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Pascale Aebischer

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INTRODUCTION

*Beyond Shakespeare: the contemporary
Jacobean film*

1991, a cinema somewhere in North London, a screening of Derek Jarman's *Edward II*. The film left me with the overwhelming sense of having watched something important I did not yet feel quite equipped to understand but would return to. The sensation was very different from that of watching Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* two years earlier, which had convinced me that Shakespeare was quite accessible. For my English Literature finals, I chose to work on *Edward II* alongside *Henry V*. The viva concentrated on *Henry V*; *Edward II* got no mention. Jarman had died; Branagh was filming *Hamlet*.

2012, Dungeness. The wind, in violent gusts, seemed in turns to propel me towards the black fisherman's cottage with its yellow window frames and then, suddenly, to add to the difficulty of walking on the shingle beach. In the distance, the nuclear power station dominated the view, its square forbidding structure fenced in at the end of a vista filled with wild flowers, corroding fishing equipment and the row of huts along the Dungeness road. It had taken two cab rides and four trains to get me to my destination. As I approached the garden with its twisted sculptures made of rusting metal spikes and driftwood poles, I could see that the door of the cottage was ajar. On Derek Jarman's desk, his weighty Shooting Script for *Edward II* was waiting for me, gilded and with an 'It's cool to be QUEER' sticker on its cover; the script itself typed-up on an early word processor and annotated in Jarman's elegant hand. I plugged in my laptop and went to work.

This book tells a story that straddles these moments: the tale of a cultural struggle, played out on our cinema (and later our computer) screens, that uses the plays of Shakespeare and of his contemporaries as a means by which to express contrary political and artistic views. It is also the tale of multiple journeys: not just the road to Dungeness, but the often prolonged, difficult journeys travelled by filmmakers in their endeavour to bring early modern drama to the screen and to find ways of making these plays express something urgent about contemporary culture, politics and society. The landscape in which these struggles and journeys take place plays a decisive role in

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shaping them: in the distance looms Hollywood, a gigantic structure protected by powerful financial interests, in the foreground the independent films that somehow manage to grow despite the aridity of their surroundings and that adapt with remarkable ingenuity to evolving technological developments, creating artworks of jarring beauty out of objects salvaged from the past.

The overarching narrative of *Screening Early Modern Drama*, then, is that of the film adaptations of early modern drama which follow in the footsteps of Derek Jarman in their desire to step outside the boundaries of the Shakespearean canon and explore the dramatic legacies of Marlowe, Jonson, Middleton, Webster and Ford. The story begins in the 1960s and 1970s, with the efforts of European arthouse filmmakers who drew on early modern drama in their quest to create a cinematic language capable of speaking of transgressive desires and dissident identities. Their counter-cinematic work would pave the way for the cinema of Derek Jarman.¹ Jarman chose to ignore the concentration of 'quality' revivals of early modern drama on British stages and television that attracted the critical attention of Wendy Griswold (1986) and Kathleen McLuskie (1989). These steadily popular revivals would merge with the television genre of the period drama and grow, by the mid 1980s, into what would be dubbed the English 'heritage film'.² I explain in Chapter 1 how Jarman loathed these films and instead looked towards the European avant-garde, American underground, British punk and to the paintings of Caravaggio for his inspiration on how to make the early modern period enter into dialogue with the present. While he started off using Shakespeare for his counter-cultural ends, in the 1980s, as his politics grew ever more radical and Tilda Swinton joined his team, he turned his back on Shakespeare as too conservative and sought a stronger political model and pre-text in Marlowe's 'Jacobean, sexy, and violent' *Edward II*.³ Following close on the heels of Greenaway's pastiche of 'Jacobean' motifs and aesthetics in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), Jarman's *Edward II* marked a turning-point in the history of early modern drama on screen in the twentieth century.

