

“Hamlet’s a Loser, Leslie”
Pimpernel Smith, *Hamlet and Film Propaganda*

In the Introduction, I discuss the close relationship between the Ministry of Information’s Films Division and the British movie industry, a relationship crystallized in what I call the Film Propaganda Industrial Complex (F-PIC). Leslie Howard was a particularly active participant in the operations of F-PIC, and his directorial debut, *Pimpernel Smith* (1941), shows a remarkable degree of reflexivity regarding its status as propaganda.¹ In this chapter, after detailing some of Howard’s propaganda efforts as well as his role in the making of *Pimpernel Smith*, I will show that the film’s propaganda function is tightly bound up in its depiction of Shakespeare both as an emblem of Britishness and as a figure whom the Nazis were eager to identify as one of their own.² The doubleness of the playwright’s national identity echoes a claim explored in the film, that Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, authored Shakespeare’s works; and it also chimes with the fact that the film’s central character, Professor Horatio Smith (played by Howard), is shadowed by Howard’s history with Shakespeare, by *Hamlet* in particular, and by Howard’s own cinematic personae as a cerebral screen star.³ Most significantly, I will show that running through the film’s approach to these topics is Howard’s conviction that British cultural superiority is expressed not primarily in Shakespeare, but in the toleration of heterodox ideas about his national origins and, indeed, his very identity.

¹ On this film, see especially Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War*, 2nd ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 44–75.

² Richard Burt devotes several pages to the film in “Sshockspeare: (Nazi) Shakespeare Goes Heil-lywood,” in Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen (eds.), *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 437–456. To my knowledge, no other Shakespeare scholar has examined the film in any detail.

³ It is striking, additionally, that the protagonist’s Christian name evokes *Hamlet*, although as we will see Horatio Smith functions in the film not as a tragic witness but as an intellectually inclined action hero.

Shortly before the war began, Leslie Howard returned to Britain from Hollywood, where he had built a career as a major film star (he is probably best known today for his role as Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind* [1939], a part he disdained). Upon arrival, Howard proactively produced a document for the government on American propaganda; several months later, he and Anthony Asquith generated a detailed report, *The Film Industry in Time of War*, for the MOI.⁴ After the war began and the MOI began to find its footing in regard to film propaganda, Howard was recruited to be on an informal Ideas Committee, which was established in late 1941 by Jack Beddington, the third and longest-tenured director of the Films Division, to ensure coordination between the MOI and the film industry. As such, the Ideas Committee served as a central element of F-PIC. It was composed of key figures in the industry, including directors and screenwriters; its operations "allowed for the discussion of films before production and, importantly, it meant that commercial producers were kept aware of what the MOI considered was good propaganda."⁵ And yet, Howard's wartime propaganda work extended beyond the world of film. Aldgate and Richards's lengthy summary of his activities is worth reproducing:

He broadcast regularly, particularly to the United States and the Empire. . . . He acted in the MOI's first full-length feature film *49th Parallel* (1941), . . . and in the documentary short *From the Four Corners* (1941), in which he showed three Commonwealth soldiers round London and talked about the ideals they were all fighting for. He spoke the final epilogue for Noël Coward's tribute to the Navy *In Which We Serve* (1942) and spoke the commentary for *The White Eagle* (1941), a documentary about exiled Poles in Britain striving to preserve their culture. He produced a film about nurses, *The Lamp Still Burns* (1943) and directed and narrated a memorable film tribute to the ATS [Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women's branch of the British army], *The Gentle Sex* (1943). He made his final public appearance as Nelson on the steps of St Paul's reciting the last prayer before Trafalgar. . . . But above all, he directed and starred in two of the finest British wartime films, *Pimpernel Smith* (1941) and *The First of the Few* (1942).⁶

⁴ Estel Eforagan, *Leslie Howard: The Lost Actor* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010), 140. On these efforts, see also Fred M. Leventhal, "Leslie Howard and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.: Promoting the Anglo-American Alliance in Wartime, 1939–1943," in Joel H. Wiener and Mark Hampton (eds.), *Anglo-American Media Interactions, 1850–2000* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 108–126. For more biographical information on Howard, see Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father: A Portrait of Leslie Howard* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981); and Leslie Ruth Howard, *A Quite Remarkable Father* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959).

⁵ James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939–1945* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998), 78.

⁶ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 51–53.

As this suggests, Howard devoted himself to the British wartime propaganda effort to a remarkable degree.

Despite all of this, Howard occasionally evinced a certain sheepishness about his own activities. In a December 1940 radio broadcast aimed at an American audience, he addressed the question of whether his talks were a form of propaganda. “[Howard] described how the English were shy of and bad at propaganda, and when compelled by war to take it up, they did so ‘to a degree which has been the despair of their friends and the astonishment of their foes, cautiously, politely and with a painstaking rectitude.’” Howard finally concluded that his own broadcasts were of a different order because “he was just saying what he felt without calculation, simply chatting to friends as if on the transatlantic telephone.”⁷ For all their purported candor, Howard’s remarks are in their own right a sly bit of cultural propaganda. They advance a familiar conception of the punctilious integrity of the “English,” while also foregrounding Britain’s long-standing relationship with its American “friends” (who, of course, the British were desperate to bring into the war). Howard’s approach is also in line with the early stages of the MOI’s propaganda campaign, “[which was] characterized by a gentle and ‘open’ approach to persuasion.”⁸ Gentle persuasion was a part of the propagandist Howard’s stock in trade.

It is important to note, however, that the MOI’s characterization of the nature of its film propaganda has an unsavory backstory as well as a compensatory dimension. British propaganda from World War One, while considered by many (including Hitler) to have been effective, was notorious for its fabrication of German atrocities. This history of falsification threatened to undercut the efforts of the MOI to champion British virtues and values.⁹ Its “‘open’ approach,” then, is in part a reaction to past excesses.¹⁰ At the same time, this approach is also designed to draw a distinction between contemporary British and German propaganda efforts. In one of his popular radio addresses, J. B. Priestley asserted of the German propaganda film *Feuertaufe* (1940) that it “tells the world that any country which has the temerity to defy Hitler will be mercilessly bombed.”¹¹

⁷ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 69, 70.

⁸ Jo Fox, *Film Propaganda in Britain and Nazi Germany: World War II Cinema* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2007), 24.

⁹ Fox, *Film Propaganda*, 21.

¹⁰ It is also arguably in denial of some of Britain’s imperial atrocities as well as its resistance to colonial independence movements.

¹¹ Fox, *Film Propaganda*, 56. Priestley’s remarks were delivered in May 1942. Britain’s bombardment of civilian targets in Germany under the command of Air Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris remains one of the most controversial of the Allied military efforts during the war.

So much for gentle persuasion. Whereas the Nazis trumpet their strength, the British modestly, even reluctantly, articulate the values and virtues they hold dear – values that are jeopardized by the Nazi menace.¹²

Leslie Howard worked closely with a number of writers in developing the plot of *Pimpernel Smith*, which, after some difficulty securing backing, he finally contracted to make with British National Films in October 1940. The film was shot at Denham Studios in the early months of 1941 before being released that July.¹³ Significantly, the film takes cultural propaganda as its central thematic concern, and it situates its own operations in relation to the activities of the German Ministry of Propaganda. The plot concerns a mysterious figure referred to in the press as the Shadow, who, in the period leading up to Germany's invasion of Poland, rescues prominent dissidents, including scientists, artists and men of letters, from the Nazis. General von Graum (Francis L. Sullivan) of the Gestapo makes it his mission to identify and apprehend the Shadow; only eventually do his suspicions settle on Horatio Smith, a Cambridge archaeologist who has traveled to Germany with a group of students to search for evidence of an ancient Aryan civilization. Thanks to Smith's cleverness, however, definitive proof eludes von Graum until near the end of the film. After being apprehended along with Ludmilla Koslowski (Mary Morris), a Polish newspaper publisher's daughter he liberated from a concentration camp, Smith acknowledges to von Graum that he has freed twenty-eight "exceptional spirits" from Nazi oppression or confinement. In the film's final moments, as Germany is about to invade Poland and Smith faces seemingly certain execution, he slips out of von Graum's clutches and across the border, though he vows to return, along with his compatriots, to fight the Germans.

That propaganda is at the heart of this wartime espionage film is suggested by an early turn in the plot.¹⁴ *Pimpernel Smith* opens with the Shadow extricating a scientist from Berlin scant moments before he is to be arrested by the Gestapo. Immediately after this rescue, we are ushered into

¹² Also relevant to the British approach, and to Howard's way of addressing the audience in his radio broadcasts, is what Chapman refers to as "the distaste for the very idea of propaganda felt by the western democracies" (*British at War*, 42).

¹³ On the writing and making of the film, see Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 56–58.

