

# Time Lord of Infinite Space: Celebrity Casting, Romanticism, and British Identity in the RSC's "*Doctor Who Hamlet*"

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## Abstract

The article considers David Tennant's recent performance as Hamlet in the light of his portrayal of the tenth doctor on British TV's most iconic show, *Doctor Who*. It considers the way in which the two roles inform each other, particularly in the minds of the audience, and argues for a particular notion of British cultural identity manifested by both the TV show and the recent direction taken by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

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The recent success of the history play cycle at the Royal Shakespeare Company, built from a cast of home-grown company talent, few of whom boast much in the way of name recognition outside theater circles, led some to believe that this phase of Britain's most recognizable theatrical institution may mark a turning away from star vehicles such as last year's *King Lear*, with Ian McKellan. The announcement that the *Hamlet* that would define the 2008 season would feature David Tennant, star of the BBC's hit show *Doctor Who*, produced much cynical muttering about bottom lines in the face of the rebuilding of the new Royal Shakespeare Theatre, and some genuine concern about the selling out of the solid and expressly theatrical company in favor of something shinier and more easily marketable, built around TV celebrity.

There is, of course, good reason for such concerns. The failure of Project Fleet, along with the loss of a permanent home in London for the RSC, the replacement of Adrian Noble with Michael Boyd, and the demolition of the old RST have marked a period of significant upheaval for the company and raised real concerns about its financial viability. The theater construction in Stratford is a 112 million-dollar project, and even after a fifty million-pound lottery grant, movement forward was considered sluggish enough that the Culture, Media, and Sports committee stepped in to press the company — and the Arts Council — to make progress before the lottery money was consumed

by inflation. In such a climate, it is not surprising that the decision to cast Tennant as Hamlet and Patrick Stewart as Claudius was seen in some quarters as transparent pragmatism designed to put bums in the seats of the temporary Courtyard Theatre, which houses the company pending the completion of the new RST. But while there are legitimate concerns with bringing in TV and film actors to play Shakespeare on stage, which have to do with styles of acting, vocal projection, relationship with a live audience, and so forth, there is also simple snobbery and the impulse to keep Shakespeare on stage unsullied by commerce in general and celebrity stardom in particular.

The apparent subordination of art to business was recently bemoaned by no less a figure than Sir Jonathan Miller, who lambasted the West End's "obsession with celebrity" and the RSC's casting of "that man from *Doctor Who*" (July 2008). Miller had two projects of his own declined by London theaters because — apparently — they did not have the built-in box office draw of well-known actors in key roles, but the remark remains ungenerous and dismissive. For such detractors, of course, pointing out that the *Hamlet* sold out long before its extensive run began, thereby building significant revenue for the RSC, only reinforces their point. But once the show did open, reviews were generally positive, and Tennant himself garnered significant accolades despite the talk of cheapening Shakespeare in the process of spoon-feeding an audience more at home with the idiot's lantern. Of course, where reviews were negative about Tennant's performance — notably, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* — the response was not overtly anti-TV, anti-star, or anti-Tennant, but couched in the more acceptable (if predictable) terms of gimmickry and shallowness. These were countered by stronger reviews in the *Guardian*, *Times*, and the *Independent*. It is ironic and telling — and here I am indulging some snobbery of my own — that it's the inferior papers that find fault with what they perceive to be a lack of depth.

I don't have a lot of patience for carping and am deeply skeptical about the self-aggrandizing aura of theatrical purism that such skepticism seems to imply, so I would like instead to pursue a consideration of the production not in spite of its sci-fi TV valences, but because of them. I considered Patrick Stewart's performance of Prospero in the RSC's 2006 *Tempest* in similar terms, but those were expressly personal and ultimately about the baggage I brought into the theater, but this *Hamlet* presents a different prospect. However much I made connections between Stewart's Prospero and his Picard, the performances were separated by many years (the original TV show ending in 1994, twelve years before this *Tempest*, with the final *Next Generation* movie being released in 2002). Tennant's *Hamlet*, by contrast, took place at the height of *Doctor Who*'s popularity, the extended run of the theatrical production actually being a factor in the TV show's one-year filming hiatus. To contextualize this production of the Shakespeare play and its celebrated lead properly, something needs to be said about the nature and status of *Doctor Who*.

