The English Renaissance in Popular Culture

AN AGE FOR ALL TIME

GOD SAVE THE QUEENE

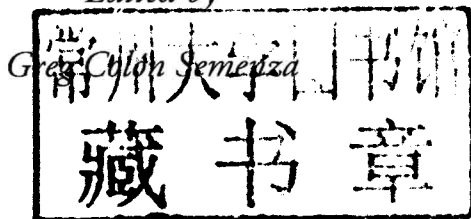SHAKESPEARE

Edited by

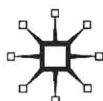Greg Colón Semenza

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For watching dozens of mediocre movies, I appreciate the work that my wife Cristina put into this project. And since my last collection proudly mentioned Alexander turning one, this one is for Benjamin, about to turn three.

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Introduction: An Age for All Time

Greg Colón Semenza

Although English Renaissance literary scholars have written extensively on popular historical and political appropriations of Shakespeare—theorizing the cultural capital accrued through contact with the central canonical English author—such work has downplayed the fact that Shakespearean appropriations are merely part of a wider popular culture interest and investment in the Renaissance as an imagined historical period. Renaissance literary scholars will be quite familiar, for example, with the political functions of Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry V* (1944), whose depiction of the seemingly miraculous English victory against the French at Agincourt was intended to boost the morale of British troops in Europe during World War II. A relative lack of attention to William K. Howard's 1937 film *Fire Over England* and Michael Curtiz's 1940 *The Sea Hawk*—both of which emphasize parallels between the Spanish Armada and the Blitz—has more to do with how the scholarly industry governs inquiry than the relative political complexity, economic success, or artistic quality of the films. In the nine years between 1935 and 1944, in a moment of international crisis, at least four major films (add Arthur B. Wood's 1935 *Drake of England*) turned to the Renaissance as a historical source of national pride, inspiration, and even moral authority, and the Renaissance was celebrated in several less overtly political films of the period such as Curtiz's *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), John Ford's *Mary of Scotland* (1936), and John Stevenson's *Tudor Rose* (1936). Nor can it be said that this period's interest in

the Renaissance is historically anomalous in any way since, if anything, popular interest in the Renaissance beyond Shakespeare has proliferated at the same rate as the popular culture industry itself. For instance, 2008 alone saw a Hollywood adaptation of Philippa Gregory's 2003 novel *The Other Boleyn Girl*, commencement of the second season of the Showtime hit series *The Tudors*, the release of *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* on DVD, and the beginning of production on a major film version of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (production on a separate indie film version of the poem began in 2009), just to mention a few examples.[1] Nor are contemporary engagements of the Renaissance any less politically involved than those half a century ago as, say, the post-9/11 debate in the mainstream media regarding Milton's advocacy of, or opposition to, religious terrorism would demonstrate.[2]

An Age for All Time encourages readers to think about popular culture's rich engagements of the history, thought, and figures of the English sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While a major contention of this volume is that scholarship has been too Shakespeare-centric, its chapters in no way seek to exclude Shakespeare, since many of the richest modern engagements of the English Renaissance have, of course, been inspired by his writings.[3] Ranging from "period films" (Kapur's *Elizabeth* films), to those that appropriate Renaissance events and figures (*V for Vendetta*, *The Filth and the Fury*), to television productions (*The Tudors*), popular literature (Faye Kellerman's romance novels), pastimes such as fairs and carnivals, and music (The Sex Pistols), the rich and varied chapters in this collection focus both on how popular culture engages the Renaissance and how our understanding of the Renaissance is influenced by popular culture. To what ends do moderns seek to portray, adapt, or appropriate the English Renaissance? Do most popular engagements of the period tend toward conservativism? How are largely period-specific concepts such as "Reformation" or "humanism" communicated through different media and to different audiences? In what ways have popular adaptations of Shakespeare's plays—say, Zeffirelli's comedies or Welles' tragedies—informed popular ideas about what the Renaissance was "actually" like? Have they promoted an author-centered industry in spite of a largely postmodern scholarship? How have they in turn limited or enabled our teaching and our students' learning about early modern literature and history?

