Questions of Adaptation: Bringing Premodern Queens to the Page and Screen

INTRODUCTION

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The chapters in part two address issues associated with adapting the lives of female historical figures for popular consumption, primarily from the 'telling' medium of written history into the 'showing' mediums of film and television.[1] The specific topics and historical figures under examination in each chapter, as well as the approaches taken to studying them, are varied. However, broadly speaking, these case studies encompass a consideration of the people and processes involved in the creation and consumption of these narratives. Also in play is the nature of the media studied here—these films and television shows can be classified as both adaptations and historical dramas or period pieces.[2] Adaptations are intertextual—the 'remake' exists in a dialogue with the 'original,' while historical dramas and period pieces are intertemporal—they exist in an intertemporal space where the present engages in a dialogue with the past. In both cases this dialogue involves people, as the audiences and creators bring their knowledge of history or the adapted work to the historical drama or adaptation. Since intertemporality is discussed at length in the introduction to this volume, this brief section introduction will focus on intertextuality and the role of people—creators and consumers—in the processes of adaptation.

Intertextuality—the interaction between the adapted work and the 'original'—is a primary consideration in the study of adaptation. In

some of the case studies in this section, the 'original' or 'source text' is comprised of a specific work of historical fiction—a novel, play or film—while in others it points to a more nebulous body of work—written history—in which case the source is often indeterminable, unless the writers choose to share that information publically. While the politics of intertextuality is a primary consideration in this section, and indeed, the entire volume, the contributors strive to avoid a pitfall of the adaptation case-study model signaled by Linda Hutcheon: it 'tend[s] to privilege or at least give priority (and therefore, implicitly, value) to what is called the "source" text or the "original."'[3] Instead, the chapters that follow attempt to interpret meaning from the changes that occur from one version to another, one medium to another, and across the decades or centuries. The purpose of these case studies is to discover what the creative choices made in adaptation can tell us about the political valence of the 'remake,' and therefore the values of the people involved.

The politics of intertextuality (and, indeed, intertemporality) are largely determined by the people who interact with these texts.[4] In terms of television and film, there are a host of creators involved in the process of creation—writers, actors, set and costume designers, and so on—all of whom contribute to achieving the creative vision of a director or showrunner.[5] The role of the director and his/her creative vision is considered in each of the chapters in this section—from the 'politicized filmmakers' Bertrand Tavernier and Mika Kaurismäki in Séverine Genieys-Kirk's chapter, to more conservative directors, such as Javier Olivares, whose television shows—analyzed by Emily S. Beck and Emily C. Francomano—might be best described as 'crowd pleasers'.

The other side of this coin is the audience. As Susan Hayward has indicated, the desire of filmmakers to attract the largest possible audience (given the expense of producing heritage films) 'has meant that the product is predominantly audience-led.'[6] In other words, the perceived desires and preferences of the audience will shape the creation of the film or TV series.[7] The role that the audience plays in the process of creation is difficult to measure, as it cannot be clearly differentiated from the creative vision of the director. On the other hand, there is more that we can learn from audience response. Thus, in the chapters that follow, the commercial success or failure of a production is used as one indicator of how well the political message of a work resonates with the viewing public.

The essays that follow analyze portrayals of well-known (and controversial) female rulers: Isabel 'the Catholic,' Juana 'the Mad,' Christina

of Sweden, and Mary, Queen of Scots. Each case poses a unique set of difficulties—choices that must be made regarding how to portray these historical women, about whom the audience likely has their own preconceived notions—in addition to the difficulties inherent in adapting written history into an audiovisual format. The historical and popular legacies of these women are palimpsestic in nature; some have been obsessed over by historians, producing dozens of biographies and hundreds of focused studies; others have been portrayed multiple times in the cinema or in novels, plays, and even operas.[8] Therefore, it is expected that the target audience will be familiar with some of this material. They may have even learned about these queens in a formal setting—as part of a college course or a grammar school history lesson.

It follows that many in the audience will experience the work as an adaptation, 'oscillat[ing] between [the original] and the new adaptation [they] are experiencing'.[9] The creators, on the other hand, are pulling from these same sources and reacting to them in the process of creation—at times 'pay[ing] tribute by copying,' and other times acting on 'the urge to consume or erase the memory of the adapted text.'[10] In both cases, the people involved in these intertextual processes bring with them their personal values contemporary to the time of the adaptation, through which they filter the stories that unfold on the screen.

All of the previously mentioned topics are discussed in the first two chapters in this section, which examine recent attempts by Spanish directors to confront a difficult chapter in their nation's past: Isabel I's treatment of Jewish minorities in the late fifteenth century. Beck's essay draws attention to strategies used by the creators of the commercially successful television series *Isabel* that point to a larger trend in recent historical dramas: the downplaying of religious elements in the historical narrative in order to facilitate audience identification with or 'allegiance'[11] to historical figures. In this way, signifiers in one system—the premodern past— are traded for signifiers in another—the twenty-first century present—in order to achieve a similar effect: a narrative in which Queen Isabel is a beloved leader, rather than a religious figurehead. The same technique is observed by Armel Dubois-Nayt in her chapter on Mary Stuart, though by her estimation this strategy does not achieve the desired effect of turning an early modern queen into a postmodern heroine.

