EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

The Lost King (2022), a film by Stephen Frears

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Directed by: Stephen Frears. Written by: Philippa Langley, Michael Jones and Steve Coogan.

The Lost King, released theatrically in late 2022 and now available on DVD/Blu-ray and through various streaming services, put a lot of noses out of joint. Indeed, at the time of writing, legal action is being taken against the film's producers. Essentially, various Leicester-based historians and university administrators are aggrieved that the film glorifies Philippa Langley's discovery of Richard III's body in 2012 while demonising University of Leicester staff who allegedly sought to frustrate her project and/or to take subsequent personal and/or corporate credit for the sensational discovery. But who did what to who and who left who out of what is not the concern of this review – the priority here is to underline the significance of the film for the study of filmed Shakespeare and Shakespearean appropriation in general.

The film starts with spiky music and dynamic, graphic credits superimposed over an early modern map. It is reminiscent of the start of Hitchcock's 1959 thriller/road movie, *North by Northwest*. In that film, Cary Grant's Roger O. Thornhill undertakes a major journey to clear his name; in *The Lost King*, the Edinburgh-based Philippa Langley undertakes a literal journey to Leicester and a less tangible journey to authenticate herself as a researcher of worth and, implicitly, as a visible woman, not a mere housewife and underappreciated office worker. Langley is no Thornhill: rather, she is a vulnerable, fragile, ME-suffering individual – regularly seen in extreme close-up, her mental and physical frailty is portrayed with sometimes painful concentration by Sally Hawkins. Paradoxically, of course, Langley's weaknesses illuminate and magnify her inherent steeliness and determination. She gets a sense that Richard III is buried under a car park:

despite innumerable obstacles, she gets her long-dead man – with help from Richard III himself. Ultimately, the film is a Renaissance ghost narrative. Richard's undignified entombment under tarmac is an injustice: Richard, like Old Hamlet's ghost, returns to demand that that injustice is rectified. Langley is the young Hamlet to Richard's Old Hamlet. When the wrong is righted, he can disappear into peaceful eternity.

Langley's inspiration begins at the theatre. She has bullied her son, Max, into attending a production of *Richard III* because he is studying it at school. Richard delivers his lines with feeling, seeming to speak directly to Langley; quite infirm herself, she seems to empathise with Richard's complaints about his reputedly unattractive appearance and distorted physique. But the allure of the actor playing Richard makes a mockery of the lines about his unsightliness. This is an attractive Richard: played by Harry Lloyd, he seems to speak directly to the sensitive Langley. She falls for him, and listens to every word he says with sympathy and understanding. Langley seems annoyed at the smugness of the triumphant Richmond at the end of the play. And she is more obviously annoyed by a condescending male parent of another child – a fellow who, during the interval, makes it clear that he passively accepts the accuracy of Shakespeare's vilification of the last Plantagenet king. That chap falls asleep during the second part of the performance. The symbolism is obvious. Most people have passively, sleepily accepted that Richard III was a villain – but the wide-awake Langley feels that Richard is the victim of a centuries-long slander. Josephine Tey is not mentioned anywhere in the film, but it seems that this film will be a sort of celluloid version of *The Daughter of Time*. Quickly becoming obsessed with the historiography of Richard, Langley assumes a partisan position of appreciation for his supposed belief in fairness, political accountability and support for the then-novel printing press. She will clear Richard's name. There is no thought yet of finding the body – she determines to praise him, not to exhume him.

Langley is an amateur historian. She is aggrieved to be passed over for promotion in her dreary office job. She will never love that financially necessary job. Things develop when Langley glances out of an office window and sees a striking individual sitting patiently on a bench: Richard III. It is Richard in the body of the actor from the theatre, Harry Lloyd, but it is the historical Richard's ghost, not Shakespeare's pantomime hunchback. Later, Richard appears in Langley's garden: he ignores her request to 'bugger off'. Langley seeks out fellow disciples of Richard. She journeys to a local branch meeting of the Richard III Society – an inevitably diverse group of well-meaning oddballs and windbags. Langley's journey from Edinburgh is picturesque: we see the Castle and the Royal Mile – wide-angle camera shots linger lovingly on the attractively sunlit architecture. The meeting is held in a pub that is virtually underneath the magnificent Forth Bridge. This is the Scotland of the 1969 film version of *The Prime of Miss Jean*

Brodie rather than the ultra-grotty Scotland of 1996's *Trainspotting*. Despite the dystopian office interiors, Edinburgh seems like a lovely place. The Richard III Society members rapidly become firm allies of Langley; immediately and predictably agreeable to Langley's revisionist theories about Richard's character, they will provide great moral and organisational support, later, when Langley seeks financial help to dig for her king.

The support for Langley by the amateurs contrasts sharply with the snooty dismissal of her views by a professional historian, R.R. Lawrence, played with oleaginous superciliousness by Julian Firth. As didactic as he is arrogant, he is, I think, a parody of the disgraced David Starkey. It is surprising, though, that another historian, the supportive John Ashdown-Hill, played with otherwise avuncular charm by James Fleet, describes Lawrence to the unshocked Langley as a 'pompous old queen'. Do academics still use homophobic slurs when denigrating other academics? We certainly don't at my university.

