

LISA HOPKINS

“Denmark’s a prison”: Branagh’s *Hamlet* and the Paradoxes of Intimacy

At the opening of Kenneth Branagh’s film of *Hamlet*, a gate with the name “Hamlet” written on it slides away to show us a guard profiled against a grille. The effect is of entering the frame, of penetrating to ever greater degrees of intimacy, and it inaugurates a pattern of closing and opening of doors which pertains throughout the film. Branagh is fond of this door motif, and, I think, uses it with considerable success elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, as at the opening of his *Henry V* (1988) where the two clergymen indicate the conspiratorial nature of their conversation by shutting the door (and including us in with them) before the memorable shot where Branagh’s Henry himself first appears framed and silhouetted in a doorway and looking for all the world “like some medieval version of Darth Vader.”¹ Its reuse here appears to suggest that *Hamlet* is going to offer the same sort of experience as Branagh’s previous Shakespeare films.

I am going to argue, though, that it doesn’t do so, and that the primary reason for that is that Branagh’s conception of this play has its roots in the theatre and never breaks free of the concept of stage space. Branagh himself had been a famous stage Hamlet in

the 1988 Renaissance Theatre Company production and in Adrian Noble's 1992 Royal Shakespeare Company one; moreover, when interviewed about his direction of the play on screen, his first remark was that *Hamlet* was the first play he had ever seen in the theatre, when he was fifteen,² and he has reused here the actor he saw in the role, Derek Jacobi. He has also peopled the set with two other kinds of actors. The first category is those who are famous for acting on screen, though not generally in Shakespearean roles, such as Julie Christie, Kate Winslet, Charlton Heston, and Jack Lemmon. Secondly, there are several actors in the cast who have been noted stage Hamlets of the past, including Michael Maloney (Laertes), Sir John Gielgud (Priam), and of course Jacobi (Claudius). What Branagh *hasn't* included is anyone who is famous from an association with a previous film of *Hamlet*. Nor does he allude much to any of these, or indeed much to other films (at least recent ones) at all. In *Henry V* he had signalled from the outset an allegiance to film as a medium, but in retrospect this looks more like a witty reprise of Olivier's famous opening than a genuine acknowledgement of film as an art form in its own right rather than just as a medium for the popularisation of Shakespeare. Moreover, this element of difference from Olivier serves as a reminder that in *Henry V* Branagh's closest comparator/competitor was dead, and any acknowledgement of his existence is habitually constituted through contrast and difference. In *Hamlet*, by contrast, the proliferation of greats of screen and stage, and particularly of previous, alternative Hamlets means that the predominant effect is one of doublings and of uncanny similarities. This leads, I shall suggest, to the other main problem of the film, that it does not have a secure visual, and hence emotional, focus.

In *Hamlet*, the intimacy promised by the opening door fails to materialise. Moreover, I shall argue that one of the primary factors causing the absence of interiority in the film is, paradoxically, its use of interiors. This arises in the first place because of the sheer scale of Blenheim Palace, which was chosen as the film's Elsinore, and even when a set is being used size seems to have been the primary consideration, since the first thing the movie's official website tells you about the set is that it was "the largest single set in the United Kingdom."³ (Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks argue that Branagh is anxious for so big a set because his desire to avoid Oedipal overtones drives him rigorously to eschew the "womb-like set designs featured in other, explicitly psychoanalytic *Hamlet* films.")⁴ The problem with intimacy in this film is compounded by the fact that the door motif functions somewhat differently here than in *Henry V*. At the beginning of the earlier film, Branagh's clear signalling that this is a film studio, a constructed space, imposes a minimalist and functionalist aesthetic in which only that which contributes to the plot and mood is present: there are doors only where doors are needed. Elsinore, however, abounds in doors. We think we see a hall of mirrors, but at least some of them turn out to be doors; we think that, as in the Zeffirelli film, Hamlet is walking round a library, but he can suddenly swing back a bookcase and reveal that it conceals an entrance. He enters by one door to talk to Horatio but opens another to admit Osric. Most noticeably, at the end of the nunnery scene, Ophelia slumps across a partially opened door.

