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Shakespeare: It's What's for Dinner

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Abstract

Although the title of *The Banquet* (2006) suggests a large, public, celebratory meal, there is a noticeable lack of food in the film itself. Rather than cinematic representations of food, the film serves up a feast of Shakespearean references, including allusions to *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as various of the history and Roman plays. While both *The Banquet* and *The Celebration* (dir. Thomas Vinterberg, 1998) share a sense of themselves as national films working within an international market and a similar philosophy of Shakespearean borrowing, they differ in their philosophies of filmmaking.

It might seem an insignificant observation, but for a film called *The Banquet* (2006), a title which suggests a large, public, celebratory meal, there is a noticeable lack of food. Though *The Banquet* delivers the feast its title promises, it never manifests itself in cinematic representations of food. Instead, the film serves up a feast of multiple references to several Shakespeare plays. The film is frequently described as a loose adaptation of *Hamlet*, but that is not the only Shakespeare on the menu. Indeed, if Shakespeare citations are part of the feast for the viewer in *The Banquet*, then I imagine that the menu might look something like this: *Hamlet*, served on a bed of history and Roman plays, with a side of *King Lear* and *Titus Andronicus*, a dollop of Desdemona for dessert, and the wines of *Macbeth* (bottle of red) and *Romeo and Juliet* (bottle of white) flowing throughout the film.

Hamlet

The film's premise — that Prince Wu Lan's and Little Wan's love for each other is undercut when his father, the Emperor, marries Wan himself — has more in common with Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* than Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Similarly, Wan's conversation with her new husband, the late Emperor's brother Li, in which they agree that the new Emperor does not fit into his older brother's armor, recalls Charles I's dilemma upon inheriting the armor of his elder brother, the late

Prince Henry, more than any scene involving Shakespeare's Danish prince. Larger comparisons to *Hamlet* become evident, however, within the first few miNütes of the film. *The Banquet* offers several beautiful parallels to *Hamlet*, seen largely in attributes of the male characters: Prince Wu Luan's (Hamlet's) love of theater and anxiety about women's sexuality; Emperor Li's (Claudius's) obsession with Empress Wan (Gertrude); Minister Yin Taichang's (Polonius's) total capitulation to the Emperor; and General Yin's (Laertes's) protectiveness of his sister.

History and Roman Plays

One could devote an entire review to a discussion of *The Banquet* as a clever adaptation of *Hamlet*, but perhaps more interesting are the other Shakespeare parallels that run throughout the film. The first of these is the Prince Hal narrative. While the prince's penchant for theater recalls Hamlet's esteem for the players, the prince's theater-in-exile, at which he hides out from the king and court (shirking his responsibilities, as Little Wan points out to him) and rehearses a performance of seemingly no particular consequence, a performance that becomes crucial to the story by the film's end, has even more in common with the function of Hal's makeshift theater at the Boar's Head Tavern. The gravity of the similarities between Prince Wu Luan's narrative and the Henriad hit home during the scene in which Emperor's soldiers behead Wu Luan's proxy while the real Prince, wearing a white robe and white mask identical to his aides, hides under the water, which is similar to Douglas's defeat of Blunt while he is disguised as the king at the end of *Henry IV, Part One*.

Unlike Wu Luan, whom *The Banquet* associates with Shakespeare's relatively sympathetic and effective Prince Hal, the film compares Wu Luan's usurping uncle, Emperor Li, to Shakespeare's despotic, tyrannical, and lackadaisical rulers. One of the film's first lines, "What need do I have for a kingdom?" puts one in mind at once of Antony ("He hath given his empire / Up to a whore" [*Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.6.66-67]), Richard II ("The name of a King? A God's name, let it go" [*Richard II*, 3.3145]), Henry VI ("Oh God! methinks it were a happy life / To be no better than a homely swain" [*3 Henry VI*, 2.5.21-22]), and Richard III ("My kingdom for a horse" [*Richard III*, 5.7.13])[1] While Wan's ensuing, "teasing" suggestion that Li "give away the throne" so that they "can retire to the woods and live like hermits" recalls Henry VI's fantasy of abdicating the crown and becoming a shepherd, it is the allusions to Antony, not to mention Marlowe's Edward II, that are the strongest, for Li suggests he would be willing to give up the throne not out of discontent (like Henry VI) or desperation (like Richard III), but rather, out of desire. Li first offers to abdicate while massaging Empress Wan's naked back in bed — "Now that there is you," he tells Wan, "what need do I have for a kingdom?" Halfway through the film, Li repeats this question: "Who cares about losing a

kingdom when in the presence of such great beauty?" he asks, while gazing at Wan in her red coronation robes. Li's appreciation of beautiful things extends to his taste in palace decor. "The Emperor was a thrifty man," Li tells his courtiers, "but I am not going to suffer the way he did. Pave the ceiling with flowers in gold leaf." As in the case of Shakespeare's *Richard II*, the film suggests that the kingdom cannot afford the sovereign's expensive tastes. His vanity (he compares himself to a snow leopard who stays inside in the winter to groom his fur), self-indulgence, and inclination to surround himself with flatterers are bad for the empire.