An Age for All Time brings together leading American and British scholars of Renaissance literature and popular culture to begin answering these questions. I have chosen a title for the volume—*The English Renaissance in Popular Culture: An Age for All Time*—that signifies in multiple competing directions. First, as the subtitle's riff on Ben Jonson's famous lines about Shakespeare would suggest, the volume seeks to capture the dynamic by

which the specific and often inescapably local histories of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century life have been represented as transhistorically relevant subjects. I am talking here about popular concepts of such disparate subjects as Reformation, witchcraft, carnival, and groundlings, to mention only a few, as they are presented in popular culture. Classic Hollywood cinema (Ken Hughes' *A Man for All Seasons* [1966]), auteur films (Terrence Malick's *The New World* [2005]), Shakespeare films (Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* [1968]) and adaptations (Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* [1991]), television shows (*Blackadder* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*), and popular entertainments such as rock music and Renaissance fairs have contributed equally to the establishment of a formidable mythology of what the period was and why it remains relevant to moderns. Second, as the main title would suggest, the volume seeks to be comprehensive in addressing a range of ways in which the English Renaissance is taken up by popular media of various kinds; methodologically speaking, this book works to reconcile the seeming contradictoriness of a popular culture industry in which considerably different media forms—marked by their own unmistakably distinctive vocabularies and technologies—manage, nonetheless, to employ remarkably similar strategies of adaptation and produce similar ideas about the period. In fact, such media often engage in open dialogue with one another. As Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe point out, much contemporary popular art—particularly "new wave cinema"—is defined precisely by a deliberate integration of media forms, which "promiscuously take their visual and audio cues from their vernacular surround . . . from contemporary advertising, television newscasts, rock video, the stylings and sounds of popular (mainly youth) culture."[4] Since this volume is equally interested in how the Renaissance is depicted *and* perceived in popular culture, such an interest requires attending to the convergence, not merely the distinctiveness, of postmodern media.

Though *An Age for All Time* is the first book to cover ways in which the Renaissance figures generally across popular culture media, numerous previous studies have considered how film portrays or otherwise engages history. In fact, historical film studies is an emerging subfield of history, one dominated mainly by the pioneering work of Robert A. Rosenstone.[5] Rosenstone's unwavering belief is that "visual media are a legitimate way of doing history—of representing, interpreting, thinking about, and making meaning from the traces of the past."[6] Though he recognizes several previous studies devoted to the topic of history on film, he argues that none "has ever taken the historical film on its own terms as a way of seriously thinking the past."[7] More recently, Robert Brent Toplin has expanded the conversation by anatomizing the defining elements of historical cinema as

a genre with its own rules—like horror, westerns, and so on—and defends the strategies used by Hollywood directors to present history to massive audiences. Like Rosenstone, then, Toplin seeks to challenge the traditional notion that "*real* history... [is] much more interesting than the 'reel' stuff depicted in Hollywood's myth-based stories."[8] Each chapter in this volume takes seriously the assertions of historians such as Rosenstone, Toplin, and Paul Halsall that popular cultural texts can be "better or at least equally as good [at documenting history] as any academic history."[9]

In addition to expanding this cinematic conversation into considerations of how music, sounds, fairs, popular novels, the web, and other media configure history, this volume rejects the necessity of a binary conception of "real" and representational history. The literary scholars assembled here tend to approach the various historical texts they analyze as thoroughly "performative" interpretations, which Derrida famously defines as "an interpretation that transforms the very thing it interprets."[10] For the types of interpretive texts and traditions studied in this volume, in which certain famous stories are told and retold, "the very thing" Derrida references becomes increasingly more difficult to locate; as Julie Sanders describes this complex dynamic, "One common pattern that emerges... is that hypertexts often become 'hyper-hyper texts,' allusive not only to some founding original text or source but also to other known rewritings of that source."[11] In other words, the impossibility of rediscovering the "real" is heightened in texts that analyze more distant time periods and, perhaps tellingly, most book-length studies of historical films have focused on cinema depicting relatively recent historical events (e.g., civil war, Holocaust, Vietnam).

