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Hamlet on Film: A Post-9/11 Take

James A. Lewin



On Sept. 12, 2001, film audiences of the world woke up with the sense of being trapped in a bad movie. As Young Hamlet must have felt returning to Elsinore after the death of his father, irreducible grief and mourning expanded to become a sense of outrage haunted by a ghost of history calling for revenge. Hugh Grady has argued that each era must find its own “presentist” Hamlet, where “Presentism” may be defined as seeing in Shakespeare’s world a “simulacrum of our own time.” If so, the crisis of authority in Hamlet representing the question of sovereign authority in the early seventeenth century nation-state may also reflect our early twenty-first century crisis of legitimacy on a global scale. After Sept. 11, 2001, a terrible yearning was born to define the international authority needed to set right a time so out of joint. Gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson prophesied “guerilla warfare on a global scale, with no front line and no identifiable enemy.” Could a post-9/11 Hamlet on film reverse the prophecy and transform our movie-lovers’ collective conscience?

As defined by critical clichés, Hamlet offers an unlikely role-model to confront post-9/11 terrorism and unholy war. But if contemporary scholarship on Hamlet were transferred into popular culture, perhaps the corny clichés could be revised while remaining faithful to the sources and origins of Hamlet’s identity. Instead of a pathetic, self-obsessed anti-hero, Shakespeare’s Hamlet could make a comeback as a hard-boiled investigator who traces the line between individual morality and the power of the state.

The ideal venue for this new/old Hamlet would be on the big screen. The perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks targeted a culture expressed through its cinema. The dream-work of the movies could restore the humanity repressed by the traumatic memory of crimes against humanity.

A post-9/11 Hamlet on film would storm the box offices rather than pursuing, like Young Fortinbras, the invasion of foreign lands “By strong hand/ And terms compulsory” (1.1.105-6). Rather than determining, like Laertes, to “dare damnation”

(4.5.133), a new-millennial Hamlet would hoist the nihilistic engineers of jihad on their own petard.

Many of the best-known film versions of Hamlet have, unfortunately, reinforced the popular notion of Hamlet as a neurotic prince, enfeebled by romantic sensibilities and Oedipal inhibitions. Not that there is no validity in this received tradition from Goethe, Coleridge, Bradley and Freud. But Hamlet's individuality does not exist in a political vacuum.

For example, Laurence Olivier's post-World War II Hamlet pursues a place of psychological refuge within a non-political world. To make sure his film does not pose a threat to the re-established conservative hegemony of the early Cold War period, Olivier excises all scenes involving Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and the spoken parts of the play-within-the-play. He also reduces the uprising of Laertes to create a politically neutral performance that exalts the cultural status quo. In Olivier's film, Claudius never utters the line about the divinity that hedges a king. That would be awkward in terms of the political correctness of the time.

Olivier's *Hamlet* is a Freudian study in self-doubt. In a series of lectures delivered in 1953, at the height of the film's popularity, Peter Alexander challenged the premise in Olivier's Prologue that defines Hamlet as "the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind" (v-vi).

Instead, Alexander cites Raymond Chandler's private detective who must remain "humane without loss of toughness" (Alexander 185). Thus, Hamlet could be seen as a prototype of the hard-boiled investigator, taking the law in his own hands to confront a legal apparatus usurped by crime.

Clicking fast-forward to a post-Cold War new millenium, Ethan Hawke's Hamlet, as directed by Michael Almareyda, remains a flawed, over-sensitive character played in the mold of Holden Caulfield rather than Philip Marlowe. Such popular approaches to Hamlet emphasize the personal aspects of the drama, focusing on sexual desire and fear of death, finessing the political and providential overtones of the drama.

But, since September 11, 2001, our point of view has “undergone a destabilizing shift in significance” (Fedderson and Richardson 150). The attacks on the World Trade Center, according to this analysis, transformed the film’s “pervasive paranoia” from a focus on the “inner, private, and individual to the outer, public and geo-political” (152).

Other pre-9/11 Hamlet film versions, such as those directed by Kenneth Branagh and Russian director Grigori Kozinstzev have restored Fortinbras and other political subtexts, partially shifting from a Freudian to a Machiavellian “focus on Hamlet’s power struggle with Claudius for the Danish throne” (Crowl 130). Nevertheless, the popular reception of Hamlet continues to reduce Shakespeare’s tragic hero to an idiom. To “play Hamlet,” still commonly means to be wishy-washy, melancholy, self-obsessed, and unable to act in a decisive manner.