¹⁴ Of the wartime espionage film, Marcia Landy says "These . . . films involved such situations as the gaining of important military information, the penetration of enemy territory for the destruction of secret installations, and the rescue of important military personnel, scientists, and intellectuals. The protagonists are often members of the secret service, military men assigned to a special mission, or committed intellectuals working with the government for the war effort" (*British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930–1960* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991], 131).

the Ministry of Propaganda's headquarters, and once there we are privy to a bit of comic business.¹⁵ As if lifted directly out of a "newspaper picture" like Howard Hawks's *His Girl Friday* (1940), a group of reporters scramble into phone booths in order to relay to their editors the latest exploits of the Shadow. A German soldier interrupts the reporters to announce that tales of the rescue that we have just witnessed are false; looking straight into the camera, he then says, "In Nazi Germany, no one can hope to be saved by anybody." This scene underscores that, from the beginning of the film, both the exploits and the apprehension of the Shadow are to be considered through the lens of Nazi public relations.

The hunt for the Shadow is conducted by General von Graum, whom we first encounter when a trepidatious subordinate presents him with a report on the latest escape. We see von Graum sitting at a circular desk with built-in bookshelves, his face hidden behind a large tome. When von Graum raises his head from behind his book, he proclaims to his subordinate, "Know your enemy." We next learn that he has been conducting research into the putative "secret weapon" of the British, their sense of humor. After finding nothing amusing in P. G. Wodehouse, Edward Lear, *Punch* or Lewis Carroll – he dubs "Jabberwocky" "painful rubbish" – von Graum concludes that the British secret weapon is a myth. The significant point is that von Graum associates the fight against Britain with the acquisition of knowledge about its literature and culture.

This general project of knowledge acquisition, however, plays second fiddle to a local one: identifying the Shadow, von Graum's enemy in a narrower sense and the subject of his subsequent conversation with his subordinate. The intimation is clear: just as he fails to understand British humor, so will von Graum fail for most of the film to identify the Shadow, whose opaque (to von Graum) British humor is mobilized against him when he first meets Smith at a reception in the British Embassy. In the service of obscuring his identity as the Shadow, Smith seeks out von Graum and performs the role of a slightly supercilious, ineffectual English gentleman – the very antithesis of the bluff adventurer von Graum imagines his nemesis to be. At the same time, Smith mocks von Graum in ways that his audience recognizes but the Anglo-ignorant general cannot. It is in this scene, and in this context, that Shakespeare is first invoked.

¹⁵ This is the name that the film gives to the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda (Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda, or RMVP).

When he approaches von Graum, Smith claims he mistook him for someone else, and then states, “I’m looking for Jekyll and I find Hyde.” The reference is lost on von Graum, and thus the less-than-flattering imputation, but the General does discern that Smith has made “an English joke” – presumably, in his mind, more “painful rubbish.” (At another point in the film, he asserts that “In Germany we never joke.”) Once again, the British are inscrutable to von Graum, and so is the Shadow. Von Graum goes so far as to ask Smith to explain the “idiocy” of “Jabberwocky,” which Smith says can “mean whatever you want it to mean.”¹⁶ The suggestion is that such intellectual and imaginative flexibility is beyond the capacity of the more literal-minded Germans.¹⁷ It is then that the conversation turns to Shakespeare:

VON GRAUM: Germany is a wonderland. . . . But we have one problem: “To be or not to be,” as our great German poet said.

SMITH: German. But that’s Shakespeare.

VON GRAUM: What, you don’t know?

SMITH: I know it’s Shakespeare. I thought Shakespeare was English.

VON GRAUM: No, no, no. Shakespeare is a German. Professor Schutzberger proved it once and for all.

SMITH: Oh dear, how very upsetting. But still you must admit the English translations are most remarkable.

This exchange’s final line provides a good example of the way in which Leslie Howard weaponizes humor: Smith’s seeming acquiescence, which is underscored by his studiously polite and proper demeanor, conceals a brutal takedown of von Graum’s claim, even if, or perhaps especially because, the General doesn’t recognize it as such. The moment also exemplifies Howard’s knack for establishing complicity with his audience – complicity with a clear propaganda function. It is not merely that Howard trusts the audience to get the joke; he also interpellates them into the humor-centric conception of “English” nationalism that the film works so hard to elaborate.¹⁸

¹⁶ This scene resonates with the immediately previous one, in which a group of English gentlemen discuss all the different ways in which the phrase “absolutely nothing” – catchwords for one of their ilk – can signify.

¹⁷ It should be stressed that von Graum is represented as highly intelligent, even as his subordinates are less favorably depicted.

¹⁸ “The film demonstrates unequivocally that a sense of humour is the English secret weapon: it is the essential quality which separates a civilized society from an uncivilized one. It is also one of the best means of transmitting propaganda and maintaining morale, something the Germans in reality never understood” (Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 59). Also relevant here is what Kent Puckett describes as “a longstanding association between England and eccentricity [that] was used

But what do we make of this use of Shakespeare (to whom the film will return)? If, as I suggested in the Introduction, Shakespeare is closely associated with British national identity – the WST – what are we to do with claims about his Teutonic nature? The first thing to note is how this scene taps into the well-known German affinity for Shakespeare. As Anselm Heinrich and others have observed, “The serious German interest in matters Shakespearean goes back to the eighteenth century.” Moreover, “Repeatedly commentators added that judging from the sheer number of performances of Shakespearean drama on German stages (which had been considerably higher than in Britain from the late nineteenth century onwards) the ‘real’ home of the Bard was indeed Germany.”¹⁹ Such claims about Shakespeare’s Germanness persisted into the Nazi era, when they were strongly inflected by race theory.²⁰ Not only was Shakespeare determined to be “luminously Aryan,” in part by using a portrait to take cranial measurements of the poet, it was argued by the eugenicist Hans Günther that his works, especially the procreation sonnets, demonstrated the importance of the genetically fit male choosing an appropriate mate.²¹ Moreover, and unsurprisingly, the nature of Shakespeare’s work was understood to follow from his racial origin: “Since Shakespeare was thus indisputably Nordic, it followed that he had written Nordic plays and verse. (Of course, with classic nazi circular reasoning, his work had earlier helped authenticate his own Nordic status.)”²² Those elements of Shakespeare’s plays that did not conform to this view could be excised or revised, while entire plays that didn’t could be forbidden performance. *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* were Nazi favorites; *Merchant of Venice* was initially denied performance (because of the Christian Lorenzo and the Jewish Jessica’s marriage) only to be finally staged (after Jessica was revised into Shylock’s Aryan adoptee); while *Antony and Cleopatra*, a play that

to make Britain’s opposition to totalitarianism into a matter of not only political circumstance but also national character in the deepest sense” (*War Pictures: Cinema, Violence, and Style in Britain, 1939–1945* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2017], 13).

¹⁹ Anselm Heinrich, “‘It Is Germany Where He Truly Lives’: Nazi Claims on Shakespearean Drama,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 28 (2012): 230–242, esp. 231. See also Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a broader account of German fascination with Shakespeare, see Andrew Dickson, *Worlds Elsewhere: Journeys around Shakespeare’s Globe* (New York: Henry Holt, 2016), 1–90.

²⁰ Gerwin Strobl has written fascinatingly on this topic; see “The Bard of Eugenics: Shakespeare and Racial Activism in the Third Reich,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34.3 (1999): 323–336; and *The Germanic Isle: Nazi Perceptions of Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 36–60.

²¹ See Strobl, “Bard,” 332–333. ²² Strobl, “Bard,” 333.

represents a great "Aryan" warrior betraying his country in favor of a "racially doubtful union," was generally out of favor.²³

The playwright's putative Aryanness notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to suggest that the Nazi relationship to Shakespeare was entirely unequivocal. As Gerwin Strobl has shown, there were disagreements regarding the treatment of the playwright, who, after all, hailed from the country of their enemy. Moreover, there were fluctuations in the Nazi attitude toward Shakespeare depending on developments in the war itself. Of crucial importance, though, was Hitler's admiration for Shakespeare, which meant that he was read and performed when almost all other British writers were forbidden.²⁴ And Shakespeare was felt to have great propaganda value for Germany:

There was the familiar numbers game (ten productions in Berlin in the first winter of the war against one in London), which allowed Germany to present herself as the defender of European culture against near-universal barbarism. "The only Shakespeare known today in England is a soccer player of that name," observed a speaker at the bard's birthday celebrations in Weimar in 1940. But the appropriation went much further. Elizabethan England, which had produced Shakespeare, was itself annexed and explicitly equated with the Third Reich: two youthful nations, with strong leaders, opposing corrupt, crumbling empires; the Royal Navy thus doubled up as the Armada and Churchill as Phillip II. Usefully, this also helped explain why Germany had so far failed to produce a Shakespeare of her own: the bard's England, unlike Germany, had been free of Jews for 300 years (now, of course, there was no holding back the "New Elizabethans" led by Adolf Hitler).²⁵

If F-PIC could (as was to occur with Olivier's *Henry V*) mobilize Shakespeare as an exemplary instance of "What Britain is fighting for," the Nazis understood him to be underappreciated in his degenerate

²³ Strobl, "Bard," 334; see also Gerwin Strobl, *The Swastika and the Stage: German Theatre and Society, 1933–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109–133. *Antony and Cleopatra* was occasionally performed, but, as this review of a 1943 production in Berlin suggests, it was a tricky proposition that required an entirely unsympathetic reading of the titular characters and their actions: "The higher developed awareness concerning matters of the state leaves the Roman eventually triumphant over the egocentric excessiveness of the exotic. Even Mark Antony, glittering in his blindness, has to fall victim to this victory. The will for order defeats the sensual orgy. The private sphere evaporates *vis-à-vis* the political. The ascetic triumphs over the *bon vivant*. This is the way history decided. This is the way Shakespeare had to decide, too" (quoted in Heinrich, "It Is Germany," 237).