The effect is twofold. In the first place, we are aware that whatever we are shown, something else may be concealed just beyond our field of vision. This is of course a technique used to great effect in horror films, but *Hamlet* is not a horror film; here the

nagging suspicion that there is something you can't see is distracting rather than tension-building (and distracting was a word used by a number of reviews of the film).⁵ In the second, the plethora of doors underlines the extent to which the spatial logic of the set has itself driven the interpretation rather than *vice versa*. A particularly distracting presence is the small wooden model of a theatre to which Hamlet turns during the "Oh what a rogue and peasant slave" soliloquy, and almost equally intrusive is the use of the chapel for Polonius' speech of advice to Laertes. With apparent perversity, this begins outside, with Laertes dressed to go and in a hurry to depart, and then without explanation switches inside, with the gentle ecclesiastical music serving to dissipate any sense of urgency; and yet Laertes still leaves as if he is now departing, so that it is difficult to understand the point of the cut to the inside in any terms other than the desire to show the audience more of the set.

At first sight, my contention that the play withholds intimacy may seem a paradoxical one, because Branagh's *Hamlet* undoubtedly gives us more of the play than we have ever seen before, apparently offering access on an unprecedentedly generous scale. In the first place, it insists on its status as an uncut text (leaving to one side for a moment the textual issues which make this an impossibility): all of Shakespeare's words, it assures us, are here. In the second, it even more insistently supplements those words with pictures: whenever a character is mentioned, we are shown him, and a whole range of previous performances of Shakespeare in general and *Hamlet* in particular are evoked, particularly by the presence of so many famous former Hamlets. Even Tom Stoppard gets a look-in when Claudius, like his alter ego in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (in which Simon Russell Beale, the second gravedigger, was acting concurrently at the

National), clearly cannot tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern apart and has to be corrected by Gertrude—further underlining the ways in which the stage is at least as potent a presence as the screen in the film.

Shakespeare's own method, however, is rarely to expand or explain and often to suggest, and Branagh should, I think, have taken his cue from his writer, because inclusivity, so far from facilitating intimacy, actually precludes it. For one thing, the manic inclusiveness of the film means that, inevitably, it must be large scale. Other things also conspire to bring this about: as I have suggested above, the very choice of Blenheim dictates it, which is on a more than human scale, as does the Don Giovanni-like motif of the statue. Thus we get scenes like I.ii which is really more reminiscent of a Cecil B. De Mille epic than of a Shakespeare play. This "epicness" has dictated features of the film itself, most notably the wide screen which means, in turn, that the film is best viewed in the cinema, as a collective experience, rather than at home as an individual one.

(Nicholas Farrell, who plays Horatio, observes that emotions in the film are produced "to inspect in the safety of your—of your cinemas," clearly realising that the expected "homes" is inappropriate here.)⁶ In one way, encouraging people to see the film in a group rather than alone might seem to be true to the viewing conditions originally envisaged by Shakespeare, but then sitting or standing in the Globe in the afternoon light is very different from sitting in a darkened cinema. In the Globe, one is aware of the other members of the audience and of their reaction; the viewing conditions produced by the cinema provide an ostensibly collective experience but actually focus on the individual one. In the case of *Hamlet* in particular, the ensuing result is less to confirm the offer of intimacy than to underline the extent to which it is withheld. To some extent this can be

seen as the result of a technical problem: cinematographer Alex Thomson found it difficult to get into actors' eyes because the mirrors meant that all the lighting had to be high above the stage so as not to be seen in reflection, thereby creating a harshly top-lit effect that shadowed eyes.⁷ I think it is also, however, in large part due to Branagh himself, and perhaps it would be only fair to observe at this point that the reason I don't like Branagh's direction in this film is because I do like his acting. His stage Hamlet for the RSC got such rave reviews that anyone, like me, who missed it is always liable to feel as though they haven't really lived, and though I know it was naïve to suppose that watching the film was going to fill that gap, I expect I did nevertheless suppose so. (Perhaps Branagh too was aware of the possibility of that expectation; it might be one reason why the film keeps gesturing back to the stage.)

