Her Majesty moves: Sarah Bernhardt, *Queen Elizabeth* and the development of motion pictures

Victoria Duckett

Sarah Bernhardt, the greatest theatrical star of the late nineteenth century, enabled and even promoted the association of early film with the British monarchy. She did this literally, by playing the role of Queen Elizabeth in *Queen Elizabeth* (*Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth*, Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1912). Bernhardt also promoted the association of the cinema with monarchy symbolically, making the medium a new empathetic vehicle for the development of celebrity mystique and global power. In *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, Marc Bloch explains that in the Middle Ages through to at least the seventeenth century, royal power was associated with physical contact. English and French kings were believed to possess magical powers of healing; through their sacred touch they were thought to cure their subjects of epilepsy and tuberculosis. Distributing so-called cramp rings that they consecrated through their touch, these monarchs sought to heal the sick even beyond the boundaries of their own state.¹ Bernhardt's *Queen Elizabeth* tells the story of a royal ring's failure to deliver the Queen's favourite from death. The Earl of Essex sends back a ring given to him by Elizabeth in order to gain her pardon from the charge of treason. The ring, however, is never received and he is consequently executed. Anguished by the loss of her favourite subject, the Queen dies of remorse. At the opening of the twentieth century, Bernhardt's film functioned symbolically as a royal ring. It circulated widely, changing the ways audiences engaged with and experienced celebrity mystique and power. In this changed order, it is Bernhardt's capacity to move audiences through the nascent medium of film that confirms her already established status as a theatrical diva. Film accords her the symbolic status of queen.

Bloch explains that his history of monarchy offers a new way to investigate a subject that is otherwise formalised into accounts of political developments

and dynastic power. His aim is to explore the mystique of royalty, the objects that accompany it and the beliefs and fables that often go ignored, forgotten and overlooked.² Where Bloch reconsiders monarchy in relation to folklore, beliefs and fables, Bernhardt's *Queen Elizabeth* allows me to reconsider early film history in relation to its own folklore, beliefs and fables. Prime among these is the idea that Bernhardt's *Queen Elizabeth*, coming on the heels of her film adaptation of *Camille* (*La Dame aux camélias*, André Calmettes, 1911) is, like its predecessor, 'too theatrical' for film.

I am not alone in arguing that our reluctance to embrace a figure such as Bernhardt is part of film history's own myth, born of the need to separate and identify the medium as a unique and popular art form. David Mayer has long and eloquently argued that the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century stage and early film were mutually interdependent fields, together marking 'a fluid period of explorations and experimentations, developments, borrowings, and mutual rip-offs'.³ Jon Burrows, in his book *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918*, also debunks what he calls the 'dismissive judgment' of the merit and significance of early films featuring stars from the legitimate stage. Arguing that film was a hybrid form dependent on other established media practices, he explores on a national scale the ideas that I will instead present in microcosm.⁴

Bernhardt's marginalisation as a theatrical intruder in early film relates, I believe, to her very importance. *Queen Elizabeth* was one of the first multiple-reel feature films released in America. A transnational production, it was produced in London by J. Frank Brocliss, the European representative of the Lubin Company, for the Histrionic Film Company (established by Bernhardt for the film), and features Bernhardt with her French cast and the costumes and sets of its stage version. Accompanied by a score composed by Jacques Breil, the film drew middle-class audiences after its lavish opening at the Lyceum Theatre in New York, with its remarkable profits eventually enabling Adolph Zukor to develop Famous Players into the company that became Paramount Pictures.⁵ In this way, *Queen Elizabeth* became precursor to a major Hollywood studio and helped inaugurate a new category of spectacle in the cinema. Indeed, the success of the film drew other theatrical stars to film, helping to develop the longer playing narrative film.

As the Italian *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* notes, however, Bernhardt's indirect participation in the development of Paramount is one of the 'most paradoxical cases in the history of the film industry'.⁶ Her cinema performances are criticised for being gestural, melodramatic and physically excessive.⁷ Dismissed as 'filmed

9 Sarah Bernhardt as Elizabeth I in the final scene of the film version of *Queen Elizabeth*. National Film and Sound Archive of Australia.

theatre', *Queen Elizabeth* is characterised by a still camera, action introduced by lengthy intertitles, elaborate costumes and a gesticulating, silent Bernhardt who mimes her lines.⁸ The final scene, in which the dying queen falls to the ground in an extraordinary gown with long, bell-shaped sleeves, is often said to epitomise visual display rather than narrative in the development of the film.⁹

Queen Elizabeth is a spectacular film, whose players are indeed theatrical in a manner that appears unusual today: they are separately introduced at the opening of the film, they mouth words we can not hear, they are elaborately costumed and it is they (rather than a mobile or fluid camera) who articulate narrative meaning. Moreover, Bernhardt's final descent onto a pile of cushions is excessive, and can even seem comical. The fact that she immediately returns to this set (now cleared and cleaned) in order to acknowledge applause from her unseen spectators reinforces the potential humour of the film's conclusion. At the same time, however, questions remain. How did a Tudor Queen renew Bernhardt's hold not just on Empire (now newly conceived in terms of film), but on the affection and loyalty of an international public?¹⁰ What have we overlooked in our analysis of *Queen Elizabeth* that might reveal something of the film's pioneering appeal?

