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FERNANDO CIONI*

Italian Alternative Shakespeares. Carmelo Bene's Appropriation of *Hamlet*

Abstract

Carmelo Bene, one of the leading 'alternative' and avant-garde Italian actors and directors, produced his first *Hamlet* in 1962, with a revival at the Spoleto Festival two years later. In 1967 Bene produced *Hamlet o le conseguenze della piet  filiale* [*Hamlet; or, the consequences of filial piety*] from and by William Shakespeare. In 1973 Bene produced a film from his first production (*Un Amleto di meno* [*One Hamlet Less*]). In 1975 he performed another *Hamlet*, a sort of conflation of Shakespeare, Laforgue, and himself. The performance was adapted for television in 1975. I will analyse these two productions starting from the script and the videos. After having performed other plays 'from' Shakespeare, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, Bene came back to *Hamlet* in the Eighties, producing his own *Hamlet*, both from Laforgue and Shakespeare. It became a film with the title of *Homelette for Hamlet*. In the Nineties, Bene wrote another *Hamlet*, whose script was published in his complete dramatic works. This article will take into consideration this 'strange encounter' with Shakespeare, made of a sort of love and hatred relationship. Bene himself claims that the only way to stage Shakespeare is to rewrite it. The process of rewriting and adaptation will be studied in the article, together with a close analysis of Bene's scripts and critical essays on Shakespeare.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Carmelo Bene; rewriting; appropriation

Prologue

In contemporary theatre, as in culture at large, the classics are updated, modernized, in order to free them from a static and inviolable literary tradition, which has been appointed (chosen as) *the* simulacrum of Western culture. The creative act, T.S. Eliot suggests, becomes a critical act as:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (1953: 15)

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The twentieth century, particularly the second half, witnesses many revisings and rewritings of Shakespeare's plays.¹ Revising Shakespeare is often a reading, a re-reading or a mis-reading. It is characterized by an appropriation of the Shakespearean text, hence the original is adapted, re-contextualized to the new contemporary sensibility. The rewriting is, strictly speaking, a transformation either within the same genre or from a different genre, which interprets the text from an ideological standpoint. The rewriting transforms the text and it is based on invention. The adaptation, on the contrary, does not modify the original meaning of the work, as it happens with the real rewriting. Cohn suggests that the "adaptation" is characterized by "substantial cuts of scenes, speeches, and speech assignments: much alteration of language; and at least one and usually several important (or scene-length) additions" (1976: 3); on the contrary, in what she defines as "transformation", it is the invention that prevails, and the characters "are often simplified or trundled through new events, with the ending scrapped" (4). These definitions are hardly applicable to texts such as Charles Marowitz's collages (1978), or Howard Brenton's *Measure for Measure* (1972), where the original text is maintained with cuts and additions, and where the transformation is the starting point. A text could be composed entirely of fragments of the original, but it is necessarily neither an adaptation nor a transformation (rewriting).²

Among the many examples of ideological rewritings of Shakespeare, one could quote Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* (1941), from *Richard III*, and *Coriolanus* (1955) or Edward Bond's *Lear* (1972) and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987) from *King Lear*. Re-readings, or better appropriations, are first of all musicals, such as George Abbott's *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938) from *The Comedy of Errors*; George Sidney's *Kiss me Kate* (1954), with Cole Porter's music, from *The Taming of the Shrew*; Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* (1957) from *Romeo and Juliet*, and the most recent *The Enchanted Island* (2012) by Jeremy Sams, a baroque pastiche from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. Among the most significant re-writings are to be mentioned those which update and modernize the Shakespearean text, such as Charles Marowitz's plays (*Hamlet*, 1963/65; *Macbeth*, 1970; *The Shrew*, 1972; *Othello*, 1973; *Variations on the Merchant of Venice*, 1977); those which try to put the text in its historical context (Arnold Wesker's *Shylock*, 1976/90; John Barton's and Peter Hall's *The War of the Roses*, 1963, which gathers the first tetralogy,

¹ For a list of Shakespearean adaptations, rewritings, and localizations, see Fischlin and Fortier 2000; Scarlini 2001.

² For example, Christopher Hampton's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses. An Adaptation from Laclos* (1985) is not a rewriting only because of the invention of the last scene, but because the playwright moves the story near to the French revolution, making Merteuil's punishment coincide with that of her social class, which will be swept away by the Revolution (Cioni 1999). On adaptation, rewriting, and localization, see also Tuck Rozett 1994; Massai 2005; Hutcheon 2006.

