

Books in Motion: Literary Adaptations in the Nineties

By John C. Tibbetts

D'Artagnan was the biological father of King Louis the XIV.

This amazing revelation, coming at the end of Randall Wallace's screen adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' *The Man in the Iron Mask* (1997) constitutes, no doubt, one of the most startling screen moments of the 1990s. Who would have suspected it? Certainly not d'Artagnan's Musketeer comrades. Certainly not Louis' presumed father, King Louis XIII. Certainly not the historians. And certainly not novelist Dumas.

While viewers blissfully ignorant of the Dumas original might revel in such soap-operatic fabrications, the more informed purists surely cry foul! They charge that too many filmmakers perform such acts of sabotage on their beloved classics with impunity. They groan when Steven Spielberg's *Hook* (1991) forces Peter Pan to grow up; they weep when Alfonso Cuarón relocates Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1997) to the sunny Florida Gulf; and they cringe when Disney turns *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) into a musical cartoon with cute gargoyle characters named "Victor" and "Hugo." A lame justification for these alterations comes from the narrator of *Great Expectations*: "This isn't the way things happened, it's the way I remember them happening." Director/writer Terry Gilliam expressed it more pointedly, regarding his screen adaptation of Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998): "My attitude was, 'I hate [Thompson], I hate the bastard, [I] don't want him near this thing, I'm going to fuck up his book if he comes near this thing.' And that was my approach." (Smith, 78)

Small wonder if some writers, like Nick Nolte in Keith Gordon's adaptation of Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night* (1996), might be

tempted to hang themselves—with a noose fashioned from a typewriter ribbon.

By contrast, however, it should be remembered that more literary adaptations than ever before have displayed a faithfulness bordering on obsession—the conventional morality that regards anything less as "a kind of vulgar cannibalization, an abuse of the high art of fiction" (Admussen, 58). Michael Winterbottom's *Jude* (1996), Bille August's *Les Misérables* (1998), Claude Berri's *Germinal* (1994), and Claude Chabrol's *Madame Bovary* (1991)—to cite just a few—have displayed such respect for the texts of Thomas Hardy, Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, and Gustave Flaubert, respectively, that the results fairly choked on their own literary bile.

Less easily categorized are those post-modernist confabulations that indulge in both extremes, simultaneously. Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996), Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* (1995), Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996), and Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1990) lock text and screenplay in a symbiotic embrace. Word and image co-exist in a perpetually shifting, weirdly multi-sensual, multi-media equilibrium. Neither book nor movie, as a result, is the primary, or definitive text. Both proclaim themselves as independent alternatives. We have come to a fork in the road. And, like Yogi Berra once said, we must take it.

No decade in the history of the motion picture, save perhaps the decade before World War I, has produced more literary and theatrical adaptations than the 1990s. Early in the decade, commentator Pat Dowell foresaw the boom. "Hollywood

still loves a presold property,” he wrote, “[and now] maybe even loves it more” (Dowell, 29). Fees paid to authors by filmmakers and publishers have been steadily rising. Even though options, rather than an outright buy of a literary property, have comprised the vast majority of deals (ranging from an average of \$25,000 to \$50,000), increasingly six-figure deals are becoming commonplace. Agencies like Creative Management, Creative Artists Agency, and William Morris are giving first-buy priorities to their filmmaker clients

Spearheading what is becoming, in some quarters at least, nothing less than a literary takeover of movies, are writers like Tom Clancy, Stephen King, Michael Crichton, and John Grisham. They all, at one time or another, have assumed control over scripts and directors; in some cases, they are serving as Executive Producers of these adaptations. Tom Clancy’s CIA operative Jack Ryan has been portrayed by Alec Baldwin in John McTiernen’s *The Hunt for Red October* (1991), and by Harrison Ford in two films by Philip Noyce, *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Clear and Present Danger* (1994). Ryan was predictably stalwart, a bulwark against slippery politics and murky ideologies. “It’s a gray world,” complains one of his associates in *Clear and Present Danger*. “No,” retorts Ryan, “it’s a matter of right and wrong.”

