

one as *Hamlet*—ever exhaust the possibilities for interpretive teaching, and critical and scholarly discourse? Peering ever more closely into the monumental plays themselves (as one of my own teachers has liked to put it) gives the impression that they were founded upon shifting sands. Stephen Greenblatt writes that

We want to believe, as we read the text, “This is the play as Shakespeare himself wanted it read,” but there is no license for such a reassuring sentiment. To be “not of an age, but for all time” means in Shakespeare’s case not that the plays have achieved a static perfection, but that they are creatively, inexhaustibly unfinished.

(The Norton Shakespeare, p. 67, 1997)

Certainly the next essays participates in that creatively frustrated sense of closure. For they look at *Hamlet the Movie* extending yet further in the direction of delayed closure the unsettled and disturbing complexity of Shakespeare’s infinite play.



**“The Abstract and Brief  
Chronicles of the Time”**  
*A Study of Four Film Adaptations  
of Hamlet*

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Perhaps following Shakespeare’s lead as a successful adaptor, countless directors have taken his plays and attempted to imprint them with their own interpretations. Amongst the texts in Shakespeare’s canon, *Hamlet* has become a favored cinematic vehicle. In his book, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan

Kott notes that, "Many generations have seen their own reflections in this play. The genius of *Hamlet* consists, perhaps, in the fact that the play can serve as a mirror." And so, considering that, as Kott says, "One can perform only one of several *Hamlets* potentially existing in this arch-play," each adaptor begins the task of making the play his or her own, toying with setting and costuming while dealing with the problems of acquainting contemporary audiences with the nuances of Elizabethan language and tackling what is probably the biggest stumbling block in adapting *Hamlet* for the screen: its length. Many scholars and critics bristle at the mere thought of Shakespeare under the knife, while film directors justify their revisions as a necessity in their quest to bring Shakespeare alive for the general viewing audience. The idea of adapting a work in an effort to please the public has produced a distinct dividing line, and as Ace Pilkington states, "if the war between scholars and directors seems to be over, the peace terms have not yet been agreed, and there is a large no-man's-land into which film-makers wander at their peril. The principal combatants might perhaps be called the purists and the popularizers." Despite the inherent difficulties, and the objections of the purists, directors have prolifically adapted Shakespeare for the screen; *Hamlet* alone exists on film in approximately fifty direct adaptations and nearly one hundred others that refer to the play in some way. If it is true that *Hamlet* acts as a mirror reflecting the times and the interpretive instincts of its director, then Laurence Olivier, Tony Richardson, Franco Zeffirelli, and Kenneth Branagh are surely among the most successful popularizers to transition the play from text to screen. Working in three different decades of the 20th-century, all four directors sought to bring *Hamlet* to a contemporary audience, and in doing so have provided a chronicle of their time while finding a way to personalize the play to suit their own motivations.

If early 20th-century film makers had any concerns about the viability of Shakespearean adaptations, certainly Laurence Olivier's 1948 version of *Hamlet* laid their fears to rest by win-

ning four Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Actor. At 155 minutes, Olivier's adaptation was the lengthiest until Kenneth Branagh's version in 1996. Although Olivier cut approximately 50% of Shakespeare's text, this was the first relatively full commercial film adaptation of the play and is currently considered the first important cinematic *Hamlet* of the 20th-century.

The early 1900's saw an increase in cultural awareness of psychoanalysis, and it is not surprising that in conceptualizing the character, Hamlet, Olivier drew upon his interest in the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and Ernest Jones. Freud had studied *Hamlet*, and the play became the impetus for his theory of the Oedipus complex. In 1910, Jones expanded on Freud's theory and gave his own interpretation of the play with regard to the Oedipal issue. By 1937 Olivier was involved in a production of *Hamlet* for the Old Vic, and in preparation he visited Jones. The meeting proved fateful, as it shaped the way Olivier adapted the character, highly influencing the production of his film eleven years later.

Laurence Olivier celebrated his fortieth birthday during the filming of *Hamlet*, but chose to cast twenty-seven-year-old Eileen Herlie as his mother, Gertrude. Olivier's reasoning behind the choice was that a younger woman would help the audience to understand Hamlet's attraction to his mother. Indeed, Olivier's focus on Gertrude and her sexuality is evident from the film's opening as the camera pans along a winding staircase, pausing to frame a shot of the queen's bed. The physical contact between Herlie and Olivier seems to push the envelope as far as the times will bear, as "mother" and "son" exchange the lingering kisses that Franco Zeffirelli's adaptation will take even further by the end of the century.

