

# Introduction: Early Modern Drama on Screen

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## Abstract

The Introduction contextualizes the essays in this cluster about screen adaptations of early modern drama, emphasizing the simultaneous freedom from strictures of time and space that screen adaptations enjoy and their acquisition of new meanings and additional resonances that could not have been thought of when they were first created.

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Early modern plays were written for a bare stage and early modern performance was ephemeral. When we do have records of it, they are typically misleading, baffling, or both: Simon Forman, watching *Macbeth* at the Globe on 20 April 1610, thought he had heard the witches acclaim Macbeth as "Hail, Macbeth, King of Codon," and believed that there was a character called Mack Dove (Mabillard 2017). Screen adaptations, by contrast, can disregard both time and space. They can be set anywhere and at any time, and they endure, which means that as they stick around in the cultural landscape they may acquire new meanings and additional resonances that could not have been thought of when they were first created. It is adaptation's ability to import new meanings that lies at the heart of all the essays in this special issue, which are interested not so much in what their chosen texts may originally have meant as in what they may come to mean.

## Coming to Mean I: Alex Cox's *Revengers Tragedy*

A particularly striking example of coming to mean is Alex Cox's *Revengers Tragedy*. When this was first released in 2003, its exploration of cultural faultlines seemed confined to the film's obvious but commonplace interest in a north-south divide and the opposition created by collapsing the family structure, so that the Duchess becomes the real mother of Lussurioso, which sets up a clear contrast with the close family group of Vindici, Carlo, and Castiza.<sup>1</sup> However, watching the film in 2011, the year when it is set, was a very different experience. The comet seemed less like celestial machinery than like the Daleks and the Cybermen arriving to give Christopher Eccleston, by then starring in *Doctor Who*, something else to worry about. In the wake of the Arab Spring,

the public protests in the streets of Liverpool, where the rioters have all covered their faces, looked for all the world like a Scouse Spring, alerting us to the extent to which there was in fact always a contrast in place between the film's images of a distinctively Western decadence — this is the city as urban wasteland, with the nearest to green space a patch of waste ground opposite the Liver Building — and images of purity drawn from Islamic iconography and custom. At the trial of Junior, Imogen and all the other women in court with her veil their heads, while Castiza covers her face, and it is repeatedly remarked on that she is accompanied by her brothers and is therefore safe.

A further set of references is also in play. Cox chose Middleton rather than Shakespeare because he felt that Middleton espouses regicide. The leaflet inside the DVD suggests that watching the film may make you think of storming the palace, and Cox draws on the image of Princess Diana, who clearly lies behind the suggestively-named Imogen: she has blonde hair and a shy downcast glance, and after her suicide we see shots of memorials of flowers and toys. There are also conspiracy theories about her death ("The shot was in the back of the head. She'd have had to be a double-jointed octopus"), and her husband is played by Tony Booth, whose real-life son-in-law Tony Blair was the man credited with coining the term "the People's Princess." Particularly pertinent here is Mohammed al-Fayed's repeated insistence that Princess Diana was murdered because "the establishment" knew that she planned to marry his son Dodi and convert to Islam, and that the attacks on the World Trade Center were revenge for the west's treatment of Palestine and other parts of the Arab world; Cox, who is on record as regarding Liverpool as effectively a double for New York (Davies, 2000, 13), initially wanted the 9/11 attacks to form the climax of the film. The Diana references were always there, but by 2011 audiences would have been better prepared for them by a strongly marked set of allusions in Tim Supple's 2003 TV film of *Twelfth Night*, in which Claire Price's Olivia is clearly modelled on the princess, while Florence Cabaret suggests that Sebastian could be read as Dodi (Cabaret 2008, 167). In 2011, Cox's film was thus still a version of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, but it had also come to be about revolutions abroad as well as potential revolution at home, and it was also even more clearly about Diana.

