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In 2015, Professor David Ruitter, a Shakespearean scholar at the University of Texas at El Paso, the city where American novelist Cormac McCarthy relocated in 1976, recalled that, when telling his famous neighbour about his research, the author gave the response: ‘Shakespeare is a friend of mine’.¹ Elsewhere, in a rare interview with McCarthy, David Kushner described how

When he talks of writers he admires, like Shakespeare, there’s one quality he says they share in common: soul. “You can’t write good poetry unless you have a soul to express,” he says. And he holds the highest regard for those who express “the soul of the culture”.²

Ruitter’s anecdote is scarcely cast-iron proof that McCarthy is indebted to Shakespeare and the author has notoriously given few acknowledgements of direct literary influence throughout his career. However, Kushner notes that, ‘while he reserves high praise for a few contemporary narratives, [...] his list of great novels stops at four: *Ulysses*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Sound and the Fury* and his favorite, *Moby-Dick*’.³ Each of these novels have been explored by critics interested in their intertextual links to Shakespeare but few have asked how this connection might inform a Shakespearean reading of McCarthy’s work. Harold Bloom illustrates that this may explain why McCarthy frequently seems to appropriate, misquote and allude to Shakespeare’s language and imagery in his writing:

¹ David Ruitter. Personal interview. 21 March 2015.

² David Kushner. ‘Cormac McCarthy’s Apocalypse.’ *Rolling Stone*, 12 December 2007. para 15 of 53.

³ *Ibid.* para. 15.

Moby-Dick and Faulkner's major, early novels are McCarthy's prime precursors. Melville's Ahab fuses together Shakespeare's tragic protagonists - Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth - and crosses them with a quest both Promethean and American. Even as Montaigne's Plato became Emerson's, so Melville's Shakespeare becomes Cormac McCarthy's. Though critics will go on associating McCarthy with Faulkner, who certainly affected McCarthy's writing style in *Suttree* (1979), the visionary of *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *The Border Trilogy* (1992, 1994, 1998) has much less in common with Faulkner, and shares profoundly in Melville's debt to Shakespeare.⁴

Using the stimuli of Ruiters's first-hand account and Bloom's criticism, this paper presents an intertextual reading of the author's 1985 novel, *Blood Meridian*, focusing on its principal antagonist, Judge Holden. Beginning with an allusion to *Hamlet*, Russell M. Hillier suggests that

[i]n playing the smiling villain, and murdering while he smiles, McCarthy's diabolic Judge has the demerit of earning a place at the table with literature's most mischievous malefactors, including [...] William Shakespeare's Iago [...] Yet, although the Judge's charismatic presence threatens to overwhelm the narrative, surely an occupational hazard for any great writer in portraying a devilishly seductive character, the Judge's personality should not overshadow the fact that behind his sophisticated mask lurks a malevolent appetite for destruction.⁵

Hillier's description of a 'mischievous malefactor' suggests that Holden also represents the figure of the trickster, and therefore might also be compared with characters such as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who literally pours poison in the ears of others to manipulate their behaviour. For instance, during Holden's first appearance in the novel's opening chapter, he incites a riot in a revival tent against Reverend Green, when he suggests to the crowd that Green had been 'run out of Fort Smith Arkansas for having congress with a goat'⁶ before later revealing in a nearby bar that he had never previously met Green or been to Fort Smith. The deliberate application of this animal taboo results in immediate gunfire and the destruction of the tent. His baleful influence is not dissimilar to Iago's treatment of Cassio and Montano in

⁴ Harold Bloom. 'Introduction'. *Cormac McCarthy (Bloom's Modern Critical Views)*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2009. p. 7.

⁵ Russell M. Hillier. "'Give the Devil His Due": Judge Holden's Design in *Blood Meridian*'. *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Souls At Hazard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 49.

⁶ Cormac McCarthy. *Blood Meridian*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1985. p. 297.

Act 3 Scene 2 of *Othello* where this Machiavellian figure achieves his nefarious aims through linguistic manipulation rather than physical participation.

Judge Holden's Iago-like ability to divide and rule, to motivate others to achieve his own personal goals, and to find the right time to speak and act will herein be examined in relation to a less obvious Machiavellian figure in the Shakespearean canon: Henry V. I will also consider how the *Blood Meridian's* central relationship between its protagonist, the young Tennessean known only as 'the kid',⁷ and the villainous Holden, is similarly rich with Shakespearean intertextual potential, citing and expanding on Hillier's valuable work in his recent publication *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Souls At Hazard*, in which he notes that 'their dynamic is in several respects akin to that played out between Sir John Falstaff and Prince Hal/Henry V in William Shakespeare's second tetralogy or *Henriad*'.⁸ This will involve close investigation of the novel's various Shakespearean allusions, references and evocations, which include Holden's misquotation of *Henry V* and Henry's address to the people of Harfleur in grotesquely violent terms. Elsewhere, Hillier observes that 'McCarthy also evokes King Lear and his fool in the storm in *Blood Meridian* when Judge Holden wanders the desert with his tethered idiot'.⁹ This comparison with another of Shakespeare's monarchs informs the final section of intertextual analysis: McCarthy's image of 'some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool in the wilderness to die'¹⁰ and the novel's barren landscape of inescapable oppression and dominance, which recall *King Lear's* blasted heath.

⁷ McCarthy, p. 6.

⁸ Russell M. Hillier. "'Antic Clay'?: The Competing Ethical Appeals of *Blood Meridian*'. *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Souls At Hazard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 84.

