

# *MAGNYFYCENCE* ONSCREEN Documentary Film as Translation

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... no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife — which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living — the original undergoes a change.

Walter Benjamin 'The Task of the Translator'<sup>1</sup>

In May 2010 Elisabeth Dutton directed a new staging of John Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (c. 1519) in Henry VIII's Hampton Court Palace. Written during the early years of Henry's reign, this secular play draws upon the religious allegorical form of earlier medieval drama to make a political statement about the fall and redemption of a prince. Skelton was Henry's tutor when the king was a boy, and it is not difficult to interpret the lessons underlying *Magnyfycence's* depiction of vices leading a monarch to ruin.<sup>2</sup> Hampton Court was an impressive and well-appointed residence when owned by Henry's counsellor Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Indeed, in his satirical 1522 poem *Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?* Skelton suggests that it rivalled the king's, claiming, 'The kynges courte | Shulde have the excellence; | But Hampton Court | Hath the preemyence!'<sup>3</sup> Henry VIII claimed the palace in 1528, following Wolsey's failure to obtain papal permission for the king to divorce his wife Katherine. He sumptuously updated it for his own use, and it is now preserved for the public by Historic Royal Palaces. Dutton's staging in Hampton Court's Great Hall offered an exciting opportunity to see Skelton's warning against bad advisers and court intrigue playing out in the spaces that it describes. Dutton approached me in 2009 about making a film around the staging, in order to document the process and reach audiences after the performances concluded. Given my research interests in medieval literature and its reception and my background in filmmaking, I was excited by the artistic and scholarly possibilities that making such a film could afford.<sup>4</sup> My regular collaborator Mike LaRocco joined me as a co-director in 2010, and through discussions with Dutton we decided that the documentary genre would be the best way to approach this material. Documentary film allowed us to convey key information about the play's history and

performance context, as well as to use familiar cinematic techniques to make medieval drama more accessible to contemporary viewers. *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* is a 23-minute-long film that is now available to stream for free online.<sup>5</sup> In this piece I will share some of the thought-processes and decisions that took place during its making, with a focus on the special considerations that came with working in film.

*Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* is not meant to replace watching Dutton's production performed live, and by virtue of its medium (film) and genre (documentary) is inevitably a different kind of project from the Hampton Court staging. Instead, we came to see it as something closer to a translation. In her chapter 'Translating Media', N. Katherine Hayles refers to Efraín Kristal's work on Borges as she describes how translations of all kinds can create (and shut down) ways of reading a text:

Borges delighted in thinking of all writing as drafts in process, imperfect instantiations never fully one with the significations toward which they gesture. In this view, texts are provocations to go in search of meaning (echoing McGann); when they become instantiated in a certain set of words (and we may add, a given medium and performance in that medium), they necessarily miss some possibilities even as they realize others.<sup>6</sup>

For Hayles, who argues that there 'is no Platonic reality of texts', but 'only physical objects such as books and computers, foci of attention, and codes that entrain attention and organise material operations', remediation inevitably gives rise to a kind of translation.<sup>7</sup> While Hayles focuses specifically on digital and print texts, I share her perspective that even seemingly minor changes in medium (print on a page *vs* print on a screen; performance on a stage *vs* performance in a film) can radically alter understandings of a text. Even in the best representations, for instance, film can never capture the experience of live drama in a particular physical space and time. But while much can be lost in the translation from stage to film, film also holds its own set of narrative possibilities that can bring a text to life in unique ways. Recognising this, we made deliberate choices about our creative and scholarly representations of *Magnyfycence* on film. We wanted to make an informative documentary to address the challenges and pleasures of staging medieval drama today, while exploring the exceptional circumstances surrounding Dutton's production of *Magnyfycence* in Hampton Court's Great Hall. But we also wanted to allow for first-hand experiences of *Magnyfycence* while watching the film, to

supplement the more indirect experience of watching a recording of a live show. As a result, the film brings together traditional documentary methods with cinematic techniques from other genres: most notably, the voyeuristic looking of narrative film and the questionable ‘realism’ of reality television and mockumentary. Together, these ways of representing *Magnifycence* give rise to a new afterlife for Skelton’s sixteenth-century play: a translation, of sorts, for the present day.