In addition to many Stephen King adaptations for television mini-series (*The Tommyknockers*, *It*, *The Langoliers*, *The Shining*), there have been numerous theatrical films, including Mary Lambert’s *Pet Sematary* (1992), which proposed that you have to die *twice* to be really dead; Frank Darabont’s *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), about Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), a Messiah dispensing grace and hope to Maine’s Shawshank Prison; Taylor Hackford’s exemplary *Dolores Claiborne* (1995), which starred Kathy Bates in the eponymous role of a vengeful, abused wife (“Sometimes being a

bitch is all a woman can hold on to”); George Romero’s *The Dark Half*, in which writer Thad Beaumont (Tim Hutton) slays his wicked literary creation-come-to-life, “George Stark,” with a leaded pencil.

Michael Crichton’s books have been represented in Philip Kaufman’s *Rising Sun* (1992), which sounded a warning note against the potential Japanese corporate takeover of America (“The Japanese are not our saviors, they are our competitors; we should not forget it”); two films by Barry Levinson—*Disclosure* (1994), a corporate takeover story disguised as a tract on sexual harassment, and *Sphere* (1998), an undersea science fiction encounter with aliens, after which the three human survivors join hands and agree to forget all about it (!); and two blockbusters by Steven Spielberg, *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *The Lost World* (1997), both advertisements for a theme park at Universal City.

John Grisham’s lawyer novels, meanwhile, are, in the opinion of commentator Mark Olsen, quickly becoming the most successful literary franchise in history: “Just like a new location for a fast-food chain, a Hollywood studio can purchase the rights to one of Grisham’s stories and have a pretty solid idea of what they’re going to get.” (Olsen, 76). No matter that their depictions of the letter of the law and the practices of judicial procedure usually stray far from home—these stories are no different from biographies and history films in that they conform their subjects to the formulas of popular entertainment. They are the stepchild of the conspiracy thrillers of the Seventies, and, at the same time, like seismic readings, they reflect the changing face of the legal system and our growing concern, even distrust and confusion, about the efficacy of legal procedures in the Nineties. Thus, in Sydney Pollack’s *The Firm* (1993), Tom Cruise portrays brash young Mitch McDeere in a “Faust goes

into a law firm” allegory. In Alan J. Pakula’s *The Pelican Brief* (1993) newspaperman Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) and law student Darby Shaw (Julia Roberts) uncovers the conspiracy behind the assassination of two Supreme Court judges. Joel Schumacher’s *The Client* (1994) and *A Time to Kill* (1996) throws maverick attorneys Reggie Love (Susan Sarandon) and Jake Brigance (Mathew McConaughey), into the clutches of mobsters and the Ku Klux Klan, respectively. James Foley’s *The Chamber* (1996) pits fresh-faced Adam Hall (Chris O’Donnell) against a justice system determined to execute his convicted grandfather (Gene Hackman). Francis Ford Coppola broke a long dry spell with his hugely successful *The Rainmaker* (1997), which casts Matt Damon as a neophyte, shiny-faced idealist battling the wiles of a slick, big-city lawyer, Leo Drummond (Jon Voight) in a medical insurance case.

Certainly one of the major events of the Nineties has been the continuing series of adaptations of novels by Jane Austen and Henry James. By the late 1990s, five Austen adaptations were playing in American theaters and on television. Their reception thus far has been profitable and has spread beyond the “art house” crowd. Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) cost only \$15.5 million to make and during its initial release grossed \$42 million. *Persuasion* (1995), targeted as an art-house film, pulled in a respectable \$5.3 million. Roger Michell’s *Clueless* (1995) established Alicia Silverstone as a star and spun off an ABC television sitcom and a line of Mattel Toy Company dolls. The six-hour BBC/Arts and Entertainment *Pride and Prejudice* became A&E cable channel’s fastest-selling video title. And Douglas McGrath’s *Emma* (1996) prompted *People* magazine to proclaim Austen one of the “25 Most Intriguing People of 1995.”

