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Shakespeare and Covid Drama in *This England* (Winterbottom, 2022)

Abstract: This article considers the significance of different Shakespearean allusions in a political docudrama miniseries *This England* (2022), directed for Sky by Michael Winterbottom and scripted by Winterbottom and Kieron Quirke. The action focuses on the first crucial months in England after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, offering a panoramic view of the nation under duress as a newly formed government, with Boris Johnson at its helm, mishandles the crisis. The article seeks to explain the presence of multiple Shakespearean references, from the title alone, through numerous direct quotations to the casting of Kenneth Branagh as Johnson. Shakespearean traces play a pivotal, though confusing, role as they both critique the actions of the government and its leader by offering an ironic framing device while increasing the viewer's sympathy for its central protagonist via the presence of a Shakespearean celebrity.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptation, Branagh, Covid, *Richard II*, Johnson, *This England*, casting, reception.

This article aims to investigate the significance of several different Shakespearean allusions in a political docudrama miniseries *This England* (2022), directed for Sky by Michael Winterbottom and scripted by Winterbottom and Kieron Quirke. As Douglas Lanier reminds us, following Michel Foucault, “attaching an author’s name (and image) to a text (or product) predisposes us to interpret it in a certain manner, to classify it with certain texts (or products) and not with others, to expect it to have certain qualities, themes, ideas, or formal traits” (2007: 93). The project’s link to Shakespeare immediately raises the issue of the Bard’s cultural capital and mythic resonance as England’s greatest poet, whose works serve “as a point of reference for communal memory and understanding,” especially in the troubled times of conflict and crisis (Makaryk 7). This is why

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each Shakespearean reference becomes a powerful intertextual intervention that affects the reception of the series, though sometimes producing confusing outcomes.

The action starts with the announcement of the result of the Brexit referendum, whose two opposing sides repeatedly evoked Shakespeare in their Leave and Remain campaigns (see: Blackwell; O'Neill; Kaptur), to then focus on the first crucial months in England after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The docudrama offers a panoramic view of the nation under duress as a newly formed government is slow to take decisive action to prevent further spread of the virus. As a result, we see the impact of that negligence on individuals and institutions, from the frail elderly in care homes, overwhelmed NHS hospitals, and grief-stricken households as the crisis is handled, or rather mishandled, by the newly appointed Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his aids. Shakespearean traces, from the very title, through direct quotations to Kenneth Branagh's casting as Johnson become powerful leitmotifs which significantly impact the reading of factual events and their architects.

Even before the show begins, we see the opening credits rolling over the black screen and an inscription with the date of the 23rd of April, 2019, traditionally associated with Shakespeare's birthday, as we hear an excited voiceover announce that Johnson's long-awaited biography of the Bard, *Shakespeare: The Riddle of Genius*,¹ is finally due the following year. This explains why Johnson frequently references Shakespeare in the series as he is researching for the publication—an activity that took precedence over the handling of the pandemic, as his former aid Dominic Cummings alleged a year before the show came out (Culbertson). Still, it is the way Shakespeare will be (mis)used by Johnson, the main character of the docudrama, which points to the series' inconsistency and tonal imbalance, making one wonder what purpose these Shakespearean references serve.

As the title alone indicates, its premise is bound up with Shakespeare-heavy allusions from the start. According to Jane Goodall, it "signals association not just with Shakespeare but also with a larger range of mythic and symbolic traditions: the Arthurian legends revived in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, Blake's 'Jerusalem' and the national hymn derived from it, Churchill's exhortation to fight on the beaches, and the arcane ceremony of royal funerals and coronations". It is derived from a famous and frequently quoted passage in act 2, scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, in which the dying John of Gaunt expresses his love for England and then prophesies and laments its fall under the reign of the unfit ruler. The speech will be quoted in its shorter and then longer version

¹ Johnson's biography of the Bard was originally scheduled to come out in 2016 to celebrate Shakespeare's 400th anniversary. As of the time of writing, it has still not been published.

on two occasions in the series by Johnson, punctuating the show's critical moments and providing it with an ironic framing as we observe the meaning of "This England" change over time.

