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Hamlet and His Solution:

“How All Occasions” as Objective Correlative on Page and Screen

According to T.S. Eliot’s well-known critical essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” Hamlet—Shakespeare’s enigmatic prince of subjectivity—lacks what Eliot calls the “objective correlative” for his emotions: “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion,” as Eliot defines it; the “equivalence” of an emotion to that which precedes and produces it, resulting in the emotion’s “artistic ‘inevitability’” (92). Famously and sensationally, to Eliot this alleged absence of objective correlative makes *Hamlet* “most certainly an artistic failure” (90), yet *Hamlet* is widely regarded as one of Shakespeare’s greatest artistic successes in spite of, or even because of, the supposed impossibility of confining what Harold Bloom calls Hamlet’s “enigmatic malaise” (428) to the formulaic, the mechanistic, the linear. If Eliot and Bloom disagree profoundly on the artistic merit of *Hamlet*, they agree on the absence of equivalence, the lack of an adequate Hamlet equation, which Eliot implicitly desires and Bloom would almost certainly reject: “Hamlet’s spiritual despair transcends a father’s murder, a mother’s hasty remarriage, and all the miasma of Elsinore’s corruption,” Bloom writes, “transcend” here suggesting an expansive departure from correlative formula (430)—the same phenomenon Eliot negatively describes as “an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in *excess* of the facts as they appear” (92). Bloom goes on to passionately embrace the mystery not just of Hamlet’s malaise but of what some call Hamlet’s “sea-change,” the notable shift in his characterization which occurs somewhere between Act 4 and Act 5, perhaps while Hamlet is offstage at sea: “The crucial question becomes,” writes Bloom, “How ought we to characterize Hamlet’s melancholia in the first four acts, and how do we explain his escape from it into a high place in Act V, a place at last entirely his own, and something like a radically new mode of secular transcendence?” (430). A more crucial question, however, is not whether we *can* establish an objective correlative for Hamlet’s so-called sea-change—his

Act 4 “How all occasions” soliloquy from the Second Quarto can fit the bill quite nicely—but whether we *want* Hamlet to have a solution.

For those seeking an objective correlative for the Act 5 Hamlet, the most logical method for finding one is absurdly simple: if you want to understand how Hamlet behaves in Act 5, wouldn't you begin by looking to whatever he says last in Act 4? In many editions, this will bring the reader to Hamlet's seventh and final soliloquy, “How all occasions do inform against me,” in Act 4 Scene 4. The speech begins with a seemingly contradictory pull between opposing poles, a new “To be, or not to be,” the question which Hamlet will, in this soliloquy, finally answer: “all occasions” both “inform against” Hamlet and yet also “spur [his] dull revenge” (4.4.31-32), the latter phrase itself a play upon the contrast of sharpness-violence and dullness-inaction, a microcosm of the structure of the speech as a whole. Everything in Hamlet's life, in other words, accuses him of inaction even as it drives him onward toward revenge. The contemplation of dull inaction comes next, the “[b]estial oblivion” of a life of merely eating and sleeping (4.4.32-39): a soul-death and intellect-death, the oblivation of all but the physical form, and therefore a state of not-life and not-being, one of this soliloquy's framings of “not to be.” In this section is also introduced a sense of fate, a musing on the purpose of life: “Sure he that made us [...] / gave us not / That capability and godlike reason / To fust in us unused” (4.4.35-38): surely, Hamlet resolves, with our God-given intellect in the maker's image, we are made for greater things. The “live” in “I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do” (4.4.42-43) offers an early implication, to be expanded upon later, that whether prophetically or pragmatically (one does not typically live long after killing a king, after all) Hamlet views his revenge as a suicide mission; he lives to talk about revenge only because he has not yet achieved it. The next lines, “Sith I have cause and will and strength and means / To do't,” both complete the juxtaposition of not-doing versus doing—once more, a variant iteration of “To be, or not to be”—and form a transition to the next section of the speech as it moves from “dull” to “spur,” from oblivious inaction to sharpness and revenge.

Watching the army of Fortinbras march past him, Hamlet is moved to contemplate the nature of greatness, emphatically using “great,” “great,” and then “greatly” in three of the four consecutive lines which form the heart of the soliloquy, of Hamlet's decision, and of the reputedly elusive objective correlative for the “sea-change” itself:

Rightly to be great
 Is not to stir without great argument
 But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
 When honour's at the stake (4.4.52-55).