⁹ Russell M. Hillier. "'Like Some Supplicant to the Darkness Over Them All': The Good of John Grady Cole in *Cities of the Plain*'. *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Souls At Hazard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 160.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

My objective is not to catalogue the moments of Shakespearean occurrence that are visible in McCarthy's construction of Judge Holden, but to use this intertextual reading to address questions about the character's origins, history and motivations. Holden has received the most widespread critical attention of any *Blood Meridian* character, primarily because of his enigmatic roots in the novel, which McCarthy makes clear by saying that 'whatever his antecedents he was something wholly other than their sum, nor was there a system by which to divide him back to his origins for he would not go'.¹¹ Is he, as the author's ambiguous representation suggests, beyond human categorisation or comprehension: more grandiose and ominous than the mere exponent of a crude hegemonic agenda, specific to his own historical setting? Or, to what extent can Holden be understood as a military leader with nationalistic motivations, inherently rooted in the language and setting of the post-Vietnam America in which McCarthy was writing, despite the novel's setting against the backdrop of historical events that took place on the Texas-Mexico border in the 1850s? Is he a meta-textual representation of McCarthy's own anxiety of influence, with Shakespeare's spectral 'ghost in our cultural machinery'¹² haunting the author's confession that 'books are made out of books'?¹³

Throughout *Blood Meridian*, much of the discussion of Holden by the novel's other characters revolves around his mysterious identity and genesis, with the kid particularly vocal in his questioning 'what's he a judge of'¹⁴ and the final accusation he directs towards Holden: 'you aint nothin'.¹⁵ To some extent, the kid represents the dumbfounded reader when faced with Holden's metaphysical force throughout *Blood Meridian*. By tracing the character's

¹¹ McCarthy, p. 326.

¹² Adam Hansen and Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. 'Introduction'. *Shakespearean Echoes*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. p. 11.

¹³ Richard B. Woodward. 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction'. *New York Times*. 19 April 1992. para. 23 of 50.

¹⁴ McCarthy, p. 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

connections back to his monarchic forebears in Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, I hope to encourage further discussion of Holden's motivations or lack thereof, and to develop the limited, but growing, critical conversation about Shakespeare's influence on McCarthy and his 'creative appropriation of Shakespearean tragic intertexts'.¹⁶

Blood Meridian begins with the kid, whose mother died in childbirth, and who leaves home at an early age after his father's death, venturing across state, eventually becoming enlisted in a blood-soaked gang of scalp-hunters. They are led by the unpredictable and fearless Captain Glanton and the mysterious Holden, a bald, seven-foot sadist who appears to be an omnipresent force, as hinted at by one of the company's remark that 'every man in the company claims to have encountered that sootysouled rascal in some other place'.¹⁷ Steven Frye notes that 'McCarthy draws from actual history, specifically from a narrative account of the gang's horrific exploits written by a participant, Samuel Chamberlain, entitled *My Confessions: The Recollections of a Rogue*'.¹⁸ Here, one can draw comparison with Shakespeare's similar manipulation of *Holinshed's Chronicles*, as evidenced by Frye's explanation that '*Blood Meridian* takes Chamberlain's essential prototypes and from the scant data provided creates rendered literary characters, elevating them to mythic and densely philosophical proportions'.¹⁹

Over thirty years after the novel was written, Holden's central philosophical claim that 'war is god'²⁰ continues to fascinate readers of *Blood Meridian*. His eloquence and determination to assert his dominance regardless of collateral damage amongst a group of men who seem to be far beneath his intellectual level, contribute to this fascination:

¹⁶ Russell M. Hillier. 'Introduction'. *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Souls At Hazard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 11

¹⁷ McCarthy., p. 131.

¹⁸ Steven Frye, 'Into the West: *Blood Meridian*'. *Understanding Cormac McCarthy*. The University of South Carolina Press, 2009. p. 68.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 68-9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

paradoxically, we are drawn to his philosophy as readily as we are repelled by his actions and their apparent justification. However, within the carnivalesque context of the nightmarish Comanche attack in Chapter 4, succinctly summed up by McCarthy as ‘death hilarious’,²¹ noting ‘the horsemen’s faces gaudy and grotesque with daubings like a company of mounted clowns’,²² Holden becomes more akin to a Machiavellian trickster or jester than an explicit embodiment of maniacal evil.

Despite gang members frequently questioning Holden’s intellectual meditations on both war and religion, they continue to follow his lead and, when presented with the opportunity to destroy him, the kid does not shoot Holden when they are isolated in the desert. Critics vary in their views of the kid’s failure at this moment, with some believing it to offer proof that Holden is immortal, echoing the novel’s final words of ‘he says that he will never die’.²³ Others have offered a reading of his relationship with the kid as being that of a surrogate father and son. For instance, John Vanderheide suggests that a persistent theme throughout McCarthy’s early work leading up to and including *Blood Meridian* is ‘the search for the father’,²⁴ explaining that ‘McCarthy situates the searching son in squalid or abject conditions that recall the circumstances of the archetypal prodigal’.²⁵

Holden plainly adopts a paternal tone during his final meeting with the kid by telling him that ‘I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me’.²⁶ Here, I suggest that the bloody odyssey made by the kid is somewhat akin to that of Prince Hal throughout the course of both parts of *Henry IV*. They begin with the disappointment of his biological father, Henry IV, and his education at the hands of a surrogate father, Falstaff.

²¹ Ibid., p. 55.

²² Ibid., p. 55.

²³ Ibid., p. 353.

²⁴ John Vanderheide. ‘The process of elimination: tracing the prodigals’s irrevocable passage through Cormac McCarthy’s southern and western novels’. *Myths, legends, dust: Critical responses to Cormac McCarthy*, Ed. Rick Wallach. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. p. 177.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 177.

