

ELIZABETHAN STAGE VS. CINEMA
IN KENNETH BRANAGH'S *HAMLET*

JACEK FABISZAK

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

The aim of this paper is to discuss certain uses of Elizabethan staging in Branagh's film version of *Hamlet* as well as their cinematic transformations. Two phenomena in particular will be analysed and given special attention: on the one hand, the physical conditions of the scenery and, on the other, the metadrama (and metatheatre, with elements of metacinema) as an employment and travesty of Elizabethan theatricality. It appears that the shape of the throne room (or the main hall which is occasionally used for that purpose) of Branagh's Elsinore bears some resemblance to the Elizabethan theatre (both public and private) and the metadrama often draws on Elizabethan stage techniques. Since Branagh's production is a fully fledged film in its own right, not just a version of theatrical performance, an attempt will be made to discuss the use of these phenomena in the cinematic system of signs.

Michèle Willems (1987: 92) aptly characterises basic semiotic affinities between film and theatre:

Superficially, the cinema, television and the theatre all appear to rely on the layering of signs to communicate with their publics. Viewer and audience alike must apprehend a variety of signs simultaneously: aural signs such as words spoken by actors, music and other sounds; visual signs such as costumes, setting, lighting and sometimes special effects. But there the similarity ends, because the respective importance and status of these signs vary enormously from one medium to the next. On the stage all other signs are subordinated to speech (in monologue, dialogue or aside), while on the screen words are secondary; the dialogue follows the image. It is a commonplace to say that the theatre is an aural medium whereas the cinema is primarily a visual one ...

This voice can be supplemented with the opinions frequently expressed by critics and directors who emphasise, on the one hand, the fluidity of action as typical of both the Elizabethan stage and screen (cf. Coursen (1995: 5) and Pilkington (1994: 163)), and – on the other – the intrinsic realism and representationalism of the latter medium as opposed to the former (see, for example, Fuegi (1972: 39)). Hence, the major problem that all directors of Shakespearean films need to face is how to accommodate the histrionic nature of Shakespearean text in a fundamentally non-verbal, image-dependant medium.¹ In other words, how to translate one system of signs into another.

One of the ways in which this problem has been handled (also resulting from the temporal constraints put on film) is the selection of fragments of the original text.² It is particularly important in cases when a signal, obvious in terms of the semiotics of the Elizabethan stage, appears redundant and awkward on film. For example, when Polonius exclaims “O, I am slain.” (3.4.23)³ after Hamlet attacks him in the bedchamber scene, it was a signal to Shakespeare’s audience that Polonius is dead beyond doubt. A present-day viewer, however, does not expect Polonius to remain alive after Hamlet stabs him several times (as does Branagh in his film) and therefore needs no confirmation from the most concerned party. If a director decides to have his/her Polonius utter this line, it may then be difficult to present it convincingly in cinematic terms. It may even cause problems in a theatrical performance, more word-oriented as it is, although here the audience’s response can be considered and incorporated into the overall design of the staging. Live audience is a missing element in the case of a film production;⁴ thus, the film director and actor need to decide on how the theatricality of Shakespearean texts can be rendered in a film.⁵

In the case of Branagh’s cinemascope version of *Hamlet*, the director ventures to accommodate a drama intended on a non-illusionistic stage to a realist

¹ As Jonathan Miller put it, “You have to find some counterpart of the unfurnished stage that Shakespeare wrote for without, in fact, necessarily reproducing a version of the Globe theatre” (Hallinan 1981: 135).

² Considering the unstable nature of the Elizabethan dramas which are continually being amended and changed, such a practice is critically justified.

³ All references to the text of *Hamlet* are to the 1982 edition (Jenkins 1982).

⁴ One must remember however that watching a film in a cinema is a communal experience slightly resembling the theatrical experience; also actors sometimes act for the sake of technicians operating the equipment on a film set (Willems 1987: 93).

⁵ If the convention of a character announcing his/her dying is used in a film or a present-day, traditional theatrical production, it can and often does successfully serve to express the character’s acceptance of death and thus add to his/her dignity. Polonius, of whom Hamlet so often made fun, achieves this special dignity in the face of death (a peculiarly striking example of such an effect of a character’s acknowledgement of his/her death (an effect that is powerful both on stage and screen) is the scene when Mercutio/Ned Alleyn dies in a staging of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Oscar-winning *Shakespeare in Love*).

film (according to Jorgens’ (1977: 7) taxonomy of Shakespearean films) without resorting to any cuts or substantial rearrangements in the text. Consequently, it was impossible to avoid the problem of typically Elizabethan stage conventions by rejecting fragments of the text; it seems that Branagh decided to translate them into cinematic signs, often retaining the original Elizabethan spirit in doing so.⁶