The key question here is whether Hamlet is being sincere or ironic, and the best answer is that he is, of course, both: appropriately for Hamlet the defiant trickster, Hamlet the outsider and observer, Hamlet the great questioner of the assumptions of the world, his life-altering revelation hinges upon an observation of human absurdity. Is this greatness? To take up a trivial cause for which to battle and die in the name of honor? And yet as “twenty thousand men” pass him by on the way to their “imminent death[s],” to fight outnumbered in a losing battle over a contested plot of land so insignificantly small that it has not even room enough to bury them all when they die for it (4.4.59-64), Hamlet is moved to “shame” for having much truer cause for action in the defense of honor and yet, beast-like, “let[ing] all sleep” (4.4.58). This soliloquy’s second framing of “not to be” is death, and yet in sharp contrast to “To be, or not to be,” the nature of the afterlife is now no longer a deterring consideration; “[w]hat dreams may come” (3.1.65) are never here at issue, because Hamlet resolves himself to die.

And so, after several fits and starts over the course of the play, Hamlet enters fully into the fallen world, the heart of the mortal coil of a time out of joint, moving from observer and commentator to participant; it takes the revelation of the doomed, transcendent folly of Fortinbras and the combined vagary and gravity of honor for Hamlet to finally harness the immense mental power of his “capability and godlike reason,” yoke it to both of his once-opposed forces of the noble and the absurd, and drive it entirely, unquestioningly, toward a monomania on bloody revenge. In his vow of vengeance which caps the soliloquy, “[m]y thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth” (4.4.65), Hamlet at last commits to perform the role of the hero of his own revenge tragedy. He becomes *fey*, in the old sense of the word—fated to die, with the implication of a foreknowledge of death and its accompanying mental shift—as “To be, or not to be” is no longer to him the question. Now he will be *and* not be; he will move from the non-being of inaction, the static world of bestial bodily survival, into the non-being of death, and in between the two he will *be*, not simply continue but truly live, now as an avenger and a man of honor, ultimately outstripping Fortinbras to the grave. In the Act 5 Hamlet there is a sense of fate, as though perhaps after

all he was “born to set it right” (1.5.187), yet a greater sense of free will to accept that fate: given by Horatio the opportunity to avoid a duel with Laertes which is unlikely to end well—“You will lose, my lord” (5.2.187), Horatio warns Hamlet in no uncertain terms—Hamlet refuses to turn away. Like Fortinbras and his twenty-thousand men marching boldly to their doom for far less cause, Hamlet is ready to live, to kill, and to die, and “[t]he readiness is all” (5.2.200).

If this rather straightforward reading of “How all occasions” can produce the objective correlative for the change in Hamlet which becomes apparent in Act 5, why would any production of *Hamlet*—Laurence Olivier’s excellent 1948 film, for example—leave it out? For one thing, *Hamlet*’s complicated textual history leaves much open to editorial interpretation. Multiple texts of *Hamlet* have survived, and modern editors are concerned particularly with the First Quarto (Q1), Second Quarto (Q2), and First Folio (F) texts; amongst these three texts are various elements which are either in conflict with one another or absent from the other two texts entirely, including the “How all occasions” soliloquy, which appears only in Q2 (Thompson and Taylor 8). Thus, as goes scholarly opinion on the authority of the Q2 text, so too in large part must go the theoretical legitimacy as to the inclusion of “How all occasions” as a vital part of *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* editor Philip Edwards contends that Q2 is an early version of the play and that “How all occasions” does not appear in the other extant texts because the speech was “ultimately rejected” by Shakespeare and cut from the script (Werstine 13-15), while years later Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor state in their Arden Third Series Revised Edition of *Hamlet* that they “have to concede that, if one were forced to choose just one of the three early texts of *Hamlet* as, on the balance of the evidence, the most likely to have authority, it would have to be Q2” (11). Given that, as even Thompson and Taylor’s carefully chosen words suggest, there is no consensus as to the importance of Q2, and that “How all occasions” has come to be a “frequent targe[t] of editing or elision” (Gamboa 1763), it is worthwhile to consider which productions choose to retain it, and why they do so.

