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**Women in *Hamlet* as Represented in the Film Adaptations by  
Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project aims to explore the field of film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays by examining two adaptations of *Hamlet*: Laurence Olivier's (1948) and Kenneth Branagh's (1996). Specifically, it sets out to analyse the women characters in the adaptations in relation to the original text as well as to the context and the main characteristics of each adaptation. The methodology has consisted in watching the two film adaptations under discussion closely and critically as well as studying previous research on the matter, in order to suggest a link between the genre of a film adaptation and the way it deals with female characters. The project also offers a brief overview of the field of adaptation studies and of Olivier's and Branagh's film adaptations of *Hamlet* so as to lay the foundations for the subsequent analysis of the representation of the women characters.

**Key Words:** Kenneth Branagh, Laurence Olivier, film adaptations, *Hamlet*, female characters

## **RESUMEN**

El objetivo de este proyecto es explorar el campo de estudio de las adaptaciones cinematográficas de Shakespeare analizando dos adaptaciones de *Hamlet*: la de Laurence Olivier (1948) y la de Kenneth Branagh (1996). El análisis de éstas se lleva a cabo con el objetivo de poder analizar los personajes femeninos en las adaptaciones en relación con el texto original y con el contexto y las características principales de cada adaptación. La metodología ha consistido en visionar las dos adaptaciones bajo discusión de manera crítica, además de examinar investigaciones anteriores del tema para poder sugerir una relación entre el género de una adaptación cinematográfica y la manera que representa a los personajes femeninos. El proyecto también ofrece una breve visión general del campo de estudios de adaptación y de las adaptaciones cinematográficas de *Hamlet* de Olivier y Branagh a fin de sentar las bases para el posterior análisis de la representación de los personajes femeninos.

**Palabras clave:** Kenneth Branagh, Laurence Olivier, adaptaciones cinematográficas, *Hamlet*, personajes femeninos

## MOTIVATION AND RATIONALE

It is possible to say that Shakespeare is the best known writer in the history of humanity. One could venture to say that the plays that Shakespeare wrote over four hundred years ago have been the most adapted, watched and acclaimed of all times. The credits for this accomplishment may perhaps be given to the fact that the stories he wrote are timeless. The human condition has not changed much from what he was surrounded with in his time, and therefore we can all connect with the feelings, desires and hopes expressed in his writings. Some of his characters are easy to empathize with; others are easy to dislike. In either case, they give rise to feelings in the reader or spectator that will not expire.

Throughout the years there have been hundreds and hundreds of theatre versions of Shakespeare's plays. His plays were conceived to be played on top of a stage with an audience right in front of them. Since the invention of cinema, though, and with the technological transformations it underwent over the last century specially, we can do something that Shakespeare could only have dreamt of: film adaptations of his plays.

This field of study seems particularly interesting to me, as I not only enjoy Shakespeare's plays, but I am also really keen on the cinema. Being an admirer of Laurence Olivier's adaptations, and someone who thoroughly enjoys Kenneth Branagh's, it seemed only right to aim my end-of-degree project on the study of a Shakespearean film adaptation by these two acclaimed directors.

The choice of *Hamlet* was also inevitable as I have always been drawn to this play in particular. To center the research on women was a natural step that came after I had started my research; it seemed like the right thing to do as it also falls within my scope of interests and, furthermore, it adds a necessary structural spine to the research. The final product, then, is a piece of research that combines several interests of mine and that hopefully will be of use for future work on the topic.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Frailty, thy name is woman!” *Hamlet*, Act I, ii

*Hamlet* and its subsequent film adaptations is a field of study that has been researched thoroughly. The way this play by Shakespeare as well as others deals with women has also been examined and explored in the past.

This makes sense, because the original text of *Hamlet* draws attention to the way the female characters are constructed. Both main female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, have certain characteristics that define them and that help us track the way adaptations of the play—whether in theatre or on film—have dealt with them. It is important to focus our attention on the extent to which adaptations of the play reproduce the sexist gender regime that was dominant and in Shakespeare’s times and what strategies—if any—they have followed in order to deviate from the perspective on women found in the source text.

Although there has been a great deal of research on Shakespeare’s film adaptations, there is still room for an analysis that aims to compare and contrast Olivier’s and Branagh’s adaptations of *Hamlet* by focusing specifically on their representation of women.

As will be seen, similarities can be traced regarding the way each film depicts the women characters, but at the same time each has a completely different tone that is worth studying further.

The objective of this project is to focus on the two film adaptations and explore the way they represent Gertrude and Ophelia. This will be done by focusing on the context of each adaptation, the director, and finally, on the genre of each adaptation. It also aims to create links between Olivier’s and Branagh’s adaptations by examining the films closely and exploring previous research on the matter.

Hence, this project is divided into two main sections: one dealing with Olivier’s adaptation and one focusing on Branagh’s. These two sections include an overview of each adaptation and a specific study on the female characters. Finally, the conclusions of the study are drawn, taking into account the objectives mentioned above.

## 2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ADAPTATION AND ADAPTATION STUDIES

Adaptation is a very recent field of studies that is concerned with the film adaptations of works of literature (whether they are novels, plays, stories or other sort of works). Therefore, this field of study finds its origins on the discovery and appearance of films as well as on the original idea of translating a piece of literature into film. In order to trace back the history and origins of film adaptation, we should briefly mention the Lumière Brothers, who patented the cinematograph, which is the great-grand-father of the films that are being produced nowadays. It took a while, though, for the field of adaptation studies to arise after films began being made. It started to be recognized towards the mid-twentieth century, even though adaptations of novels and other literary works had already been made. In fact, the one that is considered to be the first film adaptation of a literary text was made in 1924. It was Erich von Stroheim's *Greed*(1924), which was an adaptation of Frank Norris' *McTeague*. The result was a ridiculously long film—about 8 hours long—that was later shortened.

One of the pioneers of the adaptation studies field is George Bluestone who wrote the book *Novels into Film* in 1957. In this work, Bluestone finds that “a comparative study which begins by finding resemblances between novel and film ends by loudly proclaiming their differences” (1957, p.ix). His point is that a film adaptation and its literary source cannot be compared in the same terms because they differ in too many levels. This idea contradicts the general thought of superiority of the literary text that had been predominant until then; the idea that the literary work was superior than its subsequent film adaptations was defended by many, amongst them we find Virginia Woolf with her essay “The Cinema” (1926). Even though Bluestone seemed to break that pattern, he cannot fully get rid of his antecessors, and he claims that the literary source is in a higher position because “its history is longer and its materials more refined” (1957, p.7). As expressed by Mireia Aragay in *Books in Motion*, Bluestone defends that “the novel becomes ‘a model’, an original that the adaptation can at best only aspire to copy” (2005, p.14). As we can see, the beginning of adaptation studies had the clear set that films had to be copies of the pieces of literature that they were to adapt and that they were unable to surpass the quality of the written work by no means.

