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Woodcocks to Springes: Generic Disjunction in *The Banquet*

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Abstract

Directed by Feng Xiaogang, *Ye Yan* ("The Banquet") is an amalgamation of visual styles and narrative tropes: a detailed period epic developed from a mere historical sketch; a lush and stately study of court intrigue that favors whisper over decree; an artfully choreographed *wuxia* film that tempers precisely constructed sequences of action and movement with the subtleties of Chinese theatrical forms; and a reciprocation of Chinese cinematic influence on Western action films. As a generic hybrid, *Ye Yan* effectively establishes its rules of appropriation and balances them against a complex network of audience expectation and influence: a *wuxia* rooted in the literary-psychological rather than mytho-historical tradition; a film formally designed and structured, yet informed by the latest trends in wirework and CGI; *Hamlet*, and yet not *Hamlet*. At the same time, wary of overwhelming spectators in its whirlpool of source and influence, the film unsuccessfully attempts to outdo its virtues as its tightly wound, majestically paced narrative unravels.

A free, "thematic" adaptation of Shakespearean source material that recalls Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* ("Chaos," 1985) and the recent films of Zhang Yimou — such as the similarly designed and executed *The Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jin dai huangjin jia*, 2006) — *The Banquet* is set in the "Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms" period (tenth century CE),¹ yet attempts no specific representations of historical or mytho-historical events. Director Feng Xiaogang's visually sophisticated film achieves a curious originality, however, when it ceases to be what it was apparently conceived as: an adaptation of *Hamlet*. Empress Wan (Zhang Ziyi), a Gertrude with elements of Ophelia, but forged in the Lady Macbeth mode, reveals herself as the film's center and commands it to follow her lead, as Amy Scott-Douglass and others observe in their essays in this

collection. Introduced in a long dolly push,² Wan, in an elaborate gown, glides through the great hall of the palace, with the opening credits materializing and vanishing in her wake.

(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)

Conceptually simple, but loaded with context, the sequence establishes the intertwined aesthetics of "Little Wan"'s conflicted character and of the film itself. A continuous emphasis on corridors and pathways (slow and stately indoors; slow-motion outdoors, as if natural movements were impeded by the centrality of the court) becomes one of the film's strongest leitmotifs. Yet *The Banquet* is not satisfied with being merely a stately period drama, a palace intrigue, a psychological study of a brilliantly passive schemer, or even an innovative riff on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Feng punctuates the narrative with elaborate, by now *de rigueur* action sequences. While a few of the sequences, such as a swordplay rehearsal for Wan's re-coronation,³ are dramatically appropriate and contextually sound, other scenes (notably an extended execution⁴ and an attack by crossbowmen concealed in snowdrifts)⁵ feel like trailers for other, more concretely *wuxia* films. In its quest to fulfill simultaneously a multitude of cinematic expectations, *The Banquet* demonstrates a complex network of positive and negative aspects of Shakespeare appropriation.

The cinematic narrative introduces Prince Wu Luan (Daniel Wu) as multiple, masked Hamlets in an outdoor theater,⁶ immediately establishing his liminal status — in a sense, he has been "eliminated" before the film begins and will be eliminated again before the sequence has concluded. Cementing him firmly among the supporting cast, the film never affords Wu Luan the sort of theatrical entrance — "A little more than kin and less than kind" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.65)⁷ — one expects of a Hamlet figure. Wu Luan, in keeping with Chinese and Japanese theatrical traditions, proposes that masks bring out the best in a performer. Wan accuses him of being a poor actor, since he cannot conceal his emotions by turning his true face into a mask, as she has.⁸ In a perhaps unintentional way, Wu Luan's preoccupation with art and appearances has emasculated him as a political threat to the usurping Emperor Li (Ge You).

The film strategically eliminates the possibility that Wan's character is a speculative attempt to fill the blanks in Shakespeare's Gertrude. Despite her penchant for selectively revealing aspects of herself, Empress Wan is herself a liminal figure, obtaining entry into exclusive arenas (political, sensual, public) by employing a variety of subtle disguises. Lady Macbeth may knowingly alternate between her public and private faces, but the former "Little Wan" wears at least two faces in every encounter, addressed in detail by Woodrow B. Hood in his essay in this collection. A critical moment in the film hinges on the court's open acknowledgment of Wan as Empress Dowager

(which would render illegitimate Li's fraternal claim to the throne) versus Empress Mother, as she relates to her impending re-coronation.⁹ The Emperor is less concerned with Wan's bridal rights than with public approval of his right to rule or a marriage with his brother's widow.

Li and Wan's awareness of their relationship's questionable nature permeates their early scenes together. They refer to one another in moments of extreme intimacy as "brother-in-law" and "sister-in-law" — though Wan corrects him with "Empress" at one point prior to her re-coronation — each taunting the other with the implied incest. Li's interactions with Wan are primarily voyeuristic (for his pleasure) and servile (for hers), which ties the Emperor's scopophilia into that of Claudius in a curious, almost antithetical, manner. Li's visual and sensual preoccupations stem from a desire to memorialize his predecessor's achievements, but also to glorify them as his own and, concurrently, emphasize his brother's disregard of beauty in the interest of empire-building. Emotionally and aesthetically sensitive as usurpers go, Li requires particularly astute, logical counsel and seeks out such edification wherever he can find it.

