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Bad Shakespeare: Performing Failure

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Abstract: The Shakespearean actor is a readily recognisable figure within the transatlantic cultural landscape. They may move regularly between the theatrical environs, which garnered them the appellation and more mainstream fare in television or film, but they are always, somehow, *Shakespearean*. However, if easily identified, the Shakespearean actor is harder to define. For example, the multi-volume *Great Shakespeareans* shortlists individuals who, in editors Peter Holland's and Adrian Poole's words, have had 'the greatest influence on both the interpretation, understanding and reception of Shakespeare, both nationally and internationally'). But such scholarly endeavours consistently stop short of describing any social or cultural function which the Shakespearean may fill or any implicit ideological work at hand in the naming of actors *as* Shakespeareans. These omissions are all the more curious because, while its attribution is inherently positive in the examples above, popular culture also abounds with rather less illustrious Shakespeareans. Consider, for instance, how Niles and Frasier Crane watched, appalled, while their childhood icon, Jackson Hedley (Derek Jacobi), gurned and groaned on stage. Playing a caricature of himself in *Extras*, meanwhile, Ian McKellen confides that he knew what to say in *The Lord of the Rings* because 'the words were written down for me'. Welcome to bad Shakespeare: a trope that has existed for as long as there has been the potential for 'good' Shakespeareanism. For evidence, one needs only consider Hamlet's stubborn insistence that actors deliver their lines 'trippingly on the tongue'. Bad Shakespeare has no such luck, however. From Mr Wopsle in *Great Expectations* to Alan Rickman's frustrated thespian-turned-science-fiction-star in *Galaxy Quest* ('How did I come to this? I played Richard III. There were five curtain calls'), these Shakespeareans are hammy, self-congratulating and embarrassing; they exhibit what David McGowan calls 'visible acting'. Reversing a more typical focus on prestige and skill, this article will reflect on what it says about our relationship to Shakespeare that we take such evident and knowing pleasure in watching highly respected performers apparently fail at their jobs. Building on film studies and scholarship on badfilms, I will consider whether these fictional performances of failure only reify existing norms of 'good' performance or if they offer more subversive possibilities.

Keywords: Shakespeare; performance; failure; popular culture; comedy

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1. Introduction

John Gielgud's 1964 production of *Hamlet* teeters on the edge of failure in Jack Thorne's *The Motive and the Cue*. First performed on stage on the 21 April 2023 at the National Theatre in London, the play imagines the twenty-five days of rehearsals before the modern-dress version of *Hamlet* opened on Broadway in New York. Gielgud and star Richard Burton butt heads repeatedly. On only Day 4 of rehearsals, for instance, Burton bristles when he feels that Gielgud offers what 'sounds suspiciously like a line reading'.[1] Yet, the possibility of Shakespearean failure is not limited to the rehearsal room. Back in his hotel accommodation, Burton flirts with his new wife, Elizabeth Taylor. When Taylor asks if there is a role suitable for her in *The Merchant of Venice*, Burton demurs, explaining, 'You're too sexy for Portia' (Thorne 2023, 1.6, p. 38). Taylor takes offence, and so Burton concedes a playful vision of a Franco Zeffirelli-directed production that the couple will perform together in Italian, with 'toga'd waiters bring[ing] giant quaffs of wine to the patrons as they sit'. Taylor is amused, and her husband quips, 'We'll drink, fuck and be merry. And no one will notice

you're horribly miscast' (Thorne 2023, 1.6, pp. 38–40). Of course, the tension that drives much of *The Motive and the Cue* lies in the fear that Burton will be unable 'to make the Hamlet [his own]' (Thorne 2023, 1.7, p. 50). Unlike his director, he is not 'a natural' prince, Taylor explains. She continues, in Burton's 'world', shaped by an alcoholic father, 'you either wanted a fight or you didn't' (Thorne 2023, 2.1, p. 68). But Burton's identity as a Shakespearean fails in other equally telling ways that rub against Gielgud's professional authority and cultural capital. In 1.9, Burton orders scotch and sodas for the company as they rehearse, for instance. And then, in 2.2, Burton recounts for his fellow actors an anecdote from the opening night of Laurence Olivier's *Titus Andronicus*. The Welsh star describes at length the way that Olivier engineered Titus' dismemberment, marvelling 'the whole manner of the speech was merely a smokescreen. A foil for his magic trick'. Gielgud is initially patient with his star but later snaps: 'Titus doesn't even chop his own hand, Aaron the Moor does it. . . I don't know which speech of Sir Laurence Olivier's you are remembering, but it was not that one' (Thorne 2023, 2.2, p. 76). Even Shakespeareanism by proxy falters in the face of Gielgud's exhaustive knowledge; 'I am a silly lump' (Thorne 2023, 2.2, p. 77), Burton notes acerbically.

Yet, the prospect of failure is not limited to Burton in Thorne's play. Gielgud is haunted by his increasing irrelevance as his 'professional life has crumbled' (Thorne 2023, 2.3, p. 80). Burton thus needles him, 'They've given Larry the South Bank [. . .] and that Shakespeare lot in Stratford sure as hell don't want you with their modern ways. [. . .] So great. So young. And now—ignored. Poor old homeless Sir John' (Thorne 2023, 1.8, pp. 51–52). *The Motive and the Cue*'s interest in professional and artistic failure provide me with an opening example of this article's focus. Welcome to bad!Shakespeare: a cultural preoccupation with fictional failing or failed Shakespearean actors or even failing William Shakespeares. It is a trope that crosses cultural hierarchies and forms; this article will explore this trope's expression in contemporary popular culture where, thanks to the increased accessibility of media since the digital turn, there is perhaps a greater 'surfeit' of bad!Shakespeares than ever before (O'Neill 2018, p. 121).

This is a trope that is baked into the foundational texts and apocrypha of Shakespeareanism itself. One need only consider, for example, Hamlet's stubborn insistence that actors deliver their lines 'trippingly on the tongue' and avoid 'saw[ing] the air too much' with their hands (Shakespeare 2006, 3.2.2–4). Hamlet's requirements are many and detailed; he speaks with the discernment of a seasoned theatre-goer, disdaining those players 'others praised' for their 'imitated humanity', and expressing more than a little of the frustrations of a playwright ('let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them') (Shakespeare 2006, 3.2.36–37, 3.2.29–34). Happily, the visiting players deliver their parts well, and Hamlet is astonished by the 'fiction', the 'dream of passion' that allows the actor playing Priam to weep for Hecuba (Shakespeare 2006, 2.2.487–97). But while Hamlet's sensitive 'soul' is spared the infelicity of poor performance, the newlywed Athenians are not in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The rude mechanicals' skills are in doubt from their first rehearsal. The lovely maiden, Thisbe, has a 'beard coming'; Snug is anxious that he receives the lion's part in good time 'for I am slow of study' ('it is nothing but roaring' Quince reassures him); and Bottom is unable to stick to his own part (Shakespeare 1988, 1.2.43–44, 1.2.625). Things do not much improve after that; there are no fairy fixes for these amateur actors.[2] Having endured their crude—and needlessly explanatory—performance, Theseus thus begs the troupe to cut their losses. The play needs no epilogue or 'excuse', he tells them, 'for when the players are all dead, there need none to be blamed' (Shakespeare 1988, 5.1.341–42). Several other Shakespeare plays invoke the prospect of bad acting to signal variously a failure of communication and self-awareness and even an end to life. Amidst what Olivia Henderson describes as a 'society of performers', Coriolanus likens himself to 'a dull actor' who has 'now/[. . ..] forgot my part' to express his difficulty fulfilling Rome's expectations of him (Henderson 2022; Shakespeare 2013, 5.3.40–41). In *Richard II*, the Duke of York speaks of the deposed monarch in related terms. Unlike Coriolanus, who wishes to make a quick stage exit though, Richard has failed to realise that his time is up. The

audience's eyes are not on his 'well-graced' turn but on 'him that enters next' (Shakespeare 2002, 5.2.24–25). Last and perhaps most famously, Macbeth laments life as 'but a walking shadow; a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/And then is heard no more' (Shakespeare 2011a, 5.5.24–26). This metaphorical actor is, like Richard, not 'poor' for lack of skill but for the termination of his moment on stage.

