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Introduction to the Proceedings of the Conference "*Hamlet* on Screen" held at Shakespeare's Globe, London, on 28 April 2001

The play *Hamlet* is at or near the centre of the intellectual and commercial domain which is the "Shakespeare" construct. It is the only one to which an entire academic journal is devoted (*Hamlet Studies*), it contains the best-known lines of all dramatic literature – perhaps of all literature – and its imagery (especially of contemplation of a skull) is frequently employed synecdochically to connote Shakespeare and his works generally. The centrality of *Hamlet* is arguably a Romantic phenomenon – John Keats and S. T. Coleridge were typical in finding in themselves something of the indecisive prince – and the ageing Western world population of the twenty-first century might find *King Lear* more relevant. On 28 April 2001 a project intimately concerned with Shakespeare's original theatrical context, the International Shakespeare Globe Centre in London, in conjunction with King's College London, convened a conference for scholars to explore how this currently central work, *Hamlet*, has been represented on the cinema and television screen. The papers in this issue of *EnterText* comprise the published proceedings of that "*Hamlet* on Screen" conference.

As Mark Robson observes in his paper, every *Hamlet* since the first one is a repetition, and a common theme of papers was the way in which these repetitions engage in other contexts, many quite alien to the original performances; from these engagements new meanings are generated. Like the play's ghost, the play itself comes to us from a past quite unlike our present and forces attention on what has changed since then. Terri Bourus's essay "The First Quarto of *Hamlet* in Film: The Revenge Tragedies of Tony Richardson and Franco Zeffirelli" argues that what is usually considered the "play itself" (a text produced by conflation of the second quarto edition of 1604 with the 1623 Folio version) is itself a redaction of the earliest Shakespearian version, best represented in the first quarto of 1603. This quarto has been labelled "bad" inasmuch as it appears to be a garbled version of the better-known text:

> To be, or not to be, I there's the point,
> To Die, to sleepe, is that all? I all:
> No, to sleepe, to dreame, I mary there it goes,
> (*Hamlet* Q1 1603, D4v)

Bourus argues that Q1 has in fact a number of merits which unfavorable comparison with Q2/F has obscured, and in particular that its ordering of scenes is superior in avoiding certain logical difficulties of the later versions. Moreover, Q1 presents us with a Hamlet who is considerably less conflicted than the ditherer of Q2/F and contemporary accounts of the first actor of the role, the heroic and physically imposing Richard Burbage, fit the active revenger of Q1 best. This earliest *Hamlet* text is taken more seriously by Shakespearians than hitherto, and Bourus finds two film directors, Tony Richardson and Franco Zeffirelli, largely responsible for this. Richardson's 1969 film followed Q1 closely, thus showing its merits to a wide audience, and while Zeffirelli's 1990 film did not quite follow Q1, his extensive reordering and cutting of the

material effectively achieved the same outcome of simplifying the characters and presenting the action in a straightforward "avenging-hero" key.

James Hirsh too thinks that there is something clearly amiss with the text as it is conventionally received, and in "To Take Arms against a Sea of Anomalies: Laurence Olivier's Film Adaptation of Act Three, Scene One of *Hamlet*" he explores the play's logical inconsistencies which film directors have taken pains to minimise. The greatest problem is the "To be or not to be..." speech, which cannot, Hirsh argues, be an honest account of Hamlet's contemplation. Since others at Elsinore might easily see the ghost and guess why his father's spirit is unquiet, Hamlet needs to convince Claudius that he does not believe in ghosts and that in any case he is too conflicted to act. This his "soliloquy" achieves, but Hirsh sees it as a brilliant distraction by Hamlet, who having been "sent...hither" (3.1.31) is bound to have guessed who is listening in. After all, if Hamlet were sincere would he really have failed to look around the place to which his deadly enemy has summoned him (and thus find Ophelia immediately), and really have spoken his innermost thoughts aloud? The scene makes best sense if Hamlet is throwing Ophelia, Claudius, and Polonius off the scent, just as he threw off Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with talk of inexplicable melancholy and sterile promontories when he discovered that they were sent for. Directors and actors in the thrall of the common misconception of the scene (which for Hirsh derives from the virtuoso acting tradition dating back to Thomas Betterton) take steps to correct its consequences, and hence in Laurence Olivier's 1948 film version "To be or not to be..." is performed entirely alone and comes after (indeed, is caused by) the "get thee to a nunnery" exchange with Ophelia.