²⁶ McCarthy, p. 345.

Although the nature of their relationship is not based on violence, but rather on mutual usefulness, Hal reaches the point where he is fully initiated into Falstaff's world, one which is founded on questionable and selfish ethics, and must either remain locked in the embrace of his illicit tutor or reject him in order to retain both his individuality and humanity. This reading is supported by Hillier's interpretation of these parallels:

Like the fat, bluff, and dangerously eloquent Falstaff, himself based on the medieval stage Vice, who would seduce his royal protégé with his vicious Eastcheap ways, the Judge would entice the kid into the ways of the blood meridian and laments that "I'd have loved you like a son" (319). And, like Hal role-playing in The Boar's Head Tavern, the kid ultimately learns in The Beehive tavern, though at great cost to himself, to "[b]anish plump Jack and banish all the world" (1H4 2.4.466–67).²⁷

I will examine further the kid and Holden's respective fates and interconnected destinies, but it is first useful to apply Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of bad faith to an appraisal of the similarities of Falstaff and Hal's relationship alongside that of Holden and the kid. Sartre uses this concept to characterise those who fail to be responsible for their actions and live with self-deception. I believe Falstaff to be living in a constant state of bad faith, which primarily concerns the deep-seated knowledge he has, but will not admit to, that Hal will abandon him when he becomes king. Furthermore, the tragedy of their relationship is that, arguably, Falstaff perhaps knows Hal to be the imitator he professes to be in Act 1 Scene 2, where he directly tells the audience that he 'will awhile uphold / The unyoked humour of [Falstaff's] idleness'.²⁸ Falstaff is unable to prevent the inevitable heartbreak, reported by Mistress Quickly as the cause of his death in *Henry V*, for 'the king hath killed his heart',²⁹ because he loves Hal unconditionally, like a doting father. Falstaff's bad faith becomes evident in *I*

²⁷ Hillier, p. 84.

²⁸ William Shakespeare. *1 Henry IV. The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: WW. Norton & Company, 2008. I. 2. 173-4.

²⁹ William Shakespeare, *Henry V. The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: WW. Norton & Company, 2008. II. 1. 79.

Henry IV's most meta-theatrical scene, where Hal and Falstaff play out this future banishment:

FALSTAFF: [...] banish plump Jack, and banish all the world.

PRINCE HAL: I do, I will.³⁰

Sartre's philosophy encompasses two forms of bad faith that arise from relationships: firstly, giving other people full responsibility and credit for defining our essence, and, secondly, completely ignoring the impact others have on our essence. Although Falstaff is most commonly viewed as being ignorant of the thoughts and needs of his fellow Eastcheap inhabitants, Hal is the exception. Falstaff's narrative trajectory is defined by Hal's opinion of him. When Hal predominantly occupies Eastcheap in *1 Henry IV*, Falstaff is at his most riotous and carnivalesque, but once the prince has to shoulder responsibility in *2 Henry IV*, Falstaff becomes a bitter and discontented version of himself. In *Henry V*, where his banishment is absolute, Shakespeare took the decision to axe this much-loved character, demonstrating Falstaff's reliance on Hal to retain his essence, purpose and authenticity. On the other hand, Hal, the prince and future king, perhaps inhabits the other realm of bad faith, where he primarily chooses to ignore what others think.

Applying the philosophy of bad faith to *Blood Meridian*, a question which Holden asks the kid must be considered: 'was it always your idea [...] that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?'.³¹ This suggests that Holden does believe, or at least is fascinated by, the kid's existence only as it is perceived through the eyes of others. There are a number of examples where McCarthy would seem to suggest that the kid's compassion and humanity are a form of weakness which will result in his death, in a similar way to Falstaff. After the kid is the only man in the company to respond to Davey Brown's anguished plea to remove an

³⁰ *1 Henry IV*, 2. 5. 438-9.

³¹ McCarthy, p. 345.

arrow's shaft from his ankle, the expriest Tobin tells him that 'God will not love ye forever. [...] Don't you know he'd of took you with him? He'd of took you, boy. Like a bride to the altar'.³² Here, Tobin is warning the kid that he was lucky and that Brown would not have hesitated in killing him if he had failed to perform the operation successfully. However, by placing 'a bride to the altar' in proximity to the preceding image, where 'the kid withdrew the shaft from the man's leg smoothly and the man bowed on the ground in a lurid female motion',³³ McCarthy depicts this act of rare compassion, paradoxically, as an act of strangely feminine congress within the uncompromising, masculine and ultra-violent context of *Blood Meridian*. Therefore, it is possible to interpret this episode, together with Holden's later accusation of the kid's silence as self-deception, as McCarthy's representation of the trust that the kid has in others being the first form of bad faith. Equally, a Sartrean reading of Holden suggests that both his role as a nihilistic outsider who remains imperviously aloof to others' views of him and his occupation as a judge, pursuing his own uncompromising practices of law, render him guilty of existing in the other realm of bad faith.

In the same way as Hal and Falstaff, then, are both Holden and the kid living in different forms of self-deception? Shakespeare and McCarthy both seem to suggest so by having their characters hold an existential discussion about these oppositions, and mankind's wider problems with authenticity, in the earthbound setting of a tavern. Such a scene is found in *Blood Meridian's* ambiguous denouement, set in the Beehive tavern, which ends with Holden described as welcoming the kid into an outside toilet: 'the judge was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered him in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him'.³⁴ Analysing this passage, Vanderheide suggests that

³² Ibid., p. 171.