Writing in 1999, A. L. Rees gave a rather depressing account of the legacy left by Jarman and Greenaway:

With no school to follow them, they remain sacred monsters of the British cinema, independent but to that degree also isolated. . . . Their impact on

¹ I borrow the term 'counter-cinema' from Peter Wollen's 'Godard and Counter Cinema'; these European films adapting early modern drama share the distinguishing features of Godard's work.

² Higson, 'Re-presenting the National Past', p. 109. ³ Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 293.

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cinema audiences has been greater than that of their artistic contemporaries – but this is not the point insofar as their continual influence is concerned. Jarman's canon is now sadly closed, while Greenaway's remains vigorously open, but it is difficult at this stage to see who will take up their cinematic options as film- and video-makers.⁴

What Rees could not foresee, based on the sorry example of Marcus Thompson's *Middleton's Changeling* (1998), was that Jarman's work with early modern drama, even more than Greenaway's, would, at the start of the next decade, begin to bear fruit.⁵ Mike Figgis's *Hotel* (2001), the 'period punk' adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi*, I discuss in Chapter 2 in relation to Greenaway's *Cook*, and Alex Cox's *Revengers Tragedy* (2002), the subject of Chapter 3, demonstrably build on Jarman's work.⁶ The new breed of independent filmmakers producing microcinematic adaptations of early modern plays who I turn to in Chapter 4 may not be aware of the extent to which the path they tread has been opened up by Jarman's determination to use the latest cheap technologies to shoot feature films at the lowest possible cost, though it is clear that his experiments with Super-8 films and video helped create a critical environment within which filmmakers of the 1990s and 2000s would be able to appreciate the flexibility of digital video cameras and the colour and grainy quality of the images they produce. Even the mainstream ITV adaptation of *The Changeling* as *Compulsion* in 2009, which I analyse in Chapter 5 and whose glamorous cinematography and conservative politics seem far removed from Jarman's radicalism, includes a vista of Jarman's Dungeness as an acknowledgement of his influence.

Approaching the subject of Jarman's legacy from the vantage point of film studies, Rees was also unaware of how Jarman's films were affecting the work of editors and critics contributing to the Oxford *Collected Works of Thomas Middleton* (2007), and of the connections between academic discourses and theatrical productions.⁷ One of the principal strategies Gary Taylor, as the collection's general editor, adopted in the publicity campaign that proclaimed Middleton to be 'our other Shakespeare', was to propose an equivalence between Middleton and Caravaggio that relied on a strikingly Jarmanesque view of Caravaggio as a painter of chiaroscuro contrasts, shocking style, dark realism and anachronistic sensibility. When, in 2008,

⁴ Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, p. 101.

⁵ I choose not to discuss Thompson's film here. For my views on it, see: Aebischer, 'Middleton in the Cinema', pp. 340–2; and Aebischer, 'Early Modern Drama on Screen', pp. 158–9.

⁶ Figgis, *Digital Film-Making*, p. 68.

⁷ On the opposition and equivalence this edition postulates between Middleton and Shakespeare, see Aebischer and Prince, 'Introduction', in *Performing Early Modern Drama Today*, pp. 8–11.

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Melly Still staged *The Revenger's Tragedy* at the National Theatre in London and used Caravaggio's portrait of St Jerome with a skull as a backdrop for Vindice's study, the imprint of Jarman's *Caravaggio* was self-evident. Like many of the theatrical revivals of early modern drama in the past two decades that Roberta Barker⁸ and Kim Solga⁹ have scrutinised for their portrayal of problematic gender relations and acts of brutal oppression, the whole show was infused by an understanding of the Jacobean as transgressive, violent and sexually dissident – and modern.

