

BEYOND EPIC: KENNETH BRANAGH'S "HAMLET" AND THE META-NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS
OF CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD GENRE

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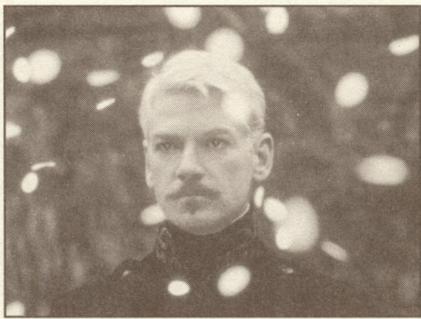
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BEYOND EPIC: KENNETH BRANAGH'S *HAMLET* AND THE META-NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD GENRE



In a filmed Shakespeare career that has spanned over twenty years, Kenneth Branagh has always conceived of his mission as a popularizing one, bringing Shakespeare to those who may not otherwise encounter the work, and making the plays accessible and easily comprehensible. In this way, Branagh's filmic practice is distinct from aggressively postmodern stylists like Baz Luhrmann or Julie Taymor in that his approach to the Shakespearean source text is

motivated by a reliance on genre styles derived from the Classical Hollywood cinema.¹ As Samuel Crowl has observed, "Branagh's route beyond Olivier, as a British-trained Shakespearean who makes films, lies in his infatuation with popular film culture, with what we have come to call 'Hollywood'" ("Flamboyant Realist" 224). Indeed, in evaluating his own directorial approach, Branagh confesses that he is "absolutely unembarrassed" by the frequent reliance on Hollywood devices that defines his style (Crowl, *The Films of Kenneth Branagh* 170).

Throughout his films, Branagh employs conventions of film genre as markers through the terrain of the Shakespearean text, terrain that is otherwise unfamiliar to the majority of his intended popular audience. These generic references and structures serve a meta-narrative function: as elements of the films' narrative discourse, they "frame" the source text, bringing with them a network of intertextual codes that render the source easily assimilable, and thus help to direct audience response. The generic appeal in Branagh's films is one that has seemed to grow progressively, becoming increasingly critical to his Shakespearean adaptation as his career has evolved. For instance, Branagh's debut film, *Henry V*, is the least classically generic of all his films, relying primarily on intertextual and generic references to more contemporary styles, like the action genre and the Vietnam War film. *Much Ado About Nothing* closely accords to the norms of the screwball comedy, a generic correspondence derived primarily from the Shakespearean text. *Love's Labour's Lost* presents a pinnacle in Branagh's conceptual and generic development, wholly subordinating the logic and authority of the Shakespearean source text to the demands of the classical Hollywood musical. Branagh's films, then, are critically intertextual in that the norms of generic production *mediate* the Shakespearean text; in this way, his Shakespeare films challenge traditional notions of adaptation in that they appeal to multiple (not solely textual) forms of authority.

In the context of Branagh's entire Shakespearean canon, *Hamlet* is significant for a densely layered approach to genre that moves his storytelling beyond stage tragedy:

the film employs three different, yet intricately interconnected, genres to meta-narrate the Shakespearean text—all genres characterized, significantly, by a sense of excess. Here, Branagh's generic approach is expansive, deploying devices drawn from the historical epic as a frame; further, the film incorporates domestic melodrama at its heart, and a horror-show encounter at its core. In some instances, Branagh uses generic tropes to reveal textual traits, thereby allowing film style to reinforce the already horrific and melodramatic qualities of the Shakespearean text; however, in his importation of the historical epic, he imposes a generic frame absent from the text. This essay examines the multiple generic modes that meta-narrate Branagh's film, and maps the ways in which *Hamlet* reveals the theoretical and critical constructs that govern each genre style.

