

re: vs.

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Abstract

How might the title of *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* preliminarily inform our reading of this play? The "versus" seems to promise pugilistic as well as legal antagonism; more speculatively, this review posits an antagonism between staged productions and filmic conventions, with special attention to the song (and John Ford film) *My Darling Clementine* (1946).

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, by David Dalton, Jeremy Beck, and
Christopher Patrick Mullen. *Quinnopolis*, NY. Shakespeare
Association of America Annual Convention, Philadelphia. April
15, 2006. *Performed by* Jeremy Beck and Christopher Yeatts.

A banal observation: *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* immediately invites some kind of a response to its title. Before the show even commences, the audience will have already decided to attend not *Hamlet* or The _____ Theatre Company's Production of *Hamlet* or *Hamletmachine* (first performed 1977; Müller 1984) or *The Marowitz Hamlet* (first performed 1977; Marowitz 1978) or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (first performed 1966; Stoppard 1967) or any number of the dozens of other adaptations of the play, but rather *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*.

How could a title animate a performance? Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was itself a title re-animating a previous version of the play, as we are so often reminded by those who insist on evacuating any immaterial trace of a Shakespearean agency, leaving us only with a ghost of an author. This long-since familiar skepticism tilts at a gigantic windmill, much as the two actors stutter at the ghost whom (that?) we cannot see onstage in *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*. But even if ghosts do not present themselves, they can still spook us. I linger with the title of this production in order to tease out what kinds of antagonistic specters it can summon for the spectators.

My reflections on this particular title draw inspiration from more wide-ranging contemplations made by Kenneth Burke, who once guilelessly proposed that "one should give" a play "an ideal title from which it could be generated" (Burke 2006). Before offering some suppositions regarding how (the title) "*Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*" generates (the play) *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*, I first adduce three quotations, as an initial prospectus towards a Burkean "theory of entitlement":

Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* . . . is a five-act redefinition of the word "enemy." In fact, as you watch Ibsen's play, you watch the slow emergence of its title, which does not come into full expression, in the words of the characters, until the dramatist has prepared you by the action to accept *his* meaning. (Burke 1984, 327)

. . . the title of the play *Hamlet* becomes expanded into all the words and simulated actions, characters, and situations of which that play is composed. The title is in effect an "essence." And in the narrative expansion that comprises the drama, the "essence" that is named in the title acquires in effect a kind of "existential definition." (Burke 1968a, 380-81)

There would thus be a sense in which the overall title could be said to be the infolding of all the details, or the details could be treated as the exfoliation-in-time of the eternal now that was contained in the rational seminality of the title. (Burke 1968b, 370)

It helps to recall that Burke began his career as a music critic, since perhaps in these scattered comments we can hear him thinking along the lines of "Theme and Variations" — as in Bach's "Goldberg Variations," which involve nothing other (if that's possible to say — for what a splendid "nothing other") than variations on the Aria, returning at the finale, inflected by its "re-definition" throughout the piece. The Aria acts as a kind of extended "title," or "essence," of the piece, at once a consolidation of all of the variations and an anticipation of them — the seed that entails the potential tree. In this spirit, what kind of seed, as it were, does *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* offer to us? How might this seed unfold into the drama, and what's the eventual (entelechial) flowering of this seed?

Of the three words in the title, I have the least to say, at least directly, about *Hamlet*. About *Hamlet* we know far too much — or rather, we know at least *enough* (the play trusts that we do) — already.

Of the first word, *Quinnopolis*. The production's program notes made some coy comments about the origins of Quinnopolis, a fabular locale in upstate New York, population four. They've nominated their wittily foolish city by Hellenizing the mock authority "Quinapalus" cited by Feste (1.5.31), thereby taking Shakespeare one step further away from either his small Latin (*quina palus*: "five marshes" [Baldwin 1944, 1:720]) or faint French (*qui n'a pas lu*: "who has not read" [Warren

and Wells 1994, 104]). The company's title — and thus part of the play's title as well — returns us to fictitious origins, specious originators. It seems appropriate that Quinnopolis is not the first company to play off of Feste's supposed scholar; the Quinapalus Theatre Company, founded by Tony Rust, was another New York-based group presenting adaptations of Shakespeare in the late 1980s (for example, a cross-gendered *Taming of the Shrew* in 1989 [Savitsky 1989]). Placed alongside *Hamlet*, the name "Quinnopolis" also echoes Hamlet's own deflated evaluation of man as nothing but the "*quintessence* of dust" — "the purest or most perfect form or manifestation of some quality" (OED, "quintessence," sb. 2b). Could Quinnopolis be some kind of essential place, even if only a mock place, to which we turn when contesting *Hamlet*?

