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PRESENTATION OF HAMLET AND GERTRUDE  
IN FRANCO ZEFFIRELLI'S *HAMLET*

In an adaptation of a play for stage or screen the basis of its originality is the screenplay and presentation of the characters. In a genre like drama, using only dialogue and monologue, the dramatis personae are chiefly characterised through what they say and how they are spoken of. Unlike a novel, a play hardly gives descriptions of people, things and events, it does not give the reader an intimate relationship with the characters as it does not bring us so easily and directly into the characters' thoughts, memories, dreams, the spheres that decode personality. As Norman N. Holland puts it:

In a play (unlike a novel) the writer must project the character's psyche into episodes and events that an audience can see. By contrast, the novelist is free to lead us into the minds of his characters at will.<sup>1</sup>

Even when a play lets us hear the characters soliloquise, it always sets us aside in the position of an observer from the outside rather than an observer from "within" or a participant; in the dramatic structure we remain the audience.

A play such as *Hamlet* does not provide us with a thorough understanding of the complex characters. There are many things said or implied about Hamlet, Gertrude or Claudius, but the picture that Shakespeare draws is not complete. He leaves many aspects of the characters' personalities understated, vague, controversial, and opens the play to a number of various interpretations. Creating his characters and the relationships between them he leaves some empty space that has to be filled in the process of directing a performance or a film. Filling in these gaps is particularly

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<sup>1</sup> Norman N. Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 338.

crucial in the case of portraying Hamlet, because he is the play itself. Each different interpretation of his character will result in a wholly different play.

The original text<sup>2</sup> characterises Hamlet in two ways – through his soliloquies and through his relationships with other characters of the play – with his father, Horatio, Claudius, Ophelia and, primarily, with Gertrude. Soliloquies give a valuable insight into the depths of his mind. They are a very convenient and direct way of presenting the character in a way that dialogue and action cannot do. Still, soliloquies are only verbal expressions and their meaning can vary depending on the non-verbal and situational context in which they appear. Therefore, the crucial thing in any interpretation of the play is establishing the context for the characters' words and behaviour, that is the relationships between them. The play does not make these connections obvious. Shakespeare poses many questions about Hamlet's behaviour towards other people and the play does not answer them all. A film adaptation, however, must be much more precise than the play and even than a stage performance. Anthony Davies quotes Pauline Keal:

In the theatre a competent actor can make many roles his own, but in movies what an actor knows and can do is often less important than what he simply is – the way he looks, how he photographs, what he inadvertently projects . . . The camera exposes the actor as a man of a certain age, with definite physical assets and liabilities. There he is in close-up, huge on the screen, and if he's trying to play something that is physically different from what he is, he looks like a fool.<sup>3</sup>

The film demands showing things in a literal way and in detail. While talking, characters must move in a certain way, have facial expressions, react not only in speech but also in behaviour. Cinematic presentation of a character leaves much less space for uncertainty and mystery. Questions have to be answered. How old is Hamlet? Is old Hamlet to Claudius really a "Hyperion to a satyr" (I. ii. 140)? What does Gertrude look like? How does she look at her son? And how does he look at her? Does he treat Ophelia in the same way? These are a few of many issues that simply have to be shown on screen, and they must be very carefully planned because they define the personalities of dramatis personae as much as the words do. A theatre performance is less dependent on physical details. There are no close-ups so actors' faces and eyes are of lesser importance, as it is often impossible for the audience to see in any detail. In a theatre performance the roles that actors play are defined by costumes and

<sup>2</sup> Referring to the text of the play I mean the conflated text as printed in William Shakespeare *Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). All references in the paper will be to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Davies, *Filming Shakespeare's Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988), p. 167–168.

make-up. In a film, on the contrary, every detail counts and adds up to the interpretation of the character; not only the age, beauty or hairstyle, but also the eye colour or even a wrinkle can make a difference.

In Zeffirelli's film (1990) *Hamlet* is played by Mel Gibson, Gertrude by Glenn Close, Ophelia by Helena Bonham-Carter, Claudius by Alan Bates, the Ghost by Paul Scofield and Polonius by Ian Holm. These are well-known screen and stage names that bear certain associations and cannot be totally detached from the actor-image behind them. It is especially crucial in the case of Hamlet and Gertrude. Mel Gibson and Glenn Close are top Hollywood stars not necessarily thought of as Shakespearean actors but, instead, strongly associated with their famous film roles, such as Mel Gibson's Martin Riggs in the action movie series "Lethal Weapon" or the title role in the "Mad Max" series, and Glenn Close's controversial Alex Forrest in "Fatal Attraction" or the memorable Marquise de Merteuil in "Dangerous Liaisons." A. B. Dawson believes that such choice of actors creates certain expectations in the audience:

Casting Mel Gibson and Glenn Close, two major Hollywood stars, as mother and son was bound to create box office expectations: lethal weapon meets fatal attraction in what turns out to be a dangerous liaison indeed.<sup>4</sup>

Another reason for the importance of casting these two actors is that in Zeffirelli's film their characters are the central focus of the action. William Van Watson notices that the privileged position of Gertrude is manifested by a very favourable treatment of her role which is far less edited than that of Claudius or Horatio<sup>5</sup>. He also points out that Glenn Close's status as the film's female lead and Hamlet's real partner can be seen in the top billing of the film.<sup>6</sup> Such a reading of the film is also very interestingly implied in the advertising poster. It shows the busts of the main characters against a very dark background. In the middle there is Hamlet holding his sword upside-down in front of him. The manifestation of the sword is rather striking and although the sword looks like a cross it still remains a phallic symbol signalling the film's psychoanalytic reading of Hamlet's character. On the right-hand side of Hamlet we can see Ophelia, Claudius, Polonius and the Ghost, while Gertrude, alone, is placed on Hamlet's left-hand side. In this way she is shown not only as an important character, but also Hamlet's match. Placing Gertrude separately, opposite other characters cramped on the other side of Hamlet – the central

<sup>4</sup> A. B. Dawson, *Shakespeare in Performance – Hamlet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 205.