It is important to mention that *This England* is also curiously, if incidentally, bound up with another film—*This is England* (2006) by Shane Meadows,² as any Internet perusal or more advanced BFI catalogue search reveals. The two projects are linked by more than just Google algorithm, however, and it is possible that Winterbottom chose "This England" over the initial working title "This Sceptred Isle" to indicate affinity with his colleague's influential drama. Significantly, Meadows' film opens with an assemblage of archival footage from the 1980s which could just as well be branded "This is Thatcher's England"—England divided by the Falklands War, racial conflict, civil unrest, the rise of nationalism and underclass. Real-life events serve here as an objective lens through which to view the fictional story about a teenage boy, Shaun (Thomas Turgoose), seduced by the patriotic flag-waving of the National Front and then bitterly disappointed by its violent racism. Shaun's life is marked by the tragic loss of his father in the Falklands War, making him vulnerable to jingoistic rhetoric cleverly employed by adults to justify the boy's personal loss. The link between the two titles, even if coincidental, thus reveals common preoccupations and even stylistic choices as both feature Britain at the time of crisis under Conservative leadership. The first episode of *This England* similarly starts with a series of newsreels depicting the unrest caused by the Brexit referendum in the streets of London and the Parliament as well as Johnson's embroilment in a series of scandals. Where the tone of Meadows' title is deeply accusatory, pointing a finger at Thatcher's government, the title of the latter, *This England*, appears more open-ended, depending on the context.

We first hear the passage from which the title derives in the 32nd minute of the first episode when Johnson delivers the first part of John of Gaunt's speech (almost verbatim) to the assembled crowd at Number 10 to celebrate the official day the UK leaves the EU on the 31st of January, 2020:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptered isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men [*and women*], this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,

² The film was later continued as a television miniseries.

Or as a moat defensive to a house
 Against the envy of less happier lands,
 This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this
 England, (2.1.45-56)³

Johnson rather conveniently chooses this fragment and delivers it with aplomb, which is intercut with the archival footage of Britons proudly waving Union Jack flags in the streets. The complete speech is, however, much more complex. Writing about Gaunt's words, Paweł Kaptur observes how many consider them to be "an undeniable proof of Shakespeare's patriotic or even nationalistic views on the relations between England and Europe. Indeed, when quoted out of a [sic] context and in a fragmented, ruptured way, it may seem as an invocation of Englishness, manifestation of Britain's insular independence on the European continent" (571), which is how Boris uses the passage at the beginning of the show. As Kaptur writes: "Such a reading of the quoted fragment might build an appealing depiction of the English bard as of [sic] a defender of England's safety against exterior enemy forces, a propagator of the island's separation from the outer world as well as a progenitor of Brexit ideas" (571). However, as he notes, the context distorts this view as, for instance, Gaunt was "a Flanders born claimant to the throne of Castile and, moreover, Gaunt's speech relies on a text written by a French speaking chronicler Jean Froissart who lived in the Holy Roman Empire. Hence, its alleged Englishness and nationalistic undertone could be easily questioned" (571).

Of course, we do not know whether the PM spoke these exact words as the series blends fact with fiction. What we do know, however, is that this particular excerpt was a popular reference employed by the Leave campaign (Doherty 187). We also know from the account of Owen Bennet in *The Brexit Club: The Inside Story of the Leave Campaign's Shock Victory* (2016) that a different speech was delivered on the day of the result of the Brexit referendum—rather predictably Henry V's Saint Crispin address before the Battle of Agincourt—by another architect of Brexit, Daniel Hannan, known for his penchant for quoting Shakespeare at any opportune occasion.⁴ According to Sam Knight of *The Guardian*: "When victory was certain, Hannan stood on a desk in the office and delivered the St Crispin's Day speech from Henry V [...]—substituting the names of people who had worked on the campaign." Anna Blackwell likens the two politicians, explaining how Shakespeare serves here as "a tool for legitimation" (177):

³ All citations come from Folger Shakespeare Library at www.folger.edu.

⁴ On Hannan's appropriation of Shakespeare for the Brexit campaign see: O'Neill and Blackwell.