It is not just the formal language of Bernhardt's film but the very performance of British monarchy on screen that prompts *Queen Elizabeth's* ongoing

association with an *haute bourgeois* theatrical culture that had no place in early film. The irony, of course, is that it is only on screen that it might be argued that Bernhardt was legitimate. We know – as her own public knew through the many references and anti-Semitic caricatures of her in the popular press – that Bernhardt was Jewish and that in the late nineteenth century this meant that she was cast as an outsider to legitimate French culture.¹¹ Moreover, Bernhardt was the daughter of an established Parisian courtesan whose profession she also followed in her youth. In these and other ways, her behavior and choices ran counter to established social and theatrical mores: she had a son out of wedlock, was rumoured to be bisexual and disregarded theatrical convention. Even the public who first made her a star were on the margins of Parisian society: they were the *Saradoteurs*, the modest workers and students of the Left Bank who were vocal and demonstrative in their support of her and who clashed with the older and more established patrons of the Odéon theatre.¹² When the constantly touring Bernhardt appeared forty years later on film in *Queen Elizabeth*, her public had expanded to include legions of spectators in both American continents and the Antipodes. She had become the first global star, with a cross-class following of similar proportions who witnessed her performances of classics and melodramas in an extraordinary range of venues. On her 1905 tour to America she played, for example, in a circus tent that seated 6,000 people as well as in conventional halls, skating rinks and a combined swimming pool-auditorium in Tampa.¹³ *Queen Elizabeth* is not, therefore, a film documenting the legitimate theatrical culture that was fast disappearing at the opening of the twentieth century. It is instead a popular spectacle that is combative, even imperious, in the way that it makes a role that had been associated with other actresses on the international stage Bernhardt's own.

Bernhardt's *Queen Elizabeth* is implicated in a history of performance and patronage that, like Bloch's discussion of the royal touch, extends over centuries. The dramatic depiction of Elizabeth I can be traced back to Thomas Heywood's 1605 play *If You Know Me Not: The Troubles of Queen Elizabeth*. The staging of her relationship to Essex reaches back to 1681, with John Banks's *The Unhappy Favorite, or The Earl of Essex*.¹⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century, the role had acquired new importance for anglophone audiences. The American actress Nance O'Neil successfully toured *Queen Elizabeth*, a 'five-act classical tragedy written around the life of Elizabeth, Queen of England, by Paolo Giacometti', to audiences in America, Australia and New Zealand in 1901 (she also took it to London in 1902).¹⁵ She returned with the play to Australia and

New Zealand in 1905 and to America in 1906. When O'Neil first played *Queen Elizabeth* in Australia, note was taken of the fact that it was new to audiences. Still, readers were reassured that '*Queen Elizabeth* will seem as an old friend to many from the mere fact of its historical foundation.'¹⁶

Giacometti's play was written for the nineteenth-century Italian tragedienne Adelaide Ristori. When Ristori first brought *Queen Elizabeth* on tour to America in 1866 the *New York Times* noted the familiarity that audiences had with its narrative, stating:

The story of the plot is an old one. It has been served in many forms and always successfully. It is simply that of Essex who, receiving a ring from the Queen in her favor, and knowing that it will give him pardon, freedom and life, refuses these boons ... in his indignation at her coquettish cruelty.¹⁷

It was the international renown of Ristori, even more than Bernhardt's contemporary Nance O'Neil, that explains her choice of *Queen Elizabeth* in 1912. The Italian diva had crowned her career with *Queen Elizabeth* in England in 1883 and performed it again on her farewell tour to America in 1884–85.¹⁸

In essaying one of Ristori's main roles and bringing this to the screen, Bernhardt was able to embark on her own, far more extensive, world tours. Reaching audiences Ristori could never reach via steamships and railways, and replacing Giacometti's script with her own commission from Emile Moreau, Bernhardt invited comparison between herself and Ristori, competing with a star who had been described half a century earlier on her American debut in the role as 'the living, breathing Queen ... Queen of art and hearts!'.¹⁹

A further explanation for Bernhardt's adoption of Ristori's role is their mutual use of an emotionally expressive style of acting. A contemporary marvelled that in Bernhardt's performance of the Queen the 'subtlest moments of craft and cunning give place in brutal suddenness – which yet seems natural – to paroxysms of rage and grief or to times of delirium'.²⁰ Ristori's own account stressed the need to incorporate character transitions in her depiction of Elizabeth.²¹ It is also in accordance with the reception Ristori enjoyed on her American debut: 'So majestic in action, so graceful in motion, no attitudinizing, no statuesque poses, but the living, breathing Queen. ... The subtle expounder of the human passions in their varied phazes [*sic*].'²² Again, the criticisms levelled by film scholars at Bernhardt's theatrical anachronism are paradoxical since she, like Ristori, abandons formal theatrical choreography for more emotionally spontaneous and impulsive action.

Adolphe Brisson, writing in *Le Temps* in 1912, argues that Bernhardt's acting provides the focus of the play and keeps the improbability of Moreau's plot at bay:

We do not understand a lot about the grievances [against Essex]. ... But what does it matter? We watch Sarah Bernhardt. And Sarah is extraordinary. The incomplete and confused tragedy becomes concentrated and precise in her, in her attitudes, in her gesture, in the trembling of her hands, in her anxious eyes, in her breathless, trembling, broken voice. We are not interested in anything about Essex, about whom we know but little. But the pain of this amorous and betrayed woman, the emotion of this queen torn between the feelings of her heart and her duties as head of State stir us. In the play's dénouement, Sarah Bernhardt is even more admirable. ... Elizabeth is inconsolable, devoured by remorse. ... Terrible, the face of the artist, her bewilderment, her dread, and in her eyes the terror of her recent hallucinations ... [on learning of Lady Howard's betrayal] Sarah utters some marvellous cries of hatred and offers us a spectacle of sublime agony [...] She translates with an extreme truthfulness the entire gamut of human sentiments, she expresses vehemence as much as sweetness; her acting is sincere, it is even realist on occasion.²³

It is clear that Bernhardt's performance of the English queen was a powerful and emotive one. Yet Moreau's play was performed only twelve times at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt in Paris in 1911 and became one of the biggest failures in the actress's career.²⁴ Nevertheless, Bernhardt's decision to film the drama was a canny one: the role allowed her to play an older woman and to develop her existing repertoire of death scenes. It also exhibited a range of emotions (joy, love, jealousy, fury, pain, terror, remorse) made intelligible through physical acting. Bernhardt's expressive gestures were a celebrated aspect of her performance style, one which enabled its subsequent cinematic success. They allowed audiences to empathetically engage with a figure (the Tudor queen but also the star who played her) often regarded as literally and symbolically removed from the public and the trials of quotidian life.

