

Performing the Early Modern Past Onscreen: History and the Politics of the Present

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Introduction

History, film and power are closely entwined. From the invention of the moving image in the nineteenth century to the present era of online streaming, film has always been used to tell stories about the past, and such stories have often focused on iconic figures that have shaped the course of history. As a result, historians have a complex relationship with the medium – many make use of film in their classrooms, while also criticising it for its perceived simplicity of representation. Writing about the Tudor era, James Sharpe bemoans the gap between the approach taken by social historians and the fact that audiences are ‘fed warmed-over version after warmed-over version of the lives of Tudor monarchs’.¹ In his analysis of the Tudors and Stuarts on film, Thomas S. Freeman writes that ‘film has fostered countless historical myths’ that remain powerful ‘because they are accepted without question’ and that ‘knowledge of the past is still most effectively conveyed in written words’.² Other critics, such as Marnie Hughes-Warrington, caution that film offers valuable insights into the past, because audiences are so well-versed in the language of film and onscreen media that they are cognisant of the ‘multi-layered and nuanced meanings’ that can attach to films, often expressed via inter-text.³

This essay examines the role of power in films that depict early modern history. It argues that the English Renaissance – roughly the 1530s to the 1640s – has

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¹ James Sharpe, “The Cinematic Treatment of Early Modern With Trials,” in *Filming and Performing Renaissance History*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 83.

² Thomas S. Freeman, “Introduction: It’s Only a Movie,” in *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 22.

³ Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), 3.

long been conceived of as central to the culture and identity of the Anglosphere, and that in the twentieth century, the medium of film was used as a vehicle through which this period could be deployed to emphasise Anglo (and later, Anglo-American) power. Such films often revolve around icons of cultural or political power such as Henry VIII, Elizabeth I or Shakespeare and they reaffirmed a sense of cultural superiority during times of crisis such as the Second World War. Seeing the early modern period onscreen, audiences could make connections between their own period and what was viewed as an earlier golden age, considered to be a central plank of what Alan Robinson calls the ‘actual or invented traditions and collective memory of social groups and nations, as imagined communities with a consensual ‘national story’’.⁴ Here, Robinson gestures towards Benedict Anderson’s conception of nations as ‘imagined communities’ which rely on the ‘imaginative power of nationalism’ to hold within themselves not only the abstract concept of borders and peoples, but also an agreed history.⁵ In the twenty-first century, this concept of a consensual history appears, within the Anglosphere at least, to have fractured considerably.

Crucially, this essay argues that due to two major factors – the advent of theory within the academy and the increasingly fractious nature of the post-war settlement in the twenty-first century – the story of the early modern period onscreen is increasingly subversive and significantly darkens the vision of a golden age that had previously been prioritised in the twentieth century. This image of the early modern period is one in which power is contested, between what is frequently seen as a decadent and deceitful ruling class who resort to state-sanctioned violence and oppressive, anti-democratic practices in order to maintain their hold on power, and a lower order of marginal or oppressed figures, who deploy various strategies of resistance to work against the prevailing order and achieve a measure of autonomy. This power struggle echoes and casts into sharp relief audiences’ contemporary understanding of their own social contexts, in which fragmentation and political division have increased.

The essay begins by exploring how the English Renaissance exerted such a powerful pull on cinema audiences in the twentieth century, examining its centrality to the Allied propaganda effort during the Second World War. It then argues, using the example of Roland Emmerich’s 2011 conspiratorial action-thriller *Anonymous* that in the twenty-first century, the early modern period is once again being turned to in a time of socio-political crisis. However, instead of reaffirming the age as one of progress and Anglophone cultural dominance, it reframes it via a lens of malaise, suspicion and state violence that works to connect the English Renaissance with a twenty-first century dealing with the fallout from the so-called War on Terror, the 2007/8 economic crash, and an increasingly fragile democratic order. *Anonymous* does this by prioritising perhaps the most potent symbol of Anglophone culture – William Shakespeare – and subverting audience expectations by placing him at the heart of a political conspiracy, working to gesture towards the concept of a secret history.

⁴ Alan Robinson, *Narrating the Past: Historiography, Memory, and the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 5.

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 159.

Secret and Public Histories

This approach to the past is indicative of what Jerome de Groot calls the ‘intersection of historical investigation in the popular imagination with conspiracy theory’, exemplified by the massive success of novels such as Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* (2003).⁶ Traditionally, historians have been the guardians of the past, carefully piecing together coherent narratives from chaotic and often contradictory sources. However, in a culture where, ‘for many people, history is what they see in films’ the role of the historian as mediator between the public and the past seems to be receding.⁷ Keith Jenkins has called into question the traditional reification of academic historiographies, asking why ‘the professional historian [...] is seemingly alone in being able to determine the proper answer to [...] what is ‘history’?’.⁸ For Jenkins, works of academic history are just as constructed or imaginative as historical fiction – ‘for texts are not cognitive, empirical, epistemological entities, but speculative, propositional invitations to imagine the past ad infinitum’.⁹ Ludmilla Jordanova goes further and argues that historical fiction is itself a form of public history, because it is ‘popular history’ that is designed for mass consumption.¹⁰ The public consume historical fiction and in doing so complicate not only public history but also professional history, calling into question the boundaries of both.