Henry VI parts 1, 2, and 3, and Richard III); those which de-historicize it (all the musicals mentioned above, and Eugene Ionesco's *The King is Dead*, 1963, from *Richard II*). The rewriting often rises as a contraposition (ideological, critical, historical) to another text, as its revisitation, or merely as a free creation departing from a source, a hypotext, considered more as a pretext than a pre-text.

1. Readings and Misreadings of *Hamlet*: The Case of Carmelo Bene

Io sono già un classico perché vivo nell'eternità,
sono eternamente vivo.³

all reading is misreading . . .
to live, the poet must misinterpret the father, by the crucial
act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.⁴

Carmelo Bene produced his first *Hamlet* in 1962, with a revival at the Spoleto Festival two years later. In 1967 Bene staged *Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale* [*Hamlet, or the consequences of filial piety*] by and after William Shakespeare. In 1973 he produced a film from his first production (*Un Amleto di meno* [*One Hamlet Less*]). In 1974 he performed another *Hamlet*, a sort of conflation of Shakespeare, Laforgue, and himself. In the same year, he adapted his *Hamlets* for television. The theatre productions are completely autonomous, as the TV adaptation was specifically thought for television.

After having performed other plays 'from' Shakespeare, such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello*, Bene went back to *Hamlet* in the Eighties, producing his own *Hamlet*, from Laforgue and Shakespeare. It became a TV film with the title of *Homelette for Hamlet* (1987). In the Nineties Bene wrote another *Hamlet*, titled *Hamlet Suite*, a collage version from Laforgue, whose script was published in his complete dramatic works (1995).⁵

³ Bene, qtd in Capitini (2014: 51). [I am already a classic because I leave in the eternity, I am eternally alive]. All the translations from Italian are mine.

⁴ I use misreading after Harold Bloom (1975: 19). This definition is perfect for Carmelo Bene's theatre and drama. Bene grafts his theatre onto Shakespeare's canon with that anxiety suggested by Bloom. See also Fink (1990: 171-83).

⁵ Theatre: *Amleto*, Rome, Teatro Laboratorio (1962); *Amleto*, Spoleto Festival (1964); *Basta, con un "Vi amo" mi ero quasi promesso. Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale, da e di Shakespeare e Jules Laforgue*, Rome, Teatro Arlecchino (1965); *Amleto o le conseguenze della pietà filiale, da Jules Laforgue secondo Carmelo Bene*, Rome, Teatro Beat (1967); *Amleto di Carmelo Bene (da Shakespeare e Laforgue)*, Prato, Teatro Metastasio (1974); *Homelette for Hamlet, operetta inqualificabile da J. Laforgue*, Bari, Teatro Piccinini (1987); *Hamlet Suite. Spettacolo concerto da J. Laforgue*, Verona, Festival Shakespeareiano, Teatro Romano (1994). Cinema: *Un Amleto di meno* (1973); TV: *Amleto di Carmelo Bene, da Shakespeare a Laforgue* (1974); *Homelette for Hamlet, operetta inqualificabile da J. Laforgue* (1987); Radio: *Amleto da Shakespeare* (1974); CD: *Hamlet Suite* (1994).

Carmelo Bene's 'strange encounters' with Hamlet (the character) and *Hamlet* (the play) cover all his career. It is an 'encounter' where love and hatred for Shakespeare clash one against the other:

Dall'*Hamlet*, *Hommelette*, all'*Hamlet suite* . . . , l'operetta del principe arti-stoide è il refrain delle vite che ho svissuto. La frequentazione assidua, per-secutoria del bell'argomento (cinque esecuzioni sceniche sempre cangianti – '61, '67, '74, '87, '94 . . . –, un film ('72'), due diversissime edizioni televisive e registrazioni radiofoniche, audiocassette e compact-disc) mi "definisce" *Am-letto* del *novecento*. (Bene 1995: 1351)

[From *Hamlet*, *Homelette*, to *Hamlet Suite* . . . , the operetta of the artsy prince is the refrain of the lives I have mis-lived. The constant and persecutory frequentation of this wonderful topic (five ever-changing performanc-es – 1961, 1967, 1974, 1987, 1994 . . . –, a film (1972), two amusing TV and ra-dio versions, audiocassettes and CD) 'defines me' as the *Hamlet* of the 20th century.]