### Coming to Mean II: Sarah Harding's Compulsion

Screen adaptations also seek out new audiences, with whom they need to communicate in new ways. Sarah Harding's TV film *Compulsion* (2009) drew on a growing body of both stage and film versions of Shakespeare within the British Asian community.<sup>2</sup> In the case of *Compulsion* (an adaptation of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*), the family shown are very clearly and specifically identified as Indian — there are numerous verbal references, including the information that they come from Mumbai, while their alcohol consumption makes it clear that they are not

Muslim — but the film's affiliations are with a body of work that has featured a number of less tightly defined communities. These include Tim Supple's very well-received stage productions first of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2006), which toured widely, and subsequently of *As You Like It* at the Curve Theatre in Leicester (2009), whose multicultural cast included a sari-wearing Rosalind and Celia and music by Nitin Sawhney; the 2003 TV version of *Twelfth Night*, also directed by Supple; and Don Boyd's *My Kingdom* (2001), in which Jimi Mistry appears as one of the Lear figure's sons-in-law. *Compulsion* contains echoes of all these, not least in the reappearance of Parminder Nagra, who starred in the Supple *Twelfth Night*: particularly noteworthy is the fact that as in *Twelfth Night* we are offered a male character to compare the heroine's situation and behavior with, since unlike her original in the play Anjika, the Beatrice-Joanna of the film, has here been given a brother, Jaiman/Jamie, who hasn't been to Cambridge, doesn't do anything useful, takes drugs, and yet entirely escapes the policing mechanisms and the criticism to which his sister's behavior is so relentlessly subject.

There are several reasons why the British Asian community should form an attractive setting for an adaptation of *The Changeling*. In the context of the massive popularity of Bollywood and the perceived need to increase the appeal of a dramatic genre too easily pigeonholed as accessible and interesting only to a few, an injection of Asian flavor is obviously an attractive option, and one that may, additionally, seem to offer a built-in postcolonial dimension that further facilitates the creation of a sense of contemporaneity. There is also the wider hope that interesting an Asian audience in Renaissance drama will translate into "bums on seats" for live productions. The British Asian community as a whole is perceived as under-represented in theater audiences, as illustrated by an article in *The Independent* in 2011 in which Farhana Shaikh asked,

Why do so few Asians visit the theatre? I have asked the question via Twitter and Facebook. One blogger replies: "For me, theatre is a real luxury; it's not so much about the money but the time." This is typical of the responses I get from tech-savvy Asians who are riding the social media wave to market themselves and their businesses. (Shaikh 2011, 20)

This alarming idea that most plays are simply too long had already been put forward in a Michael Billington article a few days previously about an apparent trend to forgo intervals, though this was about theater audiences in general rather than Asian ones in particular. Billington was writing in the immediate aftermath of the opening of Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* at the National, which on the night I saw it came in at one hour and fifty minutes straight through; earlier that week I had also seen *Edward II* at the Rose on Bankside, which was two hours straight through (though in the case of the Rose the decision not to have an interval is perhaps an inevitable product of the fact

that there is nowhere for the audience to go and no facilities for them to use). However in a 2010 special issue of Shakespeare devoted entirely to theater reviewing, Andrew Dickson noted that

I was talking, a couple of weeks ago, to Claire Higgins who's playing the Countess in *All's Well That Ends Well* at the National. She described to me that one of the great shocks for her of being in that production is that when she looks out across the audience, for the first time in her Shakespeare-playing career, she sees a significant number of nonwhite faces in the audience. (Wells 2010, 322)

(I can confirm anecdotally that at the performance I attended, I was sitting next to a group of young Asian girls.) Shakespeare, then, is perceived as the solution to the apparent reluctance of British Asians to go to the theater, and his contemporaries ride on his coat-tails.

Despite its ingenuity, *Compulsion* is perhaps not wholly successful, since it is open to the charges of being too schematic and trying too hard to discuss "issues," with the result that characters' behaviour is driven not by its own internal logic but by the demands of the plot and the desire to tick a whole range of boxes from environmental awareness to drugs, gender, race, the ethics of cigarette manufacture, the malaise of new graduates, and class. The actors are thus given too little to do (Winstone relies almost entirely on saying "Git in the car"), and there is not enough of the wild, quirky, at times almost dreamlike structure-by-association of the original play, where Beatrice-Joanna is doubly hyphenated both as herself and as her dead sister, where sex changes nature, where courtship strategies involve impersonating lunatics, and where a finger with a ring on it is severed at the end of a narrow winding space in a metaphor which is simultaneously sexual and more than that.

