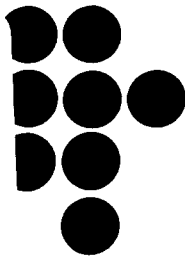# COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

"Shakespeare: Film, Performance, Hypermedia"

March 5, 1992

MIT COMMUNICATIONS FORUM
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Seminar Notes

Prof. Philip McGuire, Department of English, Michigan State University

Prof. Barbara Hodgdon, Department of English, Drake University

Prof. Larry Friedlander, Department of English, Stanford University

Prof. Peter Donaldson, MIT Department of Literature, Moderator

Elizabeth H. Prodromou, MIT, Rapporteur

Prof. David Thorburn, Director of the MIT Cultural Studies Project, opened the seminar and introduced the moderator for the session, Prof. Peter Donaldson. Donaldson explained that today's Communication Forum Seminar was part of a larger, two-day symposium under the auspices of the university's Cultural Studies Project. The Symposium acknowledges the important convergence underway between two major areas of study - Shakespearean performance criticism and Shakespearean film studies. These two areas of study constitute two of the most rapidly developing parts in the field of Shakespeare Studies and in literature as a whole. Donaldson observed that today's speakers are pioneers in the development and use of hypermedia technology, and emphasized that the importance of this technology lies not only in its application potential, but in the fact that it is revolutionizing the kinds of questions that are being posed about issues in the Shakespeare Studies field.

The first speaker was Prof. Philip McGuire, Shakespeare performance critic and theorist at Michigan State University. McGuire's talk was titled "Closing Off Options: Shakespeare's Tragedies as Text and Performance." He began by focusing on the final moments of Shakespeare's "Othello", and observed that this play has the dubious distinction of being the most often-quoted Shakespearean play at the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings in Washington. McGuire claimed that the appropriation of Shakespeare's words to frame the hearings functioned in a particular, interesting fashion - that is, to foster a comforting sense of familiarity by suggesting that the bard, at least, knew what to make of a sort of messy, confusing situation similar to the one which with we, the American public, are now confronted and are extremely uncomfortable.

McGuire also observed that Sen. Simpson's invocation of Shakespeare at the hearings drives home the point of how we can make sense of a particular period in time, with the operative word being "make". The words allow us to construct and to fashion a framework for understanding, as well as to discover something that is already extant.

McGuire examined the final moments of "Othello" to illustrate the way in which this process of the construction of reality occurs. The question he considered was the one of what the audience sees at the end of the play - is Desdemona on the bed, or does Othello, in fact, as he wants to, end up in death on the bed with Desdemona? According to McGuire, none of the earliest performances, either those done at the period the play was written or those up to and throughout the nineteenth century, allows us to close the gap between what we see versus the death that Othello envisions for himself. The imprecision of the state directions allows for confusion and interpretation and, ultimately, for decision that consistently reflect the cultural values of the time in which the performance is being conducted. We hardly ever see the corpse dead, on the bed, and even in those cases where we see Othello kiss Desdemona and die, he rolls off the bed, leaving Desdemona in lovely, lonely isolation on the bed.

Since WWII, however, audiences have seen a radically different sight: that of Desdemona and Othello, dead, coupled on the bed, linked in death. According to McGuire, the editions of "Othello" now widely used as the basis for teaching, criticism, and performance show how we construct the play in accord with our commitment to have Othello and Desdemona together on the bed and, in effect, to try to make precise something which earlier versions had left deliberately imprecise and thereby to reduce all uncertainties to a single, specific certainty.

These more recent versions of "Othello" answer in the affirmative the question that most past productions either had failed to answer or had answered in the negative. McGuire maintained that the process of loading the bed is our work as an audience and as readers, in that the performance choices and editorial decisions with which we are most familiar reinforce the need and the insistence to see or to envision Othello and Desdemona not apart in death but, as in "Romeo and Juliet", together in death. In contradistinction to the earlier versions of the play, the post-WWII versions reflect our desire to see on the bed what we were denied in the sight of the play. McGuire suggested that this desire might reflect some sort of contemporary craving for potent combinations of violence and eroticism. He also suggested, more strongly, that the final sight of the new versions, even as it offers evidence of the final differences between Othello and Desdemona and all that they represent, offers a sight of the ability to escape, to elude, and to transcend those differences (if not in life, then, in death).

In McGuire's view, the question of where Othello lies in death is not unlike the earlier point in the play where Desdemona accepts Iago as her lieutenant and the discussion of where Casio lies. McGuire remarked on the fact that, in both this earlier juncture and in the closing scene in the play, the word "lie" clearly has two meanings - that of a place or a location, and that of an untruth. He noted that it is not too much to say that "Othello" is a play about lying - who lies where, on what, and with whom.

