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MAN WITH SNAKE

Dante in Derek Jarman's *Edward II*

James Miller

A *figura serpentinata* is revealed in a flash of muscular glory. His pose is classical: a seductive *contrapposto*. His physique strikes the freeze-framing eye of temptation as youthfully beautiful without being boyish. Who might he be? [Fig. 1, p. 369]

At first glance he looks like a Renaissance statue of Fortitude or Dignity based on a Greco-Roman prototype. The passionate torsion of his chest and the thrust of his outstretched arms recall the coiling *agon* of the sons in the Laocoön group, but no agony appears in his beardless face. He bravely stands on his own, detached from the venomous attack of time. The play of his limbs is more erotic than tragic. He could be playing Hercules in a wooing mood, a cocky lad showing off his biceps in a comic mime of his snake-handling infancy; or perhaps he assumes a more serious role, Apollo attacking Pytho, say, or Asclepius averting the Plague. Though the hero of this wordless masque is clearly mythological, his significance (moral or otherwise) escapes the constricting glosses of art history. To the connoisseurial eye his posturing begins to look suspect. The patina of ancient glamour seems a little faux. Surely his gym-built core is too deltoid for a Levantine kouros and too buff for a Florentine saint.

A second glance at his flexing muscles calls to mind the academic male nudes preserved in the archival photographs of the late nineteenth century. A victor's garland, a gladiator's sword, a bacchant's wand – place any classical prop in the hands of a common stevedore, and the camera's Ovidian eye easily transforms him into Silenus or Mars. An apotheosis of some sort seems to be in store for the statuesque youth. He is bent on metamorphosis within the mysterious space of his confinement, its shadowy background evoking the wings of a cavernous proscenium. But neoclassical admiration of the idealized male form cannot turn him into an authentic icon of Victorian manhood. His haircut looks suspiciously modern. His cheeks are close-shaven, and his abs

stylishly waxed to enhance their definition. No stubbly deckhand or dustman he. His coverboy face would never turn up in the homoerotic fantasy albums of Durieu or Muybridge.¹

A third glance fixes him in another imaginary still, breaking the nostalgic spell of the beaux arts tradition. Now he seems to have stepped out of a campy photo-series of Muscle Beach warriors in posing straps, a popular fantasy of fascistic masculinity marketed to closet cases in the days before home video. Lower his iconographic origins to the male physique magazines of the 1950s, and the nostalgia prompted by his tricked-up butchness is as poignantly shallow as the sentiments of an old queen rummaging through a box of vintage beefcake sets from the Athletic Model Guild.² If only this vision of virility, hypnotically stilled by the camera, could be reanimated by the ecphrastic gay gaze!

And magically it is. As if cued by the irresistible expectations of legions of gay video consumers, the figure begins to move – in fact, to dance. He rotates his broad shoulders to the right and bends his torso back to display the smooth perfection of his pecs. Lit from above, his splendid upper body glows against a background of impenetrable darkness. His arms reach up towards the hidden source of the light, which, as it showers over him, glints off a wreath of golden oak-leaves on his head and picks out a matching spray on his bulging black thong. His neck, craning back, reveals the sinewy curve of his throat. His jaw juts out. His lips gently pucker. A kiss is coming to him. His mesmerizing performance is slow and sinuous like a bodybuilder's pose-down or a hustler's private striptease, though it is neither ponderous nor prurient. The beauty of it lies in its isolation, untainted by commerce, oddly ennobling. His gaze seems to be focused simultaneously inward and outward, one moment on the subtle rippling beneath his skin and the next on the dramatic curling and twisting of what he holds on his buoyant arms and occasionally blows little puffs of breath towards like an amorous zephyr.

For there, above his crown, stretching from one hand to the other and coiling down to his elbows is his unlikely dance-partner – an enormous Burmese python – its tongue flickering, its jet eyes glittering, its small head swaying close to the snake-charmer's lips. Who would not be charmed by them? They are the lips of a fantasy straight boy exposing himself for gay adulation with financial benefits, the fugitive star of a postmodern skin-flick in which the traditional archaeology of he-man desire is ironically queered under a badly punning title. *Gayocoön* per-

haps? Or *Hetamorphosis*? But who cares what the title is when a new god reveals himself in the flesh, even if the Priapic vision of his reptilian macrophallus draped over one shoulder and dangling above the other lasts for only sixteen seconds.

1. COUNTERING THE CONTRAPASSO

This brief but dazzling theophany occurs five minutes into Derek Jarman's theologically rebellious film *Edward II* (1991). 'Man with Snake' is fleetingly acknowledged in the credits as Barry John Clarke.³ For all his godlike immanence on screen, Clarke has long since disappeared behind the Internet Movie Database version of the Cloud of Unknowing. His dance-partner would have remained sadly anonymous if the director's notes, published with the screenplay under the polemically revved-up title *Queer Edward II*, had not preserved the talented python's off-screen name. Amusingly, it was Oscar. A size queen's homage to Wilde? No doubt Jarman would have liked his readers to think so: the pet-name recalled his celebrity-homo lineage as well as the renowned size of his own 'snake'.⁴

Not surprisingly, Man with Snake is absent from the dramatis personae listed in the director's main literary source, Christopher Marlowe's blank-verse drama *The Troublesome Raigne and Lamentable Death of Edward the Second, King of England: with the Tragical Fall of Proud Mortimer* (1594). At the very least, any adaptation of Marlowe's 'dusty old play'⁵ for the New Queer Cinema emerging in the 1990s would require a snappy title appropriate for international film festival marquees, a title even snappier than Bertolt Brecht's *Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England*. Jarman would pore over Brecht's 1924 modernist revision of the play, probably in Eric Bentley's 1966 translation, *Edward II: A Chronicle Play*, during the intensive research stage of his own rewrite, but he would not have found Man with Snake in any of these mediating texts. Man with Snake would be his own invention.

