

Seeing and Being Seen: The Hierarchy of Sight in Act 3 Scene 1 of Hamlet Movie Adaptations

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Abstract: This paper examines how the hierarchy of seeing and seen is portrayed in Act 3, Scene 1 of two movie adaptations of "*Hamlet*", namely the 1948 version by Laurence Olivier and the 1996 version by Kenneth Branagh. Through a close reading of the original text and detailed cinematic analysis, the essay compares the different portrayals of Hamlet's psychological journey and the varied interpretations of his character in the two adaptations. In the Olivier film, Hamlet is presented as an ineffectual gazer whose intellectualism fetters his ability to act, while in the Branagh film, the same character becomes a clairvoyant executor whose inner thoughts reinforce his determination. It argues that the different positions of Hamlet in the hierarchy of seeing and being seen reflect broader thematic concerns of the directors – personal paralysis for Olivier and existential predicament for Branagh, which are likely rooted in the directors' specific target audiences, as well as their understanding of the evolving relationship between classical literature and modern cinema.

1. Originality

While literature on adaptation studies traditionally revolves around the fidelity of the movie to the original literary works, this essay emphasizes the reinterpretation of Shakespeare's "*Hamlet*" by filmic adaptations. It also explores the largely neglected theme of seeing and being seen in both the original play and the films, revealing the correlation between Hamlet's position in the hierarchy of sight and the director's interpretation of the source of the tragedy.

2. Introduction

For Claudius and Polonius in Act 3 Scene 1 of "*Hamlet*", to see and not to be seen, that is the problem. As Claudius describes his status as "seeing, unseen"^[1], he reveals the significance of sight in the scene. Correspondingly, when the literary classic was adapted for the screen, the emphasis was preserved.

This paper explores the relationship of seeing and being seen in the 1948 adaptation directed by Laurence Olivier and the 1996 adaptation directed by Kenneth Branagh. The two movie adaptations, appealing to general audiences and Shakespeare scholars respectively, illustrate two variations of the visual hierarchy. By comparing them to Shakespeare's original play, the paper discovers that the former adaptation places Hamlet in the unchanged status of "seeing, seen", yet the latter accentuates Hamlet's transition from "unseeing, seen" to "seeing, seen". Thus, the movies offer the audience two

interpretations of Hamlet's character and tragedy: procrastination resulted from contemplation, and determination defeated by fate.

3. Shakespeare's Hamlet as a Victim of Peeping

Before analyzing the adaptations, a close examination of the original play is needed to reveal Shakespeare's original design of the hierarchy of sight. Act 3 Scene 1 of Hamlet is comprised of two important parts. At the start is Hamlet's soliloquy, where Hamlet walks onto the stage and contemplates the question of life and death. Then, the nunnery scene follows, as Hamlet notices Ophelia reading a book and converses with her at first courteously, but eventually insultingly. Throughout the two parts, Claudius and Polonius conceal themselves behind a tapestry to spy on Hamlet, aspiring to judge from his behaviour if he is genuinely mad.

Therefore, the motif of vision exists in the transition from the private, unseen soliloquy to the public, seen conversation. Since "the soliloquy gives the impression of interiority and leads us into the dark, tangled internal landscape of the minds of tragic heroes"^[2], Hamlet's salutation to Ophelia marks the moment he leaves his inner world and enters into the tangible reality. Thus, these lines serve as an impenetrable wall. Prior to them, everything he says is inaccessible to other characters on the stage, while after the lines, his thoughts become "seen" to Ophelia, as well as the conspirators.

Moreover, Hamlet's perception of his status from unseen to seen in the nunnery scene also signals a change of his position in the hierarchy of sight. It is not clear from which point Hamlet realises the presence of peepers, but as he asks Ophelia brusquely where her father is, it can be presumed that he senses the existence of Polonius during their conversation. Yet, his suspicion does not evolve into actions, for Hamlet quickly resumes the original conversation after getting a brief answer that Polonius is at home. From the soliloquy to the nunnery scene, Hamlet leaves his recluse of thoughts and becomes a passive object of Claudius and Polonius's observation.

4. Olivier's Hamlet as an Ineffectual Gazer

In the 1948 version, Laurence Olivier incorporates a deep focus shot of Hamlet eavesdropping on Claudius and Polonius in Act 2 Scene 2 ^[3], changing the plot dramatically. In contrast to the play, in which Hamlet is originally not aware of the peepers behind the arras, Olivier's film features a Hamlet who realises that he is plotted against from beginning to end. Because of this design, the hierarchy of seeing and being seen between Claudius and Hamlet is changed: while the two schemers' eyes are fixed on the prince, the prince's eyes are also roaming the place.

