Chapter 7

There Is Nothing Either Good or Bad But Thinking Makes It So: Postmodern Hamlet

The year 1980 is of course an approximation in marking the advent of postmodern Hamlet as well as postmodern everything else, but it will perhaps do as well as any other. In that year, Stephen Greenblatt published his epochal Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, quickly hailed as model and archetype of the so-called New Historicism. Taking its inspiration in part from revisionist historians like Lawrence Stone (The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558–1641, 1965) and cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali, 1980), this critical school fixed its gaze on government as an organism devoted to the manipulating of illusions, using the public ceremonials of statecraft as the means of engendering self-fulfilling myths of control and power. The approach was inherently skeptical of political authority. In California, at least, where many of the early New Historicists studied and taught, the movement was a response to the new Great Communicator on the scene, Governor (later President) Ronald Reagan. It was closely parallel to and allied with the critical movement known as Cultural Materialism, then making its presence known in the United Kingdom in the work of Jonathan Dollimore (Radical Tragedy, 1984), Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Political Shakespeare, 1985), John Drakakis (Alternative Shakespeares, 1985), Terry Eagleton (Shakespeare and Society, 1967, William Shakespeare, 1986), and others. These critics, who generally regarded Raymond Williams as their spiritual father, taught mostly in the new universities of the United Kingdom, not at Oxford or Cambridge, and were thus avowedly anti-Establishment and class-conscious in their ideology. More than the New Historicists in the United States, they tended to promote radical political interpretation of literary texts in the cause of rapid political and cultural change.

More or less concurrently, feminism as a critical movement loomed into new prominence. The year 1980 saw the publication of a landmark collection of essays edited by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely called The Woman’s Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare. The feminist movement itself was not new, of course, but in the world of teaching and scholarship it caught the revolutionary spirit that was in the air in the early 1980s. Appointments of women to college and university faculties, long in abeyance since the days of the Suffragette movement in the early twentieth century when a few women had become professional scholars, now began to achieve some momentum. Juliet Dusinberre’s Shakespeare and the Nature of Women, first published in 1975, became a beacon of inspiration for other feminist scholars, including Lisa Jardine, whose Still Harping on Daughters (1983) adopted a defiant stance toward the repression and oppression of women in Shakespeare’s plays, including Gertrude and Ophelia in Hamlet. Marianne Novy’s Love’s Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare (1984) and Carol Thomas Neely’s Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare (1985) followed soon after.

Meantime, the school of criticism known as post-structuralism or deconstruction burst upon the scene, first at Yale University, where the linguistic and semiotic concepts of Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida were imported from Europe to insist that language is a system of difference in which the signifiers (i.e., words and gestures) are essentially arbitrary. “Meaning” and “authorial intent” are ultimately impossible to determine. Instead of the once-familiar author of literary tradition, we now had multiple points of view, indeterminacy of meaning, and a multiplicity of texts. The method of linguistic analysis known as
of linguistic acts. At its best, as in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman’s *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory* (1985), the new deconstructive method facilitated a flexibility of linguistic meaning able to uncover new resonances of verbal play in what Shakespeare wrote. Chapter 5 of Parker’s *Shakespeare from the Margins* (1996) explores in *Hamlet* the resonant language of conveyance, translation, and representation in deconstructing meaning and interpretation.

Textual scholarship soon picked up on the excitement of the postmodern revolution with Gary Taylor and Michael Warren’s edited collection of essays called *The Division of the Kingdom* (1983), insisting that *King Lear* exists in not one but two early texts, each with its own integrity. The implications for *Hamlet*, with its three early texts, were soon being explored by Bernice Kliman, Paul Bertram, Ann Thompson, and Neil Taylor, among others; see chapter 3 and the suggestions of further reading for that chapter. The battle cry of postmodern editing, that we need to acknowledge the existence of multiple texts rather than a single text, thus marched in tandem with the insistence on indeterminacy of meaning that is the premise of deconstructive analysis, just as the critical move to set aside canonical definitions of literary greatness and to interpret a work of art as caught up in the social practices of its time bears a close resemblance to recent performance history. These developments are thus all part of a large movement of reassessment.  

The new critical movements of the 1980s were quickly at odds with more established forms of critical discourse and with one another. At a meeting of the Modern Language Association in New York in December, 1976, an overflow audience listened raptly to a debate between Hillis Miller, championing the new deconstructive method, and Meyer Abrams, insisting that deconstruction opens the floodgates to total indeterminacy of language by allowing any utterance to mean what the speaker or listener or reader wishes it to mean. Wayne Booth took part as well. (The papers were published subsequently in *Critical Inquiry.*) At a meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Boston in 1988, in a session on “Feminism vs. New Historicism,” the feminist critics (Lynda Boose and Kathleen McLuskie) declared war on the New Historicists (represented on the panel by Louis Montrose) for paying little or no attention to issues of concern to women. Some New Historicists were taken aback and even hurt by this antagonism: could not feminists and New Historicists unite in a common cause against the older and more traditional modes of literary analysis? Yet the feminists had a point, in that few New Historicists at that time were women (Leah Marcus’s *Puzzling Shakespeare* would not appear until 1988, Annabel Patterson’s *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* in 1989), and the concerns of the New Historicists were predominantly political in ways that men found particularly fascinating. Easier for the New Historicists was to declare war on the critical formalism of the by-now-no-longer-new “New” Critics. Literary study needed to focus on historical context and social practice. When Greenblatt inaugurated the journal *Representations* at Berkeley in 1983, the Shakespeare world understood that formalist critics need not apply.

*Hamlet* was certain to be a crucial text for the new schools of literary theory and analysis. A case in point is Stephen Greenblatt’s *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001), discussed earlier in chapter 3. Greenblatt picks up on the Ghost’s account of his sojourn in Purgatory in act 1, scene 5, as he and Hamlet encounter each other on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. Purgatory is not named as such, but the Ghost’s meaning is unmistakable in his reference to his being “Doomed for a certain term to walk the night / And for the day confined to fast in fires, /
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away

“ (1.5.11

Greenblatt’s new historical method is to surround this interview with a rich store of information about late medievalism and the sixteenth-century English Renaissance, when the newly established Anglican Church did away with the doctrine of Purgatory as part of a Protestant effort to redeem Christianity from the “false” accretions of what were regarded as centuries-old instances of Roman Catholic abuse. One major result, Greenblatt notes, is that ordinary Christians, long taught to seek salvation through the church and through the intercession of the saints and the Virgin Mary, now found themselves deprived of this consoling large and family-like structure of support. Individual Christians were now more on their own, not only for themselves but for their dearly departed loved ones. Chantry's erected in churches to endow prayers for the dead in perpetuity were no longer allowed in England, along with monasteries, abbeys, and other institutions once able to assist in commemoration of the dead. Favorite legends about ghosts, saints’ lives, pilgrimages, and the like were under attack as superstition by the reformers, as in Reginald Scott’s Discovery of Witchcraft (1584) and Samuel Harsnett’s soon-to-be-published Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures (1603).