Many of the recent theatrical and cinematic revivals of early modern drama thus share a stress on 'transgression, dissidence, and desire' and a conception of the 'Jacobean' which Susan Bennett, in *Performing Nostalgia* (1996), identifies as involving '(moral) decay, excess and violence – deficiencies we also find in our contemporary moment and for which this past can apparently give expression and meaning'.¹⁰ When Bennett describes Howard Barker's 'collaboration' with Middleton on *Women Beware Women* as a 'contemporary Jacobean text', her anachronistic welding together of the *contemporary* and the *Jacobean* offers an evocative label for the aesthetic cultivated by Jarman and his successors that I will adopt throughout this book.¹¹ Like Jarman, who was fascinated by the defiance of norms of early modern art, contemporary Jacobean filmmakers seek their inspiration in the connection between early modern drama and counter-cultural movements. They communicate an alternative cultural memory, remember difference – and remember *differently* from mainstream cinema and 'Shakespearean' modes of representing the early modern period.

As this suggests, contemporary Jacobean revivals stand in a conflicted and dialectical relationship with Shakespeare. On the one hand, they profit from the cultural capital of their association with the 'Shakespeare brand';¹² they use Shakespeare as 'a reliable cultural touchstone, a language "we all understand"'.¹³ On the other hand, they often define themselves against the conservative nostalgia inherent in the 'Shakespeare and Elizabethan heritage industry' that has seen the building of Shakespeare's Globe, the continuing success of Shakespearean revivals in Britain's largest subsidised theatres and the thriving Renaissance tourism focussed on National Heritage sites and Stratford-upon-Avon's various Shakespeare sites.¹⁴ Shakespeare's domination

⁸ *Early Modern Tragedy*. ⁹ *Violence Against Women*.

¹⁰ Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, pp. 80, 82.

¹¹ Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, p. 93. On the subject of the 'neo-Jacobean' theatre of the 1980s, see also Boon and Price, 'Maps of the World'.

¹² Garber, *Loaded Words*, pp. 72–82. ¹³ Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 52.

¹⁴ Pidduck, 'Elizabeth and Shakespeare in Love', p. 130.

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of the British cultural industry is crushingly obvious in the 2012 Cultural Olympics: *Guardian* theatre reviewer Lyn Gardner exhaustively notes that: ‘The official guide for the London 2012 festival lists 62 Shakespeare productions, and only 55 non-Shakespeare theatre and performance events.’¹⁵ It is in opposition to the Shakespeare industry’s reliance on ‘the idealized authenticity and authority of Shakespeare’s (great) texts’ that Bennett notes that ‘Jacobean revivals point to a less than perfect past’;¹⁶ for her, Greenaway’s *Cook* and Jarman’s *Edward II* model the manner in which the ‘Jacobean’ can provide ‘one site where the contradictory impulses of nostalgia perform themselves in a disruptive and occasionally emancipatory mode’.¹⁷

Most of the contemporary Jacobean films this book is dedicated to react against the ‘heritage Shakespeare’ films of the early to mid 1990s, epitomised by Kenneth Branagh’s ‘Renaissance Films’ adaptations of *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Hamlet* (1996).¹⁸ These films define what Samuel Crowl termed ‘the Kenneth Branagh era’ and have, in what is undeniably a simplistic understanding of the films themselves and their ability to attract Hollywood funding and international audiences, come to stand for everything the contemporary Jacobean films are emphatically not: mainstream in their popular appeal, ‘faithful’ and reverential in their relationship to their literary source, conventional in their film grammar and narrative approach, conservative in their politics and their ability to provide the visual pleasures of period and define essential ‘Englishness’ for an international audience.¹⁹ As Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe remark, this (stereo)type of cinematic Shakespeare is ‘rooted in [the] realist and heritage conventions’²⁰ associated with the archetypal heritage films that Andrew Higson influentially critiqued for displaying ‘the past . . . as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze’.²¹

It is the contemporary Jacobean films’ articulation of their opposition to Shakespeare’s cultural dominance and his perceived complicity with Hollywood’s production methods, aesthetics, politics and funding that

¹⁵ Gardner, ‘Critic’s Notebook’, p. 11. ¹⁶ Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, p. 93.

¹⁷ Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia*, p. 95.