²⁴ "Once or twice, Hitler even intervened in repertoire policy: the initial ban on Shakespeare as an enemy dramatist after the outbreak of war, for instance, was lifted on the Führer's personal orders" (Strobl, *Swastika*, 153).

²⁵ Gerwin Strobl, "Shakespeare and the Nazis," *History Today* 47 (May 1997): 16–21, esp. 20.

homeland. Von Graum's claim that Shakespeare was German has not only a long history but also a clear propagandistic dimension.

In attending to the issue of Shakespeare's potential Germanness, it's easy to miss the significance of the statement that inaugurates von Graum and Smith's Shakespeare exchange: "But [Germany has] one problem: 'To be or not to be,' as our great German poet said." In his astonishment at the reference to Shakespeare as a "great German poet," Smith does not inquire as to the nature of Germany's problem, nor does von Graum elaborate. It seems apparent, though, that von Graum is alluding to the Nazi principle of *lebensraum* (or "living space"). While this concept did not originate with the National Socialist Party, it was integral to its racial thinking, as it held that the continued vitality of the Aryan race required territorial expansion into Eastern Europe and, concomitantly, the eradication or subordination of the inferior Slavic peoples who populated the region. (It should be remembered at this juncture that the film is set in the days leading up to the German invasion of Poland.) Von Graum references Shakespeare in order to cast German expansionism as a response to an existential concern, as the choice between being and not being.

While the discussion of Shakespeare's Germanness evokes Nazi fascination with the playwright, it appears in the film as propaganda that is both laughably dubious and, insofar as it references *lebensraum*, quite chilling. And yet, we should not lose track of the fact that Howard himself deploys Shakespeare for propaganda purposes. The "English translations" are remarkable, and they emblemize the cultural virtues and values for which the British and Smith are fighting; as such, they are an example of the WST. Moreover, and as we have seen, Howard was deeply thoughtful regarding the utility of film as a propaganda vehicle. With this in mind, we can discern that *Pimpernel Smith* makes Shakespeare the focal point for a propaganda contest between Britain and Germany. As we shall see, however, the film's use of Shakespeare extends far beyond that contest.

Hamlet is not the only Shakespeare play alluded to in *Pimpernel Smith*. The first conversation between Smith and von Graum concludes with the former saying, "Parting is such sweet sorrow," which he then blandly refers to as "One of the most famous lines in German literature." A lovestruck American student standing on a balcony with his inamorata looks at the sky and sighs, "A midsummer night's dream." But it is only *Hamlet* that *Pimpernel Smith* engages with in a sustained manner. Before charting that engagement, we need to consider Leslie Howard's history with the play as well as resonances between its protagonist and Howard's star persona.

Hamlet was an important touchstone for Howard’s thinking, as well as a site for artistic exploration. In 1936, Howard produced and starred in a Broadway version of the play set in ninth-century Denmark. Unfortunately, that production ran simultaneously with another New York *Hamlet*, featuring John Gielgud. This bit of bad timing led to critical comparisons to the detriment of Howard, although his subsequent US tour of the play proved highly successful.²⁶ Around the time of the New York production, Howard wrote a short essay in which he imagined himself in conversation with Shakespeare, “one man of the theatre to another.” The two discussed the writing and audience reception of *Hamlet*:

[LESLIE]: [A] great many of your allusions are contemporary. They would be understood only by your Elizabethan audience.

WILL: You over-rate them. Most of the time they didn’t know what I was talking about.

[LESLIE]: Even so, a play like *Hamlet*, though Danish, has a political background which is Elizabethan English.

WILL: Are you reproaching me with writing a play about a country of which I could ascertain little? Too late. Bacon was before you.²⁷

[LESLIE]: Good heavens, no. Frankly, Will, your anachronisms don’t worry me at all – or any of your admirers I venture to say.

WILL: Good. They never worried me, I assure you.

[LESLIE]: I only mean that much of *Hamlet* would be a mystery to a modern audience because of contemporary allusions with which *your* audience would be perfectly familiar.

WILL: You repeat yourself so much. I understand. What do you propose to do about it?

[LESLIE]: We have to resort to a certain amount of cutting.

WILL: You want to cut those parts of *Hamlet* which mystify the audience?

[LESLIE]: (*falling into the trap*) Yes.

WILL: Will there be much left?

[LESLIE]: Within reason, Will. The mysteries of *Hamlet* are its greatest attractions.

WILL: You’re informing me? I have cause to be thankful for the riddles of *Hamlet*.²⁸

Hamlet appears here as a play of mysteries and riddles. This view is one that was likely reinforced if not sprung for Howard by reading J. Dover

²⁶ Eforgan notes that this tour “corresponded with the cultural propaganda ideas of The British Council” (*Leslie Howard*, 116).

²⁷ Will is presumably referring to authorship controversialist Delia Bacon.

²⁸ Leslie Howard, “Hamlet,” *Trivial Fond Records*, ed. Ronald Howard (London: William Kimber, 1982), 133–137, esp. 134–135.

Wilson, whose influential edition of the play appeared in 1934 and was followed a year later by *What Happens in Hamlet*: “*Hamlet* is a dramatic essay in mystery; that is to say it is so constructed that the more it is examined the more there is to discover. The character of the Prince is, of course, the central mystery: Shakespeare expressly dared his critics from the first to ‘pluck out the heart of’ that.”²⁹ Of course, *Pimpernel Smith* gives us a central character who constitutes a riddle that von Graum seeks desperately to solve.

Howard carried his passion for *Hamlet* over into the war. Reviewing it in light of current events, Howard was startled by what he saw as parallels between the play’s action and the early stages of the conflict. Ronald Howard discusses these parallels in some detail; for our purposes, it is enough to note that, in Fortinbras, Howard saw an analogue to Hitler, who claimed peaceful intentions while planning invasion, while Hamlet evoked a Danish resistance leader. Moreover,

In Hamlet’s mind was the inner within the outer war, the inner battle of attrition between a man’s heart and head, between softness and hardness, to decide a course of action. Indecision is only overthrown by an extreme exertion of will. . . . To Leslie Hamlet represented the embodiment of national resistance driven into irrevocable action to rid his country of the forces of evil and bring down the Quisling-usurper Claudius.³⁰

Significantly, Howard saw in this conception of *Hamlet* a powerful propaganda film. Others were not convinced. Jack Beddington responded memorably to Howard’s pitch: “Hamlet’s a loser, Leslie. He dies. We’re going to live and win. It’s bad propaganda material!”³¹ This daunting assessment notwithstanding, Howard continued his plans for a *Hamlet* propaganda film up until his death on June 1, 1943, when German fighter planes shot down the commercial airliner on which he was traveling. Partly at the behest of Beddington, Howard had been on a lecture tour of Spain and Portugal, during which he gave two talks, one on film (which featured material from *Pimpernel Smith*) and the other on *Hamlet*.³²

In 1936, Howard echoes J. Dover Wilson in seeing *Hamlet* (and, I think we can safely presume, Hamlet) in terms of mysteries and riddles. Midwar,

²⁹ J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1935), 19. On Wilson’s influence on Howard, see Eforan, *Leslie Howard*, 116. Ronald Howard tells us that his father’s lecture on *Hamlet*, delivered in Spain and Portugal shortly before his death in 1943, leaned heavily on *What Happens in Hamlet* and Wilson’s textual commentary (*Fond Records*, 176, 181).

³⁰ R. Howard, *Fond Records*, 121. ³¹ R. Howard, *Fond Records*, 149.

³² Beddington saw in Howard’s trip possibilities for expanding the distribution of British films abroad; see Ronald Howard, *Fond Records*, 146.

Howard's Hamlet is "the embodiment of national resistance driven into irrevocable action." While these positions are not mutually exclusive – after all, Hamlet would likely be a *mysterious* resistance fighter – we witness a clear shift of emphasis. This is not surprising, given both the impact of the war on Howard as well as his propaganda objectives for his projected *Hamlet* film. What is worth examining, however, is how this later Hamlet intersects with Howard's star persona.

