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Staging Restoration England in the Post-Heritage Theatre Film: Gender and Power in *Stage Beauty* and *The Libertine*

Abstract: This article analyses two British post-heritage films, Richard Eyre's *Stage Beauty* (2004) and Laurence Dunmore's *The Libertine* (2005). Both films are set in the seventeenth century and use the theatre as a central metaphor to describe and capture the cultural sensibilities of Restoration England. Both are based on stage plays in which theatre also functions as a site of resistance to cultural and social norms of gender and sexual politics. However, both films end by reinscribing and reaffirming the norms they set out to question, as transgressive desire is preempted and contained by an aesthetics of spectacle. Approaching the films in the light of gender performativity and queer theory, as well as examining their depiction of historical figures like Edward Kynaston and Elizabeth Barry, King Charles II and the earl of Rochester, this essay tries to find out why Restoration England appears to be so difficult to present cinematically.

1. Restoration England in Post-Heritage Cinema

“Counterfeit will not serve you on the stage.”
Rochester in *The Libertine* (Jeffreys 1995, 30)

Every period creates its own images of the past. Although historical novels, plays and films rarely acknowledge it, they can often tell us at least as much about their own time as about the period in which their stories take place. Sir Walter Scott's ideas about medieval chivalry, for example, as presented in novels like *Ivanhoe* (1819) and *The Talisman* (1825), are not merely indebted to historical information about the Middle Ages but also deeply rooted in early nineteenth-century notions of civilization, masculinity and gender relations. Because they inevitably make selections from historical material, because they omit and emphasise or even change particular elements from the available historical evidence, the stories we tell about the past are also stories we tell about ourselves and our own time. They create a ‘usable past,’¹ one that is not infrequently tailored to a contemporary audience's habits, tastes and desires.

¹ In the wake of Nietzsche's “Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben” (1874), theories of history, cultural memory and collective identity in the West have elaborated on the distinction between ‘storage memory’ (or archival memory) on the one hand and ‘functional memory’ on the other hand, the latter being a mode of applying a certain motivated selection

The demand for such stories seems unflagging. Historical films and costume dramas never quite fall out of fashion. In the UK, the so-called 'heritage film' has been widely successful since the 1980s, a fact that has been explained in sociological terms as a compensatory reaction to the radical modernisation of British society under Thatcher and to the loss of the former Empire's global political significance (s. Higson 1993, 2003). While the Merchant-Ivory films of the 1980s and 1990s mainly focused on Victorian and Edwardian adaptations, with an obvious predominance of the novels of E.M. Forster and Henry James, more recent productions also risk excursions into less well-covered territories. In recent years, as Forster-mania has given way to the Austen craze, more and more adaptations of nineteenth-century English literature have been produced (cf. Gibson 1999, Voigts-Virchow 2004). In contrast, a more wide-ranging and rather flexible historical imagination is tangible behind big-budget productions like Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995), Michael Caton-Jones's *Rob Roy* (1995), Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998), or Justin Chadwick's *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008).² But while the Middle Ages and Tudor England on the one hand, and Victorian and Edwardian Britain on the other might be said to have been well served by the film industry, the cinematic output that covers the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is significantly lower in quantity and often in quality. This fact is not so easy to understand. Certainly, 1649 or 1689 are no less fascinating or decisive years in British history than 1588 or 1851. Are Civil War, Restoration and Glorious Revolution more difficult to grasp or to present on screen than the Act of Supremacy or the Spanish Armada? Would the lives of Milton, Bunyan or Davenant, to name but a few, not make for some excellent films? Even the 'historical' comedy series *Blackadder* (BBC 1983–1989), spanning a period of four centuries and a half from 1485 to 1917, has a gap between its 'Elizabethan' Series Two and the late eighteenth-century Series Three. Apart from Ken Hughes's highly nationalistic and now rather dated *Cromwell* of 1970 or Peter Greenaway's self-reflexive and artistic *Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), films set in the seventeenth century are few and far between. And if they do materialise, they tend to be less successful artistically and financially, quickly forgotten like Michael Hoffman's *Restoration* (1995, based on the novel by Rose Tremain) or Mike Barker's *To Kill a King* (2003). Restoration England appears to be a lacuna in contemporary cultural and cinematic memory. If not cinematically unrepresentable, it is certainly underrepresented.

The two films discussed here, then, are exceptions to this rule. As period pieces, they are less concerned with politics and large-scale (or, to stay in the picture, widescreen) history than with notions of identity, gender and the limits of per-

from the past for the purposes of legitimisation, delegitimisation and distinction, often in relation to a national(ist) political agenda (Assmann 1999, 130-9). On the fictive production of foundational 'memories,' see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983. Erll and Nünning 2005 offer a survey over a wide range of 'memory concepts' used in literary studies today. – For their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article, I wish to thank Gert Buelens and Jean-Pierre Vander Motten.

