

The Lee Shore

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My Own Privatized Shakespeare: Capitalist Self-Fashioning in *My Own Private Idaho*

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A few months ago, some friends and I went to see *O*, the recent Tim Blake Nelson adaptation of *Othello* that relocates Shakespeare's characters to a modern day private high school. Personally, I was ambivalent about the translation of Shakespeare's "timeless tragedy" onto the basketball court. One of my friends, however, who knew the story of *Othello* and had even seen a production of the play, was extremely disturbed by *O* and said to me, "It was okay when it was in Shakespeare, but when it's in popular culture..." and then trailed off, shaking her head. Obviously, for her *O* had succeeded in taking something from Shakespeare and putting it directly into our

What is
"Shakespearean"?

modern culture. But in spite of that—or perhaps because of it—*O* was something quite different from *Othello*.

Can we then still call *O* and other films like it—*Kiss me Kate*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*, *West Side Story*—"Shakespearean"? They use little or none of Shakespeare's original language, change the plot of his plays to suit their thematic needs, and rename his characters. But of course they are still "Shakespearean"—not only do their credits tell us so, but

we recognize in their plots the basic structures of the Bard’s plays. A better question may be, Why do we *want* to adapt Shakespeare’s work into our contemporary culture? Because the very name “Shakespeare” contains a significant amount of cultural authority; to “Shakespearize” anything immediately makes it more “valuable.” He is cultural capital, ready to be appropriated, or privatized, for any modern day entertainment project. As Terry Eagleton has noted, “Shakespeare is today less an author than an apparatus” (*Shakespeare Myth*, 204); we always already recognize him regardless of the modern use to which he is put. And it is precisely here, in his instant identification and constant potential for adaptation, that his “timelessness,” and his timeless value, lie.

The universality we attribute to Shakespeare is merely a myth created to make sense of the many adaptations of his work into other historical and cultural periods. But it is a pervasive myth, and the tension it creates between timelessness and translation produces films such as Gus Van Sant’s *My Own Private Idaho*, released in 1991. Like other adaptations, such as *O*, it takes the basic story of a Shakespearean play—in this case, *Henry IV*—and relocates it to modern culture. What is distinctive about *My Own Private Idaho* is its method



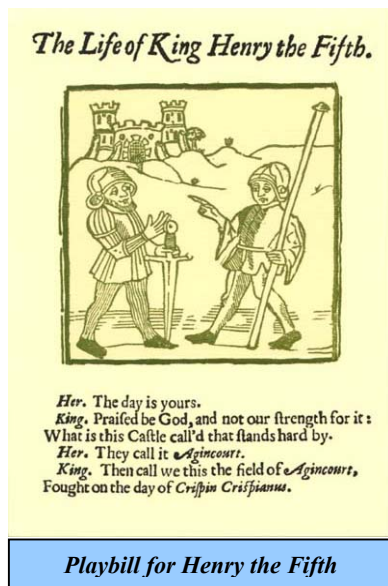
Advertisement for *My Own Private Idaho*

of adaptation. Van Sant’s film actually retains some of the play’s original language—so much that the credits attribute “Additional Dialogue” to William Shakespeare—at the same time that it removes some of the play’s characters and confines the Shakespearean matter to a subplot in what is otherwise an American road movie. Many critics have rejected the film’s attempt at adaptation, calling it “glib,” “imprecise,” and “oafish” (qtd. in Bergbusch 209), implying that Van Sant’s

understanding of the Shakespearean text was not up to high cultural par. (By contrast, the film itself has attained a cult status among devoted viewers, as is evident from the popularity of the website, <http://www.myownprivateidaho.com/>.) Van Sant, however, has made no pretense of perfect translation; he consciously took Shakespeare out of the early modern era and put him on the seedy streets of Portland, Oregon. He did not seek to reproduce Shakespeare, but instead admits to using him “to transcend time, to show that these things have always happened, everywhere” (qtd. in Wiseman 225). As Scott Favor, the Hal character, says of himself and his friends, “We are timeless.”

