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Spectator Violence and Queenly Desire in *The Banquet*

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Abstract

Unique among *Hamlet* adaptations, *The Banquet* resists the tendency in Hollywood cinematic tradition of minimizing Gertrude to a structural device used to develop the figures of Hamlet and Claudius. Instead, Empress Wan, loosely the Gertrude figure, emerges as a figure of adaptation itself, usurping the structural and visual focus as she usurps the throne. However, Wan's mysterious murder at the film's end poses the question of just how perverse an adaptation spectators are willing to accept.

Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet* (2006) leaves the audience contemplating the haunting final scene long after the film ends. Empress Wan, loosely the Gertrude figure, manages to usurp the throne, only to be stabbed in the back by an unknown assailant. The spectator is left with two lingering questions: Who kills Wan? Why? And perhaps most shocking: How did the Gertrude figure become the most powerful player in the tragedy? In his reading of filmic adaptations of *Hamlet*, J. Anthony Burton notes a popular tradition in Hollywood cinema: the vanishing of Gertrude. Surveying the film adaptations of Laurence Olivier (1948), Tony Richardson (1969), Rodney Bennett (1980), and Kenneth Branagh (1996), Burton identifies an Anglophone cinematic tradition of minimizing Gertrude to a structural device in order to emphasize the development of those characters who become the real focus of the drama: Hamlet and Claudius. More to the point, these adaptations suggest that Hamlet and Claudius are better suited to the filmic medium; as Burton concludes, "There is a fault line that separates stage performance from screen renditions, to which Gertrude's character has proven especially vulnerable because of the extent to which her onstage movement helps define who she is and how she affects the action. The stage accommodates large movements across open space . . . The close-ups and camera techniques of film and video emphasize interior and psychological dimensions of character and relationship" (2006, 229). Hamlet and Claudius are men of thought and likewise translate well to film because film tends to privilege interiority; Gertrude is a woman of action who becomes lost in cinematic translation.

However, *The Banquet*, a film loosely based on *Hamlet* and set during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period in tenth-century China, stands as a unique mode of resistance to that which Burton rightfully identifies as the popular Hollywood reduction of Gertrude. Rather than vanish, Empress Wan occupies the position of the filmic vanishing point — that localized, but elusory point toward which all perspectives converge. In the film's opening sequence, a narrative voice-over traces the fall of the Tang Dynasty and the years of social turmoil and political instability that created a bitter struggle for power within the imperial family. As Emperor Li proclaims during the film's first sexual encounter between himself and Wan, "The tug between power and love has tormented past emperors for centuries." Against this struggle for power, the film figures Wan as a narrative and visual object of desire that both propels and deconstructs the male lineal right to the throne. For Andrew Gurr (1978), *Hamlet* might also be called "Claudius's Story," as the narrative quickly unfolds around his struggle to maintain order in the state. *The Banquet*, by contrast, tells Gertrude's story. Through the figure of Wan, the film offers an image of a woman who must continually renegotiate her role in a world where power and desire are continually at odds.

Wan emerges as a structural focal point in the film because of its adaptive strategy of weaving together Shakespeare and the Chinese heroic martial arts literary genre known as *wuxia*. In the opening sequence, the non-diegetic narrator marks the film's appropriation of *Hamlet* by explaining that his brother Li, who has usurped the throne and taken his sister-in-law Empress Wan as his wife, had also murdered the former Emperor. However, the narrator also marks the film's appropriation of Jin Yong's (Louis Cha's) popular contemporary Chinese novella, "The Sword of Yueh Maiden" (1970), by explaining that the former Emperor wedded his son Prince Wu Luan's fiancée Wan three years prior to the usurpation. The martial arts tale of adventure takes as its background the generations-long battle that began in the fifth-century Spring and Autumn and Warring Kingdom period, when the King of Chuh beds his son's fiancée, an act that fractures the kingdom into warring factions. When swordsmen of Wu enter the lands of Yueh to do battle, they encounter an unassuming young shepherdess who, displaying unimaginable power, defeats them with nothing more than a bamboo staff. Wan represents an adaptive amalgam in the filmic fusion of Shakespeare and *wuxia* by performing the functions of Queen Gertrude and the Chuh fiancée, a strategy that retains the Oedipal dynamic often exploited in filmic adaptations of *Hamlet* by figuring Wan as both Gertrude and Ophelia, mother and lover. However, Wan also represents the fabled Maiden of Yueh. While this dynamic marks the opening narration as a subtle trace, it becomes conspicuous as the film progresses. For instance, during an erotic fight sequence, Wan wields what she identifies as the sword of Yueh Maiden against Wu Luan. The sequence not only figures Wan as the Yueh Maiden, but also marks her as far more powerful than the warring men

who surround her, namely Emperor Li and Wu Luan. And as the story goes, she embodies an underestimated source of power in the struggle for royal authority.

