

Doctor Who and the early modern world

Episode 5: Special Episode - Doctor Who

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Early modern England, dated by historians as the period from c.1500 to 1700, permeates British television. The glittering and dramatic set pieces of Tudor, Elizabethan and Stuart history have long provided the dramatic substance of films and historical novels and, since the middle of the twentieth century, television drama as well. Totemic and highly recognisable aspects of the period, from processes including the Renaissance and Reformation, to individual figures such as Shakespeare and Elizabeth I, recur in shows as diverse as [The Six Wives of Henry VIII](#) to [Blackadder II](#). The trend continues as seen in the popularity of works such as the [Wolf Hall](#) series by Hilary Mantel or HBO's [The Tudors](#).

The early modern period has made occasional but telling appearances as a period visited by the Doctor and his companions in *Doctor Who*. More importantly, the period is now registering as one of increasing significance to the program, making exploration of early modernism within *Doctor Who* both timely and meaningful. The Doctor has visited early modern societies (always a European one) in serials across the last 50 years. From the 'classic series' these comprise 'The Chase' (1965), 'The Massacre' (1966), 'The Smugglers' (1966), 'The Masque of Mandragora' (1976), 'City of Death' (1979), 'The Visitation' (1982) and 'Silver Nemesis' (1988). From the 'revived series' they are 'The Shakespeare Code' (2007), 'Vampires of Venice' (2010), 'Curse of the Black Spot' (2011) and 'The Day of the Doctor' (2013). What will be the next one?



William Hartnell and Peter Purves as The Doctor and Steven.
Image credit BBC.

Although the overall number of early modern stories is small they do however suggest the early modern period is one of enduring significance across different eras and production regimes, and they furthermore represent a distinctive subset of stories within *Doctor Who*. Attention to the early modern world shows that *Doctor Who*'s current engagement with British history is undergoing a transition, with the previous focus on the Victorian period and Queen Victoria that informed many historical stories (as well as the mythos of the spinoff *Torchwood*) giving way to an emphasis on Elizabethan England, a focus endorsed in the 50th anniversary special 'The Day of the Doctor' (2013).

An associated point is that the program's own portrayal the early modern past is undergoing re-orientation. Stories in the classic series set tended to cast the early modern world as one defined by continental darkness, irrationality and difference to the present, a point made by the French religious genocide in 'The Massacre', the mutilated and clearly multi-national pirates of 'The Smugglers', the Italian superstition in 'Masque of Mandragora', the threats of torture in the renaissance interlude in 'City of Death', the plague in 'The Visitation' and the poison and sorcery of 'Silver Nemesis'. By contrast the revived series valorises the early modern world as centred on the English Elizabethan world and has positioned that period as intrinsic to the show's mythology and its relationship with Englishness. Continental darkness has given way to a Queen Elizabeth I who is not only the Doctor's wife but a Zygon slayer and the early modern period is emerging as being of capital significance in the program.

Engaging with the Early Modern

Doctor Who's first engagement with an early modern setting is tentative but also telling. Significantly it was not in an 'historical' story but a science fiction story that *Doctor Who* viewers were presented with a glimpse of early modern England. In the 1965 serial 'The Chase' the Doctor's Time Space Visualiser allows him and his companions to 'watch' a meeting between Queen Elizabeth I and Shakespeare, the first appearance in the program of two historical personages who would return many decades later. The program makers showcased two of the most celebrated and recognised figures from sixteenth-century England.

The same could not be said for the next time the program showcased the early modern world. I used to teach early modern history at the University of Queensland, including the French Wars of Religion and it was hard enough getting undergraduates to understand the period and its conflict between a Catholic French state headed by the regent Marie de Medici and a Huguenot or Protestant (minority). Goodness alone knows what producer John Wiles, script editor Donald Tosh and writer John Lucarotti thought they were doing making teatime drama out of this subject matter, and in a story which makes so few concessions to the historically ignorant. The story has Lucarotti's trademark (exhibited earlier in 'Marco Polo' (1964) and 'The Aztecs' (1964)) of scrupulous historical research. Attentive viewers will have learnt that in sixteenth-century France an *ecu* coin was worth more than two *sous*, among other historical tidbits.

'The Massacre' is a terrific story and its total loss from the BBC Archives (bar a recording of the sound track) is a tragedy. The few surviving photographs suggest a visually authoritative production, in line with the BBC's usual facility in creating period drama sets, and William Hartnell is word perfect as the Doctor's doppelganger the Abbot of Amboise. If you can follow the conspiracies in the confessionally-charged environment that led up to the massacre of thousands of Huguenots on St Bartholomew's Day in 1572, then you're rewarded with an unusually grim and intense story that builds to a shattering climax.



Doctor: "I see your point." Tom Baker as the Doctor in 'The City of Death'
Image credit BBC.

