Anonymous. Dir. Roland Emmerich. Perf. Rhys Ifans, Vanessa Redgrave. Columbia Pictures / Relativity Media. 2011. Film.

Anonymous channels Shakespeare's *Richard III* in order to provide us with our very own winter of discontent. The new "master of disaster," Roland Emmerich, having already destroyed New York City multiple times in his previous films *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012*, decided the time was ripe to turn to the United Kingdom and destroy its heritage instead. Conveniently placed at the end of the current Tudor revival, Emmerich's foray into the realm of dirty Tudor England involves the restructuring of both literary and Elizabethan history. Based on the revisionist Oxfordian theory of Shakespeare's authorship - which questions whether Shakespeare did actually write the plays he penned his alleged illiterate name to - *Anonymous* seeks to rewrite Shakespeare's plays as Edward De Vere's. Playing fast and loose with Tudor history, it presents the viewer with a fictionalized account of De Vere's (Rhys Ifans) alleged literary genius and sexual escapades with harlot queen Elizabeth I (Vanessa Redgrave). This film is Shakespeare at its most meta. Or should that be De Vere? It attempts to be self-reflexive and both metatextual and meta-cinematic through its continuous use of flash-forward and flashback, parody and pastiche.

Beginning in a New York City theater, Shakespearean actor Derek Jacobi provides us with a monologue in direct allusion to Henry V's chorus, suggesting that Shakespeare didn't really write his plays after all: "Let me offer you a different story." The use of Jacobi is two-fold and works to provide the film with credentials equal to that of previous Shakespeare adaptations, in particular *Henry* V (1947) and *Hamlet* (1948), and position itself within the Oxfordian theory which Jacobi himself proudly promotes. The film then propels us *in medias res* into a fast-paced jaunt through the aesthetics of CGI Tudor London. As with Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998), *Anonymous* assumes its viewer as having prior knowledge and awareness of Shakespeare and Tudor history. Unlike *Elizabeth*, it continuously flits between the 1560s, 1590s and 1600s without any narrative hooks to support its spatial-temporal dimensions. Allusions toward Elizabeth include the film's attempt at presenting poetry as a political thriller as she appears framed transcending the body natural into the body politic in the final

scene. It does however seem to turn its back on referencing John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), which perhaps writer John Orloff would have benefited from doing. Playwright Tom Stoppard, known for his meta-textual writings, did a somewhat better job of portraying Shakespeare's life in step with his writing of *Romeo and Juliet* than *Anonymous* does with its intertextual relationship with *Henry* V, plus minor allusions to A *Midsummer Night's Dream, Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet.*

The main issue with *Anonymous* is that it lacks a clearly defined narrative. It appears dramatically absurd in its suggestion that Elizabeth sired several bastards and committed incest with her first, De Vere, which produced her last, the Earl of Southampton (Xavier Samuel). Whatever carefully constructed suggestion in *Elizabeth* that the eponymous central character (Cate Blanchett) was most definitely not a virgin (as she romped around with Robert Dudley (Joseph Fiennes) in the Royal State Bed of England), is swiftly and conclusively unraveled in *Anonymous.* This is merely one of many examples of careless disregard for historical fact which exists in almost every scene in the film.

What *Anonymous* does achieve rather spectacularly is evoking the atmosphere and look of sixteenth century Tudor London, a kingdom for a stage indeed. The scenes set in Shakespeare's Globe are particularly credible, providing an historical aura akin to actually being crammed within this wooden O. However I did wonder who might constitute *Anonymous*' target audience? It is certainly not for English Literature scholars, who will either cringe with horror or laugh themselves silly. Nor, it seems, would the average audience member care less whether Shakespeare, De Vere or even Christopher Marlowe actually wrote the plays, having been subjected to the perceived torture of having to read Shakespeare in their school days. In one scene involving a young Elizabeth (Joely Richardson) and De Vere the morning after the night before of high passion and poetry she asks: "I can't decide, are you Prince Hal or are you Romeo?" I am unsure that the film itself truly knows what it has taken on here. For all its conjecturing and definitive argument that Shakespeare (Rafe Spall) is a drunk, penniless, illiterate actor who most definitely couldn't have written the plays, it appears the lady doth protest too much. The film attempts to be persuasive, but it ends up so contradictory that it might actually make the viewer believe that Shakespeare really did write the plays after all. All the while, the Oxfordian authorship believers come across as a cult

similar to that of Scientologists. The film's tagline asks: "Was Shakespeare a Fraud?" Perhaps. *Anonymous* however, with its non-linear narrative and its fast-paced traversing through time, space and place in the name of pastiche, most definitely is.

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