² See, for instance, <<http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/theotherboleyngirl/>> (December 7, 2007).

missible social behaviour. In this respect, they differ from earlier films like *Cromwell* or from later heritage films set in the Tudor period. Dating from 2004 and 2005, they can be seen to belong to a new era of ‘post-heritage’ cinema that, according to Claire Monk (2001, 7), self-consciously foregrounds strategies of subverting the heritage film’s inherent nostalgia. They are, I think, symptomatic of contemporary attitudes towards the early modern period in general, and the Restoration era in particular as predominantly concerned with the precarious distinction between authenticity and theatricality, between inwardness and staging, (dis)simulation, masquerade and cross-dressing. They are thus very much films of today that reflect contemporary sensibilities and academic interests like transsexuality, gender-bending, the body and queerness.

Theatricality is the predominant connecting link between contemporary post-heritage costume drama and the later seventeenth century. Theatricality, performance and performativity are key elements in these films as much as they are keywords in current critical discourse. Like many terms in literary and cultural studies, they are notoriously difficult to define and “inextricably bound up with the problems [they are] being used to discuss” (Williams 1976, 13). What happens on a stage, a scenic representation in front of an audience, can be described as a simulation (or a heightened or debased or otherwise modified version) of lived life outside the theatre. Whenever theatricality enters real life, the term can be used in a pejorative sense connoting inauthenticity or staginess. However, a performance on stage is always connected by a link of signification to performance (“the doing of an action or operation,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*) beyond the stage. Not only do theatrical codes resemble those governing modes of behaviour in real life; not infrequently, what we do in real life occurs in similarly prescribed, at times even coercive settings or frames. This is why cultural anthropologists like Victor Turner (1987) and sociologists like Erving Goffman (1956 and 1974) have used the theatre as a descriptive metaphor of socio-cultural processes and forms of behaviour. Both on stage and off, performances take place in prescribed settings according to conventionalised scripts and norms.

Over the past four decades, in the wake of Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* (1980 [1962]), scholars in a wide range of disciplines have been exploring the effective conditions of performativity. In order to be effective in a given setting, a performative act must be repeatable (the condition of ‘iterability’). According to Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, the subject’s position in discourse is determined not by his or her own intentions, but by institutional, social and cultural contexts as the “enabling cultural condition” (Butler 1993, 7) of performative acts. Butler extends Derrida’s condition of iterability (i.e. “the possibility of being repeated in the absence not only of its referent [...] but of a determined signified or current intention of signification;” s. Derrida 1982, 318; 315; 326-7) by a condition of citationality. The survival of the performative formulae depends on their accurate repetition (citation). In her work, Butler has emphasised the non-naturalness and the coercive dimension of performative constructions, but citationality also allows room for potential mis-citing that – unless immediately suppressed by violence –

can result in the revision or undoing of established norms. Although Butler is best known for her work on gender and ‘gender trouble’ (1990), her concept of the performative can be applied to other areas as well, in particular politics (s. Butler 1997). All these domains, from gender and sexuality to politics, figure prominently in the films under discussion here, and the stage (as the crucial locus and synecdoche of individual and social performance) is their central medium and metaphor.

The differences and shared characteristics of *Stage Beauty* and *The Libertine* are worth examining, not least because they both use the theatre as their central motivating force and as a site of cultural power and fascination. Attempting to build on the international success of John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), they investigate the potentials of theatre in early modern (and contemporary) culture and explore the Restoration as a highly theatrical period, an era pervaded by various modes of ‘staging’ in private and public lives. Both can be classified as belonging to, or at least partaking of, the genre of ‘theatre film’ (cf. Klein 2004 and 2005). Both films, not surprisingly, are themselves adaptations of plays. *Stage Beauty*, directed by Richard Eyre and released in 2004, is based on Jeffrey Hatcher’s play *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* (1999); Laurence Dunmore’s *The Libertine*, completed in the same year but first released in the UK in 2005, is based on the play of the same title by Stephen Jeffreys (1994).³ In either case, the playwright also wrote the screenplay. In both films, theatre and theatricality figure prominently as modes (and also models) of cultural performativity. Both use historical personalities as their protagonists. *Stage Beauty*, a more mainstream production, focuses on Edward Kynaston, one of the last actors on the Carolean stage to play female parts in the Elizabethan tradition, while *The Libertine* – an independent film that took more than ten years to realise – centres on the life and death of the notorious Restoration rake, poet and aficionado of theatre, John Wilmot, the second earl of Rochester.

In the following, I am going to enquire first into the films’ depiction of gender relations and gender insecurity, or (gender) performance anxiety, before turning to a comparison between their representations of King Charles II in order to demonstrate how the films’ more radical and experimental impulses – all of them inherited from the original and ultimately more daring plays on which they are based – are ultimately thwarted and glossed over by a contemporary ‘historicising’ aesthetics of spectacle.

³ German readers who may think they missed this film should note that it was never released in Germany and is currently only available on DVD as a UK or US import. I wish to thank Martin Spies for drawing my attention to this film. Quotations from both films have been transcribed from the respective DVD.