Perhaps 'dust-up' is a more accurate term than 'adaptation' to describe Jarman's contentious engagement with the Marlovian original, for while he admired the way Marlowe 'outs the past' as a prophet of his own queer activism, he furiously rebelled against the heterosexist triumphalism behind the usual staging of the execution scene. 'Edward's cruel phallic death by the red hot poker' he called it in his journals.⁶

Loathing the contrapasso-like parody of sodomitical penetration in this notorious climax to the Troublesome Reign, Jarman decided to 'violate' the play as an insult to the reign of High Culture as sustained by British conservatism.⁷ Into its dark Elizabethan core he would thrust his fiery rage against Thatcher-era AIDS politics and sear the rhetorical tissues of its slyly homophobic moralism, reforging it from within, verse by verse, scene by scene, into a blatantly homophobic apology for himself as a queer artist opposed to Tory Family Values.

In February 1987, three years before he ritually gilded a notebook to record his notes for the screenplay, the relentless Tories had passed an amendment to the Local Government Act prohibiting local councils from distributing any publications that promoted homosexuality as 'a pretend family relationship' or represented gays and lesbians as anything other than grievously 'abnormal'.⁸ The corrosive implications of Section 28, as this amendment was known, were still coursing through his mind when he set himself up at his cottage retreat in Dungeness to attack the script.

From early spring through mid-summer of 1990, aided by his gay 'ghosts' Stephen McBride and Ken Butler, he would Jarmanize the play with a vengeance. Over two thirds of Marlowe's pentameters were cut, and many of the surviving lines reduced to Brechtian free-verse stubs. Most classical allusions were excised. Secondary barons and bishops were silently disappeared along with their prolix political speeches. New wordless sequences were added to reveal the dire effects of Section 28 on the Body Politic, the direst (in his opinion) being the homophobic gendering of the next generation of boys. British boyhood was represented by the King's young son and heir, Prince Edward, who would be taught to repress his homoerotic yearnings by his icy mother Queen Isabella and her paramour, the militant über-phobe Mortimer. Toy robots and machine guns would be the Christmas gifts from his 'real' family, tools of indoctrination to make him think and act like a 'normal' man lest he stray in the faggy direction of his mother's *haute couture* ball-gowns and jewellery. As intermittent disruptions to the old history-based plot, these additional scenes were conceived as a counter-discursive dumb show exposing the vicious construction of a model nuclear family.

A satiric simplification of post-Stonewall sexual politics took over the argument of the screenplay as if it were a rehearsal for an ultimate zap by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a last-ditch demo against the

unholy alliance of Church and State in the second (not-so-golden) Elizabethan Age. Marlowe had played up the mutterings of baronial discontent and clerical disapproval in his Machiavellian reflections on court dynamics. Brecht, in turn, had amplified the tense negotiations between the King and the rebels by repoliticizing their clashing discourses as articulations of Marxist class conflict. In contrast to his literary predecessors, Jarman was preoccupied with the King's psychological restoration through the rupturing artistic power of queer desire. Fervently projecting himself onto Edward as a thwarted visionary, he reduced the political speeches of the King's ideological foes to mere background noise against which to proclaim his own spiritual redemption. But would that happy outcome be attained through activist intervention? Not at all, or at least not in this life. In his perpetually self-indulgent imagination, it would come about through an aesthetic transcendence of history – a rather Wildean twist to the tale.

2. SNAKE-HANDLING

Back to Oscar then: how did Man with Snake wind up in this convoluted project? How does their coiling dance fit into the film? What are they *doing* in it? They appear only in Sequence 8 of the screenplay.⁹ The setting is described as an ambiguous 'Interior', which might be either an empty room in Edward's palace or a fantasy space of the mind.

If their shadowy theatre is primarily mental, whose mind (besides Jarman's, obviously) has conjured them up? Mostly likely it is the King's, for his first actions in the screenplay are intensely psychological. He is 'discovered' in Sequence 2 as a wretched prisoner dreaming of Gaveston in Lightborn's dungeon. Awakening to the nightmare of imprisonment, he crazily recites a message on a postcard he had written in happier days summoning his long-lost favourite back from exile. Having already switched the flashback sign on as a psychodrama alert by the time the serpentine dance begins, Jarman must have originally intended Man and Snake to be perceived as figments of the King's erotic dream of Gaveston or as figures in a nostalgic memory projected from the King's tormented psyche onto the 'screen' of Jarman's autobiographical imagination.

Adding a further convolution to the royal psychodrama, Jarman clearly conceived Sequence 8 as one of the brief wordless interludes

linking Marlowe's text to his own 'interior' and to the bittersweet history play of his own desires. In fact it is the commencement of the director's psychoanalytic dumb show, the mythic prologue in which young Prince Edward, standing in for Jarman as a boy, observes the Form of the Beautiful glowing in a muscular male body and experiences the early stirrings of 'abnormal' love. Man with Snake turns out to be not quite alone in the empty room, as the set directions indicate: 'The room is deserted, except for a man wearing a crown of golden leaves – handling a snake. Prince Edward watches from the shadows.'¹⁰ Does the Son behold the mystical penis of Patriarchy from his shadowy vantage-point? Or is he a dream-witness to the King's transgressive involvement with Gaveston, perhaps even to their closeted couplings? The sight of their erotic entanglement ought to have traumatized him as the horrifying primal scene in a 'pretend' family romance, but it does not (*pace* Section 28) because he is narcissistically drawn to Gaveston as the chief rival for his father's affections. A libidinal twist is thus given to the behavioural implications of the adage 'Like father, like son'. A phallic symbol as long and tempting as Snake is bound to rear its Freudian head amid such royally repressed fantasies.