While Wan occupies the pivotal point in the film's adaptive structure, she also embodies the process of adaptation itself. In our first cinematic encounter with the twice-Empress, the film visually marks her as caught between two regimes, trapped within the process of transitioning from one man of power to another. Initially framed in full shot, long take and later cutting to an overhead long shot, Wan slowly marches to Emperor Li, who now occupies the throne. The shots establish Wan as visually out of context. As she somberly approaches Li, her stark white and flowing gown contrasts visually with the dimly lit hall and darkly clad imperial guards who ominously flank her path. The scene sartorially frames Wan as a disruption in Li's court and marks her as an othered presence, a haunting remainder of the past regime. The camera shifts to shot/reverse shot as Wan regards the new Emperor with defiance by refusing to observe the proper address of "Your Majesty." When Li corrects Wan and reminds her of the change of power, Wan insolently defends herself by citing the demands of adaptation. "It is hard for me to adapt so quickly, Brother-in-law," she responds, with a disobedient laugh, again refusing him the title of Emperor. At this point in the sequence, Li exits the throne room, offering Wan a warning that "the kingdom shall not wait."

Yet, the kingdom and its new head, Li, do indeed wait on Wan, at times with arms quite literally outstretched in anticipation. As Li exits the throne room, he orders the guards to seal the door, leaving Wan trapped inside, perhaps until she consents to be his wife, and the new Empress. Before the doors close completely, however, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of Li's hand. Somewhere between a demand and plea, and with his hand open as an offering, Li utters, "Sister-in-law," to which Wan responds, "The correct address is 'Empress,'" as her hand enters the frame to rest atop his. The gesture signifies Wan's consent to Li's demand, as well as her understanding of the reality principle of the court; but the visual semiotics of the scene differentiate this mode of consent from a complete surrender. Li's hand awaits hers in the long shot. The entrance of Wan's hand disrupts the stasis of the shot, adding movement and dynamism. In offering her hand, she acknowledges Li's new power, but still refuses him the title of Emperor. Rather, Wan names herself Empress and nods at Li's role as Emperor only metonymically, through his relationship with her.

In this first cinematic meeting between Li and Wan, *The Banquet* frames relationships among the revolution of power, the power of nomination, and the process of adaptation in terms of Wan's complex agency. What do we now call Wan? Empress? Empress, again? A woman sacrificed in the name of fraternity? None of these nominations quite fit. While she consents to Emperor Li, she cannot be reduced to a woman trafficked between men. For instance, when Wan reunites

with Wu Luan, she admonishes him with the claim, "I have sacrificed enough for you and your father," yet she refuses to function as the sacrificial role of Queen Mother who willingly accepts a goblet of poison in the name of maternity. The camera deploys long shots and close ups to frame Wan, but neither offers a sense of her interiority; instead, the editing tantalizes the spectator with the possibility of knowing Wan's desires, a possibility that never comes to fruition. What can be gathered from the sequence and from Wan's complex engagements with both Li and Wu Luan is that, like adaptation itself, she performs contradictory loyalties in ways that shroud a clear understanding of her sense of fidelity.

Just as the spectator cannot know Wan's desires, Emperor Li and Wu Luan both misinterpret the Empress and attempt to figure her actions as exclusively sacrificial or malevolent, rather than strategic. For instance, the film frames Li as a failed translator during his first sexual encounter with Wan. Revealing himself as (almost embarrassingly) driven to competition by his desire for Wan, Li asks how he compares to his brother as a lover. When Wan explains that the former Emperor was wise and valiant, Li translates: "You mean to say, he was not very adept at pleasing you." Wan corrects him by explaining that the former Emperor had his moments, which Li translates: "But he was not often willing, am I right?" Li must believe that Wan sacrificed herself in her last marriage in order to validate his sense of dominance and fraternal rivalry.

In a similarly reductive move, Wu Luan mourns the Little Wan of his youth and insists that she is now a venomous woman bent on his demise. When Prince Wu Luan's mourning turns to violence and aggression, he focuses his rage on Qing Nü, loosely the film's Ophelia figure. Attempting to force the two female figures into one condensed function of feminine infidelity, he accuses Qing Nü, "You are her!" While Wan plays the sometime-Ophelia, Wan and Qing Nü cannot condense into one character in the narrative Wu Luan constructs around his pitiful situation. In this failure, Wu Luan moves beyond the boundaries of his pre-scripted role as the contemplative prince of inaction. Playing more Chiron and Demetrius from *Titus Andronicus* than Hamlet, Wu Luan attacks Qing Nü, shredding her gown and, as the spectator must imagine, raping her. Like so many critics and film adaptations of *Hamlet*, Wu Luan understands the women in his life as valuable insofar as they help him understand and navigate his desire to avenge his dead father. Elaine Showalter (1985) has noted the critical practice of treating Ophelia as an insignificant character in the play whose value extends only to what she can tell us about Hamlet — a critical practice all too similar to Anglophone cinematic treatments of Gertrude. In representing the Hamlet figure as sexually violent and wholly bent on forcing women into a system of signification that revolves exclusively around him, *The Banquet* points toward both the limits and the violence of these two parallel interpretative traditions. Following Wu Luan's death, the film reveals the full degree of his willful