Rather than using the film to bring his Hamlet to the masses, though, Branagh seems, instead, perversely intent on hiding. When Olivier both starred and directed in *Hamlet* he hogged the camera; Branagh, on the contrary, avoids it. Instead, he is prepared to show us almost anything and anyone else. This pattern is established from the very outset of the film when verbal references to Fortinbras and Old Norway are backed up by vignettes poised, I think, uneasily between flashback and fantasy.⁸ It reaches its apogee in the speech of the Player, where we seem briefly threatened with a rerun of the entire Trojan War. One of the most puzzling instances of this pattern occurs when on Ophelia's "I do not know, my lord, what I should think"⁹ the film cuts to a sex scene between Hamlet and Ophelia, and we do not know what we should think either. Is this Ophelia's memory of events—in which case she is here lying to her father, and, as Carol Chillington Rutter argues, thus "makes a credulous ninny of her brother who buries her as

a virgin...[and] ceases to represent any value alternative to Gertrude's"¹⁰—or is it her fantasy? (Later, Fortinbras certainly is lying when he says “For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune” [V.ii.393] after smashing his way into the palace.) Equally, what is happening when the words “Doubt thou the stars are fire” (II.ii.115) seem to come spontaneously alive to show us a closely similar scene of intimacy between Hamlet and Ophelia, or when the newspaper which Horatio reads comes alive as Fortinbras? Most strikingly of all, Hamlet’s vision of a dagger entering Claudius’s ear may be clearly labelled as his fantasy, but we may be less alert to the fact that his subsequent vision of the death of his father is equally anchored in imagination rather than fact. Our uncertainty on this score seems to echo the ways in which the proliferation of past Hamlets leaves us wondering who is really the hero here (the first sequence after the intermission, for instance, clearly represents Claudius’s perspective on events).

There is an interesting contrast here with both Branagh’s earlier self-directions, *Henry V* and *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), and also with his subsequent one, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2000). The first time we see him in *Henry V*, Branagh advances in silhouette from the doorway in which he’s initially been seen framed. **[videoclip 1]** Anticipation is being clearly built up as we see the close-ups of the nobles’ heads bowing. Then Branagh sits down and slumps. Having been made to wait to see him, we know that our first clear sight of Branagh will be significant, and, arguably, we learn as much about his conception of the play and character from that initial shot as from anything else in the film. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, too, the camera picks out and dwells on the face of each of the four riders to allow us to get an initial sense of them. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*—where, for my money, everything which I think went wrong in *Hamlet* goes

right—Branagh has recovered the ease in front of the camera which seems to have forsaken him in *Hamlet*. It is certainly true that there is generous footage of other characters: Adrian Lester, clearly the best dancer of the four men, is allowed what is in effect a solo sequence to showcase his talents; Alessandro Nivola's King of Navarre is seen in military training, and there is a vignette of the heroic death of Boyet. However, throughout the revelation of the other three lords' love the film cuts repeatedly to Branagh's own amused expression, and though he pares most of the language of the play to the bone, he not only retains the "Have at you then, affection's men-at-arms!" speech for his own character,¹¹ but turns it into a bravura display of how Shakespearean verse should be spoken, with the camera clinging to him throughout.

Our first sight of Branagh in *Hamlet* is strikingly different.[**videoclip 2**] We see him first in the shadows, which might seem to recall the technique of *Henry V*, but there the similarity ends, because for reasons at which I simply cannot guess, the first close shot of Branagh's Hamlet is of his feet (conceivably to draw attention to the chequered pattern of the floor and thus evoke associations with the strategies of chess, or perhaps as a prolepsis of the fact that when Osric brings the foils we first see his feet, and then subsequently cut to the running feet of Fortinbras's advancing soldiers); and though the camera does then travel up to show his face, it seems almost to do so for purposes of identification rather than of revelation, because it immediately moves away again. This inaugurates a sustained pattern of mutual avoidance between Branagh and his camera. Of course the sheer size of the set makes it difficult for this film ever to be about the play of features, and requires scenes to be blocked and shaped like a stage production rather than adhere to the more usual aesthetic of film, but even so the effect is more pronounced with

Branagh than with any of the other characters. At our first introduction to Gertrude and Claudius, for instance, the camera is trained steadily on them, though it is clearly noticeable that we are looking *up* at them rather than on a level, and I do actually wonder whether this is part of the trouble—that Branagh is perhaps so in awe of this galaxy of stars that he has assembled and, in some cases, coaxed out of retirement, and of the weight of associations that they bring. In Joe Baltake’s opinion,

The film’s casting isn’t so much a distraction, but it does call attention to the movie’s one strange flaw. For all the perfectionism and dedication that Branagh has brought to the project, all the attention to detail and all the sweat and anguish to get it just right, for all his desire to appease his potential audience and expose them to Shakespeare, something vital got lost along the way: the personal touch...Branagh was so much in control that he overlooked himself.¹²