*Doctor Who*

*Doctor Who* first ran from 1963 to 1989, becoming a monolith of British popular culture. The title character is a Time Lord who travels the universe, usually with a female human "assistant" (later a "companion"), fighting evil manifested by various alien beings and races, including the Sea Devils, the Sontarans, the Cybermen and — most iconically of all — the Daleks.<sup>1</sup> The show was famous for its innovative use of electronic music, its creative (though much maligned) low-budget special effects, and its clever solution to changing actors in the title role. The Doctor, as he is always known, is effectively immortal, the last member of his race; and when he dies, he regenerates, but with a different body and personality. The show thus built into its premise the ability to replace its star, and in its initial twenty-six year run the Doctor was played by eight different actors, including William Hartnell, Patrick Traughton with his recorder, Jon Pertwee with his frilly shirts and antique car, Tom Baker with his multi-colored scarf, curly hair, obsession with jelly babies, and robot dog (K-9, of course); the transitions were made on camera, one actor "regenerating" into another.<sup>2</sup> Each actor could bring something of his own flair and interpretive energy to the part because the character's personality was perceived to shift with each regeneration. The Doctor travelled through time and space fighting evil and righting wrongs primarily through wit, knowledge, and improvisation. He had an aversion to guns of all kinds, a trait that persisted with each incarnation of the Doctor. Throughout, the show was unique in targeting children and adults simultaneously, blending scary stories and the politics of the day with campy humor, and held a diverse audience until interest finally waned and the show was cancelled.<sup>3</sup> By this time, however, the program had become the longest running sci-fi show in television history and an essential component of British popular culture, its galloping, spacey theme music, the Daleks, and the look and sound of the TARDIS (the Doctor's time-travelling spaceship fashioned to look like a 1950s police call-box) firmly engrafted in the national consciousness.

The show was revived in 2005 with Christopher Eccleston in the lead, and though he committed to only one season, the new look (and its exploitation of CGI special effects) combined with familiar ingredients, more even acting, and richer, more thoughtful writing instantly catapulted the show back into the forefront of British pop culture. The great villains of the old show — notably, the Cybermen and the Daleks — returned with a vengeance, impressively and menacingly retooled for the times, the latter circumventing the old joke about their moving on wheels by acquiring the alarming ability to fly. The following year saw a new Doctor, the tenth, played by Scottish actor David Tennant, appearing first in the double episode entitled "The Christmas Invasion," wherein

the earth is threatened by a hostile species — the Sycorax — whose attempt at conquest through a form of mind control is thwarted when the newly regenerated Doctor is able to defeat the enemy leader in single combat with a sword.

The newest version of the show takes its minor characters more seriously than any of its former incarnations, particularly in the development of the Doctor's companions. The dramatic consequence of this development has been the explicit portrayal of a romantic subplot as the first companion of the new series, Rose Tyler (Billy Piper), clearly fell in love with Christopher Eccleston's doctor and did not want to see him change. By the end of season two, however, her affection had clearly transferred to the new Doctor (Tennant), who was and was not the same man, and — most remarkably — he clearly reciprocated her feelings in ways the ninth Doctor did not. Story-lines determined that Rose had to be confined to a parallel dimension to which he could not travel, and the Doctor and Rose were finally cut off, leaving him scarred and even more distant than usual. As Rose was replaced first by Freema Agyeman's Martha Jones (a doctor in her own right) and then by Catherine Tate's brassy Donna Noble (a temp from Chiswick), the show embraced Tennant's romantic appeal, connecting him ever more deeply to the inner lives of the women around him and their families. In so doing, the show developed an unforeseen delicacy of touch in matters of character psychology, particularly in its exploration of the Doctor's inherent loneliness and isolation. As well as spawning spin-off shows *The Sarah Jane Chronicles* and *Torchwood*, the revived *Doctor Who* show has garnered numerous awards, including BAFTA's (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) award for best drama series and best writing for television.