Austen’s appeal resides in her finely-honed dialogue and satiric thrusts at the fol-

lies of class, gender, and manners. Three of the Austen adaptations have been respectful, sumptuously mounted, impeccably-cast productions. Ang Lee’s *Sense and Sensibility* benefited from crisp compositions, a sensitive response to the rural locations, and first-time screenwriter Emma Thompson’s canny script. Lee was the perfect choice to helm the project. Like Austen, as Donald Lyons notes, Lee is “an artist of family and society, of the unending tension between ceremony and self” (Lyons, 41). The misadventures of the two disinherited Dashwood sisters (Emma Thompson as the terminally demure Elinor and Kate Winslett as the dangerously headstrong Marianne) were retained as the central focus. Arrayed opposite them were Austen’s admittedly shallow male characters (here transformed into more suitable foils), Hugh Grant as the retiring Edward Ferrars, Greg Wise as the dashing John Willoughby, and Alan Rickman as kindly Colonel Brandon. Retained is the satiric irony that was Austen’s forte, i.e., the sister’s delayed awareness of the dangerous extremes to which their respective temperaments are leading them.

An entirely different atmosphere pervades *Persuasion*, where sailors and the sea (the rainswept seawalls of Lyme Regis) play a significant role in the adventures of the Elliott family. Desperate to connect with the “proper” social set, Sir Walter (Corin Redgrave) subjects his daughters to the deceptions and hypocrisies of society—all but Anne Elliott (Amanda Root), that is, whose intelligence and sardonic detachment from such frivolities is both her strength and her weakness. She’s a Regency Cinderella who foolishly rejected her Prince Charming (Ciaran Hinds as Captain Frederick Wentworth) years before. Now, she presumes herself too plain to regain his attentions. There’s a wonderful moment when the disconsolate Anne reflects on the

inconstancy of the male gender: “All that privilege I claim for my own sex,” she muses. “We love longest, when existence or when hope is gone.”

It is *Emma*, written in 1816, the year before Austen’s death, that has best borne out the timelessness of her work. Like the three novels that preceded it, it is preoccupied with the plight of young women desperate to be appropriately married. Spinsterhood and bad connections—such as marrying beneath one’s station—are to be avoided at all costs. After a series of disastrous attempts to pair off her friends with men, Emma confronts a dilemma of her own: She falls in love with the noble Mr. Knightley, but hardly knows how to recognize, much less deal with her emotions. Two film versions, released in the same year, could not be more radically different. McGrath’s film most closely preserves the story’s period setting, story trajectory, and satiric sparkle. Perhaps its finest moment comes during the opening credits: An image of what appears to be a planet spinning in the star-spangled heavens turns out to be merely a small bauble dangling from Emma’s delicate fingers. The tiny ornament is decorated with Emma’s miniature painted images of the people and places in her narrowly circumscribed world. It is a brilliant visual pun: What had at first appeared to be the cosmos is in reality a microcosm. It reminds us that Austen regarded her work as infinitely small in scale and dramatic compass (if not in pretention), declaring it to be “the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as produces little effect after much labor.” However brittle and small Austen’s images may be, they suggest truths of a universal proportion and scale.

The second film version, directed by Amy Heckerling, sets the 16-year old Emma (renamed “Cher” and portrayed by the unflapably ditzy and relentlessly sweet Alicia Silverstone) adrift in a modern milieu of Valley Girls and teen-speak. The title, *Clue-*

less, refers to her inability to deal with her own infatuation with her father’s handsome law clerk, Josh (Paul Rudd). The use of language—always an important element in Austen’s art—is the most interesting aspect of the film. If Austen uses language as a signifier of rank and social position, the teen vernacular of *Clueless* likewise functions as a codification of who is either “in” or “out” in Cher’s insular circle. Far less mordant than Heckerling’s other teen comedy, *Fast Times at Ridgmont High* (1982), *Clueless* suggests that the cynical “X-generation” has a sweet underbelly, after all.

