

The Hamlet Mash-Up¹

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is one of the most famous works of art in the world, and has inspired countless interpretations, allusions, references and discussions. The author describes his creation of a video collage of *Hamlet* material, that shows, rather than claims, the ubiquity of *Hamlet*, and points toward what Shakespeare could look like after the advent of the Internet. *Hamlet*'s value as Hollywood shorthand is discussed, and some of the throwaway *Hamlet* references are seen to be more complex than they may first appear. Projects of a similar nature are discussed and encouraged.

Keywords

Hamlet, video, collage, multi-media, Shakespeare, theatre

The Hamlet Mash Up

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDTAn6r4HpQ>

When I began teaching *Hamlet* in my British Literature 1 class I told my students that *Hamlet* was very famous and very influential. I pointed out, for example, that the basic plot of *Hamlet* is repeated in *The Lion King*. Some students nodded their heads but I felt like the point needed more illustration. I gave them a handout explaining that the following expressions come from *Hamlet*:

- something rotten in the state of Denmark
- mad north by north west
- murder most foul
- to thine own self be true

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- the undiscovered country
- cruel to be kind
- frailty thy name is woman
- neither a borrower nor a lender be
- there are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamt of by your philosophy
- brevity is the soul of wit
- there is method in his madness
- neither good nor bad but thinking makes it so
- what a piece of work is man
- brief as a woman's love
- to be or not to be
- the lady doth protest too much
- hoisted on his own petard
- to sleep, perchance to dream
- what dreams may come

Some students recognised, for example, that “The Undiscovered Country” was the name of the sixth *Star Trek* movie, but my point was still ineffective. I had already been collecting film versions of *Hamlet* to discuss with my students. I wanted them to see the decisions directors make when bringing Shakespeare's text to life on the stage and on the screen. Along the way I began to collect television shows and movies that made use of *Hamlet*, including the cartoon *South Park*, and a scene from *Spiderman 3* in which a character, like Hamlet, dressed all in black (and suffering from amnesia), is visited by the ghost of his dead father (a hallucination?) and is urged to get revenge, and instructed “Remember Me.” I kept bumping into scenes from movies that would quote *Hamlet: True Romance*, *Nightmare before Christmas*, *Billy Madison*. And my students would come to me with the same: *Transformers: Beast Wars* and *The Addams Family*. And after a while I had too many clips to show and I needed a format that would allow me to get through them quickly.

The Hamlet Mash Up gathers together 65 clips from 65 different movies and television shows, none more than 25 seconds long, all of which perform *Hamlet*, quote *Hamlet*, mention *Hamlet*, or allude to *Hamlet*. The quotations are set up in the order that they show up in the play, and the big set pieces smash cut in the middle of sentences so that you hear, for example, the “To Be Or Not to Be” soliloquy started by one person, then picked up by another, continued by a third and so on. I have recently begun working on a second edition, and I expect when it is completed it will feature 140 clips in under 20 minutes. It does not just claim *Hamlet* is influential. It shows the influence of *Hamlet* – of the plot, of lines, and of the major speeches such as “Alas Poor

Yorick” and “What a Piece of Work is Man” – and it does it in an entertaining way.

And while it may be overbold to suggest this, as *The Hamlet Mash Up* gathers together all of these different versions and quotations and allusions it itself becomes a new version of *Hamlet*. Shakespeare was adapted from the stage to the film screen. My work is part of a similar movement to adapt Shakespeare-on-film to the Internet. And the aim is the same as it always was. Shakespeare is valuable, and making him accessible to a new audience is vital. And while it may appear irreverent and new, collage has been a big part of artistic creation for years, from the Wu-Tang Clan sampling music in their songs, to the collage paintings of Picasso. Philosopher Jacques Derrida writes about bricolage (collage):

The bricoleur, says Levi-Strauss, is someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogenous – and so forth. There is therefore a critique of language in the form of bricolage, and it has even been said that bricolage is critical language itself. (511)

If bricolage is critical language itself, then the collection and assembling of these clips is a kind of criticism, in which you see one version of *Hamlet* commenting on, or revising another.

Hollywood’s fascination with *Hamlet* is obvious. Hollywood relies on shorthand. If you want to show that someone is a genius you show him being great at chess, even though I think the relation between chess and brilliance is slight. (You can be great at chess but in my experience it does not necessarily translate into intelligence in other areas, for example, being a criminal mastermind). *Hamlet* has become shorthand for “literary” so if you want to show someone is well read or cultured you have him quote Hamlet. Because of this it is ripe for irony – for example, quoting Horatio’s beautiful parting words to Hamlet at the death of a giant robot.

There are real gems to be found in some of these clips. The one from *Clueless* I find really wonderful. Paul Rudd’s pretentious friend says “It’s just like Hamlet said: to thine own self be true,” and Alicia Silverstone, who is supposed to be a ditz, corrects her, pointing out that Hamlet did not say that. “I think I remember *Hamlet* accurately,” the girl says, but Silverstone does not back down: “I think I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn’t say that, that Polonious guy did.” Pretentious people – people who are idiotically proud not to own a television, proud for some reason to have never seen *Game of*

Thrones – think they know more than pop culture nerds. But in my experience pop culture nerds pay as much if not *more* attention to the things they love as the book nerds. I love the pop culture kid slamming the literary person on her own turf using pop culture knowledge.

