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To Laugh or not to Laugh: Italian Parodies of Hamlet

Some years ago, at the beginning of an undergraduate course on *Hamlet* at the University of Ferrara, only fifteen of my eighty students admitted to having previously read the play or seen it performed. When I asked the others to write down all they knew about *Hamlet* and to include at least one quote from the text in their summaries, only thirty came up with a plot line that bore some resemblance to the original, but all sixty-five selected “To be or not to be, that is the question” as their quote. Hardly surprising, since this line has a life of its own, independent not only of the rest of the play but, quite often, of the rest of Hamlet’s most famous monologue. If “Shakespeare now *is* primarily a collage of familiar quotations,” “To be or not to be” is undoubtedly its centrepiece.¹

Predictably, the monologue features prominently in Italian parodies of *Hamlet*. Occasionally very funny, such parodies are always worth examining because of what they can tell us about the reception of Shakespeare’s tragedy outside the theatre and the level of familiarity with *Hamlet* that can be assumed in the general public. Together with parodies of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, they testify to a popularity of Shakespeare in Italy that is not

necessarily linked to any real knowledge of the dramatist's "greatest hits", but rather to a vague acquaintance with their basic plots and their catchiest lines. After all, Shakespeare's works are not part of the Italian school curriculum, and their frequent stagings are mainly attended by a theatre-going minority. However, their main characters are widely familiar either thanks to Verdi's operas (*Othello*, *Macbeth*) or because of well publicised local connections (*Romeo and Juliet* and Verona). They are often parodied to foreground the tension between high and low culture, especially strong in Italy, where the two seldom overlap. Whenever parodists want to target high culture, Shakespeare's plays are more conveniently available than the masterpieces of the Italian canon (the world of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, for example, is too complex and unfamiliar for quick parody). Parodists who "dumbdown" key moments of Shakespeare's plays establish a complicity with their audience by exposing the dramatist as part of "a refined and effete bookish culture" whose pretensions can be easily exploded.²

Since their success depends on the audience's recognition of the intertext, parodies tend to cluster around key scenes and, therefore, to reinforce a limited, partial knowledge of the plays. In the case of *Hamlet*, they ensure, through sheer repetition, that even those who know practically nothing about the play will be able to instantly recognise and superficially understand its most frequently quoted line. Because "popular culture focuses more on character than on other elements," parodists target the protagonist, Hamlet, and reduce him to a single, easy to caricature, trait—his inability to make up his mind.³ The language itself comes to their aid. In Italian, "*dubbio amletico*" (Hamletic doubt) is a well established verbal cliché, often ironically applied to trivial matters. Familiarity with this phrase can be assumed in most viewers and represents the building block on which parodists can construct their variations. From Shakespeare's text, they sometimes take as little as a single line, from the stage iconography of Hamlet, they only draw those traits that are deemed essential to the

character's identification. The resulting playlets encapsulate the essence of Shakespeare's tragedy seen through foreign eyes. Although far from exhaustive, the sample examined in this paper highlights approaches to Hamlet's monologue and to the whole tragedy which are typical of Italian comedy.

To gauge the popularity of a play one needs look no further than the world of advertising. Because of the amount of money involved in producing and broadcasting a spot, not a single, precious second will be wasted on literary references that cannot be readily understood by a hugely mixed audience. Whatever assumptions advertisers make about cultural knowledge will be the result of in-depth market research. *Hamlet* features in a 1989 campaign targetting viewers who "forget" to bet on horses through a state approved system, "Totip". The message is that they behave as outrageously as an actor who forgets "To be or not to be". Shakespeare's monologue is not quoted because of any connection between its content and the advertising message, but as the most readily available example of an impossible-to-forget passage. After a quick, panoramic view of spectators fast asleep in their seats, the camera focuses on an aging ham actor, who strikes a heroic pose, bellows out "To be...", but then forgets his lines and needs constant prompting from an animated horse head. On being reminded that he has also forgotten to fill in his "Totip" forms, he throws away the skull and dashes off [**videoclip1 'Totip'**]. As in other modern parodies, the original text is not ridiculed, but used as a standard "by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny."⁴ The world of theatre-goers is openly scorned as a small community of elderly eccentrics who do not even enjoy their entertainment of choice. While they remain trapped in the stifling atmosphere of the miniature theatre hall, the actor runs away towards "real life," towards the far more alluring gambling world which is inhabited by the television audience. The underlying assumption is that the low culture of horse racing is preferable to the high culture of theatre going. Although Hamlet is never mentioned, he is clearly

signified by conventional traits: the predominantly black costume, the medallion on a neck chain, the blond “Northern” wig (here comically at odds with the actor’s black moustache) and, last but not least, the skull. As is often the case, the authors of this parody make it easier for their audiences to identify the tragedy by conflating the most famous iconic moment in *Hamlet* with the character’s most famous monologue, hence the presence of the skull in Act III scene 1.

