

HAMLET IN TWO INTERPRETATIONS: FUSELI AND LISZT*

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Abstract: This text analyzes two works inspired by *Hamlet*, a Henry Fuseli's painting and a symphonic poem by Franz Liszt, in order to highlight their relationship with the original text. The visual work dedicated to one of the initial scenes portrays the feeling of the frail man facing supernatural powers. Liszt's orchestral work inspires the listener to imagine scenes, images and moods, and expresses correspondence with the characters' feelings, especially Hamlet and Ophelia. In addition, the transposition of the formal structure of Shakespeare's text into the formal structure of the musical piece can be observed.

Keywords: Shakespeare. Painting. Symphonic poem.

SHAKESPEARE'S ADAPTATIONS

■ Shakespeare's works often seem transformed beyond recognition from the works he created for his audience and time. As an example, we have adaptations that can be counted by thousands. They involve not only theatrical and filmic recreations, but also texts produced in the media and other traditional arts like paintings, sculpture, installations, and music. But they can involve also objects/texts whose artistic status is questioned by conservative criticism. I am referring to charges, comics, travesties and some graphic novels.

In connection with all these kinds of transformation, the concept of intermediality proves particularly useful as an analytical tool: besides relations and topics

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traditionally investigated by interarts studies, it also contemplates intermedial and intertextual aspects of contemporary creations hardly comparable to traditional art.

In her text to *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, Solange Oliveira (2016) says that Shakespeare's *oeuvre* became a transcultural and artistic monument. For many, when one mentions "Shakespeare's work", this means the written text. However there is no "Shakespeare's authentic text" because the plays exist in many variations, coming from various circumstances, including the alterations made for some performances and even during them. Today the playwright cannot ignore the debate on contemporary issues and tries to deconstruct authority and power meanings that are embedded in canonical texts. This attitude allows for interwoven creations. Although some literary scholars are not pleased with it, it is a fact that most people get acquainted with Shakespeare not via his texts or the staging of his plays but through a visual representation such as a film, an advertisement or some fiction subgenre. It would suffice to bring to mind the great number of recreations for the cinema and the innumerable quotes from his work that have become part of everyday popular language. As an example we have a large number of recreations for the cinema and many quotations that integrate popular vocabulary. So the "work" turns into a set of texts coming from various circumstances. There is no original text. Even texts on the "folio" are copies from the "quartos" almost always mediated by copyists and directors. It is even more complicated when we think about the era of mechanical reproduction and electronic communication, in that cultural products are like recycling in new forms of narrating.

Thus, the so-called Shakespearean *oeuvre* becomes a set of texts of various kinds that may appear as dramatic texts, as versions for the performing arts, as visual texts and as products whose artistic status is questioned. So his works are "translated" into a varied of recreations that go from the more traditional rewritings to the most radical, often produced from different perspectives: feminist, post-structuralist, post-colonialist and other approaches.

All forms of recreation demand adaptation strategies and the resource of intersemiotic transposition. When a new text is created the context will induce style, scenery and situation, and the concern is restricted to the way the work has been modified. In relation to dramatic texts, sometimes the play serves only as a point of departure for the new text that is created. *Hamlet machine* by Heiner Müller and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard are good examples of this strategy. BBC's performance *Hamlet*; the ballet *Hamlet* with music by Beethoven and Mahler, as well as Ambroise Thomas's opera represent important examples of adaptations to performing arts. Furthermore we cannot help mentioning films such as the ones by Franco Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh and Michael Almereyda that challenge the tradition by paying tribute to their predecessors while working to surpass them.

Paintings by Daniel Maclise's *The Play scene*, *The childhood of Hamlet* by an unknown artist, John Everett Millet's *The Death of Ophelia*, and Edwin Abbey's *Hamlet* illustrate the artists' desires to represent visually some scenes inspired by the play. These artistic products served to interpret scenes according to the point of view of the age in which their authors lived and also according to the interpretation these artists have made, even if the scene they depict are not explicit in Shakespeare's text.