Greenblatt details the rise and fall of Purgatory as an institution, both as a doctrine and as a source of income for the Roman Church. With its demise, as Greenblatt shows, an enormously comforting means of negotiating with the dead was suddenly taken away, leaving in its wake a longing for remembrance of, and contact with, the dead that had to be met by other means. The book is thus “New Historict” in its analysis of how English culture, and implicitly other cultures as well, go about dealing with change and loss, and how literature—here, drama in particular—serves a particularly vital function. Purgatory was for the late medieval world a piece of poetry, as Greenblatt’s sees it. Its presence in Hamlet bespeaks a kind of “magical necessity” for which tragedy provides the ideal genre. The play becomes a showpiece for what Clifford Geertz calls “cultural poetics.”

An early landmark in gender studies in the postmodern era is Coppélia Kahn’s Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare (1981, pp. 132–40), taking a careful and enlightening look at the hazards faced by young males as they consider how to fulfill their quest for adult male sexuality and thus eventually take the place of their fathers. Hamlet is a prominent example. His struggle to achieve self-understanding is immensely complicated by his father’s death, his mother’s sexual disloyalty, Hamlet’s consequent sense of shame in being the son of a cuckolded husband, and his conflicted feelings for a young woman whose behavior seems to confirm all his misogynist revulsions toward the entire sex: “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2.146). Marjorie Garber, whose Coming of Age in Shakespeare was published in the same year, asks similar questions about sexual maturation and about Hamlet’s obsessive comparing and contrasting of himself with others, including Hercules and Phaethon (pp. 198–215).

Important to these and later feminist critics were such anthropological studies as Claude Lévi-Strauss’s The Elementary Structures of Kinship (1949, translated into English in 1969), with its analysis of the cultural practice of patriarchal males who marry their daughters to men outside the tribe in order to promote “exogamous” business ties beneficial to the patriarchal structure; and Victor Turner’s The Ritual Process, 1969, itself indebted to the work of Arnold Van Gennep (The Rites of Passage, translated 1960), describing the hazardous transitions of birth, puberty, marriage, and death, especially when young women find themselves facing the challenge of transferring their allegiances and whole way of life from one male-dominated family to another. As applied to Ophelia in Hamlet, this approach offers sympathy for a young woman caught between
attachment are strong. Gertrude faces a similar dilemma in her uncomfortable position as a dowager queen, dependent now on the support of her new husband and yet unable to appease the son whom she bore in her marriage with her now-dead spouse. Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1977) also provided a wealth of information on social history for new feminist studies of Shakespeare.

In “Man and Wife Is One Flesh: *Hamlet* and the Confrontation with the Maternal Body,” 1992, Janet Adelman builds on the earlier work of Coppélia Kahn. Despite the differences between old Hamlet and his murderous brother Claudius, argues Adelman, the fathers in this play “keep threatening to collapse into one another, annihilating in their collapse the son’s easy assumption of his father’s identity.” In its dual portrayal of Gertrude and Ophelia, moreover, “the play conflates the beloved with the betraying mother, undoing the strategies that had enabled marriage in the comedies.” The structure of *Hamlet* “is marked by the struggle to escape from this condition, to free the masculine identity of both father and son from its origin in the contaminated maternal body.” The image of the mother is thus bifurcated into the familiar Freudian opposites of “virgin and whore, closed or open, wholly pure or wholly corrupt.” This essay demonstrates, as does the work of Kahn and some others, the fruitful crossover between psychological and feminist criticism.

Postmodern psychoanalytic criticism of *Hamlet* tends to follow and extend the theories of Freud, Ernest Jones, K. R. Eissler, Avi Erlich, Theodore Lidz, and others detailed in the previous chapter. John Russell’s *Hamlet and Narcissus* (1995) is a post-Freudian reading of “the failure of the mother” and its impact on Hamlet as a consequence of the crucial relationship “between the infant and its maternal environment.” Jacques Lacan, noting the insistent theme of loss and mourning in *Hamlet*, and the manifest inadequacy of the rituals employed to mourn the deaths of old King Hamlet, Polonius, and Ophelia, posits a gap or hole resulting from the primary Oedipal loss that the mourners attempt in vain to remedy (*Ecrits*, 1966). What Lacan thus describes in psychoanalytic terms bears a striking resemblance to the psychic loss that Greenblatt accounts for historically in the Reformation’s abandonment of the comforting doctrine of Purgatory.

For postmodern practitioners of deconstruction, *Hamlet* is a feast of indeterminacy. Jacques Derrida (*Specters of Marx*, 1993), in a contemporary political analogy addressed to the question of “Whither Marxism?” sees Hamlet’s delay as a “waiting without horizon of expectations” for a future so bedeviled by uncertainties that hesitation is the only rational stance for him (or for any modern thoughtful person, faced by a world of underemployment, contradictions in the free market, and economic war) to adopt. Only the language of deconstruction can find a way to deal with the complex binaries of life and death, matter and spirit. Aaron Landau’s “‘Let Me Not Burst in Ignorance’: Skepticism and Anxiety in *Hamlet*” (*English Studies* 82, 2001, 218–29) argues for a “comprehensiveness and instability of ideological systems in the play” that encourages critics “to come to many different conclusions about *Hamlet’s* religious content.” The very indeterminacy of ideological meaning is a distinct asset to the play: it encourages audiences and readers to find questions rather than answers. Hamlet’s anxiety about ascertaining the guilt of Claudius is an essential part of his relationship with the stoical and skeptical Horatio. The marked difference between Hamlet’s own Christian-providential interpretation of his own story and Horatio’s secular reading of that same story in act 5 leaves the play where it should reside, in the realm of mystery and uncertainty.

Howard Felperin provides a foundational deconstructive analysis of *Hamlet* in his *The Uses of the Canon: Elizabethan Literature and Contemporary Theory* (Oxford, 1990, pp. 1–15), according to which the play may
A major critique of modern literary theory is to be found in Margreta de Grazia’s “Hamlet” without Hamlet (2007). De Grazia refreshingly asks if the quest for a modern Hamlet has left us with a protagonist who is “distinguished by an inner being so transcendent that it barely comes into contact with the play from which it emerges.” De Grazia spots this critical trend as beginning in the ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when Hamlet first becomes a deep and introspective thinker rather than the action hero of a tale of dispossession and revenge. Modern deconstructive or psychological criticism simply continues the one-sided emphasis on Hamlet’s personal angst. The basic premise of the play, de Grazia insists, needs to be foregrounded instead: namely, that the son of a murdered father, entitled by the patrilineal system to inherit his father’s throne, has had that inheritance stolen away from him by his villainous uncle. Though obliged at first to keep silent about his wrongs, Hamlet never forgets that Claudius has “Popped in between th’election and my hopes” (5.2.65). The regicide and usurpation have broken his needed attachment to his land of Denmark. The play is filled with contests over land, involving Norway, Poland, and of course Denmark. Modern criticism, argues De Grazia, has largely forgotten Hamlet’s investment in these things.

