

Shakespeare, Cinema, and Linguistic Discourse in *Chimes at Midnight* and *My Own Private Idaho*

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By examining Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* (1965) and Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), this essay explores how adapting Shakespeare's language for a cinematic medium plays out a socio-logical shift from one literary discourse to another. One discourse is that of the logocentric academic community—the language of the few. The other is the unbridled and unsophisticated lingua franca—the language of the many.¹ The low (popular) discourse often occupies a symbolic space below the high (élite) discourse in a hierarchical pyramid.² Remarkably, Shakespearean theatre transcends this schematic order, occupying a unique space in our cultural psyche. His dramatic language is at once high and low, dissected and revered by academics while reproduced unconsciously by the quotidian utterances of the masses.³ The phenomenal discursive duality that Shakespeare embodies is in effect what makes his plays so adaptable to cinema.⁴ While early film directors used Shakespeare's cultural capital to legitimize their medium, Van Sant and Welles (among others) use Shakespeare to criticize the establishment.⁵ *Idaho*, for instance, uses Shakespeare both to legitimize Van Sant's story and to criticize the

¹ For a discussion of how Shakespeare's language has become the "lingua franca of modern cultural exchange", see Garber (3). For discussions of Shakespeare and popular culture, see Howlett, Jess-Cooke, and MacCabe.

² For the purposes of this essay, I shall ignore the inherent social justice issue of placing one discourse above the other. My interest here is exclusively in Shakespearean drama's dialectic shift between high and low discourse.

³ As Anderegg and Garber illustrate, Shakespeare quotations appear comically in the popular discourse without requiring an understanding of their original context. The joke instead "inheres in the dislocation from context" (Garber 3).

⁴ For discussions of the cinematic elements of Shakespeare's plays, see Buchman and Rosenbaum.

⁵ For discussions of how early film directors used Shakespeare's plays (among other literary works) to legitimize cinema and how contemporary film directors use Shakespeare to criticize the establishment, see Cartmell, Jess-Cooke, McDonald, and Rothwell.

heteronormative logocentric authority to which this legitimization appeals. Though Van Sant's use of Shakespeare captures a paradoxical high/low discursive unity, *Chimes* marks the beginning of what Welles would call a discursive tragedy. Welles recasts the *Henriad*—the tetralogy of history plays including *Richard III*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, *Henry V*, and sometimes *Richard II*—to highlight Hal's rejection of Jack Falstaff as a tragic betrayal that symbolizes Hollywood's abandonment of Welles's refined cinematic style.⁶ At the centre of this repudiation is the hegemonic transition between literary discourses, a reversal that exchanges high for low and low for high in search of financial gain. Though Shakespeare and his contemporaries increased their earnings by adapting to the tastes of a wealthy elite, the film industry depends on mass entertainment for financial success. Therefore, Shakespeare films generate more income when directors translate Shakespeare's language into a modern dialect or supplant it with the language of cinema.⁷ In other words, Shakespeare films make more money when they are re-written for a popular audience. By tracing the tension between visual and auditory language in *Idaho* and *Chimes* and comparing this discursive anxiety to a seventeenth-century cultural shift, I will investigate how theatre and cinema—as comparable mediums—play out the cultural changes of a society whose literary taste shifts from one discourse to another.

At the turn of the seventeenth century, London's theatre scene underwent a thematic change that indicates an underlying social tension between high and low culture, and the changing venues of Shakespeare's theatre company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, shows an anxious audi-

⁶ For biographical readings of Welles' portrayal of Falstaff, see Anderegg and Rothwell.

