

Marlowe, Jarman, and Edward II: Use or Abuse?

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The relationship between cinema and theatre is an old one. In fact, it can be traced back to the very origins of the film industry, when dramatic actors were required for the screen, and theatre, together with fiction, were used as sources for plots and stories to be narrated visually. The cinema has made extensive use of all the possible literary periods, but when it has turned its attention to Renaissance England, Shakespeare has always been the favourite choice. The election is not based exclusively on literary or dramatic qualities, since cinema, as any other kind of industry, tries to be a profitable enterprise and Shakespeare has demonstrated to be almost always a synonym for success. When Derek Jarman decides then to shoot a film about a historical English king such as Edward II using exclusively the dramatic text of the Elizabethan playwright Christopher Marlowe, questions such as the commercial viability of the project or the contemporary relevance of such a play and historical moment come to mind.

Jarman's personal circumstances at the moment of conceiving the film may provide an answer to those questions. In December 1986 the British director found out that he was HIV positive, and that knowledge started informing his cinematic career. In the script he wrote right after finding out his illness, "Sod 'Em," a film never released, Jarman started making use of the Marlovian text including some excerpts and calling the protagonist couple Edward and Gaveston. That script tried to put homosexuality back into history, and because of that, the British director included not only explicit references to *Edward II*, but also historical characters reappropriated by gay culture: Marlowe himself, Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde and Isaac Newton. Jarman has shown from the very beginnings of his career as film director an especial interest in the process of re-writing history and culture from an ex-centric--in this case queer--perspective and so, such well-known films as *Sebastiane* (1976) or *Caravaggio* (1986) can be considered a deliberate attempt to put homoerotic desire at the very centre of the historical plot.

But *Edward II*--the feature film released in 1991--goes a step beyond since, apart from being another instance of the interest Jarman has demonstrated in the continuity of gayness through history, it is also both a self-reflection on a particular moment in his life--his awareness of being HIV positive--and a personal response to the AIDS crisis and homophobia in contemporary society. In other words, Jarman, far from attempting a faithful rendering of an "old play" (his words), is abusing that old play and remodelling it on his own image.

The title given to the edited script--*Queer Edward II*--and the consciousness of being "improving" Marlowe's dramatic work point out the contemporary director's aims when approaching the Elizabethan text; as Jarman writes: "[f]ind a dusty old play and violate it" (*Queer*, n.p.). The notion of violation is useful in the present context. *Edward II*, the film, can be conceived as a continuous violation of a historical figure--king Edward II--, a classical text--Marlowe's *Edward II*--and a teleological notion of History. The first kind of aggression seems to be present in any translation from one mode of discourse into a different one, since it necessarily implies a disruption of a narrative in order to create a new one, and in fact it is present in Marlowe's literary rendering of Holinshed, Stow and Fabyan. The second and third ones, however, are not so typical and serve here a very specific task: to link a progressive dismemberment of the cultural canon with the annihilation of the physical body by AIDS. Jarman's choice of Marlowe's text is, then, not a mere fancy, since, as a

canonical text, it allows him to penetrate the cultural heart of the nation and to ransack it from within, and, as a gay product it also allows an immediate identification on the part of a contemporary gay constituency.

The narrative structure of the film clearly abuses any plan Marlowe could have conceived for his play. Instead of a linear development, the spectator at the cinema is confronted with Edward's memories at the moment of his death, and the cause-and-effect disposition of scenes is here substituted by slightly interrelated episodes in the life of Edward II, his family and his peers. These alterations of the dramatic source are not the consequence of Jarman's whimsicality; on the contrary, they are the expression of a contemporary attitude toward History and language, obviously shared by the British artist. Following Lacan's theories on psychoanalysis and language, meaning is not an aprioristic concept automatically applied to the linguistic signifier: only at the end of any linguistic delivery is meaning possible; that is, in order to understand, to provide a narrative, the subject must go back from the end of a speech to the very beginning, and only then a certain meaning is conferred to the whole text. That precisely is what Edward does: his life becomes meaningful, for the audience and for himself, only at the moment of his death, choosing those fragments which lead inexorably to that conclusion. The subject, therefore, is just a linguistic "I", a grammatical entity that provides a certain coherence to the dismembered portions of the self, to the different "I's" that constitute the illusion of a stable and unified subject. Two notions of History are here at stake: the linear, objective development which perpetuates power structures, and the subjective instability which challenges tradition and creates gaps in that discourse of power. As a gay activist, Jarman opts for this latter conception, and doing so makes Marlowe's text relevant. The textual body is then distorted in the same way as a physical body is disarranged by disease. Jarman's surgical intervention in the primary text is not dissimilar to the medical operation in the human body; the aim in both cases is to give coherence to a disordered entity. AIDS, in this interpretation, is not just a biographical fact, but a pertinent metaphor that helps explain the peculiar structure of the film.