In the film, surprisingly, Prince Edward's lurking presence is cut from the scene. Only Man with Snake appears on screen. Their mysterious performance now seems to be reserved for the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectators in the shadowy 'interior' of the cinema. If dominant specularity¹¹ is reflexively heterosexist and ritually homophobic, then its proponents should be caught off-guard by this queering manoeuvre which surreptitiously transports them back to the fluidly speculative outlook of a gay child on the verge of erotic awareness.¹²

An archival photograph from the shoot, published opposite Sequence 8 in *Queer Edward II*, shows Clarke nudging his memorable torso up to a shyly delighted Jarman.¹³ [Fig. 2, p. 369]

Draped over their shoulders, connecting them like a luxurious lozenge-patterned stole, hangs Oscar. Before them, in profile, stands the boy-actor who played Prince Edward (Jody Graber), casting a big smile at Oscar whose head is bobbing somewhere off-frame to the right. If this image provides any indication of what was filmed that day, the raw footage for Sequence 8 probably included the Prince in the action as originally imagined, watching from the shadows, wondering what the strange spectacle might mean. At some point during the editing of the

film, Jarman must have decided to exclude the Prince from the scene for artistic reasons.

Squibs of sarcastic provocation in the form of Outrage!-style slogans graphically disrupt the left-hand pages of text opposite every photograph in *Queer Edward II*. Booming in boldface and large print over Sequence 8, for instance, is the menacing question ‘how do we terrify?’: Oscar provides the ironic answer – ironic *in situ* because the studio complex chosen for the shooting of *Edward II* once belonged to the Hammer House of Horror which produced monster movies from the mid-1950s through the 1970s.¹⁴ If Jarman were making a horror film in the old style, a monster python would surely do the trick as a penile terror-stimulus for the prudish British public. But he is making a homo-romantic film in the wake of Section 28. Resisting heteronormativity through invincible homoerotic energy is how ‘we’ terrify. ‘Our’ python will be gorgeously poised, alluring, unmonstrous.

Though the graphic interception of the screenplay by angry agit-prop turns *Queer Edward II* into a Berlin Wall of crazily superimposed messages, it is still worth reading as a text in its own right – in every sense *after* Marlowe’s play – because it provides foundational evidence of the director’s original plan for the film beneath the detritus of the post-Thatcher Culture Wars. At the very least, it appears to preserve his pre-production arrangement of the eighty-two sequences in the screenplay, which no doubt originated in his allusive ruminations on the play archived in the gilded notebook. Film editing took place from late March to early August of 1991. Even a cursory comparison of this prospective ordering with the actual succession of scenes in the final cut reveals how freely Jarman (along with his film editor George Akers) would play with the original sequencing of *Edward II* during post-production.

3. PLEASING SHOWS

Not surprisingly, the fantasy scenes of his own invention proved much easier to reposition in the editorial segmentation of the shoots than the Marlovian remnants tied to the chronology of the Troublesome Reign. Sequence 8, for instance, is shifted dramatically forward in the film: Man with Snake (now without Prince) appears on screen in Segment 4. Thus relocated, their act connects directly with Gaveston’s prophetic

announcement of his agenda for the Italianization of Edward's no-sex-please-we're-British court:

Music and poetry is his delight,
Therefore I'll have Italian masques by night
Sweet speeches, comedies and pleasing shows [...].
(I. 1. 54–56)¹⁵

This last verse, uttered by Gaveston in a seductive voiceover at the start of Segment 4, serves as an aural segue to the speechless performance of Man with Snake. Their dance is now immediately readable as an illustration of the sexually specialized kind of 'Italian masques' and 'pleasing shows' in store for the King, who, right on cue, appears in the next scene. Instead of a timid voyeur lurking in the shadows, the royal spectator turns out to be a triumphant spectacle of male beauty in his own right. Standing alone on a little stage atop a gleaming metallic ramp, he wears a sparkly gold robe that Jarman himself, only three years later, would famously wear as his funeral attire.¹⁶

Rapid cutting between Segments 4 and 5 suddenly links Man to King as if the two figures were psychosexually analogous, typologically allied. Is the gold-robed Edward (like the director of his psychodrama) an avatar of the gold-crowned god in the masque? If so, then who corresponds to Snake? Up the ramp and into the welcoming arms of the King slinks the obvious candidate for reptilian typecasting: Gaveston. Jarman himself noted the erotic correspondence of Snake and Minion in his journal entry for 10 June 1991:

Late last Friday we played the last reel through, the music for the dance sequence sexy and exciting 'Sweet Prince I come', Andrew Tiernan [the actor who played Gaveston] snaky. Early morning sexiness – the snake-charmer boy with his ice-pale green eyes.¹⁷

As the manipulative deviser of the interlude, Gaveston has used the arts of dance, music, and costume design in a thoroughly Renaissance way to advance himself by pleasing his 'Sweet Prince'. Transfixed during an editing session by Tiernan's sexy Gaveston, whose 'ice-pale green eyes' (as they indeed prove to be in close-up) provide on the literal level of the screen a visual confirmation of his snakiness at the tropological level of the scene, Jarman seems to have allegorically confused him – or imaginatively fused him as an erotic memory – with 'the snake-charmer boy', Barry John Clarke, whose sexiness had made a strong impression on

him during the shoot. The emblematic significance of Man with Snake proves to be unstable, reversible, appropriately shifty. Initially, as the continuity editing sets up the audience to interpret the dance sequence, Man is to King as Snake is to Minion. As soon as Gaveston enters the throne-room, however, an erotic power exchange conspicuously inverts the political power structure. Wrapping his infatuated lover around his little finger, the triumphant Minion is to the snake-charming Man as the charmed King is to the tamed and kissed Snake.