Adapting Henry James to the screen has been the constant hope—and the inevitable bane—of many filmmakers over the last half century. “What to do with James,” wails critic Daphne Merkin, “who, by his own admission, had trouble with what he called the ‘solidity of specification,’ and whose unique skill was his self-professed ‘appeal to incalculability’—for intimating, in other words, that which is psychologically most oblique?” (Merkin, 121) However, as commentator Laura Miller points out, James’ relentless pursuit of the shadowy territories of human experience—“the imagined, the feared, the hoped for, the ignored, the undone”—is precisely the perverse challenge that filmmakers haven’t been able to resist. (Miller, 31) Moreover, it was James who understood the tensions between a European Old World, where class and money preordained the paths of individuals’ lives, and the emerging New World whose new social liberties presented individuals with many competing and contradictory options.

Four Jamesian adaptations have appeared, and more are on the way. Jane Campion’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1996) is an erotically idiosyncratic, feminist reconfiguration of the troubled relationship between “New World” Isabel Archer (Nicole Kid-

man) and “Old World” Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich). Agnieszka Holland’s *Washington Square* (1997) examines the sexual politics underlying the relationship between wealthy heiress Catherine Sloper (Jennifer Jason-Leigh) and handsome idler Morris Townsend (Ben Chaplin).

The two screen versions of James’ *Wings of the Dove* by Iain Softley (1997) and Meg Richman (1998) are especially interesting in that, like the two aforementioned versions of Austen’s *Emma*, one is a faithful transcription, the other a free-form update. Iain Softley’s *Wings of the Dove*, despite shifting the time period slightly forward to 1910, retains the settings of London and Venice, the core cast of characters, and the general plot outline. That shift forward in time, by the way, while attacked by many critics of the film, seems appropriate in the light of the fact that this is the most frankly erotic of James’ novels, the one most conducive to the context of a world poised on the rim of modernism—when sexual mores and fashions are changing, the London Underground is running, and electricity is transforming urban life. Meanwhile, screenwriter Hossein Amini (*Jude*) ably sorts out the convolutions of the plot into a relatively straight-forward storyline; and director Softley rejects the sort of camera trickery, *outré* dream sequences, and other stylistic clutter that marred Campion’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1996). The cast is exceptionally fine. As the target of the scheming Kate Croy (Helena Bonham-Carter) and the seemingly diffident Merton (Linus Roache), the wealthy but doomed American heiress, Milly (Alison Elliott), is a pre-Raphaelite vision come to life. But as her affair with Merton develops, the very air grows darker and the rains fall harder, choking the brittle surfaces of Venice in the constricting coils of the unholy intrigue. Finally, it is Merton who is caught in the noose, as it were, and is left able only to love the dead Milly. He is obsessed with a passion more

exquisite—and more hopeless—than anything he can feel toward the living Kate.

This is reinforced by the penultimate scene, when Merton and Kate make love in his dingy apartment. Nowhere else in James is there a love scene like this, and the film perfectly captures his gruesome counterpointing of the blaze of sexual passion with the coldness of emotional paralysis. The figures grapple in the bed, in the shadows, but their faces remain turned away from each other. It is a moment that stands out in the catalogue of Jamesian films. Surely, it haunts the viewer, rather like the memory of Milly that will haunt Kate and Merton foreverafter.

Meg Richman’s *Under Heaven* isn’t so much a story for the ages as a story for the “New Age.” She has shorn James’ book of its period trappings and thematic complexities. Updated to a modern Seattle setting, Kate and Merton are now Cynthia and Buck (Molly Parker and Aden Young), two slackers whose relationship meanders along in a haze of booze, drugs, and squalid poverty. The target of their intrigue, Milly, is now Eleanor (Joely Richardson), who lives alone in a mansion above Puget Sound. After the intrigue is discovered, no one seems to mind much. The threesome continue to live on harmoniously enough. Eleanor looks moodily on while Buck and Eleanor disport themselves in her bedroom. Finally, Eleanor has the grace and discretion to expire prettily in the garden. While the sex scenes—including a startling moment when Eleanor reveals her double mastectomy to Buck—are franker than anything in James, the rest of the movie has reduced the book’s nastier implications into a kind of sentimental pabulum. No one, including the screenwriter/director, seems to have the slightest idea of what these characters are really about. Never mind the tangle of intrigue and deceptions, these folks are all a

pretty sweet bunch after all. Like some episode of television's *Friends*, or *Melrose Place*, Cynthia and Buck love, conspire against their best friend, then drift apart again. Well, *whatever*. . . . Never mind, just think warm thoughts.