Nowadays, though, the mindset is completely different, and it is throughout the second half of the twentieth century that adaptation studies began to consider the film an artwork per se, somehow freeing it from the constraints of the literary work that they were adapting. Nonetheless, this process took a long time to actually take place. James Naremore talks about it in a lecture he gave in 1999 called “Film and the Reign of Adaptation”; in this,

Naremore attributes a lot of importance of the change of attitude in film adaptations to French auteurs, who “spoke of film as a language and the director as a kind of writer, wielding a lens instead of a pen” (1999, p.5). Nonetheless, it was not until the close of the 1970’s that the superiority of literature over films was put to question, and it was done by Keith Cohen in *Film and Fiction: the dynamics of exchange*, about which Aragay says that “the ‘dynamics of exchange’, in other words, work both ways between film and fiction- an argument which instantly undermines claims for the superiority of literature vis-à-vis cinema” (2005, p.18)

In any case, adaptation studies is a field that is still growing, not only because it is a relatively new field, but also because adaptations are in constant development, due to filmmakers constantly evolving and finding new techniques to create their adaptations. While in the beginning, and as we have seen, literary texts were respected and adapted exactly as the author of the literary piece had written it, the contemporary adaptations contemplate a new methodology that not only allows a free interpretation of the work, but also for the director of the film to add as many changes as possible to make it more personal and unique. It is the case, for instance, of *The hours*, a film adaptation of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf that has the novel as a central core of the film but divides Mrs. Dalloway into three characters, one of them being Virginia Woolf herself interpreted by Nicole Kidman; or, on another note, we could talk about *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies*, an adaptation of the most well-known novel of Jane Austen whose readers will probably not remember quite that way; in the film adaptation, Elizabeth Bennet fights against zombies next to Mr.Darcy. Due to the constant innovations of film directors, the field is in a constant state of contemplation that allows it to grow.

There are also other sorts of adaptations that are very new and worth mentioning: cartoon adaptations of fiction. Since this paper will focus on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, it is worth mentioning a couple of those: *Hamlet*’s adaptation by The Simpsons, or Romeo and Juliet’s adaptation by “Les Tres Bessones” (the triplets), which was a popular show for children in Catalonia from 1997 to 2003. This kind of adaptations serve as a way of approaching big ‘classics’ such as those mentioned to younger generations. Obviously, the argument is diluted and transformed in order to make it more appealing to the audience in question, which is now something widely approved.

### 3. WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

Female roles in Shakespearean plays have been a widely spread case of study, both in his comedies and his tragedies. In the case of *Hamlet*, there are two main female characters that share the spotlight with the rest of—quite more numerous—male characters: Ophelia and Gertrude.

The way these characters are portrayed in the original text tends to differ from the way they are presented in the film adaptations of *Hamlet*. In many cases, the more recent adaptations have had the tendency to portray the female roles as stronger characters, be it the case of Almereyda's *Hamlet* in 2000, in which the character of Ophelia is offered a greater scope and certain personality traits not seen in the original text.

In the original text by Shakespeare, though, the female characters are represented as faulty for different reasons. In order to explore this, we need to focus on love, marriage, sexuality, motherhood, chastity and lack of individual consciousness.

Obviously, and as it could not be any other way, Shakespeare's tragedies have the tendency to have love as an important focal point. In these tragedies different aspects of love seem to be disputed, such as betrayal in the case of *Hamlet*. Moreover, in Shakespeare's tragedies which have love as a focal point we also find marriage as a pivot, and it is precisely in marriage that we find betrayal in *Hamlet*. The institution of marriage is questioned, and hence, so are women, be it the case of Gertrude who is portrayed as a betrayer. Still, love without marriage also equals failure in the play, as we can see in the case of Ophelia and Hamlet. Women, both in love and in marriage, are seen as faulty.

Gertrude is a wife that does not mourn his husband's death for long enough, describing her, this way, as not being an ideal woman—and suffering the clear consequences of it right after the moment of sudden realization and repentance from her mistakes. As we are told in Juliet Dusinberre's book *Shakespeare and the nature of Women*, in Hamlet's ethics, man and wife are one. (1996, p.99) This bond is supposed to be strong enough not to allow Gertrude to move on to a second marriage as quick as she does, which supposes the contradiction of Hamlet's ideals and goes against the ideal for chastity of women as well. Hamlet questions Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, denying the possibility of it being real love:

You cannot call it love; for at your age  
The hey-day in the blood is tame, it's humble,

And waits upon the judgment (Act III, iv).

as well as emphasizing the sexual faultiness that lies between the union of Claudius and Gertrude: “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest.”(Act I, v)

Gertrude’s sexuality is another focal point in the play. In fact, it is seen as something more strongly reprehensible than the actual murder that Claudius commits. As Janet Adelman puts it in *Suffocating Mothers*, “We can see the beginnings of this shift of blame even in the Ghost's initial account of the murder, in which the emotional weight shifts rapidly from his excoriation of Claudius to his much more powerful condemnation of Gertrude's sexuality.” (1992, p.24) This alone implies the depiction of Gertrude as being a faulty woman, as she does not fall into the standards of chastity. Her betrayal seems incomprehensible to her son as well as to her late husband, but we must take into account that Gertrude’s possibilities after becoming a widow are scarce. As a woman, her main accomplishment as well as her life vest is becoming a wife. Hamlet’s rage seems to blind him from seeing further on her mother’s behavior: that, as a woman, her aspiration and her education revolved around marriage in order to keep herself safe.

In the case of Ophelia, it may seem that innocence is what kills her, but she is also faulty at not being able to stay true to herself and her true feelings and act upon them. Nonetheless, Ophelia’s actions are the result of an education that makes her own judgment weak. As Dusinberre puts it,

(Ophelia’s) whole education is geared to relying on other people’s judgments, and to placing chastity and the reputation for chastity above even the virtue of truthfulness. Ophelia has no chance to develop an independent conscience of her own, so stifled is she by the authority of the male world. The consequence is, that being false to herself, she is inevitably false to Hamlet. (1996, p. 94)

Ophelia is seen in the original play as the representation of a value alternative to Gertrude’s (2007, p.253), as told in the essay “Looking at Shakespeare’s women on film” by Carol Chillington Rutter. Even though, as we have seen, she is also faulty, her errors come hand in hand with her constant intention to please the males that control her life, unlike Gertrude whose faults seem deliberately against her chastity.