misinterpretation of Wan in one of the film's most striking tableau shots. With an overhead, full shot, the camera frames Wan as she bends over Wu Luan's body. The trail of her vermilion gown fans out in the shape of a broken heart, which appears to be consumed by the intricately embroidered flames that form the phoenix tails on her royal robe.

Typical of *The Banquet's* cinematic handling of Wan's elusive subjectivity, as soon as the camera offers a sense of her desires (in this case her love for Wu Luan), it also presents the spectator with a complication. While the camera clearly frames Wan's heartbreak over Wu Luan's death, the overhead shot suddenly cuts to a close-up of Wan as she stands stoically, accepting the role of Majesty and ultimate ruler. Once again, the filmic editing teases the spectator with a glimpse of Wan's subjectivity, only to conclude with contradictory cuts. The tableau suggests that Wan has always loved Wu Luan, but that she nevertheless rejects this love in favor of power. It is with this sense of affective uncertainty that the film continues from the bloody banquet scene into the final sequence.

At its close, *The Banquet* situates the spectator as a first-hand witness and criminal in the rise and fall of the new Emperor Wan. We watch as Wan caresses a swatch of fabric once intended to form a gown for her wedding to Wu Luan. It will now become her coronation gown. Taking stock of her journey to the throne, she delivers what will become her final soliloquy, one that wavers among its addressees. At times she seems to speak to her dead former lover and stepson Wu Luan, but toward the end of her speech she seems to be voicing her thoughts aloud to nobody in particular. Her address also shifts from communicating vulnerability to conceit as she laments the forgotten girl she once was and traces the marriages that have replaced her name of Little Wan with that of Empress. Now, however, she declares, "No one will call me Empress again. Instead, they will call me Her Majesty, the Emperor." As she declares her divorce from male lineage, Wan wears a dark robe that visually naturalizes her against the vermilion mahoganies adorning the throne room, forcing the viewer into a retrospective reminder of the first glimpse of the Empress. Contrasting with her initial appearance in the film, in which she dons a haunting white gown that signifies her resistance to Emperor Li, Wan's royal robes here suggest that she has quickly adapted to her new role as ruler. Undercutting Wan's triumphant speech, however, the camera suddenly cuts to a close up of the sword of Yueh Maiden as it hurls through the air, projected by an unidentified agent. The sword impales Wan through the back, its tip dramatically protruding through her left breast. Turning to face her attacker, she looks directly at the camera, forming an eye-line match with the spectator. With shock and betrayal written across her face, she points an accusing finger at us as the camera cuts away from her for the last time.

The Banquet demonstrates the degree to which the tendency to make Gertrude vanish is not simply a problem of translation or a necessary simplification when one moves *Hamlet* from the page to the screen. As Thomas Leitch (2003) has argued, perceived differences in media are contingent on their historical moment rather than intrinsic qualities of the media themselves. Yet, as much as the film becomes a Wan-centric, *wuxia*-style adaptation of *Hamlet*, the Gertrude figure is still killed off. And so we are back where we started: the end. Although the film refrains from framing the hurling sword of Yueh Maiden from the spectator's perspective, Wan's accusatory gesture figures the spectator as the voyeuristic villain in the film. This final image of Wan begs these questions: What does it mean for the spectator to have murdered the embodiment of adaptation in a Shakespeare film? Or to murder a Gertrude figure who, against Anglophone tradition, functions as more than a structural device in the service of male character development? And to stab her in the back, at that? The final sequence offers a metacritical opportunity to question why we are imagined to desire Gertrude's death. Is this what we desired? Is this what we expected? (My money was on Wan from the beginning.) Katherine Rowe (2008) has pointed out the degree to which scholarship on Shakespeare film adaptations is governed by "media scripts," or unspoken, yet codified norms and expectations that we bring to readings of mediatized Shakespeares. *The Banquet* offers a filmic space in which to question the media scripts we are imagined to work within, and how that imagination aligns with our viewing practices and spectator expectations. Without the final sequence and with Wan living on as ultimate ruler in the film, would we have accepted *The Banquet* as an adaptation of *Hamlet*?

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