The prospect of an actor's failure to play their part, to hold their audience's attention or to simply occupy the stage is thus a potent, recurring threat in the plays. And these failures inevitably spill beyond the metaphorical register of their use in the plays and to the lived experience of the players who perform them. A theatrical anecdote offers a rich vein of this kind of failure through what Paul Menzer describes as 'a history largely free of facts but no less full of truth' (Menzer 2015, p. 3). Consider Richard Burbage's apparent failure to beat Shakespeare to a rendezvous with the audience member who 'grew so far in liking with him' as Richard III or other pleasurable tales of failure such as Noel Coward's admonishment, 'tut-tut, butter stumps', to Vivien Leigh when she dropped her stick as Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* (Bruce 1602; Miola 2000, p. 120). Gyles Brandreth, meanwhile, shares his experience of watching Judi Dench in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Old Vic in 1960. When Juliet asks the Nurse, 'Where are my mother and my father, Nurse?', Brandreth reports a 'reassuring voice called out from the stalls, "Here we are, darling, in Row G"' (Brandreth 2018). In so often charting the moments when it goes wrong and revealing the labour behind what should be—to quote Hamlet again—a seamless 'fiction', anecdote provides a powerful antidote to Shakespearean greatness, just as Burton's faulty memory of *Titus Andronicus* fails in the face of Gielgud's cultural authority. Indeed, anecdotes are 'not particularly concerned with keeping Shakespeare alive. He's doing just fine', Menzer argues (Menzer 2015, p. xvii). Actors fall, falter, forget their lines, or the text does not function as intended in rehearsal. But out of this failure comes something new, Menzer continues, so that 'anecdotes do for Shakespeare's plays, what Shakespeare's plays will not do for themselves' (Menzer 2015, p. xviii). How about, for instance, the audience member who answered David Warner's Hamlet during the 1965 Peter Hall production? When Warner asked if he was a coward during Hamlet's iconic 'rogue and peasant slave' soliloquy, a voice from the audience responded loudly in the affirmative. Warner continued, exhilarated by this encounter, and when Hamlet then asked, 'Who does me this', the same voice shouted back with their name. Warner finally replied, 'Swounds, I should take it'. In his account of Warner's performance, Norman Cockin writes that his 'close questioning of the audience [. . .] tempted a reply', but the anecdote tells us that evidently, at least one audience member succumbed (Cockin 1980, p. 134). In doing so, the play was momentarily transported back to the early modern period's '"flexible stage", which combined elements of the medieval *locus* and *platea*' (Purcell 2021, p. 82). Hamlet's question seems self-evidently rhetorical, but which of Shakespeare's characters so frequently—and so desperately—turns to the audience for guidance and encouragement?

2. The Play's the Thing

Ultimately, Warner escaped a charge of bad!Shakespeare. His example handily demonstrates that failure—or the threat of failure—illuminates contemporary expectations of what 'good' Shakespeare looks like, such as when the performer's skill is met by a quiet, reverential audience, for example. It does this just as 'badfilms', films that are 'identified, distinguished and potentially valued for their incompetence and technical failure', often confirm aesthetic norms (Bartlett 2019, p. 40). Uku Tooming poses that they do so if only because it is in the absence of convention that 'one learns to understand cinematic possibilities' (Tooming 2020, p. 32). And this connection is precisely why I advance bad!Shakespeare as a way of organising and articulating a hitherto unexplored yet significant phenomenon. To recognise that bad!Shakespeare is simultaneously distinct from yet always reliant upon what culture deems 'good' or 'successful' Shakespeareanism, I have borrowed and adopted a way of categorising metadata used in digital fandoms. Moonbeam explains that the sandwiching of an exclamation mark between an adjective and a noun is a 'short form for

expressing the presence of a particular trait or defining quality of a character in a story'. Typically, this piece of fan vernacular is deployed in a more specific way, though describing a style of characterisation in fan works which is 'not part of the original canon [. . .] or is at least an extreme interpretation of the canon' (Moonbeam 2017). The use of this format with imagined examples such as sauve!Malvolio or butch!Viola signals the unlikeliness of these combinations based on the characters' behaviour and description by others in *Twelfth Night*. My coinage of bad!Shakespeare similarly recognises that the trope functions as a mirror image of (good) Shakespeareanism. It reverses a more typical association of the Shakespearean with prestige and skill and instead presents fictional Shakespeareans (or Shakespeares) who are, instead, bad at their job; they are histrionic performers and self-obsessed losers who can never truly meet the lofty heights of their personal ambition.

The trope is, therefore, inherently self-conscious and meta-theatrical. Casting acts as a shortcut to comedy as these individuals (more usually recognised by the audience for their Shakespearean prowess) navigate the caprices of an industry that cares little for their artistry. Consider, for instance, Derek Jacobi's cameo as Jackson Hedley in *Frasier* (1993–2004). The titular Frasier Crane (Kelsey Grammer) meets Hedley at a fan convention, and when Crane asks if Hedley performs on stage any longer, he laments the popularity of the science fiction series he is promoting: 'The show [*Space Patrol*] became so popular I can't get cast as anything but an android, a cyborg or, when I get the chance to really spread my wings, a mutant'. As I will touch upon later in this article, Hedley's predicament echoes almost exactly that of Alan Rickman's Shakespearean-turned-science-fiction-star, Alexander Dane, in *Galaxy Quest* (dir. Dean Parisot, 2000). Like Dane, Hedley now makes a living from touring conventions and endorsing consumer goods (he is late to rehearsal because he was cutting the ribbon at 'Galaxy Mattresses'). Of course, it has been ever thus, and a reason for the trope's ubiquity is the frequency with which contemporary Shakespeareans move between the theatre and mainstream film and television, where their cultural capital is often knowingly (even cynically) deployed. Surely, ghosting both parodies is Patrick Stewart's arguably career-defining role as Captain Jean-Luc Picard on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–1994), which models a successful shift to the popular. Alongside the sci-fi series' frequent quotation of the playwright, Picard is repeatedly shown rehearsing Shakespeare's plays as both director and actor. The captain's hobby, legitimated by Stewart's own Shakespeareanism, 'earns gravitas for a medium and a genre which have always struggled for artistic respectability'. And *Star Trek* returns the favour, Andrew James Hartley observes. Stewart's subsequent return to theatre 'brings star power and considerable economic gain[. . .]' (Hartley 2007, p. 44). Bad!Shakespeare, however, ignores the possibility of a reciprocal and fruitful exchange of cultural capital and instead deliberately practises the thing that it pokes fun at: the apparent incompatibility of the Shakespearean with 'base' everyday needs (like money!) or desires (sci-fi!).[3] Tellingly, Crane is unable to imagine Hedley's career change as anything but 'demeaning', and so he bankrolls a showcase of Hedley's theatrical performances (a decision he soon regrets).