¹⁸ ‘Renaissance Films’ is, tellingly, the name of Branagh’s production company. For a discussion of ‘heritage Shakespeare’ films as a group, see Cartmell, ‘*Fin de Siècle* Film Adaptations’.

¹⁹ See Emma French for a differentiated exploration of Branagh’s relationship to Hollywood and the film industry that dismantles many of these stereotypical assumptions.

²⁰ Cartelli and Rowe, *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen*, p. 16.

²¹ Higson, ‘Re-presenting the National Past’, p. 109. Higson’s view of the heritage film has since been critiqued and refined. See, e.g.: Dave, *Visions of England*, pp. 27–44; Galt, *New European Cinema*, pp. 7–11; Hill, ‘Allegorising the Nation’, pp. 73–98; and Monk, ‘The British Heritage-Film Debate’.

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binds these films together as a coherent corpus and that is at the centre of my argument in this book. Contemporary Jacobean films are striking for the consistency with which they propagate an oppositional, 'dissident heritage' aesthetic.²² Contrary to Rowland Wymer's view that there is 'no real tradition of filming non-Shakespearean Renaissance plays', I show that not only is there such a tradition, but that failure to understand these films as interconnected reduces our ability to appreciate the counter-cultural work they are doing collectively to critique dominant modes of filmmaking and adapting Shakespearean drama to the screen.²³ What is gained by arguing that these films belong to the contemporary Jacobean corpus is a recognition that they share a consistent attitude towards their source material and are subjected to similar constraints that affect their budget, style and politics in ways that crisply distinguish them from the nostalgic heritage Shakespeare film.

One aspect of this book that will strike readers coming to it from the vantage point of Shakespearean performance studies as unusual, and that is intimately connected to the oppositional stance of contemporary Jacobean films, is my concern with the contexts of production. Contemporary Jacobean films have to be understood within an industry context in which, as Sarah Street demonstrates, it has become ever more difficult for independent British films to gain access to a market increasingly 'dominated by American interests'.²⁴ My attention to the gestation of these films is a corrective to the tendency, in criticism of screen Shakespeares, to ignore the films' imbrication in a larger body of work and a film industry context that determines not only what can be filmed, but *how* it may be filmed. I stress the development of filmmakers' ideas across time, in response to political events, industry pressures, technological developments and financial constraints, since all of these inform the meanings of the finished film.

I also repeatedly put emphasis on connections between theatre and film because the crossover between stage and screen is more complex than has been hitherto acknowledged. This is not only a matter of filmmakers also being theatre-goers. It is also a matter of shared personnel: many films liberally borrow performers with Shakespearean pedigrees to initiate a complex 'haunting' of the films by their Shakespearean intertexts and trouble the distinction between the centre and the margins of the repertoire.²⁵ The interdependence of theatre and screen performances of early modern drama is nowhere more obvious than in the online

²² de Groot, *Consuming History*, p. 212. ²³ Wymer, *Jarman*, p. 147.

²⁴ Street, *British National Cinema*, p. 19. ²⁵ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*.

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environment, where, as I argue in Chapter 4, it becomes evident that live theatre depends for its publicity and financial survival on its online remediations which, in turn, leave a tangible mark on the ways in which stage productions are conceptualised.

It is furthermore crucial that we recognise the ways in which the films I analyse in this study often resist their identification as a single, finite object, the culmination of a process that ends abruptly with the release of the film. Not only do the performers bring in an intricate network of intertextual allusions that reach beyond the boundaries of the films, acting as hyperlinks of sorts to other performances in the past or (as I argue in Chapter 4) the future, but there often actually is no 'finished film'. The object we identify as 'the film' is often a snapshot in a continuing process that has the potential to retroactively redefine the film's boundaries and its meaning. While the resistance to closure is already evident in Derek Jarman's *Edward II*, that tendency is exacerbated in the digital age: Figgis's *Hotel* DVD blurs the division between the film and its paratexts to such an extent as to challenge the fixity of the work; Cox's *Revengers Tragedy* is part of a much larger film project that might well spring back to life in a different medium; some of the short films released on the internet are embryonic versions of larger projects awaiting funding; many of the performances of early modern drama available online are part of an expanded theatrical experience that defies the insistence on the uniqueness of the live event that has become a central tenet of performance studies.

