

**To Be or Not to Be (Dangerous): Mental Instability in Branagh's and Almereyda's Film Adaptations of *Hamlet***

by Cory Joiner

Just as *Hamlet* is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, so, too might prince Hamlet be one of his most controversial characters. Many of the questions central to Shakespeare's original play revolve around the sanity of the play's eponymous character, and the danger which he may or may not pose to his fellow constituents of the court of Denmark. Much of Hamlet's character is, however, left open to interpretation, as Shakespeare's play can be read in a myriad of different ways. So, too, can *Hamlet* be adapted to film variously, with just as many different versions on the possibly-insane Danish prince. Filmic adaptations of the play may choose to portray Hamlet in a traditional manner by closely following the original text, or may choose to firmly cement his character as being either quite sane or entirely deranged. These filmic visions of Prince Hamlet are, as representations of the director's vision for the film, a sort of interpretive depiction of Shakespeare's play (or, in some cases, interpretive depictions of a staging of the play). Two such adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – one directed by Kenneth Branagh (1996), and the other directed by Michael Almereyda (2000) – present entirely different interpretive visions of the Shakespeare's play, especially in regards to the depiction of Hamlet himself. Almereyda's film presents a genuinely dangerous and highly unstable Hamlet, while Branagh's film, in more closely following the intricacies of the original text, chooses to focus instead on Hamlet's performance of insanity while still presenting the Prince as conflicted and at least somewhat disturbed.

Traditionally, as he is in Shakespeare's text, Hamlet is depicted as a troubled man who "feigns" madness in order to remain inconspicuous while watching Claudius for signs of guilt and waiting for a chance to avenge his father. The term "feigns" is dubious, as many interpretations of the character argue that he is in fact mad, though he regularly insists that he is quite sane. Almercyda's rendition of Hamlet, however, does not plot to feign madness, and is instead depicted as being – as opposed to strictly insane – rather unhinged. After the ghost of Hamlet's father appears before him to recount the tale of Claudius' having murdered him, Hamlet makes no mention of feigning madness. The film, which utilizes the original Elizabethan language but cuts many lines, does not include the passage from the original text which, spoken by Hamlet, informs the audience of his ploy:

Here, as before, never, so help you mercy,  
How strange or odd some'er I bear myself—  
As I perchance hereafter shall think meet  
To put an antic disposition on—  
\* \* \* \* \*  
That you know aught of me[.]  
(1.5.170-173,180)

Almercyda's Hamlet, therefore, can be read as being entirely sincere in his displays of intense emotion, as, for much of the film, there is no sense of dramatic irony present that would suggest to the audience that his mad behavior is anything but genuine.

The sincerity of Hamlet's actions and displayed emotions after Hamlet kills Polonius can, however, be brought into question, and it is at this point in the film that the audience may suspect that Hamlet is beginning to exaggerate his madness as (arguably) does the prince in Shakespeare's play. For evidence of Hamlet's mid-film decision to "act" mad, we can turn to Ethan Hawke's performance of Hamlet both before and after the death of

Polonius. Prior to Polonius' death, Hawke's performance as Hamlet is quite serious, and what may come across as somewhat humorous dialogue in the original text, such as Hamlet's banter with Polonius in act 2 scene 2, is, through Hawke's rendition of the prince, is instead presented on film as a spiteful mockery rather than an exaggerated portrayal of insanity. Hawke's shaky, gaunt, and clearly disturbed portrayal of Hamlet in that moment suggests that putting on a carefully constructed appearance of insanity is far from the prince's mind. Furthermore, this scene from Almereyda's film immediately precedes a scene in which Hamlet enters Claudius' office with a loaded handgun (which in the aforementioned scene is shown to the audience, but hidden from Polonius), ready to shoot and kill Claudius on the spot. This early attempt by Hamlet to take Claudius' life clearly illustrates Hamlet's initial lack of reserve in seeking to enact vengeance for his father, and demonstrates his genuinely troubled state of mind prior to murdering Polonius.

After having murdered Polonius, however, Hamlet's countenance is rather different than before. Whereas his aforementioned conversation with Polonius seemed to be nearly completely devoid of humor, Hamlet's manner when speaking to Claudius in the laundromat appears to be more exaggerated and slightly more humorous. In portraying Hamlet in this scene, Ethan Hawke uses a softer tone of voice and seems at times ready to break into a smile. This behavior stands in stark contrast to Hawke's serious and at times entirely unhinged portrayal of Hamlet prior to Polonius' death. The slight shift in Hamlet's countenance after the murder could indicate a further mental break within his psyche, but, perhaps more convincingly, could be a calculated attempt by Hamlet to claim innocence of his crimes through what would eventually become an insanity plea. As Annalise Acorn has argued in relation to Shakespeare's play, "Hamlet tries to reconcile with Laertes