Jacobi's cameo also demonstrates that the bad!Shakespearean is often already queer-coded, characterised by their rejection of (heterosexual) masculine norms through their verbosity, grandiloquence, urbanity and—simultaneously—their sensitivity and hauteur. But while this helps to signal their eventual failure, it is when they start to act and their mode of self-presentation advances beyond camp to what David McGowan writing on the Hollywood star Nicholas Cage terms 'visible acting' that their bad!Shakespeareanism is complete. Citing James Naremore's work on badfilm, McGowan proposes that visible acting rejects the aesthetic imperative to 'make obvious theatrical eccentricity seem invisible' (McGowan 2017, pp. 218–19). Indeed, according to Becky Barlett, badfilms are pleasurable despite their stylistic failure because their badness is 'obvious' (Bartlett 2019, p. 43). The bad!Shakespearean thus eschews naturalism by acting in overblown, histrionic ways. The true reason that Hedley has not returned to the stage quickly becomes apparent when Hedley performs Hamlet's dying speech with exaggerated flourishes of his arms and a noisy death rattle between lines that culminates in a final guttural gasp after 'the rest is

silence'. In the action-comedy *Hot Fuzz* (dir. Edgar Wright, 2007), the local Neighbourhood Watch Alliance for the village of Sandford murders amateur actors Martin Blower (David Threlfall) and Eve Draper (Lucy Punch). The investigating police detective, Nicholas Angel (Simon Pegg), is appalled by the NWA's actions, but when questioned, their leader, Simon Skinner (Timothy Dalton), is matter of fact: 'Blower's fate was simply the result of his being an appalling actor'. 'You murdered him for that?' Angel exclaims, and Skinner answers dryly, 'Well he murdered Bill Shakespeare'. The film does not disagree with the NWA: the production includes an apparently dead Romeo kissing his lover, Juliet, shouting 'bang' as she points a revolver at her head and then a vaudeville-style performance of 'Lovefool' by the Cardigans only seconds after the play's tragic end. With their concern for the village's reputation, the NWA cannot suffer Blower's and Draper's failure as Shakespeareans, not when the Dramatic Society is an 'important feather in [Sanford's] cap', the NWA explain.

Bad!Shakespeareanism exists not only in practice but in theory, evident in the way that these failing actors articulate and explain their relationship to performance. For instance, the bad!Shakespearean may disdain recognisable acting systems. In the British sitcom *Extras* (2005–2007), the aspiring actor Andy Millman attends an audition for a stage play that Ian McKellen will direct. Entirely unprompted, McKellen asks Millman (Ricky Gervais), 'how do I act so well?' Millman is somewhat wrong-footed by the shift from discussing his own CV to his lofty peer's career, but the conversational detour seems at least a chance for some useful guidance. After all, the episode begins with Millman's recognition that he needs to 'get' some '*real* Shakespeare'—'the play's the thing: get me a play', he instructs his agent—and here is the next best thing. But the grandiose McKellen can illuminate nothing beyond a quite literal description of the mechanisms of performance. He can act 'so well' because he 'pretend[s] to be the person [he] is portraying in the film or play'. Sir Ian continues with a further rhetorical question, 'And how did I know what to say? The words were written down for me on the script'. McKellen's banal literalism hollows out the method that *The Motive and the Cue* dramatises and which so many bad!Shakespeares parody: the effort to ground Shakespearean performance in some inner truth. Jacobi's Hedley thus prepares for his eventual awful performance by announcing grandly to the room, 'it's time to centre', and then passing his palm slowly back and forth between his forehead and his heart in an affected gesture. In the British sitcom *Vicious*, McKellen upends the joke of his *Extras* cameo. Instead, his failed actor, Freddie, searches for a truth to his roles that is disproportionate to their background status.[4]

That the actor's inevitably unsuccessful quest for immersion is such a core narrative feature of bad!Shakespeare is worth pausing on. As Charles Marowitz observes, a 'naturalist/behaviorist approach to Shakespeare goes against something in the very grain of blank verse' (Marowitz 1997, p. 7). And yet, W.B. Worthen asserts that Stanislavskian 'principles' including 'the need to develop an inner life for the role' 'suffuse thinking about acting today' as well as actors' descriptions of their work (Worthen 1997, p. 212). Roberta Barker concedes similarly that despite naturalism and realism being 'neither an inevitable nor perhaps even an appropriate aspect of modern Shakespearean actor(s)', both continue to 'shape the contemporary Shakespearean stage' (Barker 2017, p. 47). In this regard, as in others, it is possible to see Bad!Shakespeare as a negative version of Shakespeare in popular culture. Indeed, this recurrent feature of the trope may be partly explained by bad!Shakespeare's use in a mainstream cultural context, where viewers are more readily able to recognise failing methods in practice than unsuccessful efforts to deliver early modern theatre's heightened language.

3. Ham Legs

Bad!Shakespeare thereby operates through a logic that is tacitly understood by mainstream audiences. As was the case for nonsense or invented foreign vernacular on the early modern stage, audiences can discern what is ridiculous or incomprehensible 'whether or not the literal meaning of the words themselves is understood by anyone' (Zucker 2016, p. 95). Similarly, audiences are not required to pinpoint specific moments of ac-

complishment from a given Shakespearean actor's career to recognise when their Shakespeareanism is bankrupt. We are in on the joke of bad!Shakespeare and—like our early modern counterparts—'always aware that a character [is] in disguise' (Hyland 2011, p. 60). If a pointer was needed, bad!Shakespeareanism is usually determined in its on-screen reception through the difference between 'visible acting' and the expected, naturalistic performances of the scene partner(s). The evident cachet of these Shakespeareans weathers their on-screen or on-stage 'failure' as does—somewhat paradoxically—the skill required for the kind of obvious acting that is legible as a 'bad' performance. Unlike the platonic ideal of the badfilm, these are not accidental failures. Consider, for example, the 'To Bob, or Not to Bob' episode of the animated sitcom *Bob's Burgers* (2011). The titular Bob and his family are recruited by their landlord, Mr. Fischoeder, who wants them to perform *Hamlet* to catch his brother in a lie. While Fischoeder knows enough to put *Hamlet*'s distinctive meta-theatrical structure to work, the opening scene of the episode establishes his and the Belchers' ignorance of Shakespeare's plays and their revered status (this is all the more satisfying because Fischoeder is voiced by American Shakespearean Kevin Kline). We learn, for instance, that Fischoeder attended a production of *Hamlet* by accident, mistaking it for a burlesque show, *Ham Legs*, and when he explains the plot of *Hamlet*, Linda (John Roberts) exclaims in surprise, 'I thought it was about Romeo and Juliet!' No one in *Bob's Burgers* wields cultural capital; everyone gets it wrong or awry, even Shakespeare's original characters such as the Ghost (Adam Godley) who qualifies his warning, 'Hamlet also thought about things too much, and that led to a whole big thing', with the admission, 'I *think. I'm* not a big reader'. Like the Ghost and like the Belchers who sing over the episode's credits, 'we didn't read the play, so we just have to guess', the audience of *Bob's Burgers* may not know the finer details of *Hamlet*. But they do not need to. The episode's comedy requires—and expects—the audience to know just enough, and just slightly more than the Belchers, to discern that everyone is getting it wrong, despite Fischoeder's claim that we are watching *Hamlet* but 'good this time'.