⁷ Cartmell, Jess-Cooke, Keller and Stratyner, MacCabe, and Rothwell have all noted how cinema parallels early modern theatre along economic, aesthetic, and critical lines. Firstly, the financial motivation behind the twentieth century cinema boom parallels the "profit or perish" mentality of early modern theatre economics (Rothwell 3). Secondly, both mediums share the "essential yet minor" role of the printed text (MacCabe 81) and the notable absence of an "authorial presence" (Bazin, qtd. in Cartmell 1151). Finally, both mediums needed to withstand an onslaught of morality-based criticism (Cartmell 1151–3; Howlett 165; Rothwell 5).

ence in transition. In the days of the Globe Theatre—Shakespeare’s most famous venue—wealthy theatre-goers would attend the same play as impoverished groundlings, albeit at a higher cost and from a higher vantage point (McDonald 118). The Globe thus represented a primarily popular space that was still savoured by members of the social elite. But by 1608, Shakespeare’s troupe—now called the King’s Men under the patronage of James I—found a higher profit margin by performing at Blackfriars,⁸ a more intimate theatre geared toward the wealthy (McDonald 119).⁹ This move betrays the company’s profit-motive, a motive that forced shareholders like Shakespeare to adapt to the demands of a higher-paying audience. The elite’s approval of Shakespeare—and the “deification” initiated by David Garrick’s Shakespeare Jubilee in 1769 (Shapiro)—eventually marked his work as high literature, a distinction that inspired early filmmakers to raise the cultural value of their medium by appropriating his work for the screen.¹⁰ Shakespeare’s appearance in a popular medium like film does indeed call for the attention of the (academic) elite,¹¹ but the mass-production of cultural goods also means that Shakespeare can pop up on screens around the globe.

As the company moved from the Globe to Blackfriars, and as Shakespeare’s audience became less popular and more refined, so did its dramatic performances. This growth is reflected in the abolition of William Kempe’s popular jig. A traditional reading of the *Henriad* places Falstaff—comic thief, vagabond, and liar—as a “sociopolitical problem” that must be “abandoned” by the state (Barnaby 38). But Colin McCabe unveils a localized political tension that plays itself out in Falstaff’s rejection. Kempe—the original Falstaff and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men’s clown—regularly closed performances with a jig: a decidedly low

⁸ In addition to still performing at the Globe, which demonstrates that the transformation from popular to elite was not absolute or immediate.

⁹ Rothwell compares the cinematic shift from nickelodeons to palace theatres to this shift from the Globe to Blackfriars (12–13).

¹⁰ For a discussion of Shakespeare the legitimizer, see Cartmell, Garber, Rothwell, Jess-Cooke, and Wiseman.

¹¹ One need not spend even an hour researching ‘Shakespeare on film’ to uncover the overwhelming amount of ‘high’ discussion surrounding this topic.

“erotic,” “bawdy,” and “ribaldrous” dance that MacCabe compares to a modern day Beastie Boys concert (86).¹² The jig was improvised and uncensored, blurring the lines between “representation and audience” (87). But as London’s theatre authorities gradually tamed its wild and unpredictable nature,¹³ the dance lost its subversive appeal and began to fade from public interest. Around this time, the social élite began to invest financially in Shakespeare’s company,¹⁴ and the Men adapted their performances to a more refined taste.¹⁵ Eventually, Kempe left the company and instead scraped a living by jiggging his way across the countryside (88). Kempe’s departure thus marks the early stages of Shakespeare’s evolution toward high literature. As the company’s economic ambition left no place for Kempe’s jig, the Men—in accordance with the demands of a changing audience—trimmed the low, bawdy elements of their plays in favour of a more cultivated (and more profitable) style.¹⁶ With these theatre politics in mind, Falstaff’s rejection in *2 Henry IV*—“I know thee not, old man” (5.5.47)—plays out a performative acknowledgement of a shifting tradition that no longer involved Kempe. As MacCabe writes, “the Globe was consciously turning its back on what they saw as an outdated dramatic form and, most importantly, the relation it implied with the audience” (ibid). The relationship between player and audience was changing, but more importantly, so was the audience itself.

Like MacCabe’s reading of Kempe’s Falstaff, *Chimes* expresses the cultural displacement of one discourse for another, but, for Welles, Falstaff’s banishment plays out the extinction of high cinema rather than the

¹² “It probably needs an age which has the stage act of the Beastie Boys to recapture some of that mixture of song, dance and performance that contemporaries deemed erotic enough to send old men scurrying off to brothels” (86).