Like fellow Brexiteer, author and Shakespeare aficionado Boris Johnson, Hannan's seemingly erudite nature (signalled through references to Shakespeare) legitimises and complements the social capital he possesses as a white, middle-class, privately educated Oxford graduate. The implicit belief that Shakespeare is "good taste" naturalises Hannan's conservative beliefs and provides him with not only a language through which to express his politics but an in-built basis for them. (176)

Thus, it seems that Boris's citation of Gaunt's speech in the series replaces Hannan's as a comment on the political right's tendency to employ Shakespeare as their mouthpiece. It also serves as a critique of Johnson's aspirations as the next Winston Churchill since the series frequently portrays him emulating the former PM, also known for his allusions to the Bard's plays in his political writings and speeches. Episode 1 depicts Johnson quoting Churchill's words from 1940, saying that "all his life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial", comparing the significance of his appointment as PM post-Brexit to that of Churchill's during the Second World War. Churchill also quoted the first 5 lines from John of Gaunt's speech in his article "Let's Boost Britain" in the weekly *Answers* on the 28th of April, 1934, to celebrate Saint George's Day by referring to it as "the noblest tribute ever penned to this England of ours" (qtd. in Langworth). He then continued to ponder:

Ours is a wonderful island. Taken on the whole, it is the most wonderful island in the world, and we are its inheritors. But inheritance carries with it responsibilities. [...] What is being done to our island? Is it becoming more beautiful, more charming? Is it gaining continuously from the modern age and yet preserving all that has come down from the past?" (qtd. in Langworth).

Here, Gaunt's words become a springboard for a serious reflection—something entirely lacking in Branagh's Johnson's celebratory and nationalistic appropriation.

The real-life Boris Johnson is known for publicly referring to Shakespeare as a tool of self-legitimation and self-fashioning, modelling himself on the politician he openly admires⁵—an element of his public persona which the series seeks to, at least initially, caricature since, as one reviewer notices, the new PM is "unable to even get out of the bath without quoting William Shakespeare, Winston Churchill or Homer" (Vaizey). In this way, the creators of the show reveal an ironic gap between the two statesmen, particularly with Johnson's appropriation of the Churchillian war rhetoric to the times of Brexit-torn Britain. The real Johnson once opined that the EU was "pursuing a similar goal to Hitler in trying to create a powerful superstate" (qtd. in Ross). He also

⁵ Johnson wrote *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (2014), in which he seems to be drawing some parallels between Churchill and himself.

invoked Churchill in an interview for *The Telegraph* on the 15th of May, 2016, in which, as Thomas Doherty claims, he “encouraged us to emulate Churchill’s wartime defiance not just of Hitler but of all that was happening across Europe” (184) to “set the country free and save the EU from itself by voting to leave” (Ross). And while it is true that, as Irena Makaryk reminds us, writing about Shakespeare and the Second World War: “Shakespeare presents a fascinating case study of the nexus of problems binding together concepts of collective remembrance, history, war, and national identity” (4), Branagh’s Johnson’s use of John of Gaunt’s speech at the beginning of the show discloses a manipulative and selective appropriation. The new PM opts for an instantly recognisable fragment to appeal to isolationist sentiments and nostalgia but significantly omits the latter part of the speech whose words he will remember in the series’ closing as they come to haunt him.

This public display of erudition and self-fashioning is gradually replaced by more contemplative uses of Shakespeare, which unexpectedly endows his character with sympathy, if not gravitas, especially as his Shakespearean quotations are also accompanied by increasing retrospection and introspection, seen in his nightmares which open Episodes 2, 3 and 4 and fragments of Episode 5 in which he is hospitalised with Covid-19. Branagh’s Johnson’s references to Shakespeare now typically occur in private rather than public spaces as we often see him stare pensively at the window. Thus, from the 47th minute of Episode 1, in which he looks at the window and says: “I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth,” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.318-319) onwards, Shakespeare will be largely reserved for his personal rather than public reflection as he is portrayed struggling with the magnitude of the pandemic as well as guilt and anxiety over his divorce, pending deadline for the book, estranged children, new fatherhood, illness, scandals and political squabbles within his own party.

Thus, whereas, initially, Shakespearean references serve to critique and mock Johnson’s pretensions and grandiosity, in the latter part of the series they give the new PM some tragic weight, which points to the show’s tonal imbalance as well as its confusing intentions. The fact that he is the only character allowed introspection turns him into the protagonist of the show with whom the viewer is encouraged to empathise. His fears and anxieties are vividly visualised in his black-and-white dreams when he is sick in hospital. Struggling to breathe in an oxygen mask, he hallucinates seeing his estranged wife and daughters, and his new partner holding their child, against some barren wasteland. These visions stand out from the rest of the series’ documentary-like aesthetic (Fig. 1).⁶

⁶ All the images are screen grabs publishable under Fair Dealing.



Fig. 1.