Hamlet 2, which is a very weak movie (being a satire on the inspirational teacher movie that has very little to do with *Hamlet*) gets kind of amazing just at the end when you finally see bits of the character's sequel to *Hamlet*: the idea that the characters need to forgive each other and the idea that they could all be saved from the tragedy (with a Time Machine!) has a kind of Christian beauty to it, even at its most ridiculous (e.g. Hamlet gives Ophelia CPR and when she coughs out the water asks her to marry him). *The Mystery Science Theater 3000* devoted to *Hamlet* is generally considered to be a weaker instalment by MST3K fans but it includes one of my favourite MST3K lines– over the closing credits they say “HAMLET WILL RETURN... IN THUNDERBALL!”

And you begin to notice odd things in the juxtapositions. In the expanded Mash Up I discovered that Christopher Plummer was in a film version of *Hamlet* when he was very young, and it made the clip from decades later, where he says “to be or not to be” in Klingon extra funny. Two people say “to be or not to be” before a large explosion, and in the expansion, coming soon, Kevin Klein and Robert Downey Jr. show up in two things each. Three people reach for the low hanging fruit of imagining Hamlet as a dog – because he is a Great Dane. And the *Addams Family* quotes Hamlet in three different incarnations – most people don't even know there were three incarnations of *The Addams Family*.

A project like this can spawn similar projects. I myself have two others in the works, because I also teach *Macbeth* and *Paradise Lost*. I am working on a *Macbeth Mash Up* – featuring among other things *The Chronicles of Riddick*, *V for Vendetta*, Bugs Bunny, Dario Argento's *Opera*, and three actors who have played one of two lead roles in X-Men films (James McAvoy and Patrick Stewart, have played both Macbeth and Professor X and Ian McKellen has played Macbeth and Professor X's rival Magneto). For *Paradise Lost* I am preparing a Satan Mash Up because Satan in pop culture is far more influenced by Milton than either Dante or the Bible, something students do not appreciate. Surprisingly, nowhere in the Bible is Satan physically described, which means the Bible never claims he is red, has a goatee, has a trident, has horns, has goat legs, has bat wings, has armour, is good looking, has a throne, is a fallen angel, or is a shape-shifter. That is all artists and poets – and in our era TV and movies.

I just watched a trailer for a new movie called *Zombie Hamlet*. People keep sending me clips they see, and things keep getting made. I do not expect that the mash-ups will ever end. But I would love to see other people make more on

different literary subjects: Someone else could do an amazing *Romeo and Juliet Mash Up*, for example. This kind of things is the future, I think.

Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Trans. Alan Bass. *Postmodernism: Foundational Essays*. Ed. Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist. London: Routledge, 1998. 505-20.

FILMOGRAPHIES

Filmography (films already in the Hamlet Mash Up)

Simpsons
Clueless
Gilligan's Island
True Romance
 Peter Brook's *Hamlet*
Spiderman 3
Lion King
Dollhouse
Smallville
Kevin Kline in Hamlet
Hair
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead
Star Trek: The Next Generation
Babylon 5
Gettysburg
Britannia Hospital
Withnail and I
Coraline
Down and Out in Beverley Hills
Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged
Grosse Pointe Blank
Princess Diaries 2
Leverage
The Ninth Configuration
Soapdish
500 Days of Summer
Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Undead
Star Trek 6: The Undiscovered Country

Last Action Hero
Gilbert Gottfried Stand Up
The Brak Show
Mel Brooks in *To Be or Not to Be*
Jack Benny in *To Be or Not to Be*
Billy Madison
ER
Mel Gibson in *Hamlet*
William Houston in *Hamlet*
Campbell Scott in *Hamlet*
Ethan Hawke in *Hamlet*
Laurence Olivier in *Hamlet*
The Mighty Boosh
David Tennant in *Hamlet*
Richard Burton in *Hamlet*
Slings and Arrows
Freaky Friday
Strange Brew
Hamlet 2
Renaissance Man
Nightmare Before Christmas
Fodor's *Hamlet*
Innokenti Smotunovsky in *Hamlet*
Jude Law in *Hamlet*
Derek Jacobi in *Hamlet*
Animaniacs
Nightmare on Elm Street
Addams Family
South Park
Futurama
Mystery Science Theater
Beastwars: Transformers
Sesame Street

Filmography (films to be added to the Hamlet Mash Up)

Nick Lowe's "Cruel to be Kind" [Song]
Christopher Plummer's *Hamlet*
It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia
Comedy Bang Bang [Podcast]
Highlander 2
Kiss Kiss Bang Bang
Doctor Who

Dinosaurs
What Dreams May Come
MASH
Home Movies
VeggieTales
The Wolfman
Anonymous
Adams Family
Happy Endings
Fringe
Archer
Theater of Blood
Skins
The Third Man
Interview with a Vampire
Cheers
Saturday Night Live
Laboring Under Delusions
LA Story
Shock Corridor
Quest for Camelot
The A Team
Orange County
Singin' in the Rain
Jennifer's Body
Rosemary's Baby
Stranger than Fiction
Mighty Morphin Power Rangers
Two Girls and a Guy
Noises Off
Joan of Arcadia
Queer as Folk
A King in New York
My Darling Clementine
Shakespeare Wallah
Outrageous Fortune
Morning Glory
Fanny and Alexander
The Pure Hell of St Trinian's
Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle
Melancholia
Fringe

Happy Endings
Let the Devil Wear Black
Raising Hope