One last aspect that Shakespeare covers in *Hamlet* in relation to women is motherhood, in which Gertrude is seen as the imperfect mother. Adelman has a very

interesting point of view when dealing with Gertrude, as she claims we do not know much about the character herself, and what we do know comes in the shape of what the men around her construct. When dealing with motherhood, Adelman claims that

(Gertrude's) frailty unleashes for Hamlet, and for Shakespeare, fantasies of maternal malevolence, of maternal spoiling, that are compelling exactly as they are out of proportion to the character we know, exactly as they seem therefore to reiterate infantile fears and desires rather than an adult apprehension of the mother as a separate person."(1992, p.16)

Moreover, in the motherhood aspect we find a connection between Gertrude and Ophelia, or at least between the way Hamlet visualizes both figures. Adelman finds this correlation in Act III, i in Hamlet's conversation with Ophelia, when he claims

Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a  
breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest;  
but yet I could accuse me of such things that it  
were better my mother had not borne me (Act III, i)

This is what Adelman has to say about this particular conversation

The implicit logic is: why would you be a breeder of sinners like me? In the gap between "breeder of sinners" and "I," Gertrude and Ophelia momentarily collapse into one figure. It is no wonder that there can be no more marriage: Ophelia becomes dangerous to Hamlet insofar as she becomes identified in his mind with the contaminating maternal body, the mother who has borne him. (1992, p.14)

This connection, which may not come across at a first reading of the play, becomes more and more obvious once one specifically focuses on the role of women and the idea of marriage and motherhood. The women in Hamlet are faulty because that is the way Hamlet sees them, no matter how much he may love them or he may try to—in his opinion—save them from their sins.

As Chillington Rutter claims, "In tragedy, Shakespeare habitually uses the woman's body to proxy the crisis of masculine self-representation that is the play's narrative focus. What Hamlet or Lear or Othello finally understands about himself is achieved through his catastrophic misunderstanding, misconstruction of Ophelia, Cordelia, Gertrude, Juliet, Desdemona" (2000, p. 251)

## 4. LAURENCE OLIVIER'S *HAMLET*

### 4.1. Overview of the adaptation

#### 4.1.1. Olivier: director and Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Laurence Oliver is an iconic name when one deals with film adaptations of Shakespeare in twentieth century, not only as an actor, but as a director as well. In *Hamlet* (1948) he played both roles and came up with an adaptation that was highly praised by the audience and both enjoyed but regarded as faulty by early reviewers such as Campbell Dixon; nonetheless and spite the faultiness that it was accused of, this adaptation is still considered a landmark by many.

*Hamlet* is not the only Shakespearean play that Olivier adapted: Only four years prior to *Hamlet*, Olivier directed *Henry V* (1944), where he also brought to life King Henry himself. This adaptation was a complete success in the sense that, as Kenneth S. Rothwell claims in his book *A History of Shakespeare on Screen*, it “not only launched, indeed invented, the modern Shakespeare film, but also showed that the Shakespeare movie could survive in the Palace theatre as well as the rarified art houses” (1999, p.50).

As an actor, Olivier also took part in *As you like it* (1936)—the earliest Shakespeare film adaptation that he participated in—, and *Othello* (1965). At 75, he made his last appearance in a Shakespeare play when he starred in the popular Granada television miniseries *King Lear* (1983). His successful career as a Shakespearean stage actor started at 21 years old when he played Malcolm in *Macbeth* (1928), and moved forward to theatrical adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* (1935), *Hamlet* (1937) and *Othello* (1938), amongst many others.

Olivier's success went hand in hand with his capacity for “merging art with entertainment”—in Rothwell's words (1999, p.47). Moreover, throughout his career he “reclaimed the British role as guardian of its national poet.” (Rothwell, 1999, p.47) His public triumph was marked by the knighthood he received in 1947 and his thirteen nominations for the Academy Awards—mainly as Best Actor, four of which he won.

However, despite his overall success, Olivier's work was not always acclaimed by critics. One adaptation in particular was not received the way it was expected and generated controversy. It is Olivier's adaptation of *Richard III* (1955), of which he was the director, the producer and the leading actor. It turned out to be the first film he directed that did not

receive an Academy Award. Barbara Freedman explains the reasons for this in her essay “Critical junctures in Shakespeare screen history: the case of Richard III”:

[Olivier’s adaptation] sits uneasily on the cusp of stage and screen, and leans far more heavily on a prior stage production (...) Olivier’s difficulties with the VistaVision format he chose, his interest in speed over technical mastery, and his attitude towards adjusting his stage performance for cinema, help to explain the limitations of *Richard III* (2000,pp. 56-57).

Other critics found that this adaptation focused too much solely on Richard himself, while the rest of characters and plot fell behind. However, H. R. Coursen says in this connection that “While it certainly concentrates on a single individual, it incorporates more of the ambiguous politics of the play than some believed it did at the time” (2000, p.101)

Although Olivier’s adaptations of Shakespearean plays may be considered his most famous works, he also starred in several film adaptations of other classics such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Pride and Prejudice*, where he brought Heathcliff and Darcy to life respectively, and appeared in films that have become classics over time, such as Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*. His contributions to film and specifically, to the field of Shakespearean adaptations, are of great importance. As Rothwell says, Olivier is “as talented an *auteur* of Shakespeare film as ever existed” (1999, p.47)

#### 4.1.2. Context of the adaptation

When we watch a film adaptation of a specific novel or play, we need to take into account the context in which the adaptation was made if we wish to unravel its meaning and significance. The historical, political, social and cultural context of an adaptation may explain many (if not all) of the differences that the adaptations may display as regards the original text. The context also refers to the type of movies that are being made at the time and the type of audience they address, because depending on the sort of movies that the audience is used to watching and that have proved to be successful, an adaptation may take different paths and shapes.

In the case of Olivier’s *Hamlet* adaptation, we need to take into account that it was made in 1948, about seventy years ago, when cinema was still a relatively young industry taking its very first steps towards becoming the giant that it is nowadays. Most of the movies that were being produced at that time were adaptations from previous literary or dramatic



material, such as *Casablanca* (1942) or *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). The fact that films at that time were usually adaptations from previous material is no surprise, as the film industry needed to gain a position of 'respectability' that was to be achieved by turning to literature, an older and more 'respectable' form of art. Nonetheless, there was a movie that stood out in that decade and that was even received as the best movie that had been ever made, and that was *Citizen Kane* (1941), which was received as the best movie that had ever been made, was not an adaptation but an original script by Orson Wells, who was also directing and starring in the movie. Thus, the industry was in a very bright moment, beginning to yield films that were to become classics.