¹³ They did so by reaching a compromise: the jig should no longer be improvised and the clown restricted to the lines set down for him (87).

¹⁴ As reflected by the king’s patronage in 1603 (McDonald 122).

¹⁵ It should be noted that though the company embraced its elite audience, Shakespeare continued to write with his popular audience in mind: “poetry and psychology for the gentlemen’s gallery, action and blood for the pit” (Margaret Farrand Thorp, qtd. in Cartmell 1151). This writerly duality appears to be crucial for Shakespeare’s adaptability to the popular medium of film.

¹⁶ Though by no means did the absence of the jig eliminate bawdy low humour.

low jig. Since a globalized audience is necessarily less cultivated and more multifarious, a popular medium like film must cater to the more generalized appetite of the masses. But Welles, a cultivated auteur, refused to depreciate the aesthetic value of his films.¹⁷ His stubbornness eventually resulted in Hollywood's "rejection" of his later work, which—after his early success with *Citizen Kane* (1941)—failed to captivate a popular audience (Rothwell 82). In *Chimes*, Welles reshapes the *Henriad* to build a Falstaff-based tragedy focussed on Jack (Welles)'s refusal to understand Hal's (Keith Baxter's) language.¹⁸ Jack's disease of "not listening" thus presents a tragic flaw that furnishes his eventual banishment (86). As Michael Anderegg notes, Welles negotiates the cinematic awkwardness of Hal's soliloquies by staging them as "attempts at conversation" (131), so that Hal's private commitment to one day "throw off" his "loose behaviour" appears as a clear and direct verbal warning of the clown's impending rejection (*Chimes*). However, Falstaff—a notorious liar and cheat—fails to understand the truth behind Hal's words (135). Even when Hal denounces Falstaff at his coronation—a distinctly "rhetorical act" (136)—Falstaff fails to realize that Hal means what he says, chortling as if he hopes the public performance is in jest. The defeated Falstaff desperately wishes that the king's words will be as empty as his own: "Look you, he must seem thus to the world. I shall be sent for in private to him. ... I will be as good as my word. This that you have seen was but a color" (*Chimes*).¹⁹ Welles's Falstaff thus emerges, like Kempe's, as the victim of a cultural shift away from an outdated artistic approach. Both of these cultural shifts result from the profit motive of popular entertainment, indicating how capital dictates the shifting interaction between literary discourses. In the same way that the tastes of a wealthy audience supplant Kempe's jig, the tastes of a popular audience reject Welles's refined style.

¹⁷ See Anderegg and Rothwell.

¹⁸ The division between visual and auditory language makes itself distractingly evident in the film's technical flaws. Because of funding issues, *Chimes*'s auditory track was nearly entirely re-dubbed, forcing characters' voices out of sync with their lip movement. Anderegg notes that these flaws reflect the performative aspect of language, that both Hal and Falstaff's words do not align with their corporeal entities (130).

¹⁹ Welles rearranges certain lines in this passage, including the substitution of 'heard' for 'seen'—a subtle hint at the performative value of filmic representation.

Expanding on Welles's linguistic tragedy, Van Sant uses Shakespeare's cultural capital to legitimize the story of Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves) and Mike Waters (River Phoenix) while criticizing the logocentric hegemony.²⁰ More important to this discussion, by forging new versions of Hal (Scott) and Pains (Mike), Van Sant emerges as a cultural bricoleur both guided by and building upon Shakespearean drama. Van Sant admits that "the reason Scott's like Shakespeare is because of the Shakespeare, and the reason Shakespeare is in the film is to transcend time, to show that these things have always happened, everywhere. ... I didn't fully know who [Scott] was until I saw Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight*" (qtd. in Wiseman 200-1). These comments reveal how Shakespeare plays a dual role in the reproduction of popular culture: both inspiring and legitimizing new creative works. Shakespeare's language both legitimizes and perpetuates artistic creation, acting as the stage upon which artists perform their work.²¹ In other words, Shakespeare's language creates our popular culture, which in turn reshapes our understanding of Shakespeare's language. MacCabe explains that "genuine creativity in popular culture is constantly to be located in relation to emergent and not yet fully defined audiences" (38). Just as these shifting audiences are "not yet fully defined," neither are Shakespeare's plays. In resurrecting Shakespeare's words, Van Sant expands the collection of the *Henriad*'s cultural references, creating new context for Hal's rejection of Falstaff. Van Sant as film director thus emerges as the "editor of a montage of writings," an author who draws together the building blocks of a timeless "collaborative work" (MacCabe 33; 38).²²

²⁰ See Wiseman (201).