Jarman's neo-Romantic identification of himself as a visionary artist with his imaginary projections (the powerful father who sees the show, the powerless son who was supposed to see the show, and the self-empowering boy who sets the show up to control the father) further shifts and complicates the possible psychoanalytic meanings wrapped around Man with Snake. Add to these thematic convolutions the New Queer Cinema's critically emergent preoccupation with the questionable power dynamics of director and spectator – who really dominates whom in a heterosexist dictatorship? – Jarman's allegory of dominant specularly starts to seem absurdly over-determined for an interlude lasting less than a minute.¹⁸

An offhand note for 9 June 1990 in his journal *Modern Nature*, the publication of which coincided with the final phase of post-production for *Edward II*, ironically indicates how simple his conception of Man with Snake had originally been. Violent as his pulverization of the play became, he could not blast off every dusty trace of its rich classical allusiveness. The art historian in him, not to mention the visual artist, was still enchanted by the painterly challenge of bringing poetry with its store of pagan myths and rituals 'to life':

I spend the mornings working on the script for *Edward II*. It's becoming increasingly Jacobean, sexy, and violent. We have brought the classical references to life: Apollo, a Roman triumph, Prometheus.¹⁹

If Man with Snake can be traced back through Jarman's creative process, the nucleus of their mythic coupling may well have been a creative synthesis of the filmmaker's illustrations of the first two classical references in his journal list: 'Apollo' (which might account for the python) and 'a Roman triumph' (which would explain the crown). Gaveston does not mention Apollo or Rome in his famous 'Let's Put on a Show' speech in the opening scene of the play, but the Roman sun-god celebrating his victory over the dark forces of the earth would not have

been out of place in his cunning inventory of subjects for homoerotic pageantry *all'antica*, which infamously includes

... a lovely boy in Dian's shape,
With hair that gilds the water as it glides,
Crownets of pearl about his naked arms,
And in his sportive hands an olive tree
To hide those parts which men delight to see [...].
(I. 1. 61–65)

Though these verses would not find their way into the screenplay, a trace of them can surely be seen in Segment 4. Instead of a lovely boy playing Diana, a lovely youth playing Apollo teases the male gaze with naked arms and modestly hidden 'parts' which *some* men would certainly delight to see. Instead of pearly crownets on his arms, Apollo sports a gilded crown on his head. About his arms hang the enamelled undulations of the python, its head gliding up and down in sync with the divine snake-charmer's 'sportive hands'.

These visual changes make psychological sense for the characterization of the Minion *alla moderna*. By regendering the dynamics of the imaginary scene, by transposing the key of its erotic éclat from Diana's cool virginity to Apollo's hot male lust, Jarman intensifies the élan of Gaveston's Machiavellian sexual agency. Tiernan's snaky sex appeal in the film does not lie in the passivity of a pretty catamite. If anything, it recalls the aggressive arrogance of Jarman's rent-boys or punk pickups on Hampstead Heath. The cinematic transformation of Marlowe's classical pastoral scene into an Apollonian Roman triumph also makes dramatic sense from the perspective of continuity editing. As a flashback to the couple's glory days, Man with Snake sharply contrasts with the defeated King's imprisoned appearance in Segment 2 and segues directly into the throne-room scene with Gaveston's triumphant return from exile in Segment 5.

4. CONFETTI OF SERPENT POISONS

During his most intense period of work on the screenplay, Jarman had been in and out of the AIDS ward in London's St. Mary's Hospital for various infections associated with immunosuppression. When he wasn't writhing in excruciating pain, he was immobilized by blurry vision

or drug-induced hallucinations. The array of pills prescribed for him struck his painterly eye as ‘a rainbow-coloured confetti of serpent poisons’, and the sulphadiazine that dripped through an IV into his veins only twelve days after he had delivered the first draft of *Edward II* felt ‘sharp-toothed as the adder’.²⁰ Given such private metaphoric associations, not to mention the public use of Asclepius’s serpent-twined rod as a common emblem in the medical world, Jarman may well have constructed Man with Snake as an icon of his own idealized engagement with the epidemic. If he did not succumb to the serpent poisons before the end of the shoot, perhaps he could ultimately charm the satanic disease-of-diseases into submission and transform its constricting reality into an aesthetically ravishing recollection of his phallic energy in the good old days when he had ogled boys dancing ‘cum serpentibus’ in a Camden Town pub.

‘Now all the boys are covering up their cocks’, he lamented in his gloss opposite the photo of the snake-charmer boy and himself with Oscar languorously curling around their necks.²¹ The epidemic had ushered in a neo-Victorian era of sexual modesty and homophobic repression. The spray of golden oak leaves sewn over Clarke’s briefs looks sadly like a censoring figleaf.

The symbolic pre-eminence of Man with Snake in *Edward II* is reflected in Jarman’s post-production decision to advance their act from second to first place in the order of projected entertainments – ‘projected’ in the dual sense that they were planned by Gaveston for his erotic conquest of the King and then screened by Jarman (the New Gaveston) for the seduction of his audience. Here are the first three shows as they appear one after another in the final cut:

- a. Man with Snake (Sequence 8/Segment 4);
- b. Male Couple Dancing (Sequence 6/Segment 9);
- c. Poet Reciting (Sequence 29/Segment 25).

Thanks to its introductory position, Man with Snake effectively serves as a prophetic emblem of the intricate entanglements of homosex with heteropower throughout the film. Originally, as documented in the screenplay, the first entertainment was supposed to be a theatre-dance piece set in Edward’s throne room at night. ‘The room is filled with music’, the directions simply read: ‘Dancers perform before the King.’²² Though England had no lack of specialists in the re-creation of medieval

secular music or Renaissance court dance, Jarman clearly envisioned this scene as a contemporary performance with a defiantly queer look to it. The dancers he wanted for the scene were Lloyd Newson and Nigel Charnock from the London-based company DV8, and after some weeks ‘on tenterhooks’, he was greatly relieved when they finally accepted his invitation to appear in the film.²³

What Newson and Charnock created for the revels turns out to be an explosively physical *pas de deux*, a choreographed mating battle in which two Doms determine who will be the sub. They join hands, stretch arms in opposing directions, pull each other into wild leaps, twirl in dizzying sync, and writhe convulsively on the floor until one gives in to the other with a passionate kiss. Their capering, originally slated for Sequence 6, would have accompanied Tiernan’s voiceover delivery of the opening line of Gaveston’s set speech down to ‘My men like satyrs grazing on the lawns | Shall with their goat-feet dance an antic hay’ (I. 1. 59–60). Not only would their version of an antic hay have aptly illustrated these verses. It would also have reflected the sexy power exchange at the core of Edward’s relations with Gaveston, the violent play of dominance and submission that had also intrigued Brecht in his psychoanalytic reflections on the Troublesome Reign.

