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Camp Richard III and the Burdens of (Stage/Film) History

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As the twentieth century concludes, the burdens of its history – and of what was made of its historical inheritances – have been more and more overtly thematized in several art-forms. One hallmark of postmodernism is a detached playfulness with history: wry quotations of the past appear as isolated architectural elements, as recontextualized figures in visual works, as characters haunted by lost (but tantalizingly ‘present’) connections with source-texts in narrative. The enormities of this century provide sufficient rationale for such detachment; if the earnestness of high art is no longer conceivable in the West after the Holocaust, then understated disengagement offers a welcome refuge. An alternative path, though, is a heady immersion into the unsettling stuff of history, a wilful involvement with the passions as well as the trappings of the past. Such a passionate approach may still entertain ideas of performativity as well as sincerity; Shakespeare’s historical tragedies regularly depend upon both. In his dispute with readings that ignore this volatile mixture, Jonathan Dollimore has argued that a Shakespearean playtext such as Antony and Cleopatra is predicated upon what he calls ‘the profound truth of camp, the “deep” truth of the superficial: if it’s worth doing, it’s worth overdoing’.1

Ian McKellen and Richard Loncraine, in adapting Richard III for the motion picture screen, have detected in that play and its stage history the same injunction to overdo. The resulting film certainly revels – as Dollimore reminds us about camp – ‘in a desire it simultaneously deconstructs, becoming a form of theatrical excess which both celebrates and undermines what it mimics’. We have in their film of Richard III not only theatrical but cinematic excess, as an array of movie conventions from the 1930s onward are gleefully and sometimes wickedly invoked. Among these conventions are some of the
richest materials associated with the camp sensibility: these include the production values of the Hollywood musical, which rely on the ephemera of art deco styles and fashions, and the elusive, arbitrary signs that mark the matinée idol. At the same time, their Richard III exploits the more recent conventions of the 'heritage' film (most strongly associated with Ismail Merchant and James Ivory) in order to interrogate a more unsettling aspect of both the camp sensibility and reactions to it: the frequently alleged connection between homoeroticism and fascism. By engaging with such materials in such a manner, McKellen and Loncraine have alienated not a few observers. But they have risked – even invited – such alienation in order to explore the sexual politics within the playtext and its performance traditions.

The film effectively interweaves reassurance and danger, echoing camp's problematization of 'safe' categories and markers; the supposed safety of what is historical and therefore settled (as is often the case in 'heritage' filmmaking) provokes camp's irreverent response and revision. McKellen and Loncraine reject the argument advanced by Shakespeare's Richard, when he tries desperately to consolidate his power via marriage, that 'what is done cannot be now amended' (IV.iv.291). As a result, they resist several received notions about the nature of Richard's villainy and his appeal to audiences. The idea that Richard must be attractive because of his powerfully 'malign sexuality' (which is how more than one critic has described Laurence Olivier's influential performance) warrants closer investigation and invites mockery, which is where camp may enter. As Jack Babuscio notes, the four features 'basic to camp [are] irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour'. All four are clearly at work in McKellen and Loncraine's Richard III, but an often disturbing comedy is regularly foregrounded. For Babuscio, humour constitutes the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment and, in the process, of defining a positive identity.4

The film considers how Richard has been configured both in hostile and positive lights, both within the play and in its historical and theatrical contexts. Humour helps in confronting, if not bearing, the multiple burdens of the past.

The film directly connects with the theatrical history of Richard III in acknowledging its origins in a celebrated Royal National Theatre production that opened in 1990 and continued, on tour, for over two years. Directed by Richard Eyre, this production realized an analogy