Apart from traditional “adaptations”, there are products from the cultural industry. The notion of the Shakespeare industry is generally understood both as a complex of different types of Shakespeare’s works: their theatrical, cinematographic and TV stagings, and also commercial exploitation of the playwright’s image and those of the characters that he invented; the usage of the above-mentioned images in gift production (e.g., on T-shirts, cups, key rings, magnets etc.). Shakespearian industry also includes the so-called intellectual tourism through visiting the places where the playwright lived and created his masterpieces or the ones where his famous characters lived their lives (e.g., the actual house at Stratford-upon-Avon, or the fictitious balcony of Juliet’s in Verona). Although they are important kinds of products, they belong to nontraditional art and will not be included in the present analysis.

This paper aims at analyzing two works derived from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* which involve products in visual and performing arts: the painting *Hamlet and the Ghost* by Henry Fuseli and the musical piece, the symphonic poem n. 10, titled *Hamlet*, by Franz Liszt.

FUSELI’S PAINTING

In general, William Shakespeare’s plays are approached by painters in two ways, either as an experience of reading or an experience of seeing the plays performed on stage. It means that some pictures are representations of stage scenes while others are treated with more liberty to bring to the eye the images the writer has brought to the mind. In any of these cases, the artist offers his own interpretation. One aspect of Shakespeare’s character that was particularly admired was his strong imagination. This kind of “extravagance of fancy”¹ attracted superstitious readers so that the supernatural world proved popular with artists.

Then the horrific subject matter of Hamlet, with the ghost and its apparitions appealed to artists and their public. [...] No artist was better qualified to explore this aspect than the Swiss painter Henry Fuseli [...]. Inspired by his own vision of Michelangelo’s terribilità, Fuseli was especially attuned to the violence and sexual energy underlying Shakespeare’s text. [He] responded to Shakespeare with heroic, visionary forms of dramatically emerging from dark obscurity [...] rely[ing] on extravagant distortion, hypnotic repetition of gesture, a low point of view, and the lack of spatial stability to help convey the horrific nature of the subject matter (PRESSLY, 1993, p. 17-18).

Henri Fuseli (1741-1825), one of the most learned painters of the 18th century, was born in Zurich and was considered one of the most “exotic, original and sensuous” of painters (THE NEW ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA, v. IV, p. 365). He was educated in Zurich and was influenced by the historian and critic J.J.Bodmer. But he was obliged to flee from Switzerland for political motives and went to Berlin and after to London, where he translated Johann Winckelmann’s *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* into English. He also lived in Italy where he studied classical art. In 1779, he returned to London and painted

1 This term was used by Addison (apud PRESSLY, 1993, p. 54).

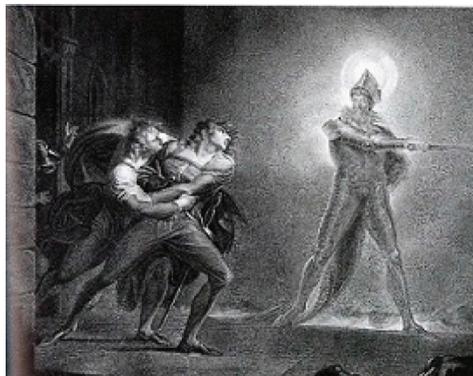
one of his most famous paintings: *The Nightmare*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782. This painting, in which darker and irrational forces are depicted, turned to be an icon of Romanticism and a defining image of Gothic horror.

In parallel to the Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, a school of British history paintings, the famous place created to promote the English engraving industry – to which Fuseli contributed with many works –, he founded his own exhibition, The Milton Gallery, a series of 40 pictures that were exhibited in London in 1799. In this same year, he became a professor at the Royal Academy, where he stayed with an interval of five years until his death. In the last decades of his life he continued to write on art.

Fuseli's contribution to the illustration of Shakespeare's works generally was very important, and *Hamlet* was a source of inspiration to him. He made drawings of a number of *Hamlet* scenes. *The Murder of King Hamlet* (1771), *The Grave Scene* (1774), *Hamlet and Ophelia* (1775), two versions of *Claudius at Prayer Watched by Hamlet* (1778-78), *Ophelia with Flowers Floating in the Brook* (1770), *The Closet Scene* (1780), *The Ghost and Hamlet* (1780), *The Graveyard scene* (1804), and *Hamlet and Ophelia* (1810), all of them engravings.

The picture to be described, *Hamlet and the Ghost*, is an engraving idealized by Fuseli when he was in Italy, a version of which was first exhibited at The Shakespeare Gallery in 1789 together with other 34 paintings. The work is perhaps the most powerful of all the visual works on *Hamlet*, and one of Fuseli's best-known works.

