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Adaptation, Shakespeare and World Cinema

Mark Thornton Burnett

There has been considerable discussion in recent years about what terms best describe the relationship between the Shakespearean 'original' and its filmic reinvention. For Julie Sanders, 'adaptation' is a particularly useful term in that it signals an 'attempt to make texts "relevant" ... via ... proximation and updating' and a 'transposition' that 'takes a text from one genre and delivers it to new audiences ... in cultural, geographical and temporal terms'.[1] Another body of opinion holds that no one taxonomy can encompass the multifarious ways in which Shakespeare is recast in new forms: there is no all-purpose expression, the argument runs, not least because film itself frequently blurs the distinctions that we, as critics, seem so anxious to uphold.[2] In my own work on Shakespeare and world cinema, I favour a terminology of adaptation, contrasting this, where necessary, with citation or quotation, while recognizing that any descriptor operates with a degree of flexibility. Is, for example, a Shakespeare film an adaptation when not explicitly billing itself in this fashion? In a sense, it is unimportant if this kind of identification is avoided, for, very often, it is via the mode of reception – the field of circulation – that a particular film product takes on Shakespearean qualifications. There can, then, be no fixed hierarchy between a play and its surrogate language or languages. In the particular case of Shakespeare on film in his non-Anglophone manifestations, where there is no English lexicon to attend to, we are invited to be responsive to other verbal registers, to narrative strategies and to emotional contours. These elements recall the plays, but not with any precise equivalence, meaning that we concentrate not so much on issues of nomenclature as questions about how categories of the Shakespearean are mobilized. Or, to put the point in another way, we also do well in adaptation studies to reflect

on the extent to which Shakespeare, variously explained and capaciously imagined, functions in terms of cultural (and economic) capital. A further important premise is that the work of adaptation is creative. Art inheres in the act of translation and in its attendant multiplication of meanings. As Colin MacCabe states, a key principle is that through the 'adaptation … process' films accrue in 'real value'.[3] When a film is generated from a play, a new text is fashioned out of an old one, and we are sensitized to how both interrelate. Fredric Jameson sees this as inherently competitive, proposing that 'the individual works, either as external adaptations or as internal echo chambers of the various media, be grasped as allegories of the never-ending and unresolvable struggles for primacy'.[4] It is as a two-way struggle, with points of contestation and complementarity in between, that we can begin to understand how plays and films reinforce and enlighten each other.

In what follows, I apply some of these understandings to a discussion of *Haider* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2014), an Indian and Hindi-language adaptation of *Hamlet*. As far as temporal context is concerned, the film unfolds in 1995, while the cultural and geographical setting is Kashmir (the territory whose ownership is still disputed between Indian and Pakistan) at the height of a fraught and critical moment in relations between the two countries. This reworking is multiply felicitous. Haider/Hamlet's rebranding as a student of the 'revolutionary poets of British India' places him in a resistant category as a potential opponent of Indian nationalism even as it also opens up questions about allegiance and affiliation. In a comparable way, Kashmir locations, such as the Jhelum river and the Martand Sun Temple, adorned with statues of the river gods (the 'Bismil' song and dance number, or the play-within-the-play, takes place here), help to highlight water metaphors and concerns touching upon cleansing and corruption (bodies of 'militants' are dumped in the river, leading to Khurrum/Claudius' despair that he is 'drowning in guilt'). Language prompted by *Hamlet* is vital to the 'transposition' overall. The play's preoccupation with acting, deception and

drama is vividly conjured in the film's exploration of the plight of the 'disappeared', in the figuration of Ghazala/Gertrude as an emotionally needy user of 'theatrics' and in scenes taking place at a video store (where film titles, either 'remakes' or those concerned with types of 'terrorism', provide ironic models of action). In particular, the archetypal Hamletian metaphor of Denmark as a prison is recast in *Haider* in a montage made up of border posts, grilles and detention centres. And then, in keeping with its creative approach, *Haider* invests in language unique to itself, as when Haider/Hamlet, in a variation on the Shakespearean soliloquy, parodically delivers phrases from the Armed Forces Special Powers Act at a Srinagar traffic intersection. As part of its narrative strategy, *Haider* re-orders action and amplifies characters. 'To be, or not to be' appears in more than one guise, arguably the most powerful being in the political slogan, 'Do we exist or not?', whose barbed accusation points up an aggressive Indian policy directed towards the liquidation of so-called political extremists. Linked to this idea, the film entertains not one but several 'ghosts', ventilating, as it does so, issues around belonging, identity and 'home'. Indeed, variations on the latter motif – indexed in statements such as 'I have to go home' and 'You are at home' – are crucial to *Haider*'s anatomization of the territorial dispute that undergirds its imaginative possibility. How, then, is the Shakespearean functioning in this adaptation? As the reception history of *Haider* indicates – dividing opinion and being banned from screenings in Pakistan – the film touches a raw nerve. Yet, as a number of its adaptive strategies indicate, from the figuration of Halaal/Old Hamlet as a doctor to the discovery of Roodhaar/The Ghost as a multi-faith symbolic spokesperson ('I'm the soul … a temple and a mosque … Shia … Sunni … Hindu'), the film's loyalties are in fact with a movement away from hostilities and towards the embrace of a Gandhi-inspired pacifism. Notably, the repetition in the film's dialogue of a non-violence mantra illuminates a reversal of the Shakespearean imperative to revenge. The capacity of Shakespeare to reach local and international audiences suggests not just the power

of world cinema but also the ways in which adaptation has a purchase in a reformative political consciousness. Spattered with signs of a bloody conflict, the snow-covered cemetery of the final stages is not the 'home' to which this adaptation of Shakespeare aspires.

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[1] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 19-20.

[2] See Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, 'General Introduction', in Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier, eds, *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A Critical Anthology of Plays from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 2-3.

[3] Colin MacCabe, 'Introduction: Bazinian Adaptation', in Colin MacCabe, Kathleen Murray and Rick Warner, eds, *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 8.

[4] Fredric Jameson, 'Afterword: Adaptation as a Philosophical Problem', in MacCabe, Murray and Warner, eds, *True*, p. 232.