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Screening Social Justice: Performing Reparative Shakespeare against Vocal Disability

ALEXA ALICE JOUBIN*,

Abstract Many screen and stage adaptations of the classics are informed by a philosophical investment in literature's reparative merit, a preconceived notion that performing the canon can make one a better person. Inspirational narratives, in particular, have instrumentalized the canon to serve socially reparative purposes. Social recuperation of disabled figures loom large in adaptation, and many reparative adaptations tap into a curative quality of Shakespearean texts. When Shakespeare's phrases or texts are quoted, even in fragments, they serve as an index of intelligence of the speaker. Governing the disability narrative is the trope about Shakespeare's therapeutic value. There are two strands of recuperative adaptations. The first is informed by the assumption that the dramatic situations exemplify moral universals. The second strand consists of adaptations that problematize heteronormativity and psychological universals in liberal humanist visions of the canon. This approach is self-conscious of deeply contextual meanings of the canon. As a result, it lends itself to the genres of parody, metatheatre, and metacinema. Through case studies of Tom Hooper's *King's Speech*, Cheah Chee Kong's *Chicken Rice War*, and other adaptations that thematize vocal disorders, this article identifies a common trope in reparative performances of disability in order to highlight some questions the trope raises.

Keywords: Reparative adaptation, voice disability, therapeutic discourse, emotional capitalism, aestheticization of suffering, Shakespeare, film adaptation.

Many screen and stage adaptations of the classics are informed by a philosophical investment in literature's reparative merit, a preconceived notion that performing the canon can make one a better person. The idea itself has a long history in literary criticism. Historically, the Western canon has always been given mystical moral authority to some degree, though reparative interpretations of the canon have taken different forms. An early example of the post-Victorian moralized readings of literature is Matthew Arnold's formulation that the high culture represents 'the best that has been known and said in the world' and thus 'the human spirit' (1869, viii; 1875, xiii). In the twentieth century, Northrop Frye has traced the formation of myth to archetypal patterns of narrative, stories 'in which some of the chief characters are...beings larger in power than humanity' (597). He further theorizes that this narrative is 'very seldom located in [factual] history' but is often used as 'allegories of morality' (599). In the twenty-first century, Martha Nussbaum has written extensively about how literature makes readers better people by enabling 'the good life' of self-reflection (32–34).

*Department of English, George Washington University. Email: ajoubin@gwu.edu

Adaptations of inspirational narratives, in particular, have instrumentalized the canon to serve socially reparative purposes.

Reparative interpretations of the classics have been rekindled—in a social justice turn in the arts—by recent movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, which began in 2013, and #MeToo, which began in 2006 and returned in redoubled force globally in 2017.¹ As adaptations on screen and on stage seek to reclaim the classics from ideologies associated with colonial and patriarchal practices, they use words such as redemption, social justice, and empathy in their mission statements. Some creators of reparative adaptations believe that they can revive declining genres of performance, such as attracting a larger audience, and improve personal and social circumstances, such as addressing sensitive issues. For example, renowned for their all-female productions, London's Donmar Warehouse (led by Phyllida Lloyd) aims to 'create a more...functional society [and] inspire empathy' because they 'believe that representation matters; diversity of identity, of perspective, of lived experience enriches our work and our lives'.² This article identifies a common trope in reparative performances of both the canon and disabled figures in order to highlight some questions the trope raises. My case studies bring theories of disability to bear on performative instances of reparative narrative.

TWO STRANDS OF RECUPERATIVE NARRATIVES

In general, there are two strands of recuperative adaptations—works that engage with reparative interpretations of the classics. The first is informed by the assumption that the dramatic situations exemplify moral universals. Earnest performances posit that reparative efficacy of the arts can improve the actors' and audiences' character and social circumstances. That said, not all reparative adaptations are ideologically conservative.

The second strand consists of adaptations that problematize heteronormativity and psychological universals in liberal humanist visions of the canon. This approach is self-conscious of deeply contextual meanings of the canon. As a result, it lends itself to the genres of parody, metatheatre, and metacinema. It exposes the contradictions in liberal humanism which naturalizes the 'universal'.

Reparation in the context of liberal humanism is not religious in nature, for liberal humanism regards religious beliefs as private affairs.³ Liberal humanism is primarily concerned with social cooperation and the responsibility of individuals as bourgeois citizens, but it has some blind spots. Writing in the context of tragedy, Catherine Belsey argues that, despite its claims, liberal humanism promotes 'inequality of freedom', for 'while in theory all men are equal, men and women are not symmetrically defined. Man, the centre and hero of liberal humanism, was produced in contradistinction to the objects of his knowledge, and in terms of the relations of power in the economy and the state. Woman was produced in contradistinction to man, and in terms of the relations of power in the family' (9). The second strand of reparative adaptation exposes such universalist assumptions behind liberal humanist readings of the canon.

Both strands are informed by the tradition of using literature as a coping strategy in times of crisis. The popularity of reparative readings of literature lies in the duality of a simultaneously distant and personal relationship to the words. During the global pandemic of COVID-19 in 2020, numerous articles circulated on social media that probed what Shakespeare could teach us about living with the 'plague' (Smith; Greenblatt).