The very beginning of the film is a good example of the kind of violence perpetrated on the Marlovian text: Edward sleeps, and Lightborn, the executor, reads a letter: "My father is deceased; come Gaveston." Lightborn is entrapped in the homoerotic relationship between Edward and Gaveston from this moment on, since his very existence is just possible as a consequence of that relationship. Furthermore, Gaveston's opening lines in Marlowe are delivered consecutively by Lightborn, Edward, who wakes, and then, Gaveston, creating thus in the film a discursive net that traps the three characters. These opening sequences justify themselves the whole narrative. The executor becomes involved in Edward's love affairs. He functions as a menace for the king, but, far from maintaining his detachment in the affairs, he creates an input of reminiscences in Edward's mind. Only later in the film, when Lightborn, in one of the two possible endings suggested by Jarman, instead of murdering Edward kisses him, the meaning of that first sequence becomes evident. Love, in all its different manifestations, is the only force that can make the human being triumph over death, disrupting thus the teleology of human life. Lightborn, the representative of the oppressive heterosexual social system, finally accepts Edward's sexuality and, through the act of acceptance, saves him from an ignominious death.

The film maintains a continuous dialogue with its dramatic source, acknowledging but, at the same time, resisting it, and through that resistance, modifying the meaning of the primary text. That post-modern strategy, the playful flirtation between Marlowe and Jarman, brings as a consequence a completely new text only understandable within a discourse very different from that other in which the Elizabethan author was immersed. The technique of collage employed by the contemporary British artist points to that direction. The process of editing puts together sequences directly taken from the Marlovian text and some new ones that highlight a particular reading of the previous text. The guest appearances of the dance company DV8 and the singer Annie Lennox seem to fulfil this purpose. The members of DV8 have publicly acknowledged their homosexuality, and queer issues inform their shows; Annie Lennox, on the other hand, has been appropriated by gay culture. Their appearance in the film, then, help emphasise the gay reading of *Edward II*. It is not coincidental that they intrude respectively in the first meeting of Gaveston and Edward--sealed with a kiss--and Gaveston's departure into exile--sealed with another one--. The sound-track and the kinetic layout of DV8's dancing sequence is full of broken rhythms, convulsive movement and sexual anxiety. Annie

Lennox's song, on the contrary, is a sad melody, a nostalgic and melancholy tune quite suitable to underline the mood of the sequence in which it is inserted. But, apart from the expansion of meaning created by those two narrative intrusions, the way Lennox's is shot also implies a disrupted--queer--reading of the whole sequence. Jarman purposefully employs a video-clip aesthetic, intermingling the lovers dancing in an exaggerated camp pose with close-ups and long shots of the singer. Sentimentality, therefore, is debunked from the sequence, inviting the audience to distance from the story and to analyse the way power structures try to absorb difference making it similar to, in this case, a melodramatic departure of heterosexual lovers. By means of the video-clip aesthetics, Jarman is defending the uniqueness of that particular relationship and resisting the great narratives of love by mocking them.

A similar purpose informs the ostension of the naked or semi-naked male body. Homoeroticism is the keyword in Jarman and that homoeroticism permeates most of the sequences in the film. The possible ambiguity of Gaveston's first speech is absolutely clarified by Jarman. The two hustlers making love in bed while Gaveston is speaking point out explicitly Gaveston and Edward's sexual orientation. Spencer's presence in the same sequence is just a redundant element that makes the audience aware of the kind of friends the king is going to be surrounded by. But the ostension of masculine muscular nudity can have other meanings. Assuming Jarman's preoccupation with AIDS, the erotization of man as object of desire can be read as an act of resistance, as a protest against the social metaphors created around AIDS that make explicit connections between the disease and the promiscuity attributed to the gay community. With this insistent insertion of eroticism Jarman is defending the right to choose one's own sexuality and to enjoy it without any kind of social stigmatisation. At the same time, the emphasis on homoeroticism and gay desire becomes an act of cultural resistance, a vindication of Marlowe and king Edward II as gay figures, putting their homosexuality in the forefront as a response to the traditional historical and literary canons which have omitted or minimised that question in their approach to those characters.