In our decision to combine these approaches, we took into account the fact (often unspoken but well-acknowledged amongst filmmakers) that in spite of its implicit claim to ‘document’ reality, documentary films still rely upon the mediating vision of directors and their creative teams. As Jay Ruby suggests, ‘all films, whether they are labelled fiction, documentary, or art — are created, structured articulations of the filmmaker and not authentic, truthful, objective records’.<sup>8</sup> Necessary decisions about what information to include and what to leave out, which images to show and for how long, from what angle, with what audio, next to which other clips, etc., make the documentary filmmaking process akin to collaging: choosing and cutting scraps of information to arrange into a coherent whole. Documentary filmmaking must always grapple with its own status as presumed truth-teller, even as it actively constructs the reality that it depicts. In recognition of this contradiction, many documentary filmmakers now eschew the disembodied, unnamed ‘voice of God’ approach to narrating voice-overs, since it suggests objectivity and access to absolute truth. Alternatives include the filmmaker introducing herself, thereby admitting that the documentary reflects a subjective vision of reality, and choosing an identifiable person from the film to serve as the narrator. Given the many voices (current and historical, real and fictional) in our story, we took another route for *Magnifycence: Staging Medieval Drama*. Rather than selecting a single narrator, we arranged these voices so that they all contribute to bringing the viewer through the film. In doing so, we hoped to prevent any one voice from dominating or claiming privileged access to Skelton’s text, and to draw attention to the fact that this film, while as accurate as we could make it, is only one of many possible depictions of actual events.

This combination of narrators also reflects the film’s intentional combination of cinematic styles. To supply contextual information, the film makes use of many of the conventions of the documentary genre. These include interviews with the actors, director, and other experts; cutaway footage from relevant locations; and scenes from the performances

and rehearsals [PLATES 1 and 2]. We also staged some scenes from the play for the camera as if we were making a narrative film, in the hopes of using cinematic language to offer our audience their own (emotional, affective) experience of the play. As part of the film's ongoing consideration of the relationship between this medieval work and our contemporary world, we also played with the techniques of reality television and mockumentary, making use of postmodern visual language to ask what kind of afterlife a text like *Magnyfycence* might have in our media landscape of today. Each of these styles attempts to draw out different aspects of Skelton's play and its staging possibilities, drawing upon the specific communicative capabilities of video and film.

The traditional documentary techniques in *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* introduce viewers to the plot and history of *Magnyfycence*, offer insight into the difficulties and rewards of bringing an allegorical play in Early Modern English to the modern stage, and discuss the significance of staging the play in Hampton Court Palace. A recurring theme in the film is the importance of staging medieval drama in order better to understand the plays and the spaces in which they were performed. In their interviews, Tom Betteridge, Professor of English Literature and Drama at Oxford Brookes University, and Greg Walker, Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at the University of Edinburgh, join Elisabeth Dutton to advocate for staging medieval plays as a form of scholarship in its own right. As they speak, cutaway scenes from the performances in Hampton Court's Great Hall provide insight into the distinctive conditions of this production, including the temporality of the performances themselves. The audience frequently appears in these clips, because Dutton staged the play in the centre of the hall with the audience eating and drinking at long tables on both sides of the actors. The camerapeople took up positions on the perimeter of this gathering so as not to interfere in the performances, so the footage often catches glimpses of the audience [PLATE 3]. Their laughter and applause echoes in the soaring chamber as the virtues and vices run and leap, bow and weep, and walk up and down the long wooden floor. Meanwhile, the light in these scenes drops as night falls outside the large windows that run the length of the hall, darkening the space as the play moves towards its dramatic conclusion. These sequences convey the singularity of the staging and the irreplaceability of having attended it, with all of its accompanying material and environmental conditions. The experts' commentary and the visibility of the audience serve essential distancing functions in the film, intellectualizing



PLATE 1: Magnyfycence (Anthony Wilks) and Fancy (Charlotte Bayley) in *Magnyfycence*, directed by Elisabeth Dutton in Hampton Court Palace's Great Hall. Performed 1 May 2010. © Dollar Bet Productions 2010.



PLATE 2: Actors Dominik Kracmar and Fiona Watson rehearse a scene.  
© Dollar Bet Productions 2010.



