

# Soliloquies in Shakespearean Films: the Case of *Hamlet*

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## 1

The epistolary debate between Harley Granville-Barker and Alfred Hitchcock that took place in the two 1937 issues of *The Listener* still offers us an interesting starting point in considering what should be shown and spoken in Shakespearean films. The point disputed by these two representatives of early-twentieth-century British stage and film was the aesthetic validity of visualizing Shakespeare's verbal images. For Barker, the visual expressiveness of the cinema that undermined the primary function of poetry was a nightmarish revival of the pictorial Shakespearean production that he thought had become outmoded. Referring to the Elizabethan tradition of a bare staging, Barker laments the assertiveness of visual elements in the film adaptations of Shakespearean plays:

if we intrude scenery when [Shakespeare] thought he need none, and distract the eye to a mere background while he is trying to occupy both our eyes and ears to the full with his characters in the foreground, we wrong his art...And while we are enjoying the sight, the effect of Shakespeare's poetry will be lost.

The gist of Barker's essay was to protect Shakespearean words from visual contamination. Given such a premise, it is natural that the final solution he offers for filmmakers is to make an adaptation without using Shakespearean words: "Shakespeare in the cinema will do — with Shakespeare left out."

In the next issue of *The Listener*, Hitchcock launches on a crusade for both

Shakespeare and film. In his essay, Hitchcock describes Shakespeare as an imaginative playwright whose gift was desperately frustrated by the poor stagecraft of his time and to save Shakespeare from such misery, "the cinema has come to Shakespeare's rescue." Criticizing Barker's pedantry that "ignore[d] the pictorial side of the plays," Hitchcock enumerates the visual effectiveness of cinema, saying "the film-makers have today given Shakespeare a forest where he asked for it ...a banquet hall where Mr. Granville-Barker would have only a trestle table with three planks laid across it." Evidently, Hitchcock thinks that the cinema is essentially superior to the stage in artistic expression, for "the stagecraft is so limited that it just can't imitate the devices of the screen." At the end of the essay, Hitchcock triumphantly declares that the cinema is the only resource that will popularize Shakespeare in the future. To the question of "what is going to popularize Shakespeare in England?" Hitchcock answers, "I am afraid Mr. Granville-Barker will never admit it. The answer is — The Cinema."

Looking at the debate after seventy years, it cannot be denied that things did turn in favour of what Hitchcock had predicted. As films are fundamentally a visual medium, verbal images in Shakespearean films are inevitably transformed into visual language, and filmmakers of popular Shakespearean films such as Kenneth Branagh and Baz Luhrmann no longer feel any constraints in such translation, nor do they doubt a film's capacity to approach a greater audience. However, even under such circumstances, there is a last stronghold of verbal expressiveness in Shakespearean plays that seems to resist being utterly subordinated to the encroachment of visual images. This is, the soliloquies.

Soliloquy is a highly artificial stage convention in which a character gives a long speech alone on the stage. According to Mary Z. Maher, it can be spoken either as a direct address to the audience or as an internal meditation on stage. Directly or indirectly, the words establish an intimate psychological relationship between an actor and the audience, making it a highlight of the stage production.

However, the soliloquy raises some problems when it is to be assimilated into the mis-en-scene of realistic Shakespearean films. In the first place, as Sarah Hatchuel points out, "[soliloquy] means a long vocal sequence delivered by one single person, which is far from normative in the cinema." (Hatchuel 75) Soliloquy compromises shot/reverse shot, for there is no one in the scene who can be the recipient of the words or make any reaction. Moreover, if spoken directly to the camera, it destroys the self-contained realistic illusion of the diegesis, an act hardly acceptable to the aesthetic of mainstream cinema. The soliloquies are, after all, the unwanted relics of stage production which disturb the realistic aesthetic of mainstream Shakespearean film, yet cannot be done away with because of their Shakespearean hallmark.

