

**Tempted by The Tempest:  
Derek Jarman's Gay Play with Shakespearean Romance**  
Cornelis Martin Renes  
*Universitat de Barcelona*

**Abstract**

This paper reassesses Derek Jarman's film *The Tempest* (UK 1979) against recent developments in film adaptation theory in order to reach conclusions about its controversial handling of the Shakespearean source material. After locating the film's lack of general critical acclaim in the practice of traditional fidelity criticism, current concepts of film adaptation theory are applied to the film's content and structure, placing it in the cultural context of British counterculture in the 1970s. Jarman's *Tempest* is analysed by discussing the film's three male protagonists in terms of gender, considering its director's choices of characterisation and plot against the backdrop of queer politics. Moving from Caliban's characterisation as non-racialised, non-threatening and essentially human on Jarman's queer agenda, Caliban and Ariel are contrasted as conflictive sexual tendencies within their master Prospero, interiorising the film's action in the latter's mind as an allegory of the release of homo-erotic desire. As a result, Jarman's rewriting of the original is seen as a subversive deconstruction in service of his gay politics and an independent piece of art.

Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* was praised by local British cinema critics for its fresh approach to well-known subject matter, while his 1979 interpretation of the Shakespeare original met with fierce resistance in the United States after a devastating review in *The New York Times* (Rothwell, 1999: 205).<sup>1</sup> That his efforts deserved a better fate

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<sup>1</sup> See Vincent Canby's review of Jarman's *Tempest* published in *The New York Times* of Monday 22 September 1980.

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may be supported by recent developments in film adaptation theory, which draw attention to the obsolescence of the criteria employed both in newspaper reviews and academic essays when judging the adaptation from novel and play to cinema, and moves away from the *fidelity criticism* to which Jarman's *Tempest* fell prey abroad.

Putting the seminal work of Wagner (1975) and Klein and Parker (1981) in a post-structuralist perspective, in *Novel to Film* Brian McFarlane deconstructs the hierarchical notion of the "single, correct 'meaning'" of a source text a filmmaker should pay homage to, and concludes that traditional fidelity criticism is unproductive because it only establishes to what extent one reading is dissimilar from another (1996: 8-9). As film adaptation draws on different production modes and techniques for story-telling, McFarlane suggests film evaluation locate film adaptations ideologically, as they draw intertextually on texts as (re)sources (1996: 10). He proposes the terms *literal or spiritual fidelity* to the original; *commentary* which would present some kind of "departure" from the source text; and *deconstruction* which "bring[s] to light the internal contradictions in seemingly coherent systems of thought" in the source text (1996: 22).

Shortly before McFarlane's study, Vaughan and Vaughan establish a similar framework for *Tempest* adaptations but struggle with the idiosyncrasy of Jarman's film. They end up evading their categories of *interpretation*, *appropriation* and *adaptation*, holding that Jarman "remak[es]" *The Tempest* into "a *commentary* on the 1970s counterculture movement" in Britain, "intended for punk and gay audiences", by suppressing most of the original text and drastically rearranging the remaining lines and scenes (1991: 200, 209, my italics). The qualification of *commentary* obviously sits uncomfortably within McFarlane's framework, and it is tempting to consider Jarman's *Tempest* a deconstruction because of its re-interpretation in terms of contemporary cultural conflict and its considerable divergence from the source text and its political agenda. Given Jarman's militant homosexuality, the question therefore is to what extent and to what end Jarman's *Tempest* sheds the foundations of the Shakespearean original to forge a new, critical work of art. Clues may be found in a consideration of the central male triangle of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban.

## 1. This Thing of Darkness

Vaughan and Vaughan point out that Caliban “is the most enigmatic and the most susceptible to drastic fluctuations in interpretation” (1991: 7). Although described as a “savage and deformed slave” in Shakespeare’s stage directions, and often called a beast and monster in the play, his image has always been the object of speculation. Deborah Cartmell sees Caliban invested with the “stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy” although “not explicitly black”, and draws attention to what she calls his “surprisingly unproblematic” representation “in the latter half of [the last] century”, using Jarman’s *The Tempest* as an example (2000: 78). Due to the character’s elusiveness, Caliban is easily transformed into an innocent exponent of Jarman’s gay universe. The threatening universe of racial difference is avoided by casting a white actor for the part and further underplayed by infantilising him: in a nude scene Caliban is breastfed by his mother Sycorax, a voluptuous, *white* Claire Davenport (56’). Moreover, Caliban is performed by “the perennial favourite of the Lindsey Kemp clique”, Jack Birkett (Rothwell, 1999: 206), a blind mime actor, harlequin and gay icon who exudes harmless vulnerability.<sup>2</sup>