W. Stephen Bush, commenting in *The Moving Picture World* on Bernhardt's capacity to make the role emotive and compelling, states:

This great artist had her own conception of the character of Elizabeth. It was not the traditional Elizabeth, crafty, calculating and not at all emotional.

So superb is the art of Sarah Bernhardt that she made her conception, which is that of a passionate woman, dominated wholly by her affections, seem not impossible. No student of history could pay a greater tribute to her art than to

say that she successfully defied a well-known historical fact. Throughout the play, which consists of three reels, she exhibited her best powers and won from her audience such keen sympathy and compassion as the real Elizabeth could never have expected.²⁵

If *Queen Elizabeth* allowed Bernhardt to compete with an eminent predecessor, it also allowed her to incarnate a role she already played as a public person. Indeed, while Ristori had been called 'the living, breathing Queen', it was Bernhardt who uniquely adopted the trappings of monarchy and made these an integral and visible part of her public life. She travelled, for example, in a personal railway carriage.²⁶ She commissioned craftsmen such as Lalique to make jewellery for her and was admired for the headdresses, bracelets, rings and brooches she wore. She bought a fort on an island in Brittany and here met, greeted and supported local inhabitants as though meeting and supporting her own subjects. Like many other famous singers and performers on the stage, she was known as 'the Divine'. She was carried regally in a sedan chair after the amputation of her right leg in 1915. Finally and perhaps most famously, Bernhardt designed a letterhead with a tendrilic monogram that featured her initials, SB, with the motto *Quand même* woven through it.²⁷ Meaning 'in any case', or 'nevertheless', this challenge to adversity played itself out both seriously and satirically against the ER of Elizabeth Regina, as well as against Elizabeth's own famous motto, *Semper eadem* or 'Always the same'.

Queen Elizabeth associated Bernhardt with monarchy. It also engaged an object – the Queen's ring – that was still topical. A report in *The Times* published the same year that Bernhardt brought the play to the stage (1911) explains under the heading 'Queen Elizabeth's Ring' that among the items auctioned at Christie's was 'the Essex ring'. Explaining that this is the 'identical ring given by Queen Elizabeth to Essex', that it had been handed down from Essex's daughter in unbroken succession from mother to daughter, and that it sold for the enormous sum of 3,250 guineas, the article presumed general knowledge of the ring's significance. The article also mentioned that the ring had been exhibited at the Tudor exhibition of 1890. Clearly, readers had an ongoing engagement in this queen and her epoch.²⁸ As proof of this – at least (again) within London but this time circulating in the American press – is a report in 1913 of Shakespeare's England being reproduced at Earl's Court, replete with narrow streets, wooden houses, the Globe Theatre (showing the relevant Elizabethan plays), as well as Queen Elizabeth dining 'in state in a banqueting hall, with all her courtiers about her'.²⁹

Queen Elizabeth tells the story of Elizabeth's relationship with her young subject, the Earl of Essex. A court favourite, he helps defeat the Spanish at sea and later introduces the Queen to Shakespeare. Told by a gypsy that he will be beheaded, the Queen gives Essex a ring with the promise of a royal pardon should he ever need it. And he does indeed need this pardon after the jealous Count of Nottingham sees him and his wife in an embrace and realises that Essex is romantically involved with both her and the Queen. After witnessing his wife's liaison, Nottingham writes an anonymous letter accusing the Earl of treason. When Essex returns suddenly to court from Ireland, he is seen by the Queen as he embraces the Countess. As the intertitle states: 'The Queen discovers Lord Essex is unfaithful. She then believes the anonymous letter and orders his arrest.' Sentenced to death, Essex gives his ring to the Countess in the hope that he will be saved. But on her way to the Queen she is intercepted by her jealous husband, who ensures Essex's death by throwing the ring into the Thames. After Essex has been beheaded – and we see the Queen watching him walk past her on his way to the scaffold, as well in the moments before his death – the Queen visits his corpse and finds the ring missing. A confession is extracted from the Countess and the Queen refuses to forgive her. Finally the distraught Elizabeth falls dying to the ground.

This narrative, like the many long-standing tales of Elizabeth and Essex, associates the Queen with romantic passion, enabling and even facilitating spectatorial empathy. Presented against a rich panoply of implied and even re-enacted paintings, prints and popular lore, Bernhardt's performance gave audiences the tools with which to interpret and be emotionally moved by film. Martin Meisel's suggestion that it was in 'the studios, laboratories, and movie houses' of the twentieth century that the nineteenth-century tension between picture and motion was finally synthesised is crucial to understanding the success of this film.³⁰ Unlike the live stage, where Bernhardt held poses for up to seventeen seconds,³¹ and certainly in contrast to painting or print, a static pose could not be contemplated on film. In this sense, Bernhardt invites cinema audiences to engage with her performance on film in a new and challenging way. She asks for an involvement that is at once empathetic and emotional as well as historically and textually dense. It is in this sense that I speak of the moving pictures: not as proof of the camera's newfound mobility, but of film's capacity to animate and electrify the static pose and, with this, to emotionally engage and move a watching audience.