In an influential essay, Jeffrey Richards argues that "[u]niquely among film stars, Leslie Howard projected a romanticized but thoroughly convincing image of the thinker, the ivory tower dweller, the man of brains rather than brawn."³³ This is what Richards calls Howard's "star archetype," and what I refer to as his "star persona." Richards's point is not only to define Howard's place within the cinematic star system; it is also to suggest the impact his particular form of stardom has upon the characters he portrays. David Bordwell analyzes the relationship between star and role in his seminal work on the classic Hollywood style:

On the whole, the star reinforced the tendency toward strongly profiled and unified characterization. Max Ophuls praised Hollywood's ability to give the actor an already-existing personality with which to work in the film. The star, like the fictional character, already had a set of salient traits which could be matched to the demands of the story. In describing the filming of *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), [Howard] Hawks suggested that one scene did not coalesce until he discovered the scene's "attitude": "A man like Cary Grant would be amused" – that is, the star's traits and the character's traits become isomorphic.³⁴

The title of Richards's essay, "The Thinking Man as Hero," captures Howard's star persona: "But most characteristic of all his roles were his intellectuals, his thinking men who find a cause, his professors humanised – for the discovery of commitment is what brings them to life and down from the heights of academe."³⁵ Among these figures, Richards singles out "the patriotic intellectuals of the wartime propaganda films": not only Horatio Smith but also R. J. Mitchell, designer of the Spitfire aircraft, in Howard's *The First of the Few* and Philip Armstrong Scott in Powell and

³³ Jeffrey Richards, "The Thinking Man as Hero: Leslie Howard," *Focus on Film* 25 (1976): 37–50, esp. 37.

³⁴ David Bordwell, "The Classical Hollywood Style, 1917–1960," in Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–84, esp. 14.

³⁵ Richards, "Thinking Man," 38.

Pressburger's *49th Parallel*. Scott, for example, is a British aesthete who has retreated to the Canadian wilderness, but who, when confronted with a pair of Nazis on the run, metamorphoses into a fighter. And while Horatio Smith's moment of decision is not presented to us, he concisely articulates the connection between his intellectual convictions and his feats of derring-do as the Shadow: "You see, when a man holds the view that progress and civilization depend in every age upon the hands and brains of a few exceptional spirits, it's rather hard to stand by and see them destroyed." These "thinking men who find a cause" evoke the Hamlet of Howard's projected propaganda film. As that character's "inner war . . . to decide a course of action" results in his becoming a resistance fighter, so do Smith, Mitchell and Scott respond to the predations of the Nazis by becoming dedicated, self-sacrificing contributors to the war effort.

Before returning to *Pimpernel Smith*, there is one more thing to be said about Howard's Hamlet-as-resistance-fighter. As Margreta de Grazia has demonstrated, post-Romantic conceptions of Hamlet routinely conflate the character's intellectualism with his notorious delay in revenge-taking.³⁶ Under the influence of both the war and propaganda imperatives, Howard envisioned a very different figure, an intellectual who acts heroically in the service of his country, a Hamlet who resembles Philip Armstrong Scott or Horatio Smith – which is to say, a Hamlet who mirrors the film star Leslie Howard.³⁷

I have suggested, then, that the Hamlet of Howard's never-realized film is largely made in the image of the actor's star persona, the thinking man as hero; this is a Hamlet who, contrary to Beddington's claim, would be anything but "bad propaganda." We've already seen how Horatio Smith is both an enigma (like J. Dover Wilson's Hamlet) and a man of action (like Howard's Danish resistance fighter). In these instances, the intertextual relationship with Shakespeare's play is centered upon correspondences between two fictional characters. On other occasions, however, the film's engagement with *Hamlet* takes a different form. Consider, for instance, the first of two evocations of the graveyard scene. The connection here is made visually: we see the archaeologist Smith flinging rocks out of a narrow,

³⁶ Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁷ It is interesting to note that this action-oriented, heroic Hamlet found his analogue on the Nazi stage: "[T]he vast majority of *Hamlet* productions seem to have taken their lead from an extensive critical discourse which denied Hamlet's romantic melancholy, his wavering and intellectuality, and instead stressed his heroic assertiveness, his vigorous youthfulness and energy" (Heinrich, "It Is Germany," 238).

deep hole in the earth; in doing so, he evokes the skull-tossing Gravedigger in act 5, scene 1. At the same time, the subject of this scene is the relationship between thought and action. Immediately before, we witness three of Smith's students fretting over the fact that he has not yet told them how they will rescue Koslowski, the Polish newspaper publisher, from a concentration camp: "48 hours and he hasn't uttered a word." "Do you think he's thought of anything?" "Let's ask him." Upon inquiring, they learn that Smith has formed a plan, the implementation of which begins in the next scene. The implication is that Smith's digging in the earth both tropes and facilitates cognition; it's a precondition for Smith generating his plan. Unlike the post-Romantic Hamlet, Horatio Smith transforms thought into heroic action. Moreover, this moment nicely suggests the commensurability between Smith's scholarly and heroic activity, as his digging is a precondition for rescuing Koslowski. This scene, then, directly alludes to the Gravedigger while more obliquely gesturing toward the relationship between Hamlet and Howard's star persona.

Howard follows up his reference to the graveyard scene with another bit of Shakespeare-centered comic business at the expense of von Graum. The general is convinced that Smith and his students are secretly harboring the concentration-camp escapees. Yet, after a week of tracking their movements, von Graum has detected nothing incriminating. In a fit of impatience, the general takes a group of German soldiers to search the archaeological site. While there, Smith shows him one of their most impressive finds, a largely intact skeleton "buried with all his weapons Presumably in the belief that there might be a rearmament program in the hereafter." Smith picks up the skull and addresses both it and von Graum: "An ancient Teuton. Alas, poor Yorick. Get thee to my lady's chamber, my dear general. Tell her though she paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come, make her laugh at that" (Figure 1.1). As we shall see, this moment resonates with Smith's final speech to von Graum, and its primary function is to suggest both the futility and long history of German militarism, not to mention the expansionist impulses native to the idea of *lebensraum*. In this regard, one detects here an echo, and a rebuke, of Fortinbras's pursuit of "a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name" (4.1.17–18).

Smith's partial quotation whisks us from the beginning of Hamlet's speech to its end – from Yorick to the painted lady, who is, of course, a familiar Renaissance emblem of worldly vanity. This latter reference chimes with a topic intrinsic to *Hamlet* and present but underdeveloped in *Pimpernel Smith*, which is misogyny. The salience of this topic to



Figure 1.1 “Alas, poor Yorick.” Leslie Howard and Francis L. Sullivan in *Pimpernel Smith*, directed by Leslie Howard. British National Films, 1941.

Hamlet has long been recognized and need not be discussed here.³⁸ In *Pimpernel Smith*, the “humanization” (in Richards’s term) of the protagonist entails a change in his attitude toward women. When we first encounter Smith, he is devoted to a statue of Aphrodite, a photograph of which he carries in his wallet. At the same time, he disparages the women in his classes (“Greek women, moreover, were condemned to habitual seclusion. An admirable practice, which unfortunately is not followed in this university”).³⁹ His idealization of Aphrodite is the flipside of his disdain for flesh-and-blood women. Later in the film, Smith transfers his ardor from Aphrodite to Ludmilla – he tears up the photo in front of her – and, in a proleptic echo of his painted lady reference, he buys his new love an overabundance of face powder in a comically awkward demonstration

³⁸ See especially Steven Mullaney, “Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600–1607,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994): 139–162.

³⁹ One could argue that Smith’s remarks are marked by a misguided chivalry, and are designed to drive the women out of the class as a prelude to recruiting male students to join him on his archaeological mission to Germany; and, indeed, Smith alludes to his having “succeeded somewhat elaborately in getting rid of the female students” in advance of introducing the mission to their male counterparts. Nevertheless, that he has a history of making sexist comments is made plain earlier in the scene when one female student mutters to her neighbor, “He’s always making cracks at us.”

of his affection. These developments have a generic dimension, as the wartime espionage film's romantic subplot demands that our hero, unlike Hamlet, must be humanized by way of acquiring a love interest.

Now, one might argue that the "painted lady" reference is a slender hook on which to hang a connection between *Hamlet* and Horatio Smith's misogyny, which is significantly less virulent than that which one routinely encounters in early modern tragedy. Indeed, as far as Smith's relationship to women goes, the more immediately relevant intertext is undoubtedly Anthony Asquith and Howard's acclaimed film version of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1938), in which Howard, playing alongside Wendy Hiller, performed another variation on his star persona. And yet, one of the effects of the film's direct engagement with *Hamlet* is that it prompts us to identify more indirect, even tenuous connections between the two works. *Hamlet* appears in this film as something like a magnetic field that exerts force on *Pimpernel Smith* without deforming it, that subtly bends elements of the text in its direction.⁴⁰ To put it more concretely, misogyny could obviously exist in *Pimpernel Smith* without the benefit of *Hamlet*, but the painted lady reference angles that misogyny towards the play.