³³ Ibid., p. 171.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 351.

the novel's conclusion recapitulates the manner in which it began. The narrative begins with a disclosure that the kid's mother died in the process of delivering him into the world; it ends with the man himself being eliminated while metaphorically giving birth to his own enormous infant, his father.³⁵

Vanderheide's view that the relationship between these two central characters is paternal appears plausible. However, it is necessary to understand the kid's true parental origins in order to discern both how McCarthy approaches literary appropriation, and the foundation of such a multi-faceted dynamic within the Shakespearean tradition. On the first page of *Blood Meridian*, the kid's rejection of his parenthood presents an immediate fissure between men of words and men of action, displacing the rumours about the Kid's 'folk' for the truth that he comes from ruinous, artistic origins:

His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from old poets whose names are now lost.³⁶

It is also important to address the problem of whether or not, by consuming the kid, Holden is strengthened by this absorption of his antithesis, enabling him to become fully authentic. Therefore, Holden can be read as the embodiment of McCarthy's anxiety of influence and his admission that 'the ugly fact is books are made out of books, the novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written'.³⁷ For instance, Holden meticulously records the details of various encounters with nature in his ledger, marking himself out as 'that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry'³⁸ for 'whatever exists in creation without my knowledge exists without my consent'.³⁹

³⁵ Vanderheide, p. 182.

³⁶ McCarthy, p. 3.

³⁷ Richard B. Woodward. 'Cormac McCarthy's Venomous Fiction'. *New York Times*. 19 April 1992. para. 23 of 50.

³⁸ McCarthy, p. 209.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

He also audibly yearns for a restrictive compartmentalisation of the world: ‘the freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos’.⁴⁰ It is precisely this abhorrence of freedom that makes the silence of the kid’s unconsciously elusive nature as attractive as it is frustrating to Holden. Steven Shaviro explains that ‘it is this indifference that irritates the will of the judge, and that he seeks to master and appropriate; this seductive child’s loneliness that he needs to baptise and give (re-)birth to’.⁴¹ This bifurcation of character renders Holden as the most contradictory and compelling figure in *Blood Meridian*. He misquotes from the ‘old poets’, showing how McCarthy’s literary mouthpiece craves control over his destiny and is yet incapable of concealing the influence and appropriation of his forebears:

And some are not born yet who shall have cause to curse the Dauphin’s soul, said the Judge. He turned slightly. Plenty of time for the dance.⁴²

Holden’s words directly reference *Henry V*, appropriating the lines spoken by Henry during Act 1 Scene 2 in reaction to the Dauphin’s present of tennis balls. This is one of those crucial moments in the *Henriad* when, in front of the court, characters undergo radical shifts in their status or mindset. The young king faces a slight against both his masculine honour and monarchic legitimacy at the hands of the Dauphin and the French claim that ‘you savour too much of your youth’,⁴³ and henceforth ‘you cannot revel into dukedoms there’.⁴⁴ Will he be Hal or Henry? The slight against his character provides him with the perfect opportunity to confound not only the foreign powers who doubt his strength as a leader, but also members of his own court, as presented in the preceding scene where Ely and Canterbury discuss his reformation following Henry IV’s death. He proves himself worthy of the throne with the first of his many declamatory speeches in *Henry V*, telling the Ambassador that the Dauphin’s

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 210.

⁴¹ Steven Shaviro. “‘The Very Life of Darkness’: A Reading of *Blood Meridian*”. *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*. The Southern Quarterly, 1999. p. 152.

⁴² McCarthy, p. 345.

⁴³ *Henry V*, I. 2. 250.

⁴⁴ Ibid., I. 2. 253.

‘mock of his / Hath turned his balls to gun-stones’,⁴⁵ stating that his rebuke shall be so great that ‘some are yet ungotten and unborn / That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin’s scorn’.⁴⁶

Beyond paying ironic homage to the ‘old poets whose names are now lost’,⁴⁷ what then is McCarthy doing when he has Judge Holden misquote this line? The quote comes, not within one of Holden’s own monologues, but at the beginning of his conversation with the kid in the Beehive at the end of the novel. Holden has just met again with the kid and, following a woman’s attempt to alleviate a commotion in which a dancing bear has been shot dead, asks him directly, ‘do you believe it’s all over, son?’⁴⁸ The kid tries to ignore him, only to find that ‘that great corpus enshadowed him from all beyond’.⁴⁹ What follows the misquote is his meditation on the dance of war, concluding that ‘only that man who has offered up himself entire to the blood of war, who has been to the floor of the pit and seen horror in the round and learned at last that it speaks to his inmost heart, only that man can dance’.⁵⁰

The French ambassador haughtily suggests, through his description of Henry’s aspirations towards France as a mere dance of war, that ‘there’s naught in France / That can be with a nimble galliard won’,⁵¹ thus dismissing the idea that revels and conflict have anything in common. The new king, although having rejected Falstaff, knows the value of the dance, like Holden, and proceeds to transform the language of play and tennis into one of war and blood: ‘when we have matched our rackets to these balls, / We will in France, by God’s grace, play a set / Shall strike his father’s crown into the hazard’.⁵² This somewhat aligns Holden with Henry by quoting one of Shakespeare’s most transformative characters in the

⁴⁵ Ibid., I. 2. 281-2.

⁴⁶ Ibid., I. 2. 287-8.

⁴⁷ McCarthy, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 344.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 344.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 349.

⁵¹ *Henry V*, I. 2. 251-2.