Shakespeare was undeniably one of the favorites of Nineties filmmakers and viewers. The recent boom, according to Anthony Lane, is but the latest move on the part of filmmakers "not merely to bring him to the attention of the masses but to convince the masses that he is ready for immediate consumption. . . ." (Lane, 65). Accordingly, several directors in the Nineties have flagrantly stamped Shakespeare's plays with a post-modernist sensibility. Only Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996), Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995), and Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado about Nothing* (1992) have kept the Bard within reach of traditional text and performance. Otherwise, Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996) and *A Midwinter's Tale* (1995), Al Pacino's *Looking for Richard* (1996), Richard Loncraine's *Richard III*, Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (1990), Baz Luhrman's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996), and Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* (1990), have wrought imaginative "takes" on their respective adaptations.

Pride of place necessarily goes to Branagh's four-hour *Hamlet* (1996), a reconstruction of the full text of the First Folio plus portions of the Second Quarto. Despite this textual fidelity, never were Hamlet's lines upon hearing of the appearance of his father's ghost—"It bodes for a strange eruption of our status"—more appropriate. Branagh's adaptation looks and acts like no other *Hamlet* in screen history. Contrasted with Olivier's 1948 version, a spare, stark black-and-white chamber drama, and the 1991 Zeffirelli version, a pre-Raphaelite conception with a drastically reduced text, this film is a big, bright, ornament throwing off a thousand

glints of light. Most of the action takes place in blazingly-lit castle interiors (a triumph of incandescent engineering!) teeming with courtiers and soldiers wearing a motley of Edwardian, mid-Victorian, and Ruritanian garb. And popping up everywhere are such modern appliances and props as photographs, newspapers, a steam engine, and a strait jacket for the mad Ophelia! Meanwhile, the indecision of Hamlet (Branagh), the machinations of usurpers King Claudius (Derek Jacobi) and Queen Gertrude (Julie Christie), and the connivings of Polonius (Richard Briers) transpire in huge ballrooms, where the *mise-en-scene* scatters the players about like chess pieces on a parquet checkerboard. Appropriately enough, in this weird Wonderland, the players strut and pose before galleries of mirrors, addressing their reflected selves as they declaim their famous soliloquies (including Ophelia's mad scene and the "To Be or Not to Be" speech). In its unabashed theatricalism, in its sheer exhilaration of *performance*, it is meta-theater on film, an event that enjoys its own mirror image as much as it solicits our applause.

But Branagh is not done with *Hamlet*. A necessary companion to his four-hour epic is *A Midwinter's Tale* (1996), a "backstage" version of *Hamlet* that Branagh released the year before. The glitches, twitches, and occasional glories behind a theatrical troupe's desperate preparations for a Christmas Eve performance of the play in an English country church constitute a rowdy commentary on the play in general (and in particular, the Branagh *Hamlet* to come). Meanwhile, when the actual play itself is enacted late in the film, it hurtles along in breathless leaps, rather like one of those Tom Stoppard breakneck versions of the Bard. (Branagh even gets in a private joke of his own, when the troupe's director reassures his play-

ers—many of whom appear in the aforementioned *Hamlet*—that they’ll be allowed to perform the play *with cuts*.)