Popular cultural iterations of bad!Shakespeare do not keep company with the 'works adored' in cult fandoms as 'trash', 'kitsch', or 'in bad taste'. Nor does the trope feature in works which fail in their 'attempt to conform to a category of aesthetic/cultural object to which they aspire' (MacDowell and McCulloch 2019, p. 644). Rather, there is a deliberateness to the trope that means bad!Shakespeare falls outside of Sontag's famous definition of camp as that which is 'always naïve', even as the trope's central echoes campness's 'sensibility of failed seriousness' (Sontag 2018, pp. 6, 10). Jeffrey Sconce's distinction between badfilm and 'terrible' films is helpful in this regard. Sconce identifies the latter as mainstream works which are technically proficient but calculating in their 'alliance' of form, market and representational politics (Sconce 2019, p. 672). There is, he argues, a 'craven' quality to these texts' engagement with failure, which I think is equally true of mainstream bad!Shakespeare, and apparent in the mechanisms by which the trope seems to subvert 'good' Shakespeare.

The last decade has supplied some notable examples of long-form texts which 'renegotiate our relationship to powerful men' by exploring Shakespeare's failures as a 'crap husband and father' (Butler 2018). These include Ben Elton's sitcom *Upstart Crow* (2016–), the speculative biopic *All is True* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 2018) and, to a lesser degree, Maggie O'Farrell's novel *Hamnet*. But beyond these works, bad!Shakespeare appears most often in cameos or bit parts. These are short guest appearances which invert or subvert the actor's star persona for comic effect. Consider, for instance, Ben Kingsley's role in *Iron Man 3* (dir. Shane Black, 2013). Kingsley first appears in *Iron Man 3* as the terrorist the Mandarin. When the protagonist of the *Iron Man* franchise, Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), finally enters the Mandarin's compound, though he finds the has-been Shakespearean Trevor Slattery. Kingsley's casting is a double feint. Although his career has grown more catholic as he has aged, Kingsley is perhaps still best known for his work on period drama such as *Gandhi*, for which he won an Academy Award. On the surface, he seems cast against type as the Mandarin, so the revelation of the Shakespearean 'beneath' the Mandarin feels like a

return to a more obvious—and expected—form. But the audience is wrong-footed once again: Slattery is not Sir Ben Kingsley, a respected actor of stage and screen. He speaks with a slightly higher pitch to his voice and a south London accent that is distinct from the received pronunciation-adjacent sounds Hollywood audiences expect from English Shakespearean stars. Slattery's employer, Killian (Guy Pierce), admits, meanwhile, that his performances are 'a little over-the-top sometimes [. . .]. They say his Lear was the toast of Croydon, wherever that is'. And in another familiar component of the bad!Shakespearean, Slattery explains that he took the part of the Mandarin out of desperation, confessing to Stark a history of substance abuse and of 'doing things in the street that a man shouldn't do'. *Iron Man 3* conflates Slattery's apparent personal shortcomings with his failure as an actor because there is, Killian's admission aside, very little evidence that he *is* a bad Shakespearean. His Mandarin is as convincing as any other superhero villain and indeed, he needs to be so that the third act revelation of Slattery works. Yet bad!Shakespeare extends an invitation to the audience to play—and win—a game of cultural competence, just as it does in *Bob's Burgers*. So, while Killian's description offers a sly joke for those familiar with England's theatre landscape (Slattery is located on the geographic and cultural periphery of his profession), it is necessarily qualified for a global audience who will be similarly unsure about the location of the south London suburb ('wherever that is').

Slattery's seemingly connected personal and professional failures are not offered as meaningful sites of contemplation. He is a punchline that furnishes a late-stage plot twist and little more. A missed opportunity, perhaps, given Stark's increasing uncertainty about his ability to play his role across phases one and two of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Downey Jr.'s own problems with addiction. This is because, for all that, the mainstream milks bad!Shakespeare for comedy, it is always a temporary pose that is relieved either by the short form mode of its expression (one-off cameos or small bit parts) or, as I will continue to demonstrate, by its incorporation in longer-form content as a necessary step on the way to Shakespearean success. The trope is thus fundamentally ambivalent in its relationship to the thing it parodies. On the surface, bad!Shakespeare seems to critique the attribution of cultural and social capital to certain individuals through their proximity to apparently 'Shakespearean' qualities. Yet, the actual functioning of the trope in popular culture reveals an evident difficulty or discomfort at sustaining Shakespearean failure. Bad!Shakespeare defaults to more familiar and perhaps more comfortable modes of success, or it vanishes entirely, having served its comic function. This is a fundamental problem with the trope that renders its otherwise productive critique of Shakespeare's cultural authority ultimately toothless. As I have written previously on *Upstart Crow:*

> [. . . The] ability to expose the privilege that empowers 'genius' cuts both ways. Shakespeare's mythical status is stripped bare for comedy, but also revealed is the disingenuousness of a comic loserdom—[screenwriter] Elton's and [star David] Mitchell's—founded on and powered by the effacement of the various kinds of educational, social or gender-based privilege enjoyed by both men. (Blackwell 2021, p. 141)

If contemporary Shakespeareanism is a 'reflection of modern cultural practices' and defined not just by 'high' cultural performance but by its movement 'between cultural modes', then these failures of failure require particular scrutiny (Blackwell 2017, p. 226). They indicate that the bad!Shakespeare project is more invested in extending and maintaining Shakespeare's legacy in popular culture than critiquing the mechanisms of his ubiquity.

4. It's Not the Skull

On the surface, Maggie O'Farrell's acclaimed novel *Hamnet* is a less obvious example of bad!Shakespeare. It thinks about failure 'straight', as it were, because its project is not the pleasure of audience or reader subversion but to 'free' itself from the 'freight of association' that Shakespeare's name brings (Merritt 2020). O'Farrell focuses rather on Agnes (as she calls Anne Hathaway), even going so far as to refer to Shakespeare only by the roles he serves in her life (the Latin tutor, husband, etc.). Yet, like other popular bad!Shakespeares,

Hamnet also succumbs to the thing it tries to sidestep. The novel concludes with one last-ditch attempt for Agnes to reunite with her absent husband in the wake of their son's death as she travels to watch the play confusingly named *Hamlet* ('There had to be some odd, strange mistake') (O'Farrell 2020, p. 345). She watches as the young Prince steps out on stage 'rehearsed and primed and prepared' with Hamnet's mannerisms, and then as Shakespeare appears as his ghostly father. Agnes realises that her husband has 'done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child's suffering for his own', and the gesture returns the couple to one another (O'Farrell 2020, p. 365). But O'Farrell does not end here. For, as soon as the author sketches this necessary reunion, she returns to Agnes marvelling at the feel of the 'boundary between audience and players, between real life and play': to a Hamlet (or Hamnet) 'as he might have been' and a ghost with her husband's hands, beard and voice (O'Farrell 2020, p. 367). Having the last word is a 'powerful position' to occupy, whether literally or more figuratively, as in this example. Janette Dillon argues that remaining on stage 'can seem to give a clinching, summative quality', which encourages the audience to 'see the action through the eyes of that closing perspective' (Dillon 2012, pp. 92–93). Agnes may be the novel's beating heart, but *Hamnet* ends with her observing her husband's transcendent skill as both actor and playwright.