In his reading of the play, Carmelo Bene wipes out the rhetorical com-plexity of *Hamlet*, focusing on the signifier through a deconstruction pro-cedure which affects all the aspects of the play: psychological, rhetorical, structural, and theatrical. "In *One Hamlet Less*, it's the thinking that has been rejected. I have 'disannoyed' Hamlet with the tragedy of thought. The refusal and the conscience of life are necessary".⁶ Bene's *Hamlet* is a ba-roque reading of the play, where every element, from the chromaticity to the light and from the film camera to the use of the voice, does not unrav-el as the result of a logical and dramatic procedure, but through a process of addition/subtraction. This process will be driven to the extremes in his *Richard III* (1995: 755-831) where "what is amputated, what is subtracted, is the whole royal and princely system" of the play, and where "only Richard III and the women are retained" (Deleuze 1993: 205).

⁶ "Dans *Un Hamlet de moins*, c'est la pensée qui est refusée. J'ai 'désemmerdé' Hamlet de la tragédie de la pensée. Il faut le refus, la conscience du vide" (1976: 5).

2. *Un Amleto di meno* (1973)⁷

The 1973 film *Un Amleto di meno* [*One Hamlet Less*]⁸ is a clear example of Carmelo Bene's post-modern approach to *Hamlet*. The original play suffers a process of amputation, subtraction, and addition. Shakespeare's text is conflated with Laforgue's morality, in a performance where music, mimicry, and setting form an ensemble characterized by a pastiche, which is the triumph of postmodern.

The film mixes up different genres and is partly more televisual than cinematic. Carmelo Bene's starting point is the impossibility of translating the theatrical language and the theatrical performance into other audio and/or aural forms, such as television, cinema, radio. In one of his provocative statements he argues that:

Visto che in teatro si fa della cattiva televisione e in cinema si fa del cattivo teatro e della cattiva televisione insieme, allora si scende a vedere che cos'è veramente la televisione. (Bene 1978: 161)

[Since there is bad television in the theatre, bad theatre and bad television in the cinema, and worse theatre and worse cinema on television, it's time to see what television really means.]

Both the film and the TV adaptation are at the same time televisual and cinematic. Once again in a provocative way, Bene argues that "big or small screens do not exist. Only great and small minds exist".⁹

The film was successfully presented at Cannes Film Festival in 1973. As Roberto Trovato (Baiardo and Trovato 1996: 55) suggests, the film can be divided into four parts: the first three parts utilize scenes from act 1, 2, and 3 of Shakespeare; the last part focuses on Claudius's and Laertes's scene (4.8) and on Yorick's scene (5.1). The TV adaptation follows the same scheme, it uses partly the same costumes, but the set is less baroque, with a particular

⁷ The film was written and directed by Carmelo Bene. Scenery, costumes, and music by Carmelo Bene; with Carmelo Bene (Hamlet), Lydia Mancinelli (Kate), Isabella Russo (Ofelia), Franco Leo (Orazio), Luciana Cante (Gertrude), Alfredo Vincenti (Claudio), Luigi Mezzanotte (Laerte), Pippo Tumminelli (Polonio). The TV adaptation, titled *Amleto di Carmelo Bene (da Shakespeare a Laforgue)* [*Carmelo Bene's Hamlet (from Shakespeare to Laforgue)*], was broadcast by RAI2 in 1978. It is six minutes shorter than the film.

⁸ The script of the film was published in French in *L'avant-scene cinema* (1976). All the quotations from the film have been translated from the French script. The script reflects the film before the final cut and differs, sometimes substantially, from it. The script has been checked with the film and integrated when needed.

⁹ "Non esistono grandi e piccoli schermi, esistono grandi e piccoli cervelli" (Bene 1978: 165). In Italian "grande schermo" stands for cinema, "small screen" for television.

use of black and white that can be seen properly taking off the colour from the TV set. As Adriano Aprà (1995: 162) has noted, the bodies of the actors come out from the absolute white, whereas the spotlight makes the faces of the actors come out from the black background.

The film opens on a seashore, reminiscent of Laforgue's actors arriving by the sea:¹⁰

Ah! les voici.

A gauche, sur les berges d'Elseneur, il aperçoit (qui n'a entendu parler de ses étonnants yeux d'hirondelle de mer?) un attroupement qui ne peut être que ces comédiens.