Power and film are central to this fictional evocation of history because films are ‘the main source of information’ about how history is ‘interpreted and reinterpreted in the popular consciousness’.¹¹ Film is so potent a cultural medium that it holds the power to either support or challenge a society’s dominant ideology – one need only consider the huge success of D. W. Griffith’s historical epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915) which spurred interest in, and membership of, the Ku Klux Klan in early twentieth century America.¹² The challenges to prevailing ideologies that films may pose do not exist in a vacuum, however. Directors and writers require

⁶ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2008), 54.

⁷ Hughes-Warrington, 1.

⁸ Keith Jenkins, *Refiguring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2003), 38.

⁹ Jenkins, 49.

¹⁰ Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), 126. Jordanova situates her work on public history within Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, arguing that it is a vital part of a liberal democracy and the exchange of ideas. See: Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

¹¹ Mark Thornton Burnett, “Preface,” in *Filming and Performing Renaissance History*, ed. Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), xii.

¹² For more on the influence of *The Birth of a Nation*, see: Everett Carter, ‘Cultural History Written With Lighting: The Significance of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)’, in *Hollywood as Historian: American Film in Cultural Context*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1983), pp. 9-19, Michele Faith Wallace, ‘The Good Lynching and *The Birth of a Nation*: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow’, *Cinema Journal*, 43 (2003), 85-104 and Stephen Weinberger, ‘*The Birth of a Nation* and the Making of the NAACP’, *Journal of American Studies*, 45 (2011), 77-93.

audience engagement – they work in conjunction with the public to build a dialogue around what history and film are, and what happens when they are blurred. As de Groot writes, while ‘professional historians busied themselves with theoretical arguments, ‘History’ as leisure pursuit boomed’.¹³ Growing numbers of people watch, read and re-enact history on multiple platforms, and ultimately are beginning to form their own networks of knowledge around the past, based on more localised, public interactions with history.

For Fredric Jameson, this obsession with the past is a signifier of the post-modern. In Jameson’s eyes, postmodernism is a ‘rebellion against the canonical’ an aesthetic that brings together old and new, high and mass cultures, and that interrogates linear narrativisation.¹⁴ Such impulses are clear in works like *Anonymous*, which destabilises the past by introducing conspiracy, non-linear narratives and political cynicism to undercut any sense the audience may have of both Shakespeare and the wider historical milieu in which his works were produced. *Anonymous* also strains against the typical mode of period drama – the heritage film, which was particularly popular in the UK in the eighties and nineties. For scholars like Andrew Higson, the heritage film is a bourgeois product that aims to evoke a feeling of nostalgia, seen in works like Merchant Ivory’s *Howard’s End* (1992) or *The Remains of the Day* (1993). Higson argues that such films are embedded in a ‘museum aesthetic’ that casts the past as an attraction, where ‘one of the central pleasures [...] is the artful and spectacular projection of an elite, conservative vision of the national past’.¹⁵ Through the heritage film, ‘audiences are invited to escape the cultural heterogeneity of contemporary Britain’ into an idealised vision of (an often pastoral) English past.¹⁶ *Anonymous* works against this, taking for its setting a grimy and dilapidated early modern London, and utilising distinctly un-heritage swearing, sex scenes and violence. However, before going on to explore how this fragmented and destabilised vision of the English Renaissance gained prominence, it is important to first examine the powerful cultural forces that placed this period at the heart of Anglophone identity in the twentieth century.

The Celluloid Century: The English Renaissance and the Second World War

One of the earliest surviving films is a piece of historical fiction: Alfred Clark’s eighteen-second 1895 film *The Execution of Mary Stuart* which depicts the Scottish

¹³ de Groot, 2.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. John Belton (London: The Athlone Press, 1986), 186.

¹⁵ Andrew Higson, “The Heritage Film and British Cinema,” in *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, ed. Andrew Higson (London: Cassel, 1996), 233.

¹⁶ Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46. For more on this topic, see: Clare Monk, *Heritage Film Audiences: Period Films and Contemporary Audiences in the UK* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), Robert Emmet Long, *The Films of Merchant Ivory* (New York: Abrams, 1997) and Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

queen's death at Fotheringay Castle in 1587.¹⁷ With the rapid growth of the film industry in the early twentieth century, studios required more material than was readily available from scriptwriters. As a result, literature was frequently adapted for the screen, introducing new markets for historical fiction. Linda Hutcheon has noted that 'a best-selling book may reach a million readers' but that a 'movie or television adaptation will find an audience of many million more' – and many of the most successful films of the period were adapted from original historical works set during the English Renaissance.¹⁸ Beyond what Rachel Carroll argues is a 'cultural compulsion to repeat', the continual return to the texts and histories of the English Renaissance seems to signify a sense of cultural security during periods of crisis.¹⁹ For film studios, Renaissance England meant money, and for audiences it seems to have provided a sense of comfort in the familiar.