by pleading a kind of insanity defense in Polonius's killing... Hamlet both accepts and refuses responsibility. He acknowledges his own wrongdoing... he passes the blame onto his madness externalized and personified" (226-227). This interpretation of Hamlet's eventual apology to Laertes for the actions that he claims to have committed in a fit of madness (5.2.197-214) is interpreted by Almereyda and transposed onto film as a deliberate decision on Hamlet's part to exaggerate his affected manner in order to bolster his chances of successfully pleading insane. When considered alongside the modern-day setting of the play – and keeping in mind that insanity pleas continue to be utilized in modern courts – Hamlet's decision to act even more insane than previously not only coincides with the tradition of the character "acting" insane, but also suggests that Hamlet has, in some way, accepted that his previous actions were committed in a fit of madness. As Acorn also claims, "Hamlet posits himself as the victim of his own madness along with Polonius the deceased, his son, Laertes, and his daughter, Ophelia," (227). We might interpret Hamlet's reevaluating himself as a victim, therefore, as an admission of his own insanity; the sincerity of this admission, in light of Almereyda's having removed Hamlet's vow to "put an antic disposition on" is not truly brought into question (Shakespeare 1.5.173).

While Almereyda's Hamlet may appear to viewers as being mentally unstable and eager to avenge his father, Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet* depicts the prince as being more conflicted towards the idea of revenge, and generally portrays a Hamlet who is not conclusively mad, but rather maintains a disguise of exaggerated madness while also perhaps experiencing a few short bursts of extreme mental instability. As Branagh's film includes nearly all of the dialogue included in the "combined text" version of the Shakespeare's play (which is a composite of the second quarto and additional lines from the folio) the film retains, unlike Almereyda's adaptation, the plot laid out by Hamlet to

Horatio and Marcellus to, “put an antic disposition on” (Shakespeare 1.5.173). Hamlet’s displays of madness in Branagh’s film can therefore, as is the case in Shakespeare’s text, be interpreted either as false displays or genuine bouts of madness; Hamlet may simply be acting insane, or he might, perhaps, truly be insane, and the line between his acting and his actual mental state may be blurred. Unlike a reading of the original text, however, Branagh’s film includes a performance of Hamlet which must take some interpretive stance on the nature of the character, as Shakespeare’s original text is quite vague about how the play (or film, in this instance) and its characters may be staged. Branagh’s performance of Hamlet (Branagh is both director and actor for this film) during his most pronounced displays of apparent insanity suggest that, while Hamlet may often times exaggerate his behavior on behalf of his aforementioned plot, he is at other moments genuinely troubled.

The most obviously exaggerated performance of madness occurs when Polonius approaches Hamlet in order to discern whether or not Hamlet is mad for love of Polonius’ daughter Ophelia. Before Polonius first approaches Hamlet, the camera lingers for a moment on Hamlet, who is looking down on and walking above the King, Gertrude, and Polonius, all of whom are discussing Hamlet’s condition. These shots indicate that Hamlet, aware of the conspiracy to unveil the cause for his odd behavior, is vigilant in maintaining his appearance of madness, and is therefore ready for Polonius’ intrusion in the following scene. When Polonius finally approaches Hamlet, the prince is wearing a mask in the form of a skull; after removing the mask, Hamlet speaks in a mocking and joking tone of voice, and often looks at Polonius with a wide-eyed and stereotypically-crazy stare. Here, Hamlet dons the persona of an almost jester-like madman, which stands in stark contrast to the passionate

and emotionally charged performances that he gives in his soliloquies; as Mark Burnett asserts, the Hamlet of Branagh's production is "a knowing impersonator of madness and a theatrically dynamic presence" (78). It is this theatrical element of Hamlet's character in Branagh's film that illustrates not only Hamlet's relative composure in the face of others, but also the depth and complexity of his true emotions. Hamlet's soliloquies, as they are performed for no one, are likely representative of his true emotional and mental state. In his moments of loneliness, Hamlet does not, however, demonstrate these jester-like qualities which he displays for Polonius and others, and instead appears despondent and at times even angry. Hamlet's complexity of emotion in his soliloquies can be vividly observed in the moments after the players arrive in Elsinore and Hamlet parts with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Branagh begins to deliver the soliloquy in nearly a whisper; as the speech continues, however, he becomes more animated – shouting loudly, rampaging throughout the room, toppling furniture and banging on the windows. These extreme emotions do not, however, surface when Hamlet is around other characters, and as such we may conclude that, while Hamlet is surely distraught and disturbed over the death of his father and the task of avenging him, he nevertheless maintains enough mental clarity to plan and calculate towards achieving his goal of vengeance.

