Dominic Cooke, dir. 2016. *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses.* Neal Street Productions, NBC Universal, WNET. DVD. (BBC, 2016)

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The BBC has celebrated Shakespeare's 400th Anniversary with the heritage epic series *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*, a three-episode sequel to the first series produced by Sam Mendes in 2012. The first series consisted of four film versions of *Richard II, Henry IV Part 1*, *Henry IV Part 2*, and *Henry V*. Therefore, the second comprises the three parts of *Henry VI* and dedicates a final episode to *Richard III*. Although, arguably, Shakespeare's original Henriads were not staged according to the chronological order of the reigns, following suit with its 1960s serial precedent *An Age of Kings*, the BBC thought it fitter to follow the real historical line of kings from Richard II to Henry VII's accession to the English throne. Theoretically, this order might reinforce E. M. W. Tillyard's propositions on the Tudor Myth (1974). Consequently, the whole series could be taken as the re-telling of the English decline after Richard II's deposition and the subsequent redemption of England with the advent of the Tudor monarchy. Nevertheless, if the Shakespearean explosion of the 2012 London Olympics gave way to a conclusion of the first series with Tom Hiddleston's rising as Prince Hal and his burial as King Henry V, consciously or not the second series was made to coincide with the extremely controversial Brexit referendum. At a time in which the British nation faces one of its greatest historical crises, *The Wars of the Roses* appears as a more than appropriate topic because of its numerous resonances with the Shakespearean texts. Certainly, it is not an accident that *An Age of Kings* and John Barton and Peter Hall's *The Wars of the Roses* have been re-edited and re-released on DVD in 2013 and 2016 respectively.[1] Likewise, the creative team and some reviewers have alluded to the similarities of the series with the HBO

[1] Actually, the DVD re-edition of Barton and Hall's *The Wars of the Roses* were released two days after the results of the Brexit referendum were published on 24 June 2016.

Game of Thrones series.[2] This saga has become a television classic that consciously proclaims its Shakespearean origins and its inspiration from the two Henriads.[3] More specifically, the character of Richard III has also been highly celebrated through the discovery of his remains at Grey Friars Church, Leicester, and through specific events like Kevin Spacey's Bridge Project tour and Rupert Goold's recent production at the Almeida Theatre.[4] Therefore, the series appears surrounded by what seems to be a flurry of interest in the decline of the Plantagenets and the rise of the Tudors.

Although this second series displays elements of continuity with the first one—i.e. Anton Lesser plays Exeter in both series and Westminster Palace is used as a location in both of them—in many ways it departs from the 2012 structure. Whereas the first four episodes were treated as self-conclusive films by three different directors—Rupert Goold, Richard Eyre and Thea Sharrock—in this production, Dominic Cooke is the director for all three films and, in association with Ben Power, is responsible for the cutting and editing of the four Shakespeare plays. This editing has resulted in a single filmic narrative arch out of four plays that could be taken as individual stories. Two main strategies were followed to condense these four plays into a period of only six hours. Firstly, Power and Cooke excised everything which did not strictly apply to the feud between the Houses of Lancaster and York. All in all, we attend the accession of Henry VI as a nine-month-old baby and we end up with the overthrowing of Richard III (Benedict Cumberbatch). This means that Jack Cade's revolt has been entirely expunged and the subplots related to Jean La Pucelle, John Talbot and the French Dauphin have been heavily cut or eliminated too. Nevertheless, although the text is abridged, a constant pattern in the three episodes is that the recitation of Shakespearean verse is given all the necessary attention

[2] See Sherlockology for Metro.co.uk (2016), Shepherd (2016), Ordóñez (2012).

[3] The Extra Features in the Spanish DVD Box-Set of *Game of Thrones* include a documentary entitled "La Verdadera Historia detrás de *Juego de Tronos*." In this short documentary, George R. R. Martin as well as a number of historians explain the resemblances between several characters in *Game of Thrones* and many characters in the two *Henriads*.