Time Magazine, too, praised much of the acting, but felt that “If there’s a lapse, it’s in the central performance.”¹³ For Baltake, the reason for this was that “in bringing ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ dimensions to the play, Branagh dwarfed his own point of view.”¹⁴ Branagh does indeed seem to have been striving for an epic effect, not least by including Julie Christie, who had starred in David Lean’s *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and choosing as his cinematographer Alex Thomson, who had also worked with David Lean. But it is not a wholehearted generic affiliation, because Branagh also wants to offer us the subjective camera more associated with *film noir* than with epic when he shows us those fantasy/flashbacks and things which simply don’t happen, like the dagger entering Claudius’s ear. Indeed multiple genre markers seem to me to be another manifestation of the film’s doomed attempt to offer the plenitude of the “whole play.”

Whatever the reason, he won’t look at us. Branagh himself has said that he believes the opposite of Olivier’s dictum that the camera must retreat as soliloquies develop because film cannot take that degree of emotion, and that in each soliloquy his

aim is to move further and further inside the mind of the actor.¹⁵ His own practice in *Hamlet*, however, comes closer to Olivier's theory than his own, at least when it comes to himself. Indeed Lawrence Guntner remarks that "Having learned from Olivier, he does not interrupt long soliloquies but begins with a close-up and moves up and away with the crane to emphasise Hamlet's isolation,"¹⁶ though this description applies in fact only to "How all occasions do inform against me." Throughout his opening exchange with Gertrude and Claudius, Branagh looks either at Julie Christie, or to one side away from Derek Jacobi, or, usually when his dead father is mentioned, upwards to the heavens. Even when the doors are shut and he is left alone for the first soliloquy, with us closed in with him, he bows his head to look at the floor and is seen only in profile. Here, as in *Henry V*, he slumps—but he slumps not into one throne but between two. This looks for all the world like a visual emblem of a man caught literally between two stools, but unfortunately this idea is one that could be applied as much to Branagh's own condition as to Hamlet's. Throughout this first soliloquy, there are no close-ups: we always see the whole upper half of Branagh's body, sometimes from behind, and never looking at the camera. In short, he is acting as if he were on stage and as if the ballroom were a set, except that if he really were on stage, he would probably look at the audience during his soliloquy (and he could do that even on film; the technique is used to great effect in the opening soliloquy of Richard Loncraine's *Richard III* [1995], where Ian McKellen looks directly into the camera on "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover").¹⁷ Initially, this illusion of a stage performance, at which we are the only audience and have the privileged viewpoint of the moving camera, might again seem to promise intimacy, but that is comprehensively denied when on "Must I remember" (I.ii.143) Branagh actually

puts his hands in front of his face as if to underline the extent to which he is in fact shutting us out. And the pattern of withholding continues: when he receives the momentous news that the ghost of his father has been seen, it is too dark and his face too much in shadow for his expression to be deciphered, and when he is left alone to digest the implications of what the Ghost has told him he throws himself face down on the earth, still in the dark, and again in profile.

To some extent this is an inevitable product of the nature of the role. The character of Hamlet is one who is famous above all for soliloquies, and for the greater part of the time he lacks an interlocutor. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Benedick looks primarily at Beatrice, and the nature of the dialogue between them naturally lends itself to a repeated use of shot/reverse-shot technique; Branagh isn't looking at us there either, but we do know where he *is* looking. Hamlet, by contrast, can talk frankly only to Horatio. Even here, however, Branagh seems to shrink from the camera, for rather than using shot/reverse-shot for the Hamlet/Horatio conversations, his preferred mode is to show one or both facing each other in profile, as in the "My lord, I think I saw him yesternight" (I.ii.189) exchange. Notably, this use of profile shots continues even after Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo have retreated into a smaller room for greater privacy and have closed the door behind them, underlining the extent to which doors are not in fact associated with increased intimacy. Even when the filming of the ensuing conversation does switch briefly to shot/reverse-shot, it is notable that Hamlet and Horatio look at least as much at either Barnardo or Marcellus as at each other.¹⁸ Conversely, where shot/reverse-shot *is* used in the film, it is often in contexts in which Hamlet is deliberately and explicitly concealing something: in his initial encounter with

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where he is instantly suspicious of their motives for visiting him; in his conversation with the Gravedigger where he is concealing his identity; in his questioning of Ophelia during the nunnery scene—and when on “Let the doors be shut on him” (III.i.133) the extent to which they are being shut on us too is sharply underlined as he closes his eyes. Branagh does look directly at Laertes in the grave, but he also disables the authenticity of the moment by saying explicitly that he is ranting. Even when Branagh does look directly at us on “No mo marriage” (II.i.149) the sight of Ophelia’s face pressed against the glass beside him, distorting its flesh, reminds us of the screen which intervenes between us rather than serving to reach out across it.