Le passeur dans son large bachot les embarquait; un roquet aboyait à ces oripeaux; un gamin s'était arrêté de faire des ricochets. (Laforgue 1894: 7)

["Ah, here they come." To the left, on the shores of Elsinore, he sees – and who has not heard of those marvelous sea-gull eyes? – a rowdy group which must unmistakably be the players. The Ferryman takes them into his big boats; a cur yaps at their faded finery; an urchin stops skipping stones across the water. (Laforgue 1956: 108)]

Then the camera moves towards the queen and the king:

Sur un fond de vaguelettes qui avancent doucement sur un rivage marin, les premiers mots du générique: Un film de Carmelo Bene. Une couronne mortuaire dans l'obscurité. Hamlet hoche la tête. Sortant d'une zone noire, éclairée par une lumière verte phosphorescente, la reine Gertrude est en train de se faire chevaucher par le vieux roi Hamlet. L'action est vue de plus près. (Bene 1976: 7)

[In the background a choppy sea is lapping gently the shore. Credits: A film by Carmelo Bene. In the dark, a funeral wreath. Hamlet shakes his head. In a dark side, illuminated by a green phosphorescent light, Queen Gertrude is making love to the old king Hamlet. Zoom on the scene.]¹¹

During this scene a voice-over plays the lines of the Ghost:¹²

¹⁰ In Laforgue the water, or rather "the sky reflected in the water", is seen as "the starting point for his [Hamlet] meditations and his aberrations" (1956: 104). The raging sea has always been associated with Hamlet's doubts and his inaction: see Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), where the Danish prince speaks the "to be or not to be" monologue in front of the sea, or Grigori Kozintev's film adaptation (1964) of the play, where Hamlet speaks the monologue nearby a raging sea.

¹¹ All the translations from the French script of the film are mine.

¹² All the quotations from *Hamlet* are from the Arden Third Series edition (Shakespeare 2006).

I am thy father's spirit [nine times; 1.5.9]
 If thou didst ever love me [seven times; 1.5.23]
 Revenge my murder [six times; 1.5.25]
 Adieu [eight times; 1.5.91]
 Remember me [three times; 1.5.91]

Hamlet and Claudius, from different sides, witness the scene. As the old king Hamlet falls asleep, Claudius puts the poison in his ear. Hamlet, disgusted, hits over and over a rose bush, symbolizing both the passion and the female sexual organ. This image of Hamlet's destructive impulse is taken from Laforgue:

Jeune et infortuné prince! Ces étranges impulsions destructives le prennent souvent à la gorge, depuis le trop, trop irrégulier décès de son père . . . Il arracha leurs ailes aux papillons futiles, décapita les limaces, trancha les pattes de derrière aux crapauds et grenouilles . . . cinglant à droite à gauche mille fleurs. (1894: 19)

[Unfortunate Prince! *He has often been in the grip of these strange destructive impulses* since his father's irregular demise. . . . He tore the wings from frivolous butterflies, decapitated snails, sliced off the hindfeet of toads and frogs, . . . *slashing hundreds of flowers right and left.* (1956: 116; my emphasis)]

The prologue, in black and white except the framings on Hamlet, ends with the cry of the Ghost, leaving the scene to Hamlet who, unlike Shakespeare's play, seems to forget his duty to punish his father's murder and to take back his throne. Bene follows Laforgue's story,¹³ Hamlet decides to leave his homeland to go to Paris and live with his beloved Kate, the leading actress of the comedians' troupe arrived at court.¹⁴ The whole story appears to him as a good subject for the play to be performed in front of the king and the queen:

Mon sentiment premier était de me remettre l'horrible, horrible, horrible événement, pour m'exalter la piété filiale, faire crier son dernier cri au sang de mon père, me réchauffer le plat de la vengeance! Et voilà! je pris goût à l'œuvre, moi! j'oubliai peu à peu qu'il s'agissait de mon père assassiné, de ma mère prostituée, de mon trône . . . Je m'en allais bras dessus, bras dessous avec les fictions d'un beau sujet . . . Car c'est un beau sujet! (Bene 1976: 7)

¹³In Laforgue, Hamlet and Yorick are stepbrothers. After the mousetrap Hamlet forgets his vengeance and decides to go to Paris on tour with the comedians' troupe arrived at Elsinore. He has forgotten Ophelia and now he is in love with Kate, the leading actress of the company. Before leaving, Hamlet brings some flowers to his father's tomb, but Laertes kills him.