<sup>5</sup> William Van Watson, "Shakespeare, Zeffirelli, and the Homosexual Gaze," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 20.4 (1992): 320.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

figure – seems to be an overt manifestation of Gertrude's position in the film. Let me, then, try to analyse Mel Gibson's Hamlet from the perspective of the Hamlet/Gertrude relationship as Zeffirelli presented it in the film.

The opening of the film – the added scene of the old King Hamlet's funeral – already gives us some crucial information about the two characters. Gertrude reveals herself as a sensitive and passionate woman. Her grief is sincere and intense. Actually, her behaviour might even seem overdone. It is reasonable to assume, then, that her marriage with King Hamlet was happy. Another immediate impression is that she does not look much older than Hamlet. Even though she is the mourning widow clad in black, she is obviously quite young, with not a trace of wrinkles on her face, looking more like a daughter than a wife of the deceased king (whose face is shown as he lies in the coffin). Hamlet's face, shown in the shadow of a hood pulled over his head, does not look much younger than Gertrude's, and their seeming closeness in age brings a tone of ambiguity to the reading of the film from the very first scene. On the other hand, however, the mother/son relationship is imposed upon us by the original story so we just take it for granted. In fact, even from the point of view of plausibility of their mother/son status, the actual age difference between them as judged by their looks is almost sufficient. Both the director and the actors try to read the issue of the protagonists' age in this way. As Glenn Close comments on her character:

I think of Gertrude as someone who came to the court at maybe ten, or 11 or 12, who had Hamlet when she was biologically able, and grew up with him. (That made sense to me.) She's much closer in age to her son than to her husband.<sup>7</sup>

The director confirms this understanding:

She must have had him at 12 or 13. I imagine she left her dolls to pick up Hamlet and carried on with him her childhood fantasies . . . they've obviously been playing together all their lives.<sup>8</sup>

Zeffirelli, then, admitting the plausibility of their ages as a mother and a son, at the same time provokes certain ambiguity about them. Although Glenn Close is 9 years older than Mel Gibson, the director does not stress the impression of the age difference.

Glenn Close is a beautiful elegant woman over 50 (born in 1947). As many other Hollywood stars like Meryl Streep (born 1949), Susan Sarandon (born 1946), Goldie Hawn (born 1945), Jessica Lange (born 1949), she

<sup>7</sup> David Gritten, "Getting Close," *Telegraph Magazine* (13.04.1991): 30.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Church, "Franco Goes to Elsinore," *Independent* (14.04.1991).

looks rather ageless – a mature woman who can be 30 as well as 50. Her Gertrude falls into the same category of female physicality. There are no visible signs of her age like greyish hair or wrinkles. She is slim, elegantly dressed and lively. She looks equally good with Claudius as with Hamlet. Interestingly enough, it is Mel Gibson (born 1956) who seems to be a little older than his usual screen image. With short cut instead of wavy hair, with inevitably ageing beard and moustache instead of ever clean-shaven smiling face, Mel Gibson looks older, wearier, graver. There are only short moments in the film when his blue eyes shine with his usual irresistible knavish flicker or when his charming smile shows for a moment the warm and merry personality shared by most of his film characters. At such moments we can understand why the straight-forward Horatio is so devoted to him, why Gertrude “lives almost by his looks” (IV. vii. 12), and why Ophelia, a naïve, sweet and tender girl with angelic face and voice, fell in love with him. Notably, these doubts, dubiousness and multiple meaning result from the particular casting and are not at all present in the original text. There, Hamlet is simply Gertrude's son, Claudius' stepson, a student on holidays.

The above-described characteristics of Zeffirelli's Gertrude and Hamlet are very strongly implied in the film's opening. Moreover, there is one element in that scene that signals the nature of their relationship. There is a moment in the scene when Gertrude looks up at Claudius and under his meaningful gaze stops crying. Hamlet notices the exchange of looks and the change in his mother's behaviour. Clearly not indifferent to what has happened, Hamlet leaves the crypt. Samuel Crowl, stressing Gertrude's central position in the film also notices that the crypt scene, as much as the casting, suggests that the whole film “is more about sons and mothers than fathers and uncles.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Desmond Ryan notices, “Zeffirelli and Gibson do everything to make their [Hamlet's and Gertrude's] relationship the fulcrum of the film.”<sup>10</sup>

The Hamlet/Gertrude/Claudius emotional triangle is developed in the immediately proceeding sequences. The meaning of the Gertrude/Claudius gaze is confirmed in I. ii., in which Claudius announces their marriage and Gertrude, visibly reborn and undoubtedly happy, sends bright smiles to him and the courtiers. Notably, Zeffirelli does not show Hamlet at the court gathering, though his presence seems to be expected on such an occasion. The genuine happiness of the newly-married couple is restated after Claudius' conversation with Laertes, when Claudius and Gertrude

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Crowl, “Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*: The Golden Girl and a Fistful of Dust,” *Cineaste* 24.1 (Winter 1998): 58.