“Glib”
 “Oafish”
 “Imprecise”

But if there is anything “timeless” about Van Sant’s characters, it did not come from Shakespeare. The plays of Shakespeare’s second tetralogy, especially *1 Henry IV*, were products of the playwright’s historical period. They are dramatizations of medieval English history, but the changing culture of Elizabethan England in the late sixteenth century necessarily influenced the way

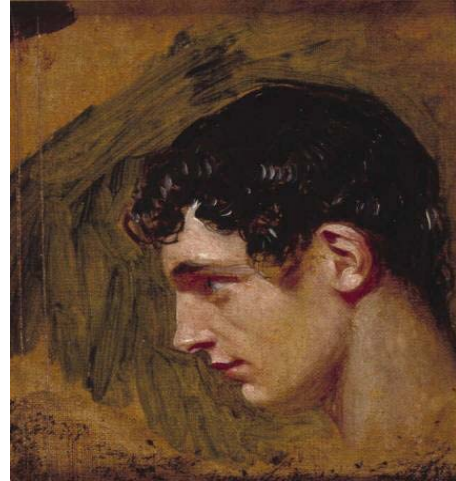


Shakespeare presented the events of that history. In the England of the 1590s, capitalist culture was just beginning to appear as an increasingly powerful petty bourgeoisie began to displace what Marx termed “the tottering feudal society” (*Manifesto* 474). The play, then, records two historical periods that exist in Shakespeare’s work cotemporally: the medieval world of Henry IV and the early modern society of Shakespeare. The clash between an old medieval

world and something newer is evident in *Henry IV*’s own plot and subplot. At Glendower’s castle in Wales, Hotspur exemplifies the feudal world and its values of honor and chivalry. But the action and characters of the Eastcheap tavern are firmly planted in the early modern petty bourgeois culture, embodied by Falstaff. The play negotiates these two worlds,

as does Prince Hal, who seems to be our modern culture's favorite character. "Most critics in this century," Jonathan Goldberg writes, "have found it all but impossible to resist the attractions of the prince" (145).

And the same seems to go for audiences, too. In many modern theaters, *1 Henry IV* is not produced in isolation but in conjunction with *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. For instance, the Stratford Festival in Ontario, Canada, advertised this past season's productions of these three plays as part of the "Making of a King" series. Presenting the plays in series like this allows directors to center their productions on the education (or miseducation) of Hal rather than on, say, the tragic demise of Hotspur or the comic conceits of Falstaff. In



Leslie's portrait of Hal

conjunction, these three plays show not only Hal's madcap days but also his ascension to the throne and his successful unification of England and even Britain against the external enemy of France; truly, the "making of a king." By presenting his reformation as well as his aberrant behavior, modern productions can in effect reclaim Hal, justifying his truancy by his successful monarchy.

**"the prince
must sound the
basestring of
humility"**

What actually makes this king, however, is a point of contention. The many social forces in the play—Hotspur, Hal's father, Falstaff—all affect Hal in some way, even at the level of his language. Hal's speech slips easily from low prose to high poetry depending on his setting and his company. But whereas

Hal's linguistic fluidity may have once been understood as a sign of how easily he is *influenced*, we might see it now as evidence of Hal's skills of *appropriation*. Hal is, like Van Sant, taking what he needs from discourses that possess cultural capital. As Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out, Hal's

linguistic ability indicates his political prowess: “The prince must sound the basestring of humility if he is to know how to play all of the chords and hence to be the master of the instrument, and his ability to conceal his motives and render opaque his language offers assurance that he himself will not be played on by another” (*Bullets* 32). With the distinction between cultural influence and political appropriation, and the benefit of Hal-centered productions, Prince Hal is no longer *made into a king* but instead *makes himself* into one. Hal’s royal self is *self-fashioned*; he is subjectified, and given control, in his speeches, the end result being an entirely new type of prince.

For this reason, he does not fit neatly into any of the pre-established social settings within which he operates. He is often considered “Machiavellian”—calculating, manipulative, political—



Portrait of Henry IV

certainly not conforming to the code of honor manifest in *Hotspur*. Instead, he would seem to be under the influence of Falstaff, who contends that honor is nothing but a word, empty air. But whereas Falstaff will have none of the feudal conception of honor, Hal rehabilitates *Hotspur*’s ideals for his own use. When his father chastises him for his miscreant behavior, Hal shows that he is planning ultimately to displace *Hotspur* by appropriating *Hotspur*’s

honor for himself and his political ends. Hal persuades his father that “the time will come / That I shall make this northern youth exchange / His glorious deeds for my indignities”, calling *Hotspur* his “factor” and hinting that he will call him into “account” (3.2.144-149). Hal’s speech demonstrates that he intends to amass honor like capital—through a barter-like exchange—rather than by *Hotspur*’s superhuman feat of “[plucking] bright honor from the pale-faced moon” (1.3.200). This exchange will fulfill the promises of Hal’s soliloquy in which he assures the audience that his “loose behavior” is only temporary (1.2.173-195). Just as he will use Falstaff and the rest of his tavern companions as a “foil” to set off his glittering reformation, he will use *Hotspur* and his

honor to fashion himself into a monarch who samples from and then leaves behind both the feudal and petty bourgeois worlds of the play.