PLATE 3: The audience surrounds the actors (Wilks and Bayley) in the Great Hall performance. © Dollar Bet Productions 2010.

the experience of watching the play and reminding the film viewer: *These people were there. You are not.* This kind of detachment not only affirms the exceptionality of the live performances, it also allows for critical reflection on the production and staging of medieval drama in general.

We did not want the film to imply, however, that those who missed this production can never have authentic performance experiences of Skelton's text. In fact, even with the enviable opportunity to put *Magnyfycence* in Henry VIII's hall, the significant cultural and linguistic changes since the sixteenth century prevented even Dutton's production from being able to fully replicate the experience of watching Skelton's play as it was 'meant' to be seen, whatever that might be. As much as she learned from staging *Magnyfycence* in the Great Hall, Dutton reflects, it was not possible to 'recreate for the audience a sense of what that play would have been like', because the production team 'couldn't get beyond them seeing it as a historic building; we couldn't make an audience feel like the Great Hall was their home'.<sup>9</sup> This impossibility of total recreation is to be expected, however, and was no deterrent to the ensemble. Actor Charlotte Bayley adds that she does not see the staging as 'a reconstruction of the historical event of the performance'; it instead allows for 'discovering ways they [Tudor actors] might have accessed [the play] previously,' while also 'bringing new things to it'.<sup>10</sup> These 'new things' inevitably draw upon

contemporary experience and culture, imbuing Skelton's text with meanings that have special relevance in the world today. We, as filmmakers, were also interested in these questions of representation: trying to capture, as much as possible, the innovations of Dutton's stage production while also 'bringing new things' to Skelton's text through the possibilities of the film medium.

In his influential article on 'the authentic Shakespeare', Stephen Orgel argues that changing standards for how to perform the Bard's plays over the centuries reflect each generation's vision of Shakespeare as a genius who fits their own time:

The assumption is that texts are representations or embodiments of something else, and that it is that something else which the performer or editor undertakes to reveal. What we want is not the authentic play, with its unstable, infinitely revisable script, but an authentic Shakespeare, to whom every generation's version of a classic drama maybe ascribed.<sup>11</sup>

Like Hayles, I do not believe in a Platonic text towards which we must strive, and Orgel provides another way of thinking about authenticity: as contingent, and always situated within performance. Orgel's claim that in performances of Shakespeare 'the text is the basis of the performance, but the performance is an independent entity', can be extended to other performances in which time and cultural shifts imbue the original text with new meanings.<sup>12</sup> Dutton's staging brings *Magnifycence's* specific historical circumstances together with the desires and expectations of contemporary audiences to create something that is at once historically faithful and immediately relevant. In making *Magnifycence: Staging Medieval Drama*, we kept the media literacies of our film-viewing audience in mind as we augmented our conventional approach to documentary with scenes staged directly for the camera. These scenes privilege the film viewer's experience of the play, and exist in conversation with the 'traditional' documentary segments of the film. Indeed, much of the dramatic irony in the play text presumes the audience's knowledge of Tudor history and courtly spaces, so while the film's documentary elements create distance between the viewer and *Magnifycence* (by talking *about* the play rather than simply watching it), the information conveyed during these sections gives viewers more points of access into the scenes staged for the camera than most might otherwise have had.

Our decision to shoot some scenes from the play in cinematic narrative style came from the special problems that accompany making a documentary about live theatre. The film viewer's second-hand experience of a play (as opposed to the theatregoing audience's primary experience) often threatens to sap the life from even the most compelling performances. Perhaps a film of a staging of a play includes too many layers of suspended disbelief to allow for engaging access to the text, or maybe theatrical conventions do not lend themselves to the camera's fascination with sweeping wide shots and the minutiae of extreme close ups. Whatever the cause, recordings of live drama are rarely able to convey the full power of the original staging. We therefore asked the actors to work with Skelton's text using performance styles that are native to film and television, making use of this special language. Dutton turned these experiments into part of the rehearsal process, encouraging the actors to use these opportunities to explore the play from a variety of angles (pun intended). In the film, we used these scenes to break into the traditional documentary form and jolt viewers into a personal experience of the play.

*Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* opens with one such scene, allowing the play to 'speak for itself' before any other speaker claims the viewer's attention. Appearing before the opening credits, this scene depicts the figure of Adversyte (played by Claire Cordier) casting Magnyfycence (Anthony Wilks) down from his throne. Magnyfycence sits at the end of a long hall, and Adversyte's voice echoes in the space as she stalks past the camera to approach him.<sup>13</sup> She becomes smaller as she moves towards the back of the frame, but the camera cuts in close to the two figures as she lifts and then flings Magnyfycence to the ground. This shift in angle allows the camera to capture the shock and anguish on his face as he falls from his throne, and the handheld footage keeps the viewer grovelling on the ground with the king as Adversyte kicks him with her boot [PLATE 4]. These techniques — carefully timed cuts, changes in camera angle, and adjustments in the camera's proximity to its subjects — are commonplace in narrative film, and open the documentary with what we hope is an engaging experience with the play itself. However the audio for this scene is imperfect, booming slightly in the echoing space of the empty hall. In spite of the filmic camera movements, this aural cue suggests the conditions of the theatre, in which audio projection is usually left to the lungs of the actors rather than to directional and hidden microphones. This in-betweenness of



PLATE 4: Adversyte (Claire Cordier) flings Magnyfycence (Wilks) to the ground in a staging of this scene filmed specifically for *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama*. © Dollar Bet Productions 2010.



PLATE 5: The vice Courtly Abusyon (Fiona Watson) appears in the guise of Pleasure and tempts Magnyfycence (Wilks) to sin. This scene was filmed in a pub as part of the rehearsal process. © Dollar Bet Productions 2010.



PLATE 6: Poverté (Dominik Kracmar) whispers in the ear of the fallen Magnyfycence (Wilks) in a staging filmed specifically for *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama*.  
© Dollar Bet Productions 2010.

the opening scene sets the stage (so to speak) for the remainder of the film, in which the conventions of cinema and live theatre frequently jut up against one another.

Another example of this kind of slippage between the worlds of film and theatre occurs in a scene that initially seems to serve a mere illustrative function in the documentary. Actor Charlotte Bayley notes the importance of drawing parallels between contemporary situations and scenarios from *Magnyfycence* in order to help the ensemble come to terms with the play. Following this statement, the film cuts to a scene between Magnyfycence and the vice Courtly Abusyon (played by Fiona Watson), who appears in the guise of Pleasure. In this version, the actors use a modern setting to help them access Skelton's text: Courtly Abusyon is a bartender who leans over to Magnyfycence, flattering him and encouraging him to 'fasten your fansy upon a fayre maystresse' [PLATE 5].<sup>14</sup> Courtly Abusyon points out possible targets for Magnyfycence's affection in the bar, gesturing towards a woman outside of the frame who blushes — 'quykely is envyed with rudyes of the rose' — as they look at her.<sup>15</sup> Magnyfycence says little, but ogles, laughs, and drinks while Courtly Abusyon, pretending to be Pleasure, describes the woman's physical charms in seductive tones.

The seedy modern setting lends itself to the implication that Courtly Abusyon is in the business of sexual procurement, and that Magnyfyence is being taken in by a well-practised con-artist. The scene of temptation and moral degradation plays out over a single take, and by its end the camera has moved in close to become the third in Courtly Abusyon and Magnyfyence's intimate conversation. While still an example to support Bayley's claim in the preceding interview, the scene takes on a life of its own through the camera's sustained focus on the two characters' interactions. But in a pause in the conversation, Dutton's voice breaks in to ask Watson a question about her comfort with the setting. The camera cuts wide to reveal that Dutton has been watching, as the director, throughout the scene. This move destabilises the meaning of the scene in the context of the documentary, giving it the dual function of both a moment of filmic proximity (in the viewer's 'now' as they watch it play out) and an example of the rehearsal process (a record of an event that happened in the past). This kind of tension is important in the documentary, which endeavours to translate Skelton for film without losing sight of the play's grounding in live theatre.