Crucially, whilst the adaptation of particular works or periods of time build up networks of meanings for audiences, they are also always inextricably tied to their source. As Sarah Cardwell has argued, often 'each new cultural adaptation appears to magically cross the chronological gap dividing it from the original text, and is seen as more closely related to that [...] than to preceding or contemporaneous adaptations'.²⁰ Another significant source of material also had a direct link to the period – the works of Shakespeare. Russell Jackson sees cinema and Shakespeare as intertwined, writing that 'Shakespeare has served diverse purposes during the history of the medium'.²¹ Kenneth Rothwell and Annabelle Henkin Melzer also observe that 'the appearance of Shakespeare's plays onscreen coincided with the birth of film'.²² As filmmakers explored the Renaissance onscreen, adaptations of Shakespeare's work continued apace – from Blackton's *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1908 to Olivier's *Hamlet* in 1948.

Images of the English Renaissance as a period of swashbuckling adventure also dominated the first few decades of cinema's existence. This included works such as Louis Napoleon Parker's 1912 play *Drake* which was later adapted for the screen in 1935. Such works nourished a belief that the Elizabethans in particular were 'the progenitors of nineteenth century nation and empire building' just as the British Empire was at its height, but was facing increasingly difficult calls for autonomy and independence from areas such as Ireland and India, and just as Europe was on the brink of the First World War.²³ This image of a 'merrie olde England' populated by seafaring adventurers acting on behalf of an eternally youthful and

¹⁷ Other silent era examples of the English Renaissance onscreen include: *Henry VIII* (1911), the French *The Loves of Queen Elizabeth* (1912) and the German *Anna Boleyn* (1920).

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

¹⁹ Rachael Carroll, *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities* (New York and London: Continuum, 2009), 1.

²⁰ Sarah Cardwell, *Adaptation Revisited: Television and the Classic Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 14.

²¹ Russell Jackson, *Shakespeare and the English-speaking Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

²² Kenneth S. Rothwell and Annabelle Henkin Melzer, eds., *Shakespeare on Screen: An International Filmography and Videography* (London: Mansell, 1990), 1.

²³ Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *England's Elizabeth: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 179.

benevolent Queen Elizabeth clearly framed the upholding of British power in the early twentieth century as a mixture of quasi-sacred duty and a boys-own adventure. It is clear that the English Renaissance formed an important backdrop for the development of cinema in the twentieth century. However, the period would attain a new prominence in the 1930s as Europe was dominated by fascism and the threat of a new global war. Against this new, crisis-laden backdrop, the image of the English Renaissance onscreen was imbued with a sense of socio-political power, as it became a vehicle for the Anglosphere to assert its ideological dominance against the threat of Nazi Germany.

During this period, films about the Renaissance proliferated. *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *Drake of England* (1935), *The Tudor Rose* (1936), *Fire Over England* (1937), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939) and *The Sea Hawk* (1940) all provided audiences with an image of Renaissance England that stressed the importance of the period for the formation of an Anglophone identity, a sense of British manifest destiny, and repeated allusions towards cultural supremacy. In fact, there were so many Tudor-set historical films during the 1930s and 40s that the American writer Gore Vidal later remarked that at the time 'it seemed as if the only country on earth was England'.²⁴ This cycle of films repeatedly invoked figures such as Henry and Elizabeth as defenders of 'the liberal values of a free society', depicting England as a plucky underdog standing against all-powerful enemies such as France, the Catholic Church, Philip's Spain and the Spanish Armada.²⁵

The figure of Elizabeth was such a powerful propaganda device that she was inserted into the screen adaptation of Rafael Sabatini's 1915 novel, *The Sea Hawk*. In an epilogue to the film, Flora Robson's Elizabeth addresses the audience directly, urging her subjects to 'prepare for a war that none of us wants' – perhaps the clearest example of Elizabeth as propaganda cover girl. This was cut from the American release of the film, as the US was still neutral. Yet there is no doubt that *The Sea Hawk* as well as other Renaissance-set films 'were a key element in emphasizing a special affinity between Americans and Britain', as each enjoyed considerable success in both markets.²⁶ Such depictions of Elizabeth (and Henry) ignored the fact that Tudor England, just like Philip's Spain – and indeed, Nazi Germany – was implicated in brutal mass expansion, colonialism, slavery and genocide, and that Britain's power in the twentieth century was built on such a legacy. Instead, a cinematic vision of the period was conjured that worked to prepare audiences for war, and maintained the fiction of the era as a golden age of progress.