Less than two months before the RSC's *Hamlet* opened, season four of *Doctor Who* ended with a dramatic two-part finale that commanded extraordinary viewing figures (almost ten million households, forty-seven percent of the TV viewing audience) and flirted with the idea of killing off Tennant's Doctor and replacing him with someone else. This exploited mounting rumors that this would be Tennant's last season as the Doctor, even leaving him apparently dying/regenerating at the end of the first installment. In the end, Tennant survived, but contact with both Rose and Donna was severed, apparently irretrievably. A Christmas special involving the Cybermen was advertised at the end of the show, but for fans — and given the *Doctor Who* merchandise that packs the aisles of every high-street Boots and Woolworths, this is clearly a considerably larger segment of the UK population than sci-fi normally commands — it would be a long wait for more of the Doctor.

### The *Doctor Who* *Hamlet*

At the beginning of his director's talk on 4 August 2008, Gregory Doran invoked *Doctor Who* only to say that with the exception of one episode (about which more shortly), he had not seen

the show since its 1960s inception, mentioning it only to insist upon its irrelevance to the *Hamlet* production. His interviewer, Paul Allen, fed the idea by referring to Patrick Stewart's *Star Trek* alter ego as Jean-Luc Picu [*sic.*] This is understandable to a point. The production wants to ground meaning in the moment of performance, in the choices made by the director, design team, and performers, and they want those meanings to be independent of whatever is going on in the culture that seems irrelevant to their approach to the play. They want, moreover — and this is a common actor fantasy — to be able to overwrite all expectations with the power of their performance, changing the audience's sense of the play and, indeed, of those involved in its production by sheer commitment to their parts. Actors want — even need — to escape their former roles, if only because being unable to do so makes all their work on the present production seem fruitless.

But as I have said before, it is unreasonable to expect audiences to shelve their sense of an actor's performative past during a production, especially if — as in the case of Tennant — much of the audience came specifically to see this particular actor *because of* those past performances (Hartley 2007). In the case of this *Hamlet*, the professed desire to move away from the associations of *Doctor Who* is a little disingenuous, and though the director clearly was not interested in drawing explicit parallels between the protagonist of the play and the TV show, there were numerous echoes that would keep the TV show in the minds of the *Hamlet* audience in interesting ways.

Hard-core *Doctor Who* fans would have noticed that the cast — as well as sporting other sci-fi icons Patrick Stewart (Claudius, formerly Picard and Professor Xavier from the *X Men* movies) and Oliver Ford Davies (Polonius, formerly Sio Bibble in *Star Wars* episodes one, two, and three) — featured several actors who had played small roles in *Doctor Who*: Zoe Thorne (the page, formerly Toclofane and The Gelth in four episodes), Andrea Harris (Cornelia, formerly Suzanne in "The Stolen Earth" episode), and Roderick Smith (Voltemand, formerly Cruikshank in the Tom Baker episode, "The Invisible Enemy").

Tennant is a Scot with a rich brogue, but he played his Hamlet with the same, neutral English accent with which he plays his Doctor. That Doctor, like those before him, has a distinctive costume, one chosen to suit his character — in this case, a slim-fitting dark suit that emphasizes his skinny frame and Converse-style sneakers. In the last couple of years, the costume has become so recognizable in the UK that it has spawned parody as in, for instance, the recent reunion episode of *The Vicar of Dibley*, in which Alice's bridesmaid outfit is a replica of Tennant's Doctor, and she is accompanied by flower girls dressed as Daleks.<sup>4</sup> A narrow suit and sneakers were also core elements of Tennant's Hamlet costume; his black-tie ensemble was undercut by bare feet during the Mousetrap scene, and by sneakers (here in a parallel dimension pastel shade) in the final scenes.

Neither suit nor sneakers was exactly the same as the Doctor's, of course, but they established a visual echo, an unobtrusive point of continuity between the two productions through the person of the actor. The incongruous pairing of suit and bare feet/sneakers suggested — as their analogous pairings do in *Doctor Who* — elegance and polish tempered by an earthiness and capacity for action that is a little dangerous, possibly even unhinged. It may be that such echoes are as much in the mind of the audience as they are on stage; one audience member remarked that when Hamlet first produced his switch blade and the light caught it, she was sure it was the Doctor's sonic screwdriver — but that, surely, is the point. Audiences remember and connect performances, and as if to emphasize the point, the BBC took the extraordinary step of airing the video adaptation of the *Hamlet* production on national television on Boxing Day (26 December) of 2009, in between the two parts of Tennant's final performance as the Doctor ("The End of Time," which aired Christmas day and New Year's Day).