In keeping with Olivier's Freudian take on Hamlet, the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy must be discussed, as it is the ultimate showcase for his psychological study. Olivier begins the film with a voice-over that states "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." From that very moment it

is the “mind” in question that Olivier seeks to give us access to, and he does it most clearly with this most famous of soliloquies. Leaving Ophelia sobbing on the staircase, Olivier climbs higher and higher eventually finding himself outdoors at the highest point of Elsinore Castle. As he stands, gazing at a stormy and raging sea that appears to mirror the intensity of his emotions, the camera zooms in upon the back of his head. The shot becomes tighter and tighter until it goes momentarily dark, as if we have entered Hamlet’s mind. Next, the sea is visible again, and we realize that we are now seeing the world from inside Hamlet’s head. What follows is a voice-over of the beginning of the soliloquy, as we, the viewer, are privy to Hamlet’s innermost thoughts. By allowing us to “enter” Hamlet’s mind, Olivier accentuates his psychoanalytic delivery of the play. The very nature of a soliloquy allows a glimpse into the mind of a character, but Olivier’s use (here and with other soliloquies) intensifies the view.

Beyond the Freudian reading of Olivier’s interpretation there are biographical accounts that shed light not only on Olivier’s determination to focus the film on the issues between mother and son, but also on his choice of physical setting. In his book, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, Peter Donaldson provides an insight into the Olivier household during Laurence’s formative years:

Olivier was the third and youngest child, and by all accounts he became the focus of parental quarrels. His mother was devoted to him and his father was hostile, unpredictable, and punitive . . . Agnes Olivier had a small stage built for Larry at home when he was five, and he performed for the family enjoying a privileged status that must have exacerbated whatever jealousy the father actually felt for his son.

This pattern of attachment for the mother while usurping the position of the dominant male figure in the household became the tone of the Olivier family dynamic. The resulting distance in his relationship with his father due to the closeness

of his relationship with his mother echoes the problem in *Hamlet* and would seem to provide a firm connection between Olivier and the title character.

Another biographical element that seems overt in the text of the film involves a traumatic incident that took place when Olivier was only nine-years-old. While attending an all boys' school, Olivier was nearly raped on a large staircase by an older boy who was a fellow student. One thing that becomes immediately apparent in the setting of Olivier's *Hamlet* is that the film is filled with staircases. The setting of this traumatic event in the director's life becomes influential, perhaps dictating how he will frame the setting surrounding Shakespeare's tragedy. Regardless of his motivations, Olivier's success as a popularizer, or adaptor, is important to the ongoing cinematic dialogue, as virtually every actor/director who attempts the project in the years that follow will reference his film as much as, if not more than, Shakespeare when preparing for their production.

If Laurence Olivier opened a cinematic dialogue regarding sexual and psychological issues in *Hamlet*, by 1969 Tony Richardson was willing to take it up and extend it in new directions. Where Olivier introduced content so new that critics thought they were *noticing* something while still being unprepared to *comment* on it, the comparatively informed society of the late 1960's was more than ready for a sexual and psychological *Hamlet* of their own. Unlike Olivier, who primarily explored the sexuality between Hamlet and Gertrude, Richardson chose to highlight the sexual relationship between Gertrude and Claudius, while introducing an explicitly incestuous tone to the relationship between Ophelia and Laertes. By making extensive use of the close-up shot throughout much of the film, Richardson delivers an intimate psychological study, which serves to heighten the tone of claustrophobia running through the play.

For Richardson, there is no stronger show of sexuality in *Hamlet* than the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude. Where other adaptations hint at the physical reality of the

marriage between Hamlet's mother and his uncle, this adaptation explicitly portrays it. In perhaps the only scene in the film that offers a distinct setting, Gertrude and Claudius (Judy Parfitt and Anthony Hopkins) conduct the business of court from their bed. Exchanging kisses and enjoying a sumptuous spread of fruit as King Claudius consumes King Hamlet's food, his wife, and his bed, Richardson forces us to watch closely. Glenn Litton has observed: "The insidious quality in Gertrude's and Claudius' sexuality is expressed more explicitly during the scene in which the king and queen are paid court as they lie in bed. The décor . . . suggests a miniature Eden." The atmosphere of the scene is indeed lush and it provides an exhibition of Claudius' excessive appetites—be they for food, sex, or the power of the throne of Denmark.