Hamlet's Epic Frame²

While critics of the Classical Hollywood epic film have rarely agreed on an absolute definition of the genre, they have nonetheless enumerated a distinct set of epic traits, chief among which is the relationship of the Hollywood epic to history.³ Indeed, in much film criticism, "epic" and "historical epic" are synonymous, indicating that one is inconceivable without the other. Derek Elley claims that the revisioning and reinterpretation of history is the central project of the epic genre:

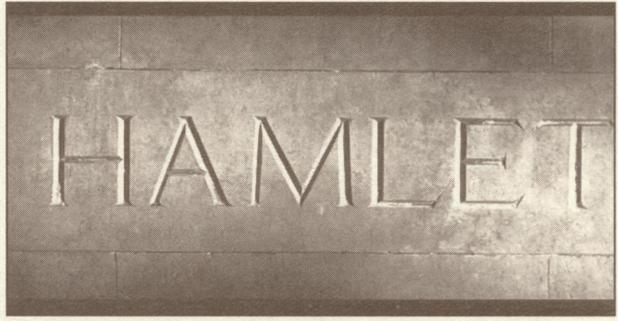
[T]he epic form transfigures the accomplishments of the past into an inspirational entertainment for the present, trading on received ideas of a continuing national or cultural consciousness. Myth—the projection of a people's beliefs on a fictional past—allows scope for allegory based on moral, religious or political qualities pertinent to the audience. (13)

Of course, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not, strictly speaking, historical; although Shakespeare took as his source the story of Amleth as recorded in Saxo's twelfth-century *Danish History*, this source provided him with only the rough outline of his main plot. Outside of this rough outline, much of the play is likely Shakespeare's own, ahistorical invention (while he may have been influenced by an earlier stage version, now called the *Ur-Hamlet*, this play—if it ever existed—has been lost, and we might never know the extent of Shakespeare's potential indebtedness). To correct this lack of specific reference to recognizable and shared history in his source text, Branagh frames his story in such a way as to make it *seem* historical: Old King Hamlet and Fortinbras tell a story that is not found in Shakespeare, the story of the death of a repressive regime and the fall of an empire. While the invasion that marks the film's conclusion, that of Fortinbras into the castle of Elsinore and the throne of Denmark, is reminiscent of the fall of Tsarist Russia and the storming of the Winter Palace (indeed, Branagh's screenplay refers to Elsinore as the Winter Palace), another element of the film's ending, the destruction of Old Hamlet's statue, calls to mind more recent examples of toppling dictatorships.

The epic genre, as commentators note, is a film genre characterized by excess, and spectacle is its stock-in-trade. In a way that is perhaps singular to this genre, however,

the epic's excess manifests itself not only in its expansive stories and expensive style, but also in its mode of presentation: the epic genre generally deploys a bloated running time and as large a film gauge and image size as contemporary technology can sustain. Vivian Sobchack asserts that "an excess of temporality finds its form in, or 'equals,' *extended duration*: films far longer than the Hollywood norm. Correlatively, an excess of space finds its form in, or 'equals,' *expanded space*: Cinerama, Cinemascope, 70mm" (295; original emphasis). Thus, Branagh's *Hamlet* incorporates the physical characteristics of the epic genre in its extreme running time of 242 minutes (including an intermission, as a nod to theatrical practice) and its 70mm gauge. As Sobchack and others discuss, however, the classical film epic contains many other marks of excess, from its *mise-en-scène* to its promotional materials, and Branagh's *Hamlet* employs them all.

Indeed, from its very first frames, *Hamlet* escorts the viewer into epic territory. Sobchack writes that the epic is characterized by "portentous calligraphy introducing us to History writ in gilt and with a capital H" (281). "Portentous calligraphy" opens Branagh's film, yet its "capital H" stands not for History, but for Hamlet: the name of the old king, which the viewer learns, as the camera pans across Elsinore's exterior, is inscribed on his statue. This shot serves as the film's title credit. There is, however, no gilt here, on the castle's grounds; the film's "gilt" is reserved for Claudius and his court, and there is plenty of it to be found inside the castle of Elsinore. Thus, *Hamlet*'s opening shot etches in stone the epic connections of Branagh's film.