One of the most important consequences of the open-endedness of these expanded films is that they invite us to revisit them, using a retrospective, anachron(ist)ic mode of reading them that allows later developments to impact on earlier ones. This preposterousness – a term I will unpack in its early modern polysemy in Chapter 2 – is also what enables the filmmakers I discuss here to treat the early modern texts as critical responses to present-day dilemmas. Several films challenge the chronological narrative techniques of mainstream cinema in fundamental ways and offer a model for reading early modern texts both for their role in shaping the society we live in and, more importantly, for their ability to *respond* to that society, critiquing it from the vantage point of the past while looking at the past, as Jarman would say, 'through the eyes . . . of the present'.²⁶

It is in recognition of the contemporary Jacobean films' ability to put the past and present into dialogue that, at several points in this book, I follow their example in appropriating fragments of early modern thought to

²⁶ Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion*, p. 176.

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illuminate an aspect of the films. When I introduce Montaigne in Florio's translation to think through the problems posed by the use of cannibalism as a trope for cultural production, or when I pore over George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* to dissect the rhetorical figures that govern *Hotel, Revengers* and *Compulsion*, I want the anachronism to unsettle. The aim is to stop the Jacobean from becoming simply contemporary and to point to the manner in which even a film like *Compulsion*, which hides its early modern origin from its popular audience and seemingly seamlessly integrates the contemporary Jacobean adaptation in ITV Drama's prime-time programming, relies on the deep structures of its source text which trouble easy signification and disturb the surface narrative of assimilation.

In espousing preposterousness, contemporary Jacobean films begin to apply their corrosive power to one of the most damaging side-effects of the resurgence of scholarly interest in early modern drama in the wake of New Historicism and cultural materialism. I was struck, when reading through mountains of criticism for my research on *Jacobean Drama: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (2010), by the preponderance of studies that embed the plays in their historical, religious, cultural, social, bibliographical, theatrical contexts. The importance and value of this scholarship must not obscure the glaring disparity it creates between Shakespeare studies, where presentist approaches thrive alongside historicising criticism and where there is always at least an implicit acknowledgement that the plays are pleasurable, profound and intriguing regardless of their imbrication in the early modern period, and the wider field of early modern studies, which often disregards the plays' intrinsic pleurability and interest for a present-day reader, let alone the viewer of a performance on stage or screen. What the contemporary Jacobean films I discuss here quite consistently do is to insist precisely on the plays' intrinsic interest, their ability not just to bridge past and present, but to *be* part of present-day culture.

Rather than simply build on the cultural capital attached to Shakespeare, contemporary Jacobean films pose uncomfortable questions about what literary heritage is, and, more importantly, what it is *to us* and how it may be *used* within the political and cultural arena. As a result, contemporary Jacobean films are less deferential towards their source texts than their Shakespearean equivalents. Whereas Branagh's *Hamlet* proudly boasted of its ability to present the 'full text' of the play in its combination of the Second Quarto with the Folio, thus tapping into the discourse of 'fidelity' that for a long time dominated adaptation studies of Shakespeare, this critical framework is blatantly inappropriate when applied to contemporary

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Jacobean films.²⁷ Instead of treating their source texts as literary treasures that must be preserved and brought to a wider audience intact in all their original glory, locked into a temperature-controlled display case, contemporary Jacobean films treat the early modern literary tradition like an attic that can be ransacked, whose contents are just as likely to be discarded as rescued and reassembled into new artworks.