When Jarman decided to cut the set speech off at ‘Sweet speeches, comedies and pleasing shows’, the male *pas de deux* was no longer immediately relevant to the Marlovian programme of intended revels. He was therefore free to move it around wherever its symbolic connection to Gaveston’s political actions could be visually strengthened and clarified. Its strategic repositioning later in the film, as Segment 9, cleverly enhances its relevance to the Minion’s vengeful attack on ecclesiastical privilege since it occurs immediately after his sadistic humiliation of the Bishop of Winchester, who is stripped of both office and vestments and compelled to mime fellatio before a pair of hooting torturers. The clerically condemned ‘deviant’ thus asserts his power over the church by cockily inviting DV8 to kick up the dust before the throne. DV8’s performance is also intercut with shots of ‘the pliant King’ bending his upper body and tossing his mane of golden hair over his lover’s forehead while Gaveston, seated at the foot of the throne, engages him in aggressive foreplay. They end up kissing on the dais just like the dancers on the floor. The visual paralleling is hard to miss.

5. LOSING THE STRAIGHT WAY

Somewhat easier to miss are the expansive allegorical implications of the third entertainment, the poetry reading, since the complex typological connections between plot and performance spring from an Italian comedy of unparalleled complexity in its own right. The Poet who recites verses to Gaveston and Edward in Segment 25 turns out to be Dante in modern dress. The sudden intrusion of his *Commedia* into the Troublesome Reign serves to shake up all the queer meanings already coiled around the sodomite on the throne.

Like *Man with Snake*, the Dante cameo corresponds to nothing in Marlowe or Brecht. It is all-out Jarman, an intertextual collision of his sacrilegious screenplay with the sacred poem. Dante's original allegory of otherworldly desire must now be read from an outrageously queer standpoint in the here and now, while Edward's historic love for Gaveston must be subjected to intense moral scrutiny *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Jarman guides his viewers into the Dante cameo with a deceptively calm close-up of Edward and Gaveston listening attentively to the Poet. With their elbows positioned on the back of a row of golden chairs, the lovers rest their chins on the backs of their hands and cast their eyes in the direction of their celebrity guest. The whimsical character of the cameo is ironically rooted in a chronological coincidence that Jarman must have noted while conducting historical research for the screenplay. Edward II had been on the throne for seven years when the *Inferno* was first published. Dante was his elder contemporary.²⁴

In voiceover the Poet is heard reciting the opening lines of the *Commedia*. Allan Corduner, the out gay British actor whom Jarman cast as the Poet, punches out every syllable of the first tercet in a studiously American accent. When he comes to 'diritta via' (*Inf.* I, 3),²⁵ the allegory of the *smarrimento* is strategically marked by a cut away from the gay intimacy of Edward and Gaveston to the straight face of the modern Americanized Dante. A reverse shot finds Edward and Gaveston still listening behind the first row of chairs in the middle distance, their heads affectionately close together as if they were teenagers on a hot date at the movies. The camera angle now places the viewers in the position of the Poet, his right hand poised to punctuate his next lines with dramatic gestures. 'I came to myself within a dark wood, where the straight way', he gasps, 'was lost!'²⁶ After a histrionic pause on 'straight way', his hand suddenly jerks back and forth, mapping out in the air the crooked

way underground that the hell-bent pilgrim is destined to take with his beloved guide.

This solemn moment is undercut by an impish smirk that Gaveston flashes at Edward. The camera catches them sharing a private joke, taking ‘straight’ in the modern gay sense of ‘heterosexual’. The alternative sense of losing the straight way cannot be unimagined now – or critically dismissed hereafter – for Jarman has captured it for contemplation as the Ur-moment in the queer reception history of the *Commedia*.²⁷

That moment invites a retrospective Dantean reading of the first two entertainments. The DV8 dancers in the second entertainment can now be connected typologically with the sodomites whose energetic motions Dante mistakenly perceives as a thrashing ‘dance’ (*‘tresca’*, *Inf.* XIV, 40) from his distant viewpoint on the hard margins of the Desert of the Violent. The sodomites are not really performing a dance there, of course, since their rapid steps and vigorous slapping motions are reflexive actions meant to protect their bodies from the burning sand and flakes of fire. Yet even when Dante views the boys in the sand up close, his defensively aesthetic gaze transforms their athletic clashes with each other into a whirling configuration resembling a round dance (*‘così rotando’*, *Inf.* XVI, 25). A side-note to Sequence 6 in the screenplay reveals Jarman’s disappointed effort to recreate this infernal scene *literaliter* on the floor of the King’s throne-room. ‘I ordered the floor to be sand’, he recalls, heaving an Indie-weary sigh, ‘and all we could afford was mud. Lloyd and Nigel danced in a dust-bath like fighting cocks.’²⁸ But their combative *pas de deux* really was a dance. It may now be replayed in hindsight as an act of defiantly free creativity, a queer counter-motion to the compulsive flitting and flailing of Dante’s sodomites under the destructive downpour of divine wrath. Emerging as an anti-Dante – the new Dante-poet for postmodernity – Jarman will wreak his revenge on the homophobic clergy and their army of heterosexual allies by banishing their tyrannical God from the scene.

Typological counter-glossing does not end there. The allegorical *impeto* unleashed by the Dante cameo ripples back through the film to the first entertainment where it suddenly twists and transfigures the meaning of Man with Snake. In his foregrounded position as a focus of lustful attention, Man with Snake might be viewed as Jarman’s answer to the macrophallic Minos in the Circle of Lust. Just as Minos coils his serpentine tail around his upper body (*‘cignesi con la coda tante volte’*, *Inf.* V, 11), so does Clarke with Oscar. But Oscar’s coiling does not serve

as a demonic signifier of the infernal circles to which the Damned will be variously relegated. It serves no judicial function at all. It is a stimulus for aesthetic delight rather than apocalyptic dread, and its off-screen spectators (the King among them) are invited to experience randy *disio* without religious *paura*. In this respect Jarman perversely out-Wildes Wilde, whose meditations on male beauty were anxiously coded as dangerous within the tropological framework of damnation. In sharp contrast to Wilde's imaginary portrait of Dorian Gray, Jarman's cinematic record of an actual man with his actual snake was not morally destined to decay before the spectator-subject's eyes.²⁹