In *The New York Times*, for instance, Daniel J. Popeo, of the Washington Legal Foundation, decries politicians who “play Hamlet” as dithering rather than drilling for oil in Alaska. From a different end of the political spectrum, Warren Bennis of the University of Southern California, informs *The Washington Post* of the fine distinction between the “genuine reflection and reconsideration” of a wise Obama, as opposed to the “incessant inability to act” of Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

In Shakespeare’s time, to “play Hamlet” was to be crazy like a fox. Returning to the original Elizabethan idiom, scholarly criticism offers an alternative to popular platitudes. Instead of a Romantic-Freudian neurotic, we should re-invent Hamlet as a subversive trickster and righteous agent of radical change, whose unresolved Oedipal conflict underscores his intention to consign Claudius to the pits of damnation.

Hamlet as cunning trickster would also be true to the original source material from Saxo Grammaticus’ Historica Danica. Saxo’s account informed the French text by Belleforest that may have been available to Shakespeare. Of course, we do not know if the so-called Ur Hamlet of scholarly speculation presented Hamlet as a wily coyote. But Hieronimo in the The Spanish Tragedy, Brutus in The Rape of Lucrece, and Titus of Titus Andronicus also conceal their madness by playing madder than they really are while biding their time to take revenge. And Hamlet explicitly states his intention of

putting on an “antic disposition” to camouflage his pursuit of justice in “strange or odd” behavior (Hamlet 1.5.180;178).

From his first words, Hamlet establishes his role as a jousting punner, rebuffing the king who is “more than kin and less than kind” for putting him “too much in the sun.” Yet, Hamlet is nothing if not sincere, deriding his mother for her happy-face in the shadow of death while he mourns without pretence: “Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not seems” (1.2.65, 67, 76).

Like the sentinel Francisco, who appears and disappears in the first scene of the play, Hamlet is “sick at heart” (1.1.9). A troubled heart reverberates in the text, through Hamlet’s first soliloquy (But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” 1.2.159), returning in Laertes’ anticipation of revenge (“It warms the very sickness in my heart” 4.7.54) and again in Hamlet’s prescience of his own demise (5.2.208-9).

But after seeing the ghost, Hamlet conceals his madness by exaggerating it. Furthermore, his feigned madness frees him to confront Claudius without revealing his guilty knowledge to anyone but his intended victim. Thus, he fashions his own version of an old script “The Murder of Gonzago” to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2.601).

Hamlet’s play-within-the play is one of a series within the text. Polonius directs a spy-master’s honey-trap with his daughter Ophelia as bait. Hamlet’s “Mousetrap” throws the court off the scent by casting the leading villain, Lucianus, as nephew rather than brother of the king, yet making sure that Claudius knows that Hamlet knows what only Claudius knows. Ultimately, in the final poisonous parody of a Mummings play featuring Hamlet jousting with Laertes, all trappers are trapped by their own devices.

Hamlet turns the tables on opponents tricking all tricksters with tragic irony. He retaliates with language, parchments, poisons or swords “wrested from his adversaries, directing them back with telling effectiveness.” Typically, Hamlet “lets his adversary attack first. Then, using the weapon of his adversary, he strikes swiftly home” (Shepard 281-282).

Hamlet lives in a world usurped by the powers of treason. In Elsinore, loyalty to the king means complicity with a criminal regime. Apart from Horatio, nobody can be trusted except the gravedigger.

In Hamlet's Elsinore, passive obedience to the status quo represents the litmus test of fools and knaves. Polonius and his progeny exemplify the privileged elite corrupted by their proximity to the sovereign villain. Polonius is a Donald Rumsfeld type political infighter obsessed by a paranoid awareness of the "unknown unknowns" (Rumsfeld qtd. in Furedi).

Yet, in Almaderya's *Hamlet*, Bill Murray shows us a Polonius who loves his kids and wants the greatest good for the greatest number. A living cliché, he is oft quoted by speakers at graduation ceremonies: "This above all: to thine own self be true" (2.3.78).

What could Polonius mean by himself? Socrates might wonder.

Does Polonius, or any of us, have a self to which to be true? Or is that self only a potential, lurking in the shadows of the repressed conscience?

Shakespeare developed his tragic vision in his English history plays. By delving into the atrocities of the collective past, the playwright was able to define the significance of sovereignty in terms of a complementarity of power and legitimacy. Only by integrating the body natural and the body politic can authority be established under the providence of history.

Claudius sees himself as king of tricksters. Like Hamlet, he believes his transgressions may be justified by political necessity. Unlike Hamlet, however, Claudius is a fugitive of providence. After having usurped the throne through the murder of his brother, Claudius still claims divine right:

There's such divinity doth hedge a king

That treason can but peep to what it would

Acts little of his will. (4.5.123-5)

Faced with a popular uprising led by Laertes, Claudius invokes the ideology of the body politic to co-opt divine law, along with all else, to his lust for power. Claudius represents himself as the voice of reason but is the voice of diplomatic despair. He is the trickster king of the corrupted body natural.