The centrality of this theme of lying is evident again in the scene where Emilia asks to be layed next to her mistress, Desdemona. McGuire considered whether or not this first request has been honored in various versions of the play. The state directions are ambivalent and have been inconsistently executed, and McGuire concluded that the evidence shows that rarely, if ever, is Emilia's request honored in the stage performances. This denial is certainly clear in the performances up through the middle of this century, when both Emilia and Othello are kept from Desdemona, thereby preserving her in isolation. It seems that, over the centuries, audiences have seen Desdemona completely alone on the bed and, more recently, Desdemona coupled on the bed in death with Othello. However, audiences never see Desdemona with Emilia on the bed, nor do they see all three (Desdemona, Othello, and Emilia) on the bed.

McGuire concluded that the concealment of the above sight occurs not because actors, directors, and editors are incompetent and insensitive, but because each of the excluded possibilities, if shown, would bring out contradictions and anxieties related to cultural views on the meaning of marriage, infidelity, and intimate relationships.

As an example of the length to which we will go to avoid doing such culturally confrontational and controversial work, McGuire played a short clip from the critically acclaimed 1981 BBC version (the Jonathan Miller production) of "Othello". What we say in this clip was that no one lays Emilia beside Desdemona and, instead, that Emilia must make her own way from the foot of the bed to Desdemona's shoulder, where she dies half on and half off the bed. The camera briefly registers the two women together, as it follows Othello out of the room. Othello, when he stabs himself, is sitting beside Desdemona on the other side of the bed, in a position that doesn't allow us to see either Desdemona or Emilia. We never see Othello kiss Desdemona, and we never see Othello and Desdemona together on the bed, at the side of which Emilia rests, also unseen by the audience. Instead, the camera shows us the men looking at the object that Ladivico calls the "object that poisons sight". The camera is self-censoring.

McGuire emphasized that the BBC version reinforces the point that we need to see how responses to prevailing cultural practices and views work to narrow and to restrict the possibilities for presenting as certainties what are, in fact, choices, and that these choices would otherwise require us to make different sense to ourselves, of ourselves, and for ourselves.

The next speaker was Prof. Barbara Hodgdon, NEH Professor of English and a film critic at Drake University. The title of Hodgdon's talk was "Mel Gibson's 'Hamlet': Return of the Repressed, Redressed Male of Today". Hodgdon opened with a reference to the playing field in "Field of Dreams", which was a film representation of the familiar narrative that celebrates the rites of passage of boys through the activities of their fathers. She noted that she felt unable to experience the film's message, and that we need to ask what is being done today in films by creating a film space for a gorgeous man (like Mel Gibson) and they by lashing him to a Shakespearean film like "Hamlet". How do we make this connection?

According to Hodgdon, the problems arise in making such a connection arise not so much from the fact that Gibson does not match the Shakespearean image of a man. The issue is, rather, that while so much has been written on who men look at women and, to a lesser extent, how men look at men, little work has been done on how women look at men. The male body, while highly visible as a sociological entity and as a subject of study within the perspectives noted above, has remained curiously invisible as an object of the female gaze. The best that theory has done in this area is to codify the male body as an object of the lens' gaze, within the context of male, gay discourse and of the female erotic vision.

Hodgdon's aim was to explore a different perspective on the kind of male object that Mel Gibson's Hamlet raises. She discussed the placement of the film jacket on the video-store shelf, where it is usually situated between two male-female films, "Hard to Kill" and "He Said/She Said". The film jacket shows Mel Gibson framed by two women, Glen Close as his mother, Gertrude, and Ophelia, the other main female protagonist in the film. According to Hodgdon, this happy conjuncture draws on the well familiar ideas of the male fear of making a choice of a female mate and the notion of the woman as either dominant or submissive.

The choice of Gibson as Hamlet was an ingenious one in terms of the contemporary cultural issues surrounding male-female relationships and the ideal male. That is, Mel is neither too hard nor too soft, neither too macho nor too sensitive, so his perfect blend of qualities sutures the contemporary

women into Mel and Hamlet. Further, if we look at Mel and Glen Close, we see that their faces are the same size and that, if we follow their gaze (on the video jacket), it eventually crosses. His sword, his weapon, is held upright and is what separates them. In Hodgdon's view, these images on the video jacket call out the linkage of three cultural forces and issues: family scandal, affairs of the heart, and the underworld connection. These three tropes constitute the nexus of the contemporary t.v. apparatus. Ergo, Zefirelli's "Hamlet" becomes mainstream culture's Shakespearean soap opera.