There are one or two occasions when the film does not seem afraid of the shot/reverse-shot technique. One is during the play-within-the-play, when it is, I think, used to brilliant effect to collapse distance into loomingness and public into private as the repeated cutting between the faces and viewpoints of Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude makes their sightlines the paramount feature of the scene despite the crowd. (There is of course an interesting parallel here with the court masque, where the sightline of the king and his own visibility form the structuring features of the event.) This is in fact squarely in line with Branagh’s own comments about how this “felt like a very strong scene to treat cinematically and we went in determined to cover it with endless numbers of angles. In editing, we could construct it and we’ve probably spent more time on that scene than any other in the picture.”¹⁹ His very use of the “we,” though, underlines the extent to which he is reluctant to present himself as the centre of attention; it is, it seems, because he can showcase the others that he shows himself here.

The same is true for the other scene in which the shot/reverse-shot technique is used to great effect, the conspiracy of Laertes and Claudius. It is true that the technique is also used to structure the final conversation between Hamlet and Horatio, which is, for me, one of the strongest parts of the film. Even the risky use of Robin Williams as Osric cannot detract from Hamlet's clarity and stature here; there is an originality and firmness of vision signalled by everything from the small details—for once Branagh's Hamlet is distinctively rather than conventionally dressed—to the larger, such as the fact that he is, for once, not afraid to look calmly and steadily at the camera, stand still while he is talking to it, and allow it to close in on him, especially in the "special providence" speech (V.ii.150). This is a speech which seems to be very important to Branagh, since he quotes from it repeatedly when interviewed about the making of the film, shot it twice, once at the outset of the project and once towards the close, and devotes to it the longest gloss of any in his commentary on the shooting script (though the jokey and self-deprecatory tone of this seems to confirm his uncomfortableness with taking his own performance seriously).²⁰ Of course the notable contrast with his earlier demeanour which this scene clearly establishes may in itself be meant to make the point that Hamlet has matured, but I think that not letting us see anything of his journey until he reached the end of it was too great a price to pay. And the newfound intimacy is not sustained; no sooner has he begun to apologise to Laertes than the film cuts away from Branagh to the advance of Fortinbras, a widening of perspective which, together with the use of Robin Williams, seems to align the film more with the aesthetic of comedy—arguably, in fact, Branagh's forte—rather than that of tragedy.

These few instances of how effectively the technique of shot/reverse-shot could have been used may well serve, then, merely to underline its absence for the rest of the time, and to highlight Branagh's general reluctance to engage with his camera. Ironically, the most sustained acts of avoidance seem to me to come in what is often considered the heart of this play, the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Branagh has admitted that he found this daunting, claiming that he put in the opening shot to give himself time to decide "whether we dare do it in the mirror," and talking about his own indecision here mirroring Hamlet's.²¹ Though the self-deprecation here is in many ways endearing, it also becomes apparent that it is not necessarily the quality best suited to a man proposing to direct himself in *Hamlet*. This is of course a strange and in many ways atypical soliloquy; its lack of any personal pronouns make it seem more general commentary than particular reflection on the condition of Hamlet himself, and it is sometimes even suggested that Hamlet must know from the outset that he is being listened to and that this is therefore in no sense a revelation of his true thoughts.²² Nevertheless, it is the most famous speech in the play, and everyone knows so, and it would be therefore simply perverse not to acknowledge that status in any way. Certainly it does receive special treatment in Branagh's film, since perhaps the film's most spectacular setting, in immediate proximity to the mirrors which line the main set, is reserved for it. Though the speech itself is privileged and emphasised, Hamlet's relation to it, however, is curiously fragmented and downplayed, and this is pointedly *not* because we are invited to believe that this is not in fact a full soliloquy: in a generally rather ambiguous scene, one of the few things that is actually crystal-clear is that it is not until the word "nunnery" that Hamlet hears a noise and deduces that he is being spied on. And yet the whole effect of the scene is,

nevertheless, one of a restricting of access to a purely surface level rather than genuine revelation of any sort of interiority. It is almost as though it is *we* who are the spies, and whose access to truth must be frustrated.