Hamlet, in contrast, is the prince of the dispossessed body politic. Passed over for succession after his father's death, Hamlet seeks truth over power. He, too, is a trickster who sanctifies sarcasm. But, unlike Claudius, Hamlet surrenders his self-interest in pursuit of cosmic justice.

Hamlet's character contains "complementary natures within a single protagonist" allowing for the "princely exercise of power" and "satiric exorcism of power" (Hedrick 76).

Old Hamlet, the medieval warrior king, haunts him. Claudius the usurping monarch is his blood enemy. But Hamlet's true progenitor may be the court jester Yorick, whose skull Hamlet discovers in the graveyard scene of act five. As described by my dear former professor David P. Young, Yorick is "a sort of spiritual parent" to Hamlet as well as a "counterpart" since "the jester's part" has been adopted by the prince who finds "madness and foolishness more congenial and useful than heroism" (Young 204).

Yet Hamlet is a trickster with a troubled conscience. He realizes that killing Polonius is a tragic error. Nevertheless, he accepts it as his destiny to become the scapegoat of a terminally corrupted world. Doomsday is mentioned three times in the text (1.1.120; 2.2.242; 5.1.60). Also the "last trumpet" (5.1.232). But the world does not end. It drags on, as the shallow opportunist Fortinbras takes up the crown.

Shakespeare had a unique ability not only to portray life-like characters but to show those characters changing and evolving in life-like ways. Yet rarely, if ever, has a film version of Hamlet represented the transformation of the title character from the opening to the final act of the drama. The Hamlet of act five is not the Hamlet of act one.

The gravedigger, Hamlet's sole equal in wit and wisdom, tips off the fact that Hamlet is thirty years old by act five (5.1.164). Based on this evidence of the text, it

seems that a number of years have elapsed since Hamlet's first adolescent soliloquy contemplating the seductions of suicide. In the course of the first four acts, Hamlet has grown up. He has discovered his tragic destiny and made an uneasy peace within his own conscience.

As demonstrated by Lisa S. Starks, cinema and psychoanalysis may be taken as dual keys to our consciousness of modernity. Both films and depth psychology simultaneously promote and undermine individual identity by "questioning the boundaries of the modern subject and decentering its position in the world" (181). In film, the alter-ego may meet itself returning from the fulfillment of its own fantasies. In this sense, movies serve as "a metaphor for modernity and its radical other, the double that undermines its authority" (200). Hamlet of act five, as his own alter-ego, doubling himself, enacts his final gesture of love and fate. In this artistic apotheosis, Shakespeare has continued significance as a cultural authority for a world suffering from the nightmares of history.

For example, as directed by Sven Gade, Asta Nielsen's post-World War I film *Hamlet: Drama of Vengeance* posits a Hamlet who is female at birth, inverting the revenge code through an expressionist film with a pacifist subtext. Incorporating traumas fresh in the memory of the European audience of trench warfare and social upheaval, Nielsen's version, balances politics and providence within the puzzle of Hamlet's personality. Just as Asta Nielsen transformed a war-weary audience, we too need a bold leap of the imagination to inspire a cynical and paranoid populace.

"Who's there?" (Hamlet 1.1.1). The opening line of Shakespeare's plays hearkens back to the rebirth of drama in the call-and-response rituals of medieval church that had banned Roman theater. Yet, somehow, we are never ready for that challenge in the dark of midnight:

Question: Who is there? Answer: The Son of Man.

Unlike the dogmas of religion, however, Shakespeare's Hamlet has multiple levels of interpretation. A secular martyr, Hamlet dies sacrificing both the crown and the hope of redemption. A profane messiah, he excises what is rotten in the state of Denmark.

A non-sectarian savior, he gives his dying support to Fortinbras, the son of his dead father's arch-rival.

In August 2006, a Scripps Howard/Ohio University "survey of 1,010 adults, found that 36 percent of the American public suspects that federal officials assisted the 9/11 attacks, or took no action to stop them so that the US could justify going to war in the Middle East" (qtd in Furedi).

What the poll did not ask is how many adult members of the American public are prepared to accept their own culpability for being complicit, or failing to prevent, or justifying the 9/11 attacks for the sake of oil, power, or a complacent sense of superiority to the wretched of the earth.

Each production of *Hamlet* redefines Shakespeare as a cultural authority. Shakespeare's text incorporates the conflict of internal/external consciousness -- from the opening scene, through the play-within-a-play, to the fatal denouement. Thus, the problems of Hamlet are our problems.

For victims of apparent injustice, should revenge be mandated or forbidden? How do we establish the authority of a global crusade for freedom of conscience? Hamlet is haunted by a Shakespearean Ghost. We are haunted by Hamlet. To be or not to be is still the question.

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