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The Banquet as Cinematic Romance

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Abstract

In Feng Xiaogang's version of *Hamlet*, *The Banquet*, the film's music, its slow motion duels, its beautifully photographed landscapes and horses, the weight given to Qing Nü's dreams and her songs, the heightened theme of adultery, and the odd ending suggest that the film is not a tragedy, but a romance. Romance, according to Fredric Jameson, is the genre that reveals the social or historical contradictions that produce the illusion of good and evil. In fact, Feng is following the historical shift away from the old notion of *Hamlet* as a play about revenge, and we can see this shift towards romance by looking at the different interpretations of *Hamlet* from the Renaissance to the modern era. In the filmography of *Hamlet*, the displacement of tragedy by romance is most obvious in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. This shift in interpretation and our understanding of the romance genre make us ask what social contradictions *The Banquet* tries to resolve.

T. S. Eliot famously declared in 1919 that *Hamlet* is "certainly an artistic failure" (1919, 123), and it is not impossible that Feng Xiaogang, known for his comic films, recognized that failure is the closest any film can get to the original. There is, in Feng's *The Banquet*, no obvious overlap in dialogue with the Shakespearean original, at least in the English subtitles. One looks in vain for "To be or not to be," since Prince Wu Luan, Hamlet's counterpart, is much more given to slow motion sword-play than to soliloquies. The digitally contrived leaping, by the same technicians who produced *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, may meet the audience's demand for cutting-edge effects, but this stylization distracts from our thinking about the play — which was Eliot's original objection. The spectacle suddenly works, however, in a different way; after a few absurd high karate kicks by Empress Wan (a staple of the form), right at the moment when Wu Luan and Wan, his former lover, step-mother, and soon-to-be wife of his uncle, slowly bend backwards, almost like spoons, in a beautifully synchronized pairing shot from overhead. The dance represents Wu Luan's desperate loneliness and Wan's entrapment, symbolized by the sword of the Yue Maiden

that Wu Luan carries in the scroll of a song he has written about her. Perhaps inspired by Ophelia's snatches of old lauds about desperate lovers, the Yue Maiden can only be understood in terms of the ending of the play, but even before we reach that point it is obvious that Feng's cinematic talent has taken over and that his movie is no mere introduction to *Hamlet* for undergraduates, but an advanced lesson in film genre.

Few Asian versions of Shakespeare value lexical fidelity. Rather, as Feng's clever transpositions of plot and character show, he heeds Eliot's warning about the failure of *Hamlet* as a drama, and as so often happens with major filmmakers, his cinematic sense displaces traditional themes. The film's music, its slow motion duels, its beautifully photographed landscapes and horses, the weight given to Qing Nü's dreams and her songs, the heightened theme of adultery, and the odd ending of the film suggest that the real genre of *The Banquet* is not tragedy, but romance. In the filmography of *Hamlet* this displacement of tragedy by romance is most obvious in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, starting from the impossible series of coin tosses that all come up heads and leading to a fore-feeling that a world of science and logic is waiting, even if it is not yet fully understood. Similarly, and perhaps as a result of the film version of Tom Stoppard's play, a supernatural intervention occurs at the end of *The Banquet*. Wu Luan's death is not the final scene of the film; instead, the sword of the Yue Maiden abruptly kills Empress Wan, even as she is about to take sole political control. But where does the flying sword come from? Feng leaves the final scene unexplained, forcing us to consider each character more closely, to re-read the film almost as if we were reading a murder mystery and thereby challenging our suppositions about the genre of *Hamlet*. As if in answer to Eliot, *The Banquet* shows that *Hamlet* itself is as much a romance as a tragedy. I will start by reviewing some key similarities between *Hamlet* and *The Banquet*, then look at the instability of tragedy as a genre, and finally consider how Fredric Jameson's theory of romance explains some of the key changes in Feng's cinematic version of Shakespeare.