What 'The Massacre' also offers is a vision of early modern history as violent and foreign. Three incarnations and ten years later the Doctor returned to Renaissance-era Europe in 'The Masque of Mandragora', again setting down in a period defined by the on-screen dramatics as darkly ignorant and violent. A cultic brotherhood performs sacrifices in a ruined temple in a wood (in scenes more than a little reminiscent of the forest-set devil worship in horror productions [Blood on Satan's Claw](#) and [Cry of the Banshee](#)) and a thuggish nobleman threatens the Doctor that 'If you are making sport with us, Doctor, we shall make sport with your body'. More Renaissance-era violence, although this time played more for laughs (in a script that was after all partially written by Douglas Adams) is threatened against the Doctor in 'City of Death'. In Leonardo Da Vinci's study (although the great polymath remains an off-screen presence, as he had in 'Masque of Mandragora') a suave alien disguised as an Italian nobleman and a surly henchman threaten the Doctor with various forms of torture including the thumbscrews ('his hands are cold!' complains the Doctor as they are applied) and cutting out his tongue ('you can write, can't you?' snaps the alien when

the Doctor ponders aloud how he could be interrogated with no tongue). A similar level of savagery and dark ignorance pervades the Caroline-set scenes in 'Silver Nemesis'.



Fiona Walker and Gerard Murphy as Lady Peinforte and servant Richard. Image credit BBC

Once again, BBC designers surpass themselves in the immaculately detailed sets that form the 1638 setting of Lady Peinforte's house. Lady Peinforte is a sorceress and murderess; a cauldron full of an obscene concoction bubbles on her hearth, a dead man drained of his blood sprawls nearby, dead birds hang from the ceiling, and there is a circle of esoteric and cabbalistic writing. The scenery is matched by a brilliant performance from Fiona Walker as Lady Peinforte, and the scenes are overall the most accomplished and successful in an otherwise average story. The scenes re-iterate the portrayal of early modernism from the blood-drenched streets of Paris and the caverns and torture implements of earlier early modern stories, insisting on the period of one of darkness, cupidity and superstition.

It is striking how much the relaunched *Doctor Who*, on the air since 2005, owes to the earliest 1960s seasons, including stories with individual episode titles and a general alternation between stories set in the past and in the present or future. Also of influence is the sense that if the Doctor is going to travel into human history, he may as well meet famous people. The First Doctor met (besides Marie de Medici), Marco Polo, Kublai Khan, Doc Holliday, Robespierre and Richard the Lionheart. Since 2005, Charles Dickens, Queen Victoria, Madame de Pompadour, Agatha Christie and other historical celebrities have featured, as though the program is a version of Tassaud's brought to life. Since the 2005, the early modern period has re-emerged as a destination for the TARDIS. Once again, for the first time since 1965's 'The Chase', Shakespeare and Elizabeth I shared the screen in 'The Shakespeare Code', when the Doctor and his companion Martha visit London in 1580.

At the end of the story, when Elizabeth appears and orders an archer to kill 'her sworn enemy' the Doctor, it's clear that somehow he's made her cross. Some explanation is offered in what has been to date the most lavish and the most important story in the revived show, 2013's 'The Day of the Doctor', the fiftieth anniversary story. Beginning with UNIT bringing the Doctor into 21st century London, on the authority of the Tudor Queen, the narrative swiftly establishes the central significance of the Elizabethan period to the Doctor's own story, one which the show's writer Steven Moffat has woven into a story that has been of the greatest significance to the ongoing mythology of the show as it reached its fiftieth year. Not only does the Doctor romance and marry Queen Elizabeth, the redoubtable monarch herself outsmarts the story's monsters, the alien Zygons, killing one, tricking others and rescuing no

fewer than three incarnations of the Doctor from her own Tower of London. ‘I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but at the time, so did the Zygon’, she says, in what is probably the best paraphrase of real Elizabeth’s famous speech at Tilbury in 1588 since the one in *Blackadder II*, when a soon to be very drunk Queenie declared ‘I may have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a concrete elephant’.

But look what’s changed. These voyages to the early modern period has been set in England, not on the continent, and dark European superstition has been replaced by a badass Queen Bess, who is the Doctor’s wife. In fact the threatening elements of the Renaissance era are still resolutely foreign in new *Who*, being contained so far in an Italian-set story ‘The Vampires of Venice’ and out at sea in ‘The Curse of the Black Spot’. In the fiftieth anniversary story, Moffat wove the Elizabethan period into a major reappraisal of the entire mythic fabric of the show, in an agenda-setting story the influence of which we will see when Peter Capaldi’s first season begins to air. Will he go back and visit his wife? Will he revisit early modern England? A case has been made in new *Who* for the importance of this period to the Doctor’s own story, this importance lying in its Englishness and a positive reappraisal of a period once so darkly foreign as far as *Doctor Who* was concerned.

Bio: Marcus Harmes lectures at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. His research interests include science fiction and horror, especially Hammer and *Doctor Who*. He has explored the use of renaissance-era works in *Doctor Who* in [*Doctor Who and the Art of Adaptation: Fifty Years of Storytelling*](#) (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).