Many literary adaptations have introduced American audiences to the works of a group of relatively unknown international writers, old and new. Among the less touted screen “finds” of the decade is that self-proclaimed “galley slave to pen and ink,” Honore de Balzac. Although he produced more than 100 major works before his death in 1851, he has been relatively ignored by filmmakers (only a *Masterpiece Theater* production of *Cousin Bette* comes to mind). Perhaps this has been due to a mistaken notion that the interrelationships among the characters of his *La Comedie Humaine* series would present problems for audiences unfamiliar with him. Yet, Yves Angelo’s *Colonel Chabert*, 1995, Des McAnuff’s *Cousin Bette*, 1998, and Lavinia Currier’s *Passion in the Desert*, 1998) may bode well to make Balzac the *auteur du jour* for the future. *Colonel Chabert* was an absorbing character study of a man (Gerard Depardieu) claiming to be a long-lost (presumably dead) hero in Napoleon’s campaign against Russia. By the story’s end, he has lost everything except the integrity of his name. *Cousin Bette* was a high-toned soap opera, a dark fairy tale that cast Jessica Lange as a pale, tight-lipped, stiff figure of vengeance—a carnivorous bloom sheathed in black—against her boorish, selfish family. *Passion in the Desert* was the most interesting of the three; indeed, one of the most unusual literary adaptations of the Nineties. Virtually a wordless meditation on the folly of art, society, war, and other human predilections, it confronted actor Ben Daniels with the most dangerous challenge faced by any actor of the decade—portraying a Napoleonic cavalryman who, after losing his way in the Egyptian desert, engages in a most peculiar relationship with a savage leopard.

Authors more contemporary to our time include several Chinese writers from the so-

called “New Realist” period of the late 1980s. Zhang Yimou in his “break-through” films *Judou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) adapted, respectively, *Fuxi Fuxi*, by Liu Heng (the pen name of Liu Guanjun) and *Da hong denglong gaogao gua*, by Su Tong. Initially banned in China by the China Film Bureau, they are particularly distinguished by their sensitive portrayals of the repressed status of women in the patriarchal contexts of Chinese culture.

Jane Campion brought to the screen the three-volume autobiography of Janet Frame, New Zealand’s foremost writer, under the title, *An Angel at My Table* (1990). Steven Spielberg and Steve Zaillian brought Australian writer Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s List* to the screen in 1993. Mexican author Laura Esquivel adapted the “magic realism” of her own *Como agua para chocolate* for her husband, Alfonso Arau, in *Like Water for Chocolate* (1993). From Australia came Gillian Armstrong’s adaptation of Peter Carey’s bizarre love story of two gambling addicts, *Oscar and Lucinda* (1997). From Scotland came Danny Boyle’s adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s ferociously trenchant portrait of drug trafficking in Edinburgh, *Trainspotting* (1996). And from Ireland several Irish writers have been represented—Maeve Binchy in Pat O’Connor’s nostalgically bittersweet *Circle of Friends* (1995); Patrick McCabe in Neil Jordan’s darkly surreal *The Butcher Boy* (1998)—one of the most disturbing portraits of psychotic paranoia and mental integration in movie history; and Roddy Doyle’s “Barrytown Trilogy” in films by Alan Parker (*The Commitments*, 1994), Stephen Frears (*The Snapper*, 1995 and *The Van*, 1996).

Some of the Nineties’ most controversial topics arose in literary adaptations. Mike Figgis’ *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995),

based on John O'Brien's 1991 autobiographical novel, portrayed the last days of a suicidal alcoholic. Neil Jordan's *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), drawn from Anne Rice's book, flirted with homosexuality and AIDS. Sex in general, both licit and illicit, graphic and suggested, was, as always, a recurring preoccupation in many other adaptations. Roland Joffe's *The Scarlet Letter* (1995) revisited Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic account of sex and adultery in Old Salem. Mike Nichols' *Primary Colors* (1998) adapted "Anonymous"'s political expose about sex and adultery in the White House. And Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* (1997) took on Vladimir Nabokov's book about pedophilia and sexual obsession in the American Heartland.

Significantly, all of them go soft, as it were, and shrug off their commitments.