After several such cinematic interludes that seek to give viewers their own experiences of the play, however, the final sequence of the film gives over entirely to filmic interpretation [PLATE 6]. The last few minutes depict an intimate moment of intense human emotion — even though the 'humans' are also allegorical figures. A wretched Poverté (played by Dominik Kracmar) cradles the fallen Magnyfyence in his arms, recounting his losses and urging him to pray to God. The framing at the beginning of the scene captures the two men's upper bodies; Poverté sits behind Magnyfyence, the king leaning back against him. But as Poverté begins to whisper admonishments, the camera moves in closer and closer as if to catch his words. Abandoning the critical and physical distance that was so important in the traditional documentary segments of the film, we decided to give film a chance to consider readings of *Magnyfyence* based on 'extreme' proximity: in this case, the erotic 'extreme' of the 'extreme close-up'.

The camera skims over the men's entangled bodies, examining the muscles and veins in their hands as Poverté begins to deliver a monologue directed towards the fallen king. Poverté's arm clamps across Magnyfyence's chest to grip one of his shoulders, and Magnyfyence clings to this same arm with one hand. A slow, minor guitar chord begins to strum as Poverté whispers, 'nowe must ye lerne to lye harde, | That was wonte to lye on fetherbeddes of downe' and the camera moves up their

necks to their faces, which are pressed closely together. Poverté's lips hover centimetres from Magnyfycence's ear when he tells the king, 'Nowe must your fete lye hyer than your crowne'.<sup>16</sup> Poverté continues to murmur the monarch's misfortunes, their faces filling and falling out of the frame as the handheld camera shifts during these lines. Such a view of Poverté and Magnyfycence emphasises the sensual, focusing on the two men's corporeality at the moment that Poverté reminds Magnyfycence that he is now 'in bed' with poverty. Magnyfycence's new metaphorical sleeping position with his feet over his head becomes a potential double entendre, tinged at once with the possibility of homophobic fear and also (given the surprising tenderness of the scene) with the tension of homoerotic desire.

Cinema's ability to bring the viewer close, to be a *voyeur* in someone else's intimate moments, is part of its exceptional power. Laura Mulvey famously writes that film allows for the satisfaction of scopophilic desires — taking pleasure in looking at others — while at the same time letting us identify with what we see.<sup>17</sup> This kind of intimate gazing at the actors' bodies is not possible in the vast majority of live theatre stagings, but is common in cinema. Such proximity is surely incommensurate with Skelton's 'intentions' for the play, and is unlike any experience Dutton's audience had of the scene in Hampton Court Palace, much less what a Tudor audience might have had. These filmic techniques may even undercut the characters' roles as allegorical figures, but they also cast new light on Skelton's text, suggesting new readings of how two people — or a fallen person and his own poverty — might touch one another in a moment of abjection. The camera's obsessive looking in this closing scene casts away any pretence of the film's objective 'documentation', and the non-diegetic music encourages total emotional surrender. At the last, the film viewer's experience of *Magnyfycence* takes total precedence.

This filmic 'staging' suggests the potential of cinematic interpretation to discover alternate readings of a text: readings that arise out of the peculiarities of the medium and rely upon particular cultural circumstances. Audiences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have become accustomed to the visual language of cinema and television, which has changed with technology and culture. Viewers bring their own expectations about the implications of visual language to each film or TV text that they encounter; as with Shakespeare's plays and audiences, in today's media a text's 'meaning ... is dependent on the audience, and is not uniform or constant within it'.<sup>18</sup> As part of our attempt at a documentary 'translation' of Skelton, we experimented with visual language that refers

specifically to our current media landscape. Reality television and mockumentary are popular remediations of the documentary form that play with the reliability of claims to reality and elevate the everyday to celebrity status. Reality TV, especially, signals a particularly postmodern media experience, having risen dramatically in prominence since the late 1990s/early 2000s.<sup>19</sup> It is a genre that borrows from mockumentary's pastiche of documentary, but uses these same techniques to represent a 'reality' that is edited to increase sensationalism. We wanted to include scenes in *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* that draw upon this genre in order to explore how well the play *Magnyfycence* could 'speak' in this context. We also wanted to draw attention to the similarities (and differences) between traditional documentary and these other two genres, which are often associated with the bending of reality for the purposes of entertainment and heightened dramatic tension. So in the first sequence of the film after the opening credits, we cut reality TV-style 'confessions' from Skelton's characters into Dutton's overview of the play.



PLATE 7: Director Elisabeth Dutton describes the plot and context of *Magnyfycence* in an interview. © Dollar Bet Productions 2010.