In stark contrast to Gertrude, Wan uses physical intimacy, tempered with Iago-esque intimations, to assert power over, rather than delegate it to, Li the usurper. Her power over him resonates throughout the court as a sort of legend-in-the-making. The Emperor, on a redecorating campaign, admires the icon in the palace temple, a snow leopard that may well have been commissioned by his late brother. Minister Yin Taichang (Ma Jingwu) suggests a tiger instead and, making one of her many calculated entrances, Wan proposes a flying dragon.¹⁰ Li ultimately supplements Wan's dragon with a phoenix, which Wan then adopts as her power animal. Later, Qing Nü (Zhou Xun) is charged with embroidering Wan's usurped coronation gown (intended for Qing Nü's marriage to Wu Luan). When she expresses frustration in stitching the eyes of a phoenix, Minister Yin recommends she take inspiration from the eyes of her mistress, which inspire at once reverent awe and fear.

Compared to the static, almost sterile world of the palace, the outside world is a dangerous series of frontiers and official exiles, none more definitive than the royal threshold. While characters move through palace interiors in the slow, controlled motions imposed by ceremony,¹¹ Feng presents several passages of exterior action — even the joyful approach of Qing Nü to the palace upon news of Wu Luan's return — in fluid, camera-imposed slow motion.¹² In *The Banquet's* detailed universe, the world outside the court must be slowed down to correspond with the languid, introverted microcosm of the inner court. As in Shakespearean tragedy, most precisely *Hamlet* and *Othello*, personal obsessions obscure political realities, making conquest not only inevitable, but especially convenient for one's enemies. Wu Luan's return and slow-burn

revenge bring external danger within the palace walls. Despite his limited, almost taken-for-granted character arc, Wu Luan is well-suited to survive whatever might threaten his life in exile, but must necessarily perish within the court. Wan's plotting exploits this revised atmosphere, adding those aspects of Claudius that Emperor Li eschews into her manifold character, but continually conflates her memory of youthful romance with actions selfish and irrevocable. As the cinematic narrative approaches a series of foregone conclusions, *Ye Yan*'s balance of interiority and surface are stretched and sundered by similar tensions.

Recent *wuxia*-influenced films have begun to imitate *The Matrix* series' imitations of the unique tropes of earlier *wuxia* films. *The Banquet*'s amalgamation of cinematic devices and stylistic traditions results in a number of sublime moments, but several stylistic disjunctions isolate these moments rather than integrate them into a unified cinematic vision. The film presents the viewer, however elegantly, with a number of incongruities. The confrontation between Wan and Wu Luan upon his return, observed in part by Emperor Li, strives to establish dramatic and romantic tension between the former lovers, as well as between "Little Wan" and the Empress who possesses her. The scene's sensuous wirework foregrounds its emotional artifice when it attempts to make flashy visual poetry of their lost romance.¹³ Intercut with the spying Emperor, one notes a strong reconnection with *Hamlet* at a point where the audience may well have stopped seeking correspondences. Wan realizes that she may be performing not only for Wu Luan and the servants, but also for Li himself. Since the continuation of her romance with Wu Luan is impossible, given her dream of ruling the kingdom and his attitude toward her as a fallen woman known by both his father and uncle, the sense of danger the sequence attempts to conjure rings as either false or self-nullifying. Even the Emperor, assured that this relationship is no longer a threat to his sexual or political well-being, rubs his white jade Buddha¹⁴ and walks away. In contrast to this relatively subtle handling of principal characters, peripheral deaths are diminished by cartoonish sprays of CGI-enhanced blood.¹⁵

Ye Yan's foremost stylistic disjunction effectively splits the film in two. Rather than establish Wan's re-coronation in the visual language of her growing hold on the court — echoing perhaps her title-sequence entrance — the creative team generates a cinematographically unlikely, large-scale pull-back from action on the palace threshold to an epic exterior with thousands of artificial extras.¹⁶ Feng deploys these extraneous devices as if uncertain whether the film's embrace of its inherent hyperreality is firm enough to be felt by subject and spectator alike. At roughly the moment that one recognizes Wan as its central figure, the film begins to break its well established visual and narrative rules, generating tone and mood in the service of specific moments rather than perpetuating a sense of thematic continuity or natural progression.

(A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.)