De Grazia’s title, then, “Hamlet” without Hamlet, with its wordplay on the common expression, “Hamlet without the Prince,” is not a call for criticism to detach the protagonist from his play, but quite the opposite. Her project is to search not for the play’s original meaning (whatever that might be), but for what it can mean today when we strip away the critical errors imposed on the play by Romantic sensibilities of two hundred years and more. To do this will be to take away the “monadic exclusivity” that alienates Hamlet from the rest of the play and thereby restore to him the complexity and centrality that he should enjoy in the context of the whole work. De Grazia’s study is thus not a throwback; it is fully modern in the process of redefining what “modern” should mean in an interpretation of Shakespeare’s great play. It requires sensitivity to meanings of words often concealed from modern readers, like “hide” denoting a measurement of land as well as a skin, or “Doomsday” in its conjoining of “domain” and “doom,” land and judgment, or “groundlings” as a name for those who pay ground rent for a place to stand in the theatre. Some normally rejected readings from the 1603 first quarto, like “guyana” for “Vienna” in the second quarto and the Folio at 3.2.236, and “Nor Turke” for “nor man” or “or Norman” at 3.2.32, take on new and plausible value for De Grazia in light of the play’s incessant wordplay and fascination with periods of decline in human history. De Grazia’s insight is invaluable: Hamlet began to look “modern” in the nineteenth century because his presumed psychological makeup was perceived then as modern, but the time has come today to reinvent Shakespeare’s Hamlet in the light of a modernism that can see the whole play and its protagonist in as multiple a cultural context as the play deserves.

Many stage productions of Hamlet in the early 1980s manifested the intellectual and political preoccupations of the postmodern generation of critics coming into prominence at about the same time. Jan Kott’s Shakespeare Our Contemporary (translated from the Polish punningly-titled Szkice o Szekspirze in 1964), responding to the profound disillusionment especially in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of World War II, had already galvanized the world of theatre with its apocalyptic vision of a civilization on the brink of
disaster. His concept of Hamlet, as indeed of other Shakespeare plays as well, was of a bleak comedy of the absurd through which “we ought to get at our modern experience, anxiety and sensibility.” Hamlet for Kott is “only a drama of political crime,” centered on a young protagonist who is “deeply involved in politics, sarcastic, passionate and brutal,” a “young rebel who has about him something of the charm of James Dean” and for whom “action, not reflection, is his forte” (pp. 51–65). In his absurdist reading of cultural nihilism, Kott was attuned to the powerfully influential existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the visionary theatrical concepts of Antonin Artaud (The Theater and Its Double, 1958) and Jerzy Grotowski (Towards a Poor Theatre, 1968), and such absurdist plays as Eugène Ionesco’s The Chairs and The Bald Soprano. These challenging ideas had been around since the end of World War II, and had shown themselves, as we have seen in the previous chapter, in stage and film productions by Grigori Kozintsev, Peter Hall, Tony Richardson, Buzz Goodbody, and others. Now, in the early 1980s, the tempo of protest accelerated in the climate of postmodern revolution.

Jonathan Miller envisaged his austere production of Hamlet at London’s Warehouse Theatre in 1982 as portraying a world in which “politics are a game and a lie.” Miller unheroically conceived of his protagonist, played by Anton Lesser, as “a rather unattractive character, a tiresome, clever, destructive boy who is very intelligent but volatile, dirty-minded and immature.” Claudius for Miller was “a sort of Prussian Junker” (Subsequent Performances, New York: Viking, 1986, pp. 110–11). Adrian Noble’s production of a full-length Hamlet for the Royal Shakespeare Company at London’s Barbican Theatre and then at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1992–3, with Hamlet played by Kenneth Branagh, employed a Victorian mise en scène only to expose the hollowness of that cultural tradition and the fragmentation of the postmodern world. Glimpses “backstage” of the actors getting ready for their performances in the play-within-the-play called attention to the theatre itself as the centerpiece of Noble’s design: everything was staged. In a modern-dress production at Chicago’s Wisdom Bridge Theatre in 1985, Robert Falls staged the first court appearance of Claudius (1.2) as a modern media event: Claudius, visible only on two television monitors flanking the stage to left and right, blandly offered political assurances about his new administration in the unmistakable style of President Ronald Reagan, while on stage his political operatives and handsome young women in cocktail dresses were busy preparing a Public Relations reception for the press.

The Romanian director Alexander Tocilescu, at Bucharest’s Bulandra Theatre in 1985, similarly conceived of a Hamlet (played by Ion Caramitru) who coped as heroically as he could with the corrupt regime of Claudius—in other words, of the Stalinist Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceaușescu, who would be executed in 1989. (Caramitru was one of the leaders of the revolution against the government.) Peter Zadek, in a Brechtian German production of 1977 restaged in 1999 (mentioned briefly in the previous chapter), assigned the part of Hamlet to a fifty-year-old actress, Angela Winkler, who portrayed the protagonist as too abused and psychologically crippled to plot a revenge. The stage in Otmar Krejca’s version of the play in Düsseldorf (1977) was dominated by a huge mirror; that of Jürgen Flimm in Hamburg (1986) centered visually on a huge wall. In Lin Zhaohua’s staging of Hamlet in Beijing in 1989–90, the actors playing Hamlet, Claudius, and Polonius exchanged roles at various points in order to underscore the production’s emphasis on existential angst unrelieved by a tragic vision; the only permanent prop was a barber’s chair, symbolizing at various times a throne, a bed, or a rock beside Ophelia’s grave.
Productions of the twenty-first century have continued to find new and unique concepts for the Hamlet. London’s National Theatre in 2000 and transported to the United States in 2001–2, starring Simon Russell Beale, took the visible form of a huge cross dominating the set. Elimination of the Fortinbras plot focused this version on spiritual and psychological issues. Beale’s Hamlet was intelligent, caustic, emotionally wounded, yearning to return to a student’s life, awash in grief, disheveled, able finally to confront his enemy in the play’s final scene with calm and resolution. The set was both a prison and a cathedral, low-lit and dark, with church-like hanging lanterns and ecclesiastical background music. Sound effects, blocking, and set design were all focused on Caird’s central idea of an existential and familial drama.

Mark Rylance, the artistic director of the new Globe Theatre on the Bankside from its completion in 1997 until 2007, played Hamlet under the direction of Giles Block in 2000 (see Illustration 18). Rylance portrayed a delicate mind on the brink of clinical depression and even madness, lightened by flashes of wit and whimsical dottiness. In the Globe space that invites chumminess and overstatement, Rylance was resourceful in developing a rapport with audiences. He pointedly hurled at them Hamlet’s line about how “groundlings” are “capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows,” then adding, after they had objected vociferously at this, “and noise” (3.2.11–12). Despite swift-paced action on a Jacobean non-scenic stage, the show at three and one-half hours was too long for inexperienced playgoers, some of whom were indeed noisy. Reviewers generally felt that Rylance achieved the not inconsiderable feat of creating a subtle and fascinating character in the face of considerable odds.

Steven Pimlott wrote of the protagonist (played by Samuel West) in his four-hour modern-dress Hamlet at Stratford-upon-Avon in 2001 that Hamlet is “a killer. He wants truth at all costs, and the costs, when you think about it, are Ophelia, Claudius, Polonius, Gertrude, etc., etc.” The “etc.” would of course include Laertes, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern. This Hamlet belonged to a youth culture rebelling against an unfeeling world. To provide a backdrop for a tale of carnage, the modern setting was drab and grey. The stage was essentially an empty space swept by searchlight-like lighting effects and watched over by surveillance cameras. The “spin doctoring” presided over by a suave Claudius (Larry Lamb) in scene 2 reminded audiences of George W. Bush and Tony Blair. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern offered a marijuana joint to Hamlet. He and the gravediggers in 5.1 shared beer and sandwiches, then tossed Yorick’s skull back and forth as though it were a rugby ball. In the final scene, Hamlet nicked Claudius with his poisoned sword, forced him to drink the poisoned cup, and then shot him with a revolver. When Fortinbras took the seat of royal authority, the courtiers pressed forward, hesitantly at first, then enthusiastically, to show their devotion to the new political order.