2. Empowered Women, Object Men

“I believe men are hurdles that must be negotiated.”
Elizabeth Barry in *The Libertine* (Jeffreys 1995, 30)

Both films can be viewed as enquiries into masculinity under duress. They surround their male protagonists with strong female characters, whose rise in stature and status points up even more forcefully the men’s decline. From strongly assertive, potent and powerful characters, Kynaston and Rochester are in the course of both films successively reduced to social insignificance, personal insecurity, and, in Rochester’s case, even mental and physical annihilation. Only Kynaston is permitted a chance of survival, but only after taking a severe beating by Sir Charles Sedley’s henchmen, and only after humiliating himself as a transvestite performer in taverns, who is exploited by the audience and his management.

The historical Edward Kynaston (baptised 1643, d. 1712?) was indeed one of the last actors to play female parts in the Elizabethan tradition on the Carolean stage. A common practise in the Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses, this tradition of boys or men performing women’s parts began to lapse after the Restoration and the re-opening of the theatres in 1660, as women were now allowed to perform these roles themselves. *Stage Beauty* depicts Kynaston, played by Billy Crudup, as a male ‘diva’ about to lose his livelihood. His situation somewhat resembles that of Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder’s classic *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) or Lina Lamont in Stanley Donen’s and Gene Kelly’s *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Like Desmond and Lamont, silent film stars whose world disintegrates when sound is introduced to the movies, Kynaston sees his special art of performance threatened by something new and vulgar: “A woman playing a woman – what’s the trick in that?” he asks. Kynaston here appears to echo what Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, namely that “drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but [...] hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (1993, 125). Women on the Restoration stage needed to repeat the prior imitation of a performance hypostatized and presented (by men in drag) as an idealisation of ‘natural’ and ‘original’ feminine qualities.

However, the historical Kynaston was not yet twenty years old at the Restoration, and he only had his stage debut at the Cockpit, Drury Lane, in March 1660, together with Thomas Betterton. John Downes, prompter for the Duke of York’s Company, praised Kynaston in his *Roscius Anglicanus* as “a compleat Female Stage Beauty; performing his Parts so well [...] that it has since been disputable among the judicious, whether any Woman that succeeded him so sensibly touch’d the Audience as he” (Downes 1789, 26). Later that same year, Kynaston was sworn in as a member of Thomas Killigrew’s King’s Company, continuing to perform female roles as well as taking on the parts of young men (s. Milling 2004). His art of illusion and transformation was still admired throughout the 1660s by such theatre buffs as Samuel Pepys, who is also featured as an observer figure in *Eyre*’s film. In his diary, Pepys recorded his praise of Kynaston several times. On August 18, 1660, he wrote that “one Kinaston, a boy, acted the Dukes sister [in John Fletcher’s

The Loyal Subject] but made the loveliest lady that ever I saw in my life – only, her voice not very good” (Pepys 1970, I, 224). Half a year later, on January 7, 1661, Pepys saw “Kinaston the boy” in a performance of Ben Jonson’s *The Silent Woman*; he again emphasised Kynaston’s ability for physical transformation:

Among other things here, Kinaston the boy hath the good turn to appear in three shapes: 1, as a poor woman in ordinary clothes [...]; then in fine clothes as a gallant, and in them was clearly the prettiest woman in the whole house – and, lastly, as a man; and then likewise did appear the handsomest man in the house. (Pepys 1970, II, 7)

Pepys did not comment on Kynaston’s further career, apart from a brief appearance in February 1669 when he reported that Kynaston had received a severe beating in revenge for impersonating Sir Charles Sedley, one of the libertine court wits, on stage; a week later (February 9) he noted that “Kinaston” was “well enough to act again, which he doth very well” (Pepys 1976, IX, 441).

There is, then, in Pepys’s diary no trace of Kynaston’s artistic crisis, nor of his crisis in terms of his gender or sexual identity. His repertory seems to have been far from threatened by the advent of women as stage performers; apart from roles like Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene* (a woman who is revealed to be a boy in disguise), Kynaston acted in demanding roles that involve no cross-dressing, such as Peregrine in Jonson’s *Volpone*, Boabdelin in Dryden’s *Conquest of Granada*, the title role of Orrery’s *The Black Prince*, and Scipio in Lee’s *Sophonisba* (Milling 2004). Far from unsuccessful, Kynaston moved on to become a shareholder in the King’s Company and remained influential after the troupe’s merger with the Duke’s Company in 1682, five years after announcing his retirement from the stage. Despite this announcement, Kynaston continued to appear on stage in powerful roles throughout the 1680s, not infrequently embodying kings or tyrants from Henry IV to Muley Moloch in Dryden’s *Don Sebastian*.

Kynaston’s acting career followed an established path on the early modern stage: It developed from parts usually reserved for boys (playing women and younger men) to more mature and finally senior male parts, from “the Duke’s sister” to King Henry IV. This shows not only the flexibility demanded of seventeenth-century actors in general (male more than female), but also the potentials for growth and development in an individual actor’s trajectory and choice of roles. The violent incident in 1669, moreover, was not directed against Kynaston as a female impersonator performing out of bounds (as it is in the film), but against his performance as a stage caricature of Sedley himself. “Exactly what Kynaston did that offended Sedley is not certain” (Highfill et al. 1984, IX, 82).