Plot situations and character types, with appropriate changes determined by cultural differences and interpretation, transfer from stage to screen more easily than language does. Moreover, Feng freely transfers features of Shakespeare's tragedies from one character to another. Emperor Li and Wu Luan spy on each other, as Claudius and Polonius do in *Hamlet*. Empress Wan is at times an ambivalent Lady Macbeth and a scheming Goneril. Wu Luan and Empress Wan buy poison from a supplier right out of *Romeo and Juliet* (all discussed at length by Amy Scott-Douglass in her essay in this issue). Still, *The Banquet* retains the figure of a displaced and disgruntled nephew not obviously bent on revenging his father's most unnatural murder. Hamlet's rather brutal, but ambivalent dealings with Ophelia lead to both Wu Luan's rape of Qing Nü and her obvious willingness to endure even a Freudian doubling when he insists, in moment of passion, that she

is the Empress. Further to illustrate Wu Luan's uncertainty, Feng Xiaogang greatly increases the sexual attraction between him and his uncle's wife, slightly altering the Oedipal fascination that twentieth-century directors, including Laurence Oliver, have added to the relationship between Hamlet and his mother. It is easy enough to see something creepy in Claudius's cloying passion for Gertrude — certainly Hamlet is obsessed by their love-making, and so Emperor Li's passion for his new queen's beauty, even his neurotic obsession with his brother's sexual prowess, seem by comparison reasonable.

Himself a borrowing, although he says nothing about borrowing or lending, Minister Yin does a fair imitation of Polonius by bending before the winds of political change. Similarly, his son Yin Sun responds appropriately to the impossible situation of his lovesick sister Qing Nü, who plays out her madness by singing, like Ophelia, to which she adds what Ken Kesey would have called "dream wars" with Wu Luan (Wolfe 1968, 108). She communicates with Wu Luan extra-sensorily, she says, certain that he really loves her and not the Empress — whom Wu Luan thinks he loves, but who is usurped first by his own father and then by his murdering uncle. We are never sure whether Qing Nü is right or wrong, since Wu Luan seems not to know as much about Empress Wan as we do — or he would not have mismanaged his performance at the Emperor's final banquet, the equivalent of the duel between Hamlet and Laertes that Claudius arranges. In this scene, Empress Wan prepares a poisoned chalice for her second husband, using poison stashed under one long fingernail. But Qing Nü, prompted by the misguided Wu Luan, interrupts just before the Emperor can drink. As Minister Yin looks on — no rapier through the arras for him in this version — his daughter Qing Nü drinks, sings, and dies from the poison. Realizing that the cup was meant for him, Emperor Li commits suicide by drinking from it. He does so either, as he claims, because he really does love Empress Wan and cannot bear that she does not reciprocate, or because he knows Wu Luan will defeat him anyway. As Emperor Li falls, Yin Sun tries to stab Empress Wan for having prepared the poison that killed his sister, but Wu Luan seizes his dagger by the blade just before it penetrates her back. Empress Wan dispatches Yin Sun by a sudden backhand dirk to the neck, even as it is announced that the blade was poisoned. Wu Luan begins to die, and the Empress then weeps for him.

Although the film continues to the death of Empress Wan, at this point the tragedy offers a classical Aristotelian recognition, combined with a change of fortune. As Wu Luan realizes too late that Empress Wan plotted against her husband for his sake, his well-intentioned misperception leads to turmoil and deaths. The problem with this reading is that Empress Wan has so mistreated Qing Nü — having her lashed, branded, exiled to the South, and somehow mysteriously returned to court — that Wu Luan appears foolish in his devotion to her, however much one wants to excuse

Wan's behavior on the grounds that she was forcibly married to Wu Luan's father and uncle. So it is hard to fit Feng's Wu Luan tidily into the classical pattern of a man whose admirable intelligence leads him through a sequence of decisive, moral actions that, due to circumstances he cannot control or reasonably foresee, unfortunately kill him.

But Hamlet's character has always been a problem in the definition of the play *Hamlet* as a tragedy. The original story in Saxo Grammaticus's *Historical Danica*, book 3 (ca. 1200) is about a hero who assumes madness or stupidity for the purpose of revenge. His father kills the King of Norway in single combat. His enemies send a courtesan (the ur-Ophelia) to seduce him, but he rapes her. He then goes to England, wins the king's daughter there, returns, and kills the usurper in a sword exchange. Saxo also has fratricide, incest, and the king's love of drink. Its tone is more brutal than that of Shakespeare's play: Amleth boils the Polonius figure and feeds him to the pigs. He vigorously burns down the palace. Still, he is somewhat melancholic. Polonius escapes physical boiling in *The Banquet*, but other elements remain, such as Qing Nü's rape and Wu Luan's moodiness. Some are suitably altered. Instead of feigning madness, Wu Luan retreats to the forest and the life of an artist, although the Empress Wan suggests — perhaps ironically, since it is not clear whether she knows Emperor Li is listening — that Wu Luan's retreat is comparable to madness, since a real man should rule kingdoms and not write poetry. Wu Luan has no taste for rule, but never seems worried about being a real man. He is too skilled in fighting — in contrast to his uncle Emperor Li, who never duels, though at one point he twirls a sword with some skill.