⁵² Ibid., I. 2. 261-3.

appropriation of a remark that suggests that the legacy of war will result in suffering so great that it will affect those not yet born. Furthermore, McCarthy advances beyond misquotation by remoulding the line for his Judge, trading ‘scorn’ for ‘soul’. In expressing the view that the repercussions of the ‘Dauphin’s scorn’ at the futility of man’s attempt to prevent the inevitability of war will resonate, not just for the people of a specific nation, but throughout mankind as a whole, he supports his philosophy, which emphasises the sanctity and vitality of war above any other form of faith. Peter Josyph supports this reading of the line, suggesting that

McCarthy and Judge Holden are not misquoting Shakespeare: they are becoming Shakespeare and transforming the line from a reaction to a specific slight or insult - tennis balls - to a deeper and more general judgment- *Judge*-ment - against the soul of the enemy, against the essence of enemy whoever he or they might be. Henry’s phrase is a resolution, a vow, a promise and a threat: France will suffer the wrath of England for generations. The Judge’s statement is a reassurance: the joys of war are not about to die out soon, or ever.⁵³

Shakespeare similarly interrogates Henry’s passion and justification for war throughout *Henry V*, which exhibits itself in his later monologues and interactions in his camp before Agincourt with two of his soldiers, Bates and Williams. For instance, the playwright explores the realities of weaponised rape and violent excess during Henry’s speech to the Governor of Harfleur in Act 3 Scene 3, which *Blood Meridian* also displays when viewed in its post-Vietnam context. After his army has achieved victory, Henry uses such a threat as a vicious weapon, warning the governor that if he does not yield then ‘in a moment look to see / The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand / Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters’.⁵⁴ The difference between Henry’s army and *Blood Meridian*’s Glanton gang is, crucially, that Henry offers the enemy the option to surrender, albeit in language which demonstrates that, drawn from the social depravity he witnessed in Eastcheap, lies the

⁵³ Peter Josyph. Personal interview. 20 March 2015.

⁵⁴ *Henry V*, III. 3. 110-3.

dormant capacity to inflict an extreme level of suffering upon his victims. Most notably, the mention of ‘the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters’ is approximately similar to the scalplings which McCarthy describes throughout *Blood Meridian*, in which images rear up reminiscent of the ghostly bloodbath in *Macbeth*: ‘one of the men from inside appeared in the doorway like a bloody apparition’.⁵⁵

Henry and Holden deliberately confuse the languages of war and play: for Henry, ‘the game’s afoot’ and for Holden, ‘war is the ultimate game’.⁵⁶ This combination has led critics to view both characters as inherently Machiavellian. Avery Plaw argues instead that

Harry never explicitly invokes the image of Machiavelli [...] this is only a testament to the success of Harry’s political performance both as Prince and King: he never appears publicly as the brutal political realist that we, the audience, are permitted to see that he is. In this way, Harry realizes one of Machiavelli’s central political precepts: one must know how to be bad while always appearing good.⁵⁷

The most significant moment of transition in Henry’s development towards becoming the ‘quintessential Machiavellian prince’⁵⁸ comes during the final scene of *2 Henry IV* when he tells Falstaff that ‘I know thee not, old man’.⁵⁹ McCarthy perhaps unconsciously references the rejection of Falstaff’s world of untempered chaos when ‘even in their wretched state’⁶⁰ the Glanton gang pass by Santa Cruz, looking on the disorganised depravity of its inhabitants ‘with undisguised contempt’,⁶¹ describing the conglomerate mass they see as ‘this falstaffian militia’.⁶² The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word as ‘characteristic of or resembling Falstaff [...] Also, resembling the ‘ragged regiment’ recruited by Falstaff (*2 Henry IV*)’.⁶³ Just

⁵⁵ McCarthy, p. 190.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 263.

⁵⁷ Avery Plaw. ‘Prince Harry: Shakespeare’s critique of Machiavelli’. *Interpretation: a journal of political philosophy*. Pugwash, 2005. p. 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁹ William Shakespeare. *2 Henry IV. The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: WW. Norton & Company, 2008. V. 5. 45.

⁶⁰ McCarthy, p. 233.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 233.

⁶² Ibid. p. 233

⁶³ Definition taken from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://www.oed.com/>.

as Falstaff recruits a ragtag group for soldiery, so McCarthy describes in *Blood Meridian* how ‘Glanton and the judge went out to see if they could recruit any men from the rabble reposing in the dust of the square’.⁶⁴ In relation to the progression of Falstaff’s character and use of violence, R.A. Foakes comments that

whereas in Part 1 he describes his method of recruiting soldiers in an amusing soliloquy, in Part 2 we see him and Bardolph misusing the King’s press grossly as a way of making money [...] the soliloquy he is given this time reveals his contempt for Shallow and the plan to make more money out of him.⁶⁵

A plausible source for McCarthy’s use of the expression relating to Falstaff, beyond possible Shakespearean reference, is an entry from an 1880 edition of the Bismarck Tribune. Ernest Ingersoll writes a brief account of ‘James Pursely, an adventurous fur trader’,⁶⁶ and his passage as ‘the first American who seems to have penetrated to New Mexico’.⁶⁷

[...] on that bleak March day in 1866, he unwillingly tramped into Santa Fe at the head of his Falstaffian band, hatless, bootless and trouserless through a year’s campaigning on the plains and in the mountains.⁶⁸

Given the close proximity to the events of *Blood Meridian* and the novel’s basis in historical fact, drawn from the memoirs of Samuel Chamberlain, it is probable that McCarthy appropriates Ingersoll’s words as he did Shakespeare’s. Interestingly, the account, with its description of James Pursley’s own depravity - ‘hatless, bootless’, ‘trouserless’ - could equally apply to the frequently naked and debauched Holden. McCarthy’s conscious decision to have the Glanton gang view the people of Santa Cruz as a ‘falstaffian militia’,⁶⁹ rather than describing the gang themselves in these terms, aligns them with Henry and his army, embodying the values of organised and regimented chaos, unleashed when necessary, but reined in at points to prevent falling into the ruin they pass. Despite being decimated in a

⁶⁴ McCarthy, p. 245

⁶⁵ R.A. Foakes. ‘Shakespeare on war’. *Shakespeare and Violence*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. p. 95.