The following essay is an attempt to analyze how filmmakers actually treat the soliloquies in their realistic film adaptations of Shakespearean plays. In order to consider the effects that different treatments make, six film versions of *Hamlet* have been selected as a case in point. These are films by: Lawrence Olivier (1948), Grigori Kozintsev (1964), Tony Richardson (1969), Franco Zeffirelli (1990), Kenneth Branagh (1996), and Michael Almereyda (2000). How these filmmakers, whose film aesthetic is as varied as their nationalities, struggled to assimilate soliloquy into their films reveals the fact that Shakespearean words are tenacious enough to make Barker's aforementioned solution superfluous.

## 2. The Voice-Over: Olivier, Kozintsev, Almereyda

To say that soliloquies and film are fundamentally incongruous does not signify that the latter is without a means to assimilate the former. The most conventional device in incorporating the Shakespearean soliloquy into a realistic mis-en-scene in the film is to use the voice-over: asynchronized speech dubbed on a previously filmed image. Laurence Olivier's 1948 version of *Hamlet*, where three

soliloquies are spoken, utilizes the device in two soliloquies, "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt," (I. ii. 129-158) and "To be, or not to be" (III. i. 56-90).

A soliloquy spoken through a voice-over is generally considered to be an internal monologue of the person on the screen and Olivier himself was well aware of this effect. He observes that, "it seemed the most natural thing in the world to have Hamlet's soliloquies as words in his head" (Olivier 290) and the sequence of Hamlet's first soliloquy fully displays this idea of "words in Hamlet's head." In Olivier's version, the camera first films Hamlet with a long shot. He is left alone after Claudius' public announcement of his marriage with Gertrude and his desolate physical posture expresses his internal suffering caused by his mother's infidelity. When the camera captures Hamlet's tormented face in a close-up, his constrained voice begins to narrate his inner distress. Except for the occasional outburst of emotion, where he actually voices his anger with words like "nay not two", his lips do not move so that what he narrates is considered to be the voice of his mind, heard only by the audience. As for the "To be" soliloquy, Olivier has Hamlet speak most of it aloud, but in the part where Hamlet meditates about suicide, the voice-over narrates his private thoughts, allowing the audience to access his interior thoughts.

As it is evident from the fact that these internal monologues are only heard by the audience, the voice-over is a faithful filmic translation of the structure of a soliloquy on stage. By assigning two different spaces for words and images, the voice-over ensures the priority of words in conveying the meaning, while keeping the realistic illusion of the image intact. As Mary Ann Doane says, "the voice displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible: the "inner life" of the character."(Doane 168) The subjective voice reveals what the objective image on the screen cannot depict, so the voice subordinates the image by "turning the body 'inside-out'."(168) However, a close analysis of Olivier's sequences reveals the fact his film suffers from a paradoxical situation in which the priority

of the words will be undermined if the image reiterates what the voice is saying about. In Olivier's sequences, the inner distress that Hamlet's subjective voice depicts through the voice-over is objectively portrayed by the visual image of his suffering face, making what the voice says redundant. Here, the voice does not turn the body "inside out", for the body itself has already betrayed what the voice reveals. It is true that Olivier succeeds in making the voice-over a cinematic equivalent of the soliloquy on stage, but his sequences fall short of utilizing the device to full effect, for the image and the sound are never contradictory in his *Hamlet*.

