Teaching Shakespearean Play Hamlet as Revenge or Sampling - A Postmodern Criticism

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Introduction

In *The Great Hamlets*, an educational video of interviews with famous actors and directors of *Hamlet*, made in 1985 and released by Films for the Humanities in 1996, the narrator, Trevor Nunn, has the following conversation with Laurence Olivier:

> Nunn: The subtitle Laurence Olivier gave to his film [*Hamlet*] was much debated when the film was released. What had led [you] to calling it "The story of a man who could not make up his mind"?
>
> Olivier: I'd heard it in a film with Gary Cooper, about—I think it was sort of an 18th-century period film, on a ship, and Gary Cooper was reading *Hamlet*, and someone said to him, "What are you reading?"
>
> —He said, "Well, it's a play, called *Hamlet*."
>
> —"What's it about?"
>
> —"It's about a man who can't make up his mind."
>
> And I felt that has a succinctness that ought to be useful. It was too simple for my critics. They thought that was an outrageously simple explanation. But I needed something for my—as you say, talk about the millions who've never dreamt of seeing *Hamlet*; they're going to now—I needed every reasonably helpful sop I could to that fact. (*Great Hamlets*, 1996, vol. 2)

While Olivier claims this filmic allusion is merely a "reasonably helpful sop," Nunn is accurate in recognizing it as a "much debated" assertion. As significant as the assertion itself is the fact that Olivier's most prominent interpretive stance in his film version of *Hamlet*, one that has provoked debate and speculation for over fifty years, should be taken from another film. This

famous tagline has a cinematic provenance acknowledged by Olivier: he is referring directly to an allusion to *Hamlet* from a popular film, confirming, in the process, the significance of the use of allusions and references, or to use postmodern terms, paratexts, or samplings of *Hamlet* in feature films.

Critical Analysis

The film that Olivier refers to in his conversation with Nunn is the 1937 action drama, *Souls at Sea*, directed by Henry Hathaway, starring Gary Cooper and George Raft. In *Gary Cooper, American Hero*, Jeffrey Meyers notes that in this film Cooper "is unusually talkative, intellectual, and literate. He plays chess, tells the story of the Trojan Horse, refers to the career of Sir Walter Raleigh, reads *Hamlet* aloud, and quotes from Romantic poetry" (1998). Clearly, it is not just the postmodern sensibility which recognizes the importance of recycling and repositioning high and low culture.

It is, nevertheless, widely acknowledged that one aspect of postmodernism is its tendency to recycle. Whether it is called "paratext,""bricolage," "sampling," or more old-fashioned terms, like "parody,""allusion," and "literary borrowing," the phenomenon has particularly infected movies of the last two decades (Mallin 1999).We have become used to seeing "based on" in the credits of films like *Clueless*, based on Jane Austen's *Emma*, or *Ten Things I Hate about You*, based on William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, or *O*, based on *Othello*. It should not surprise us, given the film industry's continuing enthusiasm for Shakespeare on film, to find that "sampling," the term I will use to describe this phenomenon, of Shakespeare in film extends far beyond a simple lifting of obvious plot elements.

While Olivier's example reminds us that this is not a new occurrence, it should also remind us that *Hamlet* is a prime source for sampling. Perhaps no other of Shakespeare's plays has been ransacked for lines, scenes, plot devices, or oblique but telling references as often or as completely in films of the last two decades as *Hamlet.* Examples ran the gamut from Tom Stoppard's witty attempt to turn *Hamlet* inside out in his 1967 play and 1990 film of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* to Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas's deliberately witless attempt to turn *Hamlet* into beer-guzzling farce in their 1983 film, *Strange Brew*. *Hamlet* adds high culture archetypal allusions to *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff 1994) and provides a frame for the

mass culture thrills of *Last Action Hero* (McTiernan 1993). It illuminates cultural politics in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (Meyer 1991) and sexual politics in Mick Jackson (director) and Steve Martin's (writer) *L.A. Story* (1991).