Inside its diegesis, *Hamlet* replicates, in every way, the excess valorized by the classical Hollywood epic of earlier generations. While much of the humor of Branagh's "other" *Hamlet* film, *In the Bleak Midwinter*, derives from the small size of its cast, with the doubling, tripling, and quadrupling of the cast members into the play's roles a recurring motif, *Hamlet* takes the opposite tack, providing one actor for every speaking role, and a host of "decorative" cast members as extras to fill the parts of nurses, attendants, soldiers, and courtiers. It is not merely the vast number of extras filling Branagh's *mise-en-scène* that calls attention to his massive cast, however; more significant for this film is the number of bona-fide stars that fill even the smallest speaking roles in the film. Publicity for the film touts the appearance of ten major-name actors, regardless of the size of the part they play: among others, this film sports star turns by Jack Lemmon, Gerard Depardieu, Robin Williams, Julie Christie (whom Branagh brought out of retirement), Judi Dench, Kate Winslett, Derek Jacobi, Charlton Heston, and John Gielgud in his final Shakespearean screen appearance. Further, publicity for the film even privileges these "name" actors over those with larger roles. Thus, the press images herald the appearances of Gerard

Depardieu (who, as Reynaldo, has only a handful of lines in one brief scene) and Robin Williams (who only attended one day of principal shooting for his minute role as Osric) over that of Richard Briers, for instance, whose Polonius is central to the plot of the play, but whose name is not listed with the principal cast.

The epic spectacle, the sense of sumptuous extravagance that characterizes the genre, is nowhere more evident than in Branagh's setting. While the interior scenes for the film were shot on lavish soundstages at London's Shepperton Studios (including what was reported at the time to be the largest single set in England), the film's exterior scenes were shot on location at England's Blenheim Palace—Winston Churchill's childhood home. This immense, elegant manor provides a historical seal-of-approval to the visual texture of Branagh's film, while simultaneously enriching it with its immensity and gravitas. Branagh's interior sets are similarly expansive, impressive, and excessive, constructed to be

photographed in the sprawling 70mm format. The massive scale of the sets is matched by a thorough attention to décor and detail, with marble busts, gilded porticoes, and mirrored halls that would seem equally at home in Versailles as in Branagh's fictive Elsinore. In its lushness,



Branagh's pseudo-Edwardian *mise-en-scène* matches his dictum that there should be “[n]o glam spared on this film” (Jackson 192). Much of Branagh's leisurely visual style in *Hamlet* is, in fact, designed to complement his *mise-en-scène*, with long takes, circular camera movement, tracking shots, and widescreen format allowing the viewer to linger over the details of the setting. Our first view of the mirrored stateroom, the film's principal interior, seems engineered to show the film's visual excess to its best effect: as Claudius speaks to the Danish court, Branagh frames the new King and Queen primarily from behind, in a long shot that exaggerates the epic scale of the set's vastness, décor, and seating capacity.

Branagh's epic treatment, however, extends beyond his *mise-en-scène*, and is replicated in his direction of one of the film's central scenes. Branagh's visual treatment of the soliloquy that precedes the intermission (“How all occasions,” imported by Branagh from the second quarto) presents a traditional iconic image in the epic, that of the lone hero dwarfed by and isolated within his landscape. Branagh here strengthens this moment's connections to his historical frame, as Fortinbras's troops fill the shot's background. Further, Branagh's treatment and direction of this scene has been linked to another prominent historical epic: “In terms of its tone, visualization, and emotional force, the soliloquy as located by Branagh has been appropriately compared to Scarlett O'Hara's cry, ‘As God is my witness, I'll never go hungry again’” (Keyishian 80).

As Sobchack asserts, the epic not only represents historical events, but it also tends to imbue itself with a sense of “historical eventfulness”; that is, the epic proper

does not merely represent history, it is itself history—the “event film” (287). As she states, “the genre *formally repeats* the surge, splendor, and extravagance, the human labor and capital cost entailed by its narrative’s *historical context* in both its *production process* and its *modes of representation*” (287; original emphasis). Thus, in examining an epic’s “language” about itself, we will find references to its own excess, expansiveness, and significance. Sobchack demonstrates this through a reading of the press book that accompanied *How the West Was Won* (Ford, 1962); she describes the rhetorical excess that characterizes the glowing opening statements made by the presidents of MGM and Cinerama, as well as the “making of” story of the film and the panoramic photo plates that illustrate the text. Above all, Sobchack focuses on the ways in which this press book touts the excesses of the film’s production process:

Production notes give us endless numbers: how many buffalo, horses, extras, pairs of shoes, yards of homespun ordered from “ancient looms in India”; actual American Indian tribes participating; pounds of hay, grain, food, and crew—and how arduous all this gathering and deploying was and how long it took. (289)