They have been called Bergmanesque by some reviewers (see: Rowat; McCahill). In them, his relatives express their disappointment, addressing him directly and looking intently into the camera. Even though the scene lacks any literal Shakespearean quotation, it nonetheless evokes Shakespeare visually, in particular Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015),⁷ whose mise-en-scène singles out the weird sisters, one of whom is shown holding an infant, from a dark and harsh Scottish landscape (Fig. 2). Kurzel's witches are the story's moral compass (see: Rasmus "What Bloody Film is This. *Macbeth* for Our Time"), just as Johnson's female relatives are in his fever-induced nightmares. As a result of this stylistically sophisticated scene, Branagh's Johnson emerges as a troubled individual out of his depth, who even dreams sophisticated Shakespearean visions, unlike all the other Covid-19 sufferers presented in the series.

Shakespeare is used again in a similar way in the middle of Episode 2, in which we witness Johnson examine with trepidation the predicted figures of Covid-19 fatalities on his laptop computer. He then looks at the window and whispers: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all" (5.2.234-237), as the scriptwriters put in his mouth a fragment of one of Hamlet's most famous musings, increasing the viewer's sympathy for the troubled hero. Episode 3 opens with his dream, followed by him staring pensively at the window and whispering to himself: "Beware the Ides of March," as if to signify that he is

⁷ For the discussion of Kurzel's *Macbeth* in the context of Brexit see: Rasmus "What Bloody Film is This? *Macbeth* for Our Time."

about to be betrayed by his allies.⁸ Shakespearean quotations thus present the viewer with the contemplative and restrained Johnson rather than the bombastic and overconfident politician she or he may be familiar with from Boris's numerous public appearances.



Fig. 2.

Yet, the most powerful moment revealing Johnson's capability of retrospection comes in the last few minutes of the final episode, in which Branagh's Johnson returns to John of Gaunt's speech. The sequence opens with the real footage of different people clapping in support of true heroes: the NHS. As we see it unfold, we hear Branagh's famous Shakespearean voice deliver the same lines of John of Gaunt's speech as in Episode 1 off-screen, providing the images with contemplative resonance and none of the pomp of the earlier declamation. It then cuts to Johnson, who looks pensively at the window, then turns to his anxious-looking wife and comments: "Usually leave it there, you know, forget the rest". He then picks up the last part of the speech:

[This England]
Whose rocky shore beats back the envious siege
Of wat'ry Neptune, is now bound in with shame,

⁸ This could refer to Dominic Cummings's trip to Durham during lockdown, which eventually led to public outrage and Johnson's resignation. It could also suggest that Johnson's government does not listen to scientific advisors and does not take their warnings seriously enough.

With inky blots and rotten parchment bonds.
 That England that was wont to conquer others
 Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.
 Ah, would the scandal vanish with my life,
 How happy then were my ensuing death! (2.1.68-74)

His earlier reading of the speech changes once it is delivered in a longer version. Now, it could also be interpreted not just as “a praise of England’s invincibility and power over foreign forces” but also “as a warning against the self-destructive corruption and nationalism [...]” (Kaptur 571). As Helen Hawkins wonders: “Has Boris ever been that sombrely circumspect and regretful? Give the scene to a tragedian as practised as Branagh, and it is bound to sing. But is this bit of fictionalising in aid of truth or, just as likely, dramatic impact?” As *This England* was completed before the Partygate revelations, its creators’ vision of the PM is more sympathetic than some viewers might be ready to accept at present. Winterbottom claims that “The last episode is the most fictional—‘lessons Boris Johnson learned from the first wave.’ Which it turned out were not as many lessons as we thought he might have learned” (qtd. in Dalton).

What follows is an inscription informing the viewer that England was the worst-hit country in Europe, with Covid-19 claiming 112,264 lives by April 2021.⁹ We then see a real clip from Cummings’ testimony about the government’s failure to manage the pandemic, followed by another one showing Johnson’s resignation on the 7th of July, 2022. These videos stress the discrepancy between the real-life Johnson, who would cling to power for another year, refusing to take responsibility or blame for his government’s mishandling of the crisis, covering up the Partygate scandal and repeatedly lying to the Parliament, and the fictional Johnson created in the series – a man overwhelmed with guilt and fully aware that, unlike Churchill, who in 2002 was voted the greatest Briton of all time, he will die in shame

This leads us, finally, to the discussion of the most important Shakespearean element in the series—Branagh as Johnson. The actor’s involvement in the project was from the start its main advertising gimmick. His presence, even if hidden behind the layers of prosthetics and heavy make-up, is by far the strongest Shakespearean intertext. The thespian’s face and voice seem to filter through the costume and endow Johnson with extra tragic weight, especially when his delivery of famous Shakespearean lines turns into a self-reflexive monologue.