Dillon's point is echoed in Paul Prescott's observation that the conclusion of a play is a 'time of intense marking and heightened participation' (Prescott 2012, p. 52). Bad!Shakespeare's various endings are similarly significant because, as *Hamnet* demonstrates, they are a final litmus test of how alert a text is to the radical possibilities of failure and, in José Esteban Muñoz's words, to 'reject[ing] normative ideas of value' (Muñoz 2019, p. 173). *Hamnet* is a case in point, but so is my opening example: *The Motive and the Cue*. Despite its earlier, interesting work on the contingency of performance, there is an increasing sense of submission to the transformative power of Shakespeare as the play moves towards its conclusion. With Gielgud's encouragement, Burton channels his own antipathy towards his father rather than Hamlet's expected filial devotion. In doing so, he 'unleash[es]' the 'truth' he finds within and at long last successfully navigates Marvin Carlson's famous configuration of the 'paradox' of Hamlet: that audiences expect each new actor to 'establish *his own* Hamlet' despite the Danish prince being 'the role in the English language tradition that evokes the most crowded field of ghosts' (Carlson 2001, p. 81). Richard O'Brien identifies a similar pattern in the use of *Hamlet* in two other essential bad!Shakespeare texts: the Black comedy film *Withnail and I* (dir. Bruce Robinson, 1987) and the 'semi-fictional' travel sitcom television and film series *The Trip* (dir. Michael Winterbottom, 2010–2020) (O'Brien 2018, p. 1). For the titular Withnail, as for actor and comedian Steve Coogan in *The Trip*, Shakespeare's 'greatest part for a young male actor helps to highlight themes of transience, regret, ghosting, and wasted ambition'. But Hamlet 'also points a way out of the darkness' for Coogan and Burton, too (O'Brien 2018, p. 9). Gielgud thus proclaims triumphantly of his star: 'And *that* is a Hamlet I have never seen' (Thorne 2023, 2.6, p. 93).

A laudatory tone is carried into *The Motive and the Cue*'s final scene and was emphasised in its first performance at the National Theatre in 2023. Thorne's play provides the final closing stage directions:

> BURTON *is left*.
>
> *He steps forward*.
>
> *He becomes a Prince*.
>
> *He takes a deep breath*.
>
> *Curtain*. (Thorne 2023, 2.7, p. 104)

This is evidently a transformational moment as Burton 'becomes' Hamlet, but there remains a degree of openness or uncertainty about what happens next within the confines of the text alone. The historic success of the Broadway production is not a given because, as Peggy Phelan famously expounds, theatre's 'only life is in the present' (Phelan 1993, p. 146). Narrative or historical inevitabilities are suspended in the gap between Burton's

'deep breath' and Hamlet's speech (which we never see). Silence, Robert Shaughnessy explains, 'renders the outcome of the action, at least momentarily, insecure' (Shaughnessy 2012, p. 209). The production entertains no such doubts, however, through the addition of three theatrical elements to Thorne's instructions, which grant an uncomplicatedly triumphant tone to Burton's 'deep breath'. First, the moment is accompanied by Handel's rousing coronation anthem, 'Zadok the Priest'; second, it is contextualised on monitors dotted around the auditorium, which announce, for instance, that 'Richard Burton went on to appear on stage another four times. No other production matched the success of his Hamlet'.[5] Thirdly, Burton (Johnny Flynn) stands, his back to the audience, with a skull in hand. This is, of course, Yorick's skull, which Hamlet scrutinises on his return to Elsinore.

In operation, it is an echo of what makes modern Shakespeare editions 'Shakespearean' according to Paul Menzer. There is a 'depth through duality, a doubling that telegraphs that meaning abides elsewhere' (Menzer 2023, p. 67). The theatrical ending of *The Motive and the Cue* is similarly *Shakespearean* because Burton occupies not only his own moment (the opening night) but a theatrical past and future. It is telling that to do so, however, the production relies upon an image of Shakespeare in performance that is also deployed as part of the bad!Shakespeare toolbox. It makes no sense within either the diegesis of *The Motive and the Cue* or any version of *Hamlet* for Burton to hold Yorick. As Paapa Essiedu corrects the comic Tim Minchin in a sketch for the 2016 *Shakespeare Live! From the RSC* anniversary gala, 'it's not the skull—that's the wrong speech'.[6] Contrary to Minchin's protestation that 'Hamlet always has the skull', Yorick does not appear until Act Five Scene One. Like the scene's soundtrack and framing information, it is thus the broadest impression of Shakespeareanism that is offered at the conclusion of *The Motive and the Cue* because the appropriateness of the skull collapses under the lightest of scrutiny. This is no accident. Douglas Lanier observes that despite carrying connotations of 'high art' and 'traditionalism', popular cultural Shakespeares signify 'instantaneous accessibility, newness, "democratic" inclusiveness, and anti-elitism' (Lanier 2007, p. 95). There are, of course, a whole host of strategies used to accomplish this, but Yorick's skull is a useful metaphor for the decontextualisation often required for Shakespeare to work (or successfully 'fail') in popular culture. Indeed, the portability of Yorick's skull attracts other failures like a game of telephone. As Coogan informs Brydon, his travelling companion in *The Trip to Italy*, Hamlet's lament 'Alas poor Yorick. . .' is the 'most famous misquote in the English language'. Coogan corrects Brydon's error ('Alas poor Yorick, I knew him Horatio' rather than '. . .. I knew him well'), and after a momentary fluff, completes Hamlet's address to the skull (2017, Episode 6).

5. How Did I Come to This?

Jack Halberstam writes that 'male stupidity masks the will to power that lies just behind the goofy grin', and a similar sleight of hand is in operation here (Halberstam 2011, p. 57). Shakespeare's cultural dominance may similarly be questioned, deferred, or even rejected, but it always lurks beneath bad!Shakespeare's temporary failures. This occurs in large part because of who gets to fail at Shakespeare in popular culture. Halberstam recognises that 'stupidity is as profoundly gendered as knowledge formations in general': 'unknowing in a woman indicates a lack and justification of a social order that anyway privileges men'. By comparison, male stupidity is not only forgiven but often not recognised as such because 'white maleness is the identity construct most often associated with mastery, wisdom and grand narratives'. Halberstam concludes male stupidity can thus be 'quickly folded back' into male success: an amusing or even endearing but ultimately temporary show of vulnerability (Halberstam 2011, p. 55).

To wit, I have yet to locate a failure of female Shakespeareanism in mainstream culture aside from Judi Dench's 'Hamlet the Dame' in the aforementioned RSC gala sketch. Tellingly, Blower is targeted by the Neighbourhood Watch Alliance in *Hot Fuzz* for crimes against Shakespeare, but his Juliet is murdered for having an annoying voice. Bad!Shakespeare is not just a gendered trope, though. It is white, middle or upper-class,

able-bodied men who benefit most from the privilege of failure without consequence, and accordingly, it is difficult to find the trope connected to non-white performers. As the RSC sketch attempts to point out, this is because Blackness is not legibly Shakespearean in the same way as whiteness. The comic takes offence when Essiedu queries his credentials, asking, 'Is there some intrinsic reason that audiences wouldn't accept me as the Prince of Denmark?' In an ironic refusal of expectation, it is *Minchin* who imagines he will be barred from the role because of a facet of his 'intrinsic' appearance—his ginger hair.