King Lear and *Titus Andronicus*

In its emphasis on the narratives of a male sovereign figure rejecting his truthful courtier in favor of flatterers and of a woman sovereign figure delighting in the pleasure of exercising power over others in acts of sadistic revenge, *The Banquet* recalls two Shakespeare plays in particular: *King Lear* and *Titus Andronicus*. The similarities begin when Governor Pei Hong, chief advisor to the late Emperor, refuses to acknowledge Emperor Li's legitimacy. Pei bows before Wan, greeting her as the Empress Dowager rather than the Empress. The Emperor complains that Pei has "rearranged the hierarchy of the court," but leaves it up to Wan whether she will kneel to him as her husband. When she complies, Pei responds by laughing and looking up to the sky, asking, "Late Emperor, did your spirit in heaven witness this vile exchange?" The new Emperor kicks the truthful old advisor out of the court, just as the enraged Lear does Kent. Once outside, Pei becomes the Gloucester figure, subjected to an episode of ritualized violence while Emperor Li and Empress Wan watch from their thrones. Later in the film, after the Empress's plan to murder the Emperor is discovered, Wan's similarities to Goneril and Regan are made more apparent by Minister Yin Taichang, who calls her a "venomous woman." But in Pei's torture scene, the Empress bears only a surface similarity to Lear's eldest daughters. Though it is difficult to judge the motivations of Wan, given the extent to which her character masks her true feelings throughout the film, her reaction of repulsion and guilt upon seeing Pei being tortured suggests that her participation in the scene stems not from personal vengeance, but rather from what she sees as the political necessity of illustrating her fidelity to the Emperor and of establishing herself as a Machiavel.

Where Wan most resembles Shakespeare's vengeful villainesses is in her treatment of Qing Nü, daughter of Minister Yin Taichang, sister of General Yin Sun, and fiancée of Prince Wu Luan. Early in the film, Qing Nü functions as a parallel to not only Ophelia, but also Cordelia. She visits the prince, self-exiled in his bedroom in the Emperor's palace, promising to stay with him "so that when he is lonely, there will be someone to sing to him." Jealous of Qing Nü's engagement to the prince, Wan first orders her to be whipped and later instructs two men to brand her face and exile her

to the South. The joy Wan takes in her power to exact revenge upon Qing Nü's body by demanding her torture is reminiscent of Tamora's pleasure at allowing her sons to rape and then ordering them to murder Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, in spite of the Roman virgin's pleas for mercy.

Othello

As the film progresses, Qing Nü becomes less like Ophelia, Cordelia, or Lavinia and more like Desdemona. When he further instructs her to leave Wu Luan alone, unlike Ophelia, who allows herself to be manipulated by Polonius and Claudius, Qing Nü refuses to capitulate, promising her father, "My heart will never change." In the next scene between Qing Nü and Wu Luan, Qing Nü demonstrates that her commitment to the prince extends even past the point of his violence against her: after Wu Luan rapes her, she responds by cradling him in her arms in an embrace. When Emperor Li sends Wu Luan as a hostage to their enemy country, Qing Nü stands in front of the court and insists that she be given permission to go with her beloved, much like Desdemona before the Senate. Qing Nü's behavior constrasts with that of the Empress, who tells Wu Luan, "Go," claiming that his exile is evidence of the Emperor operating in the Prince's best interest. Finally, the lyrics to the song Qing Nü performs at the end of the film: "Trees live on mountains, and branches live on trees / My heart lives for your heart, but you do not see me" recall those to Desdemona's "Willow" song: "The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree / [. . .] / Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee" (*Othello*, 4.3.38, 40). As in "Willow," in Qing Nü's "Boat Girl" a female persona laments the loss of her beloved. And as in Desdemona's case, Qing sings this song immediately before her death.

Macbeth and *Romeo and Juliet*

If Qing Nü morphs from Ophelia into Desdemona as the film progresses, Empress Wan has little in common with Gertrude from the start. Even before Wan seizes the red cloth intended for Qing Nü's wedding dress and appropriates it for her own coronation gown, forcing Qing Nü to sew and embroider the Empress's new signature-color robes, the parallels between Wan and Lady Macbeth are pointedly clear, particularly in Wan's all-out ambition and the strategies she uses to achieve political power: her sexuality, her ability to quell Li's anxieties about his masculinity, and her Machiavellian ability to mask her true emotions and to suppress any sympathy she might feel for her victims that would keep her from carrying out their punishments.

But another Shakespearean story line flows through *The Banquet*, one that helps to round out the character of Wan in particular: *Romeo and Juliet*. The parallels between the pairs of star-crossed lovers does not emerge until the middle of the film, when Wu Luan buys poison from an

apothecary. Wu Luan visits the apothecary after being prompted by a white napkin with a drawing on it of Emperor Li murdering Wu Luan's father and a large red spot of blood coming from the late Emperor's head. This bloody napkin, dropped into Wu Luan?s room either by Wan or Qing Nü, references both Desdemona?s strawberry handkerchief and Lady?s Macbeth's "damn?d spot" on her "little hand" (*Macbeth*, 5.1.30, 43). Later, Wan purchases poison from the same apothecary (the set design, costuming, and camera filters make the scene look like it could have come out of Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* [1968] or *Hamlet* [1990]), who explains to Wu Luan and Empress Wan that the only thing more lethal than the poison he sells is "the human heart," a sentiment with which they both agree.