²¹ Though the statement that all popular culture can be traced back to Shakespeare is extreme, it would be difficult to find any epistemological oeuvre that does not reflect even the most minute aspect of Shakespearean drama. His exceptional popularity and cultural position within a hegemony whose education system enforces a certain familiarity with his work gives him a unique place at the helm of English-speaking culture. I do not mean to suggest, however, that Shakespeare should be considered an 'origin' of popular culture; Shakespeare's work itself emerges from the rich sociocultural context of his time.

²² This is also true of Welles.

Using this cultural bricolage, Van Sant uses Scott and Mike's twentieth-century friendship to play out the conflict between logos (language) and pathos (emotion). Instead of writing, as Welles does, a Kempe-like tragedy of outmoded cultural discourse, Van Sant focuses on the discursive division between Mike and Scott to explore how their respective social positions interact with logocentric power. Using the otherness of homosexuality to symbolize Mike's exteriority and Scott's (temporary) social deviance, Van Sant shows that the logos/pathos division is a matter of hegemonic position. He places Scott's eloquence in diametrical opposition to Mike's silent, narcoleptic visions. We see this opposition in highly cinematic dream sequences that provide the viewer with direct access to Mike's unconscious desires through moving images that symbolize his maternal longing.²³ Using these visions, Van Sant aligns his audience with Mike so that Scott's impending betrayal resonates more strongly (in the same way that Welles's charismatic performance as Falstaff intensifies the tragic rejection).

Through Mike's visions, we have intimate access to Mike's feelings, but he never succeeds in vocalizing these emotions to Scott. In their most intimate scene together, Mike's stuttering attempt to express himself using language—combined with Scott's bluntly vocalized disinterest in a homosexual relationship²⁴—demonstrates Mike's social exteriority and Scott's logocentric allegiance:

MIKE: I'd like to talk with you, I mean I'd like to, uh...to really talk with you. I mean we're talking right now, but you know...I dunno, I-I-I don't feel like I can be...I don't feel like I can be close to you...I mean, we're close... right now we're close but I mean...you know...

²³ Since visual cues do not rely on language, cinematic language can be considered more "universal" (Bernhart, qtd. in Rothwell 3). In the context of Shakespeare films, Cartmell argues that "pictures can speak as loudly, if not more loudly than words" (1157).

²⁴ Scott's political ambitions do not align with a homosexual relationship, which would place him outside the social norm.

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SCOTT: Uh, how close? I mean...

MIKE: Uh, whatever.

SCOTT: What?

MIKE: What do I mean to you?

SCOTT: I'm your best friend.

Phoenix delivers Mike's words in an awkward mumbling whisper, making them difficult to decipher. And even when Mike seems on the brink of disclosing his love for Scott, he instead cues Scott to speak on his behalf. But Scott's answer, "I'm your best friend," gives Mike nothing, and the attempt at verbal communication disintegrates.

Though here it seems that language divides Mike and Scott, it is not so much language itself as the socio-cultural function of language.²⁵ After all, Scott has no trouble striking up a romantic relationship with Carmella (Chiara Caselli), who literally speaks a different language (Italian). Like Hal appropriating Katherine in *Henry V*, Scott can connect emotionally with Carmella through the patriarchal arrangement of marriage, but Mike—along with his homosexual identity—cannot participate in this heteronormative discourse. By aligning the audience with Mike—who, like Falstaff, is betrayed by Scott/Hal's emotionless political ambition—Van Sant shows that hegemonic structures are a threat to emotional connections between individuals.