Thus, when Hamlet appears on the screen, he is brushing the arras with his book and inspecting the room for peepers ^[3]. These details indicate that, in Olivier's interpretation, Hamlet is never a craven who resigns himself to his fate. Instead, he seizes the initiative in the face of adversity, and establishing his dominance within the hierarchy of sight: Conscious of his being seen, he exerts the power of gaze back on the espials and refines his plan of vengeance under the current state of affairs. Nevertheless, his predominance fails to facilitate his revenge. The power he gains in the gaze, however mighty, is always imaginary. Since he cannot see through the arras, his gaze is then redirected to his inner world, as if the tapestry had been transformed into a mirror. Consequently, as Hamlet is conscious that he is looked at, he quickly reacts to the situation, indulges himself in his ideas, and therefore, loses the ability to implement his plan.

This can be further illuminated by a comparison between Act 3 Scene 1 and another "eavesdropping scene", Act 3 Scene 4. The two scenes have shared features, i.e. an arras that screens the conspirators from Hamlet's sight. In response to the similarity, Olivier also designed similar gestures for Hamlet, i.e. to draw out his sword and thrust it at the man behind the arras. However, in Scene 4, when Hamlet is startled by Polonius, who was hiding behind Gertrude's tapestry, he reaches

for his actual sword by instinct and kills Polonius, thinking it is the King ^[3], while in Scene 1, when he is immersed in his prospect of revenge, he can only pull out his imaginary sword, in particular his finger, and point it at the fantasy of his enemy, without causing any harm to Claudius in reality ^[3].

Just as Hamlet himself confesses in his philosophical ponderation of death, "Thus conscience does make cowards – / And thus the native hue of resolution / Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" ^[1], his determination to kill King Claudius is impaired by his own rationality. In the 1948 version, Olivier follows the stage convention of postponing the "to be or not to be" soliloquy until after the nunnery scene, establishing a logical connection between Hamlet's quarrel with Ophelia and his thoughts of committing suicide. Yet in addition to this effect, Olivier also creates a correlation between Hamlet's suicidal intent and his attempt to murder Claudius. His bodkin falling into the sea ^[3] after a long philosophical reflection on life and death, Hamlet opts for life as the answer to his problem. However, his seemingly optimistic choice is not a positive message, as it not only further proves his argument that reason is a hinderance to tenacious action, which, in this case, means to commit suicide, but, in retrospection, echoes with his inability to pull out his tangible sword when he is engrossed in his internal intellectual activities earlier in the scene ^[3]. Furthermore, the change in the sequence of the plots also leaves the audience with an impression that Hamlet retreats to the conceptual world inside his mind after a quarrel with Ophelia in reality, accentuating Hamlet's indecisiveness.

For Olivier, Hamlet is the man whose defect corrupts his virtues, as is mentioned in the prologue of the film ^[3]. The director is likely to agree with Coleridge that "Hamlet is brave and careless of death; but he vacillates from sensibility, and procrastinates from thought, and loses the power of action in the energy of resolve" ^[4]. Hence, in the 1948 adaptation, Hamlet is portrayed as an excessively pensive man who hesitates due to "a great, an almost enormous, intellectual activity" ^[4]. Accordingly, the tragedy of Hamlet is presented as a tragedy of indulgence in thoughts, one "to exemplify the moral necessity of a due balance between our attention to the objects of our senses, and our meditation on the workings of our minds, – an equilibrium between the real and the imaginary worlds" ^[4].

5. Branagh's Hamlet as a Clairvoyant Executor

In contrarily, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 version retains the original plot, i.e. Hamlet's soliloquy is performed before the nunnery scene, and Hamlet does not become aware of the espials until Ophelia's fleeting glimpse at them ^[5]. However, extensive alterations are made to the setting: The quaint castle Elsinore is replaced by a modern palace, in which the arras in Act 3 Scene 1 is substituted by innumerable one-way mirrors. On account of the reflective nature and unequal power of vision intrinsic to one-way mirrors, Hamlet and the schemers are placed inside a double structure of sight.

The first structure concerns the power relations of Hamlet and the peepers. When Hamlet walks into the room, delivers his "to be or not to be" soliloquy, and greets Ophelia, Thus Claudius and Polonius spy on him covertly. Hamlet, ignorant of the conspiracy against him, is neither casting his eyes at other people, nor aware of any stares directed at him. Thus, Claudius and Polonius gain an advantage over Hamlet in the beginning. However, Hamlet's cold stare into the mirror ^[5] signifies the moment he overthrows the initial hierarchy. It is the glimpse that changes Hamlet's position from an unwitting subject of sight to a formidable opponent in the contest of seeing and being seen. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Branagh's Hamlet immediately starts to scour the room for the schemers furiously after his realisation. The gaze empowers Hamlet.