[4] Goold's recent production of *Richard III* at the Almeida Theatre opens with a group of archaeologists working on an excavation in the middle of the stage. Before the performance begins, they extract what unmistakably looks like Richard's extremely twisted spinal column.

on the small screen.[5] In many scenes, such as the public sequences taking place at Westminster Hall, the actors have the chance to display their vocal and physical projection in conditions very similar to those of the theater stage. Thus, Cooke clearly states that, just because the recording is filmic, it does not involve sacrificing the textual power of the play-texts.[6]

The other great strategy followed was the visual mapping of various themes and images which help achieve cohesion and coherence in the complex operation of blending four plays to form a single narrative arch. Firstly, the film makes ample use of icons that appeal to popular audiences. A multi-generational cast of British theater and television talent is featured. Very often, these artists come in pairs. That is the case of Cumberbatch and Andrew Scott (King Louis of France; BAFTA winner for his acclaimed Jim Moriarty), both of them stars in *Sherlock*. This also applies to the stars of *Ashes to Ashes*, Philip Glennister and Keeley Hawes, who play the champion John Talbot and the Lady Elizabeth Grey respectively.

Reviewers have highlighted Cumberbatch's performance as Richard III. Contrarily to recent film adaptations of *Richard III*, this series offers Richard's journey from his youth to his tyrannical rule. As Richard Plantagenet (Adrian Dunbar) challenges King Henry (Tom Sturridge) and rides to his home, he discovers his sons Edward and George practicing sword-fighting. A medium shot shows the sinister, deformed and swinging figure of Richard attending his father's call in what seems akin to a horror film closure of the first episode. Later on, in the third episode, we can for the first time see Richard's naked body as we see the repulsive hump on his back. Also, very frequently, Richard suffers the horrible pains of scoliosis and arm paralysis. Although the character is depicted as dreadful, we can perceive some of Sherlock's persona in how his humorous sociopathy is often played out in the figure of this monarch who sits down in chambers below the ground and furiously finger-taps on the table as his wife Lady Anne and the two Princes are murdered in the London Tower.

[5] According to Charlotte Brunsdon, British quality television is endowed, amongst others, with two main assets: the "literary source" and "the best of British acting" (1990, 85–86).

[6] See "The Making of *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*" in DVD (2016).

Cooke employs a number of other iconic features that are recurrent through the film. The white rose and the red rose are constantly referred to through banners, heraldry motifs, battlefield markers, tapestries, and colors worn by soldiers of the different factions. Following suit with the first episode in the first series, a Plantagenet genealogy is shown by Mortimer (Michael Gambon) as he explains to Plantagenet that he is the true inheritor to the English crown. Yet, perhaps the most repeated icon is the crown that gives its name to the series. Passing from one hand to another, very often this coveted object is given close-ups and a life of its own. The object even undertakes its own journey as Henry VI throws it into the river and afterwards it is retrieved by Warwick's men.

The use of iconicity extends to the representations of landscapes, a theme which has come to be mandatory in any British historical series. Unsurprisingly, in line with a Tillyardian reading of the plays, the first episode commences with a view of the Dover cliffs and Cooke allows himself some poetic license in letting the viewer hear Judy Dench reciting part of Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida* (1.3.107–13). It is indeed significant that the opening aerial shot in the first episode features the White Cliffs of Dover, an icon of Britishness often displayed in film in opposition to the continent. Also, it is indeed noteworthy that Ulysses' speech on hierarchy is used at a time in which Brexit supporters challenge the European hegemony and order.

A series of other British locations are, likewise, exhibited. Amongst these, I would like to highlight the Tower of London, which is very often accessed through the so-called Traitor's Gate by boat so that, by way of reiteration, the viewer is invited to infer that somebody in the tower is going to be executed. Even in those realistic settings, Cooke does not let us forget that characters like Richard Gloucester need to constantly interact with the audience. Thus, Cumberbatch directly addresses the viewer as he is taken by boat through the Traitor's Gate. Also, he addresses us as he explains his plans to take "the English Crown." Afterwards, after savagely and repeatedly stabbing King Henry, he comes to us again to share his loneliness and lovelessness with the viewer (cf. *King Henry VI Part 3*, 5.6.68–93).