Figure 1 – *Hamlet and his Father's Ghost* (1780-1785), Henry Fuseli. Plate XLIV from Volume II of *Boydell's Shakespeare Prints*; the illustration is based on the original painting of 1789. The text accompanying the engraving: "Hamlet. Act I. Scene IV. A platform before the Castle of Elsinour. Hamlet, Horatio, Marcellus, and the Ghost. Painted by H. Fuseli, R. A. Engraved by R. Thew"².



The picture depicts a scene that is staged in Shakespeare but from which the artist abstracts the essential theatrical tension and re-dramatizes it through representing it in this different iconic medium. Like most of Fuseli's Shakespeare works, this is far from being a reproduction of what he might have seen in the

2 Available at: <http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Shakespeare_Illustrated/Fuseli.Ghost.html>. Access on: Feb. 8th 2017.

theatre. Instead, it is an exercise in presenting in graphic terms what Fuseli would have considered a moment expressive of the sublime, a moment of awe and terror as humanity confronts supernatural forces.

Its compositional arrangement was anticipated in reverse by the drawing that is now in a museum in Zurich. The scene depicted is the moment on the platform before the castle of Elsinore when the Ghost beckons Hamlet, and he struggles to follow him. The creature stands upon the parapet, facing forward, his legs wide apart. With his right arm extended, the Ghost points off to the left of the picture, and with the bludgeon in his right hand he seems to beckon to Hamlet, who stands at the right. The phantom, whose head is turned toward Hamlet, is dramatically back lit by what in many illustrations of the scene is moonlight, but here appears to be some kind of powerful supernatural aura. The Ghost's plate armor emphasizes rather than hides the muscular structure of his body, adding to the impression of power exuded by the figure³.

At one level, the total composition expresses an elemental confrontation between superhuman power (the Ghost) on one hand, and humanity on the other. The near nudity of the three male figures on the right⁴ (Horatio, Marcellus and Hamlet) serves, as is characteristic of Fuseli's work, to emphasize both their essential being and (something that surely applies in this scene) their human vulnerability. By contrast, the Ghost wears full armor.

On reaching towards moments of awe and terror, on evoking the sublime in the location of his settings and on presenting humans in collision with powerful nonhuman forces – all characteristic of his painting – Fuseli is being coherent with his view. The character of the artist's illustration was in many respects revolutionary for in the history of English graphic representations of literary works there had been nothing like them before.

LISZT'S MUSICAL PIECE: SYMPHONIC POEM N. 10

This piece inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a much more global interpretation of the play. Even for the abstract character inherent to music, formal, sentimental and poetic relations among them can be perceived.

Franz Liszt was a Hungarian composer, virtuoso pianist, music teacher, arranger, and organist. Among his compositions were his 13 symphonic poems, a term used for an orchestral piece that is based on a pre-established program, inspired by legends, paintings, heroes, historical facts, literature and plays. Influenced by philosophical and historical-literary culture a symphonic poem is a romantic genre conceived under liberty, creativity and the right to fantasy. In addition, it can translate musically, mainly through the formal liberty without the rigor of traditional forms such as sonata. Different from the concept of "absolute music", a symphonic poem inspires the listener to imagine scenes, images and humors that are treated in the original work. Different from operas, in which there is a sustained response to a whole work, it represents a union between drama and music but without a text, and invests particular characters for the purpose of offering musical accounts or "imaginings" of them.

3 For an in-depth analysis of this engraving, see Young (2002, p. 153-163).

4 In the picture the figures are on the left. It is because the engraving was anticipated in reverse by the drawing that is now at the museum.

In the analysis of the symphonic poem *Hamlet* inspired on seeing a particular actor perform the central role of the main character, we will focus on the musical interpretation of both the protagonist's conflict and emotional state, and Ophelia's feelings. Formally, we will concentrate on the transposition of the formal structure of the play to the structure of the music.

Figure 2 – Initial motif of Liszt's symphonic poem

Source: Liszt (1949, p. 1).

Liszt begins his “poem” coherently: the appearance of the ghost twice for the soldiers (on the first scene) and twice for Hamlet (on fourth and fifth scenes) corresponds to the initial motif which is presented four times at the beginning of the piece: two times in measures 1 to 5 and 5 to 8, and the other two, in measures 33 to 36 and 37 to 40.