What really keeps the Doctor in mind during this *Hamlet* is the presence of Tennant himself, who brings something of the same intensity and manic energy to the role that he brings to his Time Lord. His performance is marked not by an attempt to escape the Doctor, but by many of the same vocal and gestural touches — elements of what I have elsewhere called the actor's performative habitus, his "bag of tricks" and the physical vocabulary he has absorbed through training, experience, and habit (see Hartley 2009). Tennant uses his hands expressively, in quick flickering movements that are vaguely evocative (as Bruce Smith pointed out at intermission) of Renaissance oratory manuals. He counterpoints his frantic, flailing movement with moments of extraordinary stillness and focus. Above all, he is a gifted comic actor, able to undercut a ponderous moment with a throw-away quip, a flippant shift in vocal register, or an expansive facial expression. All of these characteristics Tennant brought to his Hamlet, creating a mocking, parodic — but simultaneously likeable — protagonist who many acknowledged as the funniest they had seen (Billington 2008).

The humor Tennant found in the role of Hamlet takes us beyond what the show itself was doing that might tap into elements of the Doctor and into those for whom it was a given: large portions of the audience. When I saw the show, there were a disproportionately large number of young people in attendance, particularly teenaged girls. Tennant's appeal has evidently spread from the stereotypical adolescent male, sci-fi geek to something broader and sexier. Many of these audience members were so thrilled to see their hero in person that the theater positively thrummed with delighted energy. Some would not have been out of place chasing Ringo through *A Hard Day's Night*, and their engagement with the actor as celebrity was perhaps — as some of the skeptics suggested — too totalizing for them to engage with the story and the role, but these

fans were, I think, in the minority. What the fan audience's delight brought to the theater as a whole was a willingness to see the humor, to enjoy it, even where it shot between moments of darkness, introspection, and tragedy. This refusal to be overly weighted by the play's seriousness — particularly in the second half — intoxicated the audience and made for a more celebratory experience and a joyous connection with the protagonist. This in no way — at least from my experience and the majority of people I spoke to — undermined the seriousness of the play. Rather, the unexpected humor — or rather, the unexpected capacity to enjoy that humor — made sense of Robert Weimann's linkage of *Hamlet* to the comic, topsy-turvy punning of the Vice tradition (Weimann 1978). It was a revelation, and one that I doubt I could have had without that crucial element in the audience, the same element that jammed the barriers at the stage door in the hundreds, autograph pens and programs in hand, breathlessly waiting for Tennant to appear.

And it was this curious shift in the Doctor's audience demographic that helped facilitate another dimension of the RSC's *Hamlet* production, one that even the program cover embraces. Because while the Doctor has always had his fans, it has only been since he regenerated into David Tennant that he could be considered a sex symbol, and much of that — apart from the actor's good looks — is grounded in the story-lines of the last two seasons of *Doctor Who*. Emma Smith's shrewd review for the *Times Literary Supplement* sees the two roles as essentially different, despite significant resemblances:

In fact Tennant's Hamlet is rather like his Doctor — sardonic, clever, verbally facile, isolated — but less mordantly intellectual and more febrile. Doctor Who's superciliousness as he bests circumstances and challengers in episode after episode here gives way to a radical susceptibility. Hamlet's loneliness is not that of superior understanding but of submission to events. His belated realization that "the readiness is all" seems here less an intellectually achieved stoicism, more a visceral understanding that he is the object rather than agent of events. (Smith 2008)

Smith tracks the Doctor's separateness to his intellectual superiority, and there is some truth to that, but the isolation stems more deeply from what seems to be his most desirable attribute: his immortality. As the show has progressed, the Doctor's inability to age and die has become the core of what makes ordinary human relationships both desirable and impossible for him. Tennant's Doctor began life as a fighter: a feisty, playful, scientific genius of a fighter, admittedly, but a fighter, nonetheless. In his first episode, still weak from the regeneration process and with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, he had to discover who he was, what kind of personality had come with his newly regenerated body, and he found it after having one hand severed by the Sycorax

leader's sword. "That's a fighting hand," he quipped, as the hand — thanks to the incomplete regeneration cycle — regrew. But if such a moment was visually recalled by the vigorous and thrilling fight scene with Laertes in the final act of *Hamlet*, the swashbuckling dimension of the Doctor was, by the end of season three, subordinated to his status as romantic hero, and this was the element on which the production drew most decisively.