As a public acknowledgement of their previous failures, the RSC sketch captures the relationship in popular culture between Shakespeareanism and racial difference from a perceived white norm—or lack thereof. Indeed, I find it telling that one of the few Black actors involved in the trope, Colin Salmon in *Master of None* (2015–2021), holds a much looser and vaguer connection to Shakespeareanism than his white comic counterparts. The series' protagonist and aspiring actor, Dev (Aziz Ansari), meets Salmon—who plays an exaggerated version of himself—on the set of *The Sickening*, a low-budget horror film. Salmon speaks with an affected Received Pronunciation version of his own East London accent; his language is florid and formal, and his gestures are overtly performative. For instance, on describing to Dev the recent loss of his cat (of course named Shakespeare), Salmon intones, 'The memory of that gruesome silhouette behind an alpine sunset… well, it's something I will never forget'. Salmon pauses and stares theatrically into the middle distance. Dev leaves, discomforted by the grandness of the gesture, and the scene cuts away with Salmon still standing mournfully. Interestingly, the real Colin Salmon is better known for his performance in genre franchises like *Resident Evil* or James Bond and with nods to prior performances such as *Alien* Vs. *Predator*, the episode does not pretend otherwise. The joke, then, is not that Salmon has failed in his Shakespeareanism like Jacobi's Hedley—we are given no evidence of this. Rather, he is another broad caricature of the British Shakespearean working in Hollywood and the incongruous bedfellows it produces, with humour produced by the incongruousness of Salmon's theatricality and high cultural capital with the context in which he is employed.[7] In one telling scene, Dev asks if he can improvise a line for his character and is met with a dispassionate response from *The Sickening's* director: 'say what you want. This movie's not really about words.' But the grandiose Salmon is at odds with the logic of the mainstream. Showing his ignorance of popular culture, Salmon pitches Dev a concept for a film in which he is part-man and part-car, explaining, 'Batman has his Batmobile, Thor has a Thor-mobile. But in this movie I don't have a car… I *am* the car'. Inspired by his idea, Salmon stands and announces with a declamatory flourish, 'I have come up with the title for the film. *Car Person*. No wait, *Car Human*', to which Dev offers the more obvious, 'Why not just *Car Man*?' Salmon's Shakespeareanism is redundant and—worse—useless when devising genre pieces that are a cultural race to the bottom.

Salmon is evidently related to but distinct from other fictional versions of the British 'luvvie' in Hollywood, such as the aforementioned Shakespearean-turned science fiction star, Alexander Dane (Alan Rickman). Dane plays the scientist Dr Lazarus in *Galaxy Quest*, the name of both the film and the fictional cult television series that it parodies. Although the character is enormously popular with the series' fans and clearly remains his chief source of income, Dane—like Hedley—resents the role's hold over his career. To the exasperation of his similarly pigeon-holed and washed-up cast members who have heard this lament before, Dane protests, 'How did I come to this? I played Richard III. There were five curtain calls'. Both Salmon and Dane are thus bathetic for their inability to reconcile their high cultural aspirations with their mainstream occupations. Yet, Dane is an unsuccessful Shakespearean because he has been brought 'low' by his *Galaxy Quest* fame. His triumph as Richard has been forgotten; his fans do not clamour for 'Now is the winter of our discontent', but for Dane to deliver his character's tropey and overwrought catchphrase, 'By Grabthar's hammer, by the Suns of Warvan, you shall be avenged!' Salmon cannot claim even this much. The closest he seemingly gets to Shakespeare is the cat whose loss he grieves. Shakespearean failure thereby relies on pre-existing cultural capital, which always

runs—and is policed by the forms bad!Shakespeare takes—along racialised, gendered, classed and ableist lines.

6. Moor, Please

Extending their observation that the goofy grin conceals a 'will to power', Halberstam notes that 'Male stupidity is in fact a new form of macho, and it comes at a time when alternative masculinities have achieved some small measure of currency' (Halberstam 2011, p. 57). I propose that, just as male stupidity emerges in response to the increased 'currency' of more radical or subversive expressions of masculinity, the appearance of bad!Shakespeare in popular culture has developed alongside a growing awareness of the limitations of Shakespeare's representativeness. This scrutiny has been driven by the insistence of premodern critical race scholarship that the study of early modern literature, history and culture is never 'politically neutral', as Kimberly Anne Coles, Kim F. Hall, and Ayanna Thompson state (Coles et al. 2019). Rather, 'the colonial project is stitched in and through the language and literature' of this period. For Nora J. Williams, 'Shakespeare's supposed universality—which is often bundled with a sense of universal associability, his assumed relevance and goodness and importance in all his cultural interactions, his "lie of relatability"—crumbles under even mild scrutiny' (Williams 2022, p. 6). But the shallowness of the façade does not make the edifice any less imposing. In Vanessa Corredera's words, 'Assertions of universality thus gloss over Shakespeare as an alienating entity—a shibboleth for approved "high" culture often imagined as white' and, we might add, male (Corredera 2020, p. 29). Indeed, while this justified scepticism of Shakespeare's authority has coincided with a greater incidence of bad!Shakespeare in popular culture, it has evidently failed to result in a meaningful expansion of the associations of Shakespeareanism.

At least one recent example of bad!Shakespeare, 'Othello Tis My Shite' by Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele, has endeavoured to tackle and critique this legacy. And it is striking and instructive that their critique emerges from outside of conventional sites of Shakespearean meaning—an American sketch show broadcast on Comedy Central—and via two mainstream African American writer-performers. As the sketch begins, Lashawnio (Key) and Martinzion (Peele) seem to fail in their Shakespearean understanding. The two men bounce exuberantly out of the first act of *Othello*, trading not only a cod-Shakespearean, Black-inflected vernacular ('Oh this play doth seem dope to me') but excited predictions about the play such as 'methinks things are looking up for people of the darker hue'. The joke, it seems, is initially on Lashawnio and Martinzion for their failure to anticipate Othello's tragic end: an error that is only amplified by their loud proclamations (the titular 'Othello tis my shite!'), mimed sword fights and celebratory dances. However, Corredera notes that the sketch 'takes an ideological turn' (Corredera 2020, p. 31). As the men next emerge from the Globe, it becomes apparent that the failure is not Lashawnio's and Martinzion's but Shakespeare's own, as he is cornered by the two men and criticised for the implausibility of Othello's actions: 'If a brother kill himself every time he broke up with a white bitch, this world would be bereft of brothers'. Shakespeare (played by James Callis, who is best known for the similarly brilliant but weaselly Gaius Baltar in *Battlestar Galactica*) attempts to throw the blame on Christopher Marlowe, but the men scold Shakespeare for playing the same trick when 'the Jews wanted to kick your ass after *The Merchant of Venice*'; 'we do not purchase it, slick Willy', Lashawnio warns him. Through these critiques, Corredera observes, the sketch suggests 'that Shakespeare's engagement with and depiction of the Black male fails both then and now, for this play is largely understood as Shakespeare's racial legacy, and it is clearly insufficient' (Corredera 2020, p. 32). If Lashawnio and Martinzion are satisfied and the audience amused by Shakespeare's corrected version of *Othello*—'*Shafte* A Play in Five Acts'—it does not wholly solve or remove the tensions unearthed by Shakespeare's failure to provide for his Black audience. *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1971) and its early modern counterpart, *Shafte*, may provide the 'desired corrective for Shakespeare's duped, emasculated, and ultimately eradicated Othello', but it leaves the representation of Black culture in the hands of the very man who

failed so egregiously before (Corredera 2020, p. 33). The sketch's whimsical fantasy thereby maintains and even extends Shakespeare's authority to one of the foundational texts of blaxploitation cinema.

Despite its failure to sustain its critique, Key and Peele's bad!Shakespeareanism does at least begin to mobilise bad!Shakespeare as a generative force to 'bring down the winner' (Shakespeare) and produce an alternative (Halberstam 2011, p. 120). The sketch succeeds in this where others have not because its Shakespeare is exclusively remediated through popular culture, whether through Key's and Peele's comic talents and the well-established sketch format of the series or the fictional Lashawnio's and Martinzion's desire to see positive Black representation. There is no conventional Shakespearean prestige or cachet for 'Othello Tis My Shite' to default to.