The deadlock of Olivier's static treatment of the soliloquy was what Grigori Kozintsev had to overcome in his 1964 version of *Hamlet*, where Hamlet speaks all four soliloquies through the voice-over. Kozintsev's Hamlet is caught in a claustrophobic castle and is always surrounded by Claudius's men, making his interiority, which is conveyed through the voice-over, a last refuge of his freedom. Concerning the shooting plan of the first soliloquy, Kozintsev mentioned that "loneliness in a crowd seemed to [him] to be more tragic" so the sequence was planned to be shot in the following way:

The first soliloquy occurs in the bustle of a crowd with its bumps and jolts...the camera can go to the heart of the crowd, to the whirling epicentre of its life, can come close to a person and look him directly in the face. The sound track can combine the quiet inner monologue with the commotion of voices and the noise of celebration. (Kozintsev 192)

In the sequence of the first soliloquy, the image on the screen shows Hamlet silently walking around the lively feast of Claudius' court, while his voice utters his inner discontent through the voice-over. The image shows Hamlet calmly hovering around the crowded ball room but his voice discloses what the buoyant mise-en-scene cannot describe, making a polyphonic effect of the words and the image. Far from being undermined by the visual images, the sharp contrast of sight and sound in Kozintsev's sequence evinces the primary function of Shakespearean

words in conveying meaning, an effect that was not realized in Olivier's version.

It is noteworthy that the same polyphonic effect is also attained in the "To be" soliloquy sequence of Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*, which is located in 20th century Manhattan. In the sequence, when Hamlet's voice-over starts murmuring about his own inability to take action, the visual image depicts him walking through the Action Movie aisle of a video store. The visual image is that of a young man who is completely at home in the modern technology-oriented Manhattan, but his voice reveals his sense of alienation in such a society. Like Kozintsev's sequence, Almereyda's voice-over turns Hamlet's body "inside out", letting words reveal what the visual images cannot portray.

Almereyda's handling of the soliloquy through the voice-over becomes most interesting when the film juxtaposes Hamlet's video diary, which is shot in grainy black and white, with his voice-over monologue. In the film, Hamlet is portrayed as an amateur video cameraman who continues to record his private thoughts in his video diary. As Samuel Crowl points out, "Hamlet's video diary reflects the fractured and tormented state of Hamlet's soul and imagination"(Crowl 194) and the audience is drawn into his interiority as soon as the film starts. In the opening sequence of the film, Almereyda first depicts the cold landscape of Manhattan and then cuts to Hamlet's video diary, which consists of various fragmentary images, such as his own figure, a clip of a monster cartoon and military footage. Over such images, Hamlet's voice narrates his disillusion with mankind with words taken from Hamlet's exchange with Rozencrants. ("I have of late lost all my mirth" II. ii. 294) Noteworthy here is the fact that, while Almereyda utilizes both the voice-over and video diary to represent Hamlet's interiority aurally and visually, it is the words that preside over the fragmentary images of Hamlet's interiority. The voice controls and connects the scattered visual fragments of Hamlet's interiority and gives a coherence to his bleak isolation. It is true that Almereyda's version is eloquent in visual language but, at the same time,

the film makes the visual images dependent on the words when conveying the bleak urban isolation of Hamlet's interiority.

### 3. The Theatrical Treatment: Richardson, Zeffirelli, Branagh

While being the most effective means to handle soliloquies, the voice-over has its own limitation, for it can only accommodate the internal monologue of the character. In fact, as Bernard Beckerman points out, "the introspective soliloquy is rare" in Shakespearean plays and "not only in character are the bulk of the soliloquies nonintrospective, but also in style they are extroverted." (Beckerman 184) Most of these extroverted soliloquies have rhetorical styles, such as apostrophe or interrogation, to enable the actors to speak the words. Such rhetorical style may make the soliloquy a highlight of the theatrical production, but it is totally anomalous as a style for internal monologue. In order to accommodate such soliloquies, the filmmaker has to contrive some other device besides the voice-over.

The most frequently used device for filming the extroverted soliloquies is to make it a speech act in which a character speaks his thoughts aloud and shoot the long vocal sequence with a single shot. Tony Richardson's 1969 version of *Hamlet*, which was originally a theatrical production at the Roundhouse in London, is the typical example of filming such extroverted soliloquy in a theatrical way.