As for the political context, *Hamlet* was released in 1948, only three years after the end of the Second World War. Obviously, such a remarkable event must have consequences beyond the obvious social and political ones, and it did have an impact culturally. Olivier lived the war from up close; he was not necessarily involved in it, but he did collaborate with the British government when being asked to make an adaptation of *Henry V* to serve as war propaganda. The aftermath of war, and especially the late 1940's when *Hamlet* was made, were characterized by social and economical turmoil, as well as a feeling of unease and distrust in the future.

Certain choices, additions and other changes that Olivier made when adapting the original text by Shakespeare for the screen may be read in the light of the postwar political and social turmoil. There are some decisions that Olivier took that imply a strong political position, such as the decision to remove certain characters from the plot. In this connection, J. Lawrence Guntner suggests that

although the omission of Fortinbras as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern excises a strong political element from the play, Olivier's decision was in line with the dominant political opinion of the day, i.e. that the rise of fascism, World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, were due to delayed political action on the part of France, Great Britain and the United States. By cutting Fortinbras and coding the visual strategy of the film as he does, Olivier suggests that this is a circular pattern of history doomed to be repeated if we do not act against injustice. (2007, pp. 118-19).

Therefore, and contrary to what might be thought, Olivier's decision to cut out certain characters from the original text was not only due to a necessary shortening of the length of the film in order to make it more commercially viable, but it was also a move full of political meaning.

The role of a film adaptation is not solely to recreate a text for entertainment purposes, but to place the story in the contemporary social and political moment. Ultimately, Guntner claims that Olivier plays with different elements in his film in order to suggest that the cyclical nature of the story we have just seen, in which all actions are merely symbolic, is determined by menacing forces beyond Hamlet's (or our) control" (2007, p.119), thus highlighting the seeming inevitability of war and its consequences.

#### 4.1.3. Free adaptation: is it plausible?

Spectators tend to classify film adaptations as faithful or unfaithful to the original fictional work, especially when it comes to adaptations of 'universal classics' as is the case with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. We tend to consider an adaptation faithful if it follows the text and the plot of the original source closely; unfaithful if the director uses a freer approach that allows them to 'play' with the story and add, subtract or change certain elements in order to convey their own point of view or reading of the source material and/or ensure that it speaks about and to the present.

The concepts of un/faithfulness can also be traced in the sphere of translation; in fact, the fields of translation and adaptation resonate with each other in many respects and share similar parameters. Thus, a translation of a certain text into a different language is generally considered faithful when the translator makes as little changes as possible as regards the original text; it is commonly viewed as free when the author of said translation chooses to change certain parts of the text with the aim, mainly, of adapting it to the target culture and making it more easily accessible to the general reader of a specific language. Many scholars oppose the idea of changing the original text to adapt it to a specific culture, as they believe it changes the essence of what the writer meant to say. Regardless, many others agree that in order for a translation to surpass the limits of intelligibility, become topical and embrace the cultural and linguistic differences of a foreign text (1995, p.41), changes are inevitable. As Lawrence Venuti argues in his book *The translator's invisibility*, taking as a reference prior work of Sir John Denham and John Dryden, "Both Denham and Dryden recognized that a ratio of loss and gain inevitably occurs in the translation process and situates the translation in an equivocal relationship to the foreign text, never quite faithful, always somewhat free, never establishing an identity, always a lack and a supplement."(1995, p.67)

When it comes to film adaptations, a similar prejudice exists. However, Olivier was very skilled at protecting himself from accusations that his *Hamlet* exceeded the limits of faithfulness since he indeed took several decisions that changed many parts of the original play by Shakespeare. First of all, as Rothwell explains, “to dull the sharp edges of purists’ tongues, Olivier let it be known that his film should be regarded as an ‘Essay on Hamlet’, and not as a film version of a necessarily abridged classic” (1999, p.54). Moreover, just as the movie begins, he added a voice over with his own voice as Hamlet reciting some lines from Act I, iv and right after that, yet another voice-over with his own voice as the ‘author’ of the adaptation saying, “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind”. This added line at the start of the film sets the tone for the rest of it; importantly, it warns the audience that the director’s ‘voice’ or point of view will be central throughout.

Undoubtedly, we could say Olivier’s *Hamlet* is a free adaptation. This description does not refer to the fact that it leaves certain scenes out, since it is understood that, generally speaking, in order to transfer a long text into a film many scenes will be deleted – in principle, those that are less central to the general plot. But there are other reasons for Olivier’s adaptation to be considered a free adaptation: the fact that he chose to change certain elements of the plot, mainly related to the characters.

To begin with, and as mentioned earlier, he removed two characters that prove to be quite important for the development of the play: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. In the original play, these two characters are key since they are young Hamlet’s best friends, summoned by the King to find out the reason behind Hamlet’s madness and later, having failed in their attempt, take him to Britain where Hamlet is to be killed—but meeting their own death on the way there, instead. Of course, the choice of erasing these characters implies a change not only in the plot, but also in the general atmosphere of the play.

There is another character that Olivier chooses to leave aside even though he serves as a narrative frame in the play that is Fortinbras. This leads to quite a significant change in the way the story develops and eventually ends. As we know, in the play by Shakespeare, Fortinbras eventually inherits the crown of Denmark after it being repeatedly mentioned by other characters that he is preparing to invade Denmark. In the end, when he arrives in Elsinore, both King and Queen are dead, and also their heir Hamlet, so he becomes King of Denmark as it is foretold by Hamlet himself right before he dies. In other words, Shakespeare gives Fortinbras a very relevant role, as it offers the play a full-circle effect. As Guntner puts it, “The opening question (Who’s there?) also points to the end of the play when Fortinbras enters to clear the stage of carnage and assume the throne as Hamlet’s successor. It suggests

that there is a circularity in the play and that Fortinbras may have been more important to Shakespeare than he has been to some directors.” (2000, p.117) In other adaptations, such as Branagh’s, Fortinbras is not only not deleted, but he plays a central role. In fact, the case of Branagh is an interesting one, since he even adds certain images and flashbacks of Fortinbras *before* he even appears in the text, thus adding a new dimension that earlier film makers had not explored. To return to Olivier, the elision of Fortinbras, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seemed to be intentional so as to imply certain political ideas, as has been mentioned in the previous section, but it eventually leads to a lack of completion or a change of mood as regards the original text. As Rothwell puts it, the choice to eliminate Rosencrantz, Guildenstern and Fortinbras’ from Denmark makes the movie seem all the more “centripetal and claustrophobic” (1999, p.58) By deleting Fortinbras who comes as a foreigner, the atmosphere of Denmark—that Hamlet himself describes as a prison in Act II, ii—becomes all that more gloomy, isolated and unrealistic.

