online*. Web. March 16, 2013.

- O'Neill, Fionnuala. "Review of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* (adapted for film and directed by Ralph Fiennes)." *Shakespeare* 8.4 (2012): 456-460. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. March 16, 2013.
- Rothman, William. *The "I" of the Camera: essays in film criticism, history, and aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. *MylLibrary*. Web. March 17, 2013.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.
- Worthen, W.B. *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. *EBSCO*. Web. March 16, 2013.