It must be noted that speaking the soliloquy directly to the audience in a theatre came into fashion around the 1960s with Peter Hall's 1965 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*. In the production, David Warner's Hamlet directly interrogated the audience with his soliloquy as if he were in a public meeting, a style that was well-tuned to the fervent political climate of the time. Not only Hall but another influential RSC director, John Barton, also set a high value on the direct address of the soliloquy. Barton comments on its efficacy as follows:

There are very few absolute rules with Shakespeare, but I personally believe

that it's right ninety-nine times out of a hundred to share a soliloquy with the audience...The actor must open himself to his audience, and make them think with him because he needs to share his problems. In dialogue a character reaches out to another character and in a soliloquy a character reaches out to the audience. There's no great difference between the two. The moral is simple. An actor must make the audience listen and follow the story line of the thoughts. (Barton 117-127)

Richardson's Roundhouse theatre production of *Hamlet* was evidently following the footsteps of Hall and Barton, and his Hamlet, played by Nicol Williamson, directly spoke to the audience that surrounded him in a theatre-in-the-round situation. In translating his theatrical production into film, Richardson makes no effort to visualize a realistic *mis-en-scène* of Elsinore castle and the film is shot in what Jack Jorgens calls a "theatrical mode." According to Jorgens, a "theatrical mode" uses "film as a transparent medium...[that has] the look and feel of a performance worked out for a static theatrical space and a live audience" (Jorgens 7) As such, Richardson's Hamlet in the film version also speaks his soliloquy directly to the camera, as if the camera itself were the live audience that he is facing.

Though it is interesting as an experiment, Richardson's film version exposes the fundamental difference between film and theatre, revealing the crucial fact that what was effective in a live theatre performance does not necessarily bring about the same effect in a different medium. When Hamlet delivers the soliloquy in this film, the camera tensely focuses on his face, representing the intense attention that the audience would surely pay to his words in the theatre. But in fact, the theatrical force of Hamlet's words is not effectively translated into the visual medium of Richardson's film, for the director seems to have forgotten what André Bazin has pointed out concerning the basic difference about the two media: "in contrast to the stage the space of the screen is centrifugal...[and] the dramatic

force of the text, instead of being gathered up in the actor, dissolves without echo into the cinematic ether." (Bazin 105) Williamson's performance as Hamlet, especially his deliverance of the first soliloquy, is subtle and thrilling enough, and Richardson's camera intently focuses on his face while he speaks the soliloquy. However, though the audience is at first gripped with the masterly articulation of Hamlet's words, the fixed camera gradually strains and dissipates the attention of the audience during this sequence. Far from stimulating our desire to see more, Richardson freezes his camera on Hamlet's face and makes it a mere passive recorder of Hamlet's verbal articulation. The result is an effect equivalent to that of "dead theatre", an effect that Jorgens has warned the theatrical mode of Shakespearean film is likely to achieve.

The challenging task of retaining the theatrical force of extroverted soliloquy on film has been tackled separately by Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh, both of whom make their Hamlet speak the soliloquy without looking at the camera. Zeffirelli's Hamlet, played by Mel Gibson, is not a meditating intellectual but a passionate man of action, a type that Gibson has repeatedly played in his previous action films. His soliloquies are spoken as emotional outbursts, as in the case of his first soliloquy which is spoken as a reaction to a kiss from a joyful Gertrude who afterwards runs down the stairs to join Claudius for a horse ride. Disgusted by his mother's frivolity, Hamlet begins to express his anger and his wish for self-slaughter in the "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" soliloquy. The camera captures Hamlet's outburst with a medium close-up shot but when he turns his eyes to the window and sees his mother, Zeffirelli skillfully edits the cheery shot of Gertrude's promenade into the gloomy sequence of Hamlet's soliloquy. In Zeffirelli's version, the long sequence of Hamlet's soliloquy is undauntedly cut into short fragments so that there can be an interplay of words and images. Significantly, Zeffirelli attempts to "naturalize" the theatrical performance of the soliloquy within the cinematic diegesis, but his attempt inevitably undermines the

impact of Gibson's acting. Though the actor is given an opportunity to demonstrate his performing skill, for Zeffirelli, the realistic mise-en-scene of the diegesis is far more important than the integrity of the actor's performance.