One production which includes “How all occasions” and is effective in assigning it great significance is director Rodney Bennett’s 1980 BBC production of *Hamlet*, starring Derek Jacobi, part of the BBC’s television series of the complete plays of Shakespeare. Shot, as Mary Z. Maher describes them, as “a hybrid form of theatre and television,” the concept of the series was to “present the plays in the most straightforward manner possible, eschewing deliberate intellectual obfuscation and the use of gimmicks”

for an intended audience which included “people who in some cases had never before witnessed a Shakespearean production” as well as high school and university students (418-419): the kind of production and audience, in other words, which would be assumed to favor the straightforwardness of a clear motive, an objective correlative. Jacobi, who plays Hamlet in layers—the Vice-like antic veil, the frustrated rage simmering beneath—takes the minimalist route to portray the gravity of Hamlet’s “sea-change,” the contrast between Jacobi’s Hamlet in Act 4 Scene 4 as compared to Act 4 Scene 3 highlighted by a particularly stratified interpretation of Hamlet’s Scene 3 exchange with Claudius. It seems appropriate that both the “madness” and the “method” Polonius famously identifies in Hamlet’s speech (2.2.202-203) are on full, nearly simultaneous display during the discussion of where Hamlet hid Polonius’s body: Jacobi plays Hamlet’s “worm” lines to Claudius (Patrick Stewart), from “Not where he eats but where ‘a is eaten” through “A man may fish” (4.3.19-27), much as he plays his “sponge” exchange with Rosencrantz earlier in the scene: whatever we know lies beneath, he presents a convincing cover of agile metaphorical wordplay as disruptive nonsense. Yet early in his next line, “Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar” (4.3.29-30), he lets a knowing smile at Claudius’s growing suspicion dissolve, as he holds the king’s gaze, into a thinly veiled threat on Claudius’s life. For his last lines of the scene Jacobi returns to the unfocused eyes, parted lips and nearly boyish affect of his “antic” Hamlet; as he faces the reality of exile in England, his attitude resembles that of a misbehaving schoolboy who takes nothing seriously enough to be upset by being sent to the principal’s office. He allows one last insinuating stab at Claudius with “Man and wife is one flesh. So—my mother” (4.3.50), vitriol again seething from under his cover, and then promptly resumes his manic mode in “Come, for England!” (4.3.51) and his exit.

There is much in the staging and delivery of Jacobi’s seventh soliloquy which emphasizes Hamlet’s line in the same speech about “the invisible event” (4.4.49). Act 4 Scene 4 begins with Fortinbras and his men against what looks to be a plain white backdrop with the sounds, clearly added in post-production, of people (presumably soldiers) talking, trumpets, and horses: other than the few messengers and standard-bearers we see against the invisible background, the rest of the event of Fortinbras’s army passing is invisible to the audience. When the scene cuts to Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern walking towards the Captain and his men, the camera reveals a completely unadorned grey

stage (also used elsewhere in this production), vaguely velodrome-like in its upward angle around the sides, the frame of the shot horizontally bisected above the halfway mark by a hard horizon line created by the point at which the grey stage meets the bare white wall. In the next shot, the actors' bodies are directed toward the camera as they observe and discuss Fortinbras's invisible army as it passes by, again indicated by artificial crowd noise. The Captain and his two soldiers exit, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit, and Jacobi's Hamlet takes a few steps toward the camera. As Maher describes it, "the whole speech is shot with the camera framing the upper half of Jacobi's body. There is no movement at all" (425). The horizon line between the empty grey stage and the blank white wall is at Jacobi's shoulders, slightly slanted. All else is invisible.

The scene, thus, rests entirely on Jacobi's performance, which is itself as unadorned as the staging—Hamlet is metaphorically "set naked on your kingdom" and entirely alone, before he even writes those words in his letter to Claudius (4.7.43-50)—and Jacobi's delivery succeeds for precisely that reason: after two hours and twenty-six minutes of his multi-layered and unknowable Hamlet, he cuts through to Hamlet's heart. "The actor's tone is immensely simple and still," as Bennett describes it, "[a]s though he's suddenly become profound. All the turbulence has just settled, so on 'how all occasions' he simply walked up to the camera and that's where he stayed" (qtd. in Maher 425). Bennett and Jacobi's interpretation of the speech is mostly low-key and generally straightforward. There is some frustrated self-directed vitriol in Jacobi's almost percussive emphasis on the word "dull" in "my dull revenge" (4.4.32), which continues to smolder as he speaks the "What is a man" section (4.4.32-38) directly to the camera, as if to explain to the viewer his previous sentence. For "Now whether it be" (4.4.38) Jacobi looks downward and introduces a note of consternation, building to his Hamlet's head-shaking, almost pleading uncertainty at "I do not know" (4.4.42). At "strength" and "do't" (4.4.44-45), rather literally, Hamlet's strength of will to "do it" emerges; more interesting is the disdain in Jacobi's voice at the notion of Fortinbras "[e]xposing what is mortal and unsure" (4.4.50): does the notion of exposure (rather than layered dissembling) remain on some level antithetical to Hamlet's sensibilities, does Hamlet envy Fortinbras's forthrightness, or is it simply that the combined notions of mortality and uncertainty are an unpleasant reminder of his own indecision? The potential for interplay between existential absurdity and heroic resolve in Hamlet's declaration on how "[r]ightly to be great" is