¹⁴The leading actor's name is William.

[My first feeling was to remember the horrible, horrible, horrible event, in order to exalt my filial piety, to make my father's blood cry its last cry, to warm over my plate of vengeance. And then I began to take a liking to my little work. I forgot little by little that it concerned my murdered father, my prostituted mother, my throne. I went along arm in arm with the fictions of a lovely subject: and the subject is certainly lovely.]

The passage is almost taken *verbatim* from Laforgue:

Mon sentiment premier était de me remettre l'horrible, horrible, horrible événement, pour m'exalter la piété filiale, me rendre la chose dans toute l'irrécusabilité du verbe artiste, faire crier son dernier cri au sang de mon père, me réchauffer le plat de la vengeance ! Et voilà, je pris goût à l'œuvre, moi ! J'oubliai peu à peu qu'il s'agissait de mon père assassiné, volé de ce qu'il lui restait à vivre dans ce monde précieux (pauvre homme, pauvre homme!), de ma mère prostituée (vision qui m'a saccagé la Femme et m'a poussé à faire mourir de honte et de détérioration la céleste Ophélie!), de mon trône enfin! Je m'en allais bras dessus, bras dessous avec les fictions d'un beau sujet. (1894: 8)

[My first intuition was to restage the horrible, horrible event, to exalt my filial piety, and translate everything with the full undeniability of artistic speech, to wring again from my father his last bloody cry, to warm over my plate of vengeance! And then I began to take a liking to my little work! I forgot little by little that it concerned my murdered father, robbed of the years he had left in this precious world (poor man, poor man!). I forgot that it concerned my mother in her role of prostitute (a vision which has ruined all Womanhood in my eyes and driven me to let heavenly Ophelia die of shame and deterioration), that it concerned, in a word, my right to the throne. I went merrily along arm in arm with all the fictionalized amplifications of a lovely subject. For it is certainly a lovely subject. (1956: 108-9)]

As Hamlet, voice-off, pronounces his last words the credits roll again: "Un Amleto di Meno"; music: Stravinsky's "Scherzo à la russe"; close-up on the actors' trunks where the actors are attaching two labels "Paris" and "Express". In the following exchange with Kate, Hamlet abandons his role, his character, affirming his firm intention not to be Hamlet anymore:¹⁵

¹⁵ This cancellation of the role of Hamlet and, consequently, of the whole drama, can also be found in Heiner Müller's *The Hamletmachine*. The play opens with the actor saying: "I am not Hamlet" (Müller 1984: 53); in the fourth section the actor who plays Hamlet says "I am not Hamlet. I play no role anymore. My words have nothing more to say to me. My thoughts suck the blood of images. My drama is cancelled. Behind me the scenery is being taken down. By people who are not interested in my drama, for people, to whom it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to me either. I'm not playing along anymore" (56).

HAMLET. Et cela n'est rien! Je te lirai tout! On ira vivre à Paris. Je t'aime, Je t'aime, Je t'aime. . . . (Bene 1976: 8)

[And this is nothing! I'm reading everything to you! We are going to live in Paris. I love you, I love you, I love you. . . . *I don't give a damn about my throne. The dead are dead. We will see the world! Paris, my life, it's just you and me.*]¹⁶

The next scene is taken from Shakespeare (1.2.160-254).¹⁷ Unlike Shakespeare, the dialogue takes place in the middle of the preparations for the performance, that last ninety seconds before Horatio addresses the prince. Hamlet, faithful to his new role, does not seem to take too seriously the lines he speaks. Conversely, Horatio is the one who wants the play as Shakespeare wrote it. Hamlet speaks the lines following a script, whereas Horatio is the guardian of the tradition, he will be the one to whom Hamlet will ask to speak the most famous lines, including the "To be or not be" monologue.

The ghost suddenly appears during the settling of the theatrical space:

(On voit soudain un masque menaçant.)

VOIX OFF. Souviens-toi de moi! Souviens-toi de moi! Souviens-toi de moi!

(. . . Hamlet se précipite vers la caméra. Nouveau plan : Hamlet . . . Rapide panoramique vers le masque.)

VOIX OFF. Souviens-toi de moi!

(L'espace est maintenant sombre: Hamlet tourne sur lui-même comme étourdi. Plan frontal du masque.)