Jarman’s Caliban remains, nevertheless, the colonial slave upon whose work Prospero and Miranda’s welfare depends, leading to his revolt with the jester Trinculo and the butler Stephano. In Shakespeare’s text, this rebellion *interrupts* the proceedings of Prospero’s daughter’s wedding in “disturbing” ways and poses a threat Prospero takes seriously (cf. Barker & Hulme, 1985: 202-203): “I had *forgot* that foul conspiracy | Of the beast Caliban and his confederates | Against my life. The minute of their plot | is almost come” (IV.i.139-142, my italics). However, the film sees the drunken rabble chased through the mansion by Ariel and Prospero in a carnivalesque masquerade that *precedes* the ceremony and undoes the sensation of danger (59’). Eventually, Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo stumble drunkenly in upon the wedding ceremony: Stephano dressed as a king, Trinculo as his

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<sup>2</sup> Lindsey Kemp is a British dancer, (mime) actor, choreographer and director who reached fame in alternative circles in the 1960s and 70s, and is notorious for his camp productions.

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(drag) queen, and Caliban hanging on as their prince—a gay parade merely crowning the festive mood (80’).

Thus, Jarman’s Caliban incorporates more of the harmless court jester than the dangerous monster that should be controlled by Prospero at all costs. As Kenneth Rothwell says, Jarman “did not seem to have much interest in the plight of exploited workers under capitalism” but put all his efforts in “defang[ing] ‘heterosoc’ prejudice against ‘queers’ that he saw as the lynchpin for ideological, racist and gender policing” (1999: 204). His choice to underplay the racial element in Caliban is inspired by his wish to make a general statement on homophobia rather than a desire to obscure racial oppression (cf. Cartmell, 2000: 80-81). However, Jarman gave the racial issue a different, more positive shape by having the black soul singer Elisabeth Welsh perform the film’s apotheotic finale—“Stormy Weather (since my man and I ain’t together)” —but imbued Prospero’s “thing of darkness” (V.i.275-6) with another *monstrous* connotation in his gay universe.

### 2. My Tricky Spirit

The most intriguing change Jarman applied to *The Tempest* script is surely the foregrounding of the intimate, homo-erotic relationship between Prospero and Ariel. Harris and Jackson claim that there is “an element of psychodrama involving the central trinity of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban” (1997: 97), so that Caliban and Ariel could be understood to represent antagonising tendencies of restraint and freedom, and hetero- and homosexuality in Prospero. This ties in with Jarman’s representation of events as a nightmarish, irrational dream, “plac[ing] the action entirely within the mind of Prospero” (Collick, 1989: 99). The initial film sequence —the intermingling of Prospero restlessly tossing on his bed in a Gothic mansion, with the sounds of breathing, images of the storm, stranding and shipwreck in blue, and cries such as an allegorical “We split” (3’)— comes full circle in the final one —Prospero heavily and peacefully asleep in the dark ballroom, the storm blown over, his mind-voice echoing the play’s lines “Our revels now are ended [...] We are such stuff | As dreams are made on; and our little life | Is rounded with a sleep” (IV.i.148-

158/127"). The barely lit chambers and labyrinthine stairs and corridors of the Tudor-style Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, the scarce exteriors in the indistinct and illusory blue-filtered dune-scape of the Northumberland coastline, and the use of young, vigorous, dark and Byronic Prospero (Harris & Jackson, 1997: 91) add to the sensation of the film being a projection of the subconscious, or, as Jarman calls it, "an island of the mind" (1984: 186).<sup>3</sup>

Harris and Jackson place "the relationship between Prospero and Ariel [...] at the emotional centre" of the film (1997: 97), and indeed, key scenes in the film underline the homoerotic tension present in their relationship. Prospero's first call on Ariel has more of an impatient lover's than master's, and ends up in a teasing hide-and-seek (4'). Prospero also repeatedly vows to release Ariel in return for his loyal service, suffusing his words in a soft relish which betray the surfacing of homosexual desire. Ariel's successful pursuit of Caliban and his fellow revolutionaries —a containment of heterosexual tendencies of sorts— meets with yet another promise of freedom, in answer to which Ariel pants heavily in satisfied "postcoital lassitude" (Harris & Jackson, 1997: 95). Additionally, the tableau of the immense, white, flabby and naked Sycorax having a baby-like Caliban suckle on her breasts questions the naturalness of heterosexuality. Sycorax unsuccessfully tries to subdue Ariel to her imposing femininity, pulling on the chain around his neck to move his naked body closer to her breast (57'). Unlike Caliban, Ariel is frightened of physical contact with the woman, and for saving him from Sycorax's claws, Prospero claims his loyalty. Thus, Prospero's incorporation of and identification with Ariel, the undesirability of the *monstrous* Caliban and the containment of the latter's rebellion may be taken to represent important steps in the imposition of homosexual desire over the heterosexual norm. However, total victory will be only achieved with the film's finale.