At the Birmingham Repertory Theatre and Edinburgh International Festival in 2003, Calixto Bieito’s cynical and flippant Hamlet, with George Anton in the lead role, emphasized seediness, corruption, surveillance, drug culture, and kinky abuse. Michael Bogdanov, who had previously directed Hamlet in 1977 for the Young Vic, staged the play again in 2005 at the Grand Theatre, Swansea, in a production that took aim at aggressive war in Iraq and around the globe. Philip Bown, as Hamlet, found himself in a world of insane competition for wealth and power.

The Wooster Group’s production of the play at New York’s Public Theater, 2007, and in other locations, took as its inspiration the Gielgud-Burton Hamlet of 1964 (see previous chapter). Under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte, fleeting film images of Burton on screen were juxtaposed with Scott Shepherd as Hamlet
and other actors on stage—Ari Fliakos as Claudius, Marcellus, and Ghost, and Kate Valk as both Gertrude and Ophelia—giving solid form to the evanescent phantoms behind them. The effect, as Ben Brantley wrote for the *New York Times* on November 1, was that of “an aching tribute to the ephemerality of greatness in theater.”

Jude Law’s Hamlet, as directed by Michael Grandage first at the Donmar Warehouse in London and Elsinore Castle and then at New York’s Broadhurst Theatre opening on September 12 in 2009, was bound to be a media sensation; after all, Law had been named among the Top Ten most bankable Hollywood movie stars in 2006, as well as being one of the handsomest males in show business. With many successes on stage and in film, Law has gone on more recently still (2009–10) to the role of Doctor Watson in Guy Ritchie’s film adaptation of *Sherlock Holmes*. For John Lahr, reviewing the Broadway production in the 19 October 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*, this “slick, streamlined three-hour production” did not reach the level of “inspired nuance” of David Warner or Jonathan Pryce (see previous chapter), but was nonetheless admirable for Law’s sharp critical intelligence and clear, crisp delivery of the lines. Lahr’s chief reservation was that Law could not hide his dashing, charismatic sense of being so at ease with himself; emotional paralysis and self-doubt were beyond his register. Ben Brantley wrote in the *New York Times* that “Law approaches his role with the focus, determination and adrenaline level of an Olympic track competitor staring down an endless line of hurdles.” (For some reflections on a similar media blitz in David Tennant’s Hamlet of 2009, see below in a discussion of film and television productions.)

Shakespeare on film and on television in the 1980s and afterwards has enjoyed a considerable and sustained success, both artistically and financially, even more so than in the spate of Shakespeare films right after World War II chiefly by Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles. That earlier generation of Shakespeare on film yielded only one *Hamlet*, by Olivier, in 1948; the more recent era has seen at least four notable productions, in addition to a very capable and straightforward BBC *Hamlet* of 1980 with Derek Jacobi as Hamlet. The four major films are, as one would expect, considerably less avant-garde than the stage productions of the same era. Commercial films, even those with intellectual aspirations, need to reach out to large audiences. Indeed, the story of filming *Hamlet* in the three decades or so since 1980 is one of attempting to bring *Hamlet* back into the prominence it once enjoyed on stage while at the same time interpreting the play in the light of contemporary mores. The result is that *Hamlet* is well-known today by large numbers of people, who have thereby been invited to think of *Hamlet* as a fable for our time. It is of course widely taught in schools and universities. *Hamlet* is our contemporary, in the English-speaking world and more broadly still. The play’s success as visual entertainment has been bolstered by, and has contributed to, the successful filming of other Shakespeare plays, including *Henry V, Much Ado About Nothing, Othello, Twelfth Night, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Love’s Labour’s Lost*, and still others.

Franco Zeffirelli’s 1990 film *Hamlet* is a blend of updating and tradition. On the one hand, the film goes Hollywood in its casting, thereby suggesting analogies to contemporary popular entertainment; on the other hand, it is fairly conventional in visual design and in concept. The director’s decision to cast Mel Gibson as Hamlet, along with Alan Bates as Claudius, Glenn Close as Gertrude, Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia, Ian Holm as Polonius, and Paul Scofield as the Ghost was transparently a move to woo audiences with box office pizzazz. The film’s commercial success was in fact respectable, even if its twenty-million-dollar gross profit in the United States (at a cost of fifteen million dollars) could not match that of Gibson’s other action films.
things to happen. Gibson as Hamlet is ceaselessly in motion as he chases after his father’s ghost on the guard platform, outmaneuvers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, urges Ophelia to get herself to a nunnery (see Illustration 19), stabs Polonius behind the arras in the Queen’s chamber, browbeats his mother, and overpowers his enemies in the play’s scene of final reckoning. Manliness displaces the introspection of traditional interpretation. A pruning to less than forty percent of the play’s original length makes room for the action sequences.

Film reputations are exploited to similar effect in the other major characters as well. Glenn Close, the passionately seductive “other woman” of Fatal Attraction, becomes in Zeffirelli’s film a widowed queen who is infatuated with her new lover, with no hint of hesitancy or bewilderment. Given this interpretation, Alan Bates is well cast as the object of Gertrude’s sexual longing: he is, as he is often seen in other films or plays, an attractive male for whom a woman like Gertrude might forget nearly everything else in her desire for him. Bates’s Claudius is so winsome and jovial in his pleasure-taking that one tends to forget that he has murdered his brother. Helena Bonham Carter, familiar to modern audiences as the attractive, jittery, feisty sufferer of unhappy love relationships in films like Twelfth Night and Howards End, is, as Ophelia, another sympathetic loser. Zeffirelli embraces celebrity type-casting at every turn.

Nor does Zeffirelli deny the viewer any of the lavish scenic effects for which he is justly famous in earlier films like his The Taming of the Shrew (1967) and Romeo and Juliet (1968). Especially gorgeous is his depiction of the hillside graveyard where Ophelia is buried. The costumes and architecture are richly appropriate to a film intent on providing visual splendor. Zeffirelli is a star of his own production. The film is vividly contemporary in these terms while lavishing its attention on what Hollywood has to offer. It is a conservatively “safe” film, apolitical, commercially appealing to audiences desirous of entertaining action and romantic intrigue. As such it appropriately brings to a close the decade of the 1980s dominated by Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States, and the apathetic and acquisitive Baby Boomer generation.