In the film, contrary to historical fact, Charles II introduces a ban on female impersonators in the playhouse. Thus the way onto the stage is free for women and barred for men in drag. The audience is meant to sympathise with poor Ned Kynaston, who loses not only his job and professional honour but also his gender identity: The film shows him having to re-learn how to act in a ‘masculine’ way, both on and off the stage. By showing the conventionality of gendered behaviour and the non-naturalness of ‘sex,’ the film might be seen as Butlerian in its queering of gender roles and sexual identities. However, its solution is highly conventional

and can equally be construed as highly conservative, since Kynaston's reintegration into human society, his re-introduction to the stage as a performer of male parts, and his 're-discovery' of his sexual identity as a man are only permitted to occur at the price of sacrificing his freely ranging bisexuality and submitting to a normative heterosexual regime. Earlier in the film, we see him having occasional affairs with female 'groupies' to whom he proves that he has, indeed, "a gentleman's thingy," as well as an ongoing relationship, however imbalanced by class difference, with George Villiers, the second duke of Buckingham, who enjoys 'dying in' Kynaston wearing Desdemona's or Cleopatra's wig on the stage bed. (Shakespeare, the viewer may conclude, could work as an aphrodisiac.) We are also shown that bisexuality was not infrequent in the seventeenth century when Sedley, who is "in the market for a mistress," feels the cross-dressed Kynaston up and, on revealing his masculinity, declares that he wants him nonetheless. His aggression against Kynaston at least partly derives from having been spurned and injured in his (class-based) pride.

From an initial condition of playful and visibly enjoyable transgression of conventional, scripted gender roles (permitted by the stage, but occasionally practiced off-stage as well), Kynaston undergoes a phase of abjection (cf. Kristeva 1982), shedding all the glamour that surrounded his former personality and supporting himself by performing in cheap transvestite shows in inns, before he is allowed to become a fully integrated subject again by subjecting himself to the normative codes of a heterosexual society. He is physically punished precisely for taking his flamboyant and disobedient behaviour into the streets, when he is accosted by Sedley and pretends to be a prostitute. It is for this act of social and gendered disobedience that he receives his well-nigh crippling beating. The ultimate price of abandoning a heteronormative masculinity, we learn, is physical pain and abjection. After his successful reintegration, having received 'sexual therapy' by his former maidservant and now star actress, Kynaston's repression of his transgressive desires results in an outbreak of violence: scripted, certainly, since this is a performance of *Othello*, but the point is that we do not know whether the violence he performs against Desdemona is indeed merely theatrical or, suddenly and brutally, authentic and directed against the actress who had previously ousted him from 'his' part. As the introduction of women to the stage leads to the (highly unlikely and anachronistic) discovery of method acting in a Shakespeare performance, the suppression of gender-transgressive masculine desires is translated into violence and, perhaps, racial discrimination. Needless to say, Kynaston as Othello has to perform in blackface. His masquerade has shifted from Desdemona to Othello, from gender to race; even though he is now a heterosexual male, he is once again relegated to the cultural margins by performing a (violent) racial other. Sexual subversiveness is replaced by racial subalternity.

In contrast to Kynaston, his former maidservant, Maria – an entirely fictional character, played by Claire Danes – develops into a star of Bridges Street. In the film, she is the first woman ever who is permitted by law to act in a playhouse, under the assumed name of 'Margaret Hughes.' The historical actress and royal mistress

Margaret Hughes (d. 1719) was possibly “among the first group of actresses to join the King’s Company of players after the Restoration” (Callow 2004), and is reported to have been the first woman to play Desdemona in *Othello*. In the film, before the ban on actresses is lifted, we see her sneak off to take part in a performance at the Cockpit, where she plays her Desdemona in a precise imitation of Kynaston’s performance. (One might receive the impression that *Othello* had been the only play in the Restoration repertory, and Shakespeare the only playwright.) The role of Maria/Margaret, and Danes’s performance of it, are clearly modelled on Gwyneth Paltrow’s Viola in *Shakespeare in Love*, who – dressed as a boy actor – takes over the part of Juliet, an experience that is both empowering and liberating. In *Stage Beauty*, Maria, like Kynaston, has to undergo a painful learning process. When she first auditions with Betterton, she once more copies exactly the artificial manner of delivery, the high-pitched voice and gestures that she has learned from Kynaston, such as “the five positions of feminine subjugation” – conventionalised postures of femininity that Kynaston has learned from a long tradition of boy actors. Her adoption of these postures, however, leads to the doubly theatrical and constructional – or deconstructive – effect of a woman impersonating a man’s impersonation of a woman. Maria/Margaret is soon outshone by other new actresses, like Elizabeth Barry and the King’s mistress Nell Gwyn (who, rather implausibly, is a royal mistress first and only becomes an actress later). It is Nell who, by using her sexual charms, ‘convincing’ Charles II to issue the proclamation that, henceforth, “all women’s parts be acted by women.”

