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**AMBITION AND DESIRE: GERTRUDE AS TRAGIC HERO
IN FENG XIAOGANG'S *THE BANQUET* (2006)**

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Hamlet contains more characters than Hamlet himself, as Margreta de Grazia has recently reminded us. We still need this reminder. While Ophelia has achieved iconic status as the tragically romantic and drowning figure of pre-Raphaelite paintings, Gertrude remains a cipher and, as J. Anthony Burton has noted, seems to be disappearing from screen adaptations of the play.¹ In *The Banquet* (2006), director Feng Xiaogang and writers Qiu Gangjian and Sheng Heyu do something entirely new with these two inscrutable women, jumbling their storylines and presenting us with hybrids: a Gertrude who has many elements of Ophelia, and an Ophelia who dies Gertrude's death.² In this version, Little Wan (Gertrude) becomes a tragic protagonist equaling and perhaps exceeding the stature and import of Wu Luan (Hamlet). The film follows Little Wan's struggle to be satisfied with her decision to marry Emperor Li (Claudius) as she pines for, punishes, and protects Wu Luan, simultaneously taunting and torturing Qing (Ophelia).³

In this essay, I consider the result of building a *Hamlet* adaptation around Gertrude and evaluate how Wan's character revises this most filmically marginalized of Shakespeare's women. I argue that Feng places Little Wan as the emotional center of his film. Consequently, he changes all the fault lines of desire in *Hamlet*, invoking the long critical history and representational tradition interested in the Oedipal tensions between Gertrude and Hamlet. *The Banquet* features the relationship between Claudius (Emperor Li) and Gertrude, which exists primarily in the wings of Shakespeare's play. Promoting their intimacy to center stage invites the audience repeatedly into Gertrude's closet, making the private spaces of Wan and Li's court more crucial than the private regions of Wu Luan's mind. Meanwhile, Wu Luan is presented as passive in the extreme, soliloquy-less, friendless, and stripped of the verbal vigor traditionally ascribed to Hamlet. In addition, Feng preserves the Ophelia character in Qing, who is rendered all the more tragic by her unending devotion to an abusive and disinterested Wu Luan. Refocusing the plot on Little Wan's story of resistance to Wu Luan's story of loneliness, exhaustion, and sorrow, the film invites us to contemplate a *Hamlet* centered on an active, rather than passive or pensive, protagonist. Ambition and desire are Little Wan's weapons against Wu Luan's loneliness and Qing's pathetic devotion and are the characteristics that define her as the film's true tragic hero.

The Many Faces of Gertrude

Gertrude appears in only half of the twenty scenes that comprise *Hamlet* and speaks less than two hundred lines in the entire play. Despite, or perhaps because of, her relative silence, she has traditionally fascinated and confused readers, audiences, and scholars. A. C. Bradley claimed Gertrude was a "very dull and very shallow" character with "a soft animal nature," while Janet Adelman reads Gertrude

as “a woman more muddled than actively wicked,” one who is “less powerful as an independent character than as the site for fantasies larger than she is.”⁴ Yoshiko Uéno asserts that Gertrude’s “reticence,” which “does not allow her to disclose to us what she really thinks and feels,” leads scholars and readers to presume she is a weak character.⁵ Akiko Kusunoki calls her “the most controversial” of Shakespeare’s female characters, noting, “since the text leaves crucial aspects of her motivation undefined, critics tend to treat her not as an individual but as a mirror reflecting other characters’ inner states.”⁶ According to Rebecca Smith, Gertrude is one of Shakespeare’s female icons that we’ve been rewriting—or misreading—for generations. Smith argues that film productions misrepresent Gertrude as “a sensual, deceitful woman,” when in the play text she is actually presented as a “soft, obedient, dependent, unimaginative woman.”⁷ Richard Levin notes that accounts of Gertrude’s sexuality in *Hamlet* are unreliable, as they are filtered through the perceptions and biases of her son and late husband: “Unfortunately for her, Gertrude is the victim of a bad press, not only on the stage and screen and in the critical arena, but also within Shakespeare’s text, since she and her libido are constructed for us by the two men who have grievances against her and so must be considered hostile and therefore unreliable witnesses, while she herself is given no opportunity to testify on her own behalf.”⁸ Meanwhile, Maurice Hunt has recently argued that Gertrude “possesses a surprisingly complex interiority,” largely located in her silences, and primarily fixated on what Hunt calls “a fantasy of family.”⁹ Gertrude has been read as a representation of male anxieties about “female intervention in patrilineal culture,” as a figure for “the aging body” of Queen Elizabeth, and as “a strong-willed woman” whose remarriage is “a demonstration of female agency.”¹⁰