The key to the film's take on the issues it raises might be thought to lie in its chosen title, but that is inherently ambiguous. Does it mean compulsion as in a sense of obsession, or as in being compelled, and if so who is compelling whom to do what? Anjika complains that "I've spent my whole life doing what men wanted me to," but we note that her mother is by no means powerless — she is easily able to persuade her husband to accept Anjika's English boyfriend — and Anjika herself ultimately gets everything she wants, or at least everything she thinks she wants, for although her guilt is never proved (though her friend suspects something), it has been apparent for some time that she is trapped inside her own head. In the last shot, we see her wearing Flowers' bangle and strapped into the back of the wedding car, recalling the image system of bars which was so strongly marked in the Supple *Twelfth Night* and which has also been present here too. (The first full shot of her has barred windows behind; Flowers drives past railings that look like bars and picks up an Asian girl there; he parks Anjika in front of railings and a bench with a slatted back

when she asks him for sex; later, as they talk in the car, slatted blinds can be seen behind his head.) As a chauffeur, Flowers is a figure of mobility, but Anjika, it seems, is in a prison, even if it is one partly of her own making. In replacing the prison-like atmosphere of Vermandero's castle with purely internalized constraints, the film perhaps seeks to evoke an idea of ideological repression which it may feel will resonate with the young South Asian audiences to which it hopes to appeal. In Harding's adaptation, *The Changeling* has ceased to be about seventeenth-century Alicante and instead come to be about twenty-first century London, and instead of speaking about Spaniards, it now speaks about British Indians.

### The Essays

A similar tension between compulsion and liberty obtains in the wide variety of screen adaptations examined by the contributors to this special issue. Andrew Duxfield's exploration of Jan Žvankmajer's *Faust* argues that not only is the film surrealist in its own right, but that it helps us to understand *Doctor Faustus* itself as a proto-surrealist text. One aspect of that surrealism is the way both play and film (doubly) resurrect the dead; Janice Wardle's essay explores how Shakespeare is "brought to life" in three modern stories for screen, and in the process, implicitly intervenes in current theoretical debates about the death of the author and the importance of fidelity in adaptations. Constraint literally comes to the fore as Domenico Lovascio discusses the Tavianis' transposition of *Julius Caesar* to an Italian prison in their 2012 film *Cesare deve Morire*, in which art becomes the liberator of the spirit, while Megan Murray-Pepper considers Ngaio Marsh's various imaginings of *Macbeth*, in the form of both real and fictional theater productions. This essay is about what Murray-Pepper terms Marsh's "intermedial aesthetic," but it is also about what *Macbeth* comes to mean in a new context and a new country.

Two essays focus on Hamlet. Adele Lee explores *King and the Clown* (*Wang-ui Namja*, dir. Lee Joon-ik 2005), which "grafts the play onto Korean history and retells the story from the perspective of the traveling players." Douglas Lanier discusses how the title of Helmut Käutner's *The Rest is Silence* evokes not only *Hamlet* itself but also the guilt-ridden silences of postwar Germany. Finally, R. S. White looks at three films that, on the face of it, appear to have nothing to do with Shakespeare — Jacques Rivette's New Wave movie, *Paris nous appartient* or *Paris Belongs to Us* (1961), *A Love Song for Bobby Long* (2004), and the Australian aboriginal film *Bran Nue Dae* (2009) — and shows how they can collectively comment on both Australia and *Pericles* as sites in which new generations come to terms with the old. Together, these seven essays explore how screen adaptations help the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries to find new audiences and negotiate new meanings, as *Doctor Faustus* becomes Czech, *Hamlet* Korean and German,

*Macbeth* a New Zealander, and *Pericles* an Australian, while even the inherent Englishness of Shakespeare and Italianness of Julius Caesar are made to mean in new ways.

### Notes

1. Both Ben Spiller (2003) and Patrick J. Cook (2007, 88) discuss the repeated shots of the back of a limousine in which the Duke's sons jostle for space but which gets less and less crowded as brother upon brother disappears from the scene.
2. In the UK, the term "Asian" is primarily used to refer to groups of persons with ancestry in the Indian sub-continent.

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