The origin of such political commentary in this cycle of films can be traced to Alexander Korda's 1933 film *The Private Life of Henry VIII*. It was the Hungarian-

²⁴ Gore Vidal, *Screening History* (London: Harvard University Press, 1994), 33. For more on the influence of wartime Britain on US cinema, see: Harrison Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood 'British' Film, 1959-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

²⁵ Susan Doran, "From Hatfield to Hollywood: Elizabeth I on Film." In *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 89.

²⁶ Will Coster, "The Armada, War and Propaganda in the Cinema." In *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 162.

born Korda who proposed to the British Ministry of Information that he create a 'movie that defined the nation's war aims and reassured the public' – this film ultimately became *The Private Life*.²⁷ Despite the film's comic representation of Henry (played with relish by Charles Laughton), the king demonstrates a keen awareness of the need to defend England with a navy, telling his Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell that 'to leave ourselves unguarded will cost England' – a sentiment that would have reverberated strongly with a 1930s British audience. Korda later produced the 1937 *Fire Over England*, which focused on the threat posed by the Spanish Armada. Julia Walker has argued that such films 'used admiration for the Tudor navy as a coded call for rearmament' – taking advantage of the long-standing sentimentalisation of Tudor ingenuity.²⁸ Potent naval imagery is present in *Drake of England*, *Fire Over England* and *The Sea Hawk*, underlining the comparisons between Tudor England's need for a navy and the belief that 1930s Britain had to defend itself against Germany. In 1933 Korda's historical advisor Philip Lindsay, wrote that, 'the public wants' historical films and that 'the world, in fact needs them' as they are 'tormented by memories of the last war, frightened at the menace of another'.²⁹ The maintenance of British power in the 1930s relied on the affirmation of Tudor power – film and history intersected to produce a complex network of political allusions and intertextuality that persuaded audiences to see the English Renaissance as a vital and relevant way in which to understand the present.

In a call to defend the world order from the threat of fascism, filmmakers like Korda imbued the English Renaissance with a significant cultural power, reaffirming its place at the heart of the Anglosphere's sense of its cultural and political identities. However, this strategy may ultimately have hastened the demise of the world order it sought to protect just as the US joined the war effort. The twentieth-century descendants of Elizabeth's American colonies rescued England, but in doing so ultimately fashioned a Europe in its own image, and not that of its former master. Yet the image of Tudor power would endure throughout the twentieth century, and the image of a hierarchical, politically secure Golden Age was reflected in the academy. Critics such as E. M. W. Tillyard believed that the Renaissance was characterised by a shared belief in a 'Great Chain of Being' that ordered society as a reflection of the cosmos, and in which dissent was barely conceivable.³⁰ Tillyard's position – and, despite their differences, that of other twentieth-century critics such as A. C. Bradley and Moody E. Prior – was based on a belief in a

²⁷ Todd Bennett, "The Celluloid War: State and Studio in Anglo-American Propaganda Film Making, 1939-1941," *The International History Review* 24, no 1 (2002): 70. For more on the Second World War and Anglo-American propaganda, see: Mark Harris, *Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014); Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007) and Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000).

²⁸ Julia M. Walker, *The Elizabethan Icon: 1603-2005* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

²⁹ Philip Lindsay, "The Camera Turns on History," *Cinema Quarterly* 2 (1933): 11.

³⁰ E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Vintage, 1959), 18.

universal human nature, as well as the transcendent aesthetic power of literature.³¹ Renaissance power, in their view, resided with the monarch and was dispersed from that source outwards and downwards.

However, this position was radically challenged in the late twentieth century with the advent of theory within English Studies. Work by new historicists such as Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) or cultural materialists like Jonathan Dollimore in *Radical Tragedy* (1984) invested in an anti-humanist agenda that disputes the idea of an essential human nature, and complicates the traditional conception of a powerful ideological order versus a submissive populace. Although new historicism and cultural materialism have differing methodologies and priorities, both engage with the notion that individuals are shaped by the cultures in which they reside, rather than any intrinsic human nature.

Furthermore, despite the fact that Terry Eagleton famously declared the death of theory at the start of the new millennium, it is clear that such theoretically-inflected thinking has radically transformed the study of the Renaissance.³² Ewan Fernie and Ramona Wray have observed that in 'Renaissance Studies, theory is everywhere' while Neema Parvini asserts that the influence of theory in the academy 'endures hidden, disavowed and unquestioned' despite its apparent fall from fashion.³³ In their comparative study of the Renaissance and the postmodern, Thomas L. Martin and Duke Pesta wonder if the theory revolution 'has [...] really come and gone? [...] or is it with us still, like the fluoride in our water so ubiquitous that we insist it must not be there?'.³⁴

It is important to place texts such as *Anonymous* within the context of theory's influence the academy, as, since the beginning of the present century, historical films have also been marked by a radical shift not only in how they depict historical power, but also how they conceive of it. *Anonymous* – a multi-million dollar blockbuster that engages with long-discredited conspiracy theories and which clearly rejects any notion of historical accuracy – may not appear at first glance to hold