Similar to the Elizabethan practices is his treatment of the *mise en scène*, costumes and the temporal setting of the action of the film. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was enacted in costumes that were modelled on the apparel worn by its audiences. Elizabethan producers were, in a sense, free from recreating the historical or geographical details.⁷ Likewise, Branagh (following many other directors of *Hamlet*) is free to have his Hamlet live in any historical period. Exercising his freedom the director makes a surprising choice, though. The 19th century setting differs drastically from the more traditional historical locations: the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or even the director’s own times. One may also wonder why Branagh chose winter and not any other season of the year (which leads to clashes with the text – e.g., when Gertrude describes the garlands of flowers that Ophelia made shortly before her drowning, 4.7.165-170), but this seems to be concordant with the epic grandiosity and distancing devices employed in the film.

The epic quality of Branagh’s *Hamlet*, emphasised by the use of cinemascope, long shots (particularly of the wintry vistas made to seem boundless), numerous cast (and a famous one) as well as the many extras is reminiscent of the Russian 19th century epic novel.⁸ This climate is also generated by the neoclassical shape of the Duke of Marlborough’s palace. At the same time, however, Branagh skilfully interweaves the large-scale scenes with ones typically Elizabethan in tone. For example, Fortinbras’s army is fully presented only in the scene of the attack on Elsinore; when it passes through Denmark on its way to Poland, it is significantly reduced to Fortinbras and one of his captains (while the main force is only convincingly hinted at in the brief scene when the first line emerges from the fog). It thus conforms to the principle of synecdoche which underlies Elizabethan stage productions.

Another instance of Branagh’s acknowledging of Elizabethan theatre is the single guard posted in front of the palace gates who looks so insignificant both

⁶ At the same time his film also refers to the tradition of film adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays (*Hamlet* in particular) and may be treated as a voice in the theory and practice of presenting Elizabethan drama on the screen.

⁷ An interesting comment on the use of historical times on the Elizabethan stage and their use today in film/TV productions is offered by Jonathan Miller in an interview conducted by Tim Hallinan (1981: 136): Miller emphasises the differences in the Elizabethan and present-day perspectives of ancient Rome.

⁸ This has been pointed out to me by Anna Cetera and Małgorzata Fabiszak whose precious remarks on Branagh’s film I would like to gratefully acknowledge.

in the opening scene and particularly in the scene of Fortinbras's attack on Elsinore⁹ when the contrast is so painfully sharp. Arguably, the image of a whole army against a single guard is, in a sense, a parody of the Elizabethan convention of substituting a single soldier for an army (a convention also evoked in the scene of Fortinbras's passage through Denmark).

Not only does Branagh follow Elizabethan practices in his free choice of the temporal setting. The *mise en scène* is also reminiscent of the physical conditions of Elizabethan theatre. The shape and structure of the throne room (which actually serves as the stage proper where a lot of action takes place) may strike one as modelled on Elizabethan stages. It is especially similar to such theatres as *The Fortune* (square in shape) and the indoor Blackfriars (rectangular); also, it resembles the kind of temporary stage raised in tavern yards. It seems, however, that if Branagh indeed thought of the Elizabethan stage while locating the action of his film, it was not any particular stage that he had in mind; it is the general shape of Shakespearean theatre that is recreated in the throne room of Branagh's Elsinore.¹⁰

The rectangle of the throne room is surrounded by an upper gallery; on the floor, against one of the shorter walls there is a dais behind which there are doors. The gallery together with the "pit" in front and on the sides of the dais/stage forms the auditorium. Although the dais is not consistently used (e.g., in Claudius's first speech when he addresses the court, 1.2.1-128; and – in part – during Hamlet's "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt" soliloquy, 1.2.129-159), the "pit" is littered with fragments of scaffoldings which will be eventually used to turn the hall into a proper theatrical space in the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*. Throughout the film, the area of the throne room is employed as both acting space and auditorium. An interesting aspect of its use and its openness are the many doors through which it is accessible; arguably, it seems that the doors lead to conventionally marked locations. Furthermore, the doors in Elsinore seem to play another significant role: almost any locale in the palace is equipped with at least a *pair* of doors for actors' entrances and exits (usually, different doors are used to symbolically mark an entrance and an exit – an Elizabethan practice), including such places as characters' bedrooms. The plethora of doors which signals the openness and exposure to prying eyes so characteristic of an (Elizabethan) stage is forcibly illustrated in the scene of the chase of Hamlet after the killing of Polonius.

⁹ This scene, showing Norwegian troops running on the snow-covered yard of the Danish palace, echoes shots presenting the attack on the tsar's Winter Palace from Eisenstein's *October*.