Not surprisingly, Prospero praises Ariel for the glamorous wedding ceremony, staged as a celebration of male bonding. The audience is plunged into a queer world of colours, music, dance and happiness that questions the heterosexual pairing underway in a merry and gay "spoof of a Busby Berkeley production number" (Rothwell, 1999: 207). With barely suppressed sexual innuendo, a group of young sailors dances in circles and pairs to a cheerful, up-tempo hornpipe,

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<sup>3</sup> Prospero is performed by Heathcote Williams.

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while the courtiers await in the uniforms of their respective offices, a Renaissance collection of potential *Village People*.<sup>4</sup> This is, significantly, one of the scarce moments when the film abandons its dark gloomy air, and critics have described the originality of this “stunning wedding-masque finale” as the epitome of the film’s camp universe (Harris & Jackson, 1997: 95).

If Ariel denotes Prospero’s homosexual side, a difficult-to-handle part of his own personality, Jarman’s finale can be read as a metaphor of its necessary and healthy release; this would explain the wedding as the cathartic celebration of Prospero’s homosexuality, a queer merger of the male and female principle which subsumes the heterosexual dangers encapsulated in Caliban’s rebellion. After homoerotic desire has finally been liberated, visualised by Ariel briefly enthroning himself before Prospero’s sleeping figure, he exchanges the mansion for the wide world. In the silence after the storm, Prospero is peacefully asleep and his voice-over proclaims that his “revels” are over, here not only taken to mean the celebration, but also the sexual pleasure experienced. Thus, the blues song ‘Stormy Weather’, performed to round off the festivities, denotes Prospero’s inner turmoil and explains how his torment may only finish after confronting his hidden sexuality:

Don't know why, there's no sun up in the sky  
Stormy weather, since my man and I ain't together  
Keeps raining all the time  
Life is bare, gloom and misery everywhere  
Stormy weather, just can't get my poor old self  
together  
I'm weary all the time, the time, so weary all the time  
When he went away, the blues walked in and met me  
If he stays away that old rocking chair will get me  
All I do is pray the lord above will let me  
Walk in the sun once more

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<sup>4</sup> The *Village People* were a popular late-70s and early-80s group of gay singers, who vaunted camp stage dress and performed upbeat disco music boosting lyrics with barely-disguised homosexual innuendo. Still popular are their songs ‘In the Navy’, ‘Macho Man’, ‘Go West’ and ‘Y.M.C.A.’.

I can't go on, everything I had is gone  
Stormy weather since my man and I ain't together  
Keeps raining all the time, keeps raining all the time.  
(Ted Koehler and Harold Arlen, 1932)

In such a psychological reading, Jarman's *Tempest* becomes a pamphlet against the repression of homoerotic desire, visually describing the act of coming out of the closet as Ariel's leaving the mansion. Thus, Jarman invites the viewer to revel in the homosexual universe at a time when gay liberation was still a relatively recent phenomenon and the strictures on a queer lifestyle ubiquitous.

### 3. Conclusion

In the light of the previous discussion, Jarman's adaptation of the Shakespearean script obeyed a clear objective. From his commitment to gay activism, he sought to deconstruct the text in order to imbue it with those elements that would pay homage to homoeroticism, a subversive move which would provide him with scant critical and box-office success worldwide. In an elucidating comment, Jarman writes:

Having decided on the format of the film, one which enabled me to take the greatest possible freedom with the text, I cut away the dead wood (particularly the obsolete comedy) so that the great speeches were concertinaed. Then the play was rearranged and opened up: the theatrical magic had to be replaced.  
(1984: 188)

Obviously, the suppression of much of the dialogue, the rearrangement of the remaining lines with resultant twists in the plot, the dress code shuttling between different historical periods with obvious references to gay and punk subculture, the timeless dream-like structure, the setting in a Gothic mansion, and the introduction of a shockingly camp universe as both point of departure and arrival in the film reconstruct the Shakespearean script into a film that is substantially

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different from the original text, but leaves an odd sensation of similarity due to the consistent use of Shakespearean language and characters.

Despite the latter, Jarman's *Tempest* may certainly be called a *deconstruction* in McFarlane's terms, as it discovers the faultlines in the discourse on the presumed prevalence and desirability of heterosexual love in the source text. What is more, Jarman's adherence to lines and characters of the Shakespearean original allowed him to work more effectively on the politics of the subject matter, a reading which would understand his version of *The Tempest* as an utterly subversive one. Indeed, in announcing his film as "*The Tempest* [...] as seen through the eyes of Derek Jarman" (Crowl, 1980: 1), he insists on a radical revision of the play's content within the prestige of the original. It is this wish to make the play distinctively his own in combination with his love for the original –Jarman speaks of "the delicate description in the poetry, full of sound and sweet airs" (1984: 186)—, that makes for a new, vibrant work of art.

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