While Mike's homosexuality and discursive shortcomings place him outside of Scott's logocentric world and outside of language itself, Van Sant uses Shakespeare to emphasize Scott's keen ability to speak within a hegemonic discourse. Shakespeare's language thus represents both an authoritarian and an anti-authoritarian viewpoint. This duality embodies Shakespeare's paradoxical cultural role: his language can be at once high and low, elite and popular, refined and vulgar. On one level, the echoes of Shakespearean dialogue represent the language of the social

²⁵ The distinction between these situations is parallel to Saussure's distinction between langue (language: Italian, English) and langage (the system of language).

elite, a patriarchal dialect spoken by Scott's father (Tom Troupe), parodied by Bob (William Richert, *Idaho's Falstaff*), and performed by Scott. On another level, Van Sant "degrades" Shakespeare's language by translating it into a Portland street-hustler dialect (Howlett 165). The translation awakens the "crude energy of the popular idiom" (178) by changing Shakespeare's "How long is't ago, Jack, since thou sawest thine own knee?" into "How long has it been, Bob, since you could see your dick?" (*1 Henry IV* 2.4. 315-16; *Idaho*). The translated language infuses *Idaho* with the literary strength of the vernacular,²⁶ toeing the line between linguistic realism and an absurd carnival. Though translated, the Shakespeare lines maintain a certain archaic stiffness,²⁷ awakening Bob and Scott's performativity. Bob thus emerges as a patriarchal parody, a play-actor playing king in a royal blue dressing gown, while Scott's valley-speak betrays his "false eloquence" (Howlett 173). Scott's discursive talents, therefore, manifest themselves as performative efforts to engage in a logocentric social system. His linguistic abilities rely on adapting his own inner pathos to a logocentric discourse. For Scott, discourse is a matter of applying his ambitions to whatever 'language' society demands of him.

Like Scott, playwrights and film directors must also adapt to language: specifically, the literary language expected by the audience. The tragedies of Kempe and Welles alike stem from an inability—or a stubborn refusal, in Welles's case—to adapt to a changing literary discourse. Though the wealthiest audience dictates which cultural discourse prevails, Shakespeare occupies a unique space at the intersection of elite and popular culture permeates high and low. We see this overlap especially in film adaptations that spark high discussion of a typically low entertainment medium.

I began this study by tracing the importance of symbolic space in Renaissance performances of Shakespeare, and I would like to conclude

²⁶ For a discussion of the strength and historical importance of the vernacular, see McCabe (147).

²⁷ This stiffness is accentuated by Reeves's trademark acting style.

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now by stressing the importance of considering film as a spatially symbolic medium. We have seen in recent months how the *occupation* of a symbolic space like Wall Street can send a strong political message to those in power. Indeed, certain spaces seem to belong to the wealthy elite and by occupying those spaces, the huddled 99 per cent may symbolically disrupt hegemonic injustice. When film directors like Welles and Van Sant transplant Shakespeare's ostensibly high language into the low medium of film, the opposite occurs: high culture takes over the low space of the cinema. But we need to remember that when Shakespeare wrote for the audience at the Globe, he wrote for a mixed elite and popular audience. It was only in subsequent centuries that Shakespeare was idolized and preserved as a monument to high English culture. In a globalized society that has given the entertainment industry's economic power back to the masses, the medium of film has heroically returned Shakespeare's language to the universal space idealized in modern reflections of the Globe.

I am a fourth-year English literature student with a special interest in how popular culture interacts with the literary canon. I am currently mapping out my honours thesis which will explore the extent to which Hamlet is affected by an ever-changing socio-cultural context.

I have been building this project on the foundations of the essay you find here, "Shakespeare, Cinema, and Literary Discourse," which I submitted last fall to Dr. Erin Ellerbeck as my final paper for Special Studies in Shakespeare: Shakespeare on Screen. I would like to acknowledge the assistance of a Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Award (supervised by Dr. Ellerbeck), which allowed me to spend many afternoons scurrying around the McPherson Library and many long evenings building massive book forts in preparation for the writing process. I hope you enjoyed reading the final product as much as I enjoyed arranging it!

-Cameron Butt

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