Zefirelli further widened the cultural appeal of his "Hamlet" by his choice of a multi-national cast of actors. For example, the use of Mel Gibson's Australian-English voice calls out the two aspects of popular culture and high culture. The choices of Gibson and Close project an ideological mobility across films. The two also get at the Oedipal relationship, although the choice of two actors in the same age range somewhat diffuses the traditional Oedipal tensions.

In looking at a clip of the opening scene of the film, Hodgdon explains the way in which Zefirelli, with brilliant economy, creates the triangulated gaze of Hamlet, his mother, and her future husband (Claudius, the older man). With Gertrude's dilemma of the conflicting objects of the male in Hamlet and Claudius once established, the character of Gertrude thereafter seems deliberately constructed to counter the femme fatale image of Close's previous female screen persona. At the same time, after this opening scene, it is hard to forget that the familiar Oedipal complex rests on fleshly matters.

Gibson as Hamlet challenges the conventional readings of Hamlet as an agonizing, self-doubting intellectual. Instead, Gibson's charismatic presence suggests that he (and, therefore, Hamlet) thinks with his body. The sheer presence of Gibson's body calls into question the longstanding portrayal and interpretation of Hamlet as having primarily intellectual strengths and pleasures. Further, while it is certainly true that the question of Hamlet's narrative (i.e. can he do it?) remains central to Zefirelli's film, Gibson's portrayal somehow transposes the exploration and answer of this question into a physical domain. It is mainly through close-ups and physical movement, two ways for the camera to code masculinity, as opposed to reliance on language and dialogue, that the film evokes the turns of Hamlet's restless questioning. Gibson's performance embodies the "to be seenness" of Hamlet's existential dilemma.

Hodgdon observed that, while the persona of Mel Gibson the actor may be coherent, there is a fragmented subjectivity to Hamlet. This fragmentation becomes, for Gibson, the acting problem of disavowing one subject for another. For example, in the closing moments of the performance, we see the incredulous look that flashed over Gibson's (Hamlet's) face as he feels the first effects of the poison, stumbles, and then falls. In spite of knowing that Hamlet must die, this image is especially shocking for the audience because we are accustomed to Gibson in his movie subjects as being invincible. Simply, the audience is not prepared for the immanent possibility that something could happen to such a perfect specimen of the male body. Further, the shock is even more intense because it touches the unconscious. Whereas, within representation, women's bodies offer an unstable place for working out questions of gender politics, the image of masculine bodily perfection is enduring.

The final speaker was Prof. Larry Friedlander, hypermedia technologist at Stanford University. The title of his presentation was "Developing a Critical Vocabulary for Performance: The Potential and Limitations of Hypermedia", and was accompanied by the use of various forms of hypermedia technology to illustrate his points.

Friedlander remarked on who we must think about the fact that what is most striking to us is not necessarily that which is visible but that which is invisible. Inn "Othello", this is clearly the case from a variety of perspectives - e.g. where is Emilia lying when the camera focuses on Othello and Desdemona; what is Iago thinking (what is going on inside of him) when he is speaking; what are the intentions behind the words of the characters, etc. This sort of shifting from the visible to the invisible is a critical part of the performance experience, where the focus of attention is moving from level to level. The shifting of subjectivity is a question for the audience as well as for the performers. Also important is the constant code-switching that occurs in performances, for it creates a sense of connection with the stage through powerful interpretive issues that evoke feelings in the audience and in the actors (which, in turn, feeds through into their portrayal of the character and, ultimately, to the impact on the audience). How can we capture and describe the experience? According to Friedlander, one of the most valuable aspects of the new, hypermedia technology is its ability to help us capture and understand the code-switching and shifts in subjectivity that occur in performances.

Friedlander pointed out different ways to use hypermedia technology for the above purposes. For example, we can use it to separate Shakespeare's plays into different categories of understanding, such as viewing, performing, editing, etc. This allows us to create a linking system for an event that is defined by relationship rather than by presence. Hypermedia allows us to link these relationships, by simultaneously bringing up on a screen the scene, the text, and edited versions of modern performances, for a multi-faceted comparison. We can watch the scene, take notes, attach notes, recreate the scene, establish patterns, etc., through the use of the technology. In linking, we discover a multitude of technical problems, in that the things that we are linking are not necessarily equal. Nonetheless, this gives us the opportunity to break up scenes and components of the overall performance experience into different analytic sequences and perspectives.