Though the TV audience could not hear the whispered words, this Doctor confessed his doomed love for Rose at the end of season two, at the moment when she was taken away from him, and from that point on, his wildness, his deflecting humor and crazed sense of adventure were revealed as a device to keep the loneliness and fragility at bay. He was the last of his kind, one for whom the time was out of joint and whose ongoing, never-ending mission was not just to set it right, but to do so alone. The end of the story-line and the romance was the Doctor's unwilling acceptance of his essential separateness from Rose because he could not age with her. Far from being simply smarter than the humans with whom he interacts, this Doctor is deeply lonely, finally cut off from those he works hardest to save, and this marks the heart of the show's success. However fun and scary the older series was, the new version has given less attention to space and more to time, finding in the implications of the Time Lord's nature an inherent pathos that can be quite painful. It is a sci-fi device that achieves a romantic effect because the Doctor is separated not by his intelligence in the misanthropic manner of a Sherlock Holmes, but through the depth of his empathy, though the connection that empathy desires is always deferred.

This was also Doran/Tennant's Hamlet, a Hamlet beset by the crassness and superficiality of the world, a man more sinned against than sinning (his guilt in the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern significantly relieved by some deft cutting) whose love for Ophelia was genuine and whose grief at her death nicely counterpointed Claudius's political manipulation. For Hamlet, the gap between the public and private was excruciating, so that his dour, formal stiffness in the first court scene became a cramped, fetal sobbing for his first soliloquy. He felt for his mother, for Laertes — if only in the final moments, when he realized what had so pointlessly occurred — even, perhaps, for Claudius who was allowed the dignity of drinking his own death. As his shifting wardrobe suggested (dinner suit at one moment, jeans and T-shirt the next), he was a man out of time, trapped in a world where connection to those around him was impossible because the time was out of joint, a man who felt the pain of others without being able to relieve it.<sup>5</sup> This *Hamlet* was (as Stanley Wells remarked) a return to the Victorian romanticism of Irving and Tree, in which the hero was out of step with the sophistry of the court, feeling too deeply for the world, a hero whose death ("The rest is silence") ended the play. Fortinbras entered wordlessly (surely a bewildering



moment for those who did not know the play), but with a production so centered on the inner and unknowable mind of its protagonist, there really wasn't anything else to say. It is no accident that the program art inserts Tennant into Casper David Friedrich's icon of Romanticism, *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (the wanderer above the sea of fog), the suited gentleman standing high on a rocky crag gazing out into the numinous tumult of nature, separate, tormented by insight, even lost and verging on suicidal. Such an image, I think, uses traces of Tennant's most famous role to inform the separateness of his Hamlet.

The residual snobbery that some critics hung on to despite the apparent success of the production speaks to the rift between television and theater and the attention attracted by the production's "irresistibly unlikely coupling of high and low culture" (Smith 2008). John Morrison acknowledged that Tennant had done his job by filling the house, but dismissed his performance with the faint praise rooted in that high/low divide: "He's a good stage actor, but on this evidence, not a great one" (Morrison 2008). Some thought he lacked weight, some felt the character did not evolve adequately and that Tennant relied overmuch on showy, manic energy and glee (as when, after having been interrogated by Claudius, he was pushed off stage while taped to a desk chair and exclaimed a non-textual "Whee!"). Such criticisms, though I did not agree with them, may be justified, but beneath them one sometimes senses the refusal to be awed by the celebrity actor, a rearguard action against being wowed (or wheed) by television star power. Again, there are, no doubt, good reasons for such critical distance, but I worry whether they do not also manifest an impulse towards something that is fundamentally antitheatrical: the desire to strip the performance of its actors, to restore something textually pure, untainted by the theatrical means of production. After all, Tennant was not some pop singer or soap star taking over the Christmas panto circuit. He is an actor *rejoining* the RSC after a spell on television, just as Patrick Stewart did.<sup>6</sup> Stewart's return to the stage received the same scrutiny, the same cynical asides about box-office appeal and low-culture gloss, despite his fuller track record of Shakespearean roles. Taken together, this *Hamlet* might even be seen as a hand-off from the sci-fi TV star of the past, in the person of Stewart's doubled Old Hamlet and Claudius, to that of the present, perhaps even with the spectre of *Star Wars* in the person of Oliver Ford Davis trumped by the Doctor's current appeal. Whatever else might be said about Doran/Tennant's *Hamlet*, there is no question that it was better received by audiences and critics than the RSC's other new summer offerings, *The Merchant of Venice* (dir. Tim Carroll) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (dir. Conall Morrison), which the *Hamlet* in some ways facilitated. These less than crowd-pleasing takes on famously troublesome plays were possible in part because *Hamlet* was bound to make money hand over fist.