¹⁰ Although scholars rightly stress the diversity of Elizabethan theatres, it is possible to make a list of some general structural features that they shared.

The use of the doors in Branagh's film can be compared to their function in the Elizabethan theatre: it is through the doors that the audience files into the auditorium and it is through the doors that actors make their entrances, as if through the stage doors situated in the tiring house. These doors also served another purpose: eavesdroppers could be placed behind the curtains obscuring the doorways. Branagh's use of this convention is ingenuous: he equips Elsinore's hall with numerous mirror-glass doors, transparent from one side (Venetian mirror), through which Claudius and Polonius can both *hear* and *see* what happens on the stage proper. Thus, the scene simultaneously retains its metatheatricality and is naturally cinematic.

The Venetian mirror doors separate the throne room from small chambers adjacent to it which serve as the discovery area (the idea of a small, private room as a locale for presenting both soliloquies and subplot scenes is also evident in Hamlet's second soliloquy, "O what a rogue and peasant slave am I!", 2.2.544-601, and in the scene of Polonius giving instructions to Reynaldo to spy on Laertes, 2.1). The doors not only allow Branagh to convincingly present eavesdropping in a scenery without curtains but also lead the viewer to associate them with the Venetian mirror windows in police stations through which interrogated suspects are observed or suspects identified. Such windows are known to a cinema-goer from many police movies; as a result, through this metacinematic manipulation, the viewer perceives the "To Be" and the nunnery scenes in terms of interrogation – first of Hamlet, then of Claudius and Polonius (when Hamlet realizes the presence of the eavesdroppers and then locates their hiding, he not only pretends madness but also purposely maltreats Ophelia miserably to test the eavesdroppers).

A reversal of roles occurs in the Claudius-at-prayer scene (3.3) which follows the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* (the nunnery scene precedes it): here it is Hamlet who watches Claudius unaware of his presence. The scene presents also a moral judgement marked histrionically: one character (the observer/viewer) passes a moral judgement on another (the observed). Locating the scene in a chapel, in what looks like a confessional box, Branagh stresses the moral and religious dimension of the scene and provides a typically filmic justification of Hamlet's decision to refrain from killing Claudius. The "Now might I do it pat" speech (3.3.73-96) is delivered in a very emblematic context, one that would remind a reader of Shakespeare of emblematic scenes in Elizabethan theatre (cf. Doeblér 1974: 96-113) albeit translated into codes that are cinematic and directed at a contemporary viewer: Claudius and Hamlet make confessions which are not heard by a priest as the middle space in the confessional box is empty. Since the monologues are conventionally delivered for the sake of the audience/viewers it is the viewers who are thus placed as judges of the characters' morals. Thus, the confessional box becomes another stage: the viewers are watching Hamlet watching Claudius.

Hamlet's position as an entrepreneur and actor, the ease with which he moves between the stage and auditorium, and his capacity as a stage manager are most notably manifested in the organisation and staging of *The Murder of Gonzago*. The rehearsal and the performance both take place in the area already indicated as the theatrical space: the throne room. The "Rugged Pyrrus" speech (2.2.464-514) is delivered by an actor who – both on and off screen – is regarded as one of the best and most celebrated actors, Charlton Heston.¹¹ His recitation is illustrated with a film in which another well-known and revered Shakespearean actor makes an appearance, Sir John Gielgud. This ostensibly metacinematic element is significant for two reasons: not only is it a kind of homage paid by Branagh to two great actors but the film-within-the-film is actually set within a theatrical performance in a film; in this way Branagh combines the Elizabethan metatheatre with present-day metacinema. It should also be noted that the Troy film (i.e. the film within) is, unlike most of the flashbacks presenting Fortinbras, Old Hamlet or Yorick, a voice one: the text is supported by both visual and aural effects.¹²

The Murder of Gonzago is performed on a stage that is stylised (as much as the auditorium). It resembles the Elizabethan stage in that it is accessible from three sides, the line between the auditorium and the stage is not clearly marked and can be easily crossed (by Hamlet and Polonius). Interestingly, whatever is said on the stage, not only the actors' words but also Hamlet's exchanges with Polonius and Claudius, is treated as an element of the theatre and met with the audience's response. Conversely, when Hamlet sits by Ophelia in the auditorium and talks to her in a voice that is audible by the audience, the spectators try to hide the fact that they hear every single word.