Branagh’s published screenplay for *Hamlet* (containing an introduction by Branagh and a film diary by Russell Jackson) proves a fascinating corollary to Sobchack’s discussion, for these documents attest to the scale and excess of *Hamlet* and its production process, emphasizing the “epic” story behind the film as well as its own sense of being an important historical effort.⁴

While the book’s jacket claims that Branagh’s *Hamlet* is destined to become “a landmark in film history,” Branagh’s introduction to the script chronicles his own twenty-year obsession with the play and several of his experiences playing the part, a lengthy involvement that is in itself excessive in its scale. Branagh has been outspoken in his belief that the role of Hamlet is not for every actor:

There’s a finite line [in the age of the actor], I reckon about thirty-five. It doesn’t matter what you look like—whether it’s twenty or forty—but there is something about his dilemma, and the urgency of it, that if you are beyond thirty-five just doesn’t work. You want to give the actor a smack. (Crowl, “Hamlet Most Royal” 6)

Therefore, Branagh’s Hamlet is something of an “event role” for him, a happy coincidence of fulfilling his self-set age requirement, while still possessing “the courage to bring a slightly older and more complex self to the role” (Branagh xiii). Thus, finally in his career possessing the requisite blend of innocence and experience, Branagh stops just short of claiming that destiny brought the film opportunity to him at the perfect time: for Branagh, “the readiness is all.” The experience, then, of filming this play is bounded by an excessive obsession with the play and the part, and reveals a sense of historical eventfulness (happy coincidence) in its origin.

Jackson’s film diary, a sort of “making of” chronicling the film’s principal shooting phase, replicates the excess and the sense of historical eventfulness that characterizes the book’s introduction, lodging the experience of the film further into Sobchack’s

classification of the epic as history experienced. At points, Jackson takes great pains to demystify both the process of making the film and the legends that appear within it; at others, however, he replicates the epic praxis. For instance, Jackson delights in relating the fact that prior to each take, Jack Lemmon mutters “magic time” to himself, as if it were his lucky charm (186), and that the camera crew solves the problem of “addressing a screen legend” by calling Charlton Heston “Chuck” (184). These humanizing details stand in stark contrast to another episode that Jackson relates in the diary, an episode that attests to the eminence of the film’s star and director, and by extension the film itself, in telling ways. As he notes, Derek Jacobi, the man whom Branagh credits with inspiring his interest with Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, and indeed the acting profession in general, presented Branagh with a gift on his last day with the unit:

[Derek] holds up a small, red-bound copy of the play, that successive actors have passed on to each other with the condition that the recipient should give it in turn to the finest Hamlet of the next generation. It has come from Forbes Robertson, a great Hamlet at the turn of the century, to Derek, via Henry Ainley, Michael Redgrave, Peter O’Toole and others—now he gives it to Ken. (206)

Thus, Branagh’s film *Hamlet* replicates many of the concerns, in style, in presentation, and in promotion, that characterize the historical epic. In keeping with his estimation of the cultural gravitas of what is perhaps Shakespeare’s most famous play and, for Branagh, a “genuine force of nature,” Branagh provides *Hamlet* with an epic frame that is distinguished by its spectacular excess. Within this sprawling framework, however, Branagh explores other generic styles; closely linked in tone to the epic presentation of the film at large is Branagh’s portrayal of Hamlet’s encounter with his father’s ghost—an encounter that seeks to reach the expansive tone common to the rest of the film through its evocation of horror film tropes.

Horror and the Paternal Encounter

Hamlet’s meeting with his father’s ghost is the inciting incident of Shakespeare’s play, and a director’s treatment of the scene sets, in performance, the tone and tenor of the entire production. Indeed, this early scene is critical to the fabric of the overall interpretation of the play. In *Hamlet*, Branagh reinforces the interpretive weight of the scene by rendering it in a visual language that is simply unparalleled, stylistically speaking, by anything in his directorial arsenal. Significantly for Branagh’s generic approach, this ghost is no figment of Hamlet’s imagination, like Macbeth’s imaginary dagger; it is authentic, and Branagh’s diegesis even provides a point of origin for the ghost, as the film’s opening sequence depicts old Hamlet’s statue coming to life.