Kevin Kline and Kirk Browning had the bad luck to choose that same season of 1990 as the year in which to do their PBS production of Hamlet for WNET/Thirteen’s “Great Performances” series. Based on an earlier New York Public Theater production (1989) with Kline in the role of Hamlet, this version was shown only once on PBS public television. The timing was disastrous. Pitted hopelessly against the Zeffirelli-Gibson juggernaut, Klein’s Hamlet has been generally and undeservedly forgotten. This is a great pity. Never showy or blatanty commercial, focusing quietly on superb performances and insightful interpretation of the script, this production is the opposite of the Zeffirelli film in every way. Dana Ivey as Gertrude, Diane Venora as Ophelia, Brian Murray as Claudius, Michael Cumpsty as Laertes, Peter Francis James as Horatio, and Kline as Hamlet understand every word they say, and provide just the right gestures. No doubt this version has been penalized because it is a low-budget studio production without Hollywood glitz, but by the same token we are given the opportunity to observe nuanced acting at close range. The film is extraordinarily intelligent without being avant-garde. It seemingly offers no suggestive analogies to the contemporary 1980s scene. Costuming is traditional. This Hamlet attempts to be timeless, and perhaps that is another reason it did not capture public attention in competition with Zeffirelli’s Hollywood blockbuster. The version is available on DVD.
Kenneth Branagh, having challenged Laurence Olivier with his film version of *Henry V* in 1989, turned to *Hamlet* in 1996–7. (*Much Ado About Nothing,* with which Branagh had great success in 1993, was not on Olivier’s list of accomplishments as film actor-director.) Olivier’s *Henry V* in 1944 and *Hamlet* in 1948 had set the standard for Shakespeare on film in mid-century Great Britain, and Branagh, brash and ambitious, was keen to fashion himself in the role of successor to his great father-figure. Perhaps Branagh’s most striking decision in determining how to go beyond Olivier’s black-and-white *Hamlet* was to film the play in its entirety and in color. Branagh had already starred as Hamlet in a full-length stage production in 1992–3 (mentioned earlier), directed by Adrian Noble for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican Theatre in London. At four hours in length, the film required an intermission for the screenings, and produced considerable anxiety among Branagh’s financial backers. He persisted, and the result is that today we can savor the whole thing, including all of the fourth act that is so often severely abridged.

Derek Jacobi, the Hamlet of the BBC production in 1980 mentioned above, is quite remarkable as Claudius in 1996–7: he is presentable as a king, efficient as an administrator, savvy as a politician, and deeply tormented with guilt for the terrible thing he has done. Julie Christie as his queen is touchingly persuasive in her big scene with Hamlet (3.4), as she moves from defensiveness and denial to painful acknowledgment of guilty sorrow. Kate Winslet expertly manages the emotional distance she must traverse from a hesitantly unsure young woman to one who is distraught, deranged, and confined to a straitjacket. Richard Briers as Polonius rejects the usual comic role of doddering old fool for that of a counselor who is surprisingly sagacious. Exterior shots of Blenheim Palace, and studio interiors representing its great halls and waiting rooms, make for an impressive mise en scène. The choice of a late nineteenth-century time frame lends itself to elegantly handsome costuming. (See Illustration 20.)

Like Zeffirelli, Branagh exploits the celebrity status of some well-known film actors, mainly in cameo appearances. Robin Williams lends his zany, offbeat style of acting to the foppish Osric. Charlton Heston sonorously intones the part of the Player King. Some of the brief appearances are not very successful: Jack Lemmon as Marcellus in act 1 is generally regarded as something of a disaster, and Gérard Depardieu in the minor role of Polonius’s servant Reynaldo seems oddly cast, with his distinctive French accent, as though he has wandered onto the wrong filming location. Billy Crystal as the Gravedigger, with his Brooklyn accent, seems no less out of place. Silent appearances by John Gielgud and Judi Dench add little, other than to the name-dropping roster. (Dench had played Ophelia to John Neville’s Hamlet at the Old Vic in 1957.) Still, these brief star turns give celebrity gloss to the film without impinging on the major roles. Branagh is of course counting on his own stardom to enhance the audience’s interest in his performance of the lead role.

Branagh chooses other ways to update his *Hamlet* for a wide audience wishing to see the story as reassuringly modern and accessible. In a flashback he shows us Hamlet and Ophelia in bed together, thus erasing any doubt as to whether they have been lovers in the fully sexual sense. To modern sensibilities, if Hamlet and Ophelia have been attracted to each other, why shouldn’t they consummate the relationship sexually? Yet the film’s choice erases cultural distance between the present day and a centuries-old court in which Ophelia would lose everything if she were to take a chance like that. As both her father and brother emphatically insist, her value on the marriage market would be reduced to nothing at all if she were to give in
to Hamlet’s supposed “unmastered importunity” (1.3.32). In the play she seems to listen carefully to their advice, but a modern film for popular audiences has reason to choose otherwise.

Similarly, the quake-like moving of the earth in Hamlet’s scene with the Ghost gives a visual demonstration of the Ghost’s otherworldly ability to “work i’th’earth so fast” (1.5.171), thereby providing this modern popular film with nearly-mandatory special effects. Blenheim Palace is subjected in the film’s last scene to a gratuitous invasion by Fortinbras’s army, smashing windows and leaping over railings in a way that would presumably have delighted Zeffirelli and Mel Gibson. Still, this is an important and generally successful film. It resonates powerfully with remembrances of current events in the late 1990s, including the sensational death of Princess Diana in 1997, other garishly publicized scandals in Great Britain’s royal family, the recent collapse of Soviet communism, and millennial apprehensiveness about an approaching apocalypse and the end of history.

Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) demonstrates brilliantly how a low-budget, modern-setting adaptation can be made to illuminate Shakespeare’s text at least as effectively as the more costly and showy enterprises of Zeffirelli and Branagh. Almereyda chooses as his mise en scène the steel-and-concrete canyons of Manhattan near Times Square, where Claudius (Kyle MacLachlan) is Chief Executive Officer of a multinational conglomerate enterprise named the Denmark Corporation. He has recently married his deceased brother’s widow (Diane Venora), a well-groomed suburbanite for whom luxurious creature comforts mean everything. Together they savor the sybaritic pleasures of stretch limousines and a private swimming pool in their luxury high-rise Elsinore Hotel. Yet all is not well. The Ghost of Hamlet’s father (the playwright Sam Shepard) ominously appears and vanishes on the building’s closed-circuit video monitor security system and on the high concrete balconies that serve as this movie’s battlements.

Hamlet (Ethan Hawke), in this fallen world of decadent privilege and secret crime, is a rebel with a cause. Outfitted in a Peruvian woolen hat and informal attire, he stands out as an alienated and misunderstood youth. (See Illustration 21.) Being a film geek, he naturally undertakes to test the intentions of his hated uncle with an experimental film of his own making—Almereya’s ingenious substitution for Shakespeare’s “The Murder of Gonzago.” Gadgetry meaningfully pervades this reflexively multimedia and metatheatrical film about film. Hamlet is astute enough to detect the wiretap that Polonius (Bill Murray) and Claudius have planted on Ophelia (Julia Stiles) for her interview with Hamlet. Hamlet communicates with Ophelia on her answerphone. When Hamlet is being escorted on an overnight flight to England by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he has the bright idea of investigating their laptop computer in the overhead luggage rack while they are asleep. Finding there an incriminating message they are conveying to the King of England with orders for the execution of Hamlet, the Prince simply backspaces the computer message and substitutes their names for his. Media stunts such as these illustrate the cleverness with which Almereyda has updated *Hamlet* to the early twenty-first century. The performances (also with Liev Schreiber as Laertes) are first rate.

David Tennant’s Hamlet, under the direction of Gregory Doran for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon from July to November in 2008 followed by a West End run at the Novello Theatre, enjoyed such a phenomenal success that it was then filmed for BBC2 with Tennant (of Doctor Who fame) still in the title role and with Patrick Stewart as Claudius/Ghost, Penny Downe as Gertrude, and Mariah Gale as Ophelia, all from the original company, along with Edward Bennett, who had substituted
substitute for Elsinore Castle, the producers and director chose as their filming location the deconsecrated nineteenth-century missionary school chapel and surrounding cloisters of St Joseph’s College in the north London suburb of Mill Hill. This three-hour modern-dress version, based substantially on the second quarto of 1604, includes Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Fortinbras, and even the often-deleted Reynaldo. Yorick’s skull, as in the stage version, is that of the concert pianist André Tchaikowsky, who bequeathed this object to the RSC for just this kind of theatrical use. The extensive familiarity of the cast with the play and with one another through repeated stage performances makes for a production that is intense and intelligent. The BBC2 film version was broadcast in the United States on 28 April 2010.

