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Televised Hamlet: BBC Television Shakespeare and Shakespeare – The Animated Tales.

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Abstract: This paper attempts to analyse two televised productions of *Hamlet* from BBC's *Television Shakespeare* (1980) and *Shakespeare – The Animated tales* (1992) and study their advantages and disadvantages concerning their transition from a text meant for a stage performance into a small screen production. The reception of these productions by their audiences and critics are also discussed.

Keywords: Television, Adaptation, Audience, Transition, Soliloquy, Impact, Cinema, Camera technique, Shakespeare, Inaccessible.

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Walter Benjamin drew a comparison between a painter and a 'magician' (faith healer), and between a cameraman and a surgeon. The painter and the 'magician' both maintain a distance from reality in their work. Whereas, the cameraman with the help of a mechanical device such as the camera with all its zoom-in features, pervades deep into the reality it attempts to portray. The surgeon too, unlike the 'magician', operates on his patient in order to cure him, which will require him to open up a part of his patient hence being more exposed to his subject

than a magic healer ever will be (Benjamin 35). Television for many reasons is the most suitable and appropriate medium for such camera technique. The close-up shots are typically used in abundance in order to help the directors draw the audience's attention to his character's innermost thoughts and thus exposing the character's personality. This feature actually compensates for the deficiency of the television as against film with regard to film's advantage over the resource of finance and time which makes it possible for the cinematic films to create elaborate sets and have more time to edit the footages. However, differences between television and cinema is not so prominent in this age of advanced technological development as can be clearly seen in many television series such as *Game of Thrones* with large scale production, which are not just restricted to the domestic audience. The televised Shakespearean series made so far have these advantages as well as disadvantages and are a true evidence of a difficulty faced both by the former theatre actors and the filmmakers in the transition of a text meant for a stage act into a small screen.

The two television productions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* I have chosen for discussion in my paper are *Hamlet* from the *BBC Television Shakespeare* (1980) and from *Shakespeare – The Animated Tales* (1992). If we are to follow the list prepared by Neil Taylor, these two productions of *Hamlet* can be grouped under "six 'pure' *Hamlets*" which are currently widely available on video (180). Both these productions are launched with a pedagogic interest of familiarising the public with the Britain's most important literary figure. The high culture which was previously accessible only to the elites and the experts is now confronted with a new and multitudinous audience. The fate of this particular culture is bound for an inevitable modification. Shakespearean appropriation with popular culture in mind is one such example of this inevitable modification.

BBC Television Shakespeare consists of 7 seasons with 37 episodes for each of the Shakespeare's play. This mammoth enterprise was inaugurated in 1978 with Cedric Messina as the producer for the first two seasons and Professor John Wilders as its literary advisor. This series was produced with a non-theatre goer or general public as audience in mind, an audience unfamiliar with the bard and his plays, and who most likely are even incognizant of the play's ending. Yet, the rigidity of the production, a consequence of BBC's strict instruction to take no liberty with the Peter Alexander's 1951 edition of the text making it quite inaccessible to the

“ordinary people”¹ makes us question the BBC’s commitment to its targeted audience. Professor Alexander’s edition, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* was published posthumously and is widely circulated as one of the most authoritative Shakespearean text because of its clarity and highly valuable introductory articles written by academics. To quote Michele Willems from her essay “Reflections on the BBC Series” as she calls attention to the production’s ‘confusion’ about the public aimed at: “The production of a ‘definitive’ version of the Shakespeare canon concerns a limited public of students, teachers, and Shakespeare lovers who may be interested in turning to ‘preserved’ Shakespeare for want of the real thing” (73). In the same article, she raises an important question of whether the production’s fidelity to the text (to an extent of confusing the play’s text for film script and hence obstructing the ‘transcoding’ necessary in translating the theatre’s ‘aural’ medium into film and television’s ‘visual’ one) is responsible for its unpopularity since “it had neither the international impact of Olivier’s *Richard III*, nor the critical acclaim of his *Henry V* which Bazin described as ‘Shakespeare pour tous’” (74). *BBC Television Shakespeare* is however not facing its harsh criticism based on its “mediocrity” (Jorgens 415) from Willems for the first time. Right after its opening of the first two episodes, Martin Banham whose title for the review in *Critical Quarterly* is self-sufficiently expressive of his opinion, “BBC Television’s Dull Shakespeares” could not stop himself from making a request to the BBC: “But, dear BBC, for Shakespeare’s sake, there is time (and life?) to change” (40). *Hamlet* from this project was directed by Rodney Bennet and it aired as one of the later episodes of the second season in UK on 25th May, 1980. Bennet disregarding television’s terse characteristic, uses the text of the play as the script and remains so faithful to the original play that his *Hamlet* is of 3hours and 45 minutes long with just one interruption. Even Derek Jacobi, Bennet’s Hamlet “was to discover that he had far more lines to learn for Bennet than he had ever had to deliver on the stage” (Taylor 191). It indeed came as a surprise for Jacobi, considering the fact that the actors have to deliver more speeches on stage, for stage is the legitimate medium for the play with its emphasis on the aural performance. Derek Jacobi has a moderately large fan-base. A lot of them consider him the ‘best’ Hamlet despite harsh critical reviews on his performance in this production by experts including Kenneth S. Rothwell who thought Jacobi “suffered from the recurring indecisiveness about whether to be theatrical or telegenic, and succeeded at being neither” (Rothwell 109). In my opinion, apart from the fact that he is a brilliant actor who has won plenty of critically acclaimed awards, the fans’ effortless decision to