<sup>10</sup> Desmond Ryan, “Gibson in Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*,” *Philadelphia Enquirer*, (18.01.1991).

meet on the stairs before going to Hamlet's room and then, not in front of the court but in private, they kiss passionately.

Having made a clear statement on the nature of Gertrude/Claudius relationship, Zeffirelli proceeds to the more delicate issue of that of Gertrude and Hamlet. Gertrude is apparently concerned about Hamlet. It is she who seeks to talk to him and, since he avoids public confrontations, she urges Claudius to visit Hamlet in his study and discuss the current family situation in private. In the original text, this conversation is a part of the court scene (I. ii.) and takes place in the presence of the whole court, while Zeffirelli splits it into a number of scenes and places this particular exchange between Claudius, Hamlet and Gertrude in Hamlet's study. The beginning of their conversation, when Claudius tries to assume a fatherly tone and with patience and reason soothes his stepson's grief for his real father, does not seem to work. Hamlet answers scarcely and with rude irony so Gertrude takes over the control. Led by an unmistakable female (or perhaps maternal) instinct she nods to Claudius to leave her and Hamlet alone. In their intimate conversation, however, it is not her words that have power over Hamlet but her tenderness towards him. To her arguments he responds with the same impertinence as he did to Claudius but when Gertrude comes close to him, holds him, and simply asks him to stay (I. ii. 118–119), he is helpless. Faced with his mother's love he can do nothing but obey. There is, though, a visible tension in Hamlet as this close encounter takes place. Nothing is said or shown definitely but as Gertrude becomes more and more intimate, Hamlet becomes more and more nervous. His eyes wonder restlessly over her face and he looks most confused. If we did not know that it is a mother and son the scene would look like a typical love scene full of swaying emotions and inevitably aiming at a kiss. Seemingly puzzled by the situation, Hamlet kneels at Gertrude's feet and presses his face to her womb, as if trying to reassure himself and bring back the proper mother/son status. But Gertrude is not aware of her son's emotional state – she kneels as well and kisses his forehead, eyes and finally lips. Here, the kiss is very innocent, "motherly enough"<sup>11</sup>, as A. B. Dawson notices, different from the passionate kiss with Claudius just before the conversation with Hamlet, but it is powerful enough to shake Hamlet off his balance. Unaware of the impact of her behaviour Gertrude leaves the room and is shown running merrily down the stairs, putting on her cloak, flirtatiously turning around and going out of the castle to join Claudius for horse-riding. Here again, before mounting her horse, she kisses the King and distributes smiles among the courtiers. In the way she treats Hamlet her intentions are innocent and though she

<sup>11</sup> A. B. Dawson, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

displays unusual affection towards him, considering he is a grown-up man, it seems to be the way she is, "a blend of passion and naivety."<sup>12</sup> There is no doubt that it is Claudius she treats as a man and a partner. Hamlet, however, finds this situation unbearable. When his mother leaves he bursts into "O, that this too too solid flesh would melt" (I. ii. 129).

It is important to notice here that Hamlet knows nothing of his father's ghost yet. After attending his father's funeral and the following marriage of his mother he wants to leave the court, but Gertrude asks him to stay. In view of his reaction to her intimacy and tenderness, the soliloquy can be read as Hamlet's helpless despair about his strong feelings towards Gertrude, the woman, not the mother. Bearing in mind the film image of Hamlet and Gertrude kneeling and kissing it is very tempting, if not compulsory, to read Hamlet's bitter longing for death in the context of his feeling for Gertrude. On "that it should come to this" (I. ii. 137) Hamlet looks through the window and sees the royal couple, happy and smiling, leaving for a hunt. The tone of despair in his voice changes into pure anger as Hamlet, finishing with "frailty, thy name is woman" (I. ii. 146) abruptly shuts the window.

In this scene Zeffirelli considerably alters the implications of the original text. First, by omitting I. i., in which the Ghost appears for the first time and manifests his unnatural presence to the guards and Horatio, and replacing it by a short scene of the King's funeral, he neglects the political theme making the audience concentrate on the issue of Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius. Secondly, by making the conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude from scene ii private, he brings out the sexual aspect of Hamlet's attitude to his mother, the theme resulting not from the spoken lines (such implication is absent in the text) but from the characters' behaviour and body language.

This film scene is very crucial for presenting Zeffirelli's interpretation of the Hamlet/Gertrude issue. It is their first direct confrontation and, as such, is expected to define their relationship. It does so, indeed, and the major ideas conveyed in this film scene are as follows. Firstly, it reveals Gertrude's compulsion to obtain Hamlet's attention, to make him listen to her and be nice to her, which suggests that she needs Hamlet's approval of her new marriage. Though Gertrude is not deeply concerned with the true nature of Hamlet's feelings and she is easily satisfied with his reluctant decision to stay in Elsinore, it is rather evident that her son's presence and acceptance are crucial to her well-being. It is also evident that she does not realise the nature of Hamlet's feelings for her. She kisses and embraces

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<sup>12</sup> Hugo Davenport, "Zeffirelli strips Shakespeare down to basics," *Daily Telegraph*, (18.04.1991).

him with natural ease that can still be considered motherly in view of her previously manifested emotionality.

The second thing implied here by Zeffirelli is Hamlet's attraction to his mother and his inability to accept her marriage. Clearly, it is not his father's death, as both Gertrude and Claudius think, but Gertrude's relationship with Claudius that is so painful to Hamlet. It also seems that, looking at Gertrude, as she pleads him to stay, he starts realising that his anger is not a moral objection to her "o'erhasty marriage" (II. ii. 57) – as she puts it – felt somehow on behalf of his deceased father, but his own personal jealousy of his mother.