The tables have turned and, while Maria performs Desdemona on stage, Kynaston is relegated to the tavern. When she is eclipsed by the likes of Barry, Maria rescues Kynaston from the inn and takes him out of the city to the countryside. It is their emerging sexual relationship that ultimately allows him to assume a purportedly ‘natural’ masculinity, to ‘rediscover’ his gender identity and to perform as a man – a performance that had strikingly and painfully misfired earlier in the film when he had been called upon by Charles II to give an impromptu performance as Othello. In auditioning before the King in a male part, the ‘feminine’ gestures had kept interfering with Kynaston’s performance of ‘masculinity.’ Now, in bed with Maria, Kynaston can successfully unlearn what tradition taught him. In need of an actress, Betterton engages Maria/Margaret again; Kynaston tutors her and directs her to be a ‘naturalistic’ performer. The film’s plot is spanned out between two radically different performances of *Othello*: On the one hand, it shows us Kynaston’s highly stylised performance as Desdemona, in which the delivery of the lines is declamatory and stilted; on the other hand, it shows us Maria playing Desdemona to Kynaston’s Othello, a performance in which the acting appears (to modern audiences) lifelike and realistic. In *Stage Beauty*, Shakespeare as the central cultural medium of the period (and, implicitly, of our own era, in filmic adaptations) is also enlisted, by reference to the plot of *Othello*, to convey the impression of jealousy and violence between the sexes in a struggle for representation fought out between different ideals, norms and notions of masculine and feminine behaviour.

Like *Stage Beauty*, *The Libertine* focuses on strong-willed women and insecure men. The film is loosely based on the life of Rochester (1647–1680), played by Johnny Depp. As in *Stage Beauty*, Rochester's significant (female) other is an actress, Elizabeth Barry, played by Samantha Morton. Next to Barry, other strong women in the film include Rochester's wife, Elizabeth Malet (d. 1681), and the prostitute Jane who is depicted as Rochester's only genuine friend. All of these women can be seen to grow stronger as Rochester grows weaker. The film's main interest and asset is Rochester's genuine passion for the theatre. Stricken by *taedium vitae*, bored with the countryside as much as with life at court, Rochester is presented as a prototypical Nietzschean who can enjoy life only in the form of aesthetic phenomena. As in Jeffreys's play, which the film at times follows very closely, Rochester expounds his passion for "the truth" in performance:

Life has no purpose, it is everywhere undone by arbitrariness: I do this, but it matters not a jot if I do the opposite. But in the playhouse, every action good or bad has its consequence: drop a handkerchief and it will return to smother you. [...] Contentment is the drug of fools. I prefer truth. And the truth is that we are animals scratching and rutting under an empty sky. Here in this theatre we can pretend that our lives have meaning. But the pretence only holds if we are given the truth. [...] The theatre is my soothing drug, and my cynic's illness is so far advanced that my physic must be of the highest quality. (Jeffreys 1995, 32)

Like the play, the film concentrates on Rochester's historical "grand affair" (Ellis 2004) with the actress Elizabeth Barry (1658?–1713). It was Rochester who, in 1675–76, transformed Barry from a mediocre and not particularly good-looking actress into a star of Restoration theatre, teaching her "not only the proper cadence or sounding of the voice, but to seize also the passions, and adapt her whole behaviour to the situations of the character" (Davies 1784, 199–200). Barry's first successes on stage were the (small) part of Draxilla in Otway's *Alcibiades* in 1675 and the role of Leonora in Aphra Behn's tragedy *Abdelazer, or the Moor's Revenge* in 1676 (Highfill et al. 1973, I, 313). In the film, Barry's first performance after Rochester's tutoring is as Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Once again, Shakespeare stands in for the less well-known fare of Restoration drama. The film only hints at further complications in the Rochester-Barry relationship – most significantly, the daughter born in December 1677, who is only briefly mentioned in Barry's and Rochester's final conversation, as are "other children" fathered by Rochester (the historical Rochester had a legitimate daughter, Anne, born in 1669). As Barry's star is in the ascendant, Rochester's is sinking – analogous to the basic plot of *Stage Beauty*. As Kynaston does with Maria, so Rochester with Barry: Having been dismissed by Betterton, Rochester tutors her and takes her from declamatory delivery to a more 'naturalistic' form of acting. In distinction to *Stage Beauty*, sexual intercourse between the male and female protagonists occurs at the film's mid-point, not its end, and Rochester is allowed a brief moment of tenderness with a man after this scene. This time, however, it is this neophyte libertine, Billy Downes, who is punished for a gay kiss, killed in a brawl from which Rochester cowardly escapes.