In these films, of which Stoppard's is perhaps the fullest example, the text of *Hamlet* becomes a kind of "raw material" that both has meaning in itself and also derives meaning from its rearticulation within a new form. This essay examines the effect of such borrowings from *Hamlet*, keeping in mind that *Hamlet* itself was the first work of art to borrow deliberately from *Hamlet*. The play within the play of act III draws its power to catch the conscience of the king by reiterating what the ghost has told Hamlet in Act I. The story of Old Hamlet's death is literally rearticulated within a new form in the dumb show and the play-within-the-play of *The Murder of Gonzago*. Yet not all filmmakers have been as successful as Shakespeare was in using elements of *Hamlet* to expand the significance of a work. In fact, *Hamlet* can become a problematic literary icon, which disrupts through the contrasts it establishes.

Samplings of *Hamlet* range in complexity and significance, but can be easily categorized. First, short quotations from key scenes are often used in a film to illuminate character or theme. These brief snippets usually refer to the best-known moments in *Hamlet*, as in the "to be or not to be" speech used in Denys Arcand's 1989 film, *Jesus of Montreal*. Somewhat more extensive use of *Hamlet* occurs when archetypal plot elements are borrowed, as in *The Lion King*. *Hamlet* can be used in more complex thematic ways to underline conflict, as in *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*, or to resolve conflict, this time romantic rather than martial, as in *L.A. Story*. Yet paradoxically, the use of *Hamlet* becomes more problematic the more central *Hamlet* becomes to a film.

When Hamlet is presented as the "first action hero" in order to link his heroic qualities to the story of *Last Action Hero*, or when the effect of reading and understanding this great story becomes the major task of the film, as in *Renaissance Man* (Marshall 1994), perhaps too much of a contrast is set up between *Hamlet* and the vehicle that embodies it. Repositioning *Hamlet* inthis kind of frame tends to show the relative tawdriness of the frame. Surprisingly, this is true even in what must be the most elaborate frame story using *Hamlet*, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and*

Guildenstern Are Dead. In a reverse of postmodern expectations, sampling from *Hamlet* can cause the high cultural elements of this acknowledged masterpiece to subvert the low cultural context in which it is placed. Nevertheless, filmmakers have found it tempting to take advantage of the audience's knowledge of *Hamlet* to advance plot, enhance theme, underline character development. In doing so, they allow us to examine both the benefits and limitations to be found in the range of Shakespearean sampling.

The most basic sampling of *Hamlet* might be characterized by its combination of brevity and familiarity. This brief illumination of theme or quick characterization often falls to the most recognizable lines or scenes from *Hamlet. Hamlet* may be used as a kind of shorthand that is easy for the audience to read and interpret. Thus, one of the most common uses of Shakespeare and *Hamlet*, both in movies and in life, is the kind of one-upmanship that reveals character. In the 1995 comedy, *Clueless* (Heckerling), for instance, the heroine, Cher, a seemingly airhead Valley Girl, corrects the attribution of one of the most famous lines from *Hamlet*, "To thine own self be true." Not only do we applaud when the pseudo-intellectual pretensions of her art student rival are countered by a girl who may not know Shakespeare but "know[s] Mel Gibson," but we also cannot help but approve of a heroine who can correct one of the most misattributed lines in all of Shakespeare's canon. Like Emma Woodhouse, her fictional counterpart from Jane Austen's *Emma*, Cher may often be willful and wrongheaded, but she is basically cleverer and smarter than she might wish to admit, as the smile on the face of the young man who represents Mr. Knightly clearly indicates.

In a more serious context but with a similar strategy, the director of *Jesus of Montreal*, uses an extremely well known passage from *Hamlet* to illuminate theme. In the decidedly secular and high-tech world of *Jesus of Montreal*, Shakespeare has become one of the few universally recognizable sacred texts. This point is made briefly and succinctly in the film. With its reenactments on several levels of the life of Christ, *Jesus of Montreal* examines the significance of the sacred in the modern world. In the film one of the actors agrees to appear in the passion play that is central to the plot only if he can quote Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech. By choosing to insert this quotation in the resurrection scene of the passion play, Arcand posits a Jesus who is as unsure as Hamlet of the nature of the hereafter. As a subtext, the passage reminds

us of the problems of secularization that the film highlights, when Shakespeare resonates more deeply than the *Bible* on such a solemn occasion.