Rory Kinnear’s Hamlet, in a modern-dress production by Nicholas Hytner at London's Royal National Theater and shown on film in the winter of 2010-2011, earned special praise for its ability to give new meaning to the play's remarkable and familiar language. As reviewed by (among others) Ben Brantley for the New York Times (1 January 2011), this version capitalized on close-ups in the eavesdropping scenes with insightful interpretations of the play’s well-known lines. The effect was to give immediacy and poetic power to Hytner's concept of a fascist Denmark constantly under the surveillance of grey-coated security men with cell phones and listening devices. Kinnear's Hamlet was a thinking man and Renaissance prince whose feigned madness eloquently underscored a genuine malaise and emotional distress. Gertrude (Clare Higgins), in her searing encounter with her son in her chambers, appeared to see the Ghost of her former husband, despite her denials to Hamlet. She was an alcoholic, afraid of her new husband Claudius (Patrick Malahide), who was, to be sure, a cold-blooded tyrant. Polonius (David Calder) seemed aware of his own pomposity as he bore down on his son with fulsome advice about being true to oneself. The careful attention to language and meaning throughout was materially enhanced by a new technological advance (also put recently to use in broadcasting opera and symphonic music) of filming the production to live audiences in selected movie theaters, as part of the National Theater Live series of performances.

As befits such a famous play that lends itself so well to screen interpretation, Hamlet is available today in more film versions than is any other play by Shakespeare or indeed any other dramatist who ever wrote. All of the films described here deserve careful attention. Together they provide an unequaled opportunity for comparing different interpretations. Still other famous Hamlets on film include Maurice Evans (NBC, 26 April 1953), John Neville (Old Vic Production on CBS’s Show of the Month, 24 February 1959), and Christopher Plummer (BBC/Danmarks Radio, 1964), taped at Elsinore Castle in Denmark.6

The commercial filming of Hamlet, then, has found ingenious means of interacting with contemporary culture. The potential for a broadening of the appeal of Shakespeare, and of Hamlet in particular, manifests itself in other cultural venues as well: in foreign-language films; in adaptations, musicals and rock operas; in musical scores inspired by the play; in spin-offs, spoofs, and parodies; in numberless allusions incorporated into modern plays, films, works of fiction, poetry, political cartoons, television sit-coms, and just about every imaginable facet of modern culture; and in Hamlet’s enormous if often unacknowledged impact on the very language that we speak today. These multiple and ever-expanding transformations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will bring our history of Hamlet to a close for the present.
Hamlet has been produced filmically in widely divergent cultures worldwide: India (1935 in Hindi and 1955 in Urdu, directed by Kishore Sahu), Austria and West Germany (1960–1, directed for television by Peter Wirth and Maximilian Schell, with Schell as Hamlet), France (1962–3), Hungary (1963), the Soviet Union (by Grigori Kozintsev, 1963–64), northern Ghana (1964, in Tongo, the home of the Frafra people), Canada (The Trouble with Hamlet, 1969, and a complete Hamlet in 1973), Brazil (Ozualda Ribiera Candeias’s A Herança, 1970), Japan (1977, and Yukio Ninagawa’s Noh theatre Hamlet in 1998), Turkey (Metan Erksan’s film Intikam Melegi–Kadin Hamlet, 1977), Italy (Amleto, 1978), the Netherlands (1980), Poland (1981), Sweden (1984, with Stellan Skarsgård as Hamlet), Mauritania (Dev Virahsawmy, 1995 and 1997), China (Shanghai Peking Opera’s Revenge of the Prince, 2005), Saudi Arabia (as in Suleyman al-Bassam’s The Al-Hamlet Summit), and still others.

In an aggressively postmodernist Spanish film of 1976, directed by Celestino Coronado, twin Hamlets (Anthony and David Meyer) soliloquize jointly in a duologue before confronting Ophelia (Helen Mirren) from the contrasting points of view of a divided sensibility. “I did love you once,” one of them insists, only to be refuted by his twin: “I loved you not” (3.1.116–20). (The idea of two actors in the role of Hamlet as a key to his divided sensibility had actually occurred earlier, in the 1930s, to the courageous Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who was shot in 1940 on Stalin’s orders for having dared to stand up to the Soviet regime; his sadly unfulfilled wish was to have carved on his tombstone, “Here lies a man who never played or produced Hamlet”). Heiner Müller staged a collage of his Hamletmachine and his own translation of Hamlet in a seven-hour marathon at the Deutsches Theater in East Berlin in 1990, complete with a radio broadcast of Stalin’s funeral, a stage littered with artifacts of European history, and clown routines. We have seen how Hamlet has been put to work as an ideological protest against dictatorship in Russia and eastern European countries. Hamlet has proved to be no less powerful as an ideological weapon in Egypt as well, particularly in opposition movements against Gamal Abdel Nasser as President from 1956 to 1970.

Adaptations of Shakespeare have often been motivated by a wish to update the plays and show how “relevant” they can be to burning contemporary issues today. 10 Things I Hate About You (Gil Junger, 1999, currently being refashioned into a TV sitcom series) transfers the story of The Taming of the Shrew to a high school in Seattle, where Cameron James (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) falls for Bianca Stratford (Larisa Oleynik) only to learn that her obstetrician father, Dr Walter Stratford (Larry Miller), fearful of premarital pregnancy, will not let her go out on a date until her stridently feminist older sister Kat (Julia Stiles) can learn to relate to some member of the opposite sex. The intrepid Joey Donner (Andrew Keegan) takes on the daunting assignment of getting Kat to go out with him. In Tim Blake Nelson’s O, the protagonist of Shakespeare’s Othello is transformed into Odin James, or “O. J.” (Mekhi Phifer), a black high school South Carolina basketball star with a white girlfriend named Desi Brable (Julia Stiles) and a jealous buddy, Hugo Goulding (Josh Hartnett), who bitterly resents having been displaced as the basketball team’s first player. Paul Mazursky’s 1982 Tempest begins the story of that play in late-twentieth-century New York, when a disillusioned architect (John Cassavetes) decides to escape from civilization with his teenage daughter Miranda (Molly Ringwald) to a Greek island, where he takes up with a twice-divorced American cabaret singer named Aretha (Susan Sarandon). And there are many others.