This Freudian reading of the play and seeing Hamlet's dilemma as an Oedipus complex is nothing original. Such an interpretation, pointed out by Freud himself, has been developed by a number of literary critics and psychologists<sup>13</sup> and used in the cinema by Lawrence Olivier. It is not, then, the idea itself that is interesting in Zeffirelli's film, but the way it is employed. Zeffirelli makes it the central motif of the film and the core of the tragic conflict. He suggests that Hamlet's feeling for Gertrude is his sole driving force. While in Olivier's film the Freudian interpretation is an undercurrent and an alternative explanation of Hamlet's endless meditations and indecisiveness, in Zeffirelli's film it is the answer to all questions. As Samuel Crowl puts it: "[Zeffirelli's] solution to the Oedipal conflict, complicated in his own case by his bastardy and homosexuality, is not to destroy the father but to glorify the mother."<sup>14</sup> Such interpretation, even though supported by critical works, is rather controversial in its singularity. However, Zeffirelli directs the film consistently in a way that such a reading seems the only right way to see the problem of *Hamlet*.

In the film, as well as in Shakespeare's text, the next confrontation of Hamlet and Gertrude takes place half way through the film, in the performance scene, but they have no chance of an intimate conversation until the closet scene. Although they do not meet much, Hamlet thinks about his mother often. When Horatio arrives, Hamlet does not fail to mention his mother's marriage and express his strong disgust with it (I. ii. 177–178, 180–183). Then, in I. v., in which Hamlet accompanies the guards waiting for the Ghost, Zeffirelli shows them walking on the upper level of the castle battlements and observing a court banquet hosted by Claudius

<sup>13</sup> See: Jacques Lacan, *Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in "Hamlet"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian subject: between language and jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993); John Russell, *Hamlet and Narcissus* (London: Associated University Press, 1949).

<sup>14</sup> S. Crowl, *op. cit.*, p. 59.



and Gertrude. In the film they are shown as a merry couple, kissing, rejoicing, eating and drinking, and, apparently, it is their joy that provokes Hamlet's anger.

Notably, the Ghost revealing the truth of the murder to Hamlet speaks very dearly of the Queen. Zeffirelli's Ghost says in a quiet and tender voice: "my most seeming virtuous queen" (I. v. 46). There is no doubt, either in the play or in the film, that the Ghost blames only Claudius and sees no guilt in Gertrude, and it is Hamlet who seeks to blame her. Zeffirelli, directing Hamlet's reaction to the Ghost's revelation, stresses the difference between Hamlet's and the Ghost's feeling about Gertrude. The Ghost is gentle and speaks of the Queen with tenderness. When he disappears, Hamlet, still petrified, swears remembering his father and then comes down from the tower where the Ghost had led him to the platform from which he previously observed the banquet. The feast still continues and Hamlet sees Claudius and Gertrude exchanging caresses. We expect him to be shaken by the revelation about his uncle-murderer and share the Ghost's outrage at the villain's deed, but Hamlet's emotion caused by the Ghost's visit are first directed against his mother as he bursts into "Oh most pernicious woman!" (I. v. 105). Only then does he add: "Oh villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!" (I. v. 106). The discord between what the Ghost meant and what Hamlet understood is evident even in the text but the way it is said in the film – with a pause after "Oh, most pernicious woman" – makes it even more clear.

Hamlet's indecision and inability to carry out the revenge has been widely discussed but if we take Zeffirelli's point of view – that it is not the uncle's bloody deed but the mother's marriage that really bothers Hamlet – Hamlet's behaviour starts making sense. In his interpretation Zeffirelli seems to be influenced by psychoanalytic approaches, especially that of John Russell. In his *Hamlet and Narcissus* he claims that the Ghost imposes two tasks on Hamlet, that is avenging his death by killing Claudius and cleansing the royal bed of Denmark from incest by detaching Gertrude's desire from Claudius and restoring the triadic structure in which the mother and the son could celebrate the memory of the father.<sup>15</sup> Russell notices that Hamlet focuses his energies exclusively on his mother and successfully completes the secondary task, without actually getting rid of Claudius.<sup>16</sup>

This notion seems to be developed in Zeffirelli's film. The director wants us to believe that Hamlet is above all concerned about his mother's marriage. It is not so much the news of the murder that causes him pain but the sight of Gertrude holding Claudius' hand, touching and kissing

<sup>15</sup> J. Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 112–113.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

him. Thus, we are made to believe that Hamlet can live with the awareness that his father's murderer wears his crown, but he cannot stand the fact that the murderer possesses the Queen. The film suggests, it seems, that the revenge of his father's death is a secondary issue to Hamlet which he delays in favour of the mother issue. Zeffirelli believes that the reason why Hamlet does so is because of the way he allocates his feelings. The director claims:

The problem of the boy is quite simply – whom to love? He did not really love his father; that was a secondary character in his life. . . he is always uncertain, ambiguous – *because his heart is not come out of mother's womb! Because there is no safer place in all the earth!*<sup>17</sup>

The idea, controversial as it is, results largely from Lacan's reading of *Hamlet* and can be summed up as a conclusion that Hamlet is "too much in the mother".<sup>18</sup> The film, therefore, provides the solution – Hamlet does not really care about the throne and avenging his father's death is not his chief purpose. It is the mother who occupies his mind and holds the key to his heart. The real problem that troubles Hamlet is that his mother is with another man; it makes him deeply downhearted, but not angry enough to kill the uncle, especially that it can be mended simply by persuading Gertrude to withdraw from the incestuous marriage. This is the picture that emerges from Zeffirelli's adaptation.