Man with Snake surely also harks back to the men with snakes who populate the darkness in the *bolgia* of the thieves. Dante's explicit horror at the homoerotic spectacle of their phallic couplings and hyper-Ovidian metamorphoses is psychologically connected with the shocking confession and swift repression of his desire to hurl himself down among the sodomites 'to embrace them' ('di loro abbracciar', *Inf.* XVI, 51). What he could not bring himself to do with the sodomites on their flaming dance floor, he later beholds the thieves *compelled* to do with each other in the cathected obscurity of Malebolge. Their interaction with the serpents is played out before his erotically transfixed gaze in a hideous series of same-sex parodies of procreative intercourse. They generate new shade-bodies either by stealing each other's reptilian or human identities or by destroying their corporeal forms through venomous fusions (*Inf.* XXV, 49–144). If Man with Snake is Jarman's answer to the sexual horror of the seventh ditch, its cinematic realization takes the form of an aesthetically redemptive vision which literally pours a stream of Apollonian love-light down upon the sinewy surfaces of the male object of desire.

A long-term thief of Dantean imagery, Jarman had been breaking into the *Inferno* to enrich his gay (and later queer) projects for the stage, the screen, and the gallery ever since his student days at the Slade.³⁰ There, or much later at Prospect Cottage where his engagement with British art history reached a fever pitch, his eye may have been drawn to Blake's famous illustration of Vanni Fucci giving the figs to God. Around the blasphemous thief's right arm coils a giant snake.³¹ [Fig. 3, p. 370]

Could this striking image have been at the back of his mind when he introduced Man with Snake into the screenplay? If so, then his overhead lighting for the scene may owe something to Blake's romantic the-

atricity. Where Dante-poet had focused the pilgrim's attention on the appalling blackness of the snake-pit, Blake chose to open the infernal firmament up with lightning bolts and streamers of ruddy fire snaking down towards Vanni's defiantly uplifted face. Thus illuminated, the thief's muscles seem to glow with the demonic energy that Blake sacrilegiously commended as the source of erotic joy. Having banished God from his queer Inferno, Jarman had no need for Blake's punitive bolts or parodic tongues of fire. The spotlight he shines down on the scene has a metamorphic effect, turning the Man's erotically charged physique into the body of an Ovidian god. Like the trio of muscular sodomites whirling ecstatically in Blake's illustration for *Inferno* XVI, Vanni displays in the dance-like posturing of his magnificent body the 'human form divine'.³² Following Blake's lead, Jarman projects this triumphantly dynamic form onto Man with Snake as an emblem of queer opposition to the morally inflexible religion that had condemned Brunetto and Jacopo and Vanni to an afterlife of charred oblivion.

6. INFERNAL GHOSTWRITER

'Perhaps the sodomites should be written out of Dante's *Inferno*', Jarman wrote in his journal on 1 August 1990: 'I'll offer myself as the ghostwriter.'³³

What does he mean by 'ghostwriter' here? How queer is this odd speech-act? What is he offering to *do* to the homophobic landscape of the Inferno, that forbiddingly sealed textual prison, with his Hollywood pitchman's casual bid to 'write out' the sodomites as if they were a slight embarrassment to the divine justice system? Is he speaking in jest as a writer of gay satires and sacrilegious memoirs, or in deadly earnest as an activist who had renounced the middle-class pretensions and frivolities of the pre-AIDS gay world?

Jarman could hardly play ghostwriter to a poet who had *already* triumphed in this self-appointed role, who had become The Poet not only by writing about ghosts more vividly than any other author in literary history but also by shadily rewriting (and slyly purloining) the works of his classical predecessors. Dante's ghostwritten version of the *Aeneid*, namely the *Inferno*, is validated as a classic at every turn by the miraculous immanence of its original author. Virgil literally retraces his steps through the textual route of the classical underworld journey as

if it were he – rather than his ghostwriter – who is bent on producing a new edition of his epic by amending its errors and filling in its gaps.

The desert of the sodomites is an egregious gap in the underworld of the *Aeneid*, which of course couldn't possibly have contained such a biblical locus. Dante's ghostwriting quietly discovers it for the newly authorized revision of the journey and fills it with new flocks of spirits whom Virgil is now compelled to recognize. If Dante had kept a Jarman-style notebook while he was planning the *Inferno*, he might have jotted down something like this: 'Perhaps the sodomites should be written into Virgil's *Aeneid*.'

When Jarman offered to be Dante's ghostwriter, Dante, of course, was not there to accept or reject the deal. His imaginary proposal should be construed then as an artistic self-prophecy, an anticipation of his strategic move to appropriate the Poet's authorial (and authoritative) voice for the audacious queering project of *Edward II*. As an art-house director long caught up in the Paragone between literature and the visual arts, Jarman was struggling in his hospital bed to define his relation to the Poet in a serious aesthetic sense polemically at odds with the satiric implications of his journal entry. Rather than appointing himself the politically correct sanitizer of the *Inferno*, he was going to rewrite its outrageous allegories of sexual damnation for an AIDS-phobic Britain.

The quiet profession of ghostwriter hardly fits the public profile of Jarman as a raging activist-auteur. For one thing, ghosting is a self-effacing activity, and Jarman's expansive self was never more out there – smack in the public's face – than in his final years. For another, the profession of ghostwriter is commonly defined in crass commercial terms quite unaffected by aesthetic idealism or political outrage. The supplementary counterpart to the role would be a celebrity 'author' who for one reason or another (lack of time, no discipline, poor writing skills) can't put two words together on paper but needs to put out a book about beating the odds and becoming a star. The inarticulate star will hire a humble behind-the-scenes hack to supply enough sentences to fill a marketable manuscript. The hack is then paid by the word or the page from the advance given to the celebrity by a publisher whose primary goal is to cash in on a famous name. When the spurious autobiography appears in print, the celebrity alone is credited with authorship or is given top billing above an obscure 'as-told-to' assistant.