Something similar occurs in the film's final scene, which, while devoid of explicit references to the play, resonates in interesting ways with Hamlet's famous line about death as "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (3.1.78–79). It's important for this scene (and for Hamlet's soliloquy) that *boorn* can mean both "boundary" (*OED*, n.2, 1) and "terminus" (*OED*, n.2, 2). The scene begins with Smith and Ludmilla Koslowski's nighttime disembarkment at a dark, foggy train station where they are greeted by two German officers. The officers apprehend Smith but allow Ludmilla to depart on another train. Smith is conducted into a waiting room where von Graum awaits. The exchange between the two men brings each into clear focus for the other: in contradiction to a statement he made at the British Embassy about Germans being peace-loving, von Graum is now explicit about the Nazi worship of "power and strength and violence"; for his part, Smith finally acknowledges that he is the Shadow and tells the gun-brandishing von Graum that he has saved twenty-eight people from "your pagan pistol." It also becomes obvious that von Graum intends to kill Smith with that pistol: after revealing that the Germans will march against Poland that

⁴⁰ Compare Eric S. Mallin's analysis of "non-adaptations" in *Reading Shakespeare in the Movies: Non-adaptations and Their Meaning* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).



Figure 1.2 The Shadow in shadows. Leslie Howard in *Pimpernel Smith*, directed by Leslie Howard. British National Films, 1941.

same night, von Graum says, “Why do I talk to you? You are a dead man.” In response, Smith asks permission for this “dead man” to say a few words:

You will never rule the world, because you are doomed. All of you who have demoralized and corrupted a nation are doomed. Tonight you will take the first step along a dark road from which there is no turning back. You will have to go on and on, from one madness to another, leaving behind you a world of misery and hatred. And still you will have to go on because you will find no horizon and see no dawn until at last you are lost and destroyed. You are doomed, captain of murderers, and one day, sooner or later, you will remember my words.

During this speech, in which the camera tracks slowly toward him, Smith’s head is largely in the shadows, a slanting light illuminating a portion of his right side while casting the left one deeper into darkness (Figure 1.2). At the moment the speech concludes, a train whistle indicates Koslowoski’s departure. Von Graum ushers Smith outside, to near the German border, and reveals to a subordinate that his intention is to shoot Smith as if he were trying to escape across the frontier. Earlier shrouded in darkness, Smith is now bathed in light from a lamp above his head. Smith directs von Graum’s attention to a “valuable relic” from his excavations, which, he

asserts, “proves among other things the complete non-existence of an early Aryan civilization in this country.” Von Graum smashes the urn onto the ground, and when, in response to the sound of shattering ceramic, his men come forward and unintentionally distract the general, Smith slips across the border. Von Graum yells for Smith to come back, and in reply we hear his voice softly say, “Don’t worry, I shall be back. We shall all be back.”

Set on the “bourn” between Germany and an unidentified other country, the scene also occurs on the threshold between life and death. In von Graum’s phrase, Smith is a “dead man,” which designation lends the latter’s speech a prophetic power. This student of the past, who has located the ancestry of German militarism in the skeleton of an armed Teuton, foresees on the cusp of his death a disastrous future for the Reich. Moreover, through his assertion that von Graum is doomed and that he “will remember my words,” Smith resembles the Ghost more than he does Hamlet.⁴¹ His quasi-spectral nature is underscored in the film’s final moments. We do not see Smith get away. Instead, he silently vanishes when von Graum’s back is turned, the only remaining trace of him being a slightly swinging gate and wisps of cigarette smoke. The sense that Smith has dematerialized is reinforced by the manner in which his final words fall somewhere between the diegetic and the nondiegetic.⁴² They are almost whispered, as if they were emanating from the smoke, or Smith were at von Graum’s ear instead of across the frontier.

There is a puzzling disconnect, then, between the film’s concluding propaganda message – Smith will return, along with the Allied forces, to seal the Germans’ doom – and the way it is communicated. An explanation for this might lie in the fact that there is another threshold upon which the film’s final scene occurs, and that is the one between war and peace. With the invasion of Poland, the time of the Shadow is past. Smith intimates as much several scenes earlier, after one of his students alludes to meeting up again in Cambridge: “I wonder. I have an idea that our country may have more important work for us.” In other words, the final scene shows the Shadow melting into the night, pledging as he does to rematerialize later in a form suitable for the next stage of the war.⁴³ We might consider this transformation as extending beyond the character of

⁴¹ See Burt, “Sshockspeare,” 445. ⁴² Burt, “Sshockspeare,” 445.

⁴³ Another explanation is offered by Leif Furhammer and Folke Isaksson, who see Smith as a Christ figure: “*Pimpernel Smith* [sic] is a saviour in the literal sense, who has arrived in an evil world where his origins seem very mysterious and the authorities go all out to destroy him. . . . The film ends with Smith announcing that he will soon be back” (*Politics and Film*, trans. Kersti French [London: Littlehampton Book Services, 1971], 232; quoted in Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 63). As fanciful as this

Horatio Smith to encompass Leslie Howard's star persona. That is, the Shadow's dematerialization poses the question, what happens to the thinking man as hero – and to the film star – in wartime? “I shall be back,” Smith says, but in precisely what form? How does he accommodate himself to the “more important work” he will be called upon to do? In Howard's case, the answer to the last question is to be found in his extensive contributions to British propaganda.

With this in mind, it is worth contextualizing the ending of *Pimpernel Smith* in both cultural and film-historical terms. First conceived of in 1939, the film shares a great deal with espionage films of the 1930s, especially its emphasis on the cloak-and-dagger heroics of an exceptional individual. A central tenet of F-PIC propaganda, however, was that of “the people's war,” about which I shall say more later in both this chapter and the next. The key idea is that British film of this era increasingly located heroism in the valor and sacrifice of the collective on both the front lines and the home front. In this regard, the conclusion of *Pimpernel Smith*, in which the Shadow becomes part of the collective, heralds a representational shift in cinema: “We shall all be back.”

As far as we know, *Pimpernel Smith* was finished before Howard began to contemplate a movie version of *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, given the former film's extensive involvement with the play, and the resonances between *Hamlet* and Howard's star persona, it's tempting to read the Shadow's dematerialization as a recasting of the Danish prince's fate. Once again, Jack Beddington: “*Hamlet's* a loser, Leslie. He dies. We're going to live and win.” Set on the bourn between life and death, the concluding scene of *Pimpernel Smith* both kills off one version of the thinking man as hero and saves him, albeit in a different form, to fight another day. In this way, the film solves what Beddington sees as *Hamlet's* propaganda problem in a way that a strict interpretation of the play could not.

“Alas, poor Yorick. Get thee to my lady's chamber, my dear general. Tell her though she paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come, make her laugh at that.” When earlier presenting these lines, part *Hamlet* and part Horatio Smith, I withheld the one subsequent to them: “The Earl of Oxford wrote that, you remember.” In the wake of the newspaper publisher Koslowski's rescue, Smith appears at von Graum's office in Gestapo headquarters with a book he says he found while “doing a little research

interpretation is, it is responsive to the quasi-spiritual nature of the film's ending, which, as we have seen, occurs on the threshold of life and death.

work” on Shakespeare’s identity in the British Embassy’s library. The title of the book isn’t given, but the reference is almost certainly to the most influential Oxfordian text of the era, J. Thomas Looney’s *“Shakespeare” Identified in Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*.⁴⁴ “Now this, this proves conclusively that Shakespeare wasn’t really Shakespeare at all. . . . No, he was the Earl of Oxford. Now, you can’t pretend that the Earl of Oxford was a German, can you?” Later in the conversation, Smith observes that “[t]he Earl of Oxford was a very bright Elizabethan light. But this book will tell you he was a good deal more than that.” Oxfordians then and now would agree.

Not surprisingly, this exchange has been taken as evidence of Howard’s stance on the authorship question. William Boyle, for example, enlists *Pimpernel Smith* to build the argument for Howard’s Oxfordianism:

Others on the Internet have tried to make the case that these scenes are in fact Howard’s attempt to ridicule the anti-Stratfordian position rather than promote it, since his references to Oxford are spoken while he is “fooling” with his Nazi opponents (therefore, they reason, the statement that the Earl of Oxford was Shakespeare must be “foolishness”). Yet anyone who views the entire film can see that the three separate mentions of it really constitute promotion of this idea, not ridicule. Otherwise why mention it at all, let alone three times?⁴⁵

Why, indeed? As unconvincing as this Trumpian logic is – mention it thrice, it must be true – it is fair to ask about the dramatic function of the Oxfordian argument in the film. In this regard, the unidentified “others on the Internet” get closer than Boyle does. Until the film’s final scene in the train station, a through line for all of Smith’s exchanges with von Graum has been the former’s deployment of “British” humor at the expense of the befuddled German general. Smith’s references to the Earl of Oxford represent another instance of this; he counters one preposterous idea – Shakespeare was a German writer – with another – Shakespeare was not Shakespeare.