These brief uses of *Hamlet* are actually not unlike "totalizing" uses of Hamlet, in which a filmmaker basically says, "Please note how much my film resembles *Hamlet*." *The Lion King* is one such well-known film. The appearance of the ghost of Simba's father, who reiterates "Remember …," like the ghost of Hamlet's father, illuminates the archetypal conflicts between Simba and his evil and usurping uncle, Scar. While it may add depth to the story, causing the audience to associate Simba's plight with Hamlet's struggle, this sprinkling of "*Hamlet*-dust" over the plot is really designed to help at least a portion of the audience recognize some elements of tragedy and redemption that give this animated Disney feature a claim to having a serious theme. Thus, while the kids enjoy the hyenas, at least some of the parents can enjoy a little nod of recognition of *The Lion King*'s literary underpinnings.

In contrast to the "serious" use of *Hamlet* in *The Lion King*, Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas use *Hamlet* to underscore the silliness of their 1983 film, *Strange Brew.* In *Strange Brew,* two young Canadian guzzlers set out to get as much free beer as they can and end up embedded, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in the story of *Hamlet.* The beer company they set out to defraud is called Elsinore Brewery, located in a picturesque castle straight out of Olivier's *Hamlet.* There they discover that the owner of the brewery has recently died and his daughter, Pamela, who should have inherited the business, has been pushed aside by her uncle, Claude. Moreover, Claude has married Pamela's frivolous and careless mother. Our heroes bungle around trying to set things straight in Elsinore.While the totalizing "*Hamlet*-dust" is all over this film, it is hard to call any of it consequential. Rather it is the contrast between the silliness of the *Strange Brew* story and the seriousness of *Hamlet* that provokes the laughter that Moranis and Thomas seek. Both *The Lion King* and *Strange Brew* need *Hamlet* but for exactly the opposite reasons, indicating how flexible and useful these "take-over" samplings—loosely called "adaptations"—of the *Hamlet* plot can be.

Comparison with *Star Trek VI*

Transitory uses of *Hamlet* tend to be pointed and functional. Occasionally, however, films like *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* and *L.A. Story* can more successfully combine disparate elements from *Hamlet.* These films make creative use of prominent themes and language from the play to set up the significant conflicts that they will explore. They are generally more creative and risk-taking in their approach to *Hamlet*. This is true in the verbal and thematic exploits performed on Shakespeare in the early 1990's contribution to the Star Trek film series, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. With a sub-title from Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech and seemingly more quotations from Shakespeare than *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, the film, at first glance, overwhelms us with Shakespearean references that it challenges us to sort out. In fact, the title is one of the best uses of *Hamlet* in the film. In his soliloquy, Hamlet realizes that it is the dread of change and of the unknown, the "undiscovered country" after death that leads us to accept, or at least bear, the many pains and wrongs of our present situations. In *Star Trek VI*, the "undiscovered country" is not death but the possibility of intergalactic peace. In this Cold War parable,we are encouraged to mourn for the lost stability of the "Great Powers" era as we enter the chaotic period surrounding the decline of the Soviet empire. The crew of the starship *Enterprise* accepts the discomforts and threats of enmity far better than they deal with the promise of peace.

The "Shakespeare gimmick" in *Star Trek VI* is that the Klingons claim the Bard as their own cultural property and proceed to quote rings around the bemused officers of the Enterprise. Here at the "end of history," when the Klingons and the Federation are supposedly making peace, ideological opposition takes the form of cultural appropriation. As the Klingons make the "To be or not to be" speech from Hamlet uniquely their own, and as the crew of the Enterprise react with surprised frustration and irritation to their claim that Shakespeare is a Klingon, we in the audience discover that hostilities between these two old enemies have not been abandoned: they have merely shifted ideological ground as cultural politics supplant realpolitik.