Ghostwriters, like ghosts, rarely collect royalty cheques. As part of the deal, they're supposed to fade out when the profits roll in. Though Dante might qualify as a celebrity author with a life-writing project admittedly too big for his own *ingegno*, he never lacked time or words or discipline for the task and never missed an opportunity to distance the spiritual profits of his poem from the corrupt money-grubbing Florentine world satirized in it. Obviously, as a fierce opponent of free market capitalism, Jarman could not relate to Dante as a ghostwriter in the 'straight' commercial sense.

From a postmodern queer perspective, however, the role of ghostwriter may have deeply appealed to him because it both conceals and reveals the paradoxical relation of all authors to their texts. If any kind of writer understands the absence of the author 'within' a text despite the spectral trace of authorial presence 'behind' it, it is the ghostwriter whose name vanishes from the title page but whose voice hauntingly resounds from cover to cover. If the ghostwriter is a talented mimic like the Ovidian magpies which function as antitypes of the Poet (*Purg.* I, 13–14), then the artful deception of ghosted textuality will signal much more than the paradoxes of authorship. It will mark the site of a bewildering fusion of identities comparable to the strangely homoerotic metamorphosis of Agnello and Cianfa in the *bolgia* of the thieves.

Where does the celebrity author's text begin and the ghostwriter's end? 'Vedi che già no se' né due né uno!', as the thieves cry out (*Inf.* XXV, 69): 'Lo, thou art now neither two nor one!' Instead of a commercial transaction between authors, a psychological transference must occur behind the scenes during the creative process leading up to the generation of their hybrid text. When the aggressive ghostwriter ignores the contract of self-effacement and deviously appropriates the celebrity's voice for his own political or aesthetic agenda, then the sneaky craft of ghosting verges on the snaky crime of identity theft.³⁴

The modern suspicion that a ghostwriter can all too easily turn into an identity thief is eerily anticipated by Dante himself when he assumes Ovid's voice to narrate the over-the-top metamorphoses of the thieves. While their transformations have nothing to do with writing at a literal level, it is to the literal level of writing itself – letters traced on parchment with books of *auctores* piled nearby – that his metaphors recurrently turn our attention in *Inferno* XXIV and XXV. The swiftness of Vanni Fucci's combustion reminds the poet of the speedy inscription of the letters 'o' and 'i' – reversing, as in a mirror, the Italian first per-

son singular pronoun 'io' (*Inf.* XXIV, 100–01).³⁵ The staining of pale human flesh-tone with dark reptilian scale colours in the hybrid body of Agnello-Cianfa recalls the browning of the white surface of a scrap of parchment as a candle flame is passed nearby (*Inf.* XXV, 64–66), an action designed to reveal the hidden traces of invisible writing. The fiery destruction of the very ground of writing is also hinted at in this ghostly association of thievery with authorship.

The Homosexual as Thief (with its Genet-promoted variant, the Homosexual Author as Thief) is one of the defining tropes of modern homophobia that Jarman gleefully exposed and reversed in his queer *contaminatio* of Dante with Marlowe and Brecht in *Edward II*. Dante's thieves are punished with a perpetual robbery of their tough-guy identities. Marlowe's knavish Gaveston is repeatedly accused by his court enemies of robbing the King of his honour, his renown, and of course his virility. Gaveston fights back by spitting the same accusation back at the Queen: 'Madam, 'tis you that rob me of my lord' (I. 4. 161).

Jarman counters the trope of homosexual theft visually with the triumphant figure of Man with Snake. The Dantesque merging of snake and thief is replaced by an erotic dance in which the gilded youth raises his phallic partner above his head and seductively kisses it on the mouth. Whereas Dante would have us notice the grotesque parody of the Trinity played out in the seventh *bolgia* – with the unchanging Puccio as God the Father, the two-natured Agnello-Cianfa as Christ, and the fume-veiled Buoso receiving his forked tongue from the serpent Francesco in a demonic replay of the gift of tongues from the Spirit – Jarman clears away all overdetermined theological meanings to revel in the purely aesthetic impact of the phallic dancer. All the ghosts from Dante's snakepit are conjured away in the film and replaced with the solid presence of a single gorgeously spotlit male body. Ghost-writing Dante, for Jarman, meant more than a mere appropriation of homoerotic scenes from the *Inferno* into his screenplay. It meant a complete reimagining of their aesthetic significance within the filmscape of his Dantean transformations.

NOTES

- 1 The academic tradition of male physique photography is well illustrated in Peter Weiermair, *The Hidden Image: Photographs of the Male Nude in the Nineteenth*

- and *Twentieth Centuries*, trans. by Claus Nieland (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 42–52, and in Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 8–13.
- 2 Bodybuilders were often featured as Greco-Roman warriors or wrestlers with snakes coiling around their bodies in *Physique Pictorial* magazine: e.g. 9.4 (April 1960), pp. 6, 23, and 13.1 (August 1963), pp. 10–11. On Jarman's incorporation of *Physique Pictorial* images into a miniature stage design featuring a Dante-inspired Gate of Hell, see Tony Peake, *Derek Jarman: A Biography* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 2000), p. 116.
 - 3 'End Credits', *Edward II*, DVD, directed by Derek Jarman with Ken Butler (New York: Fine Line Features, New Line Cinema, 2005).
 - 4 Jarman's obsession with tracing a queer lineage for himself began in the early 1960s. 'It may seem ludicrous now that stumbling on Marlowe's outing speech from *Edward II* could be an eye-opener', he recalled in *At Your Own Risk* (London: Hutchinson, 1992), p. 46: '[...] I began to read between the lines of history. The hunt was on for forebears who validated my existence.' For his use of 'snake' to denote his penis, his Pasolinian pride in its size, and his exultation at beholding 'the biggest, thickest cock' on a youth in the subway, see Peake, *Derek Jarman*, pp. 281–82.
 - 5 Jarman, *Queer Edward II* (1991), unnumbered dedication page: 'Marlowe outs the past – why don't we out the present?' The dedication goes on to demand 'the repeal of all anti-gay laws, particularly Section 28.'
 - 6 Jarman, *Modern Nature: The Journals of Derek Jarman* (1989–90) (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 233: 'The king could recount Marlowe's play like Scheherazade, ninety minutes of reminiscence and seduction, the executioner as sexy as this skinhead who stretches and pointedly turns his arse in my direction. Edward's cruel phallic death by the red hot poker.'
 - 7 Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, dedication page.
 - 8 For the text of Section 28, see David Rayside, *On the Fringe: Gays and Lesbians in Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 19–43 and n. 1, p. 316.
 - 9 Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p. 16. Throughout this essay 'Sequence' refers to the scenes numbered by Jarman in the screenplay, while 'Segment' is used for scenes in the film (as numbered by me).
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 Colin MacCabe (1974) coined this term to denote a spectator's privileged position to reality as constructed by a classic realist text: see his 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses', in *Theoretical Essays: Film, Linguistics, Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 33–57 (p. 39). Jarman knew MacCabe well, as indicated in the screenplay *Queer Edward II*, p. 16: 'Colin MacCabe (my structuralist friend) told me [...]: "The audience is only interested in sex and violence." So I said to Stephen, who chopped Marlowe up, "Put sex and violence into every scene."' Man with Snake certainly sexes up Gaveston's return and possibly hints at the violence to come from it.