Adaptations of African-American minister Malcolm X's life, such as *Malcolm X* (dir. Spike Lee, 1992), have played key roles in American civil rights movements and current struggles for racial equality. Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize- and Tony Award-winning play *Angels in America* has been an iconic and important text in the gay movement. Adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* are a constant point of reference among young trans girls in mainstream media (Hurley, 258–59; Spencer 123). Literature gives language to victims of psychological trauma who lose speech. By being able to talk indirectly about their situation through literary narratives, victims regain a sense of agency. In New Hampshire, Roberta Stewart has organized reading groups in which the portrayal of post-war trauma in *Coriolanus*, for example, has given 'veterans the opportunity to try out different words and ways of thinking about their experience' (n.p.). Despite Hannah Arendt's famous observation that war takes away words and becomes an unspeakable experience (1968), literature provides a new language of empowerment in Stewart's reading groups. In the field of art therapy, too, literature has long been deployed to help patients create narratives to express feelings 'in a structured fashion' (Griffiths and Corr 107–14, quoted in Koopman, 1). However, in her clinical psychological and comparative literary study of grief, E.M. Koopman shows that most patients are inclined to 'consume the art that others have made' rather than 'creating stories oneself'. She identifies four stages of engagement with literary narratives, beginning with a recognition of parallels between fictional characters' and one's own situations and moving on to identification with a character, derivation of insights from literary interpretations, and eventually attainment of catharsis. She uses 'narrative feelings' to refer to the act of being absorbed in the narrative world, which would be supported by 'aesthetic feelings', an 'appreciation of stylistic features' of the narrative (68–88).

Some scholars are more sceptical of the efficacy of reparative performances. The idea that adaptations remedy social conditions does not always work in neoliberal economy, though there is a symbiotic relationship between reparative adaptation and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism tends to privatize the human endeavour including emotional labour which becomes part of emotional capitalism. Todd Landon Barnes argues that documentaries of recuperative Shakespeare are the results of the 'concomitant rise of neoliberalism and emotional capitalism which employ therapeutic discourses to individualize social inequality' (1). Guided by free market principles, neoliberalism uses ideas of entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency to redefine many areas of life not previously considered part of the economic domain, such as private emotions and self-identity. Going hand in hand with neoliberalism is emotional capitalism which commodifies private emotions. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault observes that neoliberalism uses market principles to measure and regulate human worth. The notion of 'human capital' quantifies various unquantifiable aspects of human life (226). Building upon Foucault's theory, David Harvey reveals the danger of the otherwise appealing 'concepts of dignity and individual freedom' (5). Freedom of the market does not always guarantee individual freedoms because the freedoms embodied by the market 'reflect the interests of...multinational corporations and financial capital' (7). Along a similar axis, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have critiqued the process of 'productive socialization' of individuals who are fixated within social institutions (24). Subscribing to this mode of valuation, conventional reparative adaptations cement

self-realization as an individual's responsibility in neoliberal divisions of labour. Even personal relationships are shaped by, as Eva Illouz observes, 'economic...models of bargaining, exchange, and equity'. When conventional reparative performances saturate the public sphere with 'the exposure of private life', sometimes in styles borrowed from reality television shows, therapy becomes 'a narrative of selfhood' that incorporates 'the narrative of self-help' (43). Wendy Brown theorizes that neoliberalism turns over 'to the market for individual production and consumption—what was formerly publicly supported and valued'. Everything is framed 'in terms of capital investment and appreciation, including and especially humans themselves' (176). Some reparative adaptations employ the logic of self-help books because, in the neoliberal logic, the burden of combating inequality rests on the individual and is to be compartmentalized and isolated.

The moralist approach is informed by the therapeutic self-help ethos, while the parodic approach sometimes challenges the neoliberal logic by questioning the canon's capacity for emotional transformation. As much as conventional reparative adaptations celebrate each individual's struggles and subsequent triumphs, they also compartmentalize social inequality by aestheticizing suffering in figures that are presented as larger than life. These figures, in turn, provide inspiration porn in emotional capitalism for voyeuristic pleasures. Coined in 2012 by activist Stella Young, inspiration porn portrays disabled individuals' otherwise ordinary life as extraordinary solely on the basis of their disability. In a broader context beyond disability studies, reparative adaptations run the risk of creating one-dimensional saints out of suffering individuals whose existence serves to warm people's hearts. The narratives and emotions become marketable consumer products.

SHAKESPEARE COMES TO THE RESCUE

There is a long history of tapping into a curative quality of Shakespeare's narratives. Reparative adaptations are allegedly based on Shakespeare's hypercanonical status as readily available reference points in popular culture. Shakespeare as a hypercanon is ubiquitous and thrives on other writers' allusions. According to David Damrosch's study of world literature, while a hypercanon 'is populated by the older "major" authors who have held their own', it 'coexist[s] comfortably with...and gain[s] new vitality from association with...the countercanon [consisting] of...subaltern voices' (45) of less commonly taught writers. When Shakespeare's phrases or texts are quoted, even in fragments, they serve as an index and social shorthand of intelligence of the speaker. Within the history of global performances of Shakespeare, the perceived moral authority of the Shakespearean canon has led to an impression that the works are both period specific (as our contemporary) and beyond history ('timeless').⁴ The works empower individuals as well as threaten the status quo.

Douglas Lanier has raised questions about performances of socially conscious, inspirational narratives that use Shakespeare as their centrepiece (n.p.). Such works 'invest Shakespeare with a magical reformatory' capacity to empower the socially marginalized, such as refugees, women of colour, and inmates. Lanier connects reparative Shakespeare as a mode of performance to politically oriented literary criticism. Fictional and documentary films in this genre often feature a foolhardy troupe

or director working with unlikely Shakespearean actors for a high-stakes performance. Despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles and setbacks, the narratives end with a triumphant performance. He is primarily concerned with the ethics of criticism, asking whether ‘a bad misreading of Shakespeare’ can ‘nevertheless create a positive effect in a performer’ and asking what constitutes ‘bad reparative Shakespeare’ (n.p.).