This effect is made all the more obvious because the “To be or not to be” soliloquy is directly preceded by a striking moment of genuine intimacy and revelation, as Claudius muses on the discrepancy between his deed and his “most painted word” (III.i.53) and the camera closes in to dwell on his expression. Claudius and Polonius then retreat behind one of the mirrored doors, and the immediate cut to Hamlet makes, I think, for some initial ambiguity about who can see whom and who knows which person is there which further problematises the scene. When Hamlet does start to speak, his face is reflected to both him and us in one of the mirrors, underlining the degree to which this scene focuses on external appearance rather than internal revelation. Most strikingly, when on uttering the word “bodkin” (III.i.76) he pulls out a dagger, the camera immediately zooms into a close-up at last—but it is Jacobi’s face, not Branagh’s, which we see. Lehmann and Starks have argued that Branagh’s stated desire to avoid Oedipal overtones in Hamlet’s relationship with Gertrude only thinly masks a fixation on Derek Jacobi’s Claudius which, they claim, makes this “the most oedipal filmed *Hamlet* of all time,”²³ and certainly the strikingly similar haircuts and colouring of Branagh’s Hamlet and Jacobi’s Claudius have already suggested a close parallel between the two well before the advent of this literal mirroring motif.²⁴ (It is also notable that, unlike almost everyone else in the cast, neither Julie Christie nor Kate Winslet was an experienced Shakespearean and both expressed trepidation at the thought of acting Shakespeare,²⁵

suggesting that Branagh was indeed concerned primarily with negotiating with *male* predecessors and traditions.)

Again, though, this becomes an image of the failure of communication rather than the achieving of it. In particular, the insistent use of the mirror throughout the scene seems to me to evoke a previous Branagh film, the critically ill-fated *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994) (which also seems to be recalled in the mingling of its famous fire and ice motifs when during the aftermath of the ghost scene fire bursts up from the earth). In that narrative there is famously a mirroring effect linking ostensible hero to ostensible villain.²⁶ In *Hamlet*, we see only the reflected Hamlet, not the looking one (an effect that would have been technically impossible to achieve). Audiences acquainted with the Gothic logic of *Frankenstein*, therefore, may surely wonder who it is who is actually looking in the mirror, especially since the documentary *Hamlet—to cut or not to cut?* clearly shows a Branagh-double who looks as if he might well be required for use in this scene. (The shooting script confirms his existence, though not what he was used for.) Audiences may wonder, too, to what extent Hamlet's own status as hero is compromised by the use of a motif which famously suggests doubling and split personality. This is particularly so when Hamlet cries "no mo marriage" (III.i.149) and the film cuts to Jacobi's expression so fast that it seems as if they must indeed be seeing each other, though a moment later it is clear that they are not. For a brief instant, the film has at last gestured at some of what film as a medium can do, in the rapid and suggestive juxtaposing of images, but it has had to turn its back on that possibility because it is still committed to and bound by the more literal logic of stage space. Finally, when Ophelia is left alone momentarily, she slumps across a doorway. The floor beyond her is lit, but we

cannot see into the room—a fitting emblem for the way in which the scene as a whole has teased us with the promise of something it has ultimately withheld.

Similar techniques apply in the film's treatment of the other soliloquies, and it is a rich irony that only a speech which is *not* a soliloquy, "Angels and ministers of grace defend us" (I.iv.38), is performed in a way genuinely suggestive of access to the mind, by doing it as interior monologue until "Whither wilt thou lead me?" (II.i.1) (Indeed, there seems to be a hangover here from the radio performance which was what originally triggered Branagh's decision to perform a full-text *Hamlet*.) Here the visions of Hamlet's dead father are for once unequivocally identifiable as definitively representing his memories. However, this serves only to underline the far more ambiguous status of the scene which follows, because the vignettes which appear during the ghost's speech work very differently. We first see him asleep while Claudius steals up on him: certainly this represents his memory of *what* happened, but by the same token the fact that he was asleep means that this cannot be his memory of *how* it happened. Even more insidiously, he cannot possibly be remembering the scenes of courtship between Claudius and Gertrude which follow: as Iago reminds Othello, the adultery of his wife is a thing which a husband is unlikely to be able to witness.²⁷ The fact that the Ghost here assures us with such certainty of something he cannot know does also of course have a spin-off benefit, though, in that it makes absolutely understandable Hamlet's reluctance to proceed on the Ghost's word alone. Equally, however, this does damage, because in a film that shows us a great deal, and seems to regard showing as an inevitable adjunct to telling, it makes us reluctant to believe what we are shown, especially when we note how many of these 'flashbacks' are indeed of people telling us about things of which they do not have