³¹ See: Moody E. Prior, *The Drama of Power: Studies in Shakespeare's History Plays* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 1905). For a broad overview of Shakespeare criticism in the twentieth century, see: Michael Taylor, *Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³² Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003). For more works interrogating whether or not we live in a post-theory era, see: David N. Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2014); Lorien J. Goodman, 'Teaching Theory after Theory', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 41.1 (2007), 110-120; Valentine Cunningham, *Reading After Theory* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) and Thomas Docherty, *After Theory: Postmodernism/Postmarxism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

³³ Ewan Fernie and Ramona Wray, "General Introduction: Reconceiving the Renaissance," in *Reconceiving the Renaissance: A Critical Reader*, edited by Ewan Fernie, Ramona Wray, Mark Thornton Burnett and Clare McManus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1 and Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare and Contemporary Theory: New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 3.

³⁴ Thomas L. Martin and Duke Pesta, *The Renaissance and the Postmodern: A Study in Comparative Critical Values* (London: Routledge, 2016), xii.

within it the collected knowledge of the twentieth century's theory wars, but it is shaped by the wider society in which such theory rose to prominence. As the next section will elaborate, *Anonymous* is a deceptively complex piece of historical fiction that suggests those who challenge the historical record have the power to shape the present.

Anonymous and the power of the past

In his 1598 work *A Survey of London*, the antiquarian John Stow describes the Tower of London as 'a citadel, to defend or command the city; a royal palace for assemblies or treaties' and crucially, 'a prison of state, for the most dangerous offenders'.³⁵ Although initially a royal residence, the Tower has been remembered chiefly as a prison and a site where torture, execution and murder took place. Specifically, despite its millennium-long history, the Tower is primarily associated in the public mind with the Tudor period. From Prince Edward's portentous exclamation, 'I do not like the Tower of any place' in Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1592) to Paul Delaroche's 1833 painting *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, and the depiction of the Tower in recent television series such as *The Tudors* (2007-2010), its reputation as a site of violence and horror has been sealed over the centuries by multiple creative work.³⁶

These works all depict the Tower as a site of state violence, despite the fact that, as noted by Robert Muchembled, 'England largely rejected the use of torture' during the Tudor period, unless explicitly authorised by the monarch or Privy Council.³⁷ According to James Simpson, between 1540 and 1640, 80 cases of torture were recorded on the Privy Council registers. Most of these occurred during the reign of Elizabeth I (particularly the period 1588-1600) and the vast majority are related to religion.³⁸ Despite this seemingly small number, Muchembled contends that 'the golden age of judicial torture was the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'.³⁹ Significantly, Simpson makes a connection between the early modern state and the twenty-first century, arguing that 'apart from the Bush administration' of the early twenty-first century, the only other period in Anglo-American legal history to practice legally-sanctioned torture was during the reign of Elizabeth I.⁴⁰ Despite the historical record, the Tower has come to stand for the violent excesses of state-sanctioned torture, and in Roland Emmerich's *Anonymous*, it is prioritised as a totemic sign of the inescapable power of the Tudor state, a site where the state brutally represses any form of dissent. Furthermore, Tudor-era violence is utilised as a vehicle to explore contemporary concerns in relation to state-

³⁵ John Stow, *A Survey of London, Written in the Year 1598* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1994), 87.

³⁶ *Richard III*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 3.1.68.

³⁷ Robert Muchembled, *A History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present*, tr. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 29.

³⁸ James Simpson, "No Brainer: The Early Modern Tragedy of Torture," *Religion and Literature* 43, number 3 (2011): 4.

³⁹ Muchembled, 130.

⁴⁰ Simpson, 4.

sanctioned torture and violence that pose serious questions about the limits of the state's power over its citizens in the twenty-first century.

In a move that hints at how *Anonymous* is as much concerned with the present as it is the past, Emmerich opens the film with a series of dizzying, drone-like overhead shots of twenty-first century New York. The camera glides over the bustling cityscape, before settling on the figure of Derek Jacobi, familiar to many as an accomplished Shakespearean. What may be less-well known to audiences is that Jacobi is an avowed anti-Strafordian, who does not believe that Shakespeare, 'that grubby, provincial, Stratford grain dealer' could possibly have been 'the same person as the glorious, learned, court-wise Soule of the Age' responsible for some of the world's greatest works of art.⁴¹ Jacobi is a proponent of the Oxfordian Theory of authorship, which is the 'sacrilegious thesis' that forms the basis for *Anonymous*.⁴² Oxfordian Theory contends that the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere (portrayed by Rhys Ifans), is the true author of Shakespeare's works, and that his plays can be read biographically in a manner that correspond with the Earl's life. Emmerich alludes to this in a scene where the young de Vere kills a servant spying on him from behind a curtain – this reference to *Hamlet* corresponds with the Oxfordian belief that '*Hamlet* is an autobiographical play'.⁴³ But as the film opens, it is Jacobi's persona as a famous Shakespearean actor that is slyly invoked, as the camera follows him through the backstage corridors of a theatre, laying bear the mechanics involved in stagecraft. This is a clear allusion to his role as Chorus in Kenneth Branagh's 1985 *Henry V*, but its purpose is ambiguous: is this homage, or parody? The question lingers as Jacobi stands onstage, once more assuming the role of narrator, and declares that 'our Shakespeare' is a mere 'cipher [...] a ghost' that has been created to divert our attention from the truth.

