Shakespeare Screen Adaptations: The Case Study of Hamlet

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Abstract. In the field of Shakespeare studies, there are numerous researches on the literary and historical meaning of his works throughout the ages. But film and television are products that appeared within a century and are still developing, so the screen adaptations of Shakespeare may have more room for research and analysis. As a masterpiece of Shakespeare, Hamlet is a play that has been adapted countless times, so this study uses is at the case. The main content of this research is analyzing the different kinds of screen adaptations of Hamlet, and evaluating their significances and suitabilities. The article lists some specific screen works, and investigates the topic by observing how they adapt the original work in terms of plot, picture and mirror movement, as well as their receptions. The study concludes that all kinds of screen adaptations are significant. The works that faithful to the original Hamlet have developed generations of audiences for Shakespeare's plays, making their longevity after 400 years. The works that borrow from Hamlet allow the story to show distinct humanistic principles in different historical contexts, as well as diverse cultural values in different country contexts. The derivative works of Hamlet begin with distinct views from the original work to tell a new tale or explain a new point of view.

Keywords: Shakespeare · Screen adaptations · Hamlet

1 Introduction

Screen adaption is the cinematographic interpretation of a work from another art form, such as literature, drama, opera, ballet libretto, manga, and video game. From the commercial perspective of view, screen adaption could reuse an idea to create benefits; from an artistic perspective of view, it could give the original work a new expression. Hence, in today's art and media industries, screen adaption is a very common and significant phenomenon.

Shakespeare's works have become the focus of screen adaptation since the silent era. As one of Shakespeare's masterpieces, Hamlet explores and nuanced many deep themes including betrayal, revenge, incest, and depravity. The protagonist of the play, Hamlet, is the Prince of Denmark. His uncle Claudius murdered his father, the King of Denmark, usurped the throne, and married his mother. Hamlet hence avenges his

father's death upon Claudius. This quintessential story is favored by many film directors and screenwriters, and has been adapted again and again in various eras.

This article would also takes Hamlet as an example to analyze the various situations that appear in the process of screen adaptations. The adaptation from literary work to screen work is the process of deconstracting words with images. Through the translating process from literary language to visual language, the profundity of the original texts may be flattened, or they may obtain new significances. For the production teams of film and television works, how to reproduce the connotation of the original work by deconstruction, and how to strike a balance between inheritance and innovation, is an important question.

2   Different Kinds of Screen Adaptations of Hamlet

In the following sections, the works would be divided into three categories to discuss. The logic of the classification is the degree of innovation in the adaptation process of the work, namely "works that faithful to the original Hamlet", "works that borrow from Hamlet", and "derivative works of Hamlet". At the same time, the importance of these different adaptations will also be weighed.

2.1   Works that Faithful to the Original Hamlet

As the title implies, "works that faithful to the original Hamlet" are considered as the works that faithful to Shakespeare's original, and do not make excessive changes to the character settings, background, and lines. This type of work is the slightest in terms of innovation. They usually do not require innovation, but rather inherit and preserve the original.

2.1.1   Hamlet (1948)

1948's Hamlet is a black-and-white film directed and starred by Laurence Olivier. The film's form of expression has many similarities to traditional stage plays, from the composition of character relationships, the arrangement of dramatic structure, and the construction of atmosphere, to the slightly exaggerated actions and poetic language [1].

While the film also broke through the limitations of the stage plays, embodying the visual fascination in both the design of scenes and the use of the lens. The use of several long shots in the film has played a good role in the portrayal of the environment and characters. For example, in the scene of exposing the sins of Claudius, the camera keeps moving towards the actors, moving back and forth around the semicircle of the court, highlighting the mental state of different characters: Claudius's growing fear, Hamlet's ecstasy, and friend of Hamlet, Horatio's awake. All of these push the plot to a climax.

The film won many awards. It was the first British film to win an Oscar for Best Picture, and also won the Golden Lion and BAFTA for Best Picture [2].