The opening and closing scenes of *Queen Elizabeth* reference a variety of sources. These sources include the 'Dresses, Armor and Furniture from the

Sarah Bernhardt Theatre, Paris' that were publicised in the opening credits of the film, the *mise-en-scène* that was designed by Emile Bertin for Bernhardt's original stage production in Paris, accounts of Elizabeth's famous speech given at Tilbury before her troops on 7 August 1588, seventeenth-century descriptions of gesture and court chivalry, as well as the re-enactment of famous paintings and prints.

The variety of sources that are restaged by Bernhardt and her cast in *Queen Elizabeth* give depth and nuance to the historical characters presented on film. The film animates well-known moments of Elizabeth's life and does this by suggesting and even re-staging well-known paintings and prints associated with the Queen. For example, in the opening shot of the film we see Lou Tellegen (playing Essex) fling a cloak at Bernhardt's feet when she enters the screen. Tellegen then takes his hat from his head and bends to kneel before her. Essex's gallant action is recorded in history. Indeed, we know from an array of written and visual sources that Sir Walter Raleigh, Elizabeth's favoured courtier (who, like Essex, the favoured courtier in this film, was eventually beheaded), was famous for laying his cloak before the Queen. Essex's character, associated with an act that defines Raleigh's chivalry, acquires depth and narrative purpose because of this. As Thomas Fuller recounts in his 1662 *History of the Worthies of England I*,

Captain Raleigh coming out of Ireland to the English Court in good habit (his cloaths being then a considerable part of his estate) found the Queen walking, till, meeting with a *plashy place*, she seemed to scruple going thereon. Presently Raleigh cast and spread his new plush cloak on the ground; whereon the Queen trod gently, rewarding him afterwards with many *suits*, for his free and seasonable tender of so fair a *foot cloath*.³²

While Fuller's is the first description of this act, Michael Dobson and Nicola Watson have observed that 'Sir Walter's legendary courtesy to his queen became one of the nineteenth century's favourite images of the manly and Ruskinian chivalry Elizabeth is supposed to have promulgated at her court.'³³ Dobson and Watson go on to note 'the popularity of such widely reproduced genre paintings as *The gallantry of Sir Walter Raleigh* (Samuel Drummond, 1828), *Sir Walter Raleigh spreads his cloak as a carpet for Queen Elizabeth* (William Theed, 1853), and *Sir Walter Raleigh laying down his cloak before Queen Elizabeth* (Andrew Sheerboom, 1875)'.³⁴ To these we might add *Sir Walter Raleigh laying down his cloak before Queen Elizabeth I* (circle of John Gilbert, 1817–97, n.d.), an 1854 graphite, ink and ink wash image of this same scene by Peter Frederick Rothermel, William Henry

10 The Earl of Essex (Lou Tellegen) kneels before Elizabeth I (Sarah Bernhardt) in *Queen Elizabeth* (*Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth*, Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1912). National Film and Sound Archive of Australia.

Charles Groome's *Sir Walter Raleigh pulling his cloak out for Elizabeth I* (1880) as well as John Leech's more comical *Sir Walter Raleigh and Queen Elizabeth* (reproduced in Gilbert Abbott A'Beckett's 1864 *Comic History of England*, where Raleigh spreads his cloak over a puddle before a bemused looking Queen).

What is interesting is not just the way that film frames the characters in a manner similar to the pictures (in long shot, frontally, with none of the empty space that surrounds the characters on the live stage),³⁵ but the coincidence of costume, gesture and composition. On the right of the frame a chivalrous young man with a plumed hat kneels and lays down his cloak as the Queen walks towards him. In the photograph of the stage production this is inverted, so the Queen is shown walking onto the stage on the right as Essex kneels on the left with his cloak.³⁶ In this sense, film more closely reproduces the visual and compositional elements of the event already known to spectators through famous visual images.

On film, we see a famous gesture identifiable through visual images incorporated into a moving image. The legibility of Essex's simple gesture and the inclusion of it in a scene that runs for just a few minutes indicates that the moving

pictures were a form of visual literature newly available to popular audiences. Indeed, the transference of Raleigh's gallant gesture onto the character of Essex signals, at the film's outset, the importance given spectators as interpreters of character and narrative action. Similarly, the arrival of the Queen to a site of battle alludes to Elizabeth's famous visit to Tilbury on 7 August 1588. Bernhardt's address to the men who crowd the scene on the film – and we have in the background the long spears of infantry soldiers as well as their plumed helmets – is suggestive of the most famous speech of Elizabeth's reign. Famously, she said

I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and good will of my subjects; and therefore come amongst you, as you see, at this time, not for my recreation and disport, but being resolved, in the midst and heat of the battle, to live or die amongst you all, and to lay down for God, and for my kingdom and for my people, my honour and my blood, even in the dust. I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.³⁷

The film runs too fast for a speech of this length to be spoken. Nevertheless, Bernhardt does speak and gesture to her troops. Through her physical actions she indicates an event that was recorded for posterity and endured as recounted fact. The plumed hat that Bernhardt wears in this scene also reproduces Elizabeth I's costume on this visit. Ballads written at the time of Elizabeth's reign report her 'tossing her plume of feathers' and Thomas Heywood, in his later *Exemplary Lives and Memorable Acts of Nine the Most Worthy Women of the World*, speaks of her appearing 'in the head of her Troopes, and encouraging her Souldiers, habited like an Amazonian Queene, Buskind and plumed, having a golden Truncheon, Gantlet and Gorget'.³⁸

Although there is no truncheon, gantlet or gorget in the film, there is reference to Elizabeth having the will to fight 'as a man' in the exchange we see with James VI. It is Essex, however, who encourages her and Essex who returns to announce victory just before Drake arrives. Elizabeth is thus at once a victorious Amazonian Queen, a Queen who enjoys the adoration of her subjects and a woman who is supported by the young man she later comes to love.