- 12 Jarman's Prince Edward is a clear example of 'The Child Queered by Freud' (i.e. 'the not-yet-straight child who is, nonetheless, a sexual child with aggressive wishes') as defined by Kathryn Bond Stockton in 'Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child: The Ghost, the Homosexual, the Freudian, the Innocent, and the Interval of Animal', in *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, ed. by Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 272–315 (pp. 291–96).
- 13 Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p. 17. The photographer was Liam Longman.
- 14 Peake, *Derek Jarman*, pp. 469–70. On the activists at the shoot, see Ian Lucas, *Outrage!: An Oral History* (London: Cassell, 1998), and Peake, *Derek Jarman*, pp. 463–64, 471–74.
- 15 Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p. 12. For this (and subsequent) excerpts from Marlowe, I reproduce the spelling and punctuation in Jarman's screenplay. The numbering of acts, scenes, and lines follows the Cambridge edition of Marlowe (1981).
- 16 Jarman also wore it for his 'canonization' by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in 1991: see Peake, *Derek Jarman*, pp. 484, 532.
- 17 Jarman, *Smiling in Slow Motion* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 15.
- 18 Ruby Rich, 'The New Queer Cinema', in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, ed. by Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 53, 59.
- 19 Jarman, *Modern Nature*, pp. 293–94.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 307.
- 21 Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p. 16. To Jarman's chagrin, Clarke would not perform the scene in the nude.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 Dante (1265–1321) was nineteen years older than Edward II (1284–1327).
- 25 All quotations from the *Commedia* are from Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi, 4 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67).
- 26 Translations of Dante in this essay, as in Jarman's film, are from *Dante's Inferno*, ed. and trans. by John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939; rpt. 1961).
- 27 Complementing the present essay is my conference paper 'The Straight Way Lost: Jarman and Rauschenberg under the Rain of Fire', delivered at UCLA in 2006. The conference proceedings (*Dante's New Life in 20th-Century Literature and Cinema*) are forthcoming.
- 28 Jarman, *Queer Edward II*, p. 12.
- 29 On the Freudian theory of homosexual narcissism in relation to Wilde and Jarman, see Earl Jackson Jr., *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 81–92, and Steven Bruhm, *Reflecting Narcissus: A Queer Aesthetic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 11, 45, 187 n. 3. Jarman alludes to his 1986 film *Caravaggio* in Sequence 18. Gazing into the cesspool, Edward adopts precisely the same posture as Caravaggio's Narcissus. By extension, the movie screen

- becomes Jarman's self-reflecting pool. On Dante's anticipation of these aesthetic reflections in his allusions to Ovid's Narcissus (*Inf.* XXX, 126–129; *Purg.* XXX, 76–78; *Par.* XXX, 85–87), see Kevin Brownlee, 'Dante and Narcissus (*Purg.* XXX, 76–99)', *Dante Studies*, 96 (1978), pp. 201–06.
- 30 In 1980 he filmed Throbbing Gristle's Psychic Rally at Heaven. 'Later', he recalled in *Dancing Ledge* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1993), p. 214, 'I refilmed the result, cutting it together with old black and white footage from the [1935 Hollywood] film of Dante's *Inferno*.'
- 31 On Blake's illustration of Vanni Fucci in *Inferno* XXV, see the note to Plate 52 in Milton Klonsky, *Blake's Dante: The Complete Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* (New York: Harmony, 1980), p. 194.
- 32 William Blake, 'The Divine Image', in *Songs of Innocence: The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 11. For a queer analysis of Blake's sodomites, see my essay 'Christian Aerobics: the Afterlife of Ecclesia's Moralized Motions', in *Acting on the Past: Historical Performances Across the Disciplines*, ed. by Mark Franko and Annette Richards (Hanover, MD: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), pp. 222–23.
- 33 Jarman, *Modern Nature*, p. 310. His sarcastic remark was sparked by the purging of the politically incorrect Golliwogs from *Noddy*. Note that 'ghost writer' (his spelling) has been emended to 'ghostwriter' for the sake of consistency.
- 34 Ghostwriting has been woefully undertheorized in studies of collaborative authorship. Wayne Koestenbaum ignores it entirely in *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* (London: Routledge, 1989). The homoerotic attachment of Bette Davis to her ghostwriter Sanford Dody is amusingly documented in his memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost: A Writer's Life among the Stars* (New York: Evans, 1980), p. 137.
- 35 D. L. Darby Chapin, 'IO and the Negative Apotheosis of Vanni Fucci', *Dante Studies*, 89 (1971), pp. 19–31, reads this anagram as a signifier of negated selfhood.

James Miller, 'Man with Snake: Dante in Derek Jarman's *Edward II*, in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 213–34 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_13>

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