Kenneth Branagh's approach to the soliloquy is totally different from that of Zeffirelli. In the full text version of *Hamlet* that he both directed and acted in, Branagh shoots the soliloquy in a single long take which generally extends over four or five minutes, never interrupting the continuous flow of his own performance as an actor. His is the version which lays strong emphasis on the dynamic acting rhythm of an actor, and his approach can be categorized as the "theatrical" mode of Shakespearean film by definition. Nonetheless, unlike Tony Richardson, Branagh is careful enough to avoid the stagnating effect of the extreme close-up. His camera does not stand still but keeps apace with Branagh's performance and closely follows the movement that he makes. Significantly, Branagh takes advantage of his double role as a director and an actor, experimenting both sides for a more appropriate way of rendering the soliloquy in the film.

Branagh's treatment of the soliloquy can be categorized roughly as theatrical and filmic. These styles are closely related to his double role as a director and an actor. The former style is evident when Branagh the actor outweighs Branagh the director, while the latter style is favoured when Branagh makes much of his organizing role as a director. The first soliloquy "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt," and the third soliloquy "O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!" (II. ii. 547) are the typical examples of Branagh's theatrical approach to the soliloquy. In these soliloquies, Hamlet displays a wide range of feelings through words and actions, and Branagh's camera avidly tracks his movements. However, by making the actor's performance the main feature of the sequence, Branagh's camerawork in these soliloquies is rather pedestrian and uninteresting.

Branagh's true experiment in merging his stage actor-oriented quality and the

filmic mode can be found in his treatment of the fourth soliloquy, "To be or not to be," (III. i. 56), the sequence that Samuel Crowl designates as Branagh's signature shot. The scene is set in the grand hall of Claudius' court which is lined with mirrored doors. In this sequence, Hamlet stands in front of a mirror and begins to speak the "To be" soliloquy. The camera takes in Hamlet's image in the mirror over his shoulder and, in the latter half of the soliloquy, the camera captures the mirrored image with an extreme close-up. Branagh inserts a short reaction-shot of Claudius when Hamlet says "bare bodkin" and pulls his dagger out but, besides this, the sequence is shot in a long sustained shot as is customary of Branagh's directorial style.

What is noteworthy here is how Branagh ingeniously "naturalizes" the soliloquy into his realistic mise-en-scene by making it a dialogue with his own image in the mirror. Unlike Orson Wells, whose "naturalization" of the soliloquy consisted of dividing it among different characters to make it into a dialogue, Branagh tries to accommodate it without transforming the text itself. Taking cue from the meditative nature of the soliloquy, Branagh turns the "To be" soliloquy into Hamlet's self-questioning and visualizes it as an interrogation with his own image in the mirror. The words of his soliloquy are no longer spoken in a void, but have a recipient in the mirror. Moreover, before this sequence, Claudius and Polonius have hid themselves behind the mirrored door in front of which Hamlet is questioning himself in order to eavesdrop the "nunnery scene". The interesting point about Branagh's treatment of the soliloquy can also be found in how he turns Hamlet's words into an indirect threat to the King. Though Hamlet is unaware of Claudius' presence, Claudius fully understands what Hamlet is considering in his tense self-questioning on whether he should endure his misfortune or whether he should coolly act out his revenge. This effect could not have been achieved had Branagh discarded his theatrical quality and made Hamlet speak his soliloquy through a voice-over. Nor could it have been realized had he resorted to static

camera work and had he not included Claudius' reaction shot. Here, Branagh shows that he is an accomplished auteur of realistic Shakespeare film, one who has full command of both the cinematic medium and Shakespearean text.

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