There is also a way in which Smith’s advancement of Oxfordian claims serves an important propaganda function. Note where his copy of

⁴⁴ J. Thomas Looney, *“Shakespeare” Identified in Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1920). For an extended discussion of Looney’s text and its influence on the Oxfordian movement, see James Shapiro, *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 173–249. Shapiro has a paragraph on *Pimpernel Smith*, which offers no analysis of the film but sees it as evidence that “The Oxfordian cause had clearly arrived” (220).

⁴⁵ William Boyle, “Introduction,” in Charles Boyle, *Another Hamlet: The Mystery of Leslie Howard*, 2nd ed. (Somerville, MA: Forever Press, 2013), ix–xi, esp. x.

Looney's text hails from: the library of the British Embassy. The suggestion is not that the embassy is a hotbed of Oxfordian thought. Instead, it is that, like Britain itself, the embassy is accepting of heterodox opinions. Freedom of speech and thought were trumpeted by the MOI and F-PIC as cornerstones of British society, while Nazi Germany was routinely associated with their violent suppression – witness the 1933 book burnings.⁴⁶ Von Graum's shattering of the urn at the end of the film emblemizes Nazi intolerance for ideas that are antithetical to the party's self-conception. Contrastingly, Smith amusingly subjects the identity of Shakespeare to scrutiny. In doing so, he performs a type of comic nationalism predicated upon the toleration of dissent.

While the Oxfordian argument is mobilized for comic purposes, it also has other dramatic and thematic functions. For one thing, Smith's foray into Oxfordianism provides him with an alibi: he tells von Graum that he has spent the afternoon conducting research into Shakespeare's authorship, during which time Koslowski and the others were liberated. It also serves as a form of distraction, a way in which Smith performs his apparent eggheaded ineffectuality. Most significantly, it underscores the film's preoccupation with the figure of the double, which is telegraphed by the very name of the Shadow. At the same moment that Smith is suggesting Shakespeare was actually Edward de Vere, von Graum and another officer are scrutinizing the mild-mannered archaeologist for signs that he is Vodenschatz, an identity assumed by Smith for purposes of extricating Koslowski and four others from a concentration camp. Thus, when Smith points out that the Earl of Oxford was "a good deal more" than a prominent Elizabethan courtier, this mirrors his own status as one who is other than he appears. Or, to put it differently, it reminds us that he has that within which passes show. Which means, then, that Smith evokes Hamlet – he is the puzzle that von Graum seeks to solve – simultaneously with Edward de Vere – the Oxfordian answer to the authorship riddle.

I have suggested that *Pimpernel Smith* deploys the authorship controversy for purposes simultaneously propagandistic and comic. In this regard, Oxfordian thought is safely contained within the film; it is to be graciously tolerated rather than seriously entertained. And yet, while

⁴⁶ The issue is explicitly raised in the film. Smith asks von Graum, "Tell me, is it a fact in your country there's no longer any freedom of speech?" Von Graum replies, "Lies, all lies, from the degenerate plutocratic press." The difference between British and German ideas about print was a staple of wartime propaganda. The 1941 documentary *The Battle of the Books* contrasts Nazi book-burning with wartime reading in Britain, while in 1940 the National Book Council sponsored an exhibition devoted to "Books and Freedom" that drew similar distinctions.

largely accurate, this formulation underestimates the complexity of this film's engagement with the authorship question, a complexity that is born out of the theme of doubleness. In bringing Hamlet and de Vere into alignment, Horatio Smith and the film find themselves in the Oxfordians' wheelhouse. The linchpin of Thomas Looney's argument is that Hamlet is de Vere's literary attempt at self-representation, and that many of the play's central characters correspond to historical personages with whom Oxford was closely acquainted. As Looney puts it, "[*Hamlet*] is intended to be a special and direct dramatic self-revelation"; and "it is to Edward de Vere alone, as far as we can discover, that [details of the play] can be made to apply fully and directly."⁴⁷ For our purposes, this would seem to mean, first, that Hamlet and Horatio Smith are both shadowed by Edward de Vere; and, second, that the clarity of *Pimpernel Smith's* propaganda message is muddled by the film's excursion into Oxfordian thought.⁴⁸ I want to suggest, however, that this potential loss of clarity is a risk that *Pimpernel Smith* repeatedly runs, and it does so through its persistent fascination with the figure of the double as well as its reflexive engagement with the issue of propaganda.

Pimpernel Smith's preoccupation with the idea of the double is telegraphed during the film's opening credits, which roll against a backdrop on which appears the recognizable silhouette of Leslie Howard (Figure 1.3). Early in the credits, we see Howard's hatted head and torso, with pipe in hand; by the end of the credit sequence, only Howard's head is visible, and it is framed by the words "Produced and Directed by Leslie Howard," with his name appearing in cursive that is suggestive of his signature. The initial effect is to show that Howard is signing off on this film as his. As the plot unfolds, however, we come to recognize the connection between Howard's silhouette and the figure of the Shadow – whom, it should be said, first appears in the film *as* a shadow on a wall (Figure 1.4). The implication is that the Shadow is simultaneously Horatio Smith and Leslie Howard – and perhaps the latter more than the former. Put differently, the credits invite us to see how Horatio Smith is shadowed and shaped by Leslie Howard's star persona, the thinking man as hero. They also clarify for us the extent to which the film traffics in slippages between the actor, his persona and the film's central character.

⁴⁷ Looney, "*Shakespeare*" *Identified*, 462, 484.

⁴⁸ Richard Burt suggests something along these lines when he observes that "the question of Shakespeare's identity and authorship is not simply laid to rest [in the film]" ("*Sshockspeare*," 443).



Figure 1.3 “Produced and Directed by Leslie Howard.” *Pimpernel Smith*, directed by Leslie Howard. British National Films, 1941.



Figure 1.4 The silhouette of the Shadow. *Pimpernel Smith*, directed by Leslie Howard. British National Films, 1941.

Leslie Howard and the Shadow are not Horatio Smith's only doppelgängers, however. Vodenschatz, the identity adopted by Horatio Smith to free Koslowski and the others, offers another refracted version of Leslie Howard as propagandist.⁴⁹ Vodenschatz presents himself at the German Ministry of Propaganda as "[t]he man who got you those nice headlines in America where they don't like you."⁵⁰ He demands passes into the camp for himself and a group of American journalists – Smith's students in disguise – in order that the latter might write articles that will convince the American public "not to believe those stories they hear about the German concentration camps." And when the German officer escorting them through the camp is momentarily silent, Vodenschatz chides him: "Come on, do your propaganda stuff, you can talk, can't you?" Later in the scene, as the tour is winding down (and the rescue is almost effected), Vodenschatz asserts that "[i]n America, they have the idiotic idea that German concentration camps are full of unhappy people." Vodenschatz emerges here as Howard's German counterpart, peddling propaganda to America. The differences are obvious, of course. Vodenschatz ostensibly aims to make the concentration camp palatable to US readers, while Leslie Howard reminds Americans of their strong ties to Britain;⁵¹ the former seeks to ensure the United States stays out of the war, while the latter works to enlist its direct involvement. And yet, it is significant that in Vodenschatz, Howard feels the need to create his Nazi counterpart even if, after doing so, he stages his disidentification with that figure. Shortly after leaving the camp, Smith doffs both his disguise and his false identity: "Well, goodbye Vodenschatz. You were the quintessence of all the most objectionable men I ever met, but you served a noble purpose." With Vodenschatz, Howard develops similarities between the British and German propaganda efforts as a precondition for distinguishing between them. The result, however, is to create a slight uneasiness about their potential commensurability.

It is worth considering for a moment *Pimpernel Smith's* depiction of the German concentration camps. From a present-day perspective, the film seems to offer a troublingly benign representation of them. Even as it is clear that the "American reporters" are being presented with a sanitized

⁴⁹ Phyllis Lassner, while focusing on different aspects of the film, argues that it "self-consciously examin[es] its propagandist intent and structure" (*Espionage and Exile: Fascism and Anti-fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016], 141).

⁵⁰ See Eforgan for a discussion of some of this scene's topicalities (*Leslie Howard*, 153–154).

⁵¹ In contrast, Vodenschatz says of Americans, "[They] only pretend to be democratic. At heart, they are 100% National Socialist."

view of the camps, there is not much that is dissonant with that view; while the prisoners assert their fair treatment only when prompted by the camp commandant, there's little to suggest they're being abused.⁵² Additionally, other than Koslowski and four Germans who helped him publish his newspaper, the identities and putative transgressions of those in the camps are not articulated. Which is to say, *Pimpernel Smith* seems from our perspective to be unusually, even shockingly, reticent about Nazi antisemitism (not to mention the persecution of homosexuals, blacks, Roma, and so on). Of course, at this point in the war the genocidal nature of the camps was not widely known, but German hostility and violence toward the Jews certainly was. Why is that not directly registered in *Pimpernel Smith*?