Another candidate for bad!Shakespeareanism similarly practises the power of 'being wrong, in losing, in failing' by invoking the trope without the safety net of the prior and established Shakespearean greatness (Halberstam 2011, p. 120). The 'dramatic professor' Sean Garrity (Kevin Corrigan) appears in three episodes of the NBC sitcom *Community* (2009–2015), set at the community college of Greendale. Garrity belongs to a particular iteration of the bad!Shakespeare trope, whose lack of skill has trapped him on the industry's peripheries, relegated to teaching, directing or performing in amateur theatre. These Shakespeareans' professional achievements have long passed if indeed they ever existed. Garrity proudly shares, for example, that his drama department recently put on a 'modern retelling of *Macbeth* set in gangland Chicago', to which the Greendale student Jeff (Joel McHale) quips 'Oh, fresh take' and mutters in an aside to his friend 'And you think *I'm* lazy'. Garrity teaches on the module 'The Actor Inside Me' surrounded by posters of his one-man version of *Hamlet* and clearly models himself on Orson Welles in his dress (like Colin Salmon, he is clad in black with a blazer and a polo neck), his haircut and his intense, sententious way of speaking.

Amusingly, the series assists Garrity in his delusions of grandeur. Jeff's jibe aside, there is little to suggest that Garrity's pseudo-intellectualism is in doubt, unlike other *Community* professors whose credentials are regularly challenged or mocked. His classes are all well-attended, and the Greendale students hang on his every word, including one characteristic instruction that his aspiring actors 'drink a glass of cognac in a bathtub' as homework. With a wry self-consciousness typical of the series, the same episode sees Garrity pronounce that the emotional resolution the characters Troy (Donald Glover) and Britta (Gillian Jacobs) reach may seem 'easy', but he concedes 'we're not writers. We're actors. The story doesn't matter here'. As Garrity continues, the camera zooms in on his face, pulling tighter until he delivers his final line in a close-up, 'All that matter is our time… in the spotlight'. If the camera and the Greendale student body are convinced, however, the audience knows better than to believe in Garrity's abilities as either an actor, a drama teacher or a film scholar. We are sufficiently familiar with the premise of the series to determine that, like his peers and his students, Garrity is at Greendale because he has already failed in some way. Indeed, for all his pretensions, Garrity has no obvious professional accomplishments to his name other than his forthcoming *Hamlet*. He cannot even claim to make a living from acting. After scraping the Dean's car, Garrity is forced to pay him back in kind. He agrees to gatecrash the Dean's Thanksgiving meal and 'accuse him of stealing my girlfriend' and to play the improbably named Professor Professorson in an elaborate prank on Jeff, who has forged 'a phony teacher and class for a free credit'.

So far, so bad!Shakespeare. With his already dubious talents given over to hackneyed versions of Shakespeare's plays and to the Dean's convoluted psychodrama, Garrity certainly seems to embody George Bernard Shaw's famous axiom that 'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach'. Teaching at a community college is a worthy endeavour, of course, but *Community*'s loser characters are uninterested in pedagogic excellence. A running feature of the show is the main character's efforts to game the system by completing 'easy' credit options.[8] Continuing along this theme, Garrity returns in Season Five to deliver 'Nicholas Cage: Good or Bad?', 'an odyssey of discussion about an actor who keeps the

world asking' ('Introduction to Teaching'). The pairing of Garrity and the 'extremely enigmatic' Cage is productive within a comic world shaped by failure and frustrated ambition (McGowan 2017, p. 210). Who is better placed to advise that too much of Cage's enjoyably erratic performance style can be a bad thing? 'Take care', spread out one's viewing and avoid marathons of the star's films, Garrity counsels.

Unfortunately, Garrity's warning is ignored by one of his students, Abed (Danny Pudi), who 'desperately tries to place Cage within a tangible spectrum of quality (relative to other movie stars) and is driven temporarily insane by his failure to do so' (McGowan 2017, p. 209). As Garrity recognises, there is no answer to 'Nicholas Cage: good or bad?', even if Abed had previously found a definitive solution to another rhetorically named course, 'Who's the Boss' (a study of the 1984–1992 American sitcom of the same name). It is not insignificant, I think, that Garrity is associated with Cage in *Community* and that, unlike his students, he can comfortably occupy the mode of uncertainty and ambivalence that Cage engenders. While Kevin Corrigan was a graduate of the Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute and is a prolific film and television actor, his career to date has no obvious links to Shakespeare. Unlike starrier comic cameos, his—and Garrity's—Shakespeareanism is thus always in contention. Indeed, Garrity's (failed) Shakespearean capital is not his own—it is a pale imitation of Orson Welles via Lee Strasberg. This makes all the difference and is surely rather the point when it comes to an ironic subversion of Shakespearean greatness; like Cage, Garrity's skill is precarious and contingent. And unlike the main characters in *Community*, who are compelled to some measure of personal or professional success by the series' adherence to conventional character progression and development, the peripheral Garrity can fail in perpetuity.

7. Conclusions

The examples I have explored in this article register that popular culture has an evident difficulty disdaining or obscuring the inherent association of Shakespeareanism with greatness. There is, Richard Burt argues, insufficient 'hermeneutic density' to 'most instances of Shakespeare in mass media' to 'qualify as politically transgressive' (Burt 2002, p. 7). The fallacy of subversion is that it depends upon the coherence of the concept it endeavours to critique and, as I have tried to indicate through my coinage of 'bad!Shakespeare' that the trope is thus like a bungee cord that forever returns to the same starting point: Shakespeare as a symbol of white, male power and cultural authority. Even a flawed or limited iteration of bad!Shakespeare has its uses, though if only in its function as a mirror image of 'good' Shakespeare. It is a tool by which to identify the formation and circulation of Shakespeareanism in popular culture. If the Shakespearean expresses the text through some dazzling inner truth, the bad!Shakespearean can summon only the most mundane of motivations; if the Shakespearean thrills with the intensity of their performance, the bad!Shakespearean wails, groans, and misses their cue; if the Shakespearean dedicates their life to art, the bad!Shakespearean must attend a Sisyphean circuit of fan conventions, signing items for sci-fi nerds. These are helpful markers because of the absence of any selection criteria behind collections such as Julian Curry's *Shakespeare on Stage* or Jonathan Holmes' *Merely Players*, for instance, which communicates a larger problem that also affects bad!Shakespeare: the 'Shakespearean' exists largely as an affective mode rather than a set of definitions or working practises that reflect the precarious reality of employment in the creative industries. It becomes an inherent and unconscious state: one that just feels *right* as a way of describing certain performers. But as Miranda Fay Thomas put it, 'traditional understandings of what it takes to be a "Shakespearean actor" are based in the perpetuation of inequalities found at the heart of British culture' (Thomas 2021, p. 1). To be a Shakespearean is to have already succeeded, if only in terms of structural advantages—the good luck to be born in a specific part of the United Kingdom, to parents able to support an artistic career, or to have been educated in such a way that your pronouncements ring with cultural authority. In this way, the Shakespearean inevitably maps onto conservative biases within society about who has the right to power and authority. With only a few exceptions, the same

is true of bad!Shakespeare because the trope confirms the legibility of these associations in popular culture. It will not be until the casting of non-white, disabled, queer, trans or actors of varying body shapes becomes a norm in Shakespearean performance and thence the adaptation of Shakespeare in popular culture that bad!Shakespeare will also become a more capacious category.