Amongst others, a key change to the play that Olivier makes in his adaptation is the placement of the very famous “To be or not to be” (III, i) soliloquy after Hamlet’s encounter with Ophelia rather than before. This change reinforces the film’s focus on Hamlet’s emotional and psychological turmoil. Moreover, Hamlet’s and Gertrude’s incestuous relationship is taken to an extreme in this adaptation. They display lots of physical contact and fill, which fits in the film’s reading of the play in a way that places the Oedipal complex at the center of the story.

All in all, as has been seen, there are enough reasons to consider Olivier’s adaptation a free one. This would have been a plausible description at the time the film was made, when film adaptation studies still the literary text, particularly a canonical one like Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* a superior place and looked at the film adaptations ‘from above’. Nowadays, however, talking about ‘free adaptation’ is quite risky since the field of study has moved on: film adaptations are no longer placed in a hierarchical relation vis-à-vis literary text and the director’s (or the entire creative team’s) point of view or ‘reading’ is never seen as an act of ‘infidelity’ to the ‘originality’ of a text but rather as enriching.

#### 4.2. Female characters in Olivier’s *Hamlet*

Harry Keyishian, in his essay “Shakespeare and movie genre” catalogues Olivier’s *Hamlet* as film noir. This generic adscription colors the way that the women characters are represented,

so it is worth explaining it further. Film noir involves certain stylistic and technical choices that Keyishian describes in some detail: “Film noir is most easily identified in terms of its visual style and camera strategies: low key lighting, shadows and fog; a mise-en-scène that makes settings as important as people; canted camera angles (expressing subjectivity), tight framing (showing entrapment) and slow tracking shots (suggesting the unravelling of mystery)”. (2000, p.75) All these features are certainly found in Olivier’s adaptation, which indeed plays with camera angles and movement in order to enhance certain feelings and create a particular dark, mysterious atmosphere. Olivier’s *Hamlet* makes the settings and landscapes—mainly the sea—share the spotlight with the characters; at some points, they even merge with one another, as we can see before Hamlet delivers his “To be or not to be” soliloquy, when his head fades and ‘transforms’ into the sea. Moreover, this adaptation pays abundant tribute to Hamlet’s “Denmark’s a prison” (II, ii) by portraying Elsinore as a jail. As Rothwell puts it, “[Olivier’s] sets also remain sparse, abstract, and ultimately timeless (...) the bareness and emptiness – there is a nearly total lack of furniture – make the castle a metaphor for the protagonist’s isolation and loneliness”. (1999, p.55) The tangible isolation fits perfectly into Keyishian’s description of film noir, where typically, as he claims protagonists face situations of existential solitude (2000, p. 75).

The choice of film noir as a generic frame, as was mentioned before, also carries significant connotations as regards the depiction of women. Women in film noir play two main roles: they are a distraction and an unreliable source of information for the male protagonist and/or they heighten the plot’s sexual tension. In particular, as Keyishian says “the unreliable, often fatale, femme noire [is] a sultry figure representing a puzzle related but secondary to the main murder plot. And noir was drenched in a smouldering sexuality that energises such subsidiary passions as greed, revenge and jealousy.” (2000, p.75) In addition to this, there is yet another stereotype that catalogues women in film noir: a more wifely, desexualized figure who tends to be the protagonist’s wife who is blatantly ignored by him, who instead focuses his attention on the femme fatale. In accordance to this, Susan Hayward argues that “[The hero/protagonist] usually mistreats or ignores his ‘woman’ (either the wife, very much tucked away out of the city, or the moll with the golden heart who invariably sees the ‘truth’) and gets hooked on a femme fatale.” (2000, p.130)

In the case of Olivier’s *Hamlet*, Gertrude is framed by the femme fatale stereotype. Olivier’s choice to create sexual tension in Hamlet’s relationship with his mother is often described in Freudian terms and has caused certain discomfort amongst viewers. As regards

Ophelia, even though she seems to some extent aligned with the other female stereotype in film noir, that of the ‘wifely’, desexualized woman, as Chillington Rutter points out in her essay “Looking at Shakespeare’s women in film”, “Jean Simmons’s Ophelia is a sensual child in a mock-Tudor Elsinore of eerily empty corridors, blond plaits framing her face, artlessly unaware of her erotic appeal but also ambiguously sexualized.” (2007, p.252)

When it comes to the film noir vision of women as a distraction or an unreliable source of information, in Olivier’s *Hamlet* women seem more like a threat, taking into account that the perspective that the adaptation focuses on is Hamlet’s. Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” claims that the way women are portrayed in film noir comes from a “psychoanalytic background in that woman as representation signifies castration” (1975, p. 843), reinforcing the sense of women as a threat that Hamlet’s point of view generates and that pollutes the adaptation.

Mulvey’s argument can be linked to the way women are visually portrayed in this adaptation. As Chillington also claims, “Jean Simmons (Ophelia), after Hamlet reluctantly abandons her, collapses on the staircase in the position of a rape victim while the camera moves up the stairs in the direction of Hamlet, her figure becoming smaller and increasingly insignificant” (2007, p.215) This depiction of the female body as being subject to male urges is also addressed by Mulvey, who argues that the only way to circumvent or counter the threat of castration that the representation of women signifies is to introduce voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat. (1975, p. 843) These mechanisms include a scopophilic gaze towards the female body which results in an objectification of the woman figure, as well as an exhibition of the image of the woman which pleases the male active gaze by turning female subjects passive.



**Fig. 1 Gertrude (Herlie) is violently thrown onto bed, exposing her body to the scopophilic gaze and exhibiting it to the male active gaze, as described by Mulvey**

Olivier's adaptation is one that foregrounds on the psychological dimension of the source. In the film, not only is Hamlet tormented by the situation surrounding his father's death, but he is also represented as a violent male trying to assert his power by subduing and controlling the women around him. As Chillington puts it, this film locates Hamlet's psychosis on the Oedipal bed (2000, p.252). Therefore, Hamlet's issue with his mother's sexuality is not solely that she manifests it too much, as in Shakespeare's play, but rather that her sexuality involves him as well. His desire for her transforms inevitably into violence as he tries to resist the threat she represents through fetishistic and voyeuristic mechanisms, as Mulvey has taught us. (1975, p. 843) Be it the case, for instance, of act III, iv and the way it is represented in the film adaptation. Hamlet repeatedly and violently throws Gertrude onto bed, leaving her in a helpless position that enhances an exhibition of her body, which in parallel relates to the scopophilic gaze that turns Gertrude into a source of visual pleasure and an object all at once (Fig.1).