The initial shot of Dutton in this sequence visually indicates the conventions of a factual documentary, and agrees with traditional arrangements for an interview with an expert or subject in the genre. This includes tight framing around her head, an eyeline looking slightly off-

camera, and the speaker's name and credentials appearing in text at the beginning of the segment. The university affiliation under her name identifies Dutton as an academic as well as the director of the play, signalling her status as an authority and a reliable guide to the film.<sup>20</sup> Her professional demeanour, the clear audio, and the rich textures and colours of the period costumes that hang behind her also contribute to this image [PLATE 7]. Scenes from the Hampton Court performances illustrate her description of *Magnyfycence*; as with most shots from these performances, the visible audience serves as a reminder of the temporality of the live performances. In the midst of this sequence, however, *Magnyfycence*, *Measure*, and *Clokyd Colusyon* (*Cloaked Collusion*) each interrupt Dutton's essential exposition to name and describe themselves. Using lines from the play, these three allegorical characters speak directly to the camera and make 'eye contact' with the film viewer.



PLATE 8: Clokyd Colusyon (Kracmar) interrupts Dutton's exposition to describe himself in direct address to the camera, using lines from *Magnyfycence*.

In keeping with his character, *Magnyfycence* seems almost to cut off Dutton's sentence in order to speak about his own majesty. '[P]rynce perlesse, provyd of porte,' he begins, enunciating each of the alliterated *ps* while sitting back in an armchair and smiling faintly at the camera. 'Bathyd in blysse, embracyd in comforte', he continues, gesturing around himself with an affable arrogance. The monarch finishes his brief self-

description by leaning forward and asking, ‘Loke, who is the best?’, his assured chuckle suggesting that this question is merely a rhetorical one.<sup>21</sup> Seated in the centre of the frame and breaking the ‘fourth wall’ with his gaze at the camera, *Magnyfycence* claims an intimacy with the viewer that differs from Dutton’s expert presentation and from the images of *Magnyfycence* in the Great Hall performances. The visual cues of reality television mark a break from the stream of Dutton’s narration, strengthened by the sudden shift in pacing caused by the disruption and by *Magnyfycence*’s use of early Modern English. Thus we juxtapose Dutton, the authority from ‘our’ world and the ‘reliable’ documentary genre, with this postmodern *Magnyfycence*, who appears in the style of sensational ‘reality’ TV and behaves like a present-day figure in such a show. This intersection of genres and periods takes place twice more in the brief opening sequence when Measure and Clokyd Colusyon ‘speak’ through contemporary visual language — and in early Modern English.

It is now commonplace to find television figures turning to the camera, and most viewers are trained to read such confessional moments as ‘reality’, in which the figure speaks candidly and without a script. A number of fictional shows have also adopted the techniques of mockumentary (including direct address to the camera, but also shaky handheld shots, whip pans, and imperfect audio pickup, among others) to play with the narrative possibilities of such supposed authenticity. For many shows this includes, of course, revealing the subjectivity of the filmmakers in constructing the real. Meanwhile, reality television balances the dual identity of presenting ‘real’ life with an often self-aware acknowledgement of its own constructed nature. Writing about the widespread fascination with reality television, Linda Williams notes,

The contradictions are rich: on the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no *a priori* truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth.<sup>22</sup>

It is possible to extend this paradox of admitting the impossibility of accessing concrete truth while maintaining a simultaneous obsession with ‘true stories’ to documentary filmmaking more broadly. Similarly, this film about medieval drama recognises the inaccessibility of ever fully knowing how or why *Magnyfycence* was staged (or even fully representing Dutton’s performances), but also wishes to offer the momentary illusion of receiving

insider information ‘straight’ from the play through these confessional interviews with the characters. By staging scenes in our documentary using reality TV techniques and the text of Skelton’s play, we placed *Magnyfycence* in a postmodern context that enabled it to take part in this contemporary conversation.