And what's wrong with theater making money and building a new audience for Shakespeare out of TV fans? Yes, there are the dangers of the much touted dumbing-down that shadows all conversations about Shakespeare in culture and education these days, but theater companies have to ensure their success, and star actors have been central to Shakespeare since Burbage. As the body of the actor is a material component of practical theater that some critics seem to want to wish away, so is money and an attentive audience. But to want these things not to be relevant is to wish for a Shakespeare of the mind, a *Hamlet* not just out of time but out of the theatrical moment, existing only in the infinite hypothetical of imaginary audition.

### "The Shakespeare Code"

There is one other specific intersection between *Doctor Who* and *Hamlet*, which occurred during the revived TV show's third season when the Doctor and Martha spent an entire episode in Shakespeare's London. The premise of "The Shakespeare Code" was a threat to the earth by a species called the Carrionites, who used language to alter reality, in this case by ventriloquizing the Bard through an interpolated speech at the end of his *Love's Labour's Won*. The Carrionites took the form of three witches, thereby supplying a gag origin-myth for elements of *Macbeth* (the production was set — anachronistically, for the dating of *Love's Labour's Won* — in 1599), a termination myth for the lost comedy, while also foregrounding the creation of *Hamlet*.

The story begins with the conclusion of a production of *Love's Labour's Lost* at which Shakespeare — manipulated by the Carrionite/witch Lilleth through a doll made in his image — announces a sequel that will premier the following night. The Doctor, who having seen the future, knows the play should not exist and resolves to investigate with Martha (to whom Shakespeare is clearly attracted and whom he calls first, a "queen of Afric" and later, his "dark lady"). The Doctor uses his trademark psychic paper (a convenient device by which he is able to talk his way into most situations) to conceal his identity, but Shakespeare — remarkably — recognizes the paper as blank, thereby confirming his genius. The Master of the Revels tries to prevent the play from being performed, at which point he drowns on dry land through more of the Carrionites' "witchcraft." Shakespeare is manipulated by Lilleth into penning the final word-code paragraph to the play, and Shakespeare extracts from the Globe's architect — now in Bedlam — the fact that the "witches" dictated the form of the new theater to him. One of the witches materializes and kills the architect, but the Doctor is able to dismiss her by recognizing and using her species' true name, Carrionite. They are, he says, a race that creates quasi-magical effects through an ancient science tied to the power of words. These three members are effectively imprisoned, but seek to use Shakespeare's verbal aptitude to create a fissure through which the rest of their species can

enter and take over the world. As *Love's Labour's Won* concludes on stage, Martha revives the Doctor, who has been incapacitated, by restarting his left heart (Time Lords have two), but the last lines have been delivered by two baffled actors, and the portal is opened. Shakespeare attempts to prevent the final words from being spoken, but he is incapacitated by Lillith, and the play proceeds. Martha is also incapacitated through the use of her true name, but Lillith cannot identify the Doctor adequately to affect him. Instead, she steals a lock of his hair and fixes it to her puppet before stabbing it through the heart. The puppet is actually a DNA replication module, and her action causes the Doctor to collapse, apparently dead, until Martha revives him. As the Carrionites swarm, the Doctor tells Shakespeare that only his words can close the rift. Shakespeare improvises a stanza and Martha adds the final word, which seals the portal and confines the witches.