Gertrude has been variously read as weak, simple, complex, manipulative, manipulated, and strong-willed. What happens to these contradictions as Gertrude becomes Little Wan in *The Banquet*? Productions of *Hamlet* generally settle on a single interpretation of the Queen, so what is Feng’s? According to Charles Ross, Little Wan is less an adaptation of Gertrude than an embodiment of one aspect of Ophelia: “Earlier films make Ophelia childish. Modern versions make her angry. Feng gives the childish persona to Qing Nü and saves anger for Wan. But his film is feminist in a larger sense because, arguably, the central figure is not Wu Luan, but Empress Wan. Her role is far greater than Gertrude’s, while Wu Luan’s is much less than Hamlet’s.”¹¹ Ross does not read Wan as a direct analogue for Gertrude, but as a coopting of Ophelia’s anger and madness. Woodrow B. Hood sees a more immediate connection between Wan and Gertrude, commenting, “[t]he film recenters the play by switching the locus of the protagonist from Shakespeare’s titular character to the generally subordinate character of Gertrude.”¹² According to Hood, the film presents a virgin/whore binary in its two female leads, and Empress Wan is the whore in the equation. She is an incarnation of the “Dragon Lady” trope, an American characterization of Eastern strong women who are “domineering and manipulative,” power-hungry and destructive: “[a] Dragon Lady is characterized typically by her beauty, seductive power, and evil nature, and she is always punished for overreaching.”¹³ Dragon Ladies are also always two-faced. Hood feels that the film falls back on this stereotypical assumption of female character, ultimately leading “down a gender regressive path” in

it is proposed as a way of ensuring safer travel for herself and Celia in the forest. Posing as Ganymede allows Rosalind to speak more freely both as a man and as a youth playing a fickle woman, and to control her own life and actions in the forest. However, we see little of her apart from her wooing of Orlando, and in this context, as Rackin notes, Rosalind never actually suppresses any of her feminine attributes. Instead, she camps up the role of a woman by being more demanding of Orlando than she might as herself in order to test him and to prolong their game. Doyle aptly captures this in the use of similarly pitched instruments that differ in timbre, and while the gendering of Rosalind's material through these instruments whose ranges match the high female voice is perhaps predictable, it nonetheless indicates the lack of major differences between the two personas and Rosalind's disinterest in creating any kind of verisimilitude in regard to Ganymede's maleness. Perhaps most importantly, though, the instrumentation also allows the experiant to easily hear Rosalind's five-note motif on top of the rest of the orchestration and harmony. Ultimately, the score's motivic focus on Rosalind and its subtle mirroring of her narrative of gender identity and ethnic allegiance provide an aural guide to understanding her nature, perhaps not so changeable but, as Silvius remarks, "all made of fantasy, / All made of passion and all made of wishes, / All adoration, duty, and observance, / All humbleness, all patience and impatience, / All purity, all trial, all observance" (5.2 98-101). In Doyle's score, the experiant hears the fantasy, passion, and wishes of and for the East, as well as the compliance with adoration, duty, and observance of the West.

Notes

1. Phyllis Rackin, "Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage," *PMLA* 102.1 (1987): 31.
2. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, dir. Kenneth Branagh (HBO and BBC Films, 2006), DVD.
3. I use the term "experiant" rather than the more traditional "audience member" or "viewer" because the implications of a visual-only experience limit the understanding that the media includes music in addition to visual elements; "experiant" also reinforces the concept that the aural elements of a production can be equally as important as the visual aspects.
4. Virginia Heffernan, "Enough Already, Rosalind, Let the Kooks Talk," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/21/arts/television/21likehtml?r=3&t8dpc&oref=slogin>, accessed January 21, 2010.
5. Matt Roush, *TV Guide*, <http://www.metacritic.com/tv/shows/asyoulikeit>, accessed January 21, 2010.
6. Alison West, "Director Kenneth Branagh's New Film Debuts on HBO: *As You Like It*," Associated Content, August 20, 2007, http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/358905/director_kenneth_branaghs_new_film.html, accessed January 21, 2010.
7. Maureen Ryan, "A romp through a Shakespearean forest on HBO," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 2007, http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2007/08/a-romp-through-.html, accessed January 21, 2010.

8. Matthew Gilbert, "She's the most likable part of HBO's 'As You Like It,'" *The Boston Globe*, August 21, 2007, http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2007/08/21/shes_the_most_likable_part_of_hbos_as_you_like_it/, accessed January 21, 2010.
9. Christopher Coleman, "Wax On, Doyle-San!," *Tracksounds*, http://www.tracksounds.com/reviews/as_you_like_it_patrick_doyle.htm, accessed January 21, 2010.
10. Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Forreine Conceites and Wandring Devises': The Exotic, the Erotic, and the Feminine," in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 27.
11. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre, Arden Shakespeare Third Series (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 201. All subsequent references to playtext are taken from this volume.
12. Linda Phyllis Austern, "'Alluring the Auditorie to Effeminacie': Music and the Idea of the Feminine in Early Modern England," *Music and Letters* 74.3 (1993): 352.
13. *Ibid.*, 353.