personal knowledge. This is certainly the case with the Trojan war vignette, Hamlet's description of what is happening at Claudius's "rouse" (I.iv.8) or the ambassadors' account of the scene between Old Norway and Fortinbras, which appears to be a *tête-à-tête*, and at which they could not, therefore, have been present. At one time it used to be fashionable to argue that the so-called "Bad Quarto" of *Hamlet* represented a memorial reconstruction of the play furnished by an actor who had doubled Marcellus and the Player King, and that the *lacunae* in the text were due to his absence from the stage, particularly during the soliloquies; this theory is no longer current, but it is ironically revisited in the way that this film thus reifies accounts of scenes which are offered by those who were not actually present at them.²⁸

A particularly persistent technique during the filming of the soliloquies and indeed of Hamlet's speeches in general is for either Branagh himself or his camera to move. (He is even moving when he says "I am dead" [V.ii.338].) For instance, Branagh circles nervily while starting the Pyrrhus speech, while Charlton Heston's First Player, in noticeable contrast, stands stock still as the camera homes in on him. Heston also makes direct eye contact with a number of members of his on-screen audience until the cut to his mind's-eye view of Gielgud. When the camera returns to him, it is, as with our initial sight of Claudius and Gertrude, looking sharply up at him, as if to accentuate his status; and finally it is the tears on his face which register his emotion, just as the face is again clearly identified as the repository of meaning when we repeatedly see Horatio with his opera-glasses trained on Claudius's face during the play-within-the-play. During this scene, too, Charlton Heston's Player King remains absolutely static and indeed seated while the camera lingers on him, and similarly Derek Jacobi is shot in static, full frontal

view throughout his soliloquy about the state of his soul, with the camera advancing ever more closely towards him as it had on Heston, and the same technique is used for “Do it, England” (IV.iii.68). Fortinbras is also treated to a close-up as he advances out of the mist to order his men, with brilliantly underplayed menacingness, to “Go softly on” (IV.iv.7), as is Gertrude for her “To my sick soul” speech (IV.v.17). Even Osric gets a close-up; when the cry of “Treason!” goes up, it is to his face that we cut, before registering the injury he has sustained. When Hamlet begins “Oh what a rogue and peasant slave” (IV.iv.32), though, he starts with his face pressed partly to the wall, and then moves around, with the camera not only following him but also being irresistibly drawn to the various unusual and striking objects in the room, particularly the model wooden building which he opens and looks into but which we are not, at first, allowed to see. Indeed it is one of the most marked effects of Branagh’s interest in his setting that each soliloquy has its own location, and this does threaten to take over interest from the speeches themselves: as Mark Thornton Burnett observes, “these locational moments complicate the implications of the play’s rhetoric.”²⁹

The effect is most particularly evident in the highly stylised handling of “How all occasions do inform against me” (IV.iv.32ff). Throughout this speech, Branagh stands still while the camera steadily and determinedly retreats from him, with the scene eventually panning out into the vastest panorama yet, while an increasingly insistent musical score battles ever more successfully for our attention with his receding voice. (The effect has been unkindly, though not inappositely, compared to the “As God is my witness, I’ll never go hungry again” scene in *Gone With the Wind*.)³⁰ It is a fitting image for the film as a whole: we see more than ever before of the world of *Hamlet* the play, in

the most fully realised and elaborate version of Elsinore that money could buy—and yet the result is that we see less than ever before of *Hamlet* the prince. By attempting to offer the whole, Branagh effectively refuses to disclose what he considers important, and thus the film, by showing us everything about Hamlet’s world, shows us nothing about his mind. For Branagh, Denmark is a prison because he knows every corner of it. It is fully, concretely realised in his mind, and he desperately wants to show it to us too—but turning his camera so resolutely outwards also becomes all too visibly a symptom of the fact that when Branagh’s Hamlet looks in the mirror, it is Jacobi who looks back. Branagh himself remains locked inside.