suggested in the raise of Jacobi's eyebrows at "great" and "straw" (4.4.52-55), though not dwelt upon; the mention of his "father killed" (4.4.56), appropriately, signals in him a quiet rage that ebbs and flows through the last lines of the soliloquy. For Bennett and Jacobi this speech is, as Maher paraphrases the description by Bennett, Hamlet's "final mental resolution" (425), and the precise moment of that resolution is occasioned by an ominous musical cue that precedes and swells emphatically behind the soliloquy's final one-and-a-half-line couplet: "O, from this time forth," Jacobi sneers, eyes narrowed in determination and wrath, "[m]y thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (4.4.64-65).

Another notable screen *Hamlet* which also takes the explicative route is Kenneth Branagh's four-hour, "full text" (as it claims on the DVD package), self-directed 1996 feature film, which makes even more of "How all occasions" than does the BBC production. Referencing the Bennett-Jacobi staging of the soliloquy even as his acting choices seem suspiciously pointed in their antithesis to Jacobi's, there is in Branagh's performance a sense not just of overwriting but of triumphant obliteration of the predecessor, of Branagh usurping Jacobi's grey-white expanse and conquering it for his own. It is hard not to suspect, as Susan Allen Ford does, an Oedipal conflict in "Branagh's relationship with his own predecessors" (231): given that in this production Jacobi, appropriately, plays Claudius to Branagh's Hamlet, Branagh will enact the killing of Jacobi at the end of the film—but not until after he seizes what is arguably Jacobi-as-Hamlet's most significant soliloquy and explodes it into his own much grander and even *more* significant soliloquy, part of his seeming "effort to replace the memory of his theatrical father in the popular imagination" (Courtney Lehmann, qtd. in Ford 233). Given that Branagh's *Hamlet* takes place during a snowy winter and devotes significant attention to the Fortinbras plotline, the entire film seems to point and lead up to Act 4 Scene 4 and Hamlet's "How all occasions" soliloquy, which Branagh describes as his favorite moment in the film (Branagh and Cowl 27) and presents as its emotional apex. After a truly manic performance of Hamlet's exchange with Claudius at the end of Act 4 Scene 3—ending, Bugs Bunny style, with a smacking kiss on the enraged Claudius's cheek—and Claudius's brief, fierce moment to himself thereafter, the camera cuts to an interlude of Ophelia screaming frantically against a gate as Polonius's body is carried past by soldiers, fading to an exterior view of Castle Elsinore, which itself fades into a nearly unbroken snowy expanse. Here, as in Bennett-Jacobi, is the immense blankness, the grey-white vastness (though mingled more than delineated); the camera even undergoes a

momentary snowblind effect before the figure of Fortinbras on horseback emerges from the cold colorless fog. Even before Hamlet appears, these shots are utterly unmistakable as a feature film translation of that empty, empty 1980 BBC television stage, and yet on Branagh's budget, no event is left invisible: we see the horses, and the army, that once were only heard.