The Banquet establishes a heightened sense of period and atmosphere, a rare attempt at self-contained verisimilitude that its eclectic interests and influences cannot either sustain or overwhelm. An over-reliance on conspicuous CGI effects and enhanced wirework — paradoxically employed to heighten a drama already perched on the narrowest precipice — pushes many scenes beyond cinematic genre poetry into something like live-action animé, in which the far-reaching *Matrix* effect is readily decodable. In a nod to a long-standing trend in Mandarin and Cantonese, not to mention American, period films, a decidedly non-tenth century, piano and orchestra driven ballad accompanies the closing credits. Even Ang Lee's ultra-serious homage to the *wuxia* tradition, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wo hu cang long*, 2000), concluded with a modern love song in its final scene. The arrangement by Tan Dun (composer for both films) is rooted in *Crouching Tiger's* mournful score and, more significantly, the song appears over the film's final credit roll rather than accompanying its mystical final images. *The Banquet's* closing theme, "Only for Love," reprised from the piano and strings version that underscores the bitter and strange Little Wan/Wu Luan reunion scene,¹⁷ is a kind of aural synecdoche for the visual and narrative difficulties the film presents. The song is musically antithetical to the intricacies of an alternately eerie and robust score, creates an extreme disconnect between audience and the preceding narrative, and, crucially, appears to contradict the deliberate resolve of its central character. Could the Empress Wan, for all her subtle, controlled monstrosity, express "Little Wan"'s regrets?

In the film's elegiac denouement, Wan continues her obsession with rebirth, stunned to a slight madness by the outcome of her Machiavellian endgame. Fondling the red silk of her coronation gown, she addresses the ghost-memory of Wu Luan and wonders when and where she misplaced her identity.¹⁸ In the vicinity of a small stone koi pond, upon which the camera fixes as the piano and chorus of "Only for Love" summon us to emotional catharsis, Wan meets her end, recognizing her unseen assassin as she utters a final gasp. In *The Banquet's* final moments, as the camera pushes in to a single, unmanipulated shot of the koi pond, the murder weapon, familiar to us from earlier in the film, enters the water.¹⁹ The camera holds for well over a minute and as the ballad continues, floating weeds, displaced by the knife, drift back to obscure the koi. The closing credits roll over the image of the koi pond for another ninety seconds before fading to black. Who could these koi be that they merit such visual emphasis, rivalling Prince Wu Luan for screen time?

This final scene is connected to an early beat in which Wan reveals her jealous, but futile passion for Wu Luan.²⁰ While discussing with Qing Nü the prince's impending return, Wan feeds those very koi in the stone pond with an imperious gesture. Dampening Qing Nü's hopes for a

reunion, she speaks of her own shared past with the Prince as a thing outgrown. Besides schemes and stratagems, these fish are the only thing nurtured by "the mother of the country" in the course of her narrative; at her end, only the koi will benefit from Little Wan's spilled blood. Emphasizing this subtle, but loaded point is a nearly three-minute shot of the fish tank itself. That *The Banquet*, a film keen on cleverly reiterating and reevaluating the minutiae of its symbolic world, could root the emotional resonance of its finale in such a small, early scene and do so little to support the connection strongly suggests the almost blunted purpose of the filmmakers.

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Notes

1. DVD Chapter 1: 00:01:22.
2. DVD Chapter 1: Clip from 00:04:54 to 00:05:23; still at 00:05:04.
3. DVD Chapter 8: Clips from 00:50:06 to 00:50:24 and 00:50:53 to 00:51:23.
4. DVD Chapter 7: Stills at 00:42:15, 00:42:27 and 00:42:38.
5. DVD Chapter 12: Clip from 01:20:17 to 01:20:45.
6. DVD Chapter 1: Clip from 00:01:42 to 00:02:05.
7. Shakespeare citations comes from *The Norton Shakespeare* (Shakespeare 2008).
8. DVD Chapter 8: Clips from 00:55:08 to 00:55:38 and 00:56:29 to 00:56:56.
9. DVD Chapter 6: Clip from 00:39:17 to 00:39:47.
10. See DVD Chapter 6 (00:37:54).
11. As in the opening credit sequence, referenced in note 2.
12. DVD Chapter 3: Clip from 00:18:21 to 00:18:37.
13. DVD Chapter 5: Stills at 00:26:31, 00:27:37, 00:29:09, 00:29:41 and 00:31:16.
14. I plead ignorance to the precise form and nature of Emperor Li's icon. Given the wide range of uses he puts it to (from issuing wordless commands to performing sensual massage), the image of a praying Buddha seems to me inappropriate. From certain angles, however, the carving suggests a larger figure with its hands upon the head of a smaller figure, as an elder conferring blessings on a child or younger sibling.
15. Stills at 00:14:02 (Chapter 3), 00:34:27 (Chapter 6), 00:42:50 and 00:42:52 (Chapter 7).
16. DVD Chapter 10: Clip from 01:02:08 to 01:02:23.

17. See DVD Chapter 5 from 00:26:46 to 00:28:47 (reference only). This earlier sequence, with its wire-dance of erotic pursuit, restates the youthful passions of the Empress and Prince while denying the possibility of their rekindling.
18. DVD Chapter 19: Clip from 02:03:11 to 02:03:41.
19. Ibid.: Still of the "Sword of the Yue Maiden" at 02:06:54, compare with still at 00:29:21 (Chapter 5); Clip from 02:06:45 to 02:07:11.
20. DVD Chapter 3: Stills at 00:19:40 and 00:19:54; Clip from 00:19:45 to 00:20:15.

References

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