Leaving Las Vegas opens promisingly enough: Fired from his job as a Hollywood screenwriter, and determined to drink himself to death, Ben Sanderson (Nicholas Cage) checks in to a Las Vegas motel. Above the doorway is a sign that reads: "The Whole Year Inn." But the bleary-eyed Ben distorts the message into "The Hole You're Inn." Fair enough. Whereas the standard Hollywood formula had heretofore held out the promise of hope for a drunkard's redemption—or at least dramatically exploited his attempts to swear off the booze—this movie accepts alcoholism as a fatal fact in his life. Yet, in contradistinction to the book, the film softens the impact by enveloping the action in a romantic bloom of smeary, soft-focus images, time-lapse sequences, and gently skewed camera angles. Moreover, a bluesy soundtrack, consisting of Sting's rendering of all those Frank Sinatra-style, three-o'clock-in-the-morning laments (Figgis is himself a musician and fills in as keyboard man on the soundtrack), gently massages and comforts our distressed brow. After a lot of this, one gets the impression that Figgis is exploiting

the story for the sake of yet another torch song from the midnight jukebox. So, "set 'em up Joe. . . ."

Interview with the Vampire was supposed to be about the seduction of a character named Louis by the Parisian vampire, Lestat. Their subsequent homosexual union, and a number of other liaisons, especially Louis' infatuation with Armand, the leader of a coven of vampires in the Theatre du Vampires, would seem to speak eloquently to a decade fraught with anxieties not only about homosexuality but about blood-related contagions, especially AIDS. Jordan's screen version with Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and Antonio Banderas (as Lestat, Louis, and Armand, respectively), however, mutes, if not entirely eliminates the homosexual overtones of their liaisons. Only in the scenes with the little girl, Claudia (Kirsten Dunst) that Lestat and Louis "adopt"—in appearance a child but in practice a mature, ravenous, blood-drinking fiend—and in scenes with the darkly ferocious Antonio Banderas does the film transcend the trappings of yet another vampire movie and approach the perversities of the novel.

Surely no other literary adaptation of the Nineties perpetrated a more bizarre, unintentionally comic spin on a literary classic than did *The Scarlet Letter*. Demi Moore is Hester Prynne, and she swims in the nude, makes love in a grain bin, stands up for Women's Rights, and fights Indians. Gary Oldman is her lover, the Reverend Dimmesdale, and he also swims in the buff and makes love in a grain bin (when he's not fighting Indians). And Robert Duvall is the wicked Chillingworth, a guy who chops his hair into a Travis Bickle Mohawk and goes bare-bodied berserk at the full moon. Whereas Hawthorne chose to begin the story after Hester Prynne's adultery and concentrate upon the subsequent debilitating guilts suffered by both lovers (always a

favorite theme of the author's), the movie chose to focus instead on the details of the erotic trysts (remember that business in the grain bin) and then prove the affair to have been a cleansing experience after all. The tougher issues, like the responsibilities Hawthorne insisted they must bear for their actions, are completely omitted. The happy pair escape at the end, of course, and ride off in a carriage toward the sunset, leaving in their wake savage Indians and vicious Puritans.

Primary Colors airs out the dirty political laundry and tarnished idealism that has attended American Presidential politics over the past decade. Candidate Stanton (John Travolta) is portrayed not only as an opportunist who has indulged in shady campaign practices and the seduction of a young black girl, but as an idealist who believes that the end justifies the means. As a result, the film doesn't commit to a central viewpoint, or attitude toward its character. It's *shifty*, like Stanton himself. Still, it's great fun to watch Travolta as the big galoot who's running as hard for the Presidency as he is from his own flawed character. In short, not only can he talk out of both sides of his mouth, but he can run in opposite directions, too.

Lolita was a film that promised to break out of the strait jacket of censorship that had plagued the Stanley Kubrick version of 1962. The subject of pedophilia has always been problematic, to say the least. In the "Crimes and Criminal procedures" section of the United States Code, it is construed as a form of pornography. But although director Lyne and screenwriter Stephen Schiff did not have to knuckle down under the Production Code (which had been replaced by the Ratings Code of 1968), they had to face the reality of the Child Pornography Prevention Act that had just been passed in 1996. On a lawyer's advice, Lyne cut out most of *Lolita*'s nude scenes, disallowed physical contact between actors Jeremy Irons and Dominique