Then Branagh's Hamlet, alone on stage after speaking to the mounted Captain and dismissing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, begins slowly to erupt, to eradicate precedent. The shot is tighter than Bennett's to begin, with Branagh, off-center, facing slightly left of camera; his head and shoulders are before that now-familiar Bennett-Jacobi horizon line, here formed as grey stripes across the white snow by Fortinbras's distant army and a range of snow-capped mountains. The music, which commences as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern exit, becomes more noticeable as Branagh begins "How all occasions" approximately two hours and thirty-five minutes into the film (the speech is positioned only nine minutes later than it is in Bennett-Jacobi), speaking slowly, initially in relatively calm, quiet tones. Locomotive-like, Branagh begins with some labor and then gathers power and momentum and speed, never once wavering from his course; his expressions and vocal delivery divide the speech into "movements," each building in succession on the previous as the music heroically swells: Branagh's eyes rise initially at "What is a man" as the camera begins to pull away from him, then turn further toward the heavens with "He that made us" (4.4.35)—he gives some emphatic sibilance to the "fust" in "fust in us unused" (4.4.38), and also emphasizes "bestial," "craven," and "thinking" (4.4.39-40)—and remain upturned until he delivers "I do not know" (4.4.42) in perfect antithesis of Jacobi. What is for Jacobi's Hamlet a moment of genuine uncertainty is for Branagh's the first moment of decisive certainty as he raises his voice, shouting the word "know" in defiance as his right hand curls into a half-raised fist, breaking from Jacobi's stillness of body. The camera by now has pulled back far enough to see this, and to reveal the rocky cliff upon which Hamlet stands. Branagh has no use for Jacobi's misgivings about the "mortal and unsure," nor for his suggestion of irony at the greatness of finding "quarrel in a straw"; the latter and its preceding lines are another opportunity for Branagh's clenched fist, for the soundtrack to nearly overwhelm, as from "How stand I then" (4.4.55) Branagh's heightened soliloquy reaches its final movement and thunders like a freight train toward its single-minded destination: "O," Branagh groans, or growls, the initial interjection, now a small black figure in the center of the screen, alone in the grey-white

expanse before the twenty-thousand men who march anonymously to their deaths behind him, “from this time forth / My thoughts be bloody”—Branagh howls the last word into the snowy void, triumphantly throwing his arms out cruciform to either side—“or be nothing worth!” It is a blaringly audacious visualization of “transcendence,” to use Bloom’s word; it is an explosion of the “excess” Eliot derided; and it is ironic that Branagh describes his Hamlet in this shot, which distinctly resembles a widescreen iteration of Caspar David Friedrich’s circa 1818 painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, as “trapped and tiny” (Branagh and Crowl 26). On the contrary, it is difficult to imagine how anyone’s Hamlet could look more free: with his vow of vengeance shouted to the heavens, his arms outstretched to embrace the passions and absurdities of the fallen world, and the boundless snowscape unfurling at his feet, he has, like Adam and Eve at the end of *Paradise Lost*, all the world before him. The music climaxes and then punctuates in a final drumbeat as the word “Intermission” appears in red on the black screen. “Go chew on *that*,” Branagh seems to say—to the audience, to the critics, to Jacobi and all prior Hamlets—“for a while.”

Like the 1980 Bennett-Jacobi production, Branagh’s is an intentionally populist *Hamlet*. This much is clear from the advertising copy on the back of the DVD packaging, which sells the film as three things: exciting above all, surely to counter the popular notion that Shakespeare is boring (the words “excitement,” “energy,” and “power” are each used twice); authentically Shakespearean (“first-ever full-text film of William Shakespeare’s greatest work,” “timeless tale,” “the Bard’s words”); and, implicitly, comprehensible. Imagery of light enters into the paragraph about halfway through: the mirrors in Blenheim-Palace-as-Elsinore are “shimmering,” the film’s energy is “electrifying,” and even the cast is “luminous”; the copy culminates in the promise that “the excitement of the Bard’s words and an adventurous filmmaking style lift the story from its often shadowy ambience to fully-lit pageantry and rage.” It is a tiptoeingly delicate way to advertise that this, at last, is the *Hamlet* which will cause the lightbulb to turn on in the potentially shadowy ambience above your head.

It is also, whether coincidentally or not, a direct reversal of the imagery Eliot uses in “Hamlet and His Problems” to describe the supposed incomprehensibility of *Hamlet*. According to Eliot, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* are “intelligible, self-complete, and in the sunlight,” while *Hamlet* is “full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art” (91). Yet

still the question remains: given the choice, do we want *Hamlet* and Hamlet dragged to light, as Eliot thinks he does, or do we like them better in that shadowy ambience so enthusiastically celebrated by Bloom? Manfred Pfister writes of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy that its “semantic obscurity and its enigmatic quality, far from impeding its canonical success, have actually contributed crucially to it,” then applies this “paradox” of an inverse relationship between appeal and explicability also to “the play as a whole”: the famous and beloved “To be or not to be,” Pfister argues, is famous and beloved not in spite of but precisely *because of* how it “actually enhances the mystery his protagonist presents to himself and the audience” and “epitomises the Hamlet enigma” rather than “clarifying his motivations” (352). The promise of clarity may make for good ad copy for a DVD cover, but outside of Eliot, the frequent critical implication—as one must presume from the praise of mystery and enigma, since the possibility of an explicative interpretation of “How all occasions” is only (outside of Branagh’s film) infrequently discussed at all—is that it would be antithetical to the place of *Hamlet* within Anglophone culture.