In Friedlander's view, the issues of external description are relatively simple in comparison to attempts at using the hypermedia technology to address issues of internal description. Using hypermedia technology for purposes of internal description allows us to focus our attention on how meaning is created by positive intentions of the performers. We can create inner narratives to get at these sorts of questions of the internal intent versus the external behavior of the actors. We can see what is invisible behind the specific moment-to-moment choices of how, for example, a particular actress became the character of Ophelia - through the processes of rehearsal, reading, research and study, and the overall experience of intensive work that goes into finding and embodying the character and into refining the series of skills that lets them be present in the character.

Hypermedia technology also allows us to learn to listen and to hear in a different way, in order to answer these points concerning how the actor becomes the part. The technology provides us with ways to analyze experiences that are very complex, especially when we deal with performances as visual, as opposed to textual, events. An example would be a computer program that shows and explores how the illusion of a consistent personality is created on the state. Such a program would allow us to extract enough from the performance in order to establish certain patterns that are embedded in the performance and, thereby, to draw conclusions about underlying meanings that are contained in the performance. The power of multi-media also lies in the fact that it enables us to compare different versions of the same performance and, therefore, to work backward to understand how the performances came into being, what patterns emerged, and how these were played out in different versions.

Friedlander noted that there are some inherent cautions that must be exercised in using hypermedia technology as a tool for assessing performance. By putting performance into the technology, it encourages us to search for tidy answers that may not be there in the performance. As long as we are aware of this tendency, however, then we can avert the downsides of the use of the technology.

Another use of the technology is in the form of a program that creates simulation environments in which choices are worked out and through which the final events can be deconstructed and reworked. Simulations can be constructed for particular purposes, whether analytic or pedagogic, and allow us to move into an alternative world.

Hypermedia technology raises questions concerning the theoretical issues which emerge with reference to notions of theatre and concerning directions for research. What we see in this sort of incomplete world is that, if we want to think in terms of relationships as opposed to choosing one position, we need a kind of analysis that is process-oriented and that is not confined by the idea of a singular, underlying code of meaning. We need an analysis that allows us to deal with these multiple events and with the different subjectivities that are being created.

Question & Answer

The first remark was an observation directed to McGuire, concerning the reason why all editors have refused to give a stage direction making Emilia fall on Desdemona's bed. The audience member maintained that the reason for this lack of stage direction is that Emilia does not mean that she should be layed on the bed with her mistress. No lady-in-waiting would suggest this. Rather, she means that she wants to be put in a grave beside her mistress, as a permanent lady-in-waiting. So, the question is the wrong question to be asking.

McGuire responded that, while it may be the case that Emilia does not mean that she wants to be laid on the bed, there are several different ways of understanding the lack of a stage direction to this

effect. He noted that, while it may have been well understood by the actors performing the play in the sixteenth century, this understanding has since been lost because the historical context has changed so radically. As a result, the question is relevant because it speaks to the reason of why the editors, instead of saying nothing to address the confusion generated by the historical context, have chosen consistently to say nothing. The point is that not enough attention has been paid to Desdemona and to the filling of the bed, and that this lack of attention is extremely revealing and is just as important as the actual content that might be informed into the play once such attention has been paid. This lack of attention speaks to the cultural-ideological issues relevant to particular historical contexts.

The next question referenced Friedlander's remarks that "Hamlet" was performing a text. The speaker observed that one of the reasons why Zefirelli was correct in thinking that his "Hamlet" (both the film and the character) would appeal to the contemporary youthful audience was precisely because his "Hamlet" was not a reading of the text. Zefirelli's version excised 70% of the Shakespearean text (exactly the same amount that was eliminated from his version of "Romeo and Juliet").

Friedlander responded that he had been commenting on the fact that, when Hamlet is speaking the words, we as the audience are aware that the actor is performing a text and that others before him have done so as well. This awareness raises questions for us. Further, the fact that the text has not been reduced to 30% of the original raises the point that we still have not discovered a way to articulate what it means to perform "Hamlet". Friedlander suggested that we should celebrate the fact that theatre is not simply a text, but that it is something different and, no matter what that something is, it works. He also commented that Zefirelli's version of "Romeo and Juliet" has become so institutionalized in secondary schools that it has been embraced as a pedagogical tool and as a way of interesting and exposing students to Shakespeare - all of this despite the fact that 70% of the original text has been eliminated. Given that fact, it is too soon to make any claims concerning what impact Zefirelli's version of "Hamlet" will have. Given the new technology at our access for examining and analyzing these films, we can now ask different sorts of questions than we have asked in the past about the impact of these films.

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Philip C. McGuire
Department of English
Michigan State University

Othello 5.2.368-69

QUARTO (1622)

b. I kift thee ere I kild thee, no way but this,
g my felfe, to die vpon a kiffe.   *He dies.*

FOLIO (1623)

Oth. I kift thee, ere I kill'd thee: No way but this,
Killing my felfe, to dye vpon a kiffe.   *Dyes*

ARDEN EDITION (1962, corrected)
I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee, no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
                    [Falls on the bed, and dies.