The texture of the initial musical motif (Figure 2) is made up of harmonious, rhythmic and instrumental elements which determine a suspensive, ethereal and at the same time tenuous character. The horn with “sordine” blows a unique note which is reinforced and encompassed by the expressive melodic movement of the woodwinds, in *Molto lento and lugubre* tempo mark, whose harmonious resultant is a diminished-seventh chord over the leading note (A#) of *B minor* tonality suggested by the key signature. The association of tritone interval, the grave and slowly punctuation of the kettle drums and oscillating tempo mark (*schwankend*), promote the nebulous, enigmatic, and tragic atmosphere which will predominate in the main character's story and essence.

As the protagonist's conflict guides all the story development, the melodic idea of clarinets and bassoons will pass through the music, but in various rhythmic, melodic and instrumental variations (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Initial motif and its variation throughout the piece

Cl. e Fg., nos compassos 1 e 338

Vc e Cb - compasso 83

Vli. I e II, compasso 100; Vc e Cb, compasso 264

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In the thematic variation of the measures 83-84 (Figure 3), the initial theme reappears in *Allegro and agitato* tempo mark with rhythm and scoring different from the original. In the variation of measures 100 and 264, an inversion of the beginning melodic intervals is sharp. In measure 338, demarcating the introduction of the last section, the theme returns as it was initially presented, again marked *Molto lento and lugubre*.

Liszt takes advantage of the formal structure of Shakespeare's text by transporting it to the formal structure of the musical piece⁵. The correspondence with the division in five acts happens mainly by the changes of tempo marks and moods of the musical ideas.

According to the French authors, Huré and Knepper (2016), the play architecture transposed into Liszt's symphonic poem (Table 1) can be decomposed in a pyramid form, in which acts I and V represent the almost invalid basis of action, with respective functions of presentation and conclusion. Acts II and IV allow for the entrance and exit transition of the third act, which is the central axis, around which everything moves.

In the opposite basis of the musical structure that corresponds to the play's fifth act, the initial motif marked *Molto lento* and *lugubre* tempo of the beginning returns, in measure 338, demarcating the conclusive section of the musical piece. In the remaining 47 measures, the more tenuous, melodic, rhythmic and harmonic elements, but that keep the essence of the thematic ideas presented in the previous sections, are being reduced in small degrees, and losing vital force till the last breathing at the *fortissimo* of measure 339, after which "the rest is silence", which is punctuated by *pizzicattos* of lower strings in *pianissimo* dynamics.

⁵ The present correspondences between the formal structure of Liszt's music and Shakespeare's text are based on Pierre Huré and Claude Knepper, to which musical elements were added to justify and clarify them.

Table 1 – Equivalence between the pyramidal formal structure of Shakespeare's play and Liszt's symphonic poem

The pyramidal formal structure of Shakespeare's play

DEGREES	CLIMB	DESCENT	DESCENT
HIGH POINT (III Act – 4 scenes)	First scene – Opposition to Ophelia	Second scene – Theatrical performance (change of direction)	Fourth scene – Hamlet does not kill Claudio but kills Polonius
SECOND PHASE	II Act (2 scenes) – Preparation of theatrical performance		IV Act (7 scenes) – multiple adventures
FIRST PHASE	I Act (5 scenes) – Ghost appearance		V Act (2 scenes) – Hamlet is killed by Laertes

The pyramidal formal structure of Liszt's symphonic poem

DEGREES	CLIMB	STABILITY	DESCENT
HIGH POINT (III Act – 4 scenes)	First intermezzo - Ophelia (m. 160 – 175)	Allegro ironico (m. 176 – 201)	Second intermezzo - Ophelia (m. 202 – 217)
SECOND PHASE	Allegro molto agitato (II Act; m. 75 – 159)		Allegro appassionato (IV Act; m. 218 – 337)
FIRST PHASE	Molto lento e lugubre (I Act; m. 1 – 74)		Molto lento e lugubre (V Act; m. 338 – 392)

Source: Huré and Knepper (2016).