This works to undermine the authority and cultural power of Shakespeare, a figure who has become one of the most significant icons of Anglophone culture. This mode of undercutting the totemic figure of Shakespeare accords with a general political cynicism or malaise that has been prevalent since the start of the twenty-first century. Released in 2011, *Anonymous* was viewed by audiences who had experienced the aftershocks of 9/11 and the War on Terror, the global financial crash of 2007/8 and the associated economic disenfranchisement of millions of people, particularly the young. Indeed, the very title of the film conjures up associations with the protest group Anonymous, who target governments and other institutions they believe are deploying censorship in order to maintain control over the public. The context within which *Anonymous* circulated was one in which the economic crash quickly 'morphed into a social crisis, leading to mass unrest' around the globe as protest, riot and civil agitation were centre-stage.⁴⁴ As well continued actions by the Occupy and Anonymous movements, 2011 was the year in which

⁴¹ Ward E. Y. Elliott and Robert J. Valenza, "And Then There Were None: Wincing the Shakespeare Claimants," *Computers and the Humanities* 30 (1996), 191.

⁴² Sébastien Lefait, "Irreverence as Fidelity? Adapting Shakespearean Reflexivity in *Anonymous* (Emmerich 2011)," *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies* 17, number 2 (2015), 242.

⁴³ Paul H. Altrocchi, *Malice Aforethought: The Killing of a Genius* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2010), 277.

⁴⁴ Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2015), x.

London experienced five days of widespread civil unrest which served as a focal point for economic and social anger in the face of the Conservative-led government's severe austerity programme. In *Anonymous*, London is also depicted as a hotbed of tension and potentially explosive political violence.

The image Emmerich creates of London both echoes and contrasts that of his earlier depiction of the frenetic, anonymised New York. We first see London via an overhead shot of a dark, thunderous CGI city, with the ominous bulk of the Tower of London seemingly dominating everything within shot, as a figure runs onscreen, shot via a series of frantic jump-cuts. Crucially, the audience only becomes aware that the rain-soaked figure being chased through the city's narrow streets is the playwright Ben Jonson (played by Sebastian Armesto) because his name is repeatedly shouted by his pursuers, immediately revoking any sense of anonymity and at once affirming the power of the state to both define and control a subject's identity. Wide-angled shots of soldiers marching down dark streets are juxtaposed with cuts to scenes of Jonson frantically running to the Rose Theatre, carrying a sheath of papers that ultimately turn out to be the hidden works of Shakespeare. The soldiers carry torches, and that light contrasts with Jonson moving in the dark, half-hidden by a city that appears to be alive with subversive figures – we catch brief glimpses of what appear to be prostitutes, as well as other figures that shrink from the soldiers.

Such effects stress a clash between two domains and also suggests a deeper conflict between two opposing ideologies – the state-sanctioned, armed forces of law and order and the supposedly subversive arena of Jonson and the destabilising potential of what he represents through his powers as a playwright. After a brief struggle within the Rose Theatre, which is set alight, Jonson is captured and brought to the Tower to be interrogated by Elizabeth I's secretary of state, Sir Robert Cecil (played by David Thewlis). Cecil himself appears to be a weak, unimposing figure, but he is at the head of a regime which uses violence to control its populace.

Stephen Alford has written that by 1598 (the year before *Anonymous* is initially set), Robert Cecil's father William had 'put in place a formidable network of agents' across England and Europe – and *Anonymous* deploys a similar characterisation of his son as a master of espionage at the centre of a complex web of power.⁴⁵ *Anonymous* extends this conception of Cecil as spymaster extraordinaire – no one, it seems, can escape the reach of his spy network, which includes servants, players and playwrights, soldiers and beggars. The success of this network of spies is emphasised when Cecil is able to tell a bound Jonson all about his life – his father's job, his education and his prospects as a playwright.

This interaction demonstrates how the film constructs the early modern state as a nebulous, all-encompassing body, indicative of what Stephen Greenblatt describes as a 'totalizing society' in which the individual is subject to religious, political and social forces beyond their control.⁴⁶ In the scene, Jonson is tied to a chair

⁴⁵ Steven Alford, *The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012), 311-12.