References to *Hamlet* in advertising can also be slightly subtler and, at the same time, more directly connected to the play. A 1991 campaign for “Pomì”, a brand of tomato sauce, aims at convincing consumers to switch from bottle to carton when buying the product, the carton offering more sauce for less money. It builds on the success of a previous campaign centered on the jingle “O così o Pomì” (i.e., you either buy fresh tomatoes or our bottled sauce) and it goes on to offer the new alternative: “O Pomì o Pomì” (i.e. either the bottle or the carton). The consumer in doubt is a female Hamlet. Like the “Totip” actor, she wears a short, blond wig (which is made obvious, and therefore funny, because it is at odds with her dark eyes and eyebrows), a black costume with a white ruff collar, and a neck chain. She imitates the conventional, inspired pose of Hamlet meditating on the skull, but her right hand holds a Pomì carton. She lovingly gazes at it and at the bottle in her left hand, and wonders: which of the two is better value? Not a single direct quote from “To be or not to be” enters her text, but the connection with the tragic monologue is established by the lofty tone of her voice. While debating the relative merits of two types of packaging, she projects the image of a tragic actress fully immersed in her role. Once the decision in favour of the carton is made, she sends up her own solemnity by snapping out of her parody of Hamlet and engaging the attention of the consumers in chatty complicity [**videoclip 2 “O così o Pomì”**]. The attack on the viewers’ potential inability to identify the Shakespearean reference is three-pronged: if they miss the visual clues offered by the costume and the aural

hint of the actress's declamatory tone, her words establish without doubt that she is prey to a "*dubbio amletico*."

The "Pomì" commercial must introduce a female Hamlet because, in 1991, Italian men ate tomato sauce, but they did not buy it. By 1997, apparently, they had taken a giant step forward and were doing their own laundry (under the supervision of a female expert). In the campaign to promote "Sole", a washing powder, the Hamlet-like consumer is a man in contemporary, casual clothes. In a supermarket aisle, he holds and compares two unmarked boxes: "To be or not to be? Boh!" "Don't get it wrong!" is the recommendation of a savvy young woman. While holding up one box at a time, he further defines the problem: "Quality without savings or savings without quality?" "That is the question!" the girl agrees. "Which one should I buy, then?" he asks her. On cue, she produces a box of "Sole" and proceeds to extoll its qualities [**videoclip 3 "Sole"**]. In this spot, the references to Shakespeare's tragedy are conveyed, almost exclusively through verbal clues. The opening sentence has the sole purpose of triggering instant identification of the speaker as a Hamlet-like figure, and therefore, by definition, a man in doubt. By completing the line, the girl establishes Shakespeare's words as the ornate frame that sets off the consumer's dilemma—quality vs. savings. Missing the Hamlet connection would have left the viewers of the "Pomì" spot bewildered and dissatisfied (an effect to avoid at all costs in advertising). The effectiveness of the "Sole" campaign, on the contrary, would be diminished but not hopelessly marred by a failure to recognise "To be or not to be" as a Shakespearean line. In fact, the advert is designed to appeal to a two-tiered audience: those who see the punch line in the oddity of a man buying washing powders and those who can also appreciate the collaborative re-creation of the Shakespearean context achieved by the two protagonists.