The Renaissance version of the story adds a moral conflict to the physical perils of the original. This *Hamlet* is about a man called on to exact revenge for the murder of his father. His problems are that the murderer is a king, the source of his information is a ghost, the revenge must be suitable to be honorable, and there are spies everywhere. I cannot see that the great theme of Shakespeare's play, Hamlet's uncertainty over the possible demonic nature of the ghost, is present at all in *The Banquet*. Rather, the unknown natures he faces are those of Qing Nü, his dreamy loyalist, and Empress Wan, whose original passion for him may have been more inflected by her love of power than her passion. Still, the switch from uncertain ghost to uncertain women produces a dynamic reading of a key theme in the play.

By the nineteenth century, a romantic conception of *Hamlet* had developed. For readers in the post-Napoleonic world, *Hamlet* was about a man who lacks the opportunity to be great. Elsinore is a pit — but then, how can anyone measure up to Napoleon? Reason cannot stir the spirit, only depress it. Some of this romantic interpretation emerges in *The Banquet* when Wan berates Wu Luan for writing poetry instead of assuming rulership of the kingdom. More importantly, Qing Nü represents the power of the spirit — so much so that it is reasonable to suppose that even though she dies, she

or her spirit throws the final sword that kills Empress Wan. In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, a principal modernist reading of *Hamlet*, A. C. Bradley argued that Hamlet is melancholic, incapable of acting not because he is depressed, but because he is disgusted and does not care. The counter-argument to Bradley has always been that Hamlet shows at times extraordinary energy. Neither paradigm really works for Wu Luan, however, which further indicates that Feng's film is not focused on the tragedy of character, but on other features of the story.

In *The Wheel of Fire*, G. Wilson Knight used William James's *Variety of Religious Experience* to explore why life seems to have lost its significance for Hamlet. His soul is sicker than events allow; his actions are cruel; he is bereft of intuitive faith, or love, or purpose, by which we must live if we are to remain sane, so he dwells on the foul appearances of sex, decay of flesh, deceit of beauty. Wu Luan and his world seem just the opposite. There is beauty everywhere; Feng's China is a land of green trees and weaving, of polished floors and beautiful chambers, not an unweeded garden and place of disease. Feng Xiaogang, in fact, reverses the key imagistic sequence in *Hamlet*, which is of disease and decay. Wu Luan seems eager to set the world right; his problem is to find an action that suits his artistic conception of performance, a theme drawn from the Players' section of *Hamlet*, to which Feng gives more prominence than any other director. The result of Wu Luan's conversations with Empress Wan is the need to use masks — the evil, but practical Emperor Li specifically says that he hates masks — even though this method produces ultimate disaster because Wu Luan does not understand that wearing a physical mask is less effective than feigning a mask, as Empress Wan does. On the other hand, if it is somehow Wu Luan's spirit, rather than Qing Nü's, that drives the sword of the Maiden of Yue into the back of Empress Wan at the end of the film, then it is possible to read the movie in Knight's terms, as a sickly delay before Wu Luan finally takes an action that is beyond shocking, but explains why he never complains that his father married Wan, the woman he loved. It was only his sick soul that loved her.

Most film versions of *Hamlet* might be described as at least partially feminist readings. These productions make the play about a woman who has no control over her life, goes mad, and kills herself. Her problems are an overbearing father, a jerk for a boyfriend, a hot-house existence, a lack of female companionship or understanding, and an ignorance about the facts of life. Earlier films make Ophelia childish. Modern versions make her angry. Feng gives the childish persona to Qing Nü and saves anger for Wan. But his film is feminist in a larger sense because, arguably, the central figure is not Wu Luan, but Empress Wan. Her role is far greater than Gertrude's, while Wu Luan's is much less than Hamlet's. Her rivalry with Qing Nü is distinctly absent in the relationship between Gertrude and Ophelia, whom Gertrude says she had hoped would marry Hamlet. Moreover, Empress Wan's attempts to find power in a world of male violence motivate

the world of magic in *The Banquet*. She wields her sword on a par with Wu Luan and leaps as high. But where the supernatural in *Hamlet* symbolically represents Hamlet's destiny or fate, in *The Banquet* it provides an escape for a woman, or what Fredric Jameson would call a realm into which good and evil can dissolve. That dissolution is why we cannot pin down Wan's character. As vicious as she can be, she is the object of desire that ultimately escapes categories of good or evil. In the world of romance, her adultery is only what Jameson would call a baleful spell, not her at all.