The encounter with the ghost of Old Hamlet is a surprisingly discontinuous segment, not merely within the context of this film’s long circular takes and tracking shots, but also in terms of Branagh’s usual representative practices, which customarily tend toward a clear continuity style. The discontinuous nature of the scene is represented by the fast-paced, rhythmic montage sequence that accompanies Hamlet’s

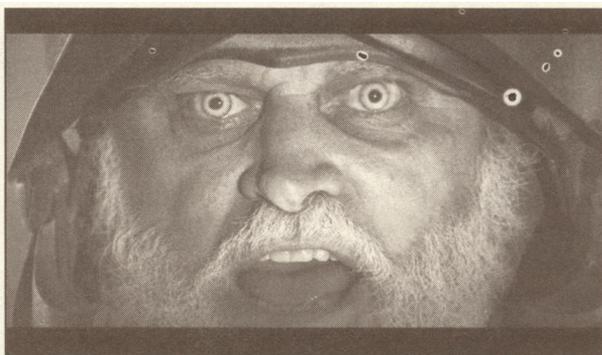
“angels and ministers of grace” monologue. Here, Hamlet searches frantically for the ghost in order to speak with it; shots of Hamlet racing through the forest are intercut with momentary flashes of quaking trees, splitting earth, the ghost itself, and Hamlet’s subjective recollections of his father lying in state—all underscored by a fast-paced staccato theme. These grandiose effects, coupled with the striking stylistic divergence from the slower visual pace and long-take aesthetic that characterizes the rest of the film, mark the encounter with the ghost as a moment out of time, as otherworldly, while it simultaneously serves to disorient the viewer.

The discontinuous style of the scene persists after Hamlet and the ghost finally meet. Branagh renders the conversation between Hamlet *père et fils* in a style that complicates the viewer’s reading of screen space; no establishing shot clarifies the relative positions of the two characters to one another—in fact, they never share the frame. Branagh does, however, connect the characters in a way that is extraordinarily uncharacteristic of him, through graphic matching. As the ghost utters, for the first time, the word “murder,” Branagh cuts to an extreme close-up of the ghost’s mouth. This shot is followed by a brief, startling shock cut to a bubbling, bleeding ear—presumably Old Hamlet’s after having received the poison. This pair of shots is then repeated, twice, in rapid succession: once, the mouth is Hamlet’s as he speaks the word “murder,” and the final instance is the ghost’s, as he repeats the word in confirmation. Similar graphic matching occurs later in the scene, as Branagh closes in tightly on the eyes of each Hamlet as the ghost urges his son not to torment Gertrude. In the rhythmically edited extreme close-ups of each character’s eyes, Branagh perhaps lapses into self-parody, as the discontinuous style of the scene as a whole fails to provide consistent eyeline matches. Thus, the Ghost’s horrific narration is visually reinforced in this scene via Branagh’s replication of the decenteredness, indeterminacy, and confusion that characterizes the visual style of the horror film.

Consistent with his appeal to genre styles in their classical form, this segment of Branagh’s film employs narrative devices common to the classical horror genre as evidenced by such films as the Universal horror cycles of the 1930s. Unlike contemporary horror films, in which the horrific element is part of everyday life, classic horror “perpetuated a notion of the horrific as foreign and otherworldly” (Sanjek 115). In discussing classic horror films like *Vampyr* (Dreyer, 1932), *The Mummy* (Freund, 1932), and *The Wolf Man* (Waggner, 1941), Bruce Kawin asserts that the horrific figure in classic horror actually demands its own peculiar landscape. The horror protagonist’s encounter with the horrific puts him “in touch with a parallel world (‘the other side,’ in Western terminology)” (Kawin 685). This parallel world, the locale for the encounter with the horrific, may be a literal or a metaphoric one (that is, a physical or a psychic landscape): “‘The other side’ may be a parallel spirit world or it may be the Underworld, the Land of the Dead; in horror films these are usually comparable” (Kawin 685).

In Branagh’s film, this otherworldly quality is created not only by the way the *mise-en-scène* treats the ghost, with icy blue eyes and a raspy, highly processed voice, but also in the persistent cinematographic appeal to the Ghost’s distance from Hamlet. Hamlet’s run into the forest (not something dictated by its source text),

then, is an event that removes him not merely physically from the everyday world of the castle, but emotionally as well. Branagh depicts in this scene a Hamlet who seeks out the foreign by journeying to the “Land of the Dead” that Kawin describes. Branagh’s diegesis marks this space as different from the “everyday” world



primarily through visual effects: the smoldering, cracking ground and shaking trees that characterize the encounter’s landscape.