The opening scene concludes with Drake arriving dressed as a pirate to receive the Queen's embrace and to confirm victory. Drake then helps Essex and two soldiers lift the Queen in a litter. The men pause to receive the applause of the watching crowd. In this final moment of the film's opening scene we are

reminded of Elizabeth's triumph: arriving on foot, she is carried victoriously away. We are also reminded of another famous painting, *The Procession Portrait of Queen Elizabeth I* (after 1593, attributed to Robert Peake).³⁹ Once more, a famous painting is restaged on screen as a moving picture.

Horizontally disposed, Peake's painting shows Elizabeth in a canopied procession, accompanied by her court and watched by spectators who crowd around and lean from open windows high in the building behind her. While on film there is no canopy, no scenic hill and no building from which spectators watch (as though from boxes in a theatre), in both pictures we see the Queen borne aloft by her loyal subjects, women in attendance, men with halberds behind her, the four pall-bearers carrying her and the framing of all at full height. Indeed, the entire scene takes the same distance from its actors as the painter does to his subject. What this framing eliminates, conveying a sense of crowding to the spectator, is the top third of the painted picture (which is separated into a three-storey building on the right and rolling hills on the left).

We can presume that audiences at the turn of the twentieth century were familiar with this image. Imitated in George Vertue's engraving *Royal Procession of Queen Elizabeth* in 1740, it was still topical at the time of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne. In her 1844 *Lives of the Queens of England*, Agnes Strickland criticised the *Procession Portrait*, stating that it

reminds us of the procession of a pagan goddess surrounded by her priests and worshippers, or the ovation of a Roman conqueror, rather than the transit of a Christian queen in civilized times. The semi-barbarous display of pomp and homage suited the theatrical taste of Elizabeth, who inherited the pride and vanity of both her parents, and understood little of the delicacy and reserve of an English gentlewoman.⁴⁰

Written in homage to the rather more staid Queen Victoria, such criticism ironically indicates why Bernhardt might have referenced the *Procession Portrait* in her film. It allowed her to be pictured theatrically, as the 'Divine Sarah', surrounded by an applauding public. That a live audience would also be watching her as she was raised on screen is significant: Bernhardt was not just a queen, she was also one of global importance who travelled and was seen 'in carriage' abroad. Here another representational strategy implicit in the original painting is evident. Commissioned (arguably) by the Earl of Worcester, who used the Elizabeth cult to commemorate his own honour,⁴¹ it nominally focuses on Queen Elizabeth in order to celebrate his relationship to this figure.

Consequently, in both painting and film, there is an oblique displacement. The real subject on view is, respectively, Worcester and Bernhardt's relationship to a queen, rather than the Queen herself.

In the final scene, the film stages a tableau of Paul Delaroche's 1828 painting, *Death of Queen Elizabeth, Queen of England, in 1603*. Here we see the clearest example of the licence Bernhardt takes with her portrayal of the Queen. Visually, the *mise-en-scène* is almost identical to Delaroche. Details are true, too, to recorded history: we know, for instance, that ermine was long an emblem of chastity and thus considered appropriate to the depiction of the Virgin Queen. We know that Elizabeth was painted with an ermine on her arm in 1585 (the 'Ermine' portrait, attributed to William Segar). We also know that during her final hours Elizabeth was surrounded by her closest female attendants, that she lay on cushions and that she did not name her successor until shortly before her death.

On film we have, however, rapid physical action. Hence, where Delaroche depicts the Queen lying in opulent splendour on an ermine cloak spread across a pile of cushions, Bernhardt instead proceeds rapidly to her demise. She walks into the room and is offered a sword (the sword of justice, itself prefigured in the 'Ermine' portrait). She discards this, stands before the pile of cushions and calls for a goblet from which she then drinks, and finally holds a mirror to her face. Discarding the mirror (which alludes not to vanity but to her awareness that her court had misrepresented her enduring beauty) she refuses support. Pulling herself straight, as though driven by a final burst of energy, she calls for the Earl of Nottingham. After naming her successor, she raises both arms upwards and, palms outstretched, falls forward.

May Agate, a former student of the actress, commenting on the stage production explains:

[Bernhardt's] performance was one of a soul-seared woman who still loves the man she has put to death. She was regal, immensely dignified, terrible, and as a picture of remorse I can think of nothing more haunting. What is more, you felt here was a woman capable of putting people to death, for she was hard, inexorable, terrifying. Even in her last throes of suffering she made no appeal to pity. There was no truck with the pendants; she died standing up, falling forward on to a mass of cushions, not writhing, senile amongst them as is recorded historically.⁴²

Agate's reference to the historic image of Queen Elizabeth's senile writhing invokes not only Delaroche's painting of the Queen but also its source, David

11 Sarah Bernhardt as Elizabeth I in the final scene of the 1912 stage production of *Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth*. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Hume's *House of Tudor* volume of his *History of England*, published in 1759. In this, Hume explains that for 'Ten days and nights she lay upon the carpet, leaning on cushions which her maids brought her; and the physicians could not persuade her to allow herself to be put to bed, much less to make trial of any remedies they prescribed to her.'⁴³

There is evidence that Delaroche's painting had been used as reference for a previous stage tableau. As early as 1829 François Ancelot concluded a tragedy on Elizabeth's life with a deathbed scene similar to that depicted in Delaroche's work.⁴⁴ In 1867, when the playwrights Eugène Nus and Alphonse Brot opened their play *Testament de la Reine Elisabeth* at the Théâtre de la Gaité in Paris, a review in *Le Temps* stated 'Since the painting of Paul Delaroche, the dramaturgical painter who concerns himself much more with historical *mise-en-scène* than with philosophy, one can not but represent Elisabeth, old and dying, unless lying on cushions and railing through the golden lace of her bristling ruffles.'⁴⁵

The *Testament de la Reine Elisabeth* called for such staging: the opening to the fourth tableau asks that Delaroche's *Queen Elizabeth* is explicitly recreated.⁴⁶ Viewed in this context, Bernhardt's adaption and Delaroche's *mise-en-scène* and historical gesture and action takes an added significance. In significantly changing and re-presenting Delaroche's painting, Bernhardt not only references a popular scene and accelerates its action, she also actively changes the character and meaning of the history depicted. In this way, an event was figuratively *and* rhetorically freed from the past.