Fictional film examples of reparative adaptation include *A Midwinter's Tale* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, 1995), *The Last Lear* (dir. Rituparno Ghosh, 2007), and *Cesare deve morire* (*Caesar Must Die*) (dir. Paolo Taviani and Vittorio Taviani, 2012); documentaries include *A Dream in Hanoi* (dir. Tom Weidlinger, 2002), *Mickey B* (dir. Tom Magill, 2007), *The Road to the Globe* (dir. Mike Jonathan, 2012), and *The Hobart Shakespearians* (dir. Mel Stuart, 2005), just to name a few. Branagh's *A Midwinter's Tale* is a classic example of reparative film adaptations that dramatize actors' life. It features a group of aspiring British actors' effort to stage *Hamlet* during Christmas, traditionally a time of reconciliation. Adding to the film's reparative value is the venue of their performance: a church symbolizing religious redemption. Adopting a similar strategy, *The Last Lear* depicts the trepidations of actors. Harish ‘Harry’ Mishra (Amitabh Bachchan), an ageing stage actor being edged out by the advent of cinema, reluctantly takes up performing in films. His vulnerability parallels that of the two father figures in *King Lear*. Harry's fall and injury during filming echo the blinded Gloucester's imaginary fall at the Dover Cliff. At the end of the film, Harry awakens from the coma induced by the fall to remember his life. He dies reciting Lear's lines from act 4 scene 7 in a profound moment of self-recognition (‘Pray, do not mock me/I am a very foolish fond old man,/Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less.’). Likewise, *Julius Caesar* plays a healing role in *Caesar Must Die*. As inmates in a theatre rehabilitation program in a high-security prison in Rome prepare for a performance of the Roman play, they reflect on their life choices and arrive at moments of self-recognition. Documentary films follow a similar, recuperative trajectory. *A Dream in Hanoi* documents the making of an American-Vietnamese bilingual production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Hanoi in 2000. Following a trajectory typical of reparative interpretations of the canon, the documentary follows members of the American and Vietnamese companies through trials to their eventual triumph (from the American filmmaker's perspective) over cross-cultural misunderstanding. Lorelle Browning, co-producer of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, intended it to heal the wounds of the Vietnam War, though the goal was not achieved because Vietnamese politeness was misread by the American crew as affection. Similar to *Caesar Must Die*, *Mickey B* documents performances of *Macbeth* by serving inmates in a maximum security prison in Northern Ireland. It is one of the growing number of films and documentaries about rehabilitation-through-the-arts programs in correctional facilities in the United States and United Kingdom. *The Road to the Globe* chronicles a different kind of unlikely heroes. It documents the challenges faced by a New Zealand production of *Troilus & Cressida* in Te Reo Māori, which toured to London to open the Globe to Globe Festival in 2012 during the London Olympics. *The Hobart Shakespearians* tells an inspirational story of an inner-city Los Angeles teacher who helps his mostly non-native-English-speaker fifth-grader stage *Hamlet* and other plays. The documentary builds towards the ultimate, triumphant moment when renowned actor Ian McKellen's attends the underprivileged students' performance.

While not all works in the reparative genre succeed in building bridges, the works briefly discussed here share several features in common. All of them belong to the genre of films about theatre-making, and several of them feature fictional or real-life inmates seeking rehabilitation. The metatheatrical scaffoldings of films about theatre often unite ‘fictional narrative and documentary footage in a style that is at once cinematic and theatrical’ (Cardullo 182), blending biographical and imaginary narratives. These reparative films, in particular, feature aspiring but under-privileged actors who are social outcasts, serving inmates, aboriginals, and marginalized students. They overcome social prejudices, financial obstacles, and personal difficulties to succeed in a high-stakes performance. The process is valued more than their production which is invariably imperfect. For example, the theme song of *A Midwinter’s Tale* points to the actor-characters’ perseverance. The title of the song, by Noël Coward, takes the form of a rhetorical question, ‘Why Must the Show Go On?’ All of these films have Shakespeare front and centre as an enabler and healer. It is through rehearsing, reciting, and performing—no matter how imperfect—Shakespeare’s plays that these actor-characters find redemption, reconciliation, or peace with themselves. Shakespeare inspires and emboldens the characters on their quest for self-education and self-empowerment.

PERFORMING REPARATIVE VOCAL DISABILITY

One genre stands out in reparative imaginations: performances that appear to diagnose and recuperate disability. Adaptations of the classics are energized by the evolution of an iconic text rather than a static image. As a result, dramaturgical recuperations of disabled figures loom large in adaptation. I focus on vocal disorders here in order to examine the rich layers of significance in the dramatization of an invisible form of disability. Having a voice and being heard are key factors in the formation of self-identity. Vocal disorders are an invisible form of disability. One does not notice it until one is unable to communicate verbally or is otherwise silenced. The act of listening itself is not innocent, either. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber’s research has shown unconscious biases in listening for racialized accents. She theorizes that ‘listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance’ (4). Along similar lines, representations of deviances from normative voices encode and enact visualization of cognitive differences. If speech is assumed to be what makes us human, individuals with speech impairment are sometimes thought to have low intelligence. In this context, Shakespeare is recruited to vouch for the disabled figure’s civilized status.

In general, there are two strains of disability narrative, namely aestheticization of suffering and political condescension, as in, for example, glorifying the sufferings of disabled figures while taking over their life narrative without their own voice. In their effort to make life narratives relatable to the broadest audience possible, biopics sometimes turn disabled figures into one-dimensional saints. Documentary films like Benjamin Cleary’s 2015 Academy Award winning short film *Stutterer* have the power to raise awareness of critical issues by giving voice to socially marginalized groups. *Stutterer*’s tagline reads ‘A man with a cruel speech impediment must face his greatest fear’. On the other hand, narratives of disability, like testimonies and coming-out stories, interpret ‘the failure...to address the particular needs of the disabled as denials of basic human rights’ (Schaffer and Smith, 2).