Notes

¹ Samuel Crowl, “Flamboyant Realist: Kenneth Branagh,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, Russell Jackson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 224.

² See *The Readiness is All: The Filming of Hamlet*, BBC2, first shown 15.02.97. The interview is reproduced on the programme’s website at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/bookcase/hamlet/index.shtml>; this comment can be found at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/bookcase/hamlet/dream.shtml>

³ <http://www.tnt-tv.com/specials/hamlet>

⁴ Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks, “Mother Matter: Repression, Revision, and the Stakes of ‘Reading Psychoanalysis Into’ Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet*,” *Early Modern Literary Studies* 6.1 (May, 2000) 2.1-24, 4.

⁵ See for instance Desson Howe in *The Washington Post*, 24 January 1997 (available online at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/review97/hamlethowe.htm>).

⁶ *The Readiness is All: the Filming of Hamlet*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Russell Jackson describes what is happening here, that “an incident described in the dialogue is enacted for the camera,” which is cumbersome but strictly accurate; the lack of any more pat phrase shows the unusual nature of what Branagh is doing (“From Play-script to Screenplay,” in Jackson, ed., *Cambridge Companion*, 27).

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1980), I.iii.104. All further quotations from the play will be taken from this edition and reference will be given in the text.

¹⁰ Carol Chillington Rutter, “Looking at Shakespeare’s Women on Film,” in Jackson, *Cambridge Companion*, 253.

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. John Kerrigan (London: Penguin, 1982), IV.iii.288 ff.

¹² Joe Baltake, *Bee Movie Critic*, 24 January 1996; reprinted at <http://www.movieclub.com/reviews/archives/96hamlet/hamlet.html>

¹³ Richard Corliss, “The Whole Dane Thing,” *Time* 149.2 (13 January 1997), available online at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/1997/dom/970113/cinema.the_whole.html

- ¹⁴ Baltake, <http://www.movieclub.com/reviews/archives/96hamlet/hamlet.html>
- ¹⁵ See *Hamlet—to cut or not to cut?* BBC2, first shown 5.2.97.
- ¹⁶ J. Lawrence Guntner, “*Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear on Film*,” in Jackson, *Cambridge Companion*, 122.
- ¹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), I.i.28.
- ¹⁸ Tanja Weiss provides a table of the shots in this sequence which clearly shows the extent to which it is a four-way rather than a two-way scene. See *Shakespeare on the Screen: Kenneth Branagh’s Adaptations of Henry V, Much Ado About Nothing and Hamlet* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 160.
- ¹⁹ <http://www.tnt-tv.com/specials/hamlet>
- ²⁰ Kenneth Branagh, *Hamlet, by William Shakespeare: Screenplay, Introduction and Film Diary* (London: W. W. Norton, 1996), 162.
- ²¹ See *Hamlet—to cut or not to cut?*
- ²² See James Hirsh, “The ‘To Be or Not To Be’ Scene and the Conventions of Shakespearean Drama,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 42.2 (1981), 115-36.
- ²³ Lehmann and Starks, “Making Mother Matter,” 10.
- ²⁴ For comment on this, see for instance Mark Thornton Burnett, “The ‘Very Cunning of the Scene’: Kenneth Branagh’s *Hamlet*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 25.2 (1997), 78-82.
- ²⁵ *The Readiness is all: The Filming of Hamlet*.
- ²⁶ See for instance Christopher Small, *Ariel Like a Harpy: Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein* (London, 1972), 37; Mary K. Patterson Thornburg, *The Monster in the Mirror: Gender and the Sentimental/Gothic Myth in Frankenstein* (Michigan, 1984; reprinted, 1987), 102; and Anne K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (London and New York, 1988), 38.
- ²⁷ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Thomas Nelson, Arden Edition, 1997), III.iii.400-1.
- ²⁸ See Graham Holderness and Bryan Loughrey, eds., *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), introduction.
- ²⁹ Burnett, “The ‘Very Cunning of the Scene,’” 80.
- ³⁰ See for instance Harry Keyishian, “Shakespeare and Movie Genre: the case of *Hamlet*,” in Jackson, *Cambridge Companion*, 80.