2.1.2   Hamlet (1990)

1990's Hamlet directed by Franzo Zeffirelli focuses on narrative rather than depicting psychology. The narrative logic is explicit and accessible, and the story unfolds in a linear structure. There are distinct layers between events, and the causal relationship is clear at a glance. Hamlet's tragedy begins with the sudden death of his father, followed by successive misfortunes, which are embodied in the loss of family, friendship, and love. In the middle of the story, three monologues of Hamlet are inserted to reflect the changes in the protagonist's thoughts and emotions [3].

It could be said that 1990's Hamlet is more like a popular version. The advantage of this dealing approach is to reduce the difficulty for the audience to understand the plot, and the disadvantage is fully represent the profound and rich ideological of the work. Probably, for this reason, although they both largely follow the original, 1990's Hamlet is much weaker in terms of awards achieved than the 1948 version.

2.2   Works that Borrow from Hamlet

Works that borrow from Hamlet usually borrow the general plot or frame of the story, and either the background, details, or characters may undergo large changes. In this type of work, the characters may have different names and live in different societies, stage similar but different stories.

2.2.1   Hamlet (2000)

2000's Hamlet did not take place in the medieval kingdom of Denmark, but in the modern United States in 2000, and is narrated by a Danish company based in the United States as the main scene. At the same time, the identities and backgrounds of the characters have also been modified accordingly: Hamlet's father becomes the CEO of the company, Claudius is a senior executive of the company, and Hamlet is a young man who likes DV production [4].

In the background of modern life, there are many electronic tools in the film: cameras, laptops, fax machines, and monitors. These electronic tools cleverly become a means of creating an atmosphere. Hamlet said the famous line 'to be or not to be' in a video store, which is a very modern scene: Hamlet wandered alone in the corridor, looking hesitant and confused, the explosion scene was playing on the TV, and action movies are displayed on the shelves, and the word 'action' was particularly prominent as if hinting at Hamlet's next move.

Reviews of this film are divided. According to Rotten Tomatoes, 58% of critics gave positive reviews based on 95 reviews. Some reviewers found this adaptation interesting, while some felt it subverted the original character and made Hamlet do not like Hamlet [5].

2.2.2   Feng Xiaogang, The Banquet

The film set the background in China's Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. As same as the original hamlet, it is in an imperial dynasty, such there is basically no

difference in the identity setting of the characters, but only the title and scene change from mediaeval Europe to China.

The film has cost huge investments, assembling directors, actors, and music producers well-known in China, and the sets, costumes, props and overall visual effects are all very exquisite. However, it is not well known overseas, and its reputation in China also seems to be relatively ordinary. Except for the best art design, the best style design, and the best supporting actress, it did not win any major awards in three major Chinese film and television awards, the Golden Rooster Award, the Golden Horse Award, and the Hong Kong Film Awards.

One of the problems of the film may be it seems to turn the profound themes of the original, including the rise and fall of the empire and the devastation of human nature, into soap operas of martial arts, strip shows, and polyamorous relationships [6].

2.2.3 Akira Kurosawa, The Bad Sleep Well

Akira Kurosawa's The Bad Sleep Well set the background in Japan after World War II, telling the story of a man's illegitimate son avenging his father's suicide by the boss.

Compared to the two films mentioned above, The Bad Sleep Well is more different from the original Hamlet in the plot. In the original, Hamlet fell in love with Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, the chief counselor to the new King. But as part of Hamlet's revenge plan, Ophelia was ruthlessly abandoned by him, and her father's death left her insane, finally, she stumbled and drowned. While The Bad Sleep Well is without the death of "Ophelia", the ghost of the father, and the success of killing the uncle, all audiences could see is a still ill-fated Hamlet, and an unsuccessful revenge story [7].

This film does not seem to be very well-known in Kurosawa's work, while its reaction tended very positive. According to Rotten Tomatoes, 100% of critics gave positive reviews based on 20 reviews [8]. As an illustration, Crowther (1963) praises the film for staging "what amounts to cliches in this type of strongarm fiction in a way that makes them seem fresh and as fully of sardonic humor as though we had never seen their likes before" [9].

2.3 Derivative Works of Hamlet

Different from the adaptations that faithful to the original or borrow from the original, the derivative adaptations, could even put a question mark on the "adaptation". In general, the so-called "adaptation" always contains its original work. No matter how deviant the adaptation is, it still retains some shadows of the original work. Derivative works, however, do not necessarily all fit this rule, as they could be total re-creations, where they can create a whole new story with just one or two characters taken from the original.