Bernhardt's elaboration of how we might think about and understand Elizabeth I was part of the celebration of Gloriana in the early twentieth century. Whereas Victorian England had initially characterised Elizabeth as a vain and cruel queen, a pagan and uncivilised goddess, by the time Bernhardt played her, public sentiment had changed. As Leonée Ormond explains, by the 1880s the Elizabethans were no longer considered barbarians but were instead celebrated across the arts for their contribution to English history; the three-hundredth anniversary of the Armada saw public festivities as well as new poems, painting, sculptures and exhibitions. Bernhardt was thus portraying a Queen who loved Essex and a woman who could herself be loved as an empathetic, historical subject. The enduring irony of this is that *Queen Elizabeth* has been written into film history as a high-class failure. We would do well to remember, however, that the tale of Elizabeth and Essex is driven by the failure of a ring to deliver royal pardon. Transformed in the new empire of film, the royal touch was becoming associated with new customs and beliefs. It was the ability to move and be moved that, at the opening of the twentieth century, signalled Bernhardt's capacity to be queen.

NOTES

- 1 Marc Bloch, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), especially 'Introduction', pp. 1–8.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 David Mayer, *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D. W. Griffith and the American Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p. 29.
- 4 Jon Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), p. 17.
- 5 Adolph Zukor bought the American rights to the film, paying US\$360 a day plus 10 per cent of gross to Bernhardt and arranged a lavish opening at the Lyceum Theatre in New York. As Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale state: 'A four reeler, it

- reconciled exhibitors towards the longer film and earned \$80,000 for Zukor on an investment of \$18,000. With this money Zukor was able to make a distribution deal with Paramount Pictures, which he eventually took over.' Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale, *The Divine Sarah: A Life of Sarah Bernhardt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), p. 310.
- 6 'L'indiretta partecipazione della grande tragica francese al sorgere delle fortune del fondatore della Paramount è uno dei casi più paradossali della storia dell'industria cinematografica.' *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (Rome: Casa Editrice le Machere, 1954), p. 371.
 - 7 Besides *Camille* and *Queen Elizabeth*, Bernhardt appeared in a fifty-second excerpt from *Hamlet* (Clément Maurice, Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, 1900), and other, longer-playing works: *La Tosca* (André Calmettes, 1908), *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Louis Mercanton and Henri Desfontaines, 1913), *Sarah Bernhardt à Belle Isle* (*Sarah Bernhardt at Home*, Louis Mercanton, 1913), *Jeanne Doré* (Louis Mercanton with René Hervil, 1915), *Ceux de chez nous* (*Those at our House*, Sacha Guitry, 1915), *Les Mères françaises* (*Mothers of France*, Louis Mercanton and René Hervil, 1917), *It Happened in Paris* (David Hartford, 1919), *Daniel* (director unknown, 1921), and *La Voyante* (Louis Mercanton, 1923). Of these films, *La Tosca*, *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *It Happened in Paris* and *La Voyante* are lost and only a short of excerpt of *Daniel* is available. See David W. Menefee, *Sarah Bernhardt: Her Films, Her Recordings* (Dallas: Menefee Publishing, 2012).
 - 8 See Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema* (New York: Scribners, 1990), pp. 204–5; and Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896–1914* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 316, for recent scholarship that endorses this view. Charles Musser, in his article 'Conversions and convergences: Sarah Bernhardt in the era of technological reproducibility, 1910–1913', *Film History* 25:1–2 (2013), p. 170, cites Terry Ramsaye, Adolph Zukor, Georges Sadoul, Robert Sklar and Eileen Bowser to support this same point. Further sources could be cited to confirm the criticisms made about Bernhardt's acting. (Jay Leyda and Andre Bazin are also critical of her theatricality.) My point is that 'filmed theatre' has long been used as a term of critique in film studies.
 - 9 See, for example, Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town*, p. 316. See also Barbara Hodgdon, 'Romancing the Queen', in *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 112–15.
 - 10 See, for example, the *Ciné Journal* speaking of Bernhardt as 'THE GREATEST ARTIST OF THE WORLD in the Cinema' and offering the rights for the 'ENTIRE WORLD', marketing the film as 'the most magnificent ever presented.' 'Queen Elizabeth', *Ciné Journal* 230 (18 January 1913), pp. 72–3.
 - 11 See Sander L. Gilman, 'Salome, syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the "modern Jewess"', in Sander L. Gilman (ed.), *Love + Marriage = Death and Other Essays on Representing Difference* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). See also Janis Bergman-Carton, 'Negotiating the categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the possibilities of Jewishness', *Art Journal*, 55:2 (Summer 1996), pp. 57–8, where it is explained that a caricature

published in 1884 in *La Vie Parisienne* entitled 'Théodora Puff' shows Victorien Sardou literally 'drumming support' for Bernhardt, who stands 'blowing her own horn' on the stage beside him. Here, Bernhardt's exaggeratedly large nose corresponds to one of the anti-Semitic physiognomic signs of Judaism. Visibly different from those physiognomies of the watching audience, Bernhardt is culturally separated from the crowd. Her thinness also reiterates this separation, suggesting a foreignness which the anti-Semitic imagination translated into sickness and disease.