Again, most women in this film are portrayed as strong, sexually active, determined and successful characters, whereas men are either debauched fops (like

Etherege and Sackville), dull celibates (like Charles II) or impotent cowards (like Rochester). The historical Barry is known to have had numerous other affairs next to Rochester, including Etherege, which probably was one reason for their breakup in 1678 (s. Backscheider 2004). Her well-known erotic exploits gained her “a Horse-laugh” from the audience when, in Nahum Tate’s *King Lear*, she spoke Cordelia’s line about her “Virgin Innocence” (Chetwood 1749, 28). The film’s Barry comes across as a much more serious and ambitious character. She seems really only interested in her acting rather than in pursuing men. Exhausted by his theatrical passions after rehearsing with Barry, Rochester is unable to perform sexually with his mistress Jane Roberts – whom the film presents as a prostitute and perhaps the earl’s only genuine and understanding friend. Later on, we see Jane assist Rochester in his impersonation of a quack by the name of Dr Alexander Bendo (one of the earl’s documented diversions; s. Ellis 2004). Next to Jane and Lizzie Barry, Rochester’s stern and forbidding mother and his committed, intelligent and beautiful wife are given much screen presence, as country-house scenes alternate with Rochester’s urban debauchery. Rochester’s decline, speeded up by syphilis and alcoholism, contrasts sharply with the rise of Barry and the unchanging beauty of Lady Elizabeth. As a cadaverous Rochester lies on his deathbed, his wife lovingly repeats to him the story of their elopement prior to their marriage.

Johnny Depp’s performance as Rochester, dedicated – according to the final credits – to the memory of Marlon Brando and Hunter S. Thompson (whom Depp impersonated in Terry Gilliam’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) owes more to American cultural history of the second half of the twentieth century than to Restoration England. Never much of a libertine or an atheist, this Rochester is more like a creative ‘gonzo’ with artistic leanings, redeemed only by a genuine passion for drama. In the film’s rather Puritan framework, his physical disfigurement and loss of control over basic bodily functions at the end can be read as punishment for his ‘sins,’ which do not seem to amount to much in the first place. Still, he is symbolically castrated by the loss of his nose after mercury treatment, and symbolically placed on the marriage bed as a living corpse next to his still youthful wife. This libertine is recuperated not only in terms of religion (we see Gilbert Burnet attend to him) and Tory politics (we see him make an impassioned speech in the House of Lords in support of the King against Exclusion) but also in terms of his matrimonial and social status. Summing up his life to the audience, speaking from a darkened box in the theatre, he repeatedly questions the viewer: “Do you like me now?” – first arrogantly, then pleadingly. It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for this unreformed rake, who has been placed in a film that almost consistently works against him.

3. The King's Two or Three Bodies

“[...] this fellow ain't Kingly enough. You know I have been a King a decent while, a while longer than some people might allow [...] and, what is more, I have knocked around among the Kingly sort, and there is a thing you find with your Kingly fucker ... and that is that your Kingly fucker expects to be obeyed, understand [...]?” Charles II in *The Libertine* (Jeffreys 1995, 54; not in the film)

Another interesting element in both films is their depiction of Charles II as a thoroughly theatrical monarch. As king, Charles II was well aware of the need of personally embodying an abstract idea of kingship, even in the manner in which an actor embodies or impersonates a part. As Stephen Greenblatt argues in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, “kingship always involves fictions, theatricalism, and the mystification of power” (1980, 167). Charles was no exception: He expected his entourage of courtiers, wits and poets to collude in this theatrical mystification and to generate spectacles of legitimisation both inside and outside the closed-off but semi-permeable world of his court. Poems like John Dryden’s “Astraea Redux,” “Annus Mirabilis” or “Absalom and Achitophel,” plays like Samuel Tuke’s *The Adventures of Five Hours* (1662) or semi-operas like *Albion and Albanus* (scripted by Dryden in 1680) or Dryden’s and Purcell’s *King Arthur* (drafted in 1684) were originally designed to augment the king’s fame and to convey his ideational and real presence in print as well as on stage and in the streets. Even in Dryden’s most celebratory panegyrics, the king is frequently presented as an actor who *performs* kingship (s. Gordon 2002, *passim*).

Stage Beauty shows a court in which nothing seems more important than theatre, in particular Shakespeare. Its Charles II is played by Rupert Everett, who only a year before had played Charles I in Mike Barker’s *To Kill a King* (2003). *Stage Beauty*’s Charles II is satirical and stereotypic – as if lifted directly off the manuscript pages of Rochester’s verse: “His Scepter and his Prick are of a Length / [...] / His Crowne and Codds have both one date, / For as these fall, so falls the State” (Wilmot 1984, 74). Restoration court life has been described, rightly or wrongly, as “a picture of high-spirited frivolity and triviality, a boisterous and silly adolescence” (Thomson 1979, 117), and it is certainly presented as such in this film. At no point is the monarch taken seriously. Very much in the spirit of Rochester’s satires, we see a ‘prick-ruled,’ balding Charles amongst his spaniels in bed, about to be fellated by Nell Gwyn (“let me see the crown”). No rightful queen ever intrudes between this couple of king and mistress. In a later scene, we see Charles and Nell engage in semi-private theatricals, rehearsing for a “musical” (a masque?), with Charles dressed as Nell and Nell dressed as Charles. This scene constitutes a comic intensification of the main theme of cross-dressing, theatricality and gender, as it is in this setting that Kynaston is then asked to perform in the role of Othello and to play “all that is bold and strong and masculine in a man.” Here, performance *is* power. Only those at the top of the social pyramid, the king and his companions, can truly afford to engage in a playful switching of gender roles, without having to fear sanctions: “For he who knows which laws to flex / Can take his joy from

either sex,” as Charles rhymes towards the end of Hatcher’s play (2006, 78), lines notably missing from the film. For Kynaston, however, an actor of lowly origins who is forced to live – or die – by performance, the negotiation of (gender) identity and different roles, sexual or otherwise, is a matter of life and death, and to cross the boundary between performance and life can be life-threatening.