Among the many instances of the cult of the male body the sequence of the nude rugby scrum deserves a particular commentary. With it, Jarman is criticising homophobia while signalling the homoeroticism inherent in heterosexual social ceremonies. The sequence comes just after the earls and Mortimer have signed Gaveston's order of exile accusing him of corrupting the royal figure and using the religious condemnation of homosexuality as a prove of that corruption. In that context, rugby, a typically heterosexual manly game institutionally approved, is presented as a social ceremony that allows men to admire and touch each other. Jarman, in the same line as Barbara Kruger in some of her photographic series, is highlighting the necessary instability of sexual desire and the role society plays in the assumption of one's sexuality, showing the intricate and complex ceremonies necessary to express desire in public when looking for the social sanctioning of those acts.

The private and the public realms overlap in sexuality. Having sex, a private concern at first sight, becomes a public issue when society regularises the acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices. The ambivalence between what is right in private but condemnable in public is present in Marlowe, and constitutes the most relevant polarisation in the play. At the end of I.iv., Mortimer Senior justifies the king when asserting that "[t]he mightiest kings have had their minions." (390); the problem, then, is not so much the private love affair between Edward and Gaveston as the public consequences of that relationship. Mortimer Junior, answering his uncle, clarifies the whole question: "Uncle, his wanton humour grieves me not/ But this I scorn, that one so basely born/ Should by his sovereign's favour grow so pert. . . ." (I.iv.401-03) The barons are angry because of Gaveston's social advancement and their consequent loss of influence in the kingdom, not because he has become the lover of another man. That conflict of interests between the medieval conception of society as a rigidly hierarchical structure and the modern concept of social mobility, between nobility of birth and nobility of merit--gained through individual acts--is of utmost importance for the Elizabethan audience who saw Marlowe's play. Jarman and his contemporary audience do not seem to share those preoccupations with the role of monarchy in society, and because of that, the film ignores Edward's political and military feebleness--there is no reference to the English army military defeats in Scotland and France--, and focuses on the public repression of homosexuality. Jarman, much more than Marlowe, proclaims the necessity of politicizing sexuality. Gaveston's death is not

just an individual defeat, but a new example of homophobia characterised by the brutal police attack on a homosexual demonstration.

The social forces in the film are unambiguously recognisable as contemporary conservative institutions: Mortimer is an army officer that turns into a military dictator; Queen Isabella gradually assumes her regal pose and becomes Margaret Thatcher herself presiding over the Cabinet, the chorus of earls, accompanied at times by their foxhounds; and the representatives of the Anglican Church back the conservative policies of army and government. These representatives of the traditional English class system, aided by the police's repressive force, are made responsible of a persistent attempt to make gays and lesbians silent again in their closet. The presence of OUTRAGE--the gay and lesbian collective--demonstrating just when Isabella is justifying Edward's deposition, is a deliberate strategy to establish explicit connections between the private act of homosexual love and the necessity to insert it into a social discourse that may contribute to normalise that particular sexual choice.

The Marlovian text becomes for Derek Jarman a mere pre-text to comment on history, politics and sexuality, and to display his own ex-centric reading of the literary canon; but it is also a valid intertextual tool to make the audience aware of his personal circumstances. When re-writing the Elizabethan play, Jarman is writing himself; the film is much more concerned with the director's figure than with anything else, even though the words the characters recite are Marlowe's and not Jarman's. The British artist is thus defined by a previous linguistic discourse colliding with some other discourses of resistance to contemporary hegemonic power structures. The subject disappears in the discursive net which traps him, and becomes other, a foreign presence that makes him understandable, that turns him into a communicative entity. His own longing for death as a climactic ending to a sick existence is delivered through Elizabethan lines:

But what are kings when regiment is gone,
But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?
I know not, but of this I am assured,
That death ends all, and I can die but once.
Come death, and with thy fingers close my eyes,
Or if I live let me forget myself.

Jarman ends the film with these lines--a collage of different speeches from V.i.--, and doing so he perpetrates his last act of violence against Marlowe, against King Edward II, and against himself. The historical king is subsumed in the dramatic character and this one in the directorial voice over of the film. The three of them need social support--the nation, the audience, the gay community--, and in that support they go out of themselves turning into pure discourse, into social beings, into human beings.

Derek Jarman died of AIDS in 1994. Death's fingers closed his eyes, but he is still alive out of himself in king Edward II, Marlowe's play, and his own film.

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