Hamlet's mental clarity is arguably, however, not entirely consistent in Branagh's film. As in the original text (and in Almereyda's film as well) Branagh's Hamlet demonstrates a brief fit of mental instability when confronting Gertrude about the truth behind the late King Hamlet's death. This display of mental instability, as in the original text, is centered on the appearance of the ghost of the late King Hamlet who is seen by Prince Hamlet, but not Gertrude (3.4.115-140). Branagh's version of the ghost, however, is significantly different in its two appearances – first at the palace gates and the forest, and later in Gertrude's

bedchamber. Branagh's initial depiction of the ghost when he appears before Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus and Barnardo highlights his otherworldly qualities. The ghost is shown dressed in full armor, and is poorly lit, as if to signify its ethereal nature; furthermore, it is primarily shot with a low camera angle, both to emphasize its grand stature and also to suggest, as is evident as well from Horatio, Barnardo, and Marcellus looking up while speaking to it, that it is floating above the guards' heads. This appearance by the ghost is undeniably real, as multiple characters including Hamlet all see it at the same time. When Hamlet sees the ghost in Gertrude's bedchamber, however, he alone can see it, calling into question his mental state during the scene. The ghost is shot in this scene in an entirely different manner than before: he is well lit and shot from a medium distance. Furthermore, the ghost takes on a radically different appearance, as it is dressed in a tattered grey robe, perhaps imitating Hamlet's description of the late King as a "King of shreds and patches," just moments before the ghost appears before him. In the differences between how the ghost is framed, lit, and dressed between his initial appearance and his later appearance during Hamlet's confrontation with Gertrude, Branagh suggests that the ghost as it appears in Gertrude's chambers is not real, but rather Hamlet's hallucination. Branagh's portraying the ghost's second appearance as a figment of Hamlet's imagination calls into question Hamlet's mental stability, if only for a brief scene, and further complicates any attempts to assert the prince as being either mad or sane.

The question of Hamlet's sanity in both films is directly related to the notion of how dangerous Hamlet, as an unchecked member of the royal family, is to his contemporaries in the court of Denmark. Before we can continue with filmic analysis, however, it is important to note the difference in setting between Branagh and

Almeryda's films, as the different settings allow for diverse staging opportunities which in turn influence how dangerous Hamlet may appear to be in either film. While the original play is set sometime around the late-middle ages, neither Branagh's nor Almeryda's film portrays this moment in time – both are set in a more modern era. Branagh's film is set some time in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century, while Almeryda's film is set in what was, at the time of the film's production in the year 2000, the modern day. As such, there is a distinct difference in the technology portrayed in the films, as Almeryda's film includes frequent use of video cameras and modern-day handguns. Branagh's film, however, includes both old and relatively modern technologies, as the guards at the gate throw spears at the ghost, but many of Fortinbras' soldiers are shown while invading castle Elsinore to be carrying late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century rifles. Accordingly, there exists the possibility in both films that Hamlet might use a firearm to enact revenge upon Claudius. While both films retain the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, only Branagh's film ends with Hamlet slaying Claudius with a rapier; all of the violent deaths in Almeryda's *Hamlet* occur as the result of gun violence. Furthermore, as is illustrated in the aforementioned conversation between Hamlet and Polonius in Almeryda's film, Almeryda's Hamlet carries around a handgun throughout most of the film. In contrast, Branagh's Hamlet never so much as touches a firearm, but does carry a dagger which he uses to murder Polonius. Branagh's Hamlet, in opting not to use a firearm to enact revenge demonstrates an element of discretion and secrecy within his character that is not found in Almeryda's Hamlet. As Almeryda's Hamlet uses a gun – a very loud instrument with the distinct possibility of causing collateral damage – to kill both Polonius and Claudius, he demonstrates to some degree a lack of concern for bystanders and subterfuge. Furthermore, Almeryda's frequent portrayal of guns and gun violence speaks to the modern-day rhetoric around firearms and their domestic use. Kim Fedderson takes this concept a step



further and argues that, by setting the film in modern-day New York, a city which “has since September 11, 2001 undergone a destabilizing shift in significance,” Almereyda’s *Hamlet* inadvertently highlights the time in which we live as a violent one, even when we may think of ourselves as being above such brutal acts of violence as are portrayed in the original play. As such, Almereyda’s film may seem to modern-day viewers to present a far more dangerous Hamlet than Branagh’s dagger-wielding depiction of the character.

Branagh’s and Almereyda’s films, in staging such drastically different interpretations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, illustrate not only the depth and diverse staging potentials of the text, but also the complexity of the play’s titular character. These two highly different yet equally acceptable depictions of Prince Hamlet speak to both the depth of the character and also to the meta-theatrical language of the original text. Just as Hamlet when speaking to the players in act 3 scene 2 is concerned with how the players might depict the characters and scenes they are to act out, so, too must a film director be conscious of the manner in which both they and their actors interpret the roles and scenes which are to be represented on film. The impact of interpretation upon how a play may be staged is highlighted when comparatively analyzing two films, such as those of Branagh and Almereyda, which are adapted from the same source material. By portraying Hamlet as both unhinged and relatively reserved, Almereyda and Branagh respectively demonstrate both the intrigue of Hamlet’s character that drives so many scholars to debate his nature and mental states, as well as the myriad ways in which individual interpretation might shape the process of adaptation.

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