The arrival of the Players is a turning point for Hamlet. Haunted by the promise of remembrance to the Ghost he sees it as an opportunity of double-checking the murder issue. Most importantly, however, the "Mouse-trap" he sets is to the same extent addressed to Gertrude and designed to make her realise her betrayal and unfaithfulness. The performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, then, not only confirms Claudius' guilt but, primarily, gives Hamlet the chance to talk honestly to his mother who, also affected by the play and astonished by Hamlet's wild behaviour during it and after the King's outburst, summons him to her closet to demand an explanation.

The closet scene is one of the text's climactic moments, and its centrality is strongly marked in the film. It is one of the longer scenes in the film full of quickly changing cuts, and it is the second confrontation of Hamlet and Gertrude in private, with no witnesses. The film closet scene is a direct continuation of all the tension and understatements from their conversation at the beginning of the film. Samuel Crowl calls it "the central confrontation.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Hapgood, *Popularizing Shakespeare: The artistry of Franco Zeffirelli*, in: *Shakespeare, the movie. Popularizing plays on film, TV and video*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard, *After Oedipus: Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 75.

... the duet to which the entire film has been building."<sup>19</sup> Both characters enter the scene with a very different knowledge of events and with different attitudes and expectations. Gertrude is unaware of Claudius' murder but she notices that things go wrong and sees changes in Hamlet's behaviour that upset her. She realises that it has something to do with her marriage, but she fails to recognise the potency of Hamlet's feelings. Completely taken aback by Hamlet's outrageous behaviour during and after the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago*, she decides to have another private talk with her son and claim explanations from him. Gertrude, then, comes into the scene as an authoritative parent who feels it is her obligation to put an end to the child's unacceptable and uncontrolled behaviour.

Hamlet, on the other hand, seems to be on the verge of emotional breakdown. We can only speculate about his past but it seems right to assume that for a long time he had a peaceful and happy life. He was the only child and had a caring father and a loving mother. Being their child he accepted his position as a status quo. Even if he felt something more to his mother than a child's love, he would not challenge his father's position and the eternal family order. The crucial thing is that Hamlet's life was orderly, and even such an uneasy mind as his could fit into this order and find it comfortably satisfying: he studies in Wittenberg, has a couple of friends, and develops a romantic relationship with one of the court girls. Had his father lived longer, Hamlet would have most probably continued his studies, graduated and then married Ophelia. In due time he would have inherited the throne and thus continued his orderly life. Instead, his father's untimely death ruined the well-established order of Hamlet's external and internal world. It is implied in the text, and the film takes up the idea, that at the moment of his father's death Hamlet was away, probably in Wittenberg, and so Claudius took over the control. When Hamlet comes to Elsinore, he finds a completely new world. His father – the ultimate power, the guardian of order, and the symbol of all virtue – is no more. For Zeffirelli's Hamlet it also means that Gertrude is no longer his father's wife. She is now only Hamlet's mother and he can enjoy the exclusive right to her love.

Here, however, appears Claudius, who not only claims Hamlet's father's position in the country, but also in the family. Hamlet understands better than anyone else that Claudius is not a rightful substitute for the old King Hamlet; he realises it, however, from the family perspective only. Taking the psychoanalytic approach we may say that when his father died Hamlet could have started realising that he might, in a sense, replace his father. None of it, of course, is said in the original text, and Zeffirelli's film does

<sup>19</sup> S. Crowl, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

not show it blatantly either. However, the way the director shows the situation at Elsinore, especially Hamlet's reactions to what he finds at home and his attitude to Gertrude, seems to suggest that such thoughts might have been going through Hamlet's mind and govern his behaviour. Such interpretation is definitely very one-sided and limited, but Zeffirelli does limit Shakespeare's play to family drama, or, as Samuel Crowl calls it "the family romance",<sup>20</sup> where relationships and emotions between the members are the main, if not the only thing that matters.

The whole thought process I have summarised, however, regards the situation before the play started, while the actual action begins when Claudius announces his marriage with Gertrude. At this point Hamlet's position changes again. Not given enough time to come to terms with his father's death and with his feeling for his mother, he has to face another problem: Claudius' claiming Gertrude and taking the place of the deceased king. Hamlet's "prophetic soul" or, in Zeffirelli's version, rather his just awakened awareness of his feelings for Gertrude, tells him that Claudius has no right to his mother. He feels he has been cheated by Claudius and the Ghost's news confirms what Hamlet subconsciously knew all the time: Claudius is not where he should belong.

Yet, Zeffirelli's film stresses that Hamlet's logic is blurred by his feelings for Gertrude. He has found passion in himself and now has to live with it. Since he knows his feelings are not quite proper, he seeks to blame the object of his feelings – Gertrude. Contrary to good reasons, he places most of his anger against her rather than Claudius. Zeffirelli's Hamlet accumulates those emotions throughout the film and they reach their momentum in the performance scene. Hamlet nervously watches Claudius and Gertrude watching the play, looking for the signs of guilt in both of them and going wild with joy not only at the sight of the King leaving the room in distress but also at the sight of shock on Gertrude's face and at the news that she desired to speak to him in private.