Bourus and Hirsh are concerned with the text of *Hamlet* and fear we may be losing valuable aspects of the original performances; film can alert us to those losses. Pascale

Aebischer's concern is with the play's most memorable property: the skull of jester Yorick

thrown up by the re-use of his grave for the burial of Ophelia. The power of this iconic property

is evident from the modern anecdote Aebischer tells of the musician André Tchaikovsky who

donated his skull to the Royal Shakespeare Company properties department and nearly was

granted his wish of appearing onstage as Yorick's skull. Modern reactions to this story remind

us that the skull is an extraordinarily overdetermined image, standing for abstract Death,

Hamlet's coming death, all the characters Hamlet invents narratives for (Cain, a politician, a

courtier, a lawyer, a buyer of land, Alexander, and Caesar), and, of course, Yorick himself. For

theatre's chain of substitutions (to which surely Hamlet is alluding here), Tchaikovsky's skull

was if anything too real – it did not stand *for* the man but *was* the man – and the modern actors

felt obliged to substitute a replica. As *Hamlet* in the popular imagination may stand for the

entire Shakespeare canon, so Yorick's skull may stand for the whole of *Hamlet*, and Aebischer

observes that although the scene including this excessive icon was recorded for Michael

Almereyda's 2000 film of *Hamlet*, it was editorially removed. Only a trace of the skull remains,

in the briefest cinematic "quotation mark" use of a clip from Johnston Forbes-Robertson's 1913

silent film *Hamlet*.

Ernest Jones famously advised Laurence Olivier on a Freudian interpretation of Hamlet's

condition, which put most crudely is that he rages at Claudius for doing what he (Hamlet) would

secretly like to do (as we all would): kill father and have sex with mother. What Aebischer calls

a "quotation" of a powerful artistic forbear can be for others considerably more anxious. In

"Denmark's a prison": Branagh's *Hamlet* and the Paradoxes of Intimacy," Lisa Hopkins finds

Oedipus creeping into Branagh's 1996 film of *Hamlet* despite the director's declared intention

to keep Freud off the premises. Branagh's Hamlet suppressed the sex in Freud's famous

discovery (or invention, as is now often claimed), but not the violence, since clearly Branagh,

Hopkins, argues, was concerned to confront his powerful male artistic predecessors. Branagh

cast several famous stage Hamlets (John Gielgud, Derek Jacobi, and Michael Maloney) but none

who had played the part on film, and indeed he does not allude to other films in this one.

Equally revealing is his casting of women actors (Kate Winslet and Julie Christie)

unencumbered by the faintest experience of performing Shakespeare. Hopkins relates these

insights into the directorial mind to Branagh's filmic techniques, which here might be most

simply characterised as tumescence: the swelling scene of his vast set, the galaxy of acting stars,

the widest possible film stock, and a text with all its parts unexcised. Repeated images of portals

suggest that Branagh wants to take the spectator by stages further within Hamlet, but the effect,

argues Hopkins, is quite the reverse, and the film's abiding flaw is its lack of intimacy.

Mark Robson finds the same struggle with forbears in Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet*, and in

"'Trying to pick a lock with a wet herring': *Hamlet*, film, and spectres of psychoanalysis" he

moves from a Freudian to a Derridean understanding of obsessive repetition. Branagh, Robson

argues, was obsessed with a number of "first times," such as using all the words, not quoting

preceding *Hamlet* films, and excluding Freud's interpretation. This itself is, of course, an

Oedipal struggle with his forebears and hence the appropriateness in the opening shot of the

inscription which is the wrong Hamlet (the Senior), not our hero. The film *Shakespeare in Love*

shows Shakespeare speaking lines which we know from the plays, so its screenwriters

effectively closed the circle of originality: they give him lines he gave them. Jacques Derrida's

Specters of Marx continues the deconstructionist critic's dazzling poststructuralist interrogation

of the notions of origin and repetition, and points out that a "first time" for something is also an

ending, since never again will there be a first time: what follows must needs be a repetition. For

Derrida a ghost is a suitable bearer of the tricky conceptual instability at work here, since it can appear only as a body and yet has no body. A ghost's apparent body might be said to be merely a citation of the once-possessed body, a ghostly presence marking a corporeal non-presence. Alternatively, a ghost might be thought of as the animation of a prosthetic body, returning us to Derrida's celebrated argument about the ontological instability of zombies and horribly suggesting that perhaps our bodies are merely prosthetic. Presence is, as ever for Derrida, a form of absence.

The five essays discussed so far have been concerned with what we might call engagements internal to the artistic world, engagements with the performance history and cinematic history of *Hamlet*. The remaining four essays look outwards to the wider artistic cultures and to politics. In "*Hamlet* in Warsaw: The Antic Disposition of Ernst Lubitsch," Nicholas Jones considers the 1942 film *To Be Or Not To Be* as an early example of the kind of engagement with politics which Jan Kott was to demand in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1965). The struggle here is with the Nazis and what Jack Benny's character Josef Tura has to learn is that the bard's texts are not autonomous bearers of meaning but rather "occasions for politicized struggle and improvised theater" because theatre "enacts aspects of heroic public life." In particular, the putting on of an antic disposition as "a comic improvisation in the face of crisis" is shared by Hamlet and by Tura, and indeed Hamlet's famous comic evasions are a form of stand-up comedy using the same tools: "the one-liner, the zany twist on the expected response, the edgy joke." In his real-life Tura does as Hamlet does, he improvises, but alas he never learns to reflect this back on his performance as Hamlet, which stays "hammy."