2.3.1 Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead

Rosencrantz and Gildenston are minor characters from Hamlet, while in the 1966's play Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, they are portrayed as the protagonists by Tom Stoppard. In 1990, the play was made into a film.

It gave a new interpretation of Hamlet from the perspective of the two minor characters, telling the absurd adventures on the way when the two were ordered to enter the palace to comfort the prince who lost his father. They speak according to Shakespeare's script without knowing what to do, and when it is not their part, they discuss and explore the world they live in, although they do not figure it out until they are dead. The two are like puppets controlled by a string, allowing Shakespeare, or the absurd fate itself, to lead them step to step to their meaningless death. They are puzzled by this, but have nothing to do [10].

From the point of view of adaptation, the storyline of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead seems to be undirectly related to Hamlet, but the former is born out of the latter. When the play was adapted from stage play to film, it faced more challenges. A common criticism of the film was that the play is more suited to the stage than to the screen. For example, Canby (1991) argue that:

[Stoppard] delights in sounds and meanings, in puns, in flights of words that soar and swoop as if in visual display. On the stage, this sort of thing can be great fun, an end in itself, somewhat like music. In the more realistic medium of film, so many words can numb the eardrums and weigh upon the eyelids like old coins. This is the effect of 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead' [11].

While generally the reaction to the film towards the positive, and the film has won the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival [12].

2.3.2 Claire McCarthy, Ophelia

In the original, Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, the chief counselor to the King. She fell in love with Hamlet, but as part of Hamlet's revenge plan, she was ruthlessly abandoned by him, and her father's death left her insane, finally, she stumbled and drowned. The 2018 firm takes Ophelia as the protagonist, telling the story of how this girl died step by step in the entanglement of betrayal and separation.

In the patriarchal culture, women are usually regarded as the "second sex" that depends on men. Ophelia plays a crucial role in Hamlet, but she seems more like a symbol of the holy and devoted woman in fantasy, her selfhood is not very vivid. Apparently the film has been influenced by the feminist trend of recent years, shaping Ophelia into a more self-conscious woman. She warmly expresses her love and hate, while affirming her own existence value [13]. This example shows that the screen adaptation of literary works also could combine some contemporary ideologies to satisfy the thoughts of contemporary audiences and convey contemporary humanistic concerns.

Reviews of this film are divided. According to Rotten Tomatoes, 62% of critics gave positive reviews based on 138 reviews. Some reviewers found this film is touched, while some felt its ploy is bland and unorganized [14].

3   Conclusion

From the works that faithful to the original Hamlet, the works that borrow from Hamlet, to the derivative works of Hamlet, it could be seen that the three types of adaptations relate more to innovation and rely less on the original aligned front to back. The works that

faithful to the original Hamlet have cultivated generations of audiences for Shakespeare's plays, making them enduring after four hundred years. The works that borrow from hamlet let the story present different humanistic values in different time backgrounds, and present different cultural values in different national backgrounds. The derivative works of Hamlet start from specific perspectives of the original work to tell a new story or explain the new point of view.

Accordingly, various types of screen adaptations of literary works are needed, and the absence of any one would reduce the diversity of the film art. Whether Shakespeare's plays or other plays, only if playwrights, theatrical circles, and critics open up their thinking and mentality, retain inheritance but not stick to tradition, and at the same time strive for innovation, the audience could enjoy more and better works.

However, the ways of division are by no means a one-size-fits-all approach. an adaptation may be innovative in multiple aspects, or could not simply be classified into one of the three types, but in a vague area. It should be also noticed that the so-called classification is only an artificial division. This article roughly divides Shakespeare's adaptations into three categories for the convenience of research and discussion. Such a classification is not necessarily the most plausible but only helps to categorize and discuss different kinds of screen adaptations. And a weakness of this paper is that the analysis and evaluation of these films may be subject to a certain degree of subjectivity. If more data or film reviews are cited, it may be more representative of the opinions of more people.

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