Langley is, now, continually haunted by Richard. He nods when she finds useful facts in an archive; she speaks to him as he sits, delightfully incongruously, across from her on a (surprisingly clean, efficient and uncrowded) train; and he loves meditating in her back garden. Some moments of comedic dramatic irony are inevitable: like Macbeth seeing Banquo's ghost, Langley can see Richard but others can't. We can comprehend what Langley is undergoing whereas characters on screen cannot. It is some time before Richard starts speaking: his previous silence is explained away by him as he says that Langley 'never asked' him to speak – that is a trifle illogical because she never asked him to start following her around either. Richard is played by Lloyd as a suave, self-assured ghost. Barring one practical joke when he pretends to fall into the River Soar, he is calm, restrained and balanced, reacting only with mild self-effacement when asked to comment on Shakespeare's depiction of him – 'a bit harsh'. Langley is, now, sure that she can detect the body of Richard III – he himself leads her to a car park where the letter 'R' painted on the tarmac combines with Richard's ghost to mystically point to a possible resting place.

Meanwhile, Langley's ex-husband, John, played as a slightly hapless but amiable everyman by the film's co-writer, Steve Coogan, complains that Langley's obsession with Richard makes him 'feel like I'm being cuckolded by a ghost'. Again, there is dramatic irony because John does not know that his ex-wife is being literally haunted by Richard; there is further irony of a different sort because one cannot be cuckolded if one is no longer married to the supposedly straying woman. John is in a confused, confusing situation: tensions between him and Langley ease during the progress of the film; he gradually gets on board with the find-Richard project; the couple nearly get back together

romantically, but don't; the rapprochement between the pair is a sort of secondary plot of the film. *The Lost King* is, in part, a very unconventional buddy movie because a depiction of a formally-divorced-but-still-affectionate relationship between a couple is unusual in cinema (the relationship between Tony Webster and Margaret Webster in *The Sense of an Ending* [2017] may be a rare other example).

After much research, Langley approaches archaeologists at the University of Leicester. They accept her lovingly-baked cake but politely dismiss her request for collaboration: their understated contempt for her is triggered partly by her nerves and her exhaustion – she needs water and a chair to even undergo the informal meeting. Richard Buckley, the main archaeologist, played as a competent but slightly feckless Average Joe by Mark Addy, changes his mind, though, when the University fires him (or just withdraws his funding - his exact employment status at the institution is never quite clarified). Pen-pushers and their lickspittles at the University become openly hostile, quite aggressively belittling the credentials of 'this woman'. With a major Richard III Society campaign, though, and the apparently Sapphic indulgence towards Langley of a tactile council funding committee chairperson, the money is found: the dig ensues.

The dig, of course, does not go quite to plan. One surprising source of moral support withdraws: Richard himself, who reacts with pique when Langley questions him about the Princes in the Tower and huffs off. He disappears from the film for a while, and there is a nice ambiguity to this – does he leave Langley because he feels guilty about the Princes or because she dares to doubt his innocence? He does, eventually, arrive again – in the car park, just as his body is exposed. Rain appears as a sort of *deux ex machina*, exposing the body. The body shows signs of physical abnormality, offering some succour to Tudor apologists who always thought that representations of Richard's deformation were not just retrospective slurs. But the physical frailties of Richard seem largely irrelevant – as irrelevant as the triumphed-over frailties of Langley's mind and body. Richard is delighted that his body has been recovered: it is the first time that we see Richard on a horse – a magnificent white horse. Richard and his modern-day apologist are united again. The University personnel attempt to take all credit for the discovery: like any other Vice-Chancellor who is present to announce good news but is nowhere to be seen when people are losing their jobs, Leicester's speeds over to speak to the press. Langley is a marginal, peripheral and sometimes altogether absent figure at subsequent press briefings, celebratory social events and even at the burial in Leicester Cathedral. So, Langley is publicly ignored but privately vindicated. She speaks to admiring schoolgirls and, crucially, waves Richard off at Bosworth Field. Richard, on horseback, surrounded by six loyal knights, literally fades into airy peace. He has got his horse. He hasn't quite got his kingdom but he has got his rest. The actor who played Richard III on

stage in Edinburgh (and as the ghost haunting Langley) is present at the funeral too. Langley, and we, now find out that the actor is a humble young father called Pete. Langley, apparently, makes no connection between the stage Richard and the ghost. But she expresses appreciation for Pete's stagecraft. We might share Langley's gratitude for his humane depiction of Richard on stage (as well as on screen). In part, the film may serve as a tribute to the actors who have taken on the supremely wordy and physically difficult role over the years; David Troughton in 1996 (The Barbican, London) and Kenneth Branagh in 2002 (The Crucible, Sheffield) are my two favourites.

The film ends on a rather monarchist note: onscreen factual text tells us that Langley received an M.B.E.; that her campaign to have Richard III re-categorised as 'legitimate' on the Buckingham Palace website was successful; and that she was also successful in her call to have a royal coat of arms included on Richard's burial paraphernalia. It is a good thing to be properly royal, it is suggested. It is good to be a royal and it is good for commoners to accept royal gongs. This 2022 film about the 2015 burial of King Richard III was released in cinemas very soon after the burial of Queen Elizabeth II. Elizabeth was interred against a near-universal chorus of hagiography. Richard III, in this film (as he was for real in 2015) is interned in a context of borderline royalist worship. *The Lost King* does nothing to challenge unthinking loyalty to anachronistic monarchies – but it does do a lot to remind us of the sheer power of actors in theatres to use Shakespeare's words to make deep connections to the complex historical past and to illuminate our own capacities for idiosyncratic obsession.