The intermediate sections, corresponding to acts II and IV of the play, contrast with the pyramid basis by the tempo mark *Allegro molto agitato*, by the diatonic melodic materials and by the tonality. A new theme appears in measure 103, emphatic, in repeated notes, marking rhythm and strong dynamic. However, the tonality is a point of reference that will be soon abandoned, persistently modified. The homogenous texture of the orchestral *tutti* predominates with distinction for the powerful sonority of the metal wind instruments adequate for the atmosphere of the war and geopolitical context of the play.

In contrast with the agitation of the previous and consequent sections, the third section of the symphonic poem (cc. 160-217), the culminating point of the

pyramidal structure, is a quiet moment of serenity that, according to the composer, represents a “kind of shadow that evokes Ophelia” (LISZT apud TRANCHEFORT, 1990, p. 436).

After an orchestral *tutti*, the three measure pause prepares the instrumentally reduced section, in *piano* dynamic and tempo mark *dolce and espressivo*, whose melody and instrumental timbre evoke the character’s sad feelings (Figure 4).

Figure 4 – Section dedicated to Ophelia.

Source: Liszt (1949, p. 26).

If Shakespeare became inspired by the old Chronicles of Greek, Roman, English and French stories and by Nordic legends to build his feminine characters (Shakespeare, s/d), Liszt, when choosing this section instrumentation, seems to be inspired by Freemasonry symbolisms that can be recognized in composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and Liszt.

In the short passage dedicated to Ophelia, two clarinets in A exhibit the musical idea that will be repeated in two flutes. According to Roger Cotte (1988, p. 132, 150), “the dark timbre of clarinets in A, employed in many Freemasonry rites, evokes funereal feelings; as it happens with the transversal flute, also a representative of sad feelings”. In Mozart, who wrote works directly dedicated to Freemasonry, for example, *Masonic Funeral Music* K. 477 (1785), the *Little Masonic Cantata* (1791) and others inspired in its symbols such as the fantastic opera *The Magic Flute* (premiered on 1791), we can distinguish the special use of the timbre of clarinet – an outstanding instrument in Freemasonry rites – as the symbol of the fraternity. The *Concert for clarinet* K621, “a hymn to universal fraternity” (PAROUBY apud TRANCHEFORT, 1990, p. 585), and the *Quintet for clarinet* K 581 were written to Anton Stadler, a Masonic brother and an expert clarinetist.

In Liszt’s *Hamlet* important characteristics of his *oeuvre* such as the lyrical force of the melodic line “that directly crosses over the rest as a fluid, live, formal, hot and pulsating unity contribute to the unity in multiplicity” (RAMANN, 2012, p. 17). Pauses and fermatas cannot also be regarded as arbitrary signs, devoid of meaning. On the contrary, “often they are catalyzers of atmospheres of the transitions from one movement or section to another contrasting, and they grow with them becoming part of its mediating function” (RAMANN, 2012, p. 18).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The dramaticism and mystery that predominate in this play can be perceived in Fuseli's pictorial work, through its movements, its contrast between light and shadow and the rest of the elements that constitute the static image taken from the imagination of the scene of the original play. On the other hand in Liszt's music, the relationship with the source text is much more comprehensible. As a text, the music grows in time and in the course of it, elements are being presented and related so as to constitute the formal structure as a whole. Well defined musical motives will be various and recurrent in all the piece, translating the dramatic concentration present in the theatrical text, represented by the main character's complexity. Both works, in different ways, pay homage to Shakespeare and illustrate the fact that the Bard continues to feed re-creations and also the fact that what we call unique and authentic in Shakespeare is the capacity his plays show for being transformed into multimedial works.

DUAS INTERPRETAÇÕES DE *HAMLET*: FUSELI E LISZT

Resumo: O texto analisa duas obras inspiradas em *Hamlet*, uma pintura de Henry Fuseli e um Poema Sinfônico de Franz Liszt, a fim de destacar suas relações com o texto original. A obra visual dedicada a uma das cenas iniciais retrata, por meio da composição e expressividade de seus elementos, o sentimento do homem frágil diante do poder do sobrenatural. A peça orquestral de Liszt inspira o ouvinte a imaginar cenas, imagens e humores e expressa correspondência com os sentimentos dos personagens, especialmente Hamlet e Ofélia. Além disso, observa-se uma clara transposição da estrutura formal do texto de Shakespeare para a estruturação formal da música.

Palavras-chave: Shakespeare. Pintura. Poema sinfônico.

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