Indeed, one begins to sense that clarifying *Hamlet* and Hamlet may be perceived not only as populist but as nearly a vulgarization, the violation of an unspoken taboo. Playing Shakespeare as written does not tend to win critical praise in recent decades—Maher writes that the BBC’s policy to keep their Shakespearean television series, including the Bennett-Jacobi *Hamlet*, “non-stylized, simple, and direct” was “greeted with some disdain by British critics, who translated ‘straightforward’ as ‘dull’” (419)—and Branagh claims in an interview to have purposely set out to twist critical tails with his choices for the seventh soliloquy. “I think my favorite moment, if I had to pick one,” Branagh says to Samuel Crowl, “is the ‘How all occasions’ soliloquy because I knew it to be the moment when, possibly, we would annoy the most people [laughs] because it would seem so enormous” (Branagh and Crowl 27). Crowl replies that Branagh was correct, and that “[t]hat moment has drawn precisely that kind of attention” (27). Branagh is unabashedly populist as a Shakespearean filmmaker, “conceiving of his mission as a popularizing one [...] and making the plays accessible and easily comprehensible,” as Jessica M. Maerz writes (128), and so with comprehensibility a taboo and enormity a great annoyance, it is unsurprising to see Branagh’s *Hamlet* called by Maurice Charney of Rutgers “a vulgar product that pretends to be honest but panders to the least educated of audiences” (Nichols 29). When asked by interviewer Nina daVinci Nichols whether Charney means “honest” in the sense of “faithful to his chosen texts,” Charney replies

that “Branagh is not that either,” framing him as an extreme literalist eager to “fill out or solve or adapt all loose ends” and “rationalize every line” to the point that there is “no irony or mystery left” (Nichols 39). To be fair, Charney is not wrong about Branagh’s literalism and seeming aversion to ambiguity; where Jacobi’s “How all occasions” suggests irony and complication in Hamlet’s contemplation of Fortinbras’s “greatness,” Branagh steamrolls on through, accompanied by his soaring background music. Be that as it may, however, great irony remains in the notion that to explicate Hamlet, to drag him to light (or “pander,” as Charney puts it), is less honest than, presumably, to purposely leave him in the dark. Tellingly, Nichols refers to “How all occasions” as “[h]is restored [Q2] soliloquy” (40), as if to subtly suggest that such a heterodoxically explicative passage was reintroduced via Branagh’s crude caprice and cannot properly belong to the play. Is an “honest” *Hamlet* one which instead excises Shakespeare’s clarifying material for the purpose of obfuscation? This is not to say that Branagh’s brazenly comprehensible and allegedly ham-handed *Hamlet* is perfect or definitive, but it is to suggest that the melancholic vitriol directed at all who dare employ Shakespeare’s own words to clarify Hamlet is a bit in excess of its cause. Either Hamlet’s emotions correlate, or the critics’ do, but perhaps not both at once.

“You cannot demystify Hamlet;” Bloom writes, “the sinuous enchantment has gone on too long” (420). For better or for worse, he is correct. “How all occasions,” the correlative linkage between the Hamlet of Act 4 and the Hamlet of Act 5 so potently portrayed by both Jacobi and Branagh, is obscured not by Shakespeare himself but by the play’s own long shadow, its impenetrable mystique, the time-honored preference for Hamlet the folkloric culture hero of the Ouroborian internal self over the explicated Second Quarto Hamlet of Shakespeare. Yet this, ultimately, returns once again to the seventh soliloquy and its unification of the unreconcilable. One needs no “or” between “to be” and “not to be.” If Hamlet can wield as weapon the strange nobility he finds in the paradox of man in the world, the grand and transcendent doomed passions co-mingled with the straws and eggshells grasped by the white-knuckled will, so too can we wink at the phenomenon of the supposed mystery of Hamlet even as we watch Kenneth Branagh, surging soundtrack and all, rightly shout the greatness of Hamlet’s solution and resolution from the snow-grey rim of the earth. As the Act 5 Hamlet says to Horatio, “Let be” (5.2.201-202).

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