Some scholars link the representation of women in Olivier's *Hamlet*, and, in particular, Hamlet's relationship with them with a personal experience that Olivier supposedly had as a child. This turns the adaptation into something more than a 'reading' of the text, since it adds an autobiographical angle to it. Thus, on the basis of Peter Donaldson's prior work, Anthony Davies claims that

The pattern is interestingly observed, pointing as it does, to an overlap of Freudian with personal autobiographical impulses behind the imagery of the film. Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia echoes what the Ghost has done to him, and that, suggests Donaldson, 'is, in part a reenactment of a key incident of abuse the director suffered as a child (2000, p. 174)

Specifically, Davies traces the above-mentioned scene where Ophelia is left on the stairs in a position similar to that of a rape victim (Fig.2) back to the incident that Olivier suffered "as victim in a homosexual rape attempt on a staircase at school" (2000, p.174). In his view, this scene is central to a pattern of circular repetition of violence in the film adaptation that goes from those with more power to those with less; that is why Hamlet is so violent towards Ophelia and incapable of dealing with Gertrude. His role as a man is to subdue women who are in a position of disadvantage in relation to him.

All in all, Rothwell reaches an interesting conclusion about the representation of women in Olivier's *Hamlet*: "Ironically the movie is not about a man who couldn't make up his mind but about a man who couldn't relate to women [...]. Hamlet's ruin stems from his Oedipal complex and corollary total inadequacy for dealing with Ophelia" (1999, p.57)



**Fig. 2: Ophelia (Simmons) crying on the stairs in a position similar to that of a rape victim while Hamlet (Olivier) leans over her and whispers "To a nunnery, go."**



## 5. KENNETH BRANAGH'S *HAMLET*

### 5.1. Overview of the adaptation

#### 5.1.1 Branagh: director and Hamlet, prince of Denmark

Branagh is well-known for being an admirer of Shakespeare's plays. His first steps were taken in theatre, where his interest for Shakespeare's dramatic sphere seems to have blossomed. He took part in the productions of *Henry V* (1984), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1988) and *Romeo and Juliet* (1987). More recent staged productions that he also worked in include *Hamlet* (1992), *Richard III* (2002) and *Macbeth* (2013). His interest in film directing seems to come hand in hand with his undeniable interest for theatre in combination with his admiration for Shakespeare's classics; so far, he has directed five film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays: *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado about Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), *Love's Labour's lost* (2000) and *As you Like it* (2006). He also starred in the film adaptation of *Othello* by Oliver Parker (1995).

Branagh's career speaks for itself. As Samuel Crowl explains, "Branagh has now surpassed Olivier, Welles and Zeffirelli, to become the only director to have produced four Shakespeare films, though an examination of those films will reveal that Branagh has moulded his own cinematic style from elements present in the work of his distinguished predecessors"<sup>1</sup>. His work as a director of Shakespeare's film adaptation is the most prolific amongst his predecessors; nonetheless, though Branagh's adaptations of Shakespeare's plays prove to be quite different from those of Olivier, Zeffirelli or Welles, it is impossible not to draw certain similarities, which Crowl identifies in Branagh's works as a mixture of "Olivier's attention to the spoken text with Welles's fascination with camera angle and editing and Zeffirelli's visual and musical romanticism". (2000, p. 224)

Branagh's film adaptation of *Henry V* may be one of his most well-known works. At 29, Branagh not only directed the film but also starred as King Henry in this adaptation which was released in 1989. Branagh's *Henry V* proved to be very successful, which came as a surprise at that time due to the fact that it had been a while since a film adaptation of a play by Shakespeare had become so popular. Not only that, but it also revived this specific genre

<sup>1</sup> At the time Crowl's essay was written, Branagh had not yet directed "As you Like it"

of film adaptations. As Samuel Crowl says, “The release of Kenneth Branagh’s film of *Henry V* in 1989 sparked a revival of creative and commercial interest in Shakespeare as a source for films” (2000, p.222) The effect of Branagh’s *Henry V* was not only the revival of the Shakespearean film adaptation, but it also, and as Crowl points out, this time in “Shakespeare at the Cineplex”, “helped to inspire the return of the genre of the good war film” (2003, p.223)

But Branagh’s work is not only prolific, but also varied. Not only is he interested in Shakespeare’s plays, but also in adapting other fictional ‘classics’ such as, for instance, *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, which he adapted in 1994. This film is considered by many one of the best adaptations of the novel, although it did not seem to reach great popularity. About this, Crowl says:

*Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* gave Branagh the experience of dealing with a \$40 million budget and provided him the technical resources to shoot on an epic scale. The film was not a critical success but, contrary to common assumption, it more than recovered its costs in its world-wide distribution and video sales and rentals. Most importantly it allowed Branagh the opportunity to expand his cinematic vocabulary as he approached his ambitious plan to film a four-hour *Hamlet*” (2000, p.226)

Therefore, his experience making *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* (1994) brought him all the knowledge he needed to create *Hamlet* (1996) and make it into one of the most ambitious adaptations of the text ever made.

#### 5.1.2. Context of the adaptation

Branagh’s adaptation of *Hamlet* was done in 1996, and released on Christmas day that year. The date for the release should be noted since it tells us a lot about the context of the film adaptation. When we dealt with Olivier’s context, we mentioned that the film industry was at a rise but that was yet to become the giant we know nowadays. In 1996, though, the film industry had already become one of the greatest, moving lots of money and being of huge value and importance. Releasing the film on Christmas day has been considered a marketing move. About this, Samuel Crowl has to say “A year later Branagh sent out a very different sort of Christmas message when his epic film of *Hamlet* opened in America on December 25th. In his earlier films Branagh had demonstrated two crucial qualities: he had found a substantial audience for Shakespeare and he could make films on time and within budget”.

(2000, p.226) His abilities went beyond the obvious capacity of interpreting and adapting a play by Shakespeare, but also going as far as making it likeable and profitable in a time when a film was not successful enough if it did not make enough money, showing “Branagh’s fascination with commercial films” (Crowl, 2000, p.226), and the spectators’ of commercial films fascination with Branagh.