In perhaps one of the stranger sexual twists in a *Hamlet* adaptation, Richardson's film imagines a clearly incestuous relationship between Ophelia and her brother Laertes. As Laertes counsels Ophelia, his warnings against her relations with Hamlet take on a new perspective as they kiss like lovers, deeply and at length. The motivations for this interpretation are unclear, and there is never a sense that this twist functions to enhance the film in any way. As Neil Taylor notes in his essay "The Films of *Hamlet*," "Lest Claudius and Gertrude feel embarrassed about the nature of their marriage, Ophelia and Laertes kiss and fondle each other incestuously." Given the fact that Williamson's Hamlet never achieves any level of chemistry with that of Marianne Faithfull's Ophelia, it is possible that this was the best use that Richardson could make of Faithfull. Taylor indicates that her overt sexuality and her status as a pop culture icon of the 1960's would seem to demand display.

One of the most distinctive elements of Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* is the close-up perspective—96% of the shots are close-ups or medium close-ups. Reviewer Roger Greenspun has noted that Richardson's propensity for the extreme close-up forces viewers to see "Hamlet's presence [as] magnified out of all proper relationship to the world around him." In-

deed, because the shots are so tight, there is very little sense of setting; it is as if there is no world beyond the actor's face. At any given moment in the film, the gaze of the audience has no other choice but to remain fixed on the problems of Hamlet. Richardson heightens the play's feeling of claustrophobia and containment by creating what Taylor refers to as an air of "forced intimacy." Even the film's ending refuses to release the viewer, or to permit a focus on anything other than Hamlet. While we watch an extreme close-up of Williamson, the credits are voiced over in an attempt to limit their potential to distract from the gravity of the moment. In the end, there is a kind of relief as Hamlet's eyes close, releasing us from his gaze.

Richardson's *Hamlet* is striking also due to the speed with which Nicol Williamson ejects his lines. Ironically, while Richardson's film is shorter than Olivier's by 43 minutes, it contains a slightly enlarged version of Shakespeare's text. The disparity can only be accounted for by the fast paced, often machine-like, delivery of Nicol Williamson. Taylor notes that "Whereas Laurence Olivier, Derek Jacobi, and Mel Gibson take over three minutes to deliver the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy . . . Williamson has finished with it in 150 seconds." In the end, Williamson's urgent and nasal delivery does contribute to our impression of the manic psychological state of the character, and there is a heightened sense that although Hamlet has not acted physically, his mind is in a continual state of hyper-activity.

Of the four popularizers under examination in this study, none has perhaps taken so many risks in the adaptive process as Franco Zeffirelli. Having proven himself a successful popularizer of Shakespearean text with his film versions of *Taming of the Shrew*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, Zeffirelli became inspired to take on *Hamlet* while watching a scene from the 1987 film, *Lethal Weapon*. In the scene in question, Mel Gibson, portraying Detective Martin Riggs, sobs and soliloquizes over a photograph of his dead wife while holding a gun and contemplating suicide. When watching the scene, Zeffirelli (most likely think-

ing “To be, or not to be.”) was immediately inspired not only to adapt *Hamlet*, but also to cast Mel Gibson in the title role. His choice proved to be an inspired one when seeking financial backers for the film (Gibson was already a reliable box-office-draw), and a decidedly risky one as critics and moviegoers tried to imagine a man known for his high energy action roles attempting a convincing rendition of the melancholy, and slow-to-act, Dane. As Cathleen McGuigan of *Newsweek* stated, “To be Hamlet—or to be simply laughable—was clearly the question after the announcement last year that megawatt heartthrob Mel Gibson would play the Danish prince on screen.” Regardless of media reaction, Zeffirelli was confident in his choice.

With Mel and the money in place, Zeffirelli now faced the task of cutting the play down to a manageable size while producing something recognizably related to the original. It is in his seemingly uninhibited amputation of Shakespeare’s text that the director caused a stir amongst the purists. In his essay “The Artistry of Franco Zeffirelli” Robert Hapgood reveals that Zeffirelli was contractually committed to keeping the film to approximately two hours in length. In doing so, Zeffirelli eliminated sixty three percent of the play. This leaves a *Hamlet* without the opening ghost scene, and the highly significant “How all occasions do inform against me” soliloquy.