⁴⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, "The Circulation of Social Energy," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 2.

and beaten by Cecil's acolytes, as the black-clad secretary watches, bathed in the shadows cast by a large fire. Cecil is surrounded by implements of torture, with low-angled shots working to emphasise his position as one of dominance, rapidly interspersed with shots of Jonson being beaten. Here, *Anonymou's* preoccupation with issues of surveillance – often highlighted by the frequent use of overhead camera shots – bleeds into the state's violent application of power. Cecil's reach, and by extension, that of the early modern state, is further emphasised when Jonson, asked if he has ever been arrested, replies 'I'm a writer aren't I? Of course I've bloody well been arrested'. This characterisation of Jonson alludes to his historical reputation as a controversial playwright who was censored, arrested and imprisoned a number of times – clearly this is a figure that Emmerich and his team felt embodied the anti-state sentiments at the heart of their narrative.

More importantly, however, in *Anonymou's* writing and writers in general are clearly coded as a means of resisting the power of the state – the works of Shakespeare within the film, written by the Earl of Oxford, are seen as particularly damaging because of their success and the means by which they draw disparate sections of the population together. A clear dichotomy is then established between the creative, politically subversive writings of Oxford, and the material power of the state which is embodied by Cecil and the Tower. The tensions between these two positions comes to a bloody climax following a performance of the potentially seditious *Richard III*, which is used to inflame the London populace and urge them to join the Earl of Essex's revolt against Cecil and the Tudor bureaucracy. Here, *Anonymou's* departs from the traditional narrative of Essex's rebellion by having the Lord Chamberlain's Men perform *Richard III* instead of *Richard II*. According to tradition, *Richard II* was read as an attack on Elizabeth, and encouraged further dissent among the Court about the elderly queen's increasingly vacillating and unsteady leadership. The use of *Richard III* in *Anonymou's* is an example of the adjustments required to make sure historical films operate in a clear way for modern audiences. The figure of Richard becomes a monstrous stand-in for Cecil, emphasising that in the universe of *Anonymou's*, it is Cecil and not Elizabeth who is the target of the plot – Elizabeth remains an iconic, heroic figure, and Cecil is cast as the villain. Both texts also deal with themes of power, corruption, civil strife and loyalty – Emmerich's decision to make use of *Richard III* may be attributable to a belief that this text would be more familiar to the audience, and so the themes of corruption, depravity and power which *Anonymou's* explores, will become more apparent when viewed within the context of a such a culturally-significant text.

The figure of Elizabeth I is also deployed in *Anonymou's* in a way that serves to undercut her traditional status as an icon of Anglophone culture, as well as affirming the film's cynical, twenty-first century inflected view of the state. Elizabeth is seen across two timelines – Vanessa Redgrave as the elderly Elizabeth in the late 1590s, and her daughter Joely Richardson as Elizabeth in the mid-1550s. Frequent flashbacks between the two periods work to emphasise what has become, since the late 1990s, the increasingly common image of a sexually active and un-virginal Elizabeth.⁴⁷ This derives in large part from the success of Shekar Kapur's 1998 film

⁴⁷ For more scholarship on filmic depictions of the relationship between Elizabeth and sexuality, see: Renee Pigeon "No Man's Elizabeth: the Virgin Queen in Recent Films", in

Elizabeth, starring Cate Blanchett as a youthful Elizabeth who only at the end of the film cultivates a performative virginity that serves a primarily political and propagandistic function. Ian McAdam observes of *Elizabeth* 'from a postmodern perspective it is [...] incredible or intolerable that Elizabeth as queen would deny herself sexual freedom' – the sexually active queen's utilisation of a myth of virginity is depicted as part political optic, part in-joke with her ladies-in-waiting.⁴⁸

Anonymous performs a similar narrative strategy, foregrounding the fictive nature of Elizabeth's status as virgin (there are references to previous pregnancies) but framing it within a twenty-first century dialectic of female empowerment – she inhabits her role as a sovereign through her attainment of sexual freedom, a freedom that binds her body and the body politic together. Yet this secret history of Elizabeth – who, it is revealed is the Earl of Essex's mother – also works to emphasise the notion of conspiracy and cover up that so permeates the text. The frequent flashbacks between the 1540s, when Elizabeth begins her affair with de Vere, and the 1590s, when de Vere is writing as 'Shakespeare', undermine a sense of history as a stable, ordered progression of events (as expressed via historiography) and instead depict it as an unstable, constantly-shifting set of narratives. Crucially, the implication in *Anonymous* is that the Tudor state has manufactured the narrative of Elizabeth's virginity to cover up her sexual indiscretions and illegitimate children – again, reaffirming for a twenty-first century audience, familiar with WikiLeaks, the NSA hacking scandal and fears over increased state surveillance – the notion that history has been constructed by the state as a means of exerting power over its subjects. In *Anonymous* and texts like it, history becomes reframed as mode of control rather than a set of academic practices.