Hamlet has similarly lent itself to film adaptation. Edgar Ulmer’s Strange Illusion (1945) tells of a young man named Paul Cartwright whose widowed mother marries a man who turns out to be the murderer of Paul’s
modern times in the Ruhrpott industrial belt of northwest Germany. In Akira Kurosawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well* (Japan, 1960) a thoughtful young businessman named Koishi Nishi (Toshiro Mifune) suffers torments of conscience as he ponders the heavy assignment of avenging the death of his father. That death was a suicide, precipitated by the corrupt bribe-taking of the villainous Iwabuchi (Takeshi Kato), now the powerful head of Japan Land Corporation. Claude Chabrol’s *Ophélie* (1962–3) is about a young man, Yvan Lesurf, who, when his widowed mother quickly remarries, becomes obsessively but wrongly convinced that he is reliving Hamlet’s story; he has been watching Olivier’s *Hamlet*. In Krsto Papic’s *Acting Hamlet in the Village of Mrdusa Donja* (1974), a Croatian village performance of *Hamlet* leads to the exposure of the crimes of the local commissar. The Finnish film called *Hamlet Goes Business* (1987), directed by Aki Kaurismäki, tells of an industrial magnate in modern-day Helsinki who kills his brother to gain control of a firm called Swedish Rubber Ducks only to be foiled by his sex-starved, blithering nephew and a chauffeur (the Horatio equivalent) who is a trade union spy. In Dave Thomas and Rick Moranis’s *Strange Brew*, 1983, Hamlet must do battle with the corrupt Elsinore Brewery.

Spaghetti Western adaptations of *Hamlet* include Leopoldo Savona’s *Apocalypse Joe* (1971, about a travelling actor and gunman who inherits a gold mine from his uncle), Richard Balducci’s *Lust in the Sun* (also 1971, with a mute Hamlet), and Enzo G. Castellari’s *Johnny Hamlet* (1972, fairly close in plot to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* for much of the story while exchanging Denmark for the Wild West). Walt Disney’s award-winning animated feature *The Lion King* (1994), directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff and subsequently making its debut as a stage musical in Minneapolis (1997) and then on Broadway, tells the story of a young African lion prince named Simba who, when his villainous uncle Scar has conspired with hyenas to kill Simba’s father, King Mufasa, is deceived into believing that he, Simba, is responsible for that death. The American television series called “Sons of Anarchy,” shown on cable network FX in 2008–9, makes use of Shakespeare’s play in its saga of a close-knit outlaw motorcycle club in northern California.

*Hamlet 2*, directed in 2008 by Andrew Fleming, written by him and Pam Brady, is an irreverent Hollywood comedy film about a failed actor and recovering alcoholic, Dana Marschz (zaniily played by British comedian Steve Coogan), who attempts to direct a musical sequel to *Hamlet*, written by himself, at the West Mesa High School in Tucson, Arizona where he teaches drama. His apathetic, snarky students, who are in his class only because all other electives are closed, have their minds on higher things, such as cell-phone conversations and teen pregnancy. Nonetheless they rally at last to help Dana create his masterpiece, into which the author has introduced Jesus, Einstein, and Hillary Clinton along with Hamlet. The Tucson Gay Men’s Chorus and a musical rendition of “Rock Me, Sexy Jesus” are so offensive to the school principal, the school board, and the community that the show is about to be quashed, but a lawyer from the American Civil Liberty Union (Amy Poehler) comes to the rescue, and the show finally achieves its triumphant realization in an abandoned railroad shed.

Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, with its inside-out version of *Hamlet* giving the major parts to the Prince’s Tweedledum-and-Tweedledee friends, is a particularly fine example of shifting dramatic perspective. First produced at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August, 1966, this show was made into a film in 1990 with a film script by Stoppard. Gary Oldman and Tim Roth assume the title roles in the film. The stage version fits better with Shakespeare’s original *Hamlet*. At Stratford, Canada, in 1986, a single
demonstrating how practical it is to have large roles in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* for some of Shakespeare’s minor characters, and conversely small parts in Stoppard’s play for roles such as Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius that impose heavy demands on the actors in the original *Hamlet*. This fine double production, with its intensely metatheatrical awareness of its taking place in the theatre, also showed how much better Stoppard’s play is than the film adaptation, where “realistic” shots of journeying through a forest or traversing the seas on board ship interfere seriously with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s* wittily profound metaphor of life and death as stage entrances and exits: “Now you see it, now you don’t.”

A special favorite of British male academics is the obscene modernized short parody called *Skinhead Hamlet*, by Richard Curtis. The flavor and breakneck speed of this adaptation can perhaps be sampled from this quotation of act 2 in its entirety:

Polonius: Oi! You!
Hamlet: Fuck off, grandad!
(Exit Polonius. Enter Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.)
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern: Oi! Oi! Mucca!
Hamlet: Fuck off, the pair of you!
(Exit Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.)
Hamlet: (Alone) To fuck or be fucked.
(Enter Ophelia.)
Ophelia: My Lord!
Hamlet: Fuck off to a nunnery! (They exit in different directions.)

A headnote assures us that the author’s intention was “to achieve something like the effect of the *New English Bible.*”

Although *Hamlet* has not enjoyed success as a musical equal to the successes of *Kiss Me Kate*, *West Side Story*, and *The Boys from Syracuse*, a few attempts at rock opera have been made. Cliff Jones produced his *Rockaby Hamlet* in 1974. *Halliday Hamlet*, by Gilles Thibault (writer) and Pierre Groscolas (composer), 1976, starred the French rock star Johnny Halliday or Hallyday. In Eastern Europe, *Musikal Hamlet* (2000), composed and written by the Czech pop star Janek Ledecky, with himself in the lead role, has enjoyed some popularity. Rap versions of *Hamlet*, including *Hamlet Rap* (1994) by Moe Moskowitz and the Punsters, and *The Trage-D of Hammy-T* (1999) by Robert Krakovski, have opted for comic sendup. Orpheus’s 1977 musicalized version of *Hamlet*, starring Richard E. Grant as Hamlet, is a campy, postmodern amalgam of Shakespeare and modern musical culture in a deliberately provocative style.

*Hamlet* has served as the model for classical musical interpretations in the years since 1900, as it had done in the two previous centuries (see chapters 4 and 5). Notable instances are Frank Bridge’s *Hamlet*-based “Lament for Strings” in 1915 and “There Is a Willow Grows Aslant a Brook” in 1928.

The good-natured spoofing of Shakespeare that was so prominent a feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enjoyment of his works (see chapter 5) continues to flourish after 1900. In George Bernard Shaw’s “The Dark Lady of the Sonnets,” written in 1910, Shakespeare, meeting with the Dark Lady and with Queen
your admiration for a while” and “I am of all ladies most deject and wretched.” (Tom Stoppard and Mark Norman’s *Shakespeare in Love* makes a similar joke when Shakespeare, abed with Viola de Lessups, hears from her mouth some especially good lines that will turn up in his *Romeo and Juliet*.)

More recently, a film spoof entitled *To Be Or Not To Be*, produced and directed by Ernst Lubitsch in 1942, features Jack Benny as a ham actor whose famous line “To be, or not to be?” turns out to be a secret signal that, unbeknownst to Benny himself, informs a Polish flyer (Robert Stack), sitting midway in the second row of the audience, that Benny is now lengthily engaged in his stage performance and that the time has arrived for the flyer to hasten backstage and join Benny’s wife (Carole Lombard) in her dressing room for an assignation. Benny collapses in a deep funk, not because of the threatened adultery of his wife (of which he has no inkling), but because during his “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, of which he is particularly proud, a militarily-dressed audience member keeps getting up to leave the auditorium, crossing over numerous pairs of knees as he proceeds toward the aisle. Benny is aghast: is he losing his touch as a great Shakespeare matinee idol? A color remake of this film in 1983 (not recommended) stars Mel Brooks in the Benny role. Lubitsch’s original film contains a marvelous spoof of Adolf Hitler, who, in his chapter on “War Propaganda” in *Mein Kampf*, had made use of Shakespeare’s famous phrase. “When the nations on this planet fight for existence,” wrote Hitler, “when the question of destiny, ‘To be or not to be’, cries out for a solution, then all considerations of humanitarianism or aesthetics crumble into nothingness” (translated by Barry Gaines).