Most of these horror tropes, however, are meant primarily for the viewer. For the character of Hamlet himself, the most “horrific” effects of this sequence come, not from the literal depiction of the ghost, but rather through the content of the flashback sequences that color the ghost’s narration. Throughout the film, Branagh incorporates flashback sequences in significant ways, primarily to highlight existing relationships among the characters; this device is used, for instance, to clarify the seriousness of Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship (they have slept together) as well as to establish, from very early in the film, the impending threat posed by Fortinbras. The use of flashback, however, is most provocative in the Ghost scenes. The flashbacks reveal an earlier time at Elsinore, before the death of old Hamlet, and their content depicts a clear sense of intimacy between Gertrude and Claudius: they embrace casually, he helps her to play a game. For the younger Hamlet, then, the truly “horrific” effect of these flashbacks is the suggestion that the romantic relationship between Gertrude and Claudius may predate the death of his father—a suggestion bolstered by the sequence’s shot of a corset being unlaced.⁵

Linda Williams uses the term “body genres” to describe three cinematic styles characterized by excess in the physical spectacle that accompanies them. The horror film, the melodrama, and the pornographic film are all, she argues, “excessive spectacles” that focus “directly on the gross display of the human body” (702), and on the physical effects of emotional excess (blood and gore, tears, orgasm). For example, the frequent reaction shots in this scene to Branagh as young Hamlet demonstrate a sense of this excess in the disgust and terror apparent on the actor’s face. Branagh’s diegesis focuses insistently on Hamlet’s *physical* reactions to the appearance of, as well as the story told by, the ghost. However, Williams’s discussion can also help us to understand the excessive pathos underlying *Hamlet*’s third major generic appeal: domestic melodrama.

Melodrama and the Feminine Encounter

As the domestic melodrama is typically theorized as a feminine genre, its appearance in this film may, on the surface, seem to be at odds with the more masculine aesthetic embodied by the film’s epic and horror leanings. Branagh, however, reserves the

domestic melodrama style primarily to explore Hamlet's relationships with Gertrude and Ophelia, the play's central women. The legendary conflict of Hamlet, that of his mother's "o'er-hasty" marriage to her late husband's brother, and the "frailty" that she comes to represent for Hamlet, reveals the centrality of the woman to the problems of the play. In his treatment of the family relationships at the heart of the play, Branagh seems to take the play's Nordic setting as an instructive starting point, for *Hamlet's* families reveal less epic bluster than they do the shaping influences of dramatists like Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov.

The classical melodrama, according to Thomas Schatz, possesses its own signature characteristics of story and style, characteristics to which Branagh's depiction of familial and romantic relationships closely adheres. Schatz similarly asserts that the genre possesses singular visual traits, traits that are replicated in Branagh's film:

The narrative strategies [of the melodrama] were calculated to enhance the victims' virtuous suffering: long camera takes, ponderous narrative pacing, frequent close-ups of the anxious heroine (usually with eyes cast heavenward), somber musical accompaniment, and so on. (222)

The slow pace of Branagh's full-text narrative, as well as the long takes in which he renders Hamlet's encounters with Ophelia and Gertrude, accord with the visual style that Schatz claims is "calculated to enhance the victims' virtuous suffering" (222). Further, *Hamlet*, both in its source text and in Branagh's adaptation, possesses a "narrative formula" that presents instructive parallels with the classical film melodrama in "its interrelated family of characters, its repressive small-town milieu, and its preoccupation with [...] psychosexual mores" (Schatz 224). Certainly, the central characters of the play—the family units of Hamlet and Polonius—are interrelated: they are The State. This interconnectedness is reinforced by Hamlet's sometime relationship with Ophelia, a relationship deepened, as we have seen, through flashback. And while Denmark may not be a "small town," strictly speaking, it is, as Hamlet says, a prison, and Branagh's adaptation reinforces the insularity of the court and castle; hence, the film's narrative focus on mirrors, hidden doors, secret passageways, and invisible vantage points. Further, unlike Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), which dramatizes the Prince's ship voyage, Branagh's adaptation generally refuses to leave the visual space of Elsinore and its immediate grounds.⁶ Finally, psychosexual mores are, legendarily, at the very center of the play, in Gertrude's unseemly marriage to her brother-in-law, as well as in Polonius and Laertes's inordinate concern with Ophelia's "maiden presence." Branagh's adaptation attends to the psychosexual resonances of the text, primarily in his presentation of Hamlet's intimate relationship with Ophelia and the sexual dimension of her madness, as well as in the several depictions of Claudius and Gertrude's insatiable appetites for one another (for instance, the arrival of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seems literally to interrupt the royal couple's morning romp in the sack).