give him the title of best Hamlet has a lot to do with the canonization of the *BBC Television Shakespeare*, especially its introduction to schools as a teaching aid. It revolutionised the entire teaching experience as it replaces the traditional teaching method of reading out the play to the class by the method of showing them the video which became available in video cassettes along with other teaching aids.

Hamlet's soliloquies seem to be somehow capable of dodging all the diatribes against *BBC Television Shakespeare*, especially the ones which talk about the production's inability to use the advantage of the techniques particular to the medium of television. Shakespeare's soliloquies typically have two functions namely acquainting his audience with the plot information and to act as a window to the soliloquy deliverer's state of mind. Bennet's soliloquies indeed serve both these purposes, the way the original text does. Bennet's usage of what Mary Z. Maher calls the "subjective camera", makes it impossible even for the audience sitting at home watching the program on a small screen to lose sight of his accentuated countenance, which exposes his innermost thoughts (Maher 417). The close-up on Jacobi's expressions and gestures especially when he directly faces the camera makes it difficult for the audience to disengage from what was being shown on the screen. Bennet takes pleasure in using the television's advantage of dominating the audience by restricting their attention in accordance to the director's will. Here, one is reminded of Adorno's critique of films as he holds them responsible for the deterioration of man's imaginative faculties.

Hamlet's soliloquies in this episode play a huge role in generating audience's sympathy for Hamlet and contempt for Claudius because as Bennet himself has told Maher that Claudius is not allowed to form that special bond which Hamlet builds with the audience (Maher 421). This formation of the special bond between the audience and Hamlet is possible because of the subjective camera mode the director uses which according to Maher places the audience in an "interactive position" with him (420). Jacobi in my opinion has here an advantage not accorded to him on stage. His facial expression which changes almost every few seconds owing to his acting skill of betraying the emotive outburst demanded by his speech, is faithfully captured on screen. This can be particularly witnessed in the fourth soliloquy "To be, or not to be", which deals with his innermost insecurities and hence the indecisiveness of whether to live or die. We catch him dreamily wishing for death which means at first to sleep and not suffer the 'arrows'

and the ‘heartaches’ anymore and then his agitated and worrisome countenance when he ponders upon the drawbacks of death that is its oblivious nature. The juxtaposition of Hamlet happily dreaming upon the advantages of death and then worryingly disturbed by its disadvantages is captured on screen along with Jacobi’s brilliant reading of the text for which he is renowned for. Jacobi’s Hamlet may have come across many as way more expressive of his melancholia and anger than we want him to be, but the delivery of the dialogues and soliloquies does serve the purpose of BBC. If not text, they must have thought the public would surely pay attention to Shakespeare if his plays are aired on television which is one of the favourite rituals taken up as a hobby by public in the late 20th century.

Shakespeare – The Animated Tales was originally released on 9th November, 1992 commissioned by the Welsh channel four, *S4C* and it was both a commercial and a critical success. It had Stanley Wells as its literary advisor and Leon Garfield, the author of the prose adaptations of the 1985 *Shakespeare Stories*, as the scriptwriter. The animations were created in Moscow, Russia while the dialogues were recorded in the facilities of BBC Wales in Cardiff, Wales’ capital city. *Hamlet*, directed by Natalia Orlova is the first episode to air from this series and she used the paint-on-glass animation technique. Paint-on-glass animation technique is basically created by manipulating the slow-drying oil paints on sheets of glass, although many painters claim that there is no correct way of doing it. Garfield’s heavily truncated script is laudable considering the difficulty of cutting down a more than three hours long play to a half an hour animated TV episode and yet somehow managing to remain true to the plot and the words in the dialogue. It was not only enjoyed by children for whom it was designed, but by adults as well. The successful truncation of the play owes much to Garfield’s innovative introduction of his own voice-over narratives which cover a massive amount of dialogues. The soliloquies too are voice-overs with no particular attention to Hamlet, his countenance or his gestures. The voice-over soliloquies rather follow the fast-paced glimpses of what it is alluding to or vice versa. For example, the entire screen is occupied by Claudius’ face with his highly accentuated grimace when “Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!” is uttered. The effort by the soliloquies to connect with the audience is undoubtedly absent. Garfield took great liberty with the chronology of the text including the soliloquies, as is conspicuously seen in the very beginning of the video itself. Marcellus’ dialogue, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark”