In *Stage Beauty*, Charles II is presented as a reasonably happy pseudo-libertine. No contrast, however, could be greater than that between Rupert Everett’s performance as Charles II and that of John Malkovich, who plays the same king in Dunmore’s *The Libertine*. From the swinging (sixteen-)sixties, we are taken to a rather bleak 1675, when, as the opening titles tell the viewer, “general rejoicing” and, yes, “binge drinking” have given way to “the hangovers” kicking in. Malkovich’s Charles is neither witty nor extravagant. The only physical exertion we see him perform is his early morning constitutional in the park. The only ‘creature comforts’ are being provided by his dogs. There are no women around him at all – no Queen Catherine, no duchess of Portsmouth, and neither Nell Gwyn nor Moll Davis. In one scene, the King and his male entourage are shown admiring a large mechanical world clock, in reference to his documented interest in speculative science, which – in the words of one biographer – was “more fashionable than profound” (Seaward 2004). Dunmore’s and Malkovich’s Charles is a stiff and stubborn, perhaps even slightly stupid figure, whose face hardly ever betrays an expression of emotion or genuine interest in anything. Rather anachronistically, he wishes Rochester to write the definitive Restoration play and to become ‘his’ Shakespeare. He wants “writing, something profound that will stand as a monument to my reign. [...] Elizabeth had her Shakespeare – you can be mine.” The historical Charles’s passion for theatrical entertainment (and for the actresses that go with it) is here replaced by a calculating desire for royal representation. The pairing of Charles and Rochester, however, is one of the most suggestive moments in the film. In one scene, we even see them walk hand in hand. This kind of male bonding in terms of a father-son relationship also fits well with the age difference between Malkovich and Depp; it suits the film’s doubling of an emotionally repressed, aging king with a debauched young earl. This suggestiveness is heightened when we learn that Malkovich had previously played Rochester in stage performances of Jeffreys’s play in Chicago (s. Galloway 2005). Rochester’s decaying body is another, younger version of the King’s. Whereas Charles II stiffly performs the ‘body politic,’ Rochester’s ‘body natural’ slowly disintegrates and begins to rot away.⁴

The play that Rochester produces in the film, however, is calculated to disappoint the King’s desire for representative entertainment and to shock the establishment. Probably inspired by Rochester’s *Sodom, or the Quintessence of Debauchery* – a pornographic stage fantasy that, needless to say, was never publicly performed and has never been ascribed to Rochester with certainty –, the film stages a dance of thinly clad nymphs that culminates in the distribution of dildos made of wood and plaster. Then a twelve-foot phallus is rolled on stage, its scrotum in the shape

⁴ For these terms, see the classic account in Kantorowicz 1997.

of Britain, aiming at a large behind that is shaped like France. Rochester himself, dressed up to look like Charles, emerges from a door in the backdrop painted to represent a vulva. In this film, it is Rochester – the King’s double – who receives oral sex from a girl on stage. The resulting scandal forces him into hiding for a while, and this coincides with the beginning of his decline in health caused by syphilis. After six months in concealment, the King finds him only to explain that he now has greater things to worry about than Rochester and that he will henceforth ignore him. Disappointed and angry, the earl returns to his country house at Atterbury and to his wife, who nurses him. In their final backstage meeting in London, Elizabeth Barry is strong and independent, while Rochester is a broken man. He returns to his wife to die. From the deathbed, the film cuts to a re-enactment of Rochester’s death on stage with Barry, closing with a crane shot around the gallery, the audience applauding, and Rochester – like at the film’s beginning – seated in a darkened box, summing up his life and directly addressing the viewer.

It is difficult to imagine a film like *The Libertine* to have been made during the 1960s or 1970s. Its ‘take’ on Restoration culture is surprisingly Puritan; there is no ‘sympathy for the devil’ in it unless we understand sympathy as distanced compassion. In focusing on the late 1670s rather than the early 1660s, it emphasises the crises and cracks in the veneer of public support for the Restoration settlement. Rochester is presented as a rebel against social conventions, a representation that only begins to make sense in the first place because the film contrasts him with a rather uptight Charles II as representing the ‘establishment.’ This image would fall apart if surrounded by the ‘vices’ and excesses of the Restoration court, where the historical Rochester actually seems to have fitted in quite well. But this rebel without much of a cause is not celebrated but contained. Obviously, the film can also be read as a sign of the times, a disillusioned descant on the promises of sexual and political liberation of the 1960s. Those viewers still hoping for a more ‘definitive’ film about seventeenth-century England will have to keep waiting, perhaps for a post-post-heritage cinema, although it is hard to see how such a film could ever appeal to a mass audience. Or can one say, perhaps, that both of the films discussed here, less deliberately than by accident, offer an only slightly flawed representation of the “arbitrary mix of hedonism and repression” (Turner 1995, 104) that characterised Restoration England?