RIVERSIDE EDITION (1974)
I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee. No way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
                    [Falls on the bed and] dies.

NEW CAMBRIDGE EDITION (1984)
I kissed thee ere I killed thee: no way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
                    He [falls on the bed and] dies

PELICAN EDITION (1969, revised)
I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
          He [falls upon the bed and] dies.

BEVINGTON: COMPLETE WORKS (1992, fourth edition)
I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
                    [He kisses Desdemona and] dies.

NEW OXFORD: COMPLETE WORKS (1986)
I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this:
Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.
                    He kisses Desdemona and dies

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Othello 5.2.243-58

QUARTO

Gra. The woman falls, fure he has kild his wife.
Em. I,I,O lay me by my miftreffe fide.   *Exit* Iago.
Gra. Hee's gone, but his wife's kild.
Mon. Tis a notorious villaine, take your weapon,
Vhich I haue here recouered from the Moore:
ome, guard the dore without, let him not paffe,
ut kill him rather, I'le after that fame villaine,
or tis a damned flaue.   *Exit* Mont. *and* Gratiano.
Oth. I am not valiant neither,
nt euery puny whipfter gets my fword,
ut why fhould honour out liue honefty?
.et it goe all.
Em. Moore, fhe was chaft, fhe lou'd thee cruell Moore,
o come my foule to bliffe, as I fpeake true;
o fpeaking as I thinke, I die, I die.   *fbe dies*

(Cuer)

FOLIO

Gra. The woman falles:
Sure he hath kill'd his Wife.
Emil. I,I: oh lay me by my Miftris fide.
Gra. Hee's gone, but his wife's kill'd.
Mon. Tis a notorious Villain: take you this weapon
Which I haue recouer'd from the Moore:
Come guard the doore without, let him not paffe,
But kill him rather. Ile after that fame villaine,
For 'tis a damned Slaue.   *Exit.*
Oth. I am not valiant neither:
But euery Punie whipfter gets my Sword.
But why fhould Honor out-liue Honefty?
Let it go all.
Æmil. What did thy Song boad Lady?
Hearke, canft thou heare me? I will play the Swan,
And dye in Muficke: *Willough, Willough, Willough.*
Moore, fhe was chafte: She lou'd thee, cruell Moore,
So come my Soule to bliffe, as I fpeake true:
So fpeaking as I thinke, alas, I dye.

ARDEN EDITION
Gra. The woman falls, sure he has kill'd his wife.
 Emil. Ay, ay, O lay me by my mistress's side.   [Exit Iago.

                              .

                              .
 Emil. Moor, she was chaste, she lov'd thee, cruel Moor,
       So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;
       So speaking as I think, I die, I die.   [She dies.

                    RIVERSIDE EDITION
   Gra. The woman falls; sure he hath kill'd his wife,
   Emil. Ay, ay! O, lay me by my mistress' side.
                                            [Exit Iago]

                              .

                              .
   Emil. Moor, she was chaste; she lov'd thee, cruel Moor;
         So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true.
         So speaking as I think, alas, I die.   [Dies]

                    NEW CAMBRIDGE EDITION
GRATIANO The woman falls; sure he hath killed his wife.
EMILIA   Ay, ay; O, lay me by my mistress' side.

                              .

                              .
EMILIA   Moor, she was chaste; she loved thee, cruel Moor;
         So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true;
         So speaking as I think, I die, I die.   She dies

                    PELICAN EDITION
GRATIANO The woman falls. Sure he hath killed his wife.
EMILIA   Ay, ay. O, lay me by my mistress' side.   Exit Iago.

                              .

                              .
EMILIA   Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor:
         So come my soul to bliss as I speak true;
         So speaking as I think, alas, I die.
            She dies.

                    BEVINGTON: COMPLETE WORKS
GRATIANO The woman falls! Sure he hath killed his wife.
EMILIA   Ay, ay. O, lay me by my mistress' side.
                                            [Exit Iago.]

                              .

                              .
EMILIA   Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor.
         So come my soul to bliss as I speak true.
         So speaking as I think, alas, I die.   [She dies.]

                    NEW OXFORD: COMPLETE WORKS
GRATIANO The woman falls. Sure he hath killed his wife.
EMILIA   Ay, ay. O, lay me by my mistress' side.   Exit Iago

                              .

                              .
EMILIA   Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor.
         So come my soul to bliss, as I speak true.
         So, speaking as I think, alas, I die.   She dies