Tura fails to connect his performance with what he learns from being Hamlet-like in his life and the domain of high culture (as Tura sees it) never meets the quotidian. Mariangela

Tempera observes that in modern Italy a similar polarisation obtains between high and low

culture, and in "To Laugh or not to Laugh: Italian Parodies of *Hamlet*" she records low-culture

mockeries of bookish elitism via attacks on Shakespeare, exemplified in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare is

not on the Italian school curriculum, but is widely known in general terms from Verdi's operas

and from place-name association (Verona, Venice, Rome, etc.). Hamlet's indecision (*dubbio*

amletico) is frequently employed bathetically in advertisements where consumers must choose

between competing products. To help television audiences understand who is speaking "To be or

not to be...", Yorick's iconic skull is frequently brought into this scene as an instant branding

device.

Global political events of the past ten years have removed the greatest polarisation

structuring international culture, that between the American and Soviet empires, and this has

allowed the triumphalist historian Francis Fukuyama to declare the end of a certain kind of

intelligible historical process. Saviour Catania's essay "'The Beached Verge': On Filming the

Unfilmable in Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet*" finds at the heart of the 1964 Soviet film a concern

for meaningful unintelligibility which we might easily think (given only analyses of Fukuyama's

kind) to be a uniquely postmodern condition. Hamlet is essentially a philosophical and linguistic

work of art, and hence not greatly amenable to film. Kozintsev, like Olivier, used voice-over for

soliloquies and he employed the same wave-crashing sound effects, but the latter are, for

Catania, central to this work's adaptation to the screen. Kozintsev relocated key scenes (meeting

the ghost, "To be or not to be...", and Hamlet's death) from the castle to the beach because for

him sea-imagery evokes death, unintelligibility, and incoherence. Kozintsev's ghost's cloak

billows like waves, pre-empting Ophelia's drowning and the liquid deaths of Claudius and

Gertrude, and Kozintsev consciously broke cinematic rules of spatial coherence in the first

meeting with the ghost on the beach in order to suggest the realm of the unknowable. For "To be

or not to be..." on the beach, "land's end becomes synonymous with life's end," a place of

meeting where the undiscovered country (the sea) could be seen; the sea becomes in this film

what T. S. Eliot complained that this play lacked, an objective correlative.

Kozintsev used dissident artists Boris Pasternak (translator) and Dmitri Shostakovich

(music director) for his film, and of course the Soviet economic-political system against which

they defined themselves no longer exists, although many of the same people are still robbing the

former country's poor. The American economic-political system which appears to have emerged

triumphant from the grand twentieth-century binarism is the context for Michael Almereyda's

2000 film of *Hamlet*. It is a world of commodification in which Shakespeare's words are

constantly drowned out by extraneous sounds, as though Shakespeare cannot be expected to

survive the din of the modern world. Much of the noise is of postmodern splitting, and in "A

'Harsh World' of Soundbite Shakespeare: Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000)," Elsie Walker

asserts that disconnection and fragmentation are precisely the conditions into which the director

wanted to place Hamlet: "the heterogeneity of Almereyda's *Hamlet* does not mask some

underlying, hidden unity." The many clips of, and allusions to, other *Hamlet*'s (and *Hamlet*

spinoffs) may be a meditation on Hollywood's lack of originality; everything is a rehashing of

something already in existence. Here *The Mousetrap* is a film Hamlet makes from clips taken

from videos he borrows from Blockbuster video store, and the perfect vehicle for images to

accompany the broken language (broken, as we have seen, since Q1/Q2/F1 in the early

seventeenth century) is a low-definition Pixelvision camera (used by Hamlet) and a 16mm cine-

camera (used by Almereyda). Unlike Baz Luhrmann in his 1996 *Romeo+Juliet*, Almereyda does

not balance long, still scenes against the frenetic ones; instead, almost every speech is cut off by

an electronic imaging or texting device such as a facsimile machine or closed-circuit television system. The horrors of global capitalism are not merely equal to the feudal machinations in Shakespeare's play: its distortions of human sensual experience serve to dwarf the individual in a specially sinister way captured by the film's cinematography which magnifies and compresses the human form.

Advertisements are the Denmark prison bars in this film, but one is entitled to ask if a Shakespeare film really can critique global capitalism. Almereyda says that, far from being product placements, his use of brand logos required him to pay the companies involved, or to thank them in the film's credits. Walker thinks Almereyda is being naïve in this: it *is* product placement, and Almereyda is *not* really subverting it. The subversion/containment debate has been a familiar element of mainstream Renaissance studies since the rise of New Historicism in the 1980s, but it surely is an optimistic sign that a Hollywood director working on a major project with international acting stars feels the need to engage with it, even if one believes (as Walker does) that he deludes himself. Recent news from Genoa brings us, as it brought Shylock, hope as well as despair, and suggests that the monovocal future which until recently seemed to be the inevitable political consequence of the events of 1989-90 may be averted.