Literature plays a key role in performances of reparative disability. As June Dwyer has observed, there is a literary tendency to draw parallels between the behaviours of mammals and the traits of certain forms of human disability: ‘the lack of speech, heightened senses, and the ability to read visual or aural cues’. While some of these connections between animality and disability are beginning to be seen in a positive light, Dwyer critiques the historical commonplace pejorative similes such as ‘blind as a bat, quiet as a mouse, dumb as an ox’ (12–13). Engagement with the classics purportedly ‘restores’ humanity and dignity in disabled characters, and sometimes, as we shall see in *The King’s Speech* and *Chicken Rice War*, quotes and allusions serve as an index of intelligence in the disabled figures.

Shakespearean texts have played a key role in disability narratives. There are several cinematic instances in which Shakespearean texts are credited with curative power of the condition of stuttering. As the stuttering Chorus (a tailor named Wabash, played by Mark Williams) in *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden, Universal Pictures, 1998) moves along in delivering the Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet*, his stammer gradually disappears and he gains confidence. Eventually he is able to finish reciting the speech in front of a packed house. To heighten the tension, the film juxtaposes close-up shots of Wabash’s straining lips as he stutters on a thrust stage with medium shots of Will Shakespeare (Joseph Fiennes) wringing his hands backstage, the hands whence the play-text flows.⁵ The uncomfortable silence and Wabash’s stuttering is accentuated by the audiences’ impatient sniggering as the camera—taking Wabash’s perspective—pans over the crowds in the pit and galleys that surround him in a multi-sided, three-tiered, open-air theatre with a central, uncovered yard. Similar series of shots and reaction shots portraying public displays of vocal disability are also employed in *The King’s Speech*, *Chicken Rice War*, and other films to be discussed. Wabash exemplifies the aforementioned archetype of unlikely heroes in reparative narratives. The tailor of stage manager Philip Henslowe, Wabash wishes to act on stage for personal enjoyment even if it would jeopardize the production. Henslowe has no choice but to oblige because he owes Wabash ‘a few debts here and there’. Despite Wabash’s stammer and Will’s disapproval, Wabash lands the role of the Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet* (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Wabash, stage manager Philip Henslowe’s stammering tailor, plays the Chorus in *Romeo and Juliet* in the film *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden, Universal Pictures, 1998).

The same play features in another reparative adaptation. In a college rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Singaporean film entitled *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Cheah Chee Kong, aka CheeK, Raintree, 2000), a stuttering student, Fenson Wong, volunteers for the role of Romeo despite scepticism from his fellow students and their drama coach. Eventually, in a redemptive arc of an underdog, Fenson wins the role and overcomes his stutter. While performing Shakespeare helps Fenson find his voice, other scenes make clear that any investment in the curative quality of classical drama is illusory.

A large number of adaptations in this area belong to the genre of ‘based on, or inspired by, a true story’ films—biopics, bio historical fiction films, and spin-offs of iconic stories. These films are not based on a single text but rather diaries, notes, and early modern and modern cultural texts. Plays and films may contain what Kathleen McLuskie has called ‘attenuated’ allusions (334) to Shakespearean themes or quotes even when the works do not retell Shakespeare’s stories in full. Shakespeare has been used as a floating signifier, or what Thomas Leitch calls ‘a transcendental precursor master text’ (288). In his study of adaptations, Leitch offers a broadened scope for adaptation studies when he writes, ‘If *Fargo* creates its own textual source by creating an original story and then framing it as if it were true, it would seem that anything can be made to assume textual authority’ (302). Sherlock Holmes adaptations fall into this category of ‘films that profess to be based on no source text at all but on a true story’ (280), since they ‘take as their primary referent not the particular story they are ostensibly adapting [...] but the franchise as a whole’ (213). An example of these ‘based on a true story’ inspirational films is *The King’s Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, See-Saw Films, 2010). A biopic based on Australian speech therapist Lionel Logue’s diary and notebook which the screenwriter obtained through Logue’s son, *The King’s Speech* draws frequently on Shakespeare for curative authority (Seidler 2010). The film’s success led to a stage adaptation in 2012 by David Seidler, who also wrote the screenplay. There is even a speech clinic named King’s Speech and Learning Center in Connecticut, which treats, among other symptoms of speech pathology, stuttering, selective mutism, and speech-language delays.

VISUALIZING STUTTERING IN *THE KING’S SPEECH*

The King’s Speech epitomizes the first approach to reparative adaptation, one that depicts how Shakespeare’s moral universals can empower and redeem disabled individuals. Like many films about disability, *The King’s Speech* adopts a redemptive arc of representing a disabled figure. First, the protagonist suffers traumatic public humiliations due to his stuttering. Numerous incidents erode King George VI’s sense of self-worth. Next, he works with a speech therapist to overcome his stammer, giving himself a voice for public speaking. Finally, he emerges triumphantly through tribulations as a calming voice on radio, providing an anchor to a nation at war. As the camerawork highlights his facial expressions when he struggles to speak, we see as much as we hear his vocal disability in each of the three stages. In the final scene, King George VI speaks methodically in a disembodied voice through short-wave radio technologies. The camerawork highlights his facial expressions to turn otherwise awkward moments of silence into deliberate, unhurried pauses—his signature

style on radio. The disembodiment signals both his disabled status and his transcendental status. In the final scene, the king turns his impairment into an advantage (Joubin, 276). The film treads cautiously between public disgust and pity of differently abled bodies.