As Kathleen Rowe claims in "Comedy, Melodrama and Gender," the domestic melodrama is, along with comedy, one of the few genres "gendered female," and one of

the primary film styles in which women may see their own experiences reflected (40). The central spectacle of the melodrama, she claims, is that of the suffering woman; melodramas “position the spectator as powerless to avert the catastrophes they enact, and in fact produce their tears out of that powerlessness” (41). Williams defines the classical melodrama as a genre “addressed to women in their traditional status under patriarchy—as wives, others, abandoned lovers, or in their traditional status as bodily hysteria or excess, as in the frequent case of the woman ‘afflicted’ with a deadly or debilitating disease” (703). Thus, in appealing to the domestic style, Branagh may be mediating the relatively shallow and often punishing portraits of women depicted in the Shakespearean original. While Rowe’s comic mode may be liberating for the female spectator, the domestic melodrama’s focus is on suffering, its emblem the woman’s tears (41). Of course, the most suffering, the most punished, woman within the story of *Hamlet* is Ophelia, and Branagh’s direction makes it abundantly clear how much she is made to suffer at the hands of the Danish court and its prince—even if she is, as Gulsen Sayin Teker has persuasively argued in “Empowered by Madness: Ophelia in the Films of Kozintsev, Zeffirelli, and Branagh,” the strongest of recent screen Ophelias. Indeed, Branagh’s treatment of Ophelia is commensurate with Williams and Rowe’s assessment of the gendered nature of the genre: her powerlessness, her abandonment, her “hysterical” madness—all are reinforced by Branagh’s genre style, far beyond the bounds originally mapped by Shakespeare.

Branagh treats the “nunnery” scene with Ophelia as a breakup scene *par excellence*. When Hamlet and Ophelia first meet, he approaches her with a tenderness to be expected from a man who has been too long away from his lover; he brightens when he sees her, as if he is glad to be distracted from the angsty nihilism that preoccupies him during the preceding speech (“To be or not to be”), and even gives her a gentle kiss. As Ophelia begins to spurn Hamlet (uncomfortably; Winslett’s Ophelia is always conscious of her auditors, and even steals glances toward their location), he treats her more harshly. Using the widescreen format to its best advantage in this scene, Branagh accentuates the metaphorical distance between the characters by placing them at the extremes of the frame, a long hallway and a door in the distance serving as visual obstacles between them. After Hamlet confirms that he is being

surveilled, and after Ophelia lies to him about the whereabouts of Polonius, he begins to treat her violently, and it is here that the spectacle of her suffering begins. Hamlet drags her roughly through the mirrored stateroom, finally shoving Ophelia’s tearstained face against the two-way mirror from which Claudius and Polonius



watch them. After Hamlet leaves Ophelia crumpled and crying, framed in a doorway, Branagh renders her teary soliloquy in long take, accentuating her misery.

For Ophelia, Branagh further incorporates a cinematic “punishment” that is strictly of his own devising. Taking her madness as his starting point, and his Edwardian setting for a frame, Branagh’s film includes some scenes of the “treatment” Ophelia receives: cold-water dousings. In fact, these dousings open up persuasive interpretive possibilities for the narrative as a whole, as well as for Ophelia’s role in the melodrama. The fact that Ophelia receives these dousings, a primitive attempt to “shock” her into sanity, dovetails with her eventual death by drowning. Further, unlike earlier cinematic interpreters, Branagh refuses to *show* us the spectacle of Ophelia’s drowning but rather has Gertrude narrate it, leaving the viewer in considerable doubt as to the truth of Gertrude’s story. A strong impression is created that Ophelia may indeed be another helpless victim of the state apparatus of Denmark, and that Gertrude’s speech may just be an “official metonymy” invented to cover up the fact that her treatment was far worse than her “disease” (Coursen 230). Therefore, this interpretive possibility both explains Ophelia’s death and adds extra resonance to the Church’s decision to bury her in consecrated ground (a man who kills his brother for the throne is surely not above coercing the church into helping him conceal an accidental murder).