Though the tone of the episode owes much to *Shakespeare in Love* and is similarly playful in its teasing out of Shakespearean issues and problems, the end roots the episode in Shakespeare's repudiation of the frivolity of comedy for something of more weight. That "something" was to be a father's response to the death of his son Hamnet, the grief of which, we are told, had somehow facilitated the rise of the Carrionites in the first place. *Hamlet* was quoted twice in the episode, first by the author musing on mortality ("To be or not to be") and second by the Doctor when he realized the centrality of performance to what the Carrionites were trying to do ("The play's the thing"). The episode emphasizes Shakespeare's linguistic genius, giving his facility with words the power to alter the universe and, most tellingly, setting up clear comparisons with the Doctor's other abilities. It is the notion of the two brilliant men set apart from the rest of the world by the depth of their grief which strains hardest against the largely flippant tone. When Martha Jones starts to flirt with the Doctor, she is rebuffed by his recollections of Rose, becoming instead the object of Shakespeare's own casual desire. Shakespeare even remarks on Martha's unwillingness to kiss him because of the Doctor, who will never kiss her. Shakespeare's clear-sightedness goes far beyond language, allowing him to identify his visitors correctly as being out of time and space; one gets the sense that his separateness, like the Doctor's, comes from knowing and feeling too much, however flippant he seems superficially. Both figures are thus rendered Hamletic according to a specifically Romantic model.

All of this weighs on Tennant's Hamlet, making the Shakespeare production an odd, but inevitable, teleology fulfilling the direction of his Doctor in general and "The Shakespeare Code" episode in particular. It extends those Shakespearean parallels and conflations — and as Iris Murdoch's *Black Prince* suggests, it is in *Hamlet* that Shakespeare sometimes seems most clearly personated — continuing a sense of character rather than creating it anew at curtain-up. There is a sense in which this is often the case with actors known primarily for other roles, but in this particular

and — to my mind — happy piece of casting, the roles fuse in interesting and generative ways that enrich the performative moment.<sup>7</sup> Some of this, I suspect, is about desire, the audience's desire to connect with two fetishized roles, both of which have an air of detachment. In Tennant those two roles (the Doctor and Hamlet) are rendered more approachable, more "human," partly through *his* desire, the earnest wish for a connection to Rose/Ophelia. He becomes more like us, easier to like, easier to connect to because we imagine that that is what he really wants. This is more than celebrity fetishism and more than merely seeing the former role in the present one, because there is a manner in which the roles align, their respective histories augmenting the present performance in ways both materially irrelevant, but essentially real.

Apart from interweaving Tennant's Doctor with Shakespeare in general and *Hamlet* in particular, the episode also underscores the essentially British phenomenon that is *Doctor Who* and brackets it — with Renaissance London, the Globe, and its most famous poet — as a particular national concern, an index of historical community identity. There is a uniquely British affinity between these icons of high and low culture, which together form part of the national psyche in ways quite different from the more disparate culture of the United States, where it is rare to find — as one does in England — conversations that seem to engage almost the whole country. Indeed, the origin myths are reversed near the end of the episode when Tennant — already, it seems, in Hamlet mode — picks up a skull and remarks — since it is clearly not human — that it looks like it belongs to a Sycorax. Shakespeare seizes on the word and stores it away for future use as the name of Caliban's witch-mother in *The Tempest*. The Sycorax were, of course, the first race this Doctor fought, the race who gave him his fighting hand. Time, which seems linear (Shakespeare hears the word and writes it into a late play) becomes a mobius strip, circling back on itself, Shakespeare's word giving a name to a crucial TV villain, metadramatically announcing the centrality of Shakespeare to British culture and *Doctor Who* in particular. It is therefore telling that when Shakespeare and the Doctor fumble for the final word of their quasi-magical incantation to send the Carrionites back whence they came, the final word that does the trick is one lifted from another bastion of British fantasy: Harry Potter's "Expeliamus!" As the world of the Globe theater resolves, the Doctor comments "Good old J. K."<sup>8</sup>

## Conclusion

*Doctor Who* used to be British because few other people in the world watched it, and because its concerns were British in an unselfconsciously provincial way. Now it's British because the new series has invested more in time than in space, focusing particularly on familiar British places and people, celebrating the local instead of doing sci-fi (à la *Star Trek*) in quasi-universal terms. It has

embraced its Britishness, championed it, shaking off the "stiff upper lip" brand of national identity in pursuit of something more contemporary, but still steeped in British cultural history. Numerous episodes are set in modern London (and others in places symbolizing British post-war rebirth, such as Cardiff),<sup>9</sup> and they intersect with key moments and people central to British identity such as the Blitz, Queen Victoria, Dickens, and Agatha Christie; the show has also become a showcase for distinctly British guest stars (Anthony Stewart Head from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue, comedian Katherine Tate, Bernard Cribbins, Felicity Kendall, Tim McInnerny and Colin Salmon from the James Bond movies). Its views of London, Wales, and Scotland are underscored with regional dialects once virtually banned by the BBC, and the overall feel is of a TV show embracing its Britishness as the core root of its wit and ingenuity, rather than trying to do TV in the American style.