Before we hear vocal disabilities of a stuttering or mute character, we first see and register visually their anxiety. The microphone is both a prosthetic device and an important prop in this film about vocal disability. The film opens with a speech at the Wembley Stadium in 1925 given by a nervous Prince Albert, Duke of York (known as Bertie, later King George VI; played by Colin Firth). The speech is given live and broadcast simultaneously. When told 'you're live in two minutes, your royal highness', Bertie freezes. At this point in the film, the source of Bertie's anxiety is not immediately clear. Characters around him try to provide emotional support by telling Bertie: 'Let the microphone do the work'. 'I'm sure you'll be splendid. Just take your time'. But the mic is the problem. Bertie's stuttering is exacerbated by his stage fright, which is triggered by the mic.

The menacing presence of the mic magnifies his deficiencies. The idea that a prosthetic device, the microphone, will miraculously 'do the work' is condescending and misguided. It mistakes an aid for a cure. This conception of prosthetic devices is part of the 'able-bodied hegemony' in Robert McRuer's theory, an ideology that is 'structured in ways that limit access for people with disabilities [...] and privileges very narrow conceptions of ability' (151). The idea that one can simply sit back and let the mic do the work is an example of dismissive, toxic positivity—the minimization and invalidation of embodied experiences. It is particularly cruel when directed at people with disabilities, because the attitude makes light of Bertie's struggle. Bertie is disempowered by the microphone that is intended to be a prosthetic device but also an integral part of a new self in an age of radio. A staple of contemporary life and neoliberalism, toxic positivity is defined by J. Halberstam as a meritocratic ideology that 'success happens to good people and failure is just a consequence of a bad attitude rather than structural conditions' (3). While Halberstam's theory is geared toward queer studies, it resonates in disability films.⁶

Film audiences are initially placed in Bertie's perspectives as he approaches the stage, locking eyes with the large microphone. A reverse shot takes the perspective of Bertie's audiences at the stadium. An extreme close-up makes the carbon ring microphone appear larger than Bertie's face. His eyes are fixated upon the imposing device, and his posture unnatural. The absence of soundtrack and diegetic sound conveys Bertie's fear. In a later scene before his coronation, Bertie, in a fit, internalizes social prejudices against his disability and exclaims that he will never overcome his disability and will go down in history being remembered as 'Mad King George the Stammerer'. As Jay Timothy Dolmage posits, it is always fraught to 'ally...disability with failure' (159). In this and many other subsequent instances in the film, the mic triggers Bertie's anxiety and does not 'do the work' for Bertie. Other characters use compulsory positivity to frame Bertie's speech impediments as a moral failure (Figure 2).

Bertie's wife Elizabeth (Helena Bonham Carter) plays an important role in solving his problems. She brings the reluctant Bertie to the doorstep of Australian therapist



Figure 2. Bertie stammers during a public speech at the Wembley Stadium. The carbon ring microphone and the crowd intimidate Bertie. *The King's Speech* (dir. Tom Hooper, See-Saw Films, 2010).

Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush). Logue's office is located in a dimly lit basement that requires a ride in a cage-like elevator to reach. Before being uplifted in a redemptive arc, Bertie has to go down first, metaphorically, in terms of social class and status and, literally, in terms of the physical space he descends into. Bertie comes to Logue confidentially out of fear that the news, if leaked, could cause scandalous media events. He uses a pseudonym when meeting Logue but has trouble taking on fully the guise of nobody. Bertie almost backs out when Logue insists on calling him Bertie to foster an equal, intimate therapist–patient relationship. The trust between them deteriorates when a later scene reveals that Logue is not a credentialed doctor, much less someone who can be endorsed by the royal family.

The film frequently visualizes vocal disability through visceral, dual perspectives. It frames Bertie's disability in aural as well as visual terms. An unwilling and unmotivated patient, Bertie does not believe any therapy can ameliorate his condition. He goes through the motions and resists Logue's treatment. During their first meeting, Logue asks Bertie to read a text aloud and assures him that he can read without stammering even before treatment begins. He ventures to record Bertie's speech on a Silvertone Home Voice Recorder—the latest technology of the time. Bertie reluctantly gives in, only to be surprised when Logue puts headphones on his ears and plays music. The text in question turns out to be Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' soliloquy. With music in the headphones, Bertie cannot hear himself, and the film puts the audience in his aural perspective as we hear the Overture from Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro* on the soundtrack. Visually, however, the film audiences take Logue's perspective. The gap between hearing and seeing is highlighted by the dual visual and aural perspectives. The Overture drowns out Bertie's recitation. Unable to hear himself, Bertie assumes he has humiliated himself again with his stammer and decides to end the session, but Logue

persuades him to keep the record even if they will not meet again. There is, of course, always a twist. After more frustrations with his stuttering, Bertie eventually sits down to replay the disc but is pleasantly surprised to find that Logue is right. Bertie's recitation of *Hamlet* turns out perfectly fluent. While in the stadium scene the ring microphone towers over him, in this scene the large bell of the gramophone overshadows Bertie. Both imposing devices make Bertie feel exposed and self-conscious. The microphone collects all sounds, including non-normative speech patterns. In a follow-up act, the gramophone magnifies the recorded deficiencies. In this scene, however, the anticipation of failure is countered by Bertie's unexpected success. Bertie rehearses not only his possible future of public speaking but also his audience's act of listening to his voice on radio.

The soliloquy from *Hamlet* foreshadows the theme of imposing fathers. Bertie's overbearing father, King George V (Michael Gambon), is a stand-in for the Ghost of Hamlet in the 'to be or not to be' speech he recites. Having mastered the then new medium of radio, George V calls radio broadcasting 'voices out of the air'. Disembodied, radio speeches bring the royal presence into homes near and afar. This 'voice out of the air' carries the king's authority and, during the wartime, hope. In one scene, George V tries to help Bertie overcome his stammer, but his impatience triggers Bertie's anxiety and exacerbates his stuttering.

