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Extending the Filmic Canon: *The Banquet* and *Maqbool*

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Abstract

The Banquet (dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2006) deploys a filmic method that, despite assertions to the contrary, is deeply read both in playing conventions and in the textual debates of Shakespeare's work. No less powerfully suggested is the film's awareness of its status as the latest in a long line of Shakespearean cinematic realizations. The outlines of the drama and the key players, for instance, are invariably doubly rephrased. Arguably taking energy from its contemporary surroundings, *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2003), too, is conscious, at least in part, of functioning as a remake. Allusions to the titular protagonist inheriting "Bollywood" and the fact that the Lady Macbeth figure is a type of frustrated actress, make logistical sense within the parameters of a film that openly confesses to being inspired by *Macbeth*. Central to the film's effect are the ways in which the traditional exercises of fatherhood are elaborated as the primary means through which power is transferred. Elsewhere, musical interludes in which a public woman's voice plays out the male protagonist's inner compulsions demonstrate the extent to which *Maqbool* pushes at some of the play's gendered preoccupations.

The canon of Shakespeare on film is challenged and supplemented by two recent additions to the catalogue, *The Banquet* (dir. Feng Xiaogang, 2006), a Chinese version of *Hamlet* set in ancient China, and *Maqbool* (dir. Vishal Bhardwaj, 2004), an Indian venture which transposes *Macbeth* to modern Mumbai's urban underworld.

Of the two films, *The Banquet* suggests a greater degree of historical distance: unfolding in the Tang Dynasty period, it concentrates upon the intrigues between a select group of characters — Prince Wu Luan / Hamlet (Daniel Wu), Empress Wan / Gertrude (Zhang Ziyi) and, to a lesser extent, Qing Nü / Ophelia (Zhou Xun) and Emperor Li / Claudius (Ge You). The banquet of the title refers to the spectacular feast that marks the climax of the action and that, in the fiction of the film, commemorates the emperor's one-hundredth day of rule. At an immediate level, *The Banquet* would seem to display its indebtedness to a host of previous Shakespeare on film and, indeed, early modern dramatic undertakings: an early backward shot of the empress moving towards the

throne references an over-the-shoulder publicity still of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* surveying his uncle's coronation, while the performative realities of a Hamlet who appears older than his (here) stepmother bring to mind Laurence Olivier's similar casting decisions, and Oedipal orientations, in his filmic recreation of Shakespeare's play.

Finally, the privileging of a banquet as the narrative cornerstone begs a Renaissance parallel and points to comparable deployments of eating and feasting as inverted and/or catastrophic celebrations in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English theatrical repertory.¹ What this points up is a filmic method that, despite assertions to the contrary, is deeply read both in playing conventions and in the textual debates of Shakespeare's work. No less powerfully suggested is the film's awareness of its status as the latest in a long line of Shakespearean cinematic realizations.

An absorbed relation to Shakespeare's play is multiply revealed. A point often remarked upon by audiences — namely, the possibility of Gertrude's collaboration in the murder plot — is fleshed out in *The Banquet* in the implication that the empress does indeed have knowledge of the way in which the first emperor died. Similarly, a conspiracy (in the so-called "bad quarto") to dispatch Claudius appears in the film in the empress's scheme to have the second emperor removed.² Incorporating such sequences, *The Banquet* emerges as a response to the questions posed by Shakespeare's play in the same moment as it pays homage to some of the immutable components of the "original." In part the film's felicity with manipulating the precursor narrative is linked to its enthusiasm for altering and adjusting the familiar chronology. Often, this takes the form of repeating, rather than singly representing, recognizable storylines: hence, Prince Wu Luan is twice exiled, while there are two internal plays-within-plays. Such a procedure makes for surprise and acknowledgement as *Hamlet* continually resurfaces, only in fresh and therefore critically arresting guises.

If the outlines of the drama are invariably doubly rephrased, then so, too, are its key players. The spirit of Ophelia inhabits both the palace attendant, Qing Nü, and the empress; behind the relatively benign Master Yin (Ma Jingwu) and the Chamberlain (Zhou Zhonghe) lie constructions of Polonius; and in Governor Pei (Zheng Qiusheng), and his protests against the emperor, one senses a dimension of Hamlet himself. The effect of these splittings, which are also types of expansion, is to reinforce salient Shakespearean preoccupations: incest, or the potential for a species of it, is stridently stated in the generational proximity of the prince and the empress, while political resistance, arguably localized in the play, is more widely distributed in the filmic equivalent. Amatory and sexual entanglements are prioritized thanks to the duplication of the

prince's lovers; the divisions of Polonius allow for a bifurcated appearance of court politics; and, because masked versions of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are everywhere apparent, surveillance is elevated into a core narrative property.

More generally, the continued concern in the film with disguise, acting, and theater brings to the fore *Hamlet's* interest in metatheatricality. Indeed, *The Banquet* would even seem to go so far as to express an internal admission that the individual character can be understood as several selves: thus, when the empress is addressed as both "sister-in-law" and "empress mother," a forceful impression of a motile and shifting personality is afforded. The process comes to a head at the film's close in a scene where the empress, having achieved dominion, ascends to a new title, "Her Majesty, the Emperor." The designation signals, at once, the absolutism to which the empress has ascended; at a deeper level, it suggests the gendered opposites that the character now incarnates. But, in this struggle for sovereignty, *The Banquet* also wants to imply, there can be no clear-cut resolution. For, at the moment when Wan gains the throne, she is stabbed (it is not clarified by whom), indicating the ghost's revenge, the people's resistance, the work of an anonymous assassin or a combination of all three. In its conjuration of another self, as yet unidentified, in its representation of a fragile purchase of power and, above all, in its grimly playful variation on source, this represents a conclusion very much in keeping with the film's overall imperatives.