Ultimately, Branagh’s “epic melodrama” version of *Hamlet* was really something of a failed experiment. Nominated for four Oscars (set decoration, costume design, score, and adapted screenplay), it won none, and failed even to recoup its production costs. Clearly, Branagh’s extended appeal to popular genres had failed to find a popular audience. *Hamlet* is, however, a transitional point in Branagh’s corpus, an evolutionary way-point demonstrating an ever-increasing sophistication in generic appeal. In this film, we see Branagh becoming steadily more skilled at using genre for thematic purposes, in that *Hamlet*’s generic qualities are determined largely by the relationships each genre depicts. With an expanded (and expansive) appeal to classical genre styles like epic and melodrama, Branagh’s debt to classical cinema begins to grow; Branagh meta-narrates one of Shakespeare’s most challenging stories with familiar filmic languages, rendering *Hamlet* more easily assimilable by a contemporary audience.

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Notes

¹ Throughout this essay, my use of the terms “classical” and “Hollywood” is influenced by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s description of the dominant mode of narrative film production; their label “Classical Hollywood cinema” is a shorthand for discussing a network of story and style traits—genre included—with which the American film industry is identified. It is classical “because of its lengthy, stable, and influential history”; it is Hollywood “because the mode assumed its definitive state in American studio films” (108). As Bordwell and Thompson are quick to point out, however, this mode of production is not temporally or geographically bound; it is, rather, employable by any country at any time (108).

² The label “epic” has been applied with some frequency to Branagh’s film. For instance, the film is most commonly compared to David Lean’s style of historical epic, as modeled by *Dr. Zhivago* (1965); this connection is “intensified by the casting of Julie Christie, Zhivago’s Lara, as Gertrude” (Guntner 123). Branagh’s visual debt to David Lean is further represented by the fact that Alex Thompson, Branagh’s cinematographer, worked for David Lean, as a focus-puller on his 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia* (Crowl, “Flamboyant” 224). Harry Keyishian’s instructive article “Shakespeare and Movie Genre: The Case of *Hamlet*” examines three versions of the film in an attempt to discover the generic forebears of each; Keyishian provides a valuable analysis of the epic traits and tendencies of Branagh’s version.

³ Elley, Sobchack, and Durnat all include discussions of the “definition problem” as regards the epic film.

⁴ A casual audience member is less likely, of course, to be aware of the stories told in this volume, since the screenplay/diary must be actively sought out, not passively absorbed, as is possible with marketing and publicity materials.

⁵ This issue is broached in other ways during the course of the film. For instance, late in the film, a flashback sequence shows Hamlet’s childhood memory of a pleasant family dinner, where the royal family is entertained by Yorick. In this scene, Gertrude and Claudius are linked graphically by their similarly colored costumes, a dull taupe that contrasts the vibrant red worn by the King, and the Prince’s white. The most startling “evidence,” however, of a lengthy relationship between Gertrude and Claudius is the simple fact that, in this film, Hamlet bears a striking resemblance to “Uncle” Claudius, and very little to his namesake.

⁶ Branagh’s diegesis presents two possible counterexamples to this assertion. The first instance, Voltmand’s report from his Norway embassy, includes several flashback images of the events that he narrates. However, given that his narration continues unbroken as he delivers his report to the King, even these visual embellishments seem to be anchored in the world of Elsinore. The second counterexample, the “How all occasions” soliloquy, presents a more complex problem. While it is true that the background of this scene provides an expansive view of the world beyond Elsinore, it is unclear that this constitutes a radical departure from the film’s insular diegesis: lacking a clear establishing shot, we as viewers simply cannot quantify how far the scene has moved from the castle at this point. Further, Branagh’s Hamlet is static and stable throughout the scene, while the camera progressively recedes from him—presumably, if screen direction can be trusted, back to Elsinore.

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