It is theoretically possible to bypass such an aporia, but it requires an acknowledgement that, even when evoked in such ironic, marginal or fleeting ways, Shakespeare can unlevel the mainstream; as Lanier observes, the 'and' in 'Shakespeare and popular culture' marks 'not just a link but a distinction' (Lanier 2002, p. 3). Bad!Shakespeare must thus mobilise the affordances of its various popular cultural contexts to countermand a default to Shakespearean success. Key and Peele begin to circumvent this problem by reprimanding Shakespeare directly (*bad*, Shakespeare!); meanwhile, *Community*'s narrative contrivances demand failure. Its plucky students may eventually find their way to personal or professional success on- and off-campus, but its staff are trapped in Greendale's halls. And in a concluding iteration of the trope, the horror film *Theater of Blood* (dir. Douglas Hickox, 1973) takes aim at the institutions which dictate Shakespearean greatness. After failing to receive a Critic's Circle award for his season of Shakespeare plays, Edward Lionheart (the excellent Vincent Price) engineers a series of macabre murders that punish his detractors in a style inspired by the play they each critiqued. For example, Lionheart explains to the audience that Meredith Merridew (Robert Morley) likened the contrast between his Titus Andronicus and his two superior female co-stars to a 'ham sandwich'. In a scene that is easy to predict but no less ghoulish for it, Merridew is then made to eat his words and more. Lionheart force-feeds Merridew a pie that contains his two poodles, demanding if the critic will ever again 'ruin the reputation of an honest man?' But a more disturbing sequence exposes the critics' own moral failings. Lionheart tricks Solomon Psaltery (Jack Hawkins) into believing his wife (Diana Dors) is having an affair by posing as her masseuse. Psaltery assumes Othello's role with disquieting speed. On hearing her happy moans, he bursts into the bedroom and utters Othello's chilling command, 'down, strumpet', before smothering his Desdemona.

Theater of Blood is indeed an apt example to end on because it succeeds where the other versions of bad!Shakespeare surveyed in this article have become stuck: it mobilises failure as a means by which to critique normative values of success and to aspire for more and better. This 'art' 'quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art and for being', echoing Sontag's formulation of camp as that which 'doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good' but offers 'for art (and life) a different—and supplementary—set of standards' (Sontag 2018, p. 9; Halberstam 2011, p. 88). Nothing about *Theater of Blood* is quiet, but the film does perhaps unexpectedly deliver on its rejection of both capitalist measures of success, such as wealth accumulation, and neoliberal imperatives of self-improvement. What is more, it does so with the important qualification that for many, 'failure can actually be the difference between life and death', Jes Battis argues that failure is not always an option under capitalism. Lionheart is certainly destroyed by the Circle's rejection. 'For thirty years the public has acknowledged that I was the master and this year my season of Shakespeare was the shining jewel in the crown of the immortal bard', Lionheart rages when he interrupts their post-awards party held at the head of the Critic's Circle, Peregrin Devlin's (Ian Hendry) swanky Thames-side apartment. The actor retreats to Devlin's balcony in desperation, where he recites 'To be or not to be' before plunging into the river below. The scene is deeply uncomfortable to watch as the camera remains inside with the critics who follow Lionheart along the balcony, laughing uproariously at him through the window.

Lionheart's murderous ambitions spring from his humiliation, but he seeks revenge with the assistance of a community who—unlike the critics—support his singular devotion to Shakespeare. He emerges half-drowned from the Thames and marvels. 'O brave new world', as he lies on the riverbank, comforted and cleaned by London's urban poor. It is these houseless individuals, along with his daughter Edwina (the RSC-trained Diana Rigg),

who help to deliver Lionheart's vengeance, serving as both audience and Chorus to his violent spectacles. Indeed, the revengers refute Devlin's assessment that the Shakespearean failed because 'a truly great actor illuminates the present as well as the past'. Disguised as their social 'betters', Lionheart and his company transition seamlessly between the well-heeled environs the critics live and play in and a past that London seeks to ignore: its abandoned homes, theatres, and docklands (tellingly, the first murder takes place in a Bermondsey squat that Devlin seeks to redevelop).

While the critics of the Circle reward newness and innovation, Lionheart thus demands recognition for his season of plays because it represents the culmination of his career. Like any revenger worth his salt, Lionheart will not allow the present to forget the past. But he also has no alternative because he faces a Prospero-like ending unless he, too, can be relieved by the 'indulgence' of a benevolent audience (Shakespeare 2011b, Epilogue 20). In this regard, Lionheart is a twisted mirror image of one of my opening bad!Shakespeareans: *The Motive and the Cue*'s John Gielgud. Burton mocks 'Poor old homeless Sir John' (Thorne 2023, 1.8, pp. 51–52), reminding the sixty-year-old director that his mode of Shakespeareanism is no longer desired by theatrical tastemakers. Of course, Gielgud is saved from Lionheart's fate. It may not be Stratford-upon-Avon or the South Bank, but success on Broadway opens another chapter in Gielgud's career. This future is barred to Lionheart, and he loses what legitimacy he once had when he leaps into the Thames. Yet, Lionheart learns a lesson that Gielgud is unable to appreciate because of his antipathy towards his fellow loser, Burton. Lionheart's critical failures are transformed into a monstrous bad!Shakespeareanism not when he washes up on the side of the Thames, but when he first sees the audience surrounding him. Joining those similarly rejected by society, Lionheart's vengeance is powered by the realisation that, in Halberstam's words, 'failure loves company' (Halberstam 2011, p. 120).

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Notes

1 Thorne (2023, 1.3, p. 27). All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

2 Michael Hoffman's 1999 film adaptation grants some skill to Flute at least. Flute (Sam Rockwell) rips off his wig, lowers his pitch from falsetto to his natural register, and smears his crude makeup to deliver Thisbe's final speech ('Asleep, my love?') in a moving appeal to the very audience who had just laughed at him.

3 The title of Judi Dench's recent tribute, which takes its name from the way that she and her late husband referred to the playwright during their tenure at the RSC in the 1970s, punctures this unrealistic expectation—*Shakespeare: The Man Who Pays the Rent*.

4 When rehearsing a role in *Downton Abbey*, Freddie renames his character 'Thomas'. '[W]hen it is pointed out that there is already a Thomas on the cast, Freddie triumphantly announces that he will use this to create "conflict".' Blackwell (2017, p. 225).

5 My thanks to Gemma Allred for sharing the fruits of her research and for confirming these details.

6 This sketch is another example of bad!Shakespeare. It features a series of prominent Shakespearean actors, who each give the then-RSC Hamlet, Essiedu, increasingly nonsensical line readings of 'to be or not to be'. When Judi Dench arrives in doublet, hose and toting another Yorick ('Hamlet the Dame') she is met by a chorus from the assembled Shakespeareans who protest again, 'it's not the skull'.

7 Salmon's apparent sophistication is also signalled by his costume—a black roll neck jumper, a garment that evokes associations of a distinctly European intellectualism—, a diegetic soundtrack of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, and props such as a silver tea set, a chandelier and the dark, mahogany-lined bookshelves of both his trailer and his apartment.

8 Some of Greendale's courses include 'Can I fry that?', 'History of Ice Cream', 'Advanced Breath Holding', 'Baby Talk', 'Intro to Senselessness' and 'Introduction to Basics'.

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