But what about *vs.*, *viz.*, "*versus*"?

This, to me, remains the most striking portion of the title, despite all the cheekiness of the name "*Quinnopolis*." It preliminarily casts the company in a kind of fight against the play, as in a boxing card, which does not in advance indicate a victory for either opponent, both of whom weigh in against one another (as in R. A. Foakes's *Hamlet versus Lear* [1993]). Indeed, the actors sometimes feint punches, circling their fists Chaplin-style as they approach the cards on the music stand (Chaplin 1931). There *is* something of an agon here, for (as other reviewers have noted) the text of *Hamlet* possesses the actors, Will they, nill they. Contrast this adaptation's title to that of *Mabou Mines Lear* (Breuer 1990) (or the more recent *Mabou Mines Dollhouse* [Breuer 2003]). "Mabou Mines" names the experimental theater company, after a Nova Scotia community near which their first production took place. Yet "*Mines*" also encapsulates a verbal action between the company and the source of the play that they are reshaping, an action *upon* the source. Thus: "*Mabou Mines* [digs up, appropriates, makes 'mine'] *Lear*." (While many venues are tempted to add a possessive apostrophe to titles produced by Mabou Mines, the company does not include such punctuation.)

Beyond the physical antagonism of the sweet science (also captured in George Bernard Shaw's final play, the marionette *Shakes versus Shav* [first performed in 1949; Shaw 1951]), "*versus*" of course evokes the legal field. (Quite literally so, when we return to the etymological root: the Latin *versus* was a turn made by a plow, and only subsequently comes to indicate poetic lines [Ferry 1996, 157], and later the legal action of one party against another.) We are invited to adjudicate a case, to serve as Solon to Thespis.¹ For such a title, there are many precedents we can cite: *People v. Hamlet*, a 1996 mock trial (Duffy 1996); *Shakespeare versus Shallow*, Leslie Hotson's 1931 reconstruction of the circumstances behind a Tudor petition against Shakespeare (Hotson 1931); Victorian arguments for Baconian authorship (e.g., *Bacon versus Shakspeare: A Plea for the*

Defendant [King 1875] or *Francis Bacon, Poet, Prophet, Philosopher, versus Phantom Captain Shakespeare, the Rosicrucian Mask* [Wigston 1891]; perhaps we can even include *Hales vs. Petit*, which Shakespeare likely drew upon in framing the gravedigger's arguments surrounding Ophelia's suicide/death [Wilson 1993]. Quinnopolis, NY, whether they knew it or not (and they need not have known), was in line with a tradition of calling Shakespeare and *Hamlet* to the stand.

"Vs." must imply for us some prior relationship, a bond that has been ruptured, or at least not fulfilled — a failed copulative "*et.*" I conclude with a thought that deflects the attention I've devoted to the equivalence between the company and the play, in order to ask whether, through the course of the performance, we discern another undercurrent of opposition — a redefinition of "*versus.*" As the evening progressed, I had the lingering sense that the company was engaged in something beyond a conflict with *Hamlet*. Granted, their enactment understandably implied a coming to terms with the burden not only of *Hamlet*'s theatrical history but also, synecdochically, Shakespeare's cultural status writ large (hence a "David vs. Goliath" story: tiny theater company vs. iconic cultural figure). I was left wondering, however, whether the production further manifested a more profound quarrel between two visions of theater itself.