Meanwhile, the visual language of reality television offers a formal accessibility that seeks to compensate for any historical and linguistic difficulties that the play may pose to contemporary viewers. In fact, we initially shot *Magnyfycence*’s ‘interview’ as part of a larger exercise with the actors to help *them* acclimate to the early Modern English and situations in the play. In the opening scene of *Magnyfycence* Measure asserts her authority over the virtues Lyberte (Liberty) and Felycyte (Wealthy Felicity), and they all profess their usefulness to the king. Dutton wanted to give the actors a modern-day scenario that lent itself to people jockeying for influence in subtle and often humorous ways, where a camera might plausibly be present. We chose to rehearse the scene as if it were for a show like *The Office*, in which such power politics often take place knowingly in front of a camera. The resulting scene was very funny, and we decided to complete the experience by filming cutaway interviews, including the above scene with *Magnyfycence*. The entire exercise demonstrated for us the power of visual language to mediate early texts. But while we were delighted to see how well the actors and camera could make Skelton’s play accessible for contemporary audiences, it also raised important questions about the nature of this kind of media translation. If certain camera angles and performance styles can transform medieval allegorical figures into familiar-seeming characters, can a documentary that uses such techniques claim to be a faithful translation of the original? Or, given the unstable nature of performance texts and their infinite potential for culturally specific afterlives, are these mediations as ‘authentic’ (in Orgel’s sense) as possible after all?

A third possibility (which is not mutually exclusive with either of the first two) is that the play is predisposed to this kind of mediation, and includes stylistic parallels that leap across time to connect with contemporary cinematic and televisual norms. As it happens, *Magnyfycence* includes a personal aside to the audience, providing a precedent for our reality TV-style direction in the film. When Clokyd Colusyon (Kracmar) intrudes into Dutton’s exposition to identify himself in the film, the text that he speaks comes from a speech that he makes alone to the audience in the play. In this scene, Clokyd Colusyon remains

in the performance space to, as he puts it, ‘passe the tyme’ and to ‘occupy the place’, presumably while the other actors change their costumes.<sup>23</sup> He says that he walks ‘here’, merging the time and space of the play with that of the theatre audience, breaking down the implicit boundaries between them. The actor’s performance for the camera translates that intimacy for the film medium, offering a cinematic experience of the text that reflects its performance history. Clokyd Colusyon leans in towards the camera, dropping his voice to a whisper as he reveals that he and ‘dyvvyson, dyssencyon, dyrysyon’ are together ‘counterfet of one mynd and thought, | By the menys of Myschyef to brynge all thynges to nought’.<sup>24</sup> A roguish smile flickers at the corners of his mouth as he completes these lines, staring fixedly at the camera [PLATE 8]. Film’s ability to pick up small sounds and movements allows Kracmar to seem to collude with the viewer for some nefarious purpose, performing the veiled subterfuge the name ‘Cloaked Collusion’ implies. Thus cinema — and specifically the direct-to-camera confessional style of mockumentary and reality TV — proves ideally suited to performing both the individuality and the allegorical identity of a medieval character like Clokyd Colusyon. Other characters’ direct-to-audience asides in the documentary may also speak to aspects of the original play text; for instance, creating for film viewers the intimacy that soliloquy seeks in stage productions.

Our experiments with film genres and styles allowed us to do three things in this documentary. First, they made it possible for Skelton’s text to speak alongside the other commentators in the film, contributing to the larger picture of the production that we were creating in the documentary. Second, familiar visual language opened up lines of (we hope) comprehensible communication between Skelton’s characters and our contemporary film audience. Finally, the experiments allowed for new readings of *Magnyfycence* that suggest surprising points of connection to our current media and culture. We sought to draw out such moments of connection throughout the documentary, and to find ways for our film viewers to have first-hand experiences of the play while still learning about the particulars of Dutton’s remarkable staging. The combination of techniques and genres that we used in pursuit of this goal gave rise to what we see as a postmodern translation of *Magnyfycence*; a self-aware construction of the play and its context for today’s audience.