Before he gets to her room, however, two more things in the film are worth mentioning. As Hamlet is talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Gertrude's envoys, he displays extreme agitation. We get the impression that after the success of the *Mousetrap* trick Hamlet will pass from meditation to action. Indeed, his treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at this moment is much more active than in their previous confrontations. Following Shakespeare's text, he no longer plays friendly games with them but loses his patience and literally attacks them (III. ii. 329–334). Moreover, Zeffirelli lets Hamlet accompany verbal attack with action. Mel Gibson's Hamlet violently pushes Guildenstern to the wall and presses a recorder

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

against his throat. His excitement is finally released in action. Leaving Rosencrantz and Guildenstern he proceeds to his mother, and his emotions seem to boil as he admits what he could do in "the very witching time of night" (III. ii. 349). Suddenly he sees Claudius praying. After his violent action towards Guildenstern, and his grim admission of dark thoughts, we expect him to act further.

In the text, this moment is also very puzzling. Hamlet plotted carefully to obtain certainty as to Claudius' guilt and accumulated a certain amount of energy and anger that should finally spur him to action at the moment of the next direct confrontation with the King, such as this one. Zeffirelli makes the atmosphere of expectation even more explicit by showing Hamlet's decisive reaction to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Yet Hamlet does not act; he stays there for a moment observing the King and excusing his own non-action. The film stresses that it is a very strange change after his previous agitation. He reacted so wildly to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who were only spies, and now does nothing seeing the murderer of his father exposed to his mercy. Only a second before he had claimed:

Now I could drink hot blood,  
And do such bitter business as the day  
Would quake to look on. (III. ii. 351-353)

and now he tries to find reasons for not doing any "business". Hamlet claims that killing Claudius at prayer would be a favour to the murderer rather than a punishment, but there is a note of deluding himself in Hamlet's justifications. Having acted after the performance and towards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern the way he did, Hamlet should act similarly here – spontaneously, without much thinking. The fact that Hamlet stops, thinks for a while and resigns from action seems to suggest that he does not want to waste time as he has actually something more important on his mind, that is the visit to his mother.

In the original text the time gap between the performance scene and the closet scene is bigger than in the film. What happens in between is Hamlet's exchange of thoughts with Horatio and then the conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the appearance of Polonius, Hamlet's soliloquy, the conversation between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Claudius, the conversation between Polonius and the King, Claudius' soliloquy, and finally Hamlet's soliloquy while watching Claudius praying. The film preserves only Hamlet's conversation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his two soliloquies, Claudius' prayer being reduced to two lines. By cutting out so much in these scenes Zeffirelli not only shortens the space between the performance and closet scene, but also focuses our attention on Hamlet and his behaviour. Thus, speeding up the tempo of action and

stressing the changes in Hamlet's behaviour, Zeffirelli seems to suggest that Hamlet may not want to settle accounts with Claudius at the moment because he is anxious to see Gertrude first. It is stressed, then, that his real concern is not the revenge but the conversation with his mother.

The attitudes at the moment of Hamlet's arrival can be summarised as follows: Gertrude is prepared to reproach her son for his weird and offensive behaviour, while he is determined to settle accounts between them – it is his chance to release his frustration and to regain his mother. For Hamlet it also means fighting with his own love for Gertrude, so he enters the closet with a sword in his hand, as if reassuring himself about his right and power. The swift exchange of words at the beginning of their conversation is very much like a sword fight indeed, but when Hamlet gets emotionally carried away and almost spits at Gertrude the following words:

You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife,  
And, would it were not so, you are my mother. (III. iv. 15–16)

cynically stressing the last part, Gertrude slaps him on his face. Frightened by what she did, she cries for help as the outraged Hamlet draws the sword against her. It is only now that Hamlet, spurred by the slap, acts without thinking, and hearing sounds from behind the arras he stabs Polonius, who is hidden there.

Hamlet is generally a person of thought. He soliloquises more than any other Shakespearean character; he thinks in situations when most people would act, and he broods over the sense of the world and his place in it. Even Mel Gibson's Hamlet, more active than other Hamlets, is not expected to perform such "a rash and bloody deed" (III. iv. 27). It is noticeable in the original text, but even more so in the film, that Claudius could not possibly be hidden in Gertrude's closet. Hamlet had just seen him kneeling and, as he moved on, there was an immediate cut to Gertrude's room. Hamlet was in a hurry so there is no chance that Claudius could manage to get to the closet before him and hide safely. Therefore, had Hamlet thought for a moment, he would not have killed Polonius, as it was not his intention to kill anyone except Claudius. But Hamlet acted without thinking. It is so unusual for him that one may suspect an extraordinary influence of Gertrude upon his emotions. Having cooled down he is honestly sorry for killing an innocent person. Even though his regret is true, it does not last long, as if Hamlet could not really concentrate on anything else but Gertrude. He then leaves Polonius' body and resumes the painful conversation with his mother. The way Zeffirelli renders this crucial moment between Hamlet and Gertrude is the essence of his interpretation of Hamlet/Gertrude relationship. The original

text does not determine the actor's behaviour in the scene. The words they exchange suggest that the conversation is very hot and emotional, but no physical contact is implied. Zeffirelli interprets this verbal battle as also physical. As Hamlet starts "wringing her heart" (III. iv. 35) telling her of "such an act that blurs the grace and blush of modesty" (III. iv. 40-41) and comparing the two brothers, he pulls her by the necklace and throws her on the bed. The climax of the scene is the moment in which Hamlet, crying out:

Nay, but to live,  
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,  
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love  
Over the nasty sty. (III. iv. 91-94)

imitates copulating movement lying on the weeping Gertrude who begs him to speak no more. Since Hamlet cannot calm down in spite of her pleading, Gertrude seals his lips with a long kiss. Only then the rage leaves Hamlet and he starts weeping with her. The implication of the scene is overt. Hamlet speaks to his mother not so much of Claudius' murder but of their unacceptable marriage and his violence with sexual implication finally confirms what his real anxiety is.