“To be or not to be” is once again the point of a joke in *Last Action Hero* (1993). At one point, Hamlet (Arnold Schwarzenegger) meditates on the hoary question only to conclude that it is “Not to be.” As he speaks, Elsinore castle blows sky-high. Tom Stoppard has produced parodic stage versions of *Hamlet*, one running fifteen minutes, the other ninety seconds. In an episode of *Gilligan’s Island*, “The Producer” (1966), some castaways on the island put on a short version of *Hamlet* set to famous operatic tunes. The Reduced Shakespeare Company’s *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr* (1994) devotes its second half to *Hamlet*. A skit called “Shamlet” by the Capitol Steps in 1988 has fun at the expense of a potential Democratic candidate for president who just can’t make up his mind whether to run for office or not. An amateur film called *Green Eggs and Hamlet* (1995) recounts the story of Hamlet in Dr Seuss’s signature doggerel style, notably in his *Green Eggs and Ham*. The first season of a Canadian television series called “Slings and Arrows” (2003), set at a fictional New Burbage Festival with obvious reference to Stratford, Ontario and featuring a number of actors from the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, tells of a former artistic Festival director named Oliver Gross (played by Stephen Ouimette) whose ghost comes back to haunt the new artistic director Geoffrey Tennant (Paul Gross) while that young man is doing is best to stage a star-crossed production of *Hamlet*.

Literary allusions to *Hamlet* in the last century attest to a never-ending fascination with this play as a central icon of culture in the English-speaking world, as in preceding centuries (see chapter 5). The speaker in T. S. Eliot’s “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917) confesses self-abnegatingly that “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be.” Stephen Daedalus, in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), expounds his theories about *Hamlet*, among which are the ideas that the Son is “striving to be atoned with the Father” (in Haines’s words) and that Gertrude committed adultery with Claudius before the murder. Buck Mulligan teases Stephen by parodying his Shakespearean obsessions: “He proves by algebra that Hamlet’s grandson is Shakespeare’s grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father.” Bloom pooh-poohs the academic question as to
to Hamlet. Joyce’s text is plentifully enriched with quotations and paraphrases: “That beetles o’er his base into the sea,” “nipping and eager air,” “very like a whale,” “a sable silvered,” “tempting flood,” “My cockle hat . . . my sandal shoon,” “glimpses of the moon,” “unweeded garden,” “when churchyards yawn,” “in the porches of mine ear,” “the proud man’s contumely,” “method in his madness,” and many more.

Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (1973) is about an aging London novelist whose name, Bradley Pearson, bears the same initials as those of the Black Prince—that is, Hamlet, with whom Bradley strongly identifies to the extent of insisting that both Hamlet and Shakespeare are homosexual. Bradley discovers the compelling force of his own homosexuality when he is able to achieve sexual arousal with his mistress, Julian, only when she cross-dresses as Hamlet. Angela Carter's fascination with Shakespeare in her novel *Wise Children* (1991) culminates in a reworking of “To be or not to be” as a song and dance. In Alan Isler's *The Prince of West End Avenue* (1994), some Jewish residents of New York stage *Hamlet* in their retirement home. In Margaret Atwood's *Gertrude Talks Back* (also 1994), the title figure disabuses her unhappy son of the notion that Hamlet Senior was murdered by his brother: “It wasn't Claudius, darling, it was me!” John Updike's *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) is a prequel to Shakespeare's play, imagining what Gertrude's adolescence must have been like, her rejecting at first her father's choice of suitor, her ultimate acquiescence, her longing for freedom from a constraining marriage, and her affair with Claudius. Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* (2006) is a fictional account of a rowdy, motherless girl who becomes the Queen's most trusted lady-in-waiting; forced ultimately to choose between her love for Hamlet and her own safety, she feigns madness and survives by escaping Elsinore.\(^9\)

Perhaps nothing can convey a sense of *Hamlet*'s astonishing universality today more readily than the extent to which its phrases have passed into the language. The word “ham” is derived from Hamlet’s name and from the temptation that has afflicted too many actors to “ham up” the part. “Hamlet” can mean a daft person, one who is irresolute and can do nothing purposefully. “To be or not to be” is by now such a warhorse of an expression that actors are driven to desperate expedients in their search for a fresh approach (as in Robert Falls’s modern-dress production of the play at Chicago’s Wisdom Bridge Theatre in 1985, when Aidan Quinn as Hamlet spray-painted “To be or not to be” on a bulkhead, stood back to contemplate what he had done, and murmured admiringly, “Now *that* is the question!”). Other phrases have become no less proverbial. “More honored in the breach than the observance” (1.4.16) is a common way of characterizing a habit that one would better do without. “Neither a borrower nor a lender be” (1.3.75) sums up a bit of worldly advice offered to spendthrifts. Many such phrases in *Hamlet*, like this one, are quoted out of context as if they represent Shakespeare’s thinking on the subject, when in fact we should remember that Polonius is speaking for himself and is not to be taken as a mouthpiece for the dramatist.\(^{10}\)

This incredible knack of Shakespeare’s for saying something appropriate to every imaginable situation has itself become proverbial. When, for example, a wealthy businessman named Tarlton in G. B. Shaw’s *Misalliance* (1910) finds in his house a thief named Gunner who is the son of a woman whom Tarlton seduced and “ruined” some years ago, the thief shows Tarlton two photographs of the woman as she once was and as she is now, exclaiming as he does so, “Look here upon this picture, and on this!” The thief, intent on improving himself through self-education, has been reading *Hamlet*—in a public library built with Tarlton’s money. Tarlton can only reply in ironic approval: “Good. Read Shakespear; he has a word for every occasion.”
The phrase “Hamlet without the Prince” has entered the language as signifying a performance or an event lacking the principal actor or central figure. The origin of this phrase is an account in the London *Morning Post*, September 1775, telling of a touring company which suddenly discovered that its leading player had run off with the innkeeper’s daughter. The company had to announce to the audience that “the part of Hamlet is to be left out, for that night.”

In their various ways, then, literary criticism, teaching, stage productions, films, videos, translations, adaptations, and even spoofs all suggest how vital is the life of *Hamlet* today, more so perhaps than ever before. The play is central to our ever-changing cultural image of ourselves. It contributes to cultural evolution and is in turn transformed into many images by that ongoing change. *Hamlet* helps us to understand ourselves and who we are socially. Our conversation with the play shows no signs of slowing down. We continue to reinvent *Hamlet* today.

Illustration 18. Mark Rylance as Hamlet as he considers whether or not to stab Claudius (Tim Woodward) at prayer (3.3), in the Globe Theatre production of 2000 directed by Giles Block.

Illustration 19. Mel Gibson as Hamlet and Helena Bonham Carter as Ophelia (3.1) in Franco Zeffirelli’s 1990 film.

Illustration 20. Derek Jacobi and Julie Christie as Claudius and Gertrude, in their first court appearance (1.2), in Kenneth Branagh’s 1996-7 film.