⁶⁶ Ernest Ingersoll. *Bismarck Tribune*. Bismarck: North Dakota, 7 May 1880. p. 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶⁹ McCarthy, p. 233.

surprise Yuma attack in Chapter 19, McCarthy's decision to contrast the gang's relative solidarity with the devastation they pass through gives the reader a sense that, regardless of their heinous deeds, they still adhere to some form of regiment in an otherwise individualistic world. As the Glanton gang's actual violence is clinical in its brutality, so Henry's savage warning to the people of Harfleur similarly demonstrates:

What is it then to me if impious war,
Array'd in flames like to the prince of fiends,
Do, with his smirched complexion all fell feats
Enlink'd to waste and desolation?
What is it to me, when you yourselves are cause,
If your pure maidens fall into the hand
Of hot and forcing violation?⁷⁰

This speech is striking because of the extent to which it offers a potentially revisionist reading of a historical account and figure who, to Shakespeare's audience, would have been viewed as both heroic and emblematic of national pride. While Shakespeare stops short of having Henry's men 'mowing like grass / Your fresh-fair virgins and your flowering infants',⁷¹ his decision to intertwine such a domestic image of horticulture with rape and murder offers a more barbarous and rooted presentation of war. The presentation of 'impious war' as a pastime worthy of the devil himself, 'enlink'd to waste and desolation' offers further subversion of Henry's image as a noble ruler, conquering foreign lands in God and England's name. This speech enabled Shakespeare to examine the methods which leaders deploy in order to achieve success, regardless of collateral damage, without directly criticising a predecessor of his Queen and royal patron, Elizabeth I.

Just as Shakespeare confronts uncomfortable truths about the roots of England's expansionism, in the genre of history play, so *Blood Meridian* has often been interpreted as approaching similar issues in relation to America via the Western and ideas surrounding

⁷⁰ *Henry V*, III. 3. 92-8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, III. 3. 90-1.

Manifest Destiny. As Steven Frye suggests, exploring the novel's connection to contemporaneous Western films:

In the early 1970s as the [Vietnam] war was coming to its tragic conclusion, a new "alternative" Western briefly emerged [...] this genre took on a number of forms, all of which contradict in various ways the assumed moral stature of the American hero and demonstrate a willingness to confront violence more directly.⁷²

Blood Meridian frequently dramatises the accumulation of testosterone unleashed in 'a vomit of gore'⁷³ or as 'death hilarious',⁷⁴ addressed by these revisionist Westerns, alongside the post-Vietnam cynicism and mistrust in politics and warfare that clearly also informed Kenneth Branagh's 1985 British film of *Henry V*. Made during the aftermath of Britain's own crisis surrounding its imperial identity after the Falklands War, this version was in stark contrast to Laurence Olivier's 1944 version, which presented Shakespeare's play in the context of a morale booster for the country during the Second World War. Such testosterone can be identified throughout Act 4 Scene 3, where Shakespeare is as much concerned with masculine self-image as with national pride. The exhilaration and dauntlessness with which Henry's famous 'St. Crispin's day' speech injects his army is palpable, almost spilling over into giddy ebullience when Warwick claims to his king that 'you and I alone / Without more help, could fight this royal battle'.⁷⁵ Just as Lady Macbeth questions the virility of her husband, with the intention of direct provocation, so Henry amply fulfils the same role in this scene, concluding his rabble-raising words, not with the national mention of 'gentlemen in England',⁷⁶ but with the deeply personal ultimatum that those men shall 'hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks / That fought with us upon St. Crispin's day'.⁷⁷

⁷² Steven Frye. 'Blood Meridian and the Poetics of Violence'. *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*. Ed. Steven Frye. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. p. 111.

⁷³ McCarthy, p. 104.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 55.

⁷⁵ *Henry V*, IV. 3. 74-5.

⁷⁶ Ibid., IV. 3. 64.

⁷⁷ Ibid., IV. 3. 66-7.

Looking beyond the typically patriotic connotations of Henry's famous speech, it is possible to examine how this king works effectively as a military leader: he questions his soldiers' very essence and status as men. Much as Lady Macbeth's chiding of her husband's masculinity has a similar effect on him, so Henry's words galvanise his troops before Agincourt. Beforehand, they appear to be in disarray, questioning the location of their king, lamenting the 'fearful odds'⁷⁸ they face, given that they are outnumbered 'five to one'⁷⁹ and the French 'are all fresh'.⁸⁰ Indeed, Salisbury openly acknowledges the possibility of death, bravely telling his kinsmen that, 'if we no more meet till we meet in heaven / Then joyfully [...] warriors all, adieu'.⁸¹ Finally, Warwick laments 'that we now had here / But one ten thousand of those men in England / That do no work today'.⁸² And yet, some fifty-seven lines later, he promises to walk into the jaws of battle alone with his king. Thus, Henry shows his ability to transfigure the insecurities of his men into strengths as they go into battle, saying that 'if we are marked to die, we are enough / To do our country loss; and if we live / The fewer men, the greater share of honour'.⁸³

Judge Holden's relationship with his men is more ambivalent than that of Henry, although he relies on similar principles. He instils in them the values of war, manhood and imperial domination in order to motivate and make them capable of fulfilling their bloody purpose. Shakespeare and McCarthy each make use of language that testifies to blood's status as the coagulant that binds together a 'band of brothers':⁸⁴

For he today that sheds his blood with me
 Shall be my brother, be he ne'er so vile,
 This day shall gentle his condition.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ Ibid., IV. 3. 5.