Arguably taking energy from its contemporary surroundings, *Maqbool*, too, is conscious, at least in part, of functioning as a remake. Allusions to the titular protagonist inheriting "Bollywood," and the fact that the Lady Macbeth figure, Nimmi (Tabu), is a type of frustrated actress, make a logistical sense within the parameters of a film that openly confesses to being inspired by *Macbeth*. Yet, over the course of the film as a whole, it is less the specific parallels with Shakespeare's play that impress as the intricate interrelations among image, plot and metaphor that throw light upon Maqbool/Macbeth's predicaments. Hence, in a sequence that incorporates a number of elements, the sight of Nimmi's cut foot (a metaphor for the prospective betrayal of her drug lord lover) is juxtaposed with the courtship of Guddu / Fleance (Ajay Gehi) and Sameera (Masumi Makhija) which, in turn, is deployed to illuminate the gathering force of Maqbool's passion for his boss's mistress. In addition, because the sequence is overlaid by a song whose lyrics refer to "love" and "madness," a sense of Maqbool's immediate condition, and incipient fate, is underscored. Counter-pointing of this kind is a filmic signature and gains credence both from musical traditions in Asian cinema and from a creative utilization of local ceremonial. Pertinent here is the way in which Sameera (who represents a female version of Malcolm) sings separately about the fear of being caught "red-footed": although the anxiety belongs with the character, the theme of an imminent discovery also speaks to Maqbool, with the aural story bringing to mind a conjunction

of amatory and political entanglements. No less suggestive is the foregrounding of the characters' participation in the Muslim festival of Ramzan Eid: a commemoration of good will and friendship, the celebrations go hand-in-hand with the development of Maqbool's decision to dispatch Khan / Duncan (Pankaj Kapur) and thereby serve as an ironic commentary upon a gangland community singularly lacking in genuine festive virtues. Part of the communicative success of *Maqbool* resides precisely in such seemingly innocuous pairings and comparisons, qualifications and counter-implications.

Musical interludes in which a public woman's voice plays out the male protagonist's inner compulsions demonstrate the extent to which *Maqbool* pushes at some of play's gendered preoccupations. With the exception of a vituperative accusation that Nimmi is a "witch," there are, for instance, no female witches featured; rather, these roles are taken by the corrupt police inspectors, Purohit (Naseeruddin Shah) and Pandit (Om Puri), who specialize not so much in abstract predictions as carefully visualized horoscopes. The play's diagrammatized equation of women and the supernatural is here complicated and inverted, with the Shakespearean source's gendered identities being relocated and re-imagined. Thus, aristocratic masculine authority is unsettled via the scene in which Badi Bi (Mohini Mathur), an elderly female servant, reflects upon the unruliness of the nocturnal weather, while the issue of motherhood is initially brought to attention through the increasing feminization (embracing make-up and manner) of Kaka / Banquo (Piyush Mishra) and his stereotypically emotive relation to his son. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* upsets masculine and feminine categories; Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* executes a similar manoeuvre by reversing and shifting polarities that are already themselves often compromised.

In fact, it is not so much the status of the mother that *Maqbool* wishes to privilege as the place of the father. Known primarily as "father," Khan appears as patriarch at several levels, both in terms of the narrative (he is an adoptive parent to Maqbool) and in terms of the film's intertexts (the character's mumbling and shambling gait brings Marlon Brando's "godfather" to mind). The traditional exercises of fatherhood are elaborated as the primary means through which power is transferred, as when Khan gives away his daughter, Sameera, in marriage, thereby ensuring the continuation of his family line, or when Maqbool, after the drug lord's death, takes over the guardianship of the young woman, cementing himself as a new "father" in familial and dynastic fashion. Vividly encapsulated in these material and symbolic forms of fatherhood is a crucial biological consideration. For, at the film's close, it is revealed that Nimmi is pregnant, although ambiguity surrounds the child's paternity. In a sense, the "true" parent becomes a moot issue: Maqbool, fleeing retribution, abandons the infant in the hospital and is subsequently mown down in the city streets, while Guddu and Sameera take over as mother and father. As befits a filmic drama

centred upon protocols and corruption, ideas of legitimacy and illegitimacy are at this point allowed to circulate expressively; simultaneously, visuals and soundtrack are deployed to underscore the mixed legacies of the Macbethian protagonist. To a frozen image of Maqbool's head is added the cry of a child and a glimpse of crows flying overhead in a resonant tableau that encapsulates the need to read "the mind's construction in the face," the implied continuation of cycles of violence, hope for regeneration, and the perils of cultural forms of inheritance. *The Banquet* and *Maqbool* are films, then, that invite informed attention and that, in their emergence in the Shakespearean scene, look set to challenge inherited canonical notions and to diversify and expand the means whereby the Bard, in his various screen manifestations, is regarded and interpreted.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker, *The Bloody Banquet* (1608-1609, revised 1620s) and Thomas Middleton, *Women Beware Women* (c. 1625-1627).
2. Conspiracy is suggested in Gertrude's being informed of Claudius' villainy in the "bad quarto." See William Shakespeare, *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmarke* (1603), sigs H2v-H3r.

References

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