Looking back, it is clear that the *Romeo and Juliet* narrative, with its emphasis on the lovers' forced separation due to familial obligations, societal expectations, and circumstance, is present from Wan and Wu Luan's very first scene together. The sonnet that Romeo and Juliet make together when they first meet finds its parallel in Wan and Wu Luan's beautiful dance-battle ballet. And as with Juliet, who plots with the Friar to be reunited with Romeo, there is a sense, throughout *The Banquet*, that Wan always hopes for and intends to meet up with Wu Luan eventually: she visits him frequently in his bedroom, she arranges for his escape from his uncle, and she prepares to crown him Emperor at the end of the film. Though Wan's love for Wu Luan manifests itself differently from Qing Nü's love, there is no doubt that Wan loves the prince. Their final scene together, with Wan holding the poisoned Wu Luan in her arms, recalls the scene at the Capulet tomb more than it does Gertrude's death scene. To a certain extent, *The Banquet* is about what happens when Juliet marries Paris instead of Romeo.

One crucial difference between Juliet and Wan is that the latter does not kill herself after her Romeo dies. Wan's final scene finds her in the thoughtful mode of Shakespeare's contemplative sovereigns. "When was it that I started to forget my name?" she asks, evoking Lear's question, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (*King Lear*, conflated text, 1.4.205). Wan rehearses the story of her loss of identity after Wu Luan's abandonment, and finally, taking a page from Tamburlaine ("Is it not brave to be a king?" [Marlowe 2007, 2.5.51]), Lady Macbeth ("Unsex me here" [*Macbeth*, 1.5.39]), or maybe even Beatrice ("Oh God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace!" [*Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.1.303-304]) and definitely Queen Elizabeth I ("I have the heart and stomach of a king"), Wan declares herself not the Empress, but "Her Majesty, the Emperor."

It would seem, then, that one of the primary reasons for all of the Shakespearean (not to mention Marlovian) borrowings in *The Banquet* is to add dimensionality to and create possibilities for the characters, in particular the women characters — dimensionality and possibilities that do

not exist within the single play of *Hamlet*. But it also must be said that *The Banquet* could succeed independently of any Shakespearean allusions at all.

Festen and *The Banquet*

In this way, *The Banquet* parallels another recent *Hamlet* film, *The Celebration* (dir. Thomas Vinterberg, 1998), perhaps more recognizable by its original title, *Festen*, or "feast," in Danish. I find the films similar not only in their titles, but also in their story lines, themes, and uses of Shakespeare. Like *The Banquet*, *The Celebration* spins off of the story of *Hamlet* (exiled son Christian returns home following his sister's drowning to confront and dethrone his abusive and incestuous father at his sixtieth birthday party) with elements of *King Lear* (the film opens with Christian's brother Michael throwing his three children out of his car, only to be reunited with his youngest daughter at film's end) and *Othello* (the racist Michael responds to his sister's decision to bring her African-American boyfriend to the party by proclaiming, "How dare you bring a monkey to dad's sixtieth!").

However, most audiences who went to see these films in theatrical release and most audiences who rent the films on DVD could probably care less about Shakespeare and did not have *Hamlet*, let alone *King Lear* and *Othello*, in mind when they sat down to watch the films. What many viewers bring to them, instead, is an interest in each film's particular cinematographic style. T*he Celebration* appeals as the first Dogme film, and *The Banquet* as a *wuxia* martial arts fantasy film in the same genre as the highly successful *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (dir. Ang Lee, 2000). Ironically, the directors of films that fall into these genres espouse opposite philosophies of filmmaking to very different visual effects. Dogme directors take a "Vow of Chastity," in which they agree to reject the very filmic and technological advances that *wuxia* directors seize upon, such as lighting, filters, speed editing, special effects, and computerization. What both *The Celebration* and *The Banquet* share, however, is a sense of themselves as national films working within an international market and a similar philosophy of Shakespearean borrowing: Shakespeare adds some complexity to the film's plot and characters, but is not particularly necessary to the success of the film; that is to say, Shakespeare is not the film's primary purpose or selling point.

The end result in the case of *The Banquet* is that viewers need not know their Shakespeare to enjoy and appreciate the film. Indeed, I imagine that for most moviewatchers what is yummy about *The Banquet* is not the feast of Shakespearean allusions and characters it serves up, but the wonderful battle scenes, the gorgeous costumes, the beautiful, athletic, and graceful actors, and the amazing special effects that make the film *wuxia*. This reviewer, however, also finds it a nice treat to chew on the characters, plot lines, and allusions that make the film Shakespearean.

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Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (1997).

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