⁷⁹ Ibid., IV. 3. 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid., IV. 3. 4.

⁸¹ Ibid., IV. 3. 7-10.

⁸² Ibid., IV. 3. 16-7.

⁸³ Ibid., IV. 3. 20-3

⁸⁴ Ibid., IV. 3. 60.

⁸⁵ Ibid., IV. 3. 61-3.

It is that which we take arms against, is it not? Is not blood the tempering agent in the mortar which bonds?⁸⁶

When Holden addresses the kid with these words, there are echoes of Hamlet's consideration of whether 'to take arms against a sea of troubles'⁸⁷ and McCarthy evokes a central theme explored by Shakespeare throughout *Henry V*. Henry's articulation of war's importance to mankind hints at much more than becoming a martyr for one's country. It involves engaging in a ritual of blood-sacrifice whereby, in embracing death itself, one is able to attain a higher understanding of the human condition, transcending bodily origins, as alluded to by Shakespeare's use of 'vile'. Similarly, Holden, acting as the catalyst for war, uses the metaphor of a card game to urge his reluctant gang to appreciate the value of war within mankind's soul:

Suppose two men at cards with nothing to wager save their lives. Who has not heard such a tale? A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man's hand or that man at his. [...] This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one's will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence.⁸⁸

The key difference between Henry's and Holden's respective call-to-arms is the specific value of country. Due to McCarthy's removal of Holden, not simply from nationhood, but from mankind altogether, it would be incorrect to interpret his treatise on war as nationalistically motivated in the same way as Henry's. However, both share the belief that war is 'a forcing of the unity of existence' and, clearly, whilst Henry frames the legacy of war within a national context, Holden similarly views war as a covenant whereby men are bound together for

⁸⁶ McCarthy, p. 347.

⁸⁷ William Shakespeare. *Hamlet. The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: WW. Norton & Company, 2008. III. 1. 61.

⁸⁷ McCarthy, p. 233.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 262-3.

eternity. Moreover, although Norman Rabkin famously argued that ‘Shakespeare creates a work whose ultimate power is precisely the fact that it points in two opposite directions, virtually daring us to choose one of the two opposed interpretations it requires of us’,⁸⁹ I suggest that, because Shakespeare has crafted Henry throughout the *Henriad*, presenting in full his youthful misdeeds, building him into his nation’s great leader, through negation, he offers a similar revisionist history of his country’s bloody and uncompromising expansionism to that of McCarthy. A tantalising connection between Rabkin’s study of the contradiction inherent in both Shakespeare’s and McCarthy’s work is revealed by the Canadian poet, Leon Rooke, whose 1986 interview with the author includes the following exchange:

I asked him what he had been reading lately.
“I’ve just finished *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*,” he said.⁹⁰

Not only does Rooke’s interview divulge McCarthy’s personal ‘feeling that all good literature is bleak’⁹¹ and that he’s ‘guided by the sweep and grandeur of classical tragedy’,⁹² later referencing Sophocles in their conversation, but it reveals that McCarthy reads not only Shakespeare but also Shakespearean criticism, in this case Rabkin’s 1967 study *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*. It is worth paying attention to the date of Rooke’s interview, which was conducted a year after *Blood Meridian*’s publication, making it plausible that Rabkin’s exploration of ‘the necessity in certain situations of employing apparently contradictory descriptions without embarrassment’⁹³ was influential on McCarthy during his writing of the novel. It is certainly reasonable to suggest that McCarthy, who keeps an office at the Santa Fe Institute, enjoys a close working interaction with scientists and has copy-

⁸⁹ Norman Rabkin. ‘Rabbits, Ducks, and *Henry V*’. *Shakespeare Quarterly* 27.3 (1977): p. 279.

⁹⁰ Leon Rooke. *Rash Undertakings*. The Brick Reader, Ed. Linda Spalding and Michael Ondaatje. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1991. p.8.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Franklin M. Dickey. *Norman Rabkin. Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*. New York: The Free Press, 1967. *Renaissance Quarterly* 25.4 (The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Renaissance Society of America, 1972): p. 508.

edited a biography of the physicist Richard Feynman, might have been drawn to the similarly interdisciplinary impulses of Rabkin, who himself borrowed the concept of ‘complementarity’⁹⁴ from ‘J. Robert Oppenheimer’s *Science and the Common Understanding*’.⁹⁵ At the very least, it demonstrates that, as Hillier suggests ‘[t]here is evidence that McCarthy reads Shakespearean literary criticism just for fun’.⁹⁶

Throughout this paper, I have sought to situate *Blood Meridian* and Judge Holden’s roots in the historical and literary past. However, it is also interesting to consider towards what kind of future the text and its central figure point. In one of the novel’s most enduring images, McCarthy anticipates the post-apocalyptic wanderings of the Man and his son, which he created in his 2006 novel *The Road*. In doing so, he colours *Blood Meridian* with a dystopian tone that also recalls *King Lear*’s blasted heath and the apocalyptic ‘naked newborn babe, / Striding the blast’⁹⁷ of Macbeth’s deepest anxieties:

They lumbered on, the judge a pale pink beneath his talc of dust like something newly born, the imbecile much the darker, lurching across the pan at the very extremes of exile like some scurrilous king stripped of his vestiture and driven together with his fool in the wilderness to die.⁹⁸

The image of the ‘scurrilous king’, naked, abandoned and exiled, coupled with McCarthy’s choice to change his description of the same ‘idiot’, which Holden and Glanton had earlier purchased, into a ‘fool’, while not a direct reference, certainly evokes Lear’s similar banishment onto the heath with only his Fool for company. Holden and Lear treat their fools with varying degrees of inhumanity. However, the tenderness of Lear towards his Fool is also perceived in the moment when this rage and cruelty soften, as exhibited by his admission in

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Russell M. Hillier. “‘Nothing is Crueler Than a Coward’: *No Country for Old Men* and *The Counselor* as *Tragic Fables* of the Contemporary Southwest’. *Morality in Cormac McCarthy’s Fiction: Souls At Hazard*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. p. 253.