This skill in self-fashioning, along with making Hal the modern prince of medieval history, also makes him attractive to our culture, makes him, in Goldberg's terms, desirable. Goldberg

“Hal as the dazzling fabricator”

analyzes our “imaginary identification” with the Prince, which relies on the ideas of “Hal as the nation, as the mature individual, as the dazzling fabricator, English essence, American construct, in any event, ego ideal” (147). We, the audience, are drawn to Hal because of our own wishful identification with him and his bourgeois subjectivity. More than any other character, Hal can determine what he wants and plan to make it happen.

But Hal's well-planned success does not come without difficulty, and that difficulty is the dramatic tension of the play. It is how Hal succeeds, not merely the fact that he does, that would have drawn original audiences to the playhouse. In fashioning himself into a king, Hal must face and overcome the obstacles in his path, not the least of which is Hotspur and the rebellion. When Harry meets Harry, “hot horse to horse” (4.1.123), the future king meets the force that would keep him from the throne. Hotspur, as Hal's rival, is a source of adversity in the play and in Hal's movement toward the crown. In challenging and defeating Hostpur and his “ill-weaved ambition” (5.4.87), Hal ensures and justifies his own triumph as a new kind of political prince.



Tom Troupe as Jack Favor, Mayor of Portland

My Own Private Idaho, however, does away with this dramatic tension by nearly eliminating the character of Hotspur. He becomes merely a passing reference used by Jack Favor, the mayor of Portland, to make his wayward son, Scott, feel guilty about his “degenerate” behavior. Instead of

entering the political and business world of his father, Scott has been spending the last several years inhabiting the “Derelict Hotel,” posing on the covers of gay porn magazines, and prostituting himself on the Portland streets. All this has left Jack wishing for a less “effeminate” son. He says, in economized Shakespeare:

When I got back from France
and set foot in Clark County and
saw what your cousin Bill Davis
had done at his family’s ranch, I
thought, by my soul, he has more
worthy interest in my estate than
you could hold a candle to. And
being no older than you are, he
organizes operations for state
senators, lobbies for the small
businessman, and has an
ambitious five year plan for the
force that even I would like to
support.

This is the only reference to this

“northern youth” in the movie, and Scott

**King. For all the World,
As thou art to this houre, was *Richard* then,
When I from France set foot at Rauenspurgh ;
And euen as I was then, is *Percy* now ;
Now by my Scepter, and my Soule to boot,
He hath more worthy interest to the State
Then thou, the shadow of Succession ;
For of no Right, nor colour like to Right.
He doth fill fields with Harneis in the Realme,
Turnes head against the Lyons armed Iawes ;
And being no more in debt to yeeres, then thou,
Leades ancient Lords, and reuerent Bishops on
To bloody Battailes, and to brusing Armes.
What neuer-dying Honor hath he got,
Against renowned *Douglas* ? whose high Deedes,
Whose hot Incurfions, and great Name in Armes,
Holds from all Souldiers chiefe Maioritie,
And Militaric Title Capitall.**

The King’s speech to Hal, 3.2.93-105

easily deprecates his cousin’s importance. Nearly replicating Hal’s speech to his own father, Scott convinces Jack of his ultimate intentions, promising a reformation of his own that is hardly, if at all, hindered by Bill Davis’ competition.

Without a prominent Hotspur character to create tension in his rise to the throne, Scott, a modern Hal, is practically guaranteed success, a success that comes on two levels: financial and personal. His own birth assures his financial success, as he will inherit a fortune when he turns twenty-one. As he tells us, matter-of-factly, “I am going to inherit money. A *lot* of money.” And we need not ever doubt him. Ultimately, we see that he does “run headlong into his inheritance,” and this inevitable culmination of his life course surprises neither us nor the other characters in the movie. Even those who are in love with Scott, such as Bob, the Falstaff character, know that the

mayor's wayward son will eventually run into his fortune, even if they do not expect his complete rejection of his former friends when that day finally comes.