Branagh is arguably one of the most important Shakespearean actors and directors of his generation. Jennifer Holl states that “Today, Shakespeare remains

⁹ As of the time of writing, the figure has been updated to 132,632 (see: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>)

the only playwright whose name in adjective form signifies a type of actor” (209), and mentions Branagh, whose “name, for example, hardly surfaces in print unless prefixed by ‘Shakespearean’ [...]” (209). His impact in instigating a wave of Shakespeare screen adaptation in the 1990s is undeniable, causing some to refer to the decade as “the Branagh Era” or “Branagh Factor” (see: Hatchuel; Rasmus *Filming Shakespeare*; Crowl). With numerous Shakespearean roles on stage and screen, he is the ultimate Shakespearean celebrity, whose image is, at least in the eyes of the British press, predominantly bound up with Shakespeare, despite his involvement in numerous Hollywood genre films, including the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Blackwell 40).

Barbara Hodgdon explains how with his first choice of Shakespeare adaptation, *Henry V* (1989), critics immediately predicted “Branagh’s trajectory as the next Olivier and, like him, linked to the nation” (59). Once he directed and starred in *Hamlet* (1996), he was no longer just a substitute for Olivier, as Blackwell proposes. In fact, the promotional materials for the film conflated him with Shakespeare:

This is not to argue that the ascription of Shakespeare’s authorship is consciously erased from the promotion of the text (it is still very much present). Rather, like the reframing of Hogarth’s painting of Garrick as Richard III, Branagh’s identity is formulated as so inherently Shakespearean that any mention of Shakespeare himself is curiously redundant. (40)

This sentiment materialised in 2018 when Branagh directed yet “another film about/on Shakespeare, not only playing in it but playing the Bard himself, thus producing a movie which, in a sense, is a culmination of Branagh’s Shakespeare filming” (Fabiszak 70)—*All is True* (2018)—a biography featuring Shakespeare’s last years in Stratford. This is significant for sealing his status as the greatest Shakespearean celebrity of his generation. Using some minimal prosthetics, an elongated nose and a wig, Branagh’s face transforms into the Bard’s iconic image which, as Jacek Fabiszak writes, is “modelled on the existing portraits of the Bard, a hybrid, palimpsestic face which has become *the* cultural trademark” (79). The actor opted, however, “not to use contact lenses, to go with my own blue eyes, because I wanted to get two things—the way he looked, but then the way he seemed to feel” (qtd. in Williams 2019). The end result is, as Ian McKellan (*The Earl of Southampton*) comments, that “the man sitting opposite you is Ken Branagh, but is also William Shakespeare” (qtd. in Williams 2019) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3.

Writing about Shakespeare's face as the trademark of Shakespeare the brand, Lanier observes that, like any brand, it connotes certain ideas (2007: 93-94). He notes elsewhere that "Shakespeare's face offers an easy means for attaching commercially useful connotations to products, among them quality craftsmanship, *gravitas*, trustworthiness, Britishness, antiquity, cultural sophistication, intellectuality, and artsiness" (2006: 112). And what if Branagh's face, now merged with Shakespeare's, then morphs into Boris's? As the study of the reception will show below, Branagh's Johnson's face is a palimpsest, conflating and merging identities. To many reviewers, it appeared less than solid with the only stable feature being Branagh's gentle and thoughtful eyes peering through the liquid mask.

In her work on the actor's body and adaptation studies, Christina Wilkins finds that praise is usually accorded to those actors who undergo massive bodily transformations for a role by either putting on or losing a lot of weight through a rigorous diet and an exercise programme. This is because, as she argues, we habitually find such bodily transformations more authentic and realistic (30). When an actor wears a fat suit and prosthetics, we tend to look for the real body underneath or marvel at the deception (31). Stardom further complicates the acceptance of an actor's body as a specific character (44), which is why promotional materials often insist that, as was the case here, "Kenneth Branagh is Boris Johnson," conflating the actor with the character. Branagh's performance is the focal point of most reviews and, rather expectedly, typically discussed in the context of his Shakespearean persona.