Swains (a pad or board discreetly separated them), and occasionally used a 19-year-old body double for Swains. Moreover, Humbert Humbert does not come across as a pedophile at all. Clearly, he is attracted only to Lolita (she reminds him of a little girl he had worshiped when he was a child but who had died tragically young); and at no time does he pay the slightest attention to the many other little girls who scamper about the edges of the story. It is the malevolent Clare Quilty (Frank Langella) who, by contrast, is the genuine pedophile. Lyne insures our antipathy to him by veiling him in infernal smoke and accompanying his scenes with the strains of Mussourgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain*. Thus, Humbert's slaying of Quilty at the end is seen to be more the action of an avenging angel than a deranged maniac. This is at variance with Nabokov's original conception, which neither justified Humbert nor attempted to diminish his wickedness. If anything, Humbert emerges here a victim of his own obsession and the target of Lolita's sexual aggressiveness and precocity. Director Lyne himself was quoted as protesting that his film took the moral high ground: "No one comes well out of it. They all *die* for chrissake" (quoted in Wood, 9). Even the mainstream *Entertainment Weekly* carped at the result, calling the film a watered-down "Lolita," a "Lolita Lite": "It cowers before the morally self-righteous, sexually-spooked America of the late 1990s" (Tucker, 54).

In closing, it's worth mentioning that, inevitably, the lives of writers themselves become grist for filmmakers and suffer the "sea change" of adaptation. One image in Bernard Rose's *Anna Karenina* (1997), based on the Leo Tolstoy novel, sums up the situation: In the prologue, Tolstoy himself is fleeing from a pack of wolves. He throws himself into a vast pit and clutches at a tree root to arrest his fall.

There he dangles, midway between the hungry wolves crouching above and an angry bear waiting below. At the top, we might infer, are the filmmakers waiting to adapt his books; at the bottom are the filmmakers waiting to dramatize his life. . . Either way, he's in trouble.

Indeed, the parade of images is varied and, occasionally, bizarre. In Brian Gilbert's *Wilde* (1998) a resplendently attired Oscar Wilde (Stephen Fry) lectures on aesthetics to scruffy miners in Leadville, Colorado. A gloom-haunted Franz Kafka (Jeremy Irons) lives out events in his novels in the night streets of Prague in Steven Soderbergh's *Kafka* (1993). Tweedy C.S. Lewis (Anthony Hopkins) mourns the death of Joy Gresham (Debra Winger) in Richard Attenborough's *Shadowlands* (1993). Algonquin Round Table wit Dorothy Parker (Jennifer Jason-Leigh) mourns life in general—"things always turn out worse than you think"—in Alan Rudolph's *Mrs. Parker and the Vicious Circle* (1994). Tightly-wound poet T.S. Eliot (Willem Dafoe) consigns his wife, Viv Haigh-Wood (Miranda Richardson), to an asylum in Brian Gilbert's adaptation of Michael Hasting's play, *Tom and Viv* (1995). Another poet, Pablo Neruda (Philippe Noiret), plays Cupid for the love-lorn postman, Mario (Massimij Troissi) in Michael

Radford's *Il Postino* (1994). A hot-house bloom like Lytton Strachey (Jonathan Pryce) inhabits a dour Edwardian Wonderland in Christopher Hampton's *Carrington* (1995). Surly Arthur Rimbaud (Leonardo DiCaprio declares himself a one-man poetry revolution in Agnieszka Holland's *Total Eclipse* (1995). And another revolutionary, the 18th century playwright/swordsman/philanderer Pierre Caron de Beaumarchais (Fabrice Luchini), smuggles armaments to the American cause in Eduoard Molinaro's adaptation of Sacha Guitry's play, *Beaumarchais, the Scoundrel* (1997).

At this writing the flow of literary adaptations taking us into the Millennium shows no sign of slowing down. Books are continually in motion. (In Greenaway's *Prospero's Books* a book in Prospero's library is entitled, "Books in Motion"; indeed, like Birnam Wood, *it moves*. . .). However, when virtual reality systems and holographic projections supplant conventional movie theaters and television screens, a plethora of new considerations regarding the adaptation process must arise—

—And then, perhaps we'll find out who the *real* father of Louis XIV was.

—John C. Tibbetts

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