*Magnyfycence*’s ability to speak through film — and to continue to yield new readings when approached through different cinematic genres — is a testament to its richness and continued relevance. Live stagings of

medieval plays can never be replaced, as *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* seeks to demonstrate. However, other media also have roles to play in the study and continued afterlives of medieval theatre. Whether providing historical information about a play, documenting a new theatre staging, re-staging a text specifically for the camera, or some combination of these, film offers its own signifying strategies that provide unique access to the drama of the Middle Ages and the Tudor period. Such strategies are intimately related to the material conditions of the medium, and will therefore necessitate some departures from theatrical conventions. However, approaching medieval drama through film opens up possibilities for new readings and insight: 'authentic' 'translations' for a given audience, cultural moment, and vernacular medium.<sup>25</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin 'The Task of the Translator' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 73.
2. *Medieval Drama: An Anthology* edited Greg Walker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 349–50.
3. John Skelton 'Why Come Ye Nat to Courte?' in *The Complete English Poems of John Skelton* edited John Scattergood (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 289 lines 406–9. It was, as Greg Walker notes, 'a central tenet of *Why Come Ye Nat?* (1522) that the Cardinal operated outside the royal court, denuding it of personnel and prestige by drawing all business to his anti-courts of Hampton and York Place'; 'John Skelton and the Royal Court' in *John Skelton and Early Modern Culture: Papers Honoring Robert S. Kinsman* edited David R. Carlson (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2008) 13.
4. My research often considers how medievalisms in literature, film, television, and new media make use of the past to construct contemporary identity. See, for instance, my essay 'Ban Welondes: Wayland Smith in Popular Culture' in *Anglo-Saxon Culture and the Modern Imagination* edited David Clark and Nicholas Perkins (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2010) 201–18, which considers Wayland from Old English literature to *The Simpsons*, and 'Reality Remixed: Neomedieval Princess Culture in Disney's *Enchanted*' in *The Disney Middle Ages* edited Susan Aronstein and Tison Pugh (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) 241–59, which focuses on Disney's appropriation of fan mashup techniques in order to update its 'medieval' image for adult viewers and consumers.

5. *Magnyfycence: Staging Medieval Drama* can be found through the Early Drama in Oxford site <<http://edox.org.uk/>> or on the video-hosting site Vimeo at <<http://vimeo.com/19975264>>.
6. N. Katherine Hayles *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 114.
7. Hayles *My Mother Was a Computer* 97.
8. Jay Ruby 'The Image Mirrored: Reflexivity and the Documentary Film' in *New Challenges for Documentary* edited Alan Rosenthal and John Corner (Manchester UP, 2nd edition 2005) 44.
9. At 17:34:52 in the film.
10. At 18:12:22 in the film.
11. Stephen Orgel 'The Authentic Shakespeare' *Representations* 21 (Winter 1988) 24.
12. Orgel 'Authentic Shakespeare' 7.
13. This scene was shot in the hall of Worcester College, Oxford, where some of the rehearsals took place.
14. John Skelton *Magnyfycence* in *Medieval Drama* edited Walker 387 line 1548.
15. Skelton *Magnyfycence* 387 line 1549.
16. Skelton *Magnyfycence* 396 lines 2003–05.
17. Laura Mulvey 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* edited Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford UP, 1999) 835–7.
18. Orgel 'Authentic Shakespeare' 9.
19. Annette Hill *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London: Routledge, 2005) 3–4.
20. Dutton's academic affiliation in the film refers to her position at the time of its making; she is now Associate Professor of Medieval English at the Université de Fribourg.
21. Skelton *Magnyfycence* 385 lines 1469–70 and 1482. In the text, line 1470 reads 'Bathyd *with blysse, embracyd with comfote*' (my italics). There is another departure from the text for dramatic purposes in line 1482; the text in Walker's edition reads, 'loke who *was the best*' (my italics).
22. Linda Williams 'Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary' in *New Challenges for Documentary* 60.
23. Skelton *Magnyfycence* 367 lines 689–91.
24. Skelton *Magnyfycence* 367 lines 700–02.
25. Since completing this article, Cecire has worked with Dutton to direct two more original documentaries about medieval drama that play with the

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relationship between live theatre and film. Cecire's work increasingly also takes into account the special circumstances and opportunities associated with web-native documentaries (films meant to be accessed online). Information, video, and images for *Three Laws in Oxford* (2013) and *Performing Dido* (now in post-production) can be found on the Early Drama at Oxford website: <<http://edox.org.uk>>. See also 'Staging and Filming John Bale's *Three Laws*', co-authored by Elisabeth Dutton, Maria Sachiko Cecire, and James McBain in *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32:1 (Spring 2014).