Just two weeks before viewing *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*, I sat through a very different version of *Hamlet*, put on by the Aquila Theatre Company (Richmond 2006). Their college-centric circuit clearly influenced many aspects of their production: an insolent Hamlet wore a university-style sweatshirt with "Wittenberg" knowingly printed on it; contemporary rock blared between scenes (Interpol's "Evil" [2004])? Yes, I recognized it, but I'm getting old). My seat-neighbor Gaywyn Moore commented afterwards that she sensed it was aiming to produce some strange amalgamation of a teen-inflected Kenneth Branagh and Ethan Hawke. In retrospect, her insight remains with me: movies such as these were Aquila's (and their presumed audience's) point of reference. Without making too broad (or too elegiac) of a generalization about theater today, I think it is fair to say that most professional companies feel an understandable pressure to compete with cinema (among many other media) when producing Shakespeare. Is the best way, however, to engage this opponent by playing on its terms? — large sets and backdrops, extensive costuming, "soundtracks" to performances, hyperkinetic blocking, and so forth . . . I'm not convinced.

There were indications to me that Quinnopolis had (perhaps inadvertently) staged a kind of competition with (or, at minimum, an acknowledgment of) a cinematic Shakespeare, found in a number of gestures, from the classically dyadic slapstick antics; to the placards, which functioned as a silent film's intertitles; to the camera on the tripod, which I take as a movie camera (although it may not technically be one, I think it's at least an honorary one when the actors eventually place the Groucho Marx glasses on it). "*Hamlet*"/(*Hamlet*), in this case, would be the eye of

film, watching unblinkingly as Quinnopolis attempts to recuperate a theatrical vocabulary without recourse to cinematic spectacle. This strikingly reverses the dynamic Stanley Cavell found at work in Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, wherein Cavell ("speaking for Hitchcock") uncovers the director "compet[ing] with Shakespeare in his handling of sources and in this way, or to this extent, to show myself to do whatever it is I do as well as Shakespeare does whatever it is he does" (Cavell 1981, 766). Now that Shakespeare has been so thoroughly cinematized, perhaps he needs to be re-theatricalized yet once more?

More than one reviewer (including this cluster's editor, Alice Dailey) has rightly singled out the scene of "Ophelia's drowning" as one of the most curiously moving moments of *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* (Dailey 2005). Quinnopolis, perhaps making a virtue of necessity, created a raw experience that managed to wring pathos out of little more than Ophelia's wet dress. Well, there was a little more — the actors plaintively sang "My Darling Clementine." I must confess that I can't get over the brilliance of placing this song here. The sardonic lyrics about a woman drowning ("alas, I was no swimmer / Neither was my Clementine") and her associated flowers ("There grow rosies and some posies / Fertilized by Clementine") so unnervingly fit with this production's macabre humor; it is a terrific credit to the intelligence of the company that they discovered this thematic conjunction. Even more provocatively, the song harkens back to the John Ford movie *My Darling Clementine* (1946), which itself includes a speech from *Hamlet* and revises that play, obliquely yet persistently (see Simmon 1996). (*A sound clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) As I have contended elsewhere, it is a difficult yet crucial task that we find ways to articulate relationships between Shakespeare and film in works where the Shakespearean corpus only fleetingly emerges in overt acknowledgment, yet nonetheless shapes deeper cinematic contours. We should be comparably attentive to instances where a film gets inflected back into a Shakespearean production — especially when an adaptation of *Hamlet* revivifies a theme song from a movie, which in turn allied itself with *Hamlet*.

Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet is entitled to figure out just how, onstage, "Hamlet returns" (the last placard on the music stand). Or maybe we can revise that last word to read, "reverses."

Notes

1. This anecdote appears in North's *Life of Solon*, and is cited in Nelson 1969, 30.

Online Resources

Aquila Theater Company Website for *Hamlet* (2006) [cited 28 October, 2006]. <http://www.aquilatheatre.com/nowplayinghamlet.html>.

Gould, Glenn, perf. Videorecording of "Goldberg Variations" [cited 28 October, 2006]. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJhs2tSoP5c>.

Internet Movie Database information for *City Lights* [cited 28 October, 2006]. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0021749/>.

Internet Movie Database information for *My Darling Clementine* [cited 28 October, 2006]. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038762/>.

Interpol. "Evil" [cited 28 October, 2006]. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf_D4Sblbno.

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