Pursuing this hybrid balance of theater, film and television, the series acknowledges that in filmic terms realism is something to be

pursued.[7] Therefore, long scenes are broken down into smaller sequences that provide realism and different settings: a hunting park, a shooting field, a tennis court, and a plethora of authentic locations. Montage is very often employed in narrative speeches in order to show what a character is revealing, and parallel sequences are featured. An instance of this appears in the first encounter between Talbot and La Pucelle at Rouen, as the two leaders deliver parts of their respective speeches to the soldiers. This filmic resource is employed again when King Richard and Henry Richmond deliver their battle speeches at Bosworth in an alternating sequence of parallel shots. Sometimes even experimental shots, such as the helmet camera shot opening *in media res* the second episode, appear, in this case featuring a street battle.

Attention has been paid to how Cooke chooses visual effect, spectacle and realism in battle scenes. Following realistic rather than theatrical metonymic premises, Cooke personalizes every battle. Thus, the battle of St. Albans takes place in the streets of the town.[8] Another battle takes place on the river and King Henry VI hides amongst the bushes spying on the soldiers walking on the water while rivers of blood fill the screen. Surprisingly, the scenes where the Old Man and the Young Man respectively discover their filicide and parricide are preserved in this production too (*King Henry VI Part 3*, 2.5.55–93). The battle of Tewkesbury is filmed in the woods and flies buzz around the corpses left hanged as the three York brothers look like three hairy wolves howling and rejoicing in their zest for violence.

Taking a look at the postcolonial controversies that also connect to Brexit, perhaps it is significant that Sophie Okonedo, a British black actress of Nigerian descent, portrays the "she-wolf of France" (*King Henry VI Part 3*, 1.4.111). If we accept the premise that there is

[7] Regarding the hybridity of the series, Rupert Ryle-Hodges, executive producer of the series, says: "It's a very interesting thing to work on because it's a mixture of theater, film and television. I really enjoy the fact that there aren't the usual boundaries you get between the three disciplines. I've not worked in the theater before, but I feel that there's so much which comes from the theater which influences how we made this" (See "Directing and Producing Shakespeare's *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*" 2016).

[8] As Cooke confirms, St. Alban's battle historically took place in the town ("Directing and Producing").

no such a thing as color-blind casting, this actress serves to present Margaret of Anjou as an object of sale ruthlessly waged by a sensual and cynical Somerset (Ben Miles) and a degraded Duke of Anjou (David Troughton). Nevertheless, Margaret's otherness is played out as her fierceness and impetus for hunting, archery and, eventually war, are represented on many occasions. Is this perhaps a striking allusion to the recent "unleashed racism" in Great Britain? Or is it perhaps a means to express the renewed distrust between the East and the West as well as the shameful part played by Europe in relation to refugees?

All in all, as mentioned above, the film makes significant textual sacrifices, and thus many of the complex subplots and theatrical achievements in each of the four plays are sacrificed for the sake of clarity and narrative pace. However, Cooke manages to keep up a straightforward storyline that may seem rather repetitive in some respects—the chessboards, the coronation ceremonies, and the Tower of London may seem a bit overused—but he manages, on the other hand, to individuate the complex map of characters in the film. All these characters who very often simply appear in the screenplay as "place names"—Suffolk, Somerset, York, Gloucester, etc.—are nicely clarified through the selection of strong interpreters who, with very brief appearances on screen, can create differentiated figures, thus resolving Al Pacino's complaint about the difficulty of understanding the entangled web of characters in *The Wars of the Roses*.[9]

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[9] Apart from the linguistic difficulty in Shakespeare's text, Al Pacino points out that a major difficulty in interpreting *Richard III* comes from the genealogical complexities of the previous three plays. See *Looking for Richard* (1996).

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How to cite this review:
Huertas Martín, Víctor. Review of Dominic Cooke, dir. *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses* (BBC, 2016). *SEDERI* 27 (2017): 231–37.

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