A different perspective on Isabel and her treatment of religious minorities is explored in Francomano's essay, which looks at two texts that deal with the Spanish queen's legacy on a meta level—through time travelers

who seek to preserve her legacy by righting a mistake that she made, and fictional filmmakers who battle with conservative historians and the twentieth-century dictator Francisco Franco over how to portray that legacy for popular consumption. Taken together, what these case studies seem to indicate is that when it comes to the 'Catholic Queen' of Spain, a modicum of controversy, applied by a gentle and reverent hand, is marketable to Spanish audiences. However, too much political controversy, whether stirred by the subject matter or by the comments of the director, can produce a flop.

The chapters by Janice North and Séverine Genieys-Kirk explore multiple filmic and television reincarnations of one queen over time, analyzing how outside forces, along with the creative vision of a director, have resulted in divergent portrayals of the same historical woman. This diachronic approach uncovers some signs of societal progress toward the second-wave feminist ideal of gender equality. For example, Genieys-Kirk's essay demonstrates how the overt lesbian themes that were struck from the initial script of the 1933 film biopic *Queen Christina* find their way back into Christina's story in the 2015 film *The Girl King*. On the other hand, these essays also reveal an uneven progression toward equality, dotted with digressions such as the insertion of medieval stereotypes linking female sexuality with witchcraft in the film *Mad Love*.

In the last chapter in this section, Armel Dubois-Nayt's analyzes director Thomas Imbach's use of creative license in adapting written history for the cinema in *Mary, Queen of Scots* (2013). Dubois-Nayt's chapter grapples with the 'surgical' nature and loss associated with film adaptations,[12] highlighting how key events are condensed, omitted entirely, or presented out of sequence, often in ways that affect how the meaning and significance of these events are interpreted. Dubois-Nayt weighs the effect of these creative choices against the stated objectives of the director, demonstrating how the privileging of emotional effect over historical accuracy results in the undermining of Imbach's vision of Mary as a strong female character.

In conclusion, the case studies in the second part of this volume focus on the politics of intertextuality in royal biopics, meta-historical narratives, and period pieces. As such, these essays home in on the contributions of the people involved in these adaptations—in particular, the creative choices of the directors—but also the role of the audience as consumers of these narratives. With each chapter employing a particular focus on one female ruler, these studies do not seek to make sweeping

generalizations about the genre of historical film, but rather attempt to untangle the meaning behind the creative choices and the audience reactions to each work. In other words, they seek to answer the question: what can these adaptations and the techniques, processes, and creative choices that they entail tell us about our relationship to the past, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality?

Notes

1. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22–23.
2. For a discussion of the distinctions and similarities between 'historical film' and 'costume drama,' see Jonathan Stubbs, *Historical Film: A Critical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013): 16–19.
3. Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, xii.
4. According to Hutcheon, 'Works in any medium are both created and received by people, and it is this human experiential context that allows for the study of the *politics* of intertextuality.' (xii)
5. Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 81.
6. Susan Hayword, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), s.v. "audience." Also see "adaptation."
7. For a discussion of the audience's impact on the creation of genres and the characteristics of 'cycles' of historical film, see Stubbs, *Historical Film*, 11–13.
8. Miguel-Ángel Laredo Quesada, Ana Isabel Carrasco Manchado, María del Pilar Rábade Orbadó, and María Cruz Rubio Liniers, eds. *Los reyes católicos y su tiempo*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Centro de Información y Documentación Científica, 2004); María A. Gómez, Santiago Juan-Navarro, and Phillis Zatlin, eds. "Appendix III: Juana as Palimpset" in *Juana of Castile: History and Myth of the Mad Queen*, (Newark, NJ: Bucknell University Press, 2008), 252–255.; "Christina of Sweden," *Queenship Studies: A comprehensive searchable database of published works on the subject of female rulers*, Accessed September 5, 2017, http://www.queenshipstudies.com/references.cfm?sortby=&id=1369&strt=101&show=50.; Jacqueline F. Johnson, "Mary Queen of Scots: an annotated bibliography," *Bull Bibliography* 53, no. 2 (1996): 152–160; Also see "Mary, Queen of Scots," in "Scottish Bibliographies Online," *National Library of Scotland*, http://sbo.nls.uk/vwebv/search?searchArg=mary+queen+of+scots&searchCode=SUBJ%2B&recCount=25&searchType=1&page.search.search.button=Search.
9. Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, xv.
10. Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 7.

11. Murray Smith, "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema, *Cinema Journal* 33, no. 4 (1994): 34–56.
12. Hutcheon, Theory of Adaptation, 19, 37.

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