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: WW. Norton & Company, 2008. I. 7. 21-2

⁹⁸ McCarthy, p. 297.

the storm that ‘poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That’s yet sorry for thee’⁹⁹ or his ambiguous lament that ‘my poor fool is hanged’.¹⁰⁰

The future to which this image alludes also relates to the central question which plagues the reader, regarding Holden’s origins, namely, when the kid asks: ‘what’s he a judge of?’¹⁰¹ *Blood Meridian*, and Judge Holden himself anticipate a time when blood and chaos will hold sway over mankind, allowing the interpretation of the world in this novel to serve as a demonic precursor to the future cataclysm which the post-apocalyptic and cannibalistic world of *The Road* portrays. Consequently, is Judge Holden just that: *Judgement Day* itself, a violent reckoning that arrives to cleanse mankind and return it to its ‘foul matrix’?¹⁰² Is Holden the very ‘black matter’¹⁰³ to which Williams refers in *Henry V*, when he conjures a gaudy vision of apocalyptic doom to reflect the suffering inflicted by mankind’s lust for war:

But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in a battle shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, ‘We died in such a place’.¹⁰⁴

Like this ‘great shambling mutant’¹⁰⁵ conjured by Shakespeare in this passage from *Henry V*, which haunts the king’s vision of war as a noble practice, Holden is a conglomeration of many disparate parts, which make it difficult to define him as other than being a portent of mankind’s bloody nadir. In the novel’s final scene, the reader receives McCarthy’s closest attempt to categorise or define Holden. He replies to the kid’s dismissal of his rhetoric that

⁹⁹ William Shakespeare, *King Lear (Conflated Text)*. *The Norton Shakespeare*. 2nd Ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard and Katharine Eisaman Maus. New York and London: WW. Norton & Company, 2008. III. 2. 70-1.

¹⁰⁰ *King Lear*, V. 3. 304.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹⁰³ *Henry V*, IV. 1. 138-9.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, IV. 1. 129-132.

¹⁰⁵ McCarthy, p. 326.

‘you aint nothin’¹⁰⁶ with a further glimpse into the truth of his existence: ‘you speak truer than you know’.¹⁰⁷

Shakespeare also plays with this word in *King Lear*, having Lear first tell Cordelia that ‘nothing will come of nothing’¹⁰⁸ and then the Fool chide Lear by saying that ‘I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing’.¹⁰⁹ The first instance is a variation on “ex nihilo nihil fit”, the Latin for “from nothing, nothing comes”. This is an ancient Greek philosophical and scientific expression which expresses the opposite of the biblical notion that God created the world out of nothing and thus sets the tone for the pagan world which *King Lear* occupies. The second occurrence of ‘nothing’ shows the fool to be unbalancing the hierarchy of the play by telling his master, the king, that he has become so destitute and unloved he is now of less value than the lowest member of his court, the fool. Emerging in the play’s first act, such explorations of nothingness by Shakespeare question central ideas surrounding religion and hierarchy and set the scene for the nihilistic heath that will expose both Lear and his world as bare and unaccommodated.

However, as *Blood Meridian* shows, there is also an immense power in being ‘nothing’ and in the context of Holden as literally ‘nothin’, a being devoid of matter and origin, conjuring images of approaching doom in a quest to quash the kid’s faith in the remnants of humanity’s innocence, it may be helpful also to consider R.M. Christofides contention that:

because we do not know for sure what the end of the world will look until we are faced with the end of the world - the Apocalypse can be imagined in a variety of forms: [...] In *King Lear* Shakespeare delivers his own interpretation, the promised end envisioned as pre-Christian.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ McCarthy, p. 349.

¹⁰⁷ McCarthy, p. 349.

¹⁰⁸ *King Lear*, I. 1. 89.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, I. 4. 169-70.

¹¹⁰ R.M. Christofides. ‘The Promised End of *King Lear*’. *Shakespeare and the Apocalypse: Visions of Doom from Early Modern Tragedy to Popular Culture*. London: Continuum, 2012. p. 151.

Lear is a judge who equally relies on a form of Sartrean bad faith, making a catastrophically poor judgement of Cordelia at the beginning of the play and then requiring a direct encounter with the apocalyptic wilderness in order to discover the truth about man's fate that 'when we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools'.¹¹¹ This is equally true of Holden, who represents the promised end within the post-Christian setting of McCarthy's violent American West, devoid of tradition like *King Lear*'s pagan world, where 'war is god'.¹¹² As McCarthy explicitly warns the reader, 'whoever would seek out his history through that unraveling of loins and ledger books must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin'.¹¹³ Holden, 'bound / Upon a wheel of fire',¹¹⁴ continues to dance out of our reach, defying categorisation or definition. He is the ultimate, intertextual testament to the author's admission that 'books are made out of books'.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ *King Lear*, IV. 6. 176-7.

¹¹² McCarthy, p. 263.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

¹¹⁴ *King Lear*, IV. 7. 46-7.

¹¹⁵ Woodward, para. 23 of 50.

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