The special position of the monarch in the theatrical space is in Branagh's film marked by seating Claudius and Gertrude in the uppermost transverse gallery suspended over the throne room. In this way, the king physically dominates the spectators and the actors; his is the central position that everybody literally looks up to. Claudius's place, however, is not advantageous in terms of comfortably watching the play, which reminds one of the place occupied by royal spectators (e.g., Elizabeth I and James I) in the Elizabethan theatrical space.¹³

The gallery on which the king and the queen are placed is also noteworthy for another phenomenon: it is there that the spotlights are situated. The use of spotlights is quite surprising as their effect is invisible in the camera lens. It may

¹¹ Heston is also famous for directing and playing Shakespeare, especially the Roman plays, and the speech he delivers at Hamlet's request resembles a fragment of a Roman play.

¹² The silent flashbacks may be regarded as filmic equivalents of the Elizabethan dumb show, especially in the light of the dumb show prologue prefacing *The Murder of Gonzago*, also illustrated with such flashbacks.

¹³ It is noted by, *inter alia*, Alan H. Nelson (1997: 65).

be explained by Branagh's stressing the theatrical convention or stressing the theatricality of the space. Since the spotlights are redundant and both the stage and the auditorium (including the king's seat) are well lit and in the same degree, their function can be compared to the conventional use of torches on the Elizabethan stage to signal darkness/night (cf. Dessen 1984: 70-83). Significantly, when the king calls for light, he is actually given none as the convention is already broken and it can be treated as a gesture towards the viewers that they are on the film set again.

The last scenes of the film also contain some aspects of Elizabethan staging. The scenes are special in that it is here that the Fortinbras plot is merged with the Elsinore plot. The grim reality of Fortinbras's attack on Elsinore¹⁴ is imposed on the more theatrical context of the fencing match/duel (which encompasses the whole theatrical space, including the galleries). The illusion is thus shattered – the theatrical space is physically invaded by the more filmic *mise en scène* (the windows are broken by assaulting soldiers and the floor of the throne room is peopled with Norwegian troops entering through the mirror doors). In a way, the scene can be regarded as a violation of the play *Hamlet* (or the film within) by a new medium/genre (literally the old political order is replaced by a new regime). With Fortinbras's reaching for the crown the film came full circle: it is him who now occupies the central position in Elsinore, which – however – is less spectacular and histrionic than that held by Claudius in the opening of 1.2.

To conclude I would like to illustrate Branagh's occasionally playful use of some techniques employed on the Elizabethan stage with the shot of Hamlet's body laid in a coffin (this scene is actually missing in the text). It seems that here, too, Branagh draws on the principle of the Elizabethan theatrical tableaux based on widely recognised emblems. The image of Hamlet's body with his hands clasped on a sword may be reminiscent to the more traditional spectator of a figure of a knight; the modern movie-goer, however, will instantly recognise in it a reference to the symbol of the film industry and film's independence from the stage: the statuette of the Oscar.

¹⁴ The realistic presentation of war is reminiscent of the almost naturalistic *mise en scène* of Branagh's *Henry V* (cf. Hedrick's stress on the use of mud in the film (1997: 46-63). It is not only metacinematic but – being a reference to another film by the same director – cinematically intratextual as well.

REFERENCES

- Boose, Lynda E. – Richard Burt (eds.)
 1997 *Shakespeare, the movie*. London – New York: Routledge.
- Coursen, Herbert R.
 1995 "Shakespeare on film and television", *The Upstart Crow* 15: 4-16.
- Cox, John D. – David Scott Kastan (eds.)
 1997 *A new history of early English drama*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Davies, Anthony – Stanley Wells (eds.)
 1994 *Shakespeare and the moving image*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Dessen, Alan C.
 1984 *Elizabethan stage conventions and modern interpreters*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Doebler, John
 1974 *Shakespeare's speaking pictures*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Fuegi, John
 1972 "Explorations in no man's land: Shakespeare's poetry as theatrical film", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23, 1: 37-49.
- Hallinan, Tim
 1981 "Jonathan Miller on the Shakespeare plays", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32, 2: 134-145.
- Hedrick, Donald K.
 1997 "War is mud: Branagh's Dirty Harry V and the types of political ambiguity", in: Lynda E. Boose – Richard Burt (eds.), 45-66.
- Jenkins, Harold (ed.)
 1982 *Hamlet. The Arden Shakespeare*. New York – London: Methuen.
- Jorgens, Jack J.
 1977 *Shakespeare on film*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.
- Nelson, Alan H.
 1997 "The universities: Early staging in Cambridge", in: John D. Cox – David Scott Kastan (eds.), 59-67.
- Pilkington, Ace G.
 1994 "Zeffirelli's Shakespeare", in: Anthony Davies – Stanley Wells (eds.), 163-179.
- Willems, Michèle
 1987 "Verbal-visual, verbal-pictorial or textual-televisual? Reflections on the BBC Shakespeare series", *Shakespeare Survey* 39: 91-102.