Advertisers who focus their spots on "To be or not to be" count on a familiarity with the line that their target audience has sometimes acquired in the theatre, but more often from

parodies in other media. In 1955, Vittorio Gassman interpreted the first Hamlet in the history of Italian television (in a production that had already toured the theatres) and achieved instant fame with discriminate viewers. The recording of that evening shows him as a brooding, romantic prince, fully aware of his own good looks. As he slowly rises from a bench to start his monologue, the camera lingers lovingly over his body. For the first time, the spectators were given the opportunity to revisit a theatre performance with a close attention to details. From that moment onwards, even those viewers who had not seen Gassman's Hamlet on stage and those who were totally unfamiliar with the play (and perhaps did not watch it to the end) strongly identified him with the role [**videoclip 4 'Amleto'**]. In 1959, he starred in *Il mattatore* (directed by Daniele D'Anza), a series of television shows where he alternated comic sketches with excerpts from his tragic repertoire (including, of course, Hamlet's monologue). The show became hugely popular because the comic sketches dealt scathingly with controversial topics. At the time, for example, Italian football teams were beginning to use a strategy called *catenaccio* (i.e., rather than trying to score they focussed on defensive tactics to prevent their adversaries from scoring). *Catenaccio* made for very dull matches, and the fans hated it. Gassman created the character of a team owner who, surrounded by his players, muses on the advantages of resorting to the *catenaccio* to avoid being demoted to the B-league.

*B o non B, questo è il problema:
 Se sia più nobile soffrire nell'animo
 Le reti e i rigori di un ingiusto arbitraggio
 O fare il catenaccio contro un mare d' avversari,
 E, contrastandoli, coprirli di lividi. Difendersi --rinunziare,
 Nient'altro. E con un ostruzionistico sistema dire: ecco, noi abbiamo posto fine
 Alle doglie del portiere e alle mille cariche irregolari
 Che sono retaggio della retrocessione. Dribblare, palleggiare:
 Palleggiare, pareggiare forse: ecco il punto
 che potrà sottrarci alla B,
 All'inesplorato dei continenti dalla cui frontiera
 Non c'è squadrone che ritorni.*

B or not B, that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The goals and penalties of outrageous refereeing,
 Or to resort to the *catenaccio* against a sea of adversaries
 And, by opposing, severely bruise them. To defend—to limit,
 No more; and by obstructing to say we end
 The heartache of the goalkeeper and the thousand irregular charges
 That retrocession is heir to. To dodge, to dribble;
 To dribble, perchance to draw; ay, there's the point
 That may save us from the B,
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
 No team returns. [videoclip 5 'B o non B']

Although the opening words are modeled on the original, the parodist finds his intertext in the Italian translation; he imitates its structural elements “while at the same time introducing a new topic, a change which demands variations mostly with regard to vocabulary.”⁵ The puns on *rigori* (both “rigours” and “penalty kicks”), the choice to render “heir to” with “*retaggio*” (which evokes “*rete*”—goal), and “the rub” with “*il punto*” (which also means “point”), all contribute to reinforce the comic effect of shifting Hamlet’s monologue to the semantic field of football. At the same time, the references to unsportsmanlike behaviour (obstructing and bruising the adversaries) make it clear that this Hamlet, torn between two choices, will ultimately select the more self-serving. Full appreciation of the sketch requires a familiarity with the entire monologue which is well beyond the cultural knowledge of the average television viewer. The author of this parody adopts strategies which are similar to those recently employed by the scriptwriters of *Clueless*, where the jokes “are sophisticated plays on the discrepancy between those that have the cultural capital to ‘read’ the film through prior knowledge of literary culture and those that do not.”⁶ All spectators are given the necessary clues to pick up the connection with *Hamlet*; those unfamiliar with the entire monologue can still enjoy “B or not B” as an elaborate act of self-parody on the part of a famous Shakespearean actor, as a witty comment on a hot topic, as a bowing of high culture to the superior interests of popular entertainment.

Gassman's transformation of Hamlet from brooding prince to cheeky crook is the main point of interest in this sketch. Make-up and false teeth deform the actor's features and efface the good looks that contributed so much to the success of his Hamlet, but the opening lines are spoken in his own famous voice. Gradually, the comic speech patterns of the team owner take over and the parody gathers momentum. It peaks with the recommendation that the players should take their "too, too frail flesh" to a convent, or retreat, because their thighs have become weak. Together with the mannerisms introduced by Gassman, the final remark suggests that this Hamlet's interest in the future of his sporting kingdom may be due to his passion for young men in shorts. Even hinting at such a possibility was quite daring in 1950s Italy.