- 12 See Sarah Bernhardt's comments about this 'band of students' called the 'Saradoteurs' in Paris in Sarah Bernhardt, *Ma Double Vie: Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt* (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1923), p. 290. See also Suze Rueff, who relates in her biography of Bernhardt that Bernhardt 'drew to the Odéon the students, the minidettes and the artisans of the *rive gauche*'. Suze Rueff, *I Knew Sarah Bernhardt* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1951), p. 48.
- 13 See Stephen M. Archer, 'E pluribus unum: Bernhardt's 1905–1906 farewell tour', in Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (eds), *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 161.
- 14 See Frederick S. Boas, *Queen Elizabeth in Drama and Related Studies* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), especially ch. 1 ('Queen Elizabeth in Elizabethan and later drama').
- 15 See David Beasley, *McKee Rankin and the Heyday of the American Theater* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2002), pp. 379–80, for a discussion of this and the impact O'Neil had in Australia.
- 16 'Queen Elizabeth', *The Argus* (25 March 1901), p. 9.
- 17 'Amusements', *New York Times* (2 October 1866), p. 5.
- 18 Marvin A. Carlson, *The Italian Shakespearians: Performances by Ristori, Salvini, and Rossi* (Washington, DC: Folger Books, 1985), p. 34; Susan Bassnett, 'Adelaide Ristori', in Michael R. Booth, John Stokes and Susan Bassnett (eds), *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 165.
- 19 F. G. W., 'Ristori', *American Art Journal* 5:26 (18 October 1866), pp. 407–8.
- 20 'Bernhardt as Queen Elizabeth', *New York Times* (12 May 1912), p. X9.
- 21 Bassnett, 'Adelaide Ristori', p. 121.
- 22 F. G. W., 'Ristori', pp. 407–8.
- 23 '[N]ous ne comprenons pas grand chose aux griefs qu'articule contre lui l'évêque de Worcester ... Qu'importe! Nous regardons Sarah Bernhardt. Et Sarah est extraordinaire. La tragédie incomplète et confuse se concentre, se précise, dans son attitude, dans ses gestes, dans le frémissement de ses mains, dans l'angoisse de ses yeux, dans le tremblement de sa voix haletante et brisée. Nous ne nous intéressons nullement à Essex que nous connaissons fort mal. Mais la douleur de cette femme amoureuse et trahie, l'émoi de cette souveraine tiraillée entre l'élan de son coeur et les obstacles de la raison d'Etat nous remuent. Au dénouement, Sarah Bernhardt est plus admirable encore. ... Elisabeth inconsolable, dévorée de remords. ... Terribles, le visage de l'artiste, son égarement, son épouvante, et dans ses prunelles l'effroi des

- récentes hallucinations. [...] Sarah de pousser de merveilleux cris de haine et de nous offrir le spectacle d'une sublime agonie [...] Elle traduit avec une extrême vérité la gamme entière des sentiments humains, elle exprime la véhémence aussi bien que la douceur; son jeu est sincère; il est même à l'occasion réaliste.' Adolphe Brisson, 'Chronique théâtrale', *Le Temps* (15 April 1912), p. 1.
- 24 Gerda Taranow, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art within the Legend* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 169.
- 25 W. Stephen Bush, 'Queen Elizabeth', *Moving Picture World* (3 August 1912), p. 420.
- 26 See the photographs reproduced in the catalogue by Carol Ockman and Kenneth E. Silver (eds), *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2005), pp. 154 and 155. Here we see a reproduction of Hall's 1912 photograph, 'Sarah Bernhardt on caboose of her private Pullman car, "Le Sarah Bernhardt"', as well as the Moffett Studio's 'Sarah Bernhardt standing inside her train "Le Sarah Bernhardt"', 1912.
- 27 See *ibid.*, p. 84, for an illustration of this.
- 28 'Queen Elizabeth's ring', *The Times* (19 May 1911), p. 11.
- 29 'Elizabethan days', *Chicago Defender* (6 April 1912), p. 7.
- 30 Martin Meisel, *Realizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 51.
- 31 As described in William Butler Yeats, 'Notes', *Samhain* (October 1902), p. 4.
- 32 Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England I* (A New Edition with a few explanatory notes by John Nichols) (John Nichols & Son: London, 1811), p. 287.
- 33 Michael Dobson and Nicola J. Watson, *Elizabeth's England: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 140.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 See the photographs of Bernhardt on the live stage in *Queen Elizabeth: Sarah Bernhardt dans 'La reine Elisabeth', pièce d'Emile Moreau: documents iconographiques* (Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1912).
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Cited in Susan Bassnett, *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective* (Oxford, New York and Hamburg: Berg, 1988), pp. 73, 74.
- 38 Winfried Schleiner, "'Divina Virago": Queen Elizabeth as Amazon', *Studies in Philology* 75:2 (Spring 1978), pp. 174–5, 176.
- 39 I do not want to go into the debates surrounding who painted this image and what it possibly represents. See David Armitage, 'The procession portrait of Queen Elizabeth I: a note on a tradition', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53 (1990). Armitage links it to the 'isolable tradition of representing royal power' and states that because we can see the garter of Edward Somerset, Earl of Worcester, as he walks alongside Elizabeth in the portrait, we can date it to 25 June 1593 as this is when he received the Order of the Garter and became Elizabeth's Master of the Horse after the fall of Essex. See pp. 301 and 305.
- 40 Cited *ibid.*, pp. 306–7.
- 41 See discussion of the *Procession Portrait* in Louis Montrose, *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation* (Chicago and London: University of

- Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 104–5, where he states that ‘this splendidly festive image of the Elizabeth cult is made the occasion and the means to commemorate the honor and worship of one of Elizabeth’s noble followers. By means of this oblique displacement, the Queen remains the nominal subject of the painting, but its real subject becomes the Earl of Worcester in his relationship to the Queen.’
- 42 May Agate, *Madame Sarah* (London: Home & Van Thal, 1945), p. 170.
- 43 David Hume, *The History of England*, vol. 1 (London: James S. Virtue, 1800), p. 543.
- 44 Norman D. Ziff, *Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth-Century French History Painting* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), p. 70.
- 45 ‘Depuis le tableau de Paul Delaroche, de ce peintre dramaturge qui s’est occupé de la mise en scène de l’histoire, beaucoup plus que de sa philosophie, on ne peut représenter Elisabeth, vieille et mourante, autrement que couchée sur des coussins, et râlant à travers la dentelle d’or de sa collerette hérissée.’ Louis Ulbach, ‘Revue théâtrale’, *Le Temps* (20 May 1867), p. 1.
- 46 ‘Le théâtre représent le tableau de la mort d’élisabeth, par Delaroche. La Reine est étendue sur de riches tapisseries amoncelées sur le parquet et lui faisant une sorte de lit. Elle est fardée, mais son visage porte l’empreinte de la mort.’ Eugène Nus and Alphonse Brot, *Le Testament de la Reine Elisabeth, drame historique a grand spectacle en cinq actes et huit tableaux* (Paris: Librairie Dramatique, 1867), p. 62.

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abel, Richard, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896–1914* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1994).
- Agate, May, *Madame Sarah* (London: Home & Van Thal, 1945).
- ‘Amusements’, *New York Times* (2 October 1866), p. 5.
- Archer, Stephen M., ‘E pluribus unum: Bernhardt’s 1905–1906 farewell tour’, in Ron Engle and Tice L. Miller (eds), *The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial period to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- Armitage, David, ‘The procession portrait of Queen Elizabeth I: a note on a tradition’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 53 (1990).
- Bassnett, Susan, *Elizabeth I: A Feminist Perspective* (Oxford, New York and Hamburg: Berg, 1988).
- ‘Adelaide Ristori’, in Michael R. Booth, John Stokes and Susan Bassnett (eds), *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- Beasley, David, *McKee Rankin and the Heyday of the American Theater* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2002).
- Bergman-Carton, Janis, ‘Negotiating the categories: Sarah Bernhardt and the possibilities of Jewishness’, *Art Journal* 55:2 (Summer 1996).
- ‘Bernhardt as Queen Elizabeth’, *New York Times* (12 May 1912), p. X9.

- Bernhardt, Sarah, *Ma Double Vie: Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt* (Paris: Eugène Fasquelle, 1923).
- Bloch, Marc, *The Royal Touch: Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, trans. J. E. Anderson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).
- Boas, Frederick S., *Queen Elizabeth in Drama and Related Studies* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970).
- Bowser, Eileen, *The Transformation of Cinema* (New York: Scribners, 1990).
- Brisson, Adolphe, 'Chronique théâtrale', *Le Temps* (15 April 1912).
- Burrows, Jon, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003).
- Bush, W. Stephen, 'Queen Elizabeth', *Moving Picture World* (3 August 1912).
- Carlson, Marvin A., *The Italian Shakespearians: Performances by Ristori, Salvini, and Rossi* (Washington, DC: Folger Books, 1985).
- Dobson, Michael and Nicola J. Watson, *Elizabeth's England: An Afterlife in Fame and Fantasy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 'Elizabethan Days', *Chicago Defender* (6 April 1912), p. 7.
- Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* (Rome: Casa Editrice le Machete, 1954).
- F. G. W., 'Ristori', *American Art Journal* 5:26 (18 October 1866).
- Fuller, Thomas, *The History of the Worthies of England I* (A New Edition with a few explanatory notes by John Nichols) (London: John Nichols & Son, 1811).
- Gilman, Sander L., 'Salome, syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt and the "modern Jewess"', in Sander L. Gilman (ed.), *Love + Marriage = Death and Other Essays on Representing Difference* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- Gold, Arthur and Robert Fildale, *The Divine Sarah: A Life of Sarah Bernhardt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
- Hodgdon, Barbara, 'Romancing the Queen', in *The Shakespeare Trade: Performances and Appropriations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).
- Hume, David, *The History of England*, vol. 1 (London: James S. Virtue, 1800).
- Mayer, David, *Stagestruck Filmmaker: D. W. Griffith and the American Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).
- Meisel, Martin, *Realizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- Menefee, David W., *Sarah Bernhardt: Her Films, Her Recordings* (Dallas: Menefee Publishing, 2012).
- Montrose, Louis, *The Subject of Elizabeth: Authority, Gender, and Representation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
- Musser, Charles, 'Conversions and convergences: Sarah Bernhardt in the era of technological reproducibility, 1910–1913', *Film History* 25:1–2 (2013).
- Nus, Eugène and Alphonse Brot, *Le Testament de la Reine Elisabeth, drame historique à grand spectacle en cinq actes et huit tableaux* (Paris: Librairie Dramatique, 1867).
- Ockman, Carol and Kenneth E. Silver (eds), *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2005).
- 'Queen Elizabeth', *The Argus* (25 March 1901).

- 'Queen Elizabeth', *Ciné Journal*, 230 (18 January 1913).
- Queen Elizabeth: Sarah Bernhardt dans 'La reine Elisabeth', pièce d'Emile Moreau: documents iconographiques* (Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1912).
- Rueff, Suze, *I Knew Sarah Bernhardt* (London: Frederick Muller Ltd, 1951).
- Schleiner, Winfried, '“Divina virago”: Queen Elizabeth as Amazon', *Studies in Philology* 75:2 (Spring 1978).
- Taranow, Gerda, *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art within the Legend* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).
- Ulbach, Louis, 'Revue théâtrale', *Le Temps* (21 May 1867).
- Yeats, William Butler, 'Notes', *Samhain* (October 1902).
- Ziff, Norman D., *Paul Delaroche: A Study in Nineteenth-Century French History Painting* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977).