The Restoration period, it seems, is of interest to contemporary playwrights and filmmakers not for its exotic and somewhat esoteric distance from today but for those aspects that appear to resemble our own time. In the pithy analysis of Steven N. Zwicker, those aspects are: irony, modernity and miscellany. As Zwicker argues, political instability and opportunism were rampant in Restoration England; irony and generic mixture, masquerade and satire functioned as aesthetic techniques of dealing with such instability. If, in this view, the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was itself at least partially an ironic and anachronistic event (“the fixing of old forms atop new facts”), irony was its most appropriate cultural reflex and its most representative literary mode, evoking “the necessity of familiar political and spiritual and cultural formations while compromising their authority and denatur-

ing their integrity” (Zwicker 1997, 182). Irony, in other words, constituted the most convincing and ‘modern’ poetics of Restoration culture: It embodied and celebrated a stability of the ‘as if’ (cf. Vaihinger 1922) and a concomitant, endlessly suspended belief in consciously contrived and promulgated “fictions of state” (Love 1993, 164). Any reader of Lyotard, Baudrillard or Jameson will probably concur that this could also be an acceptable description of contemporary ‘postmodern’ or late capitalist societies. To these features, one might add a less literary and more performance-oriented category, that of *pervasive theatricality*.

Theatricality constitutes a strong connecting link between past and present. In both films discussed here, Shakespeare functions as a central cultural mediator. His work is always perceived as contemporary (cf. Kott 1964); to revive it is not only to re-connect with a cultural ideal but even with the very power source of theatre as such. Shakespeare’s status in both films is as unquestioned as it is today, and as it certainly was not in the 1660s and 1670s. He can thus be seen to function as a guarantor of continuity between versions of a more or less idealised cultural past (also known as ‘heritage’) and a postmodern present marked by a melancholy attachment to a lost ‘Golden Age,’ variously located in the 1590s, the 1660s or the 1960s.

Both *Stage Beauty* and *The Libertine* use theatricality as a pervasive metaphor and a catalyst of desire and transgression of established norms. However, both films ultimately cover up and seek to contain the emancipatory potentials of a free-floating transitionality between genders and sexual orientations within a stable and rigid social grid of power relations. In *Stage Beauty*, the plot is one of cure and therapy that leads to the ‘rediscovery’ of a normative heterosexual identity; in *The Libertine*, we get a cautionary tale that, in its moralistic tone and sombre lighting, is reminiscent of the medieval morality play. There is no joy in the libertinism of *The Libertine*, nor in the gender-bending of *Stage Beauty*.

Butlerians and Shakespearians can share a fascination for the way in which both films read the seventeenth century as an era all too aware of the hiatus between being and performing, appearance and reality. Theatrical performances, with their scripted patterns of enabling constraint and their highly artificial and artful codes of production and reception, mirror and expose the constraining and equally non-natural codes of social and cultural performativity outside the theatre. But one might also register some concern about the glibness and superficial ease with which *Stage Beauty* handles these negotiations of gender and power, so prominent in the original play, by defusing the fascinating and challenging ambiguities of its protagonist in a conventional ‘Hollywood ending’ and in a ‘historicising’ aesthetics of spectacle that conforms to the visual standards of contemporary mainstream cinema as much as it corresponds to conventional moral standards of heteronormative sexuality.

Putting the Restoration stage back on stage is one thing; transferring it to film, interestingly enough, results in something completely different. The awareness of this media difference may be the main strength of *The Libertine* with its much darker palette and natural lighting that leads to a grainy and grimy look – a somber dirtiness that, like the film’s narrative, manages to capture more intensely its

protagonist's fractured and fractious personality, and the Restoration period's pervasive sense of multiple, irresolvable contradictions.

In the original plays, theatre functions as a site of potential and actual resistance to cultural and social norms of gender and sexual politics. In the films, these norms are questioned but finally reinscribed and re-affirmed. Rebellion and resistance in these films are confined to the enclosed space of the stage, incapable of leaving that space in order to be translated into 'real life.' This may well be a consequence of the adaptation from stage to screen, from plays that thrive on direct interaction with a live audience to films that pretend to present a closed, even 'historically accurate' imagined world and, in the process, fill in too many gaps for the viewer's presumed benefit. As Shakespeare films begin to expand their purview to a wider historical field of post-Shakespearean and pseudo-Shakespearean cinema (a burgeoning area of both popular entertainment and scholarship),⁵ one may find it hard not to object to the superficiality with which the joys and challenges of theatricality and performativity are flattened out by an aesthetics of spectacle. The rest, as Ezra Pound so memorably phrased it (1990, 535), is dross – be it ever so splendidly dressed.

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⁵ Consider not only *Shakespeare in Love*, but also such Shakespeare spin-offs as *The Bad Sleep Well* (1960), *Johnny Hamlet* (1968), *The Lion King* (1994), *10 Things I Hate about You* (1999), *O* (2001), Bollywood Shakespeare adaptations like *Maqbool* (2003) and *Om Kara* (2006), and many others. See Jackson (2000); Burt (2002); Lehman / Starks (2002).

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