There are important exceptions. Early Modern literary scholars Barbara Hodgdon, Michael Dobson, Nicola J. Watson, and Julia M. Walker all have written excellent studies of Elizabeth I's modern afterlives, extending their analyses into films about the Virgin Queen.[12] By considering the ideological and memorializing work such texts perform, these scholars have rejected the primacy of the real over the representational. Many Early Modern historians, however, have unfortunately continued to insist on the traditional distinctions. John Aberth's *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film* (2003) considers the rich Medieval history film legacy. Aberth makes a point, though, to avoid "films that are largely literary," such as those based on Shakespeare's histories, and draws a rigid distinction between representation and "real" history: "I believe that the two realms...should be kept separate."[13] Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman recently published *Tudors and Stuarts on Film*, which features sixteen introductory essays by historians on historical films (excluding television productions) about Renaissance kings and queens.[14] Because it is the only book dedicated solely to the subject of

Renaissance history on film, it deserves extended consideration here. While many of the individual essays in the volume provide excellent overviews of the major questions such films raise—and surely will prove useful for humanities instructors invested in teaching the past—the book's approach to the topic is surprisingly conservative since its major aim is, "Above all," to analyze "the accuracy of historical films in dealing with early-modern Britain."[15] Setting out deliberately to challenge the claims of scholars such as Toplin and Rosenstone, Freeman's introduction supports the traditional claim that historical films tend to "distort our perception" of past events, and he dedicates more than thirty pages to showing how films are anachronistic, interpretive, and even "inherently" inaccurate, until he arrives at the following conclusion: "Knowledge of the past is still most effectively conveyed in written words."[16] Much of Freeman's concern has to do with the danger of talking about the past incorrectly: "while audiences accept the principle that historical films are frequently inaccurate, they tend to accept the 'facts' depicted in them uncritically."[17] Upon this completely anecdotal and negative assertion about nonacademic audiences, then, a methodology is founded. I believe it is a deeply flawed one. For every quotable "dummy" out there who doesn't know, say, that Henry VIII was *really* in his forties when he divorced Catherine—as opposed to the twenty-something Henry of *The Tudors*—there are, of course, many other individuals who know this fact or will learn about it *as a result* of their interest in the series. Rather than always beginning with the assumption that film and television viewers are lazy and stupid, scholars should try being a bit more generous.

To sum up, then, what I wish to make especially clear at the outset, *An Age for All Time* explores a historical period that has been relentlessly mediated by popular literary and media hypertexts of various sorts, albeit ones with their own generic, technological, and historical modes of operation. Many of its essays openly reject the primacy of what Nietzsche calls "monumental history," whose motto is "let the dead bury the living," in favor of histories that respect the knowledge gained by "thinking unhistorically."[18] To this end, the sort of "history" this book performs is less concerned with uncovering or understanding the past than understanding our present uses of it. While previous studies of history through film have limited their analyses to a cinematic genre we often label "historical film"—that is, a genre categorizing films such as *JFK* and *Birth of a Nation*, which have a more or less overt interest in telling stories about the past—we gain much by studying texts in which history is appropriated for only secondary or even tertiary purposes. Rather than limiting consideration of the popular culture Renaissance to works such as Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998), which may be primarily a sixteenth-century tale, this collection also considers films, songs,

and written texts whose allusions and references to the period are fragmentary, symbolic, political, or even stylistic. A television commercial featuring Henry VIII—such as the one run by Century Cigarettes in the 1960s—might contribute as much to some people's perception of the Renaissance king as a feature film like *A Man for All Seasons* or an academic text; likewise, the comedic portrait of Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love* might very well emerge as a more influential hypertext for our generation than more "serious" ones such as the award-winning Channel 4 miniseries *Elizabeth I* (2005), starring Helen Mirren.

The pedagogical value of making our students conscious of how adaptation operates lies largely in helping them to recognize their own historically contingent perspectives as readers of historical texts—and, consequently, of the contingent and contextual nature of historiography. Just as "my" generation's *King Lear* has become impossible to read without remembering Jane Smiley's commentary in *A Thousand Acres* (1992), the current generation of college students will likely always know a Renaissance colored by the influence of Kapur's Elizabeth films and the Showtime series *The Tudors*. As Linda Hutcheon has recently argued in *A Theory of Adaptation*, despite "the constant critical denigration of adaptation,...Palimpsests make for permanent change," and we would be wise to avoid claims to the contrary.[19] Questioning our students about the ways in which their understanding of the past is filtered through popular culture—and about the ways popular culture uses the past—causes them to think critically about both historical continuity and difference.