By concentrating so much on the female characters in *Hamlet*, Feng Xiaogang aligns his film with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, which also defines *Hamlet* through the eyes of other characters. The theme is already in Shakespeare's play, since everyone has a different opinion about the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior. Feng extracts that uncertainty and focuses it not on Hamlet — who is not the object of others' analysis in the film — but on the death of Empress Wan. He then sets up the ending of the film by doing what cinema film does best: showing horses (which always act naturally on film), broad landscapes to suggest spaces beyond the narrow confines of our world, rugged men, beautiful women, and naturalistic method acting rather than heightened language. The elimination of language and actions that the audience knows exist in the full text in turn mimics the awareness of the limits of the world we live in, what Jameson calls the problem of the "world," which cannot be an object of perception in its own right. It is the function of the romance "landscape or village, forest, or mansion" (Jameson 1981, 98) to remind us that nature is not natural, but conditioned by society and history. The romance hero, however, is only a naïve spectator, not a deliverer from an upper world sent to battle some lower evil, as would occur if Wu Luan actually fought the Emperor Li. The real conflict is elsewhere, on a supernatural level, which is why Wu Luan and Li never fight, why Qing Nü's weapons of choice are her dreams and her songs, and why Empress Wan refuses to conform to any moral category.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson offers a three-step definition of romance. First, it depends on an "ethical axis of good and evil," as Northrop Frye said. But second, insofar as they are illusions, good and evil need to be "historically problematized," (Jameson 1981, 96). Third, romance is therefore the genre that reveals the social or historical contradiction producing an illusion of good and evil. Adultery, the theme of Feng's previous movie *The Cell Phone* (2003) and very much central to his vision of *The Banquet*, is an obvious contradiction, since one cannot commit exclusively to two different people. Another contradiction may be in making ahistorical films today in Beijing. But whatever the cultural base is beneath the superstructure of the film, and whether or not Feng Xiaogang consciously or fully recognizes the cultural work his film does, *The Banquet* escapes Eliot's censure and succeeds insofar as it dynamically interprets the main elements of *Hamlet*.

Ethical oppositions are unimportant in tragedy, Jameson says, since to call Creon or Iago good or bad makes the plays melodrama. But where tragedies rise above good and evil to "stage the triumph of inhuman destiny or fate," romance does so as a form of "social praxis" to resolve a "concrete historical situation" (Jameson 1981, 117). Romance is the story of "semic evaporation," meaning the dissolving of the "ethical binary," and the history of the form consists of the ways in which evil "generates the narrative but is resolved by it." In the medieval period, this transformation occurred in chivalric romances that posited a sudden awareness that what made one's enemy evil was precisely his identity with oneself, a moment of aristocratic solidarity that generally occurred when a knight unhelmeted. Magic served this transformative function during the Renaissance, while "new positivities (theology, psychology, the dramatic metaphor)" found their way into nineteenth-century romances. Modernism substitutes an absence or "absent presence" (134). Always there is a struggle between the older form and the contemporary materials, and so romance is a suitable genre for transitional periods. In general, the modes of social control change as the economy changes.

The clue to Stoppard's romantic reading of *Hamlet* is the way in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern defy logic, play with model airplanes and other devices, and seem constantly on the verge of recognizing the meaning of what Hamlet, whom they keep glimpsing, is doing. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern fore-feel modern science (experiments with flight, for example), but they cannot escape their world. They feel, but cannot understand, that they are actors. They wonder if they should follow instructions to put Hamlet to death, but they are restricted by local hierarchies of power, such as orders from the king. This uncertainty arises because romances hide social domination, which defines good and evil, by projecting good and evil as magic. For example, acting can be good or bad, so it must be magic. Fortune can be good or bad, so it is really about social domination.

Because the film is a romance, performance takes on a magical quality in *The Banquet*, but cannot assure success. Similarly, Fortune can be recognized, but not controlled. And so the film ends with magical death of Empress Wan, not the moral mis-calculus of Wu Luan. We do not know who throws the sword that enters her back or even if it is the sword of the Maiden of Yue. It could be anyone's ghost: that of Yin Sun, who tries to kill her; of Wu Luan's father, whose memory she betrays when she makes love to Emperor Li; of Qing Nü, whom she torments; or of Wu Luan. If Wu Luan is the killer, he might kill Wan because he finally recognizes her evil. Or he might kill her for a much more romantic reason, which is symbolized by the sword that they had known in their youth and around which they dance so beautifully. Wu Luan wants Wan to join him in the afterlife.

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