There are a few overlapping reasons. The first one we have already encountered: the proliferation during World War One of "black propaganda" – for example, stories of German soldiers impaling babies on their bayonets – led to a chastened MOI in World War Two, fearful of again being accused of pernicious exaggeration. This may help explain why the concentration camps were rarely even represented in wartime feature films.⁵³ Most important, however, was F-PIC's reticence about depicting antisemitism in film, which is described by Tobias Hochscherf:

British officials and the film industry were generally anxious to stress that Britain was fighting for herself and democracy rather than for Jews who were commonly considered to be "aliens whether or not they were citizens". . . . It seems that the commercial film industry and its sponsors (namely the MoI) were anxious about generating a flood of anti-Semitic commentary and public refusal in the event that they made films with Jewish protagonists.⁵⁴

⁵² There is one exception, when an unconscious man is kicked by a guard who believes he's loafing.

⁵³ See Robert Murphy, *Realism and Tinsel: Cinema and Society in Britain, 1939-1948* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 10. Roy Boulting's *Pastor Hall* (1940) does paint a bleak picture of a concentration camp, but few wartime British films followed its lead (the 1941 comedy *Gasbags*, directed by Walter Forde and Marcel Varnel, depicts the camps in a humorous fashion). Significantly, the appeasement-oriented British Board of Film Censors denied permission to make *Pastor Hall* until the war started, the reason being its status as anti-Nazi propaganda. See Jeffrey Richards and James C. Robertson, "British Film Censorship," in Robert Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, 3rd ed. (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan for the BFI, 2009), 67-77, esp. 71; and Wendy Webster, "Europe against the Germans": The British Resistance Narrative, 1940-1950," *Journal of British Studies* 48 (2009): 958-982, esp. 965-966.

⁵⁴ Tobias Hochscherf, *The Continental Connection: German-Speaking Émigrés and British Cinema, 1927-1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 175. The interpolated quotation, with emphasis in the original, is from Sonya O. Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 105. See also Webster, "Europe against the Germans," 970.

As Hochscherf's formulation makes plain, antisemitism and fear of provoking it could walk hand-in-hand within F-PIC. In the case of *Pimpernel Smith*, which does obliquely gesture toward the Jewishness of some of those saved by the Shadow, it seems to be MOI-encouraged caution more than anti-Jewish sentiment that is at issue.⁵⁵

Returning to the film's emphasis on doubles, we have seen that, in delineating the differences between British and German propaganda, *Pimpernel Smith* also registers potential similarities. At one point in the film, Vodenschatz observes, "You know, the trouble with you propaganda boys, you get so used to telling lies you don't recognize the truth when you hear it." "You propaganda boys": the phrase is directed at those in the German Ministry of Propaganda, but it could obviously be extended to Howard and the other members of F-PIC. Once again, *Pimpernel Smith* displays a remarkable degree of reflexivity, mocking propaganda while reminding us that that is precisely what his film is. And yet, in reminding us of that, the film also intimates it is something more than or distinct from what is produced by "propaganda boys." And this takes us to the heart of the movie's preoccupation with doubles. If the emphasis on doubling runs the risk of smudging the very distinctions the film seeks to make, it is also essential to the way it articulates meaningful cultural, national and intellectual differences.

Which gets us back to both Shakespeare and the authorship question. As we have seen, Horatio Smith is shadowed by both Hamlet and the Earl of Oxford, while that emblem of Englishness, Shakespeare, is trailed by his potential Germanness. To put it another way, the film represents both orthodox and heterodox ideas about Shakespeare and his most famous play. That does not mean, finally, that these ideas are given equal weight. In fact, one might coordinate the differences between them to von Graum's statement that "[i]n Germany, we have discovered that a substitute can be better than the real thing." In the film, Shakespeare's Germanness represents a Nazi substitution of propaganda for truth, while Smith airs the Oxfordian argument as if adhering to von Graum's

⁵⁵ Eforan points out that some of those saved by the Shadow have Jewish names "but are never explicitly identified as Jews" (*Leslie Howard*, 154). As she notes, Howard's father was a Hungarian Jew while his mother's grandfather was "a wealthy merchant of Jewish origin" who originally hailed from East Prussia (3). Moreover, a major theme of Eforan's biography is that Howard was keenly aware of and horrified by Nazi violence against Jews. It should also be noted that many German Jewish exiles were meaningfully involved in the making of *Pimpernel Smith* and in the British film industry more generally; for more on this, see Hochscherf, *Continental Connection*.

preference for the ersatz.⁵⁶ But that doesn't go quite far enough. As we have seen, the German passion for Shakespeare was both demonstrably real and in a certain sense greater than the British affinity for him (witness the number of Shakespeare productions in each country). As unsettling as the Nazi view of Shakespeare is, it illustrates the high regard in which the playwright was held in Germany.

But what about Edward de Vere? We have seen how and why Hamlet and Vodenschatz function as doubles for Leslie Howard and/or Horatio Smith. What are we to make of the Earl of Oxford's status as one of our hero's doppelgängers? The answer to that question comes obliquely, by considering how *Pimpernel Smith* revises the class politics of its predecessor, Harold Young's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934).⁵⁷ An adaptation of a novel by Baroness Emma Orczy, Young's film is set during the Reign of Terror, and it centers on Sir Percy Blakeney (Howard), a seemingly insipid and foppish Englishman. Blakeney's alter ego, however, is the Scarlet Pimpernel, a mysterious figure who, unbeknownst even to his wife, Lady Marguerite (Merle Oberon), rescues French aristocrats from the guillotine. The Pimpernel's nemesis is Citizen Chauvelin (Raymond Massey), who eventually learns his true identity. At the end of the film, Chauvelin captures both Marguerite, who by then has discovered the truth about her husband, and Percy in France. Blakeney agrees to sacrifice his own life for his wife's, and, shortly before his execution by firing squad, Blakeney expresses his patriotism by reciting part of John of Gaunt's "royal throne of kings" speech from *Richard II*.⁵⁸ However, at the last minute Blakeney is freed by his men, and he escapes with Marguerite to England.

Like *Pimpernel Smith*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* is anti-Nazi, but it was made at a moment dominated by the desire for appeasement: "The film equated the Terror in revolutionary France with that of modern Germany, but it was not a message anyone wanted to hear."⁵⁹ While the later film develops aspects of the former's plot – the use of disguise, the persistence of a foreign nemesis seeking to discover the true identity of our hero, even the protagonist's miraculous escape from death at the end – the most

⁵⁶ Von Graum, perhaps because he is preoccupied with the question of Vodenschatz's identity, offers no rebuttal to Smith's claim that a British earl could not have been German.

⁵⁷ While Young gets directorial credit, the making of the film was closely supervised by its producer, Alexander Korda.

⁵⁸ In relation to Howard and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Phyllis Lassner contends that this speech "retained its rhetorical power as a patriotic mantra that resonated throughout World War II" (*Espionage and Exile*, 135).

⁵⁹ Eforan, *Leslie Howard*, 103.

important thing the two movies share is Leslie Howard. Moreover, as different as Blakeney's and Smith's characters are, they are both riddles their antagonists seek to solve, and both fit the description of the thinking man as hero.

There are, however, some significant differences in the ideological underpinnings of the two films, especially when it comes to the topics of class and nation. Blakeney's rescue efforts are directed toward an imperiled aristocracy. Moreover, his recitation of John of Gaunt's speech strikes a dissonant note, as Blakeney has up until then seemed motivated much less by patriotism than by class fealty.⁶⁰ To put it differently, the film pivots toward nationalism in its concluding scenes as if to distract us from or compensate for its overriding focus on a transnational aristocracy.⁶¹ In contrast, and for reasons having to do with the war, *Pimpernel Smith's* patriotism sits more comfortably with its transnational emphases. As for the issue of class, the *Shadow* rescues "exceptional spirits" irrespective of rank, because of their status as dissident intellectuals. Moreover, Aldgate and Richards inform us that "Howard did not want his hero to be an aristocrat and deliberately chose the surname Smith to suggest his oneness with the people."⁶² While the poised and donnish Horatio Smith hardly seems like an everyman figure, the class coordinates of the Pimpernel character have clearly been revised for this film. Additionally, and as we have seen, the film concludes with the exceptional man subsuming himself into the collective ("We shall all be back").

Given all this, we can begin to see how Edward de Vere appears in relation to the characters of both Horatio Smith and his cinematic predecessor, Sir Percy Blakeney, and how Howard develops a critique of Oxfordianism suited both to his film and to wartime propaganda. A central tenet of Oxfordian thought – and, indeed, of most if not all alternatives to Shakespeare's authorship – is that no humble, undereducated son of a Warwickshire glover could possibly have written the poems

⁶⁰ "The issue of class is uppermost here in the iconography of the characters as well as in their behavior. The film does not question the saving of the aristocrats. It takes for granted that the Pimpernel is doing the right thing, and it portrays, moreover, the superiority of the aristocrats over the plebians" (Landy, *British Genres*, 130–131). Landy also describes "*Pimpernel Smith* [as] a document of the middle classes, drawing on the liberal humanism of Englishmen like Matthew Arnold and on their fear of anarchy" (132).