Scott's privileged birth may make him more of a spoiled brat born with a silver spoon in his mouth than a self-sufficient capitalist hero. But his personal success does not rely solely on his money; what is intriguing about this character is not so much that he is a millionaire but that he is a



Keanu Reeves as Scott Favor

self-fashioned millionaire. Scott becomes the man he wants

When I turn twenty-one, I don't want any more of this life. My mother and father will be surprised at the incredible change. It will impress them more when such a fuck up like me turns good than if I had been a good son all along. All the past years I will think of as one big vacation. At least it wasn't as boring as schoolwork. All my bad behavior I'm going to throw away to pay my debt. I will change when everybody expects it the least.

to be when
he wants,
not at his
father's
demand.
Admittedly,
he is
destined to

inherit his father's money, but while on his street "crusade," Scott is almost led away from that destiny not by political or

even financial competition but by social forces on the street. Scott's relationships with his lower class street friends threaten his inheritance, but these are inhibiting forces he introduced into his own life by embarking on his crusade. But just as he produces this subversion, he ultimately contains it by restricting the bounds of these relationships and, in the end, rejecting them altogether. The character with the most seditious potential is Mike, who openly admits to loving Scott. Scott, however, stoically tells him that he only has sex with guys for money, maintaining that "two guys can't love each other. They can only be friends." Ultimately, even this limited friendship is rejected, displaced by a fortune—and a female. Scott rejects Mike along with any queer investment or

attraction he may have secretly felt when he does finally run headlong into his inheritance and Carmella, his young Italian bride.

The absence of Hotspur, and correspondingly of real, external, political adversity, in Van Sant's telling of the Hal story implies two things. The first is that the feudal honor embodied by



River Phoenix as Mike Waters, with Keanu Reeves

Hotspur does not translate into modern culture. Even in Shakespeare's time, Hotspur and his feudalistic ideals were quickly becoming obsolete as capitalism and the bourgeoisie emerged in early modern culture. In our own culture, those ideals would be not only dated but completely unrecognizable, which is why Bill Davis is relegated to a passing reference. In an early version of the screenplay, Van Sant created a Hotspur quite similar to Hal. In a line cut in production, Jack exclaims of that northern youth, "And capital, good lord, Scott. He is turning into one of the richest men in the state!" (62). A far cry from plucking honor from the pale faced moon.

Hotspur's absence also implies that, along with being untranslatable, he is unnecessary, perhaps even undesirable, in the story of a modern, capitalistic Hal. Scott is a self-made man—and millionaire—whose progress is never effectively impeded and whose success is never doubted, a character quite attractive to American culture. The story of this modern, American Hal does not need a



William Richert as Bob Pigeon

Hotspur to grab the audience's attention; his imminent success speaks more strongly to our own social and economic desires than a struggle to reach a financial or political goal. Americans do not want to see such a self-made man fail.

It is precisely this American audience, as a sort of a silent partner in the production of the film, that makes *My Own Private Idaho* what it is. Van Sant was producing a version of the Hal story

“when you don’t have any ideas, steal from the classics”

for America in the 1990s, not England in the Elizabethan age. The audiences’ cultures, not just the culture of the film itself, determine how characters such as Hal and Hotspur are presented. Just as Shakespeare wrote

sixteenth-century England into his play about medieval history, Van Sant creates an adaptation fit not for any time, but for our time by capitalizing on Shakespeare’s iconic status and privatizing him for the purposes of an American filmmaker. As Van Sant has said, “When you don’t have any ideas, steal from the classics” (*American Film* 35).

Of course, Van Sant does have good precedent for this theft: Shakespeare himself, whose use of unoriginal stories is especially evident in the history plays. The only difference between then and now is that now Shakespeare is the classic. Shakespeare is possessed of what Linda Charnes would call a “notorious identity”: “A notorious name,” she suggests, “is the object of a cultural desire not



Chiara Caselli as Carmella, with Keanu Reeves

for what it signifies but, rather, for *signification itself*” (2). This is how Shakespeare functions in *My Own Private Idaho*—not as showing something about the nature of the characters but that the Bard can be, and often is, privatized in our cultural economy. As

Charnes writes, “fame *always* operates as a form of symbolic capital in ideological struggles and negotiations...it secures particular versions of history because of its purchasing power as a form of social ‘currency’” (6). And what currency could be more valuable than the Bard, especially once he has been privatized?

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