Hamlet's dangerously close intervention, however, is interrupted by the Ghost. The old King Hamlet appears in Gertrude's closet partly to remind his son of his duty to avenge him, but also, in the context of the family romance, to remind Hamlet of the status of the son – the appearance of the Ghost brings Hamlet, whose obsession with his mother slipped out of control, back to reality. He wakes up from a trance, as it were, and only now notices Gertrude's state. Perhaps driven by the Ghost's words, perhaps regaining control over himself, Hamlet withdraws and starts gently explaining his behaviour to Gertrude. As his words in the text become calmer and gentler, so his behaviour in the film becomes quieter and more civilised. He changes now from a madly jealous man to a calm preacher, and asks Gertrude to withdraw from her relationship with Claudius. Gertrude realises the horror of her marriage and in regret kneels with Hamlet. As Hamlet advises her to push Claudius away they sit on the floor close to each other, reunited again.

Finally Hamlet leaves the room looking gently and lovingly at Gertrude, as she sits on the floor staring at old King Hamlet's medallion that her son left her. Thus, through the characters' behaviour Zeffirelli brings to light and stresses the ideas present in the text of this scene: the tension between Hamlet and Gertrude, the explosion of accumulated emotions, and then understanding, forgiving and reuniting. In the film each movement, gesture or gaze of the characters emphasises those implied emotions – their

fight and physical abuse of Gertrude at the beginning, and then the kiss, the caress and kneeling together.

The result of this very emotional and powerful scene is most important for the whole film. In his words and action Hamlet finally reveals the main source of his pain and trouble: Gertrude's marriage. He manages to make his mother understand that her marriage to Claudius is a deadly sin and prompts her to repent. Zeffirelli stresses the outcome of the closet scene by showing Gertrude coming to bid goodbye to Hamlet as he is about to leave for England (III. iv. 201–210 – a fragment separated by the director from the play's closet scene). He shows here the mother and the son almost as a pair of conspiring lovers, secretly reassuring each other of their devotion before being split apart. Hamlet, then, succeeded in the task that was of primary importance to him – he made his mother realise her mistake and made her promise that she would reject Claudius. As it partly fulfils the Ghost's wish, Hamlet seems to have given up the thought of revenge, or at least to delay it for the time being. Therefore, even though Claudius' guilt is now confirmed, he takes no action against the King. The notion of Mel Gibson's Hamlet as a man of action has been questioned as inconsistent since he, having dispensed of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with the decisiveness and charm of his Lethal Weapon role, returns to Elsinore and does nothing. It seems natural in the text, as Hamlet celebrates his indecision throughout the play, but it might seem surprising in Zeffirelli's film, where Mel Gibson gave the flare of spontaneity and energy to the character. Yet, Zeffirelli's film explains why the lack of action after return from England is quite consistent and makes perfect sense. Hamlet sentenced Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to death because he had no choice. In spite of his suicidal meditations he did not want to be killed, not after he reached an understanding with his mother. He comes back to Elsinore not as an avenger but as a guardian of the newly re-established family order, with Gertrude on his, not Claudius', side.

When Hamlet returns from the sea voyage she is not the same woman. While in the text there is no indication of any decisive change in Gertrude's behaviour after the closet scene, the film shows her visible transformation. We observe the change in her behaviour towards Claudius from the moment Hamlet is sent away. She no longer clings to him. There is no holding hands, kissing, or smiling. When Laertes arrives on the news of his father's death, Claudius meets him alone, while in the text Gertrude stands by her husband and even defends him from Laertes' accusations. In the film, Gertrude is not even present in the scene with Laertes. She now walks separately and, apparently following Hamlet's plead, does not seek Claudius' company. We may guess that they no longer share the bed. This is how Hamlet sees them at Ophelia's funeral: Claudius walks with



Laertes in the front, while Gertrude walks behind with the ladies. Instead of Claudius' hand, she holds the cross. Again, the text implies nothing of the kind and mentions no particular reaction of Claudius or Gertrude to Hamlet's sudden appearance. In the film, on the other hand, when Hamlet and Laertes start a fight, Gertrude rushes to her son, but is stopped by Claudius. Yet she manages to get through and holds Hamlet, giving him a soothing kiss. When Hamlet leaves the funeral, Gertrude, lifting the cross to her lips, looks at Hamlet with concern and at Claudius with suspicion.

The next and the last scene in which Hamlet and Gertrude are together, both in the text and in the film, is the duel scene. After Hamlet's unexpected arrival Claudius decides to take the final step and once and for all get rid of the troublesome nephew. Using Laertes he sets up a duel. Hamlet accepts the challenge in spite of Horatio's warnings, seemingly ready for whatever is to happen. His behaviour at that point is very interesting. He has just escaped the death sentence arranged by his uncle. He comes back to Elsinore where he finds Ophelia dead and her brother blaming him for that. Yet, Hamlet does nothing; he only waits for things to take their course. Hamlet's hesitation, indecisiveness and passivity, especially after his return from the voyage to England, have often been discussed by the critics. Zeffirelli's film, however, provides a simple explanation to his questionable inaction. The reason for his peace of mind and readiness with which he accepts the duel is that Hamlet is satisfied with what he has achieved. Zeffirelli's Hamlet does not care about avenging his father's death or his own misfortune. He is concerned with his mother and in this respect he has succeeded. He has separated her from Claudius, and has rebuilt their mother/son bond. Even though he had not killed his father's murderer, he has fulfilled the promise of remembrance given to the Ghost and restored the memory of the father in the family, thus relieving himself of half of the burden imposed upon him by the Ghost's plead. Mel Gibson's Hamlet, then, walks light-hearted into the hall where the duel is to take place.