The Hamletian theme of a father's imposing presence permeates Logue's family life as well. An aspiring thespian, Logue has been unable to secure stage roles in Australia and England. He auditions for a production in London, unsuccessfully, as a Richard III who limps on stage. Logue's impersonation of a disabled character fails, but it is abundantly clear that speech therapy is merely a means to an end for Logue whose real passion lies in playing Shakespeare. Logue finds an alternative venue for his passion. At home, he quizzes his children on quotes from Shakespeare. He also performs highlights from various scenes from plays such as *The Tempest*. Despite their reluctance, the children are cajoled into identifying the character he portrays.

The same speech from *Hamlet* features prominently in many other films, notably in *My Left Foot* (dir. Jim Sheridan, Ferndale Films, 1989). The therapist Sheila (Alison Whelan) shows the speech to the protagonist Christy Brown (Daniel Day-Lewis) and asks him to learn it. Born with cerebral palsy, Brown struggles with daily speech. Similar to a therapy scene in *The King's Speech* where Logue—knowing that Bertie does not stutter when cursing loudly—deliberately provokes Bertie to curse ('a public school boy could do better' he eggs on), Sheila motivates Christy to recite 'to be or not to be' for therapy purposes by asking him if he would like to one day be able to 'say "fuck off" more clearly' without 'impenetrable' slurred speech. When asked of his opinion of the Prince of Denmark, Christy says Hamlet is 'a cripple' who 'can't hack it', before giving in and reciting 'to be or not to be'. Whereas Logue appropriates Richard III's physical disability unconvincingly during the audition, Christy uses perceived disability (a 'cripple') to dismiss Hamlet as a possible source of therapy. Nonetheless, Christy ends up reciting 'to be or not to be'. Christy's mother (Brenda Fricker) eavesdrops on his therapy session and is, like Bertie's wife in *The King's Speech*, astonished by the miraculous clarity of Christy's speech. She observes that 'there's something in that voice that disturbs me. It's not like him. It has too much hope'. Similar to other films about vocal

disability, *My Left Foot* ‘plays the supercrip angle’ with a reparative tagline that indicates it’s a film ‘about life, laughter, and the occasional miracle’ (Riley 84). The theme here, as in *The King’s Speech*, is a philosophical investment in Shakespeare’s therapeutic value and a demonstration that patients with voice disorder can benefit from reciting lines from Shakespeare.

Two observations can be made of the particular speech’s function in the cinematic narrative about disability. First, the scene signals that *Hamlet* is part of the collective memory of the British and Commonwealth cultural realm. *Hamlet* connects a Shakespeare-loving Australian speech therapist to a British monarch with dwindling significance in the modern world. Logue’s method—isolation of the potentially stuttering subject from any disturbing feedback—might work just as well even if a non-Shakespearean text is used, but Shakespeare provides a familiar anchor in therapy sessions. As Terence Hawkes argues, phrases and ideas from *Hamlet* have been so deeply embedded in everyday speech that it operates simply as ‘a web of quotations’. As a ‘universal cultural reference point’, *Hamlet* functions as ‘a piece of social shorthand’ (4).

Second, this scene is part of the cinematic tradition of tapping into the putatively curative quality of Shakespearean texts. The ‘to be or not to be’ speech is familiar enough to Anglophone audiences to have an impact. It serves as an index of intelligence despite Bertie’s speech impediment. Fragmentary uses of Shakespeare as social shorthand in recent films are part of what Geoffrey Ridden calls a process of ‘Shakespearization’. Expanding upon Ralph Waldo Emerson’s and Michael Bristol’s usage of the term, Ridden suggests that ‘in literary narratives, being in control or being “civilized” is quite frequently represented as the same as being Shakespearized’ (n.p.). As mentioned earlier, cursing is as effective as Shakespeare to ‘cure’ stuttering. However, cursing does not elevate Bertie to the status of a civilized royalty.

Bertie’s recitation of ‘to be or not to be’ harks back to the use of that speech as proof of concept and launch material for telephone as a new technology. When promoting his new invention of the telephone at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in June 1876, Alexander Graham Bell recited the soliloquy. Sir William Thomson later told the assembly at the British Association in Glasgow that ‘I heard “To be or not to be... there’s the rub” through an electric telegraph wire’ (quoted in Galey 174). As a play about ghosting and a ghost on a haunted stage, *Hamlet* anticipates telephony and radio as technologies of representation on a global scale. Radio may broadcast Bertie’s disability for public humiliation, but it also has the potential to be an enabler of Bertie’s public image.

Even as Shakespeare is used as an index of intelligence, restoring Bertie’s faith in himself and others’ faith in him, the Shakespearean text enables a critical form of self-effacement. To reduce the anxiety and stuttering triggered by social anxiety, Bertie has to remove himself from the picture by playing a fictional character. Reciting Shakespeare while he is unable to hear himself makes him less self-conscious about his voice. Along a similar line, the recording, which he plays back at a later point, ‘allows him to experience his own voice from the perspective of another’ (Stewart 2010, n.p.). From the perspective of speech therapy, both exercises of recitation and listening from afar offer the benefit of alienation.

As a cultural reference point for Anglophone cultures, *Hamlet* functions outside Shakespearean contexts as a moral high ground and a sanctified text that can ameliorate ailments and difficult physiological and social conditions. *The King's Speech* is simultaneously a re-enactment of George VI's stammer and of the use value of Shakespeare. As a post-heritage film, *The King's Speech* uses Shakespeare to choreograph a sense of belonging and national identity in post-imperial Britain, building imagined communities through a powerful common cultural denominator.⁷ Its arc of recuperation contrasts sharply with our next case study.