Therefore, it is obvious that Branagh’s adaptations are constantly in debt with the social context of his time, and pay a lot of attention to the audience while managing at the same time, to be rich and interesting adaptations. In order to do this, something that Branagh has a tendency to play with is the color in his films, and this simple fact carries significance in the final product. About this, Kenneth Rothwell says that “These Technicolor fantasies, a far cry from the ominous unit set of Laurence Olivier(...)correlate with a Hamlet who turns into one of the most affable in performance history, (...) not solemn like Oliver (...), but plain spoken and direct, almost pleasant” (1999,p. 245)

His choice of cast is also very interesting and seems like a choice made hand in hand with the context of the adaptation: films were more successful if they included a well-known cast, and Branagh took full advantage of it. Contrary to Oliver’s adaptation, in which he includes a cast of “non-celebrities”—as J. Lawrence Guntner claims—,“who would not detract from his own performance, Branagh picked an ensemble of heavyweights from screen and the Shakespearean stage and from both sides of the Atlantic.” (2000, p. 123)

Unlike Olivier’s adaptation, Branagh’s does not carry a significant political weight. Rothwell has this to say about Branagh’s adaptation of *Henry V*, and it can easily be translated into his adaptation of *Hamlet* as well: “Olivier’s film reflected the wartime ideologies of 1944, while (in) Branagh’s (...) there were no efforts to transcend any particular topicality.” (1999, p.235) Branagh’s interest was not so much to focus on topical issues, but rather to make a timeless adaptation that would also be profitable.

### 5.1.3. A language-focused adaptation

The choice for this adaptation amongst so many other film adaptations of *Hamlet* comes from a very interesting contrast that arises when considering Olivier’s and Branagh’s adaptations. In theory, film adaptations have had the tendency to become more ‘free’ the more contemporary they are (and by free I mean that the directors have been more frequently changing, adding or subtracting elements from the play or novel they were to adapt); still, Branagh remains completely faithful to the original text by Shakespeare, which is something

that Olivier does not do. This, as mentioned above, is not what should be expected taking into account the time that these two adaptations were produced. In fact, the type of movies that were being made at the time that Branagh's *Hamlet* came out had little to do with it. As Crowl mentions, "Language, so minimal and barren in the contemporary commercial film, is one of the joys of this revival of the Shakespeare film genre" (2003, p.221), a revival that Branagh had a lot to do with.

Branagh's faithfulness to the original text is such that there is not one single word that he has not reproduced in his adaptation of *Hamlet*. As J. Lawrence Guntner puts it in his essay "Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear on film", "Unlike Olivier, Branagh gives us a 'full-text' version of the play(...) The result is a film that takes four hours to watch, a film for Shakespeare devotees and English teachers as much as – or more than – the man on the street. Branagh leaves in every character, even foregrounding Fortinbras through cross-cutting." (2000, p.122) Hence, Branagh's *Hamlet* includes many scenes that have usually been eluded in other adaptations of *Hamlet* so as to make the film shorter and more pleasing for the general audience, whose preference is not to watch a four hour long movie. In fact, the more the film industry evolves, the shorter the movies tend to be, as society evolves as well and nowadays the general audience is used to short, more action-based films.

Therefore, this film adaptation stands out from the rest. By that I do not mean that there are no other text-based adaptations of Shakespeare's plays carried out towards the ending of the twentieth century or beginning of the twenty-first. There have been others, such as the adaptation of *Macbeth* that was made in 2015 by director Justin Kurzel which, even though was also text-based, did not include the whole play by Shakespeare; hence, Branagh's adaptation of *Hamlet* still stands out. In *Shakespeare and Film: A Norton Guide*, Samuel Crowl insists on the fact that "Shakespeare's texts have to be reimagined as screenplays (...) the text will be trimmed often by 50 percent or more. The director wants to make an artistically and commercially successful film". (2008, p. xvii) Even though Branagh does not fall into this standard with his four hour long adaptation, he does follow the norm by releasing a more spectator-friendly adaptation of two hours. In this shorter adaptation, the parameters are met, and the director does as expected by Crowl: "find an interesting and effective balance between word and image" (2008, p. xv)

In this case of study, and in order to properly address the issue of women in Hamlet's adaptations, we will deal with the full four hour long version and try to focus on the elements that Branagh includes in it when dealing specifically on the issue of women.

In *Hamlet*, Branagh chooses not to leave anything behind and to portray every single scene, following the dialogue exactly. By doing this, the film adaptation acquires a dimension of fidelity that goes beyond the idea of being faithful to the plot per se; Branagh decides not to change anything from Shakespeare's words, and make an adaptation that still would work in 1996 using language of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This can be considered a quite risky choice, since the audience at the time that this adaptation was made was not used to this kind of films. As risky as it were, Branagh includes certain elements that correlate with the marketing needs in order to make the film more appealing to the audience: he adds a very well-known cast of actors and actresses—as has already been mentioned—which include Kate Winslet as Ophelia, Derek Jacobi as Claudius and Julie Christie as Gertrude, amongst many others. Moreover, Branagh's *Hamlet* is filmed and presented in 70 mm format, which has an impact due to its clear resolution and its capacity to capture colors and scenery, described as epic by Guntner. (2000, p.122)

## 5.2. Female characters in Branagh's *Hamlet*

In the same article that defines Oliver's *Hamlet* as a film noir, Harry Keyishian describes Branagh's *Hamlet* as an epic film. Yet again, the genre of the adaptation interferes with the way women are depicted.

Keyishian's description of an epic film involves the use of a full-text and the addition of flashbacks, amongst other characteristics. These two elements take place in Branagh's *Hamlet* and both have to do with the treatment of women.

We will deal with the full-text method first and how it interferes in the depiction of women. As we have seen, the way all of the characters are presented in Branagh's adaptation is very similar to the way they are presented in the original text, because Branagh remains extremely faithful to Shakespeare's tragedy—and, foremost, to Shakespeare's words. This may imply that Branagh misses the opportunity to offer a different dimension to women that other directors had decided to include. It is the case of Zeffirelli, who adapted *Hamlet* just a few years before Branagh did, in 1990. About Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*, in "Franco Zeffirelli and Shakespeare" by Deborah Cartmell, the following is claimed: "What is unusual about this *Hamlet* is the prominence of the women; and it is almost as if Zeffirelli has produced a *feminist* version of the play (or at least one in which the women are allowed an equal part) in order to appeal to a more 'politically correct' audience" (2007, p.215, my emphasis). As it is mentioned, Zeffirelli's choice to give more importance to the female characters and to make

them more equal to the men in the play has a lot to do with the time his adaptation was made. The rise of feminism undoubtedly had its impact on the film industry, and in the 1990s it made a lot of sense to make a feminist version of the play. If Branagh's *Hamlet* had had a more feminist approach, the adaptation could have been more appealing to the masses, but it seems like following such a text-based approach, this option was discarded.