⁶¹ For a different take on the film, see Jeffrey Richards, *Cinema and Radio in Britain and America, 1920–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 207–210. Richards asserts that "[t]hroughout the film we are never allowed to forget that the Pimpernel is English and what is more represents the best of England" (209).

⁶² Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 56.

and plays we attribute to the Bard of Avon. As Looney puts it, “Shakespeare’s work if viewed without reference to any personality would never have been taken to be the work of a genius who had emerged from an uncultured milieu.”⁶³ Because of the putative disconnect between Shakespeare’s background and the quality of his work, Looney argues that the “laurels [Shakespeare] has worn so long” belong on a “worthier brow.”⁶⁴ Needless to say, worth here is a class-based concept. James Shapiro notes that, for Looney, “The true author had to be a man whose aristocratic lineage made him a natural leader, one who – if he had been properly recognised in his time – could have changed the world.”⁶⁵ Like Sir Percy Blakeney, the Earl of Oxford was a “leading light” who was simultaneously so much more.⁶⁶ *Pimpernel Smith* revises Blakeney’s class background while also framing Smith’s (or the Shadow’s) singular heroism as something that, on the eve of Germany’s invasion of Poland, is to be integrated into the collective. To put it another way, in updating *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Howard is acutely aware of the class politics of the earlier film and its unsuitability to wartime propaganda efforts.

That politics also did not jibe with popular thought at the time Howard was making his film. This becomes obvious when we consider again World War Two as, for the British, a “people’s war” in which class differences were ameliorated and everyone worked together for the collective good. Angus Calder says of this concept, “its influence over the press, the films and the radio was enormous; it shaped the rhetoric of five years of official and unofficial propaganda.”⁶⁷ Calder’s seminal work on this topic was written in the 1960s, and he along with other historians have come to question the extent to which this concept captured reality.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, what remains uncontested is the power of this idea during World War Two. It is easy to recognize, moreover, that the concept of the people’s war was compatible with the three themes (discussed in the Introduction) at the center of the MOI Films Division’s propaganda policy. Indeed, it served as a concrete expression of those themes, emblemizing who we are, how we fight, and, albeit more indirectly, what we are fighting for: a vision of an egalitarian social order that, many hoped, would survive the war itself. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* is at odds with such a vision, which is why

⁶³ Looney, “Shakespeare” Identified, 31. ⁶⁴ Looney, “Shakespeare” Identified, 89.

⁶⁵ Shapiro, *Contested Will*, 199.

⁶⁶ Blakeney is a prominent, fashionable figure at court as well as a friend of the Prince of Wales.

⁶⁷ Angus Calder, *The People’s War: Britain, 1939–1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 138.

⁶⁸ See Rose, *Which People’s War?*; and Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991).

Pimpernel Smith seeks to bury the traces of its narrative's elitist origins. It is not entirely successful in doing so, as its focus is on "exceptional spirits," including Horatio Smith, not the common folk. But in staging in its final moments the metamorphosis of the Shadow into a part of the collective, *Pimpernel Smith* sides with the ideals articulated in the concept of the people's war.

The theory that only an aristocrat such as Edward de Vere could possibly have authored the plays and poems of Shakespeare sits very uncomfortably alongside the concept of the people's war. On the other hand, it is of a piece with the Nazi worship of the "great man." Indeed, James Shapiro has touched upon the affinities between Nazi ideology and Looney's worldview.⁶⁹ The Stratfordian argument – that "Shakespeare" was Shakespeare, a provincial genius of humble origins – produces no such dissonance. Most importantly, Howard's conscious recasting of the class politics of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* offers an additional explanation for Oxford's status as Horatio Smith's doppelgänger. Rather than identifying himself with de Vere, Smith differentiates himself from him and the model of aristocratic heroism embedded both in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and in Oxfordian thought. As always, the joke is lost on von Graum, who seems prepared to accept Shakespeare's Englishness only if it is tethered to his nobility. At the same time, we once again see the risk this film runs through its proliferating doubles. In subtly mocking Oxfordian thought, Howard has been taken for its advocate. After all, he mentions it three times.

In *Another Hamlet: The Mystery of Leslie Howard*, Charles Boyle asserts that "[t]his mysterious theme of mistaken or masked identity was central to the character of [Howard's] greatest screen success, the silly English fop [Sir Percy Blakeney] who is secretly a savior to aristocrats condemned to the guillotine. It was also the key to his understanding of the author who created Hamlet" – meaning Edward de Vere.⁷⁰ Boyle's book, the very name of which invites us to think of Hamlet as Howard's doppelgänger, includes a short essay and a screenplay, the latter of which, while accurately depicting many of the details of Howard's life, invents the story of the actor's exposure to Oxfordian thought (an intellectually daring graduate

⁶⁹ Shapiro, *Contested Will*, 205–206, 212–213.

⁷⁰ Charles Boyle, *Another Hamlet*, 2. It should be noted that Boyle develops in an Oxfordian direction Ronald Howard's theory that (a) his father's death might have been plotted by a Nazi propagandist and (b) that the plot was inspired by *Hamlet* (see Ronald Howard, *In Search of My Father*, 203–204).

student is to blame). We are also told that Howard's projected film of *Hamlet* was to be followed by one on de Vere: "Shakespeare was a *real* Scarlet Pimpernel. Once the war is over I'm going to make a movie about Oxford."⁷¹ Most significantly, Boyle offers a new wrinkle on the conspiracy theories that have long surrounded Howard's death: the British authorities knew his plane was going to be attacked, but they did not intervene because of the explosive nature of Howard's plans for a film on Oxford. Winston Churchill himself observes that "this is a very troubling idea Leslie has, I mean, telling the world the truth about Shakespeare in a film. Not a good idea. There is too much to protect here . . . the royal family, the Church, the state."⁷² The screenplay ends with a conversation between John Gielgud and Vivien Leigh in which they both acknowledge the likely truth of Leslie's Oxfordian views but also depict them as too dangerous for general dissemination: "But a movie? Not now. (They look at each other.) Nor ever. (They both start to laugh. They laugh and laugh.)"⁷³

In Boyle's account of Leslie Howard's life and death, we find Howard, Hamlet and propaganda imbricated in one another. Boyle imagines the actor's death coming as a result of his intentions to promote "a very troubling idea" about Oxford and Hamlet that would somehow jeopardize "the royal family, the Church, the state." (Notice here that Boyle, like promulgators of the WST decades before him, assumes Shakespeare's identity to be bound up in that of the British nation.) This dangerous film about Oxford is both the companion to and a photographic negative of Howard's projected *Hamlet* propaganda feature; it is suggested that the former would bring the social order to its knees, while the latter is proposed in aid of country. Importantly, *Pimpernel Smith* shadows this theory of Howard's death; Boyle detects a parallel between Blakeney and de Vere, "a *real* Scarlet Pimpernel," but it is *Pimpernel Smith* that provides the Oxfordians their only "evidence." It is also that film, and not a fantasized "movie about Oxford," that brings together the Pimpernel figure with Hamlet.

I'm concluding with Boyle's conspiracy theory about Leslie Howard's death because it provides further evidence of the risks run by *Pimpernel Smith*. These risks do not jeopardize church and state; they are of a humbler nature and are born of the movie's propaganda function. In entertaining Oxfordianism in order to demonstrate British freedom of

⁷¹ Boyle, *Another Hamlet*, 151.

⁷² Boyle, *Another Hamlet*, 152, ellipses in original.

⁷³ Boyle, *Another Hamlet*, 206.

thought, the film ends up feeding the idea it finds risible; in drawing complex connections between Howard, Smith, Hamlet and Oxford – some of which presume affinities and others opposition – *Pimpernel Smith* seems to lend legitimacy to that which it mocks (in part because Howard's mockery is often deceptively subtle). The crucial point, though, is that Howard accepts this possibility. He recognizes the licensing of heterodox ideas, especially when contrasted with the Nazi suppression of thought, as a form of British societal virtue that also has strong propaganda value.⁷⁴ In this way, then, *Pimpernel Smith* suggests that the merit of British national culture resides not only in Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, but also in tolerating the Oxfordian ideas that shadow them both.

⁷⁴ This point is made at the end of another movie from 1941 starring Leslie Howard, Powell and Pressburger's *49th Parallel*, the only feature film made during the war that received significant funding from the MOI. The final scene features an AWOL Canadian soldier (Raymond Massey) whose grouching about his superior officers is misrecognized by a Nazi officer on the run (Eric Portman) as sympathy for the enemy. The Canadian soldier vigorously asserts his right to complain shortly before punching the Nazi in the face.