which comes as late as in the Act I Scene IV in the text is the opening sentence in the video in the form of a voice-over narrative. The narrative device employed by this production also makes it possible for the creators to easily dispense with a number of characters. One of the most important achievements of Garfield is that regardless of his infidelity to the chronology of the text, he successfully retains the original phrases or words used by Shakespeare in the dialogues of the video. The sentences are by all odds shortened to a great degree and are brilliant patchworks consisting of words or phrases sewn together which betrays an efficient use of the resources available. To elucidate this further, I will quote the soliloquies from this animation, which serve as the perfect examples of the liberty Garfield took with the original text in the most creative manner. It is also important to note that he used only the first four soliloquies in the video. The first soliloquy is shortened as follow:

Frailty, thy name is woman!

A little month! Or ere those shoes were old

With which she followed my poor father's body.

O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer –

Married with my uncle (Garfield).

The second soliloquy is only two sentences long: “O most pernicious woman! O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!” which when uttered, the camera moves towards one of the windows of the castle's chamber, where the audience is made to secretly peep into Gertrude and Claudius' private life. We see them having a good laugh with drinks in their hands. There is a deliberate attempt on the part of this production to emphasize the evilness of Claudius with his rough features accompanied by fierce facial expressions, and also to emphasize Gertrude's inconsiderateness of her husband's death and Hamlet's melancholia as she is constantly shown laughing coquettishly which is juxtaposed on the screen itself with Hamlet's gloominess. Unlike the first and the second soliloquies, the third and the fourth soliloquies, though equally shortened and patched purposively, are not chronologically ordered as per the text. The excerpt from the fourth soliloquy appears out of nowhere in the middle of the third soliloquy and is interrupted

when Hamlet looks down over the players from his window. The remainder of the third soliloquy continues after this brief interruption:

Bloody, bawdy villain!
Remorseless, treacherous, lecherous, kindless villain!
O, vengeance
That I son of a dear father murdered
Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
A dull and muddy mettled rascal
Peak and can say nothing.
The spirit that I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power
T' assume a pleasing shape, and perhaps,
Abuses me to damn me.
To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles.
And by opposing end them:
To die – to sleep,
No more...

[Hamlet hears the noise outside his window made by the players and goes to have a look after which the remainder of the third soliloquy proceeds] (mine).

About my brains: I have heard
That guilty creatures sitting at a play,
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions!
I will have those players
Play something like the murder of my father
Before mine uncle. I will observe his looks

The play's the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king (Garfield).

Garfield's script has its own unity despite its tampering with the original chronology and it functions adequately to help fulfil the objective of *Shakespeare – The Animated Tales*, which is to introduce Shakespeare's plays to children. The adults who enjoyed this video can be seen as somewhat interested only in the plot of the play and not really prepared for its original and lengthy version. Leon Garfield undoubtedly deserves the 1995 "Sam Wanamaker Award" for his work in the *Shakespeare: The Animated Tales*.

Televised Shakespeare be it successful or not, has played a major role in broadcasting Shakespeare and his works not only within the national border but also beyond it. What is more important is the consequence of these productions, which along with the film adaptations gave birth to an entirely new field of Shakespearean studies: Shakespeare and its screen adaptations. Despite the problems in adapting Shakespeare from text or theatre to screen, "no one can regret the attempt to bring Shakespeare to vastly increased audiences, and no one can discount the value of the critical debate which televised Shakespeare has promoted" (Davies 12). The two television productions of *Hamlet* in my discussion are not unknown to those interested in Shakespeare. While the *Hamlet* of *The Animated Tales* may have an advantage of also being enjoyed by those who are not a knowing audience, Bennet's *Hamlet* does require an audience already familiar with the bard or at least with the play.

Notes

1. Shaun Sutton, the producer of 5th, 6th and the 7th seasons of the BBC

Television Shakespeare was asked "What sort of public were you aiming at?" by Michele Willems (as she has mentioned in her essay listed below). He replied: "Everybody; students, but also ordinary people; Shakespeare wrote them for everybody" (73).

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