In this, *Doctor Who* is not so different from the RSC, currently gearing up to take the lead in the so-called "cultural Olympics" of 2012 with a world festival of Shakespeare: another nationalistic cementing of cultural identity, though one complicated by the markers of high art. The issue, I hope, is less about what is *ours* — British — in terms of Shakespeare, and more about what we are that involves his work in our past, present, and future. Tennant himself is a nice image of this celebrated localism, familiar from a disparaged medium but also a star, Hamletic by association with his other role as well as simply Hamlet, and adamantly provincial while still a king of infinite space. The program's cover art turns the wanderer towards the camera so that we can see his famous face staring back at us against the backdrop of cloud-capped mountains, (once German, now surely Scottish): a romantic hero as Byronic as Shakespearean, pensive, sensitive, daring and desirable, uniquely and recognizably British, but distant and out of reach as only a celebrity can be.

### Notes

1. The Daleks are an organic race encased in armor like tanks who are the mortal enemies of the Time Lords, beings without emotions other than hate and the desire for mastery. They are mechanized Nazis with squealing metallic voices (used primarily for shrieking "Exterminate!") and a distinctive visual form that has remained largely constant over the years.
2. The other Doctors were Peter Davison (the fifth Doctor), Colin Baker (the sixth), Sylvester McCoy (the seventh Doctor and also the actor who played the Fool in Trevor Nunn's 2007 *King Lear* opposite Ian McKellan), and Paul McGann (the eighth).
3. The BBC archive website for "classic" *Doctor Who* contains episode descriptions and backgrounds, many of which touch on issues of the day, as in, for example, "The Curse of

Peladon," which was seen as an allegory of the UK's bid to join the European Common Market (see *Doctor Who, Classic Series* 2010).

4. Vicar's grotesque farmer Owen, Roger Lloyd Pack, also played the creator and leader of the Cybermen on *Doctor Who*.
5. Those jeans and T-shirts emphatically insisted on the show being modern dress, but it did not begin in those terms, and it was some time before it became clear that we were close to the present. The court scenes had that time-capsule feel, the suits perhaps early twentieth century, though the ceremonial guards with their plumed helmets could have been Napoleonic curasiers. It was only later, after we saw Fortinbras's camouflaged army absailing from helicopters and Laertes returning dressed for gangster revenge in a leather trench coat with black automatic pistol, that we were clearly in a later period. Of course, much of the apparent archaism was simply the vestiges of monarchical show — a gesture at royal palatial timelessness — but Hamlet was the only one who seemed uneasy in such a setting, the only one who seemed to slide emphatically into the present.
6. Tennant's last major RSC role was as Romeo in 2000 (*Romeo and Juliet* 2000).
7. I felt the same echoes between parts when I saw Tom Baker (the fourth Doctor) on stage in Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* shortly after concluding his record setting, seven-year stint as the Doctor.
8. Tennant's only major film role is, of course, as Barty Crouch, Jr. in the fourth Harry Potter installment, *The Goblet of Fire*.
9. Cardiff has become especially important to the show, as it is now produced by BBC Wales. The Welsh city is also central to *Torchwood*.

### Online Resources

British Academy of Film and Television Arts. <http://www.bafta.org/>.

British Broadcasting System. *Doctor Who, Classic Series*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/doctorwho/classic/>.

Production Pictures, Doran-Tennant *Hamlet* Royal Shakespeare Company. <http://www.rsc.org.uk/content/7234.aspx>

Royal Shakespeare Company Archive. Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. <http://calm.shakespeare.org.uk/dserve/dserve.exe?dsqserver=srv-ex1&dsqCmd=index.tcl&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqApp=Archive>.

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*The Taming of the Shrew*. 2008. Director Conall Morrison, performers Stephen Boxer, Michelle Gomez. Royal Shakespeare Company, Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

*The Tempest*. 2006. Director Rupert Goold, performers Patrick Stewart, John Light, Mariah Gale. Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

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