Throughout "B or not B", the speaker holds in his hand a football instead of the trademark skull. It is one of the fine points of the sketch that will be picked up only by spectators familiar with Shakespeare's tragedy. Parodists and advertisers take the shortcut of using the skull to signify "Hamlet" so often that the convention itself becomes the object of parody in variety shows. In *Senza rete* (1975), Alberto Lupo, a sort of B-league Gassman, very famous for his soap opera roles, is finally given a chance to recite "To be or not to be". He is soon interrupted by Lino Banfi, a comedian, who insists that the monologue cannot be played without a skull. With increasing irritation, Lupo maintains that this convention is totally outmoded and needs not be followed, but is ultimately forced to accept Banfi's offer to play the role of the skull. While all viewers can laugh at the misunderstandings between the two actors, those who remember whose skull features in *Hamlet* have the extra pleasure of watching a Yorick-like character utterly fail to amuse his prince. Inevitably, the comedian's antics as he struggles to turn his face into a plausible imitation of a skull undercut Lupo's efforts to give a serious performance and, for once, Yorick steals Hamlet's scene.

Leo De Berardinis, a Shakespearean actor and director, takes the idea of the living skull much further in his full-length play, *Totò principe di Danimarca* (1990), written, interpreted and directed by him first on stage and then on television. He plays the role of a Neapolitan actor, modelled on the famous comedian Totò, whose shabby company receives an improbable offer to perform *Hamlet* in London. They enthusiastically start rehearsing their own version of the tragedy and eventually come to the famous monologue. De Berardinis interprets it in a subdued, confidential tone while strolling on stage arm in arm with a fellow actor, whose uncomprehending face offers a silent, down-to-earth commentary on lines that are made new by being translated into very colloquial Italian and delivered with a Neapolitan accent. **[videoclip 6 “Totò”]** Those among the spectators who are accustomed to watching Hamlet commune with Yorick’s skull can fully appreciate the comic effect achieved by substituting the prop with a silent actor. As in the previous sketch, the prince is shown in the company of his jester at the same time as he is delivering his most famous monologue. He is therefore shown on stage as sharing his thoughts with an internal audience whose reaction mirrors the bewilderment of those viewers who are only familiar with the first line. The physical appearance of the actors contributes to adding an extra layer of meaning to the scene. The tall, gaunt, aging De Berardinis forms an odd couple with his shorter, chubby sidekick. Together, they are more reminiscent of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza than of Hamlet and Yorick. This Hamlet is a tilter of windmills, a man who will never achieve his goals.

Totò principe di Danimarca can be fully enjoyed only by those among the spectators who have a fairly good knowledge of Shakespeare’s play. The reduction of the main characters to the types of Neapolitan popular theatre is cleverly achieved by offering the most basic reading of *Hamlet* as a lurid family drama involving oversexed mothers, wicked uncles, dotty girlfriends. As for the superannuated protagonist, he effortlessly integrates his

Hamlet into Southern Italian culture. The melancholy and irony of his delivery are rooted in Totò's famous portraits of his fellow Neapolitans; the key concepts of the monologue are punctuated by hand gestures that make words almost unnecessary.

If delivering the monologue with a regional accent is enough to ensure its passage from tragedy to comedy, translating it into a dialect automatically introduces an element of farce. *Ninì Tirabusciò*, a 1970 film interpreted by Monica Vitti and directed by Marcello Fondato, is a comedy based on the real life story of a girl who dreams of becoming a tragic actress, but achieves international fame as a *café chantant* attraction. The clash between high and low culture is not only woven into the script; it is also embodied in the main interpreter. In the 1960s, Monica Vitti was revered by the intellectual élite as the star of Michelangelo Antonioni's uncompromisingly high brow films. When she broke away from her personal and professional relationship with the *maestro*, she launched a new career as a comic actress and achieved the kind of popular success that, in Italy, is normally reserved for male comedians. It is especially fitting that, in one of her earliest comic roles, she portrays Ninì, an actress forced by circumstances to make the career choices that Vitti herself had so willingly embraced. Within this framework, Shakespeare's plays operate for Ninì as the equivalent of Antonioni's films for Vitti. They stand for a coveted peak of high culture that a young actress would do anything to reach. It is an illusion that low culture will turn onto its head by appropriating Shakespeare.