The way Zeffirelli directs the duel scene fully supports the conclusion drawn so far about Hamlet's attitude to Gertrude. Hamlet sees Claudius and Gertrude coming into the room from two opposite directions, apparently from their private suits in different parts of the castle. As they come in and sit at the throne they do not even look at each other. In the world of Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, where gazes are so important and where the director depicts every exchange of looks, this sudden lack of eye contact between Claudius and Gertrude is impossible to miss. We are so accustomed to their turning to each other, to their smiles and kisses that as they sit we expect them to look at each other and at least smile. It does not happen. Indeed, throughout the whole duel Gertrude hardly ever looks at Claudius.

Her behaviour says that she is no longer his Queen – she is there for Hamlet. Hamlet is well aware of the change in her treatment of Claudius, which she confirms by smiling at her son as she enters the room. Thus the film stresses again that this is the source of Hamlet's readiness: he regained his mother. Therefore, he no longer needs to put on any appearances and we finally see him the way he must have been before Gertrude's remarriage, that is in the time of "pre-Claudian state of innocence,"<sup>21</sup> as Samuel Crowl nicely phrases it. He acts properly towards his uncle. He seriously addresses Laertes and asks his pardon. Then he gives a show for Gertrude. He winks and smiles at her, and gladly lets her wipe his face. He fights Laertes fiercely only because Laertes attacks him with rage. Hamlet, making a fool of himself in the first two rounds, shows he does not treat the duel seriously and would rather not go on with what becomes a stern fight.

The turning point is when Gertrude falls from the throne struck by the poisoned drink. Though Hamlet is scratched by Laertes' poisoned blade he does not pay attention to it. At Osiric's cry, "Look to the Queen" (V. ii. 283) he stops and looks at her startled. When Horatio, seeing his bleeding wound asks, "How is it, my lord?" (V. ii. 284) Hamlet's immediate answer is "How does the Queen?" (V. ii. 288). He rushes to her and falls on his knees. He presses his head to her chest, perhaps to check if her heart is still beating, but this childlike gesture reminds us of the moment he pressed his head to her lap. When his father died Hamlet stood stone cold at his funeral. When he found out it was murder, he raged but did nothing. Now, seeing his mother's death and hearing from the dying Laertes a confession "the King, the King's to blame" (V. ii. 318) Hamlet needs no more thinking, hesitating or soliloquising. He springs on Claudius, stabs him furiously with Laertes' poisoned sword, and, still in a fury, forces the poisoned drink into his mouth.

The final stimulus that made Hamlet act against Claudius was Gertrude's death. The murder of his father did not spur Hamlet to revenge. The fact that he was poisoned at Claudius' wish did not matter. But when Hamlet sees his mother die, he hesitates no longer. He proves to be perfectly capable of immediate action. He kills Claudius violently, even cruelly, pouring the drink into his mouth even though he is already lethally stabbed. Hamlet's problem all the way through, then, Zeffirelli implies, was not his inability to kill Claudius, but the lack of proper reason for it. Hamlet felt horrified at the news that Claudius murdered his father, but the fact that he married his mother seemed much more tragic to him. Unlike Laertes, who on the news of his father's death raised his sword at

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

the King, Hamlet only contemplated revenge, considering it a secondary issue to the Gertrude/Claudius problem. Since, according to Zeffirelli's interpretation, the central person in his life was his mother, it was her death that made Hamlet act like Laertes – killing the guilty without thinking, without asking questions or seeking confirmation.

Zeffirelli's film version of *Hamlet* may certainly evoke many objections, as it reduces a very complex tragedy to a family melodrama, oversimplifies or omits many psychological, social and political issues, and strongly highlights Gertrude at the expense of other characters. Even Hamlet is not as multifaceted as Shakespeare's tragic hero. Yet, all these factors that for many Shakespearean critics would seem drawbacks, if not utter failures of interpretation, are in fact Zeffirelli's brave directorial decisions and from the point of view of the film's commercial success proved to be advantages. Franco Zeffirelli's artistic "mission" is to make Shakespeare accessible for a popular audience, and he is rather radical as far as the means of achieving this goal are concerned. As he said:

Nobody knows anything about *Hamlet*, about Shakespeare. They don't know anything. They go there in a dark room and they see something on the screen and they want to know what the story is, and you have to tell them the story from scratch, from the beginning, in a convincing way, using a language that will make clear and accessible every single word of William Shakespeare.<sup>22</sup>

It would be more accurate perhaps to say that Zeffirelli did not adapt Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for screen but rather appropriated it for the 90's mainstream moviegoers. Choosing the "hottest" aspect of the tragedy – a puzzling relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude, trimming the text so as to make the story coherent and logical, casting actors that would make the story not only credible but exciting, and directing it with consistency and artistic professionalism, Zeffirelli proves that Shakespeare can be an amazing cinematic experience.

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<sup>22</sup> H. R. Coursen, *Shakespeare in Production* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996), p. 107.