But the full-text method is not the only characteristic of the epic genre that Branagh uses and that interferes in the way women are represented. One of the very few changes that he decides to include is the appearance of certain flashbacks: some foretell the arrival of Fortinbras; others illustrate the sexual encounters that Hamlet and Ophelia have shared. About both the flashbacks and the role of women in Branagh's adaptation, Carol Chillington Rutter has a lot to say in her essay "Looking at Shakespeare's women on film":

In 1996 Kate Winslett is a dumbed-down Ophelia-for-our-times, disastrously disabled by flashbacks that make nonsense of her narrative by inventing an extra-text that presents her as the obligatory tits-and-bum in a mass market 'erotic thriller'.<sup>20</sup> When Polonius shoves her into a confession box to interrogate her about Hamlet ('What is between you?'), a flashback covers – and contradicts – her answer(...). This Ophelia is not 'honest': neither virgin nor candid. Sexually practised, and a practised liar who, post mortem, makes a credulous ninny of her brother who buries her as a virgin, she ceases to represent any value alternative to Gertrude's. Here, 'Frailty, thy name is woman' is confirmed in Ophelia's 'polluted' flesh. (2000, p. 253)

Branagh does not only choose to deprive the women in his adaptation of a certain equality that could have been achieved in his times and through his adaptation, but also, by adding those flashbacks, he bans Ophelia from being the innocent and rather angelic character that we have come to know in order to transform her into a woman who lies and serves as the 'obligatory tits-and-bum' (2007, p.253) that the adaptation seemed to need (Fig.3). And this, as well as a more feminist approach, can be seen as a marketing choice. Both are contradictory—the 'tits-and-bum' and the feminist reading—but one is not necessarily less productive than the other. As has been mentioned, the feminist approach seemed hard to achieve following such a text-based approach, and so it makes sense that the film adaptation would 'attract the masses' using other methods.



**Fig. 3 One of the several flashbacks that represent Ophelia (Winslett) and Hamlet (Branagh) having sex, which according to Chillington turn her into a liar unable to represent a value alternative to Gertrude's and who the obligatory 'tits-and-bum'**

This choice of depiction in the part of Ophelia relates very much to Laura Mulvey's approach. Although Mulvey's work focuses on the mainstream films made during the 1940's and 1950's, some of her arguments can be used to link Branagh's adaptation with Olivier's, in the sense that the women in the adaptation seem to be there to stimulate or please the male audience visually. This could explain the addition of the flashbacks in which we can see a fully-naked Kate Winslett.

Nonetheless, there are several reasons to consider that Branagh's intention was not necessarily to use women solely as described by Mulvey. To begin with, the choice of portraying Ophelia wearing a straitjacket after she has lost her mind could point towards the idea that women are often considered mad or crazy when they get to freely express their emotions, in opposition to the way they should act. (Fig.4) Ophelia has been manipulated and played with by the men around her but somehow it is as if the blame was on her—as can be seen in the original text by Shakespeare—and this is emphasized by putting her on a straitjacket.

Furthermore, the fact that Branagh seems to give the women in the adaptation more camera time—not only Ophelia, but Gertrude as well—seems to also point towards this direction. Both Gertrude's and Ophelia's emotions seem to be given more importance than in Olivier's adaptation, and the actresses are allotted more screen time. As Chillington herself also puts it:

Winslett, wearing an institutional gown, stands in a padded cell obediently facing the wall, the camera's surveillance looking in from the warden's peep-hole. Close, watching the duel that is meant to be a 'play' of swords, mops her unexpectedly sweaty brow then puts tentative fingers to her ear as her delight in Hamlet's joke-

violence turns to slow, horrified recognition and her stricken face stares from the poisoned chalice to Claudius, this whole fatal 'history' a series of quick intercuts 'behind' the main action. (2000, p. 253)



**Fig. 4 Ophelia (Winslett) is wearing a straitjacket after she has lost her father and her mind.**

This proves that the female characters in the adaptation—even in a scene in which they were not regarded as being of great significance by Shakespeare—share their camera time with the male characters who usually dominate the scenes in the original text. Still, it would be venturous to argue that this adaptation is in any way feminist. As we have seen, it falls way short in this respect taking into account other adaptations that were being made at the time. Still, some of the additions that Branagh performs can be regarded as winks of his possible discontent with the treatment of women in the play in particular and in society in general.



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

As stated in the introduction, this project had several aims. Firstly, it set out to bring together in one single work previous research on the topic by important scholars. In this respect, I have used work as varied as Laura Mulvey's or Samuel Crowl's and used it to link the different parts of my project, as well as tried to make it accessible.

As regards the comparative analysis of the representation of women in Olivier's and Branagh's adaptations of *Hamlet*, several conclusions may be highlighted. First and foremost, there are similarities that can be traced as regards the treatment of women in both adaptations, even though they are almost fifty years apart. Via Mulvey's work, it has been possible to show that the visual representation of women in both adaptations does not differ greatly, as both seem to offer a voyeuristic view of women—in the case of Olivier's, both for the sake of the male characters and the male audience, and in the case of Branagh, particularly for the benefit of the audience and offering the “tits-and-bum” that Rutter describes and that the market was used to.

It has also been seen that the genre of the movie greatly affects the way women will be depicted. In this project, I have examined a film noir (Olivier) and an epic (Branagh) adaptation. In the case of film noir, the existence of the femme fatale type as well as its antithesis, a more wifely woman figure, shapes the way Ophelia and Gertrude are depicted in Olivier's adaptation. In the case of the epic, the fact that it is text-based bans the adaptation from taking a ‘freer’ approach to its source material. At the same time, Branagh's use of flashbacks—also a characteristic of the epic genre, but one that could have been used to reveal a different, positive side to the female characters has been argued to only serve as a way of disempowering Ophelia by presenting her as a liar and, therefore, an untrustworthy woman, in opposition to the underlined innocence of Ophelia in the original play and other adaptations such as Olivier's.

Despite the similarities between both adaptations, there are also some differences that can be traced. For instance, Olivier's *Hamlet* aims for all the focus to fall on the protagonist, played by himself. Instead, Branagh seems comfortable enough sharing the spotlight with the well-known cast that constitutes his film. In relation to this, we can see that Branagh offers the female characters more camera time than one would expect when reading the original text or watching other adaptations such as Olivier's. This allows the audience to focus their attention on the female characters and their emotions more than would be expected.

For further research on this topic, it would be of great interest to focus on the spectator's responses to Olivier's and Branagh's Hamlet in relation to each adaptation's social and cultural frame, as well as by reference to the way they deal with the female characters specifically. This would throw some light on the way society has evolved (or has not) regarding gender issues, including sexism and feminism amongst others. This is something I would have liked to explore in this project, but it has not been possible due to space and time limitations.

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