Early in the film, Ninì auditions for the role of Juliet with a company of *guitti*, strolling players who pay more attention to the *pasta* they are hungrily wolfing down than to her acting. The manager is unimpressed: he tells her that her accent is all wrong, because they play everything, Shakespeare included, in Neapolitan, and asks an actor to illustrate the point. Amidst bottles and crockery, he stands up and launches into Hamlet's monologue. He wonders whether 'tis nobler "*soffrire d' int' 'o core 'e mazzate 'e 'sta schifezza 'e*

fortuna oppure andare contro a 'sta mappata 'e guaie e fare uno sconquasso" (to suffer in one's heart the blows of this lousy fortune or to go against this bundle of troubles and cause havoc). By transforming "mind" into the "core" of popular songs, turning "outrageous fortune" into a "*schifezza*" (a term that vividly sums up everything that is disgusting and unfair about the fate of sad princes but also of hungry players), and upgrading "opposing" to an empty threat of boundless violence, the voice of plebeian Naples fully appropriates Hamlet. [videoclip 7 "Ninì"] The camera holds the actor's face in the frame as he delivers his lines, which are punctuated by background noises of forks rhythmically hitting plates as the other Thespians get on with the serious business of eating. The irony of the scene is further compounded by the fact that, while Ninì's interpretation of Juliet is hopelessly bad by the standards of tragedy, the *guitto* is perfectly credible as he inscribes Hamlet within the tradition of popular theatre. Of course his version of "To be or not to be" bears only the slightest resemblance to the famous monologue. Not only are the words bent to fit the alien mould of a Southern Italian dialect; the actor's delivery itself makes it clear to the audience that he rather relishes the idea of taking arms against all comers. The two Neapolitan parodies show that "To be or not to be" can be turned into a comic piece by fully embracing one or the other horn of the dilemma explored by the speaker. Both De Berardinis' ineffectual Hamlet and the *guitto*'s belligerent one are funny because their one-sided characters work against the complexity of the thoughts they are called to express. In both cases, the audience is encouraged to come quickly to the conclusion that only one path is really open to the speaker, and, consequently, to laugh off as a show of empty rhetoric the alternative course of action that he claims to be contemplating .

The strolling players in *Ninì Tirabusciò* are not deliberately parodying *Hamlet*. The next scene shows them lustily engaged in the rehearsals of a hilarious production of Shakespeare's tale of betrayal and revenge which their audience will appreciate as tragedy.

They strip the play down to its basic sensational plot and run with it. When Ninì's Ophelia reacts to rejection as her spunky interpreter would (she loudly berates the prince and hits him with a boxful of "remembrances"), and when she freely ad-libs in the madness scene, the manager tries to rein her in and reminds her that she must stay closer to the text. She tries to give Shakespeare his due, only to see her efforts greeted with laughter by the fatherly policeman who is secretly acting as her mentor. She is duly affronted: "He must not laugh at an immortal masterpiece!" But of course he must laugh, because he mirrors the reaction that the director expects from the film audience.

The *Hamlet* parody in *Ninì Tirabusciò* neatly encapsules the interaction between high and low culture which is at the heart of so many comedy sketches. The low brow comedians present the best show they are capable of, but they are the victims of a high, or rather middle brow director who ridicules their misplaced ambition to tackle a classic. Like Theseus's courtiers, the middle class spectators, who are supposedly familiar with the "proper" way to stage *Hamlet*, are expected to laugh at the efforts of the rustics. In turn, the mannerisms of the *mattatori* (flamboyant tragic actors) are seen as legitimate targets for ridicule when Ninì presumes to rise above her station and puts on airs as a tragic actress. The spectators occupy a comfortable middle ground from which they can poke fun at performers up and down the entertainment scale. A smattering of Shakespeare is sufficient to feed their sense of superiority, because parody in the media will always take into account the need to appeal to the widest possible audience. With the notable exception of Vittorio Gassman, very few Italian actors bridge the gap between tragic roles and variety shows. Almost certainly, however, both *mattatori* and comedians will continue to be asked to perform their own, hugely different, versions of "To be or not to be" for Italian audiences.

Notes

¹ John Drakakis, "Shakespeare in Quotations," in Susan Bassnett, ed, *Studying British Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1997), 170, emphasis in the original.

² Craig Dionne, "Shakespeare in Popular Culture: Gender and High-Brow Culture in America," *Genre* 28, 1995, 390.

³ Richard Finkelstein, "Disney Cites Shakespeare: The Limits of Appropriation," in Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds, *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (London, Routledge, 1999), 193.

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 57.

⁵ Beate Mueller, "Hamlet at the Dentist's: Parodies of Shakespeare," in Beate Mueller, ed, *Parody: Dimensions and Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 149.

⁶ Esther Sonnet, "From *Emma* to *Clueless*: Taste, Pleasure and the Scene of History," in Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, eds, *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (London: Routledge, 1999), 60.