From the moment of the opening scene there is evidence of the Zeffirelli flair for rewrites as he boldly invents the funeral and interment of King Hamlet. Claudius is allowed the first lines of the play, which are taken from his address in the first act, and much of the remainder of that address, intended for the public, is broken down and placed in early private encounters. The effect of these changes is to establish the story as a true family tragedy. By actually showing the dead king in the presence of his grieving widow and son, the immediacy of the marriage that follows seems all the more grievous and incestuous. Allowing Claudius to speak the first lines of the play while standing near the mourners establishes the focus on the “new family:” that being Claudius, Gertrude and Hamlet. This



out-with-the-old and in-with-the-new framing heightens the viewer's empathy with Hamlet's melancholy disposition.

Text cutting and reworking aside, the more interesting issue is what did Zeffirelli make of what was left of the play? Therein lies the evidence of the director's desire to comment on the times and use the play to reflect his own personal interpretation. In casting Mel Gibson as Hamlet, Zeffirelli was clearly making a choice that reflected the movie-going tastes of the late 80's and early 90's. With films like *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon* and *The Terminator* dominating the box office and promising sequels, action films were decidedly the order of the day. Leaving behind the notion of Hamlet as an inactive, indecisive and languishing young man, Zeffirelli transforms the title character into a virile, dynamic, masculine creature who manages to be just pensive and melancholy enough to justify what remains of the soliloquies. Gibson's Hamlet gallops along the seashore on horseback, guzzles ale around the campfire with his friends, and generally moves about in a quick and aggressive manner. In this way, Zeffirelli has transformed the part to fit the audience's tastes and the capabilities of his star.

In choosing Glenn Close to portray Gertrude, Zeffirelli found a tool that would allow him to inflect his own idiosyncrasies into *Hamlet* by heightening the undercurrent of incestuous attraction between the queen and her son. Glenn Close, clearly not old enough to be Gibson's mother, accentuates the lack of distance between their ages by delivering a very giddy and girlish performance. The result is a series of mother/son encounters that have the feel of a series of love scenes. The incestuous tone reaches its climax during the closet scene in which Gibson physically mounts Close on the bed, delivering each line with a violent thrust of his hips, as she replies in what can only be described as an orgasmic response. Throughout the entirety of the film the couple's kisses and embraces linger far longer than a normative mother/son relationship would merit, and when promising "I shall in all my best obey you, madam," Gibson drops to his knees as Close pulls his

head firmly to her lower abdomen. Some critics have argued that this Oedipal focus is a result of Zeffirelli's desire to model Olivier's *Hamlet*, but it also seems to indicate that the director's own relationship with his mother has informed his adaptation. In pointing to this autobiographical aspect, Hapgood writes: "Certainly the incestuous implications derive authentically from his own life: he has revealed how when he was five-years-old he regularly slept in a narrow single bed with his mother, who 'would cling to me as if trying to draw warmth and health from the being she made.'" Zeffirelli's adaptation lingers at length over the ambiguous relationship between Hamlet and his mother, and it would seem that his infatuation with mothers and mother figures contributes to the overall foregrounding of Gertrude throughout the film

Ultimately, Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* achieves the goal of outreach through adaptation. Though the cuts were problematic for purists, film critics and moviegoers had a predominantly positive response to the film, and future adaptors will surely study Gibson's performance.

Where as Olivier, Richardson, and Zeffirelli distinguished themselves as popularizers, Kenneth Branagh attempted to appeal to the purists who longed for a full version of Shakespeare's masterpiece. At the time of this study, Branagh's *Hamlet* is the film version that is closest in content to Shakespeare's original text (as per the Folio). With a length of approximately four hours, Branagh includes all scenes and speeches, boldly trusting that the bright settings and 19<sup>th</sup>-century costuming will create a sort of middle ground between the Renaissance and the contemporary audience. Though Branagh had experienced previous successes with Shakespearean adaptations, this project appeared ambitious by comparison.

While listening to a player's recitation in the second act, Polonius comments: "This is too long." Indeed, this propensity toward the short attention span threatened to work against Branagh's *Hamlet* and critics seemed divided on the issue of length. Kevin Thomas, in a review for the *Los Angeles Times*,

welcomed a fuller adaptation, proclaiming that “[Branagh] allows us to immerse ourselves in Shakespeare’s profound meditation on the human condition without *Hamlet* seeming as long as it actually is.” Conversely, Thelma Adams of *The New York Post* asked: “Brevity is the soul of wit.’ Kenneth, are you listening?” Regardless of the fact that the film’s intended length could prove daunting to viewers and critics, Branagh seemed intent on undertaking the task in its entirety,