Whereas some critics saw Branagh's impersonation in terms of caricature, satire or pantomime (see: Moreland; Vaizey; Fletcher; Hilton), many

nonetheless noticed that it gave Johnson surprising tragic weight and sympathy, calling Johnson “unexpectedly sympathetic” and “a palpable human being” (Lynskey), “a hopeless and tragic figure” (Fletcher) and “a tragic theatrical hero” (Einav). Lucy Mangan’s review is even titled “[...] So Sympathetic to Boris Johnson It is Absolutely Bananas,” while Beth English observes how “*This England* works hard to try and make the audience feel sympathy for a truly unsympathetic character”. Branagh’s presence is undeniably one of the reasons for such mixed reactions, provoking numerous reviewers to make Shakespearean analogies as well. For instance, Scott Roxborough compares Johnson to Shakespeare’s classic tragedy, calling him “an odd combination of King Lear and the Fool: a Shakespeare-and-classics-quoting leader who is equal parts tragic and absurd.” Dan Einav also notices parallels between Branagh’s Johnson and a constellation of Shakespeare’s tragic figures:

Between the casting of Kenneth Branagh and the frequency with which the former PM is seen reciting Shakespeare, Johnson appears here as a tragic theatrical hero. He is as isolated and insecure as Lear; as indecisive and mirthless as Hamlet; and—in bizarre dream sequences—as conscience-stricken as Macbeth. Disguised behind heavy prosthetics and vocal tics, Branagh still cannot help but confer gravitas upon a man once dubbed by David Cameron “the greased piglet.”

Moreover, despite or rather because of Branagh’s uncanny resemblance to Johnson in *This England*, critics picked on poignant differences between the two men, especially visible in minutiae facial details, such as the eyes, giving Johnson qualities associated with Branagh as a Shakespearean performer (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4.

Goodall observes that:

Branagh portrays his behaviour with startlingly accuracy but, as the camera closes in, the face just doesn't seem to belong. An image search for close-up shots of Johnson shows that he never stops mugging for the camera, which rarely catches him off-guard. When it does, the eyes are hard, almost blank, in stark contrast to the thoughtful, reflective qualities of Branagh's expression.

Zoe Williams also notices Branagh's eyes peering through the prosthetic: "In feverish, guilty dreams, we see his conscience played back to him in chorus. And this, along with Branagh's all-too-human eyes, buried under his prosthetic pouchy face, could be where people take issue." Similarly, Rachel Cooke finds the eyes mismatched with the rest of the face: "The prosthetics make Johnson seem pathetic, in the fullest sense of that word: vulnerable, inadequate, enfeebled. From this spongy pinkness a pair of tiny eyes peer out. They plead for understanding, for courage, for a brief respite from the awful business of being oneself." Mike McCahill pays attention to the vocal discrepancy, on the other hand, pointing to the curious hybrid: "And the voice we hear emerging from this rubbery carapace, blustering through the Johnson greatest hits, vacillates: sometimes it's spot-on, but sometimes it's Branagh, and sometimes it's someone else entirely."

Adrian Lobb explains the overall effect of Branagh's impersonation in the following way: "It may be due to Branagh's soulful performance, his ability to go deep into character with such empathy and skill, that Johnson never feels truly held to account by *This England*." This rings strangely true of the actor's earlier performance of the Bard himself, which Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* describes as "a triumph of ferocity and feeling that shuns Shakespeare the literary rock star to find the flawed, touchingly human man inside." But whereas Branagh as Shakespeare is perceived as a happy marriage of faces, if not identities, Branagh as Johnson is a harder mix for many critics to swallow. The Shakespearean celebrity's all too human blue eyes peering through the prosthetics are now also those of the gentle swan of Avon, and no amount of make-up can make them match the hardened face of the disgraced politician they know.

In sum, Winterbottom's *This England* is a confusing proposition. On the one hand, Shakespeare is used ironically to indicate the gap between the real Boris and the historical figures he emulates. It is a critical portrait of a man who hides behind carefully selected lofty quotations, appropriating them out of context to seek self-legitimation. On the other hand, the criticism aimed at this prominent architect of Brexit and the man now held accountable for his mishandling of the pandemic is softened by the very presence of the Shakespearean celebrity. The show reveals the importance of casting, which attracts attention to the project but can also distract from its purpose. Just as

Benedict Cumberbatch's portrayal of Dominic Cummings in *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019) turned Cummings into a charismatic genius, Branagh's Shakespearean identity peers through the mask and looks at us with Shakespeare's gentle eyes. Connoting erudition, class, trustworthiness and intellect, Shakespeare turns Johnson into a flawed albeit likeable hero.

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