My use of a museum metaphor here is meant to bring out the affinities between the work of the heritage Shakespeare films and Aleida Assmann's important theorisation of the decisive role played by the canon in defining and shaping cultural memory. Assmann contends that cultural memory 'is based on two separate functions: the presentation of a narrow selection of sacred texts . . . and the storing of documents and artifacts of the past that . . . are deemed interesting or important enough to not let them vanish'.²⁸ The survival of the 'sacred texts', of which Shakespeare's plays form a central example, is assured by what Assmann calls the 'institutions of active memory' which 'preserve the *past as present* while the institutions of passive memory preserve the *past as past*'. Assmann goes on to explain:

These two modes of cultural memory may be illustrated by different rooms of the museum. The museum presents its prestigious objects to the viewers in representative shows which are arranged to catch attention and make a lasting impression. The same museum also houses . . . other paintings and objects in peripheral spaces such as cellars or attics which are not publicly presented. . . . I will refer to the actively circulated memory that keeps the past present as the *canon* and the passively stored memory that preserves the past past as the *archive*.²⁹

It is easy to see how Assmann's distinction between the canon and the archive can be mapped onto the distinction between Shakespeare, and the well-funded institutions of active memory dedicated to preserve his work *as present*, and the ways in which the remainder of the early modern dramatic canon has been relegated to the institutions of passive memory (the universities) to preserve these plays *as past*.

Contemporary Jacobean films, together with the recent proliferation of stage productions of early modern drama, are beginning to effect a gradual shift in the balance between passive and active memory by displaying ever more early modern plays as self-evidently belonging to the 'past present' of the canon. Because this shift is still ongoing, contemporary Jacobean films are most commonly directed at two audiences: one, a general audience that

²⁷ French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, p. 89. ²⁸ Assmann, 'Canon and Archive', p. 101.

²⁹ Assmann, 'Canon and Archive', p. 98.

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is presumed not to be familiar with the early modern texts, for whom the centre of gravity of the film lies somewhere other than in the relationship between the film and its source text, the other an elite audience of 'insiders'. These viewers will appreciate the ways in which the film interacts not just with its source, but also with a wider intertextual network of literary, cultural and filmic reference points. Contemporary Jacobean films thus foreground the 'dialogism' seen by Mikhail Bakhtin as an intrinsic feature of all texts, and which has since been theorised as 'intertextuality' by Julia Kristeva.³⁰ For Robert Stam, adaptations 'are by definition caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual transformation, of texts generating other texts in an endless process of recycling, transformation, and transmutation, with no clear point of origin'.³¹ Contemporary Jacobean films conspicuously participate in the 'intellectual game controlled by citational aesthetics' identified by Cristina Degli-Esposti in postmodern cinema, where the film text can be enjoyed at different levels of knowledge: 'When competence is weak, the citation may not be recognized at all; when it is strong, then the reference and intertextuality develop into a hypertext able to produce a true pleasure of recognition.'³²

Paradoxically, then, some of these films that position themselves as fighting the elitism of Shakespearean canonicity and see themselves as politically radical can end up being more elitist than any Shakespeare film, appealing specifically to the intellectual and cultural elites that are equipped with the specialised knowledge of mainstream culture *and* late twentieth-century subcultures, of the literary canon *and* the archive. Their radical work to dismantle the boundaries between the archive and the canon is predicated on the additional cultural capital carried by obscurity. Contemporary Jacobean films, by positioning their source texts as rare and inaccessible objects that will appeal only to the initiated, render those objects more desirable and thus bring them into cultural circulation. As the digital media, with chatrooms, blogs and comment boxes, facilitate the exchanges of cinephiles hooked up to the internet, more shift from the camp of general viewers into the camp of specialists for whom knowledge of the early modern text becomes an important source of pleasure and group identity. The development of digital media is thus not only crucial to the affordability of filming early modern drama, but also to the dissemination of knowledge about those films and the plays they adapt.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*. ³¹ Stam, *Film Theory*, pp. 209–10.

³² Degli-Esposti, 'Introduction', p. 6.