Then, a scrutiny of what Hamlet sees in the mirror unveils the second structure, which pertains to Hamlet's perception of his power, compared to that of Claudius and Polonius. Gazing at a one-way mirror, Hamlet cannot see through it at Claudius, and, physically, only the prince's own reflection is

available in the mirror. Yet by repeatedly intercutting the close-ups of the livid Hamlet and the frightened Claudius^[5], the director creates an illusion that Hamlet's sight is capable of penetrating the mirror that conceals Claudius, as if the mirror is turned into a sheet of glass, and the confrontation becomes entirely visible for both sides. In this scene, the real Claudius coincides with the Claudius seen by Hamlet's mind's eye, and the image of Claudius is superimposed onto Hamlet's own image. Thus, Hamlet's inner world strengthens his perception of reality and provokes his determination to take revenge.

The above understandings of Hamlet's power in the 1996 version enable a different reading of Hamlet's soliloquy. In contrast to Olivier's soliloquy, in which Hamlet contemplates alone, Branagh's soliloquy is more a speech than soundless thoughts. Pronouncing his ideas about life and death in front of the mirror^[5], Hamlet transforms what should be "unseen" or silent to the schemers into something that can be "seen" or heard. Consequently, when he draws out his bodkin and points it at the mirror in his discussion of suicide, Claudius flinches behind the mirror, fearing that the point of the dagger might cut his face^[5]. Associating this detail with the fact that Hamlet's reflection in the mirror overlaps Claudius's existence behind the mirror, it can be concluded that Hamlet's private thoughts unconsciously become his threat to the king, and his contemplation of suicide conversely confirms his pledge to commit homicide. In Branagh's adaptation, Hamlet's inner world and the circumstances he is in are intermingled; an incident in one world precipitates corresponding changes in another. Immersed in his thoughts, Hamlet is approaching his goal of vengeance, instead of deviating from it.

In Branagh's eyes, Hamlet "must have been quick and impetuous in action; for it is downright impossible that the man we see rushing after the Ghost, killing Polonius, dealing with the King's commission on the ship, boarding the pirate, leaping into the grave, executing his final vengeance, could ever have been shrinking or slow in an emergency" ^[6]. There is no denying that Hamlet is a melancholy scholar and a philosopher, but contrary to Dowden who claims that Hamlet, "still a haunter of the university, a student of philosophies, an amateur in art, a ponderer on the things of life and death" ^[7], loses his capacity for action in the cultivation of his mind, Branagh considers Hamlet's intellectual activeness as the other side of his resolution.

Then, where does the tragedy of Hamlet arise, according to Branagh? At the end of the film, Fortinbras, the unexpected observer, arrives at the palace with 'his train'^[1], an event that is interpreted as the Norwegian invasion of Denmark^[5]. Here, the motif of sight reappears, as Fortinbras asks 'Where is this sight?'^[1] and Horatio replies with 'What is it you would see? / If aught of woe or wander, cease your search'^[1]. Sarcastically, it is not the force from an observer outside the original visual hierarchy that annihilates the system. Instead, it disintegrates by itself under what Bradley calls "the sense of the soul's infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring" ^[6]. Thus, according to Kenneth Branagh, the fall of the hero does not reflect a tragedy of an individual's flaws, but rather reveals the destiny of all human beings.

6. Conclusion

In "Hamlet", sight is fate. By altering Hamlet's position in the visual hierarchy, the directors construct Hamlet's character and develop the central theme of their adaptations differently. While Olivier portrays Hamlet as a tragedy of an individual's defect, Branagh creates a heroic representative of mankind in the face of inescapable destruction.

The disparity can be explained by the adaptations' position on the spectrum between theatre and cinema, as well as the directors' target audience. As the pioneer of film adaptation of "Hamlet", Olivier's film still follows many stage conventions and adheres to a more traditional reading of the play. By contrast, at a more mature stage of the filmic art, Branagh regards adaptation as a medium

more capable of reinterpretation. He adapts many cinematic techniques and infuses his version with his ideas about the play.

On the other hand, the two directors presume different viewers. With the masses in his mind, Olivier selects a simpler theme so that he can highlight the plotline and popularise Shakespeare among common viewers. Yet Branagh's film is targeted at advanced readers of Shakespeare, who expect not merely the story but a fresh artistic vision in his adaptation. As a result, bold innovations and novel explanations are added to satiate the needs of scholars. But no matter how different they are, the adaptations will continue to influence people's perception of the relationship between classic literature and modern cinema.

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