ACCENTUATING STUTTERING IN *CHICKEN RICE WAR*

The aforementioned bilingual comedy film *Chicken Rice War* takes a parodic approach to curing stuttering. It exemplifies the second approach to reparative adaptation by problematizing psychological universals allegedly found in Shakespeare. The film urges its audiences to ask: why does one have to 'improve' accents and speech patterns deemed non-normative by the dominant culture?

The director trivializes the feud in *Romeo and Juliet* by reducing the generations-old dispute between the aristocratic Montague and Capulet families to petty rivalry between two families in modern-day Singapore. The families of Wong and Chan own competing stalls next to each other in a semi-open-air alfresco food court. Both families sell the same dish, chicken rice. Also known as Hainanese chicken, Singapore's national dish consists of poached chicken, seasoned rice, and chilli and cucumber garnishes. Their son, Fenson Wong (Pierre Png), and daughter, Audrey Chan (May Yee Lam), are deeply affected by the hostility between their parents—manifested as mutual sabotage and elaborate efforts to guard secret family recipes. Fenson and Audrey end up dating as they play the titular characters in their college production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

There are three impediments to Fenson's pursuit of Audrey. He stutters, he is not Eurasian as Audrey prefers, and he comes from the 'wrong' family. In an early scene in which the college students rehearse *Romeo and Juliet*, the stuttering Fenson asks his drama coach, Mr Pillay (Edmund L. Smith), if he can play Romeo. True to the spirit of a teen flick, Fenson is primarily motivated by his adoration of Audrey rather than Shakespeare. Audrey challenges her classmate: 'What makes you think that you can play Romeo? You don't have the looks, and you can't even speak properly'. She is quick to point out that the student originally cast for the male lead—her then-boyfriend, Nick Carter (Randall Tan)—is eminently more qualified because of his appearance, even if he cannot remember his lines: 'Nick, on the other hand, looks like Leonardo DiCaprio. That's why he's Romeo'. Fenson is disabled and disempowered not only by his stuttering but also by his race and social class. Like King George VI, Fenson must find a voice for his role in public settings.

Fenson stutters on stage and when he is around Audrey. In other contexts, he remains timid but does not stutter audibly. He eventually wins the role thanks to brute memorization of Romeo's lines. Shakespearean language poses as much of an obstacle to the Eurasian Nick as to Fenson, even though Nick is a native English speaker and Fenson a dialect-speaking working-class student.⁸

Though recitation of Shakespearean passages for stage presentation may seem to have improved Fenson's introvert personality and speech deficiencies, other scenes challenge the idea of reparative performance. During the bilingual college production, one family member asks pointedly: 'Hey, aren't they supposed to speak in English?' As Mark Thornton Burnett posits, such scenes deconstruct 'the illusion that Shakespeare constitutes a universal language' (134). The stylized language of *Romeo and Juliet* creates an ironic distance to the multilingual hierarchy in the film, in which the colloquial creole Singlish is presented as inferior to Standard English.

The character of news anchor (Paul Tan) in the film has an arc that is parallel to that of Fenson. While more fluent than Fenson, the newscaster is disabled by his Singaporean accent. Mimicking and parodying the framing device of the Chorus in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the conceit of television evening news in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (Bazmark Productions, 1996), and the Jerry-Springer-style TV news in Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (Miramax, 2000), *Chicken Rice War* opens with a calm television news anchor. Other than his voice, there is no soundtrack (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eS0c0JJs7L4>). His opening statement puts a local twist on the Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* (Figure 3):

Two families, both alike in dignity and profession,
in fair Ang Mo Kio where we lay our scene.
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes,
a pair of star-crossed lovers choose their chicken rice.



Figure 3. A newscaster (Paul Tan) reciting a revised version of the Prologue of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Chicken Rice War* (dir. Cheah Chee Kong, aka CheeK, Raintree, 2000).

The news anchor sounds earnest, but his tone is facetious. His supervisor objects, exclaiming, ‘What are you saying?’ invoking his accent and ineffectual communication, because ‘[manager] Mr. Tan in [the district of] Ang Mo Kio’ would not be able to understand such flourish language. This is not the news anchor’s first attempt, as his supervisor reminds him: ‘When I told you not to speak in Singlish, I didn’t ask you to sound like Shakespeare!’ However, the newscaster continues in his Singaporean accent throughout the film including the Epilogue. Both King George VI and the newscaster suffer from discrimination based on their speech patterns and accents. Just as the audiences become acutely aware of King George VI’s social anxieties when he struggles to calm his stammer and to finish a sentence, the audiences of *Chicken Rice War* are called upon to tune in to cultural identities represented by accents and dialects.

In *Chicken Rice War*, characters who speak only one dialect or language are at a social disadvantage and linguistically disabled. The Singaporean government claims that the four official languages—Malay, English, Mandarin, and Tamil—are given equal status in the city-state. However, English is the preferred language to convey authority and power, as shown by the opening sequence. It is unfortunate enough for characters who do not speak English as their first language. It is even worse, in terms of their respectability and social standing, for those who do not speak even one of the four official languages, such as the Cantonese-speaking owners of the chicken rice stalls.

The feud in *Romeo and Juliet* is marked linguistically in *Chicken Rice War*, and film audiences unconsciously enact forms of racialization based on accents and speech patterns they hear (Stoevers 4). The parental generation converses in Cantonese, while the younger generation speaks mostly Singlish. The parents’ feud is arbitrary, since they speak the same dialect. As a result, they are aligned against the younger generation in terms of linguistic difference.