Finally, the two depictions of Elizabeth reflect the changing status of the Tudor state across her reign – the youthful, sexually active Richardson emphasising the hopeful beginnings of a young Elizabeth's reign, while Redgrave is figured as elderly and post-menopausal, with both bodily and intellectual decay evident in her performance. Such contrasting depictions of Elizabeth clearly work to evoke the crisis that faced the Tudor state at the end of her reign, with no offspring to assume the throne. This is further refracted through the mother-daughter relationship of Redgrave and Richardson, bringing to the fore for audiences issues of fertility, motherhood and even familial continuity and inheritance of professions. While Elizabeth has entered the public consciousness as the humanist queen who presided over 'England's greatest flowering of literary art', her long and childless reign has been constantly reappraised.⁴⁹ For Simon Adams, far from being lauded as Gloriana, Belphebe, Titania or Cynthia as she was in texts such as Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590), at her end Elizabeth was an elderly lady

Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction, ed. Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 2001) and Aidan Norrie, 'A man? A woman? A lesbian? A whore?: Queen Elizabeth I and the Cinematic Subversion of Gender', in *Pre-modern Rulers and Postmodern Viewers: Gender, Sex, and Power in Popular Culture*, ed. Janice North, Karl C. Alvestad and Elena Woodacre (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 319-340.

⁴⁸ Ian McAdam, "Fiction and Projection: The Construction of Early Modern Sexuality in 'Elizabeth' and 'Shakespeare in Love'," *Pacific Coast Philology* 25, no. 1 (2000), 52.

⁴⁹ Walker, 1.

'shut up in a chamber from her subjects' – a spinster who had abrogated her duty and left England without a direct heir.⁵⁰ *Anonymous* emphasises such an interpretation of Elizabeth, drawing from her all the power inherent in her quasi-immortal image as it exists in the wider public imaginary, and instead reframing it around her very mortal body and its natural processes of aging and decay, which operates as a reflection of a tired and ineffective Tudor regime. Historians such as J. A. Sharpe have increasingly taken a view that highlights the 'poor condition' of both the Henrician and Elizabethan economies, 'burdened with financing warfare' as well as the wider European trend towards urbanisation with all its attendant 'social mobility and rifts in social order' – *Anonymous* clearly echoes such a reading of the period, because it connects so vividly to contemporary concerns, highlighting the strains on similar economic and political power structures following the economic crash.⁵¹ The lonely figure of the elderly Elizabeth, forced to execute her illegitimate son, Essex, and unable to marry her lover de Vere, symbolises a total collapse of Tudor power and political energy, signalling an ignominious end to the reign of one of England's greatest monarchs.

Conclusion

The twenty-first century is an unsettled time, in which long-held certainties have repeatedly been buffeted by powerful crises, stemming from economic and social disorder, conflict and growing division across multiple axes. Films such as *Anonymous* which reinterpret the early modern past not only shape their viewers' conceptions of the complex and often bloody genealogy of their own traditions, but of the violent and often savage realities of multiple divides in the twenty-first century. Although such strategies of representation may appear to be simplistic and involve uncomplicated imaginary intervention, this essay argues for film's importance as a way of exploring not only our relationship with the past but also our understanding of our own moment. Early modern England, and the way in which it has been summoned in the twenty-first century, is at the heart of this exploration because it remains a crucial and central prism through which Anglophone cultures identify with and affirm their sense of self. The re-telling of the early modern past challenges the imagined shared past which has dominated the Anglosphere, and in particular Britain, and it poses questions for how nations explore their role in the world today and how the power they hold has been attained.

In *Anonymous*, early modern power is depicted either as the enactment of violence by the state upon its subjects, or as a conspiratorial network that uses propaganda and silence to maintain the dominant ideology of the Tudor state. This is a

⁵⁰ Simon Adams, 'Eliza Enthroned? The Court and its Politics,' in *The Reign of Elizabeth I*, ed. Christopher Haigh (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), 77. For discussions on the difficulties of the last years of Elizabeth's reign, see: John Guy, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I: War and Politics, 1588-1605* (Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁵¹ James Sharpe, *Early Modern England: A Social History, 1550-1760* (London: Arnold, 1997), 7.

historicised performance of power that uses power – and the threat of violence – to cut across both the early modern period and the twenty-first century within which such texts were produced, a period that has been dominated by questions about the limits of state power. In doing so, these texts attempt to legitimise their own alternative ways of remembering and recreating the past, communicating it as a valid rendering of a period that, in Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete's words 'continues to act as an ideological provocation to the present'.⁵² The period is no longer considered to be a long, grand narrative of a golden age of discovery, but instead a fraught and turbulent time dominated by conflict and remembered via competing narratives, in which power, and in particular, questions about who wields the power to delineate and remember the past, are emphasised as a way to make connections with the present and its own power struggles and political malaise. Such connections allow the public to view history not as a monolithic entity, but instead as the result of a series of processes which, at every turn, are implicated in a complex network of power dynamics that reflect political, social and cultural anxieties and developments, which in turn influence how the public engage with the past.

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⁵² Burnett and Streete, 14.

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