It is no surprise to learn that the two major Klingons in the film are played by Shakespearean-trained actors, Christopher Plummer and David Warner. Plummer, in particular, as General Chang, has the presence and potential to be a true Shakespearean villain, like Richard III, magnetic and repulsive simultaneously. When he quotes the "To be or not to be" speech in

Klingon and then says to the officers of the Enterprise, "You should read Shakespeare in the original Klingon," he makes a cultural claim that causes us to smile, then to feel a bit uncomfortable as we realize how proprietary we in the "English-speaking world" are about the works of the Bard. But Nicholas Meyer, the director, never really delivers the potential of his villain and Chang becomes a less significant figure. Instead of squaring off Kirk against Chang, Meyer chooses to pursue some *Hamlet*-like thematic echoes in Kirk's desire for revenge for his son. Detours to a Klingon Siberia further distance us from Chang.

Quickly, Chang becomes a completely flat character, identifiable by his eye patch and his penchant for quoting Shakespeare on all occasions. The audience begins to feel they have hit the "Shakespeare" category on "Jeopardy" as they madly try to link quotations to plays. The quotations from other plays lose the initial impact of those from *Hamlet.* The game gets tiresome to us even before it gets tiresome to the crew of the *Enterprise,* who must endure a barrage of quotations from Chang as he tries to blast them out of the sky. In fact, one of the biggest laughs of the film occurs when Bones, desperately trying to save the day, says of Chang's Bardic efforts, "I'd give real money if he'd shut up!"

While *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* may make few demands on us besides the admonition to "Brush up your Shakespeare," this "cultural literacy" approach to Shakespearean allusion does elaborate on the cultural claim made more briefly in films like *Jesus of Montreal*: Shakespeare is the only author of world reputation who could be used and abused in this way. Everybody in our ever-widening English-speaking world is expected to recognize a little Shakespeare, and *Star Trek VI* makes it easy by assigning almost all the quotations to one character, so we can all play the game. Yet when Bones tires of the incessant barrage of Shakespeare, he is mimicking the feelings of many in the audience who have endured poor performances, tyrannical teachers, and a whole cultural establishment that insists on defending the cause of Shakespearean hegemony while simultaneously commodifying it.

If *Star Trek VI* inadvertently makes claims about Shakespearean cultural politics, Steve Martin's 1992 *L.A. Story* quite deliberately uses Shakespeare to expand cultural politics into sexual politics. One critic has called this film "the most exhaustive compendium of Los Angeles jokes

ever assembled" (Johnson 1991, 47). From the traffic signals that say "Uh, like walk" to the Nazi-like maitre d' at the fashionable restaurant, L'Idiot, Martin finds more than enough to satirize about L.A. In fact, he begins the movie with a rather typical Shakespearean satirical barb.While the camera focuses on an outdoor "park" for stationary bikes, Martin quotes in a voiceover from John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II*: "This other Eden, demi-paradise / . . . This happy breed of men, this little world, this earth, this realm, this . . . L.A." As if in counterpoint, a "cyclist" in the background collapses and an ambulance arrives. One more of this "happy-breed' has been laid low by the amenities of L.A.This opening sequence is an indication that Martin is going to use his Shakespearean samplings against the grain, which is of particular significance for *Hamlet*, which Martin will expertly refocus to fit into the realm of romantic comedy.

Conclusion

Clearly, opening out the play in this way facilitates the transfer from stage to film: the film has more of a sense of the action of *Hamlet* swirling around, ever present at the edges of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's perception. Yet, just as the power and quality of the *Hamlet* story can undermine lesser efforts, it tends to do so here as well. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's fate is determined by the larger play, *Hamlet.* If too much of the larger play is "on screen" it threatens to overwhelm the two characters, moving them from their odd centrality, and once again literally diminishing their roles and our interest in them. In fact, the glimpses we catch of Hamlet in the film make us want more: even in these brief interludes, we sense a fuller and more turbulent inner life than we ever see from Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Visually Stoppard had no choice but to open out *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* for the screen. The additions from *Hamlet*, the inventions that Rosencrantz nearly achieves, the slapstick sequences, the additional spectacle of the Tragedians' expanded dumb show which retells the *Hamlet* story, while they bemuse our bungling heroes, make the film work as a film. Yet the reviews of Stoppard's film were largely negative. Most critics cite the conventionality of his directorial style, with Terrence Rafferty noting in the *New Yorker* that Stoppard " isn't familiar enough with cinematic style to toy with it in the cheeky, abandoned way he toys with theatrical style" (1991, 89)

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