CONCLUSION

The two strands of reparative adaptation are exemplified by *The King’s Speech* and *Chicken Rice War*. The first, conventional approach follows a recuperative arc, while the second, parodic approach critiques moralistic assumptions of literature’s reparative merit. Whereas *The King’s Speech* takes the canon’s curative power seriously, *Chicken Rice War* deconstructs reparative interpretations of literature. As a film with limited global theatrical release (only a three-week run in Singapore) and less at stake, *Chicken Rice War* (box office: US\$688,000) satirizes the trope of reparative adaptation. *The King’s Speech* (\$430 million in box-office earnings), a mainstream feature film (10.2-week average run per cinema) dramatizing histories of the royal family, is designed to appeal to prevailing imaginations of reparative narratives. *The King’s Speech* portrays the stuttering king as a suffering hero whose hagiography serves as inspiration porn, while *Chicken Rice War* represents a subaltern voice from the margins.

Performances of vocal disability in both films navigate the fine line between the public disgust towards voice disability and the craving for what scholars have called ‘supercrip’ figures—individuals who are defined by their physical limitations but who, because of their disability, are perceived as possessing extraordinary talents and abilities. By painting the ‘crip’ figure as inspirational, the supercrip narrative makes the stories more palatable to able-bodied viewers. Their narratives seek to rise above

unredeemable suffering. At first blush, these narratives seem to be engaged in a move of reclamation, but as McRuer demonstrates, disability narratives can betray a sense of compulsory able-bodiedness (9).

The remedial cultural uses of Shakespeare's plays are fuelled by the myths of the moral values incarnated in the characters and of the enduringly universal merits of the canon as a whole. Since acting involves embodying and channelling the pathos of the characters, performances tend to be given a remedial role. The artistic and critical predilection for reparative performances is manifested and contested in performance. As Wendy Beth Hyman and Hillary Eklund write, when interpretive practices rest on 'texts that are themselves sites of contested meaning', people feel empowered to 'reproduce . . . smaller, less risky versions of the struggles present in other aspects of our institutional and social lives' (6). Reparative adaptation as a mode of expression is having a moment because it creates a channel of communication without putting individuals on the spot and without requiring them to engage in uncomfortable, public forms of confession. Each of the two strands of reparative adaptations operates in unique contexts in which they carry out affective labour.

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NOTES

¹ Both activist movements have international impact, but they have a strong US focus. Following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was used widely on social media in 2013. Tarana Burke, sexual harassment survivor and black activist, used the phrase 'Me Too' to break silence on social media in 2006. The movement spread across the globe in the wake of sexual-abuse allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, especially after actress Alyssa Milano used 'Me Too' as a hashtag.

² Donmar is well known for their *Julius Caesar* (2012), *Henry IV-* (2014), and *The Tempest* (2016). There are many other examples. Since 2009, the Social Justice Film Institute in Seattle has supported activist filmmakers through its Social Justice Film Festivals. In 2015, the Transgender Shakespeare Company was founded in London, 'the world's first company run entirely by transgender artists'. The Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen Center for Thought and Culture in New York has sponsored the Justice Film Festivals since 2015 to 'inspire justice seekers by presenting films of unexpected courage and redemption'. Marin Shakespeare Company in San Rafael, California, offers drama therapy and 'Shakespeare for social justice' programs for inmates and at-risk youths. The group uses Shakespeare to 'practice being human together' because Shakespeare offers 'deep thinking about the human condition'.

³ Catherine Belsey offers a succinct definition of liberal humanism in the context of tragedy as follows: 'Liberal humanism proposes that the subject is the free, unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of history' (8).

⁴ Shakespeare's putative moral authority has authorized comparisons between characters and motifs in his plays and our contemporary political figures. These parallels are taken at face value and rarely questioned. Indeed, throughout the 2016 US presidential campaigns, critics from both camps drew comparisons between candidates and Shakespearean characters ranging from Richard III and Coriolanus to King Lear (Shapiro).

⁵ For a clip of this scene, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgcUwXYXy3U>.

⁶ Halberstam alludes to the illuminating role failures can play in queer life: 'While failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life' (3).

⁷ In Claire Monk's definition, post-heritage films are twenty-first-century British historical drama films that tend to subvert conservatism in heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s (177).

⁸ For further details, visit the page I curated on *MIT Global Shakespeares*, <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/chicken-rice-war-cheah-ck-2000/>.

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CONTENTS

Original Articles

Introduction: Adaptation and the Battle of, and for, and over, and within the Public Humanities <i>Thomas Leitch</i>	161
Casting for the Public Good: BAME Casting in British Film and Television in the 2010s <i>Christine Geraghty</i>	168
Screening Social Justice: Performing Reparative Shakespeare against Vocal Disability <i>Alexa Alice Joubin</i>	187
Strange Masks of Adapted Identities in Patrick McCabe's <i>Winterwood</i> and <i>The Holy City</i> <i>Joakim Hermansson</i>	206
<i>Game of Thrones</i> , Tourism, and the Ethics of Adaptation <i>Robert Moses Peaslee and Rosalynn Vasquez</i>	221
Reading Climate Change in the Palimpsest: The Ecocritical Potential of Novel-to-Film Adaptation <i>Nandita Mahajan</i>	243
Is Adaptation Studies Sustainable? <i>Kyle Meikle</i>	260
What Adaptations and Adaptation Studies Tell Us (and Sometimes Don't Tell Us) about Politics, Culture, and Social Change <i>Julie Grossman</i>	274
Algorithms, Artificial Intelligence, and Posthuman Adaptation: Adapting as Cultural Technique <i>Eckart Voigts</i>	289
Book Review	
<i>Intercultural Screen Adaptation: A Global Conversation</i> <i>Claire McCarthy</i>	309

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