Although delivering Shakespeare’s full text, Branagh is not above alterations. The two most notable are the flashbacks to scenes depicting Hamlet and Ophelia making love, and the alteration of Fortinbras’ appearance in the final act. In the case of the Ophelia/Hamlet sex scenes, this may have been an attempt to satisfy the late 20th-century expectation of female nudity and sexuality in film, or simply a device to accentuate the depth of the relationship, and thus Ophelia’s torment at its end. As for the situation with Fortinbras, it is greatly distorted, and the audience is led to believe that he has waged a full attack on Denmark, and specifically Castle Elsinore. This interpretation could be the result of a very aggressive reading of Hamlet’s final question before dying; as the stage direction indicates, he hears the sounds of “A march afar off,” and asks: “What warlike noise is this?” Branagh furthers the violent deviations by depicting Osric committing suicide, which adds more bloodshed to an already bloody scene but does allow Robin Williams a bit more to make of a very brief role.

Despite Branagh’s proclamations of objectivity, his bright settings, as well as his bleached blonde, fast-talking, rendition of the melancholy Dane seem quite informed of those who have gone before him. Like Olivier, he has changed his hair color, which individualizes his look in this particular role, and like Williamson, he offers a fast-paced and aloof Hamlet who does not take the relationship with his mother to an incestuous extreme. Like Zeffirelli, Branagh produces a brightly-lit film, which further distinguishes Hamlet’s darkness in contrast with the rest of the court.

In a move that seemed to reflect his willingness to cater

to the expectations of the audience, Branagh subverted the accepted casting method used by most popularizers of Shakespearean plays. In *Shakespeare the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film* Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt have pointed out that instead of centering the film on an American star and surrounding him with qualified Shakespearean actors, “Branagh made a more canny compromise, casting American stars not as leads but in multiple cameo parts.” In casting himself as Hamlet, and Derek Jacobi as Claudius, Branagh places two highly trained British actors in roles that require the utmost in expert handling. His choice of supporting cast members seems to reflect popular contemporary culture. Billy Crystal is the gravedigger, Robin Williams is Osric, and Jack Lemmon, and Charlton Heston provide representation of yet another generation of American film stars. Branagh is, for the most part, successful with this formula, but at times it fails miserably. Charlton Heston is magnificent as the lead player, while Jack Lemmon renders the opening of the film virtually unwatchable with his sophomoric reading of Marcellus.

Minor objections aside, what Branagh’s *Hamlet* does well, it does very well. Kate Winslet, who offers a most dynamic and clearly enunciated performance, shines as Ophelia’s sanity begins to fade. At times she comes close to portraying Ophelia in a way that too closely echoes the liberated 20th-century young woman that she is, but these are only minor shadows that fade before there is time to make anything of them. Branagh himself does an excellent job of portraying the subtle changes in Hamlet’s character after his return from abroad. His speech pattern has slowed in these post-intermission scenes, and his attention to his exchanges with Horatio is heightened. Derek Jacobi is, of course, perfect as Claudius, leading the audience alternately to despise him and sympathize with him as his role evolves.

Ultimately, Kenneth Branagh provides an example of a modern director comfortable dealing with the full text of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but to insinuate that this full adaptation surpasses reduced versions in its Shakespearean integrity

would be a mistake. Branagh has showcased some fine performances, but whether or not a full text film necessarily conveys the truest dynamic of *Hamlet* has not been proven.

This study has attempted to show that when a director undertakes the task of popularizing *Hamlet*, he ultimately goes on a quest of illumination, either consciously or subconsciously, attempting to shed light not only on Shakespeare's text, but on himself and his culture. The beauty of *Hamlet* comes from its timeless ability to transcend the boundaries of a mere product positioned in a particular time period and medium. Thus, where an adaptation is ultimately finite, the play itself is boundless, and so the possibilities for interpretations are never ending. Laurence Olivier, Tony Richardson, Franco Zeffirelli, and Kenneth Branagh have personalized *Hamlet* and produced, for themselves and their culture, the "abstract and brief chronicles of the time." As each new film maker approaches the play they will bring their "personal conception" to it, imprinting it in such a manner as to make it a contribution to the evolving cannon of Shakespearean films, as well as a mirror of themselves and the moment.



## **And This the Latest!**

*Brian Murphy*

Michael Almereyda's 113-minute version, starring Ethan Hawke, and set in the New York City of 2000, is of course going to be a "take" on the four-hour complete *Hamlet*. One gets a sense of the direction by knowing the first and (except for a thematic coda) last lines: it opens with Hamlet's sad statement (lifted from the middle of the play, when he is speaking to his old school fellows Rosencrantz and Guilden-