Precisely because of this book's respect for the potential knowledge-making qualities of such representational texts, I have chosen the term "popular culture," rather than "mass culture," in its title. As is well known, both terms are fraught with oversimplified connotative and denotative meanings, but, as Richard Burt has neatly summarized the difference, "mass culture is defined as culture imposed 'on the people' whereas popular culture is culture made by 'the people.'"[20] Burt quite logically chooses the term "mass culture" in his groundbreaking analysis of "the extent to which Shakespeare's heterogeneous cultural presence often cannot be recuperated as so many examples of resistance to hegemony and cultural imperialism"—a necessary counter to the common tendency of we few Shakespeare scholars who tend to see popular Shakespeares as "identical with greater public access."[21] Further, if "mass" and "popular" seem like problematic terms, the term "culture" has become nearly impossible to define. For our purposes, Douglas Lanier's point that "to designate popular culture as popular *culture* (as opposed to popular entertainment) is to make an implicit—and for some a controversial—claim about its artistic nature and value."[22] Lanier's decision to use the

term, nonetheless, in *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (2002) implicitly recognizes the value of many popular appropriations of Shakespeare's work. Likewise, the authors in this volume adopt a mode of intellectual inquiry that is always open to the *potential* value of such engagements, regardless of whether they ultimately are believed to function in progressive ways. Consequently, I have not sought to regularize these terms throughout the chapters, instead allowing the authors to assess how the individual texts they explore function in relation to their specific audiences.

The Renaissance in Popular Culture

In an episode of the acclaimed BBC sitcom *Blackadder II* (1986), the main character, Edmund or Lord Blackadder (Rowan Atkinson), is forced into hosting in one small house two simultaneous parties whose guests must not know about the other party: in one room is his visiting aunt, who is an absurdly rigid puritan, and in the other is a collection of lewd and rowdy fellows who have placed bets on who can consume more alcohol. As Edmund tries to play host, moving frantically between both worlds, his increasingly drunken inability to manage them speaks to the gulf between two familiar, largely incompatible, popular versions of the Renaissance: the bustling sixteenth century and the boring seventeenth century. It should be said that the vast majority of popular engagements of the Renaissance focus on sixteenth-century events and figures, a reality reflected in the contents of this volume. Generally speaking, the sixteenth century, especially the later Elizabethan period, is represented as the English Golden Age, characterized by pageantry, intrigue, and a metaphoric and often literal colorfulness suggesting the vitality and infinite possibility of an England whose future greatness is already clear. Comedic representations of the sixteenth century, such as *Blackadder II*, often feed modern fantasies of a distant world without care, one in which dancin' and prancin' or a good practical joke are possible cures for almost any crisis; in this regard, such representations are generically literary and functionally nostalgic. Dramatic representations of the sixteenth century, such as Ken Hughes' *A Man for All Seasons* and Charles Jarrot's film *Mary, Queen of Scots* (1971), draw out the tensions and the historical stakes of events in a Britain suddenly thrust from relative obscurity into the center of international affairs and the jungle of an increasingly Machiavellian universe. Major literary figures of the sixteenth century also are pervasive in popular culture, both as characters (Thomas Wyatt in *The Tudors*; Sidney in *Monty Python* #36 and Scott and Barnett's historical fantasy, *Armor of Light*; and Marlowe in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* #13) and as adapted authors (Spenser in Margaret Hodges' children's version of *The Faerie Queene*; and Marlowe in Derek Jarman's film of *Edward II*).

By contrast, the seventeenth century—at least up through the Restoration—is usually depicted as a humorless and apocalyptic age, one clouded especially by the zeal and stereotyped asceticism of the godly. Even in the most secular of seventeenth-century popular narratives, such as Malick's beautiful film *The New World*, the palettes tend to be muted, the sounds faint, the movements controlled. The superior marketability of the popular sixteenth century, with its heaving bosoms, frenetic energy, and (excruciatingly) blaring trumpets, is reflected clearly in the disproportionate number of films, songs, and images focused on the Tudors and the literary world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The seventeenth-century Renaissance, on the other hand, is represented by a smattering of works on the voyage to the new world and back (Disney's *Pocahontas* and *Pocahontas 2* [1995, 1998]); the civil war (Nicola Cornick's romance novel, *Lord Greville's Captive* [2006] and the Channel 4 four-part series *The Devil's Whore* [2008]); the execution of Charles I and the rule of Cromwell (*Cromwell* [1970] and *To Kill a King* [2003]); and the occasional oddball production, such as Alex Cox's *Revenger's Tragedy*, Kevin Brownlow's film *Winstanley* (1975), and Monty Python's musical history of the English civil wars. Though a recently published essay collection has been devoted to tracing Milton's relatively massive presence and influence in popular culture,[23] only a few popular works depict Milton in his own time (e.g., Peter Ackroyd's 1996 novel *Milton in America* and the 1974 BBC film *Paradise Restored*). The post-Restoration seventeenth century, in such films as *Restoration* (1995) and *Stage Beauty* (2004), is characterized by the same splendor, busyness, and sensuality we find in engagements of the previous century, providing a bookend of sorts for the boring seventeenth-century Renaissance—which happened, in reality, of course, to have been England's most tumultuous age.[24]

Popular engagements of both centuries reflect directly one of the well-known problems of early modern scholarship, which is the dearth of information about common people and the consequent focus on royalty and aristocracy. Unlike scholars, though, who study this problem in an attempt to capture as comprehensive a view of the period as possible, non-scholars, whose understandings of the Renaissance are disproportionately influenced by popular culture, will have at best a highly synechdochic perception of the period. Though comedies tend to focus more on commoners than do dramas, they also efface the harsh realities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century life for the majority of English men and women. In this sense, they function much like Renaissance comedies themselves. Like Shakespeare's plays, popular culture paints a picture of the Renaissance dominated by the actions of its kings, queens, and courtiers—and also, importantly, by the spaces they occupy. On film, Renaissance London is a relatively narrow space defined by its most constant sites of return, Hampton Court Palace and the

Tower, and, less often, by vaguely constructed stand-ins for Whitehall and Greenwich. As always, there are numerous exceptions to the rule, such as the socially diverse theatrical spaces of Southwark or the cramped interiors of brothels and taverns, but, in popular culture, Renaissance England typically is synonymous with royal England between about 1500 and 1688.

The range of the typical in popular Renaissance historical texts also registers an interest in the period that can be characterized paradoxically as both a looking backward to "lost" ideas and values, and a looking ahead to modernity; it registers the complexity, in other words, of a period some scholars refer to as the Renaissance (usually the domain of comedy) and others as early modern (more the domain of drama). Whereas Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* revels in its nostalgia for a benign sixteenth-century London where even the harshest puritans can be won over by a good play, films such as *The Sea Hawk* and *Cromwell* function as narratives of origin for such modern developments as the expansion of the British empire or the emergence of republican values. As such examples might suggest, however—through, say, the former's new world denouement or the latter's insistence on the dignity of Charles I—most of these texts appeal to a modern curiosity about the past that is always simultaneously nostalgic and teleological. Popular Renaissance texts usually highlight both the seductiveness of the foreign and the comfort of the familiar. This paradoxical feature of Renaissance popular culture is demonstrated best by the preponderance of work imagining the private lives of great men and women. To demonstrate these patterns, I want to consider the cases of three popular Renaissance icons: Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and Oliver Cromwell.

Popular texts featuring Henry VIII both distance and titillate modern audiences by focusing on the king's barbaric treatment of his numerous wives. While Henry is typically portrayed as a "Renaissance man," an equally able scholar, musician, politician, and athlete, he is almost always also a hothead, a man whose uncontrollable rage, passion, and impulsiveness serve to explain and—in certain cases—even justify his behavior. In Alexander Korda's great 1933 film *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, Charles Laughton plays the king in a tale that begins on the day of Anne Boleyn's execution and ends with Henry's marriage to his sixth wife, Katherine Parr. The film's opening caption goes far in explaining Korda's handling of this extremely, and impressively, compressed narrative:

> Henry VIII had six wives. Catherine of Aragon was the first: but her story is of no particular interest—She was a respectable woman, so Henry divorced her. He then married Anne Boleyn. This marriage also was a failure—but not for the same reason.