VOIX OFF. Souviens-toi de moi!

(. . . Hamlet s'agenouille. Le masque se fond légèrement. Face à nous, . . . Hamlet gratte une allumette et se penche pour allumer une bougie.)

HAMLET. Oh pardon, pardon! Tu me pardonnes, mon père, n'est-ce pas? Au fond tu me connais . . .

(Hamlet soufflé la bougie et c'est l'obscurité totale.) (Bene 1976: 10)

[(Sudden menacing mask.) // VOICE OFF. Remember me! Remember me! Remember me! // (. . . Hamlet rushes towards the camera. Close-up on Hamlet. . . Fast close-up on the mask.) // VOICE OFF. Remember me! // (The space is now dim. Hamlet spins round, bewildered. Close-up on the mask.) // VOICE OFF. Remember me! // (. . . Hamlet kneels. The voice fades away. The space is still dim. Hamlet, facing the audience, strikes a match and lights a candle.) // HAMLET. Forgive me, forgive me, won't you, Father? You do really understand me, I know . . . // (Hamlet puts out the candle. Dark.)]

¹⁶ The last sentence of Hamlet's lines, in italics, is not in the French script. See also Laforgue (1956: 131).

¹⁷ Bene cuts thirty lines of the exchange between Hamlet and Horatio.

The mask of the Ghost, half-face and half-skull, with a moustache and a horned helmet, is reminiscent of Salvador Dalí's self-portraits. The reference to the surrealist painter suits the surrealistic scenery, and especially all the settings of the theatrical space throughout the film. Hamlet's last lines, and his behaviour, are taken *verbatim* from Laforgue when Hamlet "throws himself on his knees before the portrait of his father and kisses the feet depicted on the cold canvas" (1956: 109).¹⁸

The nunnery scene is preceded by a scene where Polonius helps Gertrude to undress herself. During the scene, Polonius whispers her Freud's remarks about Oedipus and the Oedipic love:

In my experience, which is already extensive, the chief part in the mental lives of all children who later become psychoneurotics is played by their parents. . . . This discovery is confirmed by a legend that has come down to us from classical antiquity: a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity. What I have in mind is the legend of King Oedipus and Sophocles' drama which bears his name.

Oedipus, son of Laius, King of Thebes, and of Jocasta, was exposed as an infant because an oracle had warned Laius that the still unborn child would be his father's murderer. The child was rescued, and grew up as a would be his father's murderer. The child was rescued, and grew up as a prince in an alien court, until, in doubts as to his origin, *he too questioned the oracle and was warned to avoid his home since he was destined to murder his father and take his mother in marriage. On the road leading away from what he believed was his home, he met King Laius and slew him in a sudden quarrel. He came next to Thebes and solved the riddle set him by the Sphinx who barred his way. Out of gratitude the Thebans made him their king and gave him Jocasta's hand in marriage. He reigned long in peace and honour, and she who, unknown to him, was his mother bore him two sons and two daughters. Then at last a plague broke out and the Thebans made enquiry once more of the oracle. It is at this point that Sophocles' tragedy opens. The messengers bring back the reply that the plague will cease when the murderer of Laius has been driven from the land.*

But he, where is he? Where shall now be read
The fading record of this ancient guilt?

The action of the play consists in nothing other than the process of revealing, with cunning delays and ever-mounting excitement—a process that can be likened to the work of a psycho-analysis—that *Oedipus himself is*

¹⁸ "[S]e jeter à genoux devant le portrait de son père dont il baise les pieds sur la toile froide" (1894: 9).

the murderer of Laius, but further that he is the son of the murdered man and of Jocasta. Appalled at the abomination which he has unwittingly perpetrated, Oedipus blinds himself and forsakes his home. The oracle has been fulfilled.

...

It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father. Our dreams convince us that that is so. (Freud 2010: 278-9, 280; in italics the parts used by Bene)

This quotation is an attempt to rid the play of Freud's reading, which has affected the interpretation of Hamlet/*Hamlet* for a long time. Bene emphasizes this when he writes: "Someone has taken seriously this Freud in *Hamlet*. Actually, I put these words in Polonius's mouth to denounce him... to say: Out! This must be out of here".¹⁹

This scene is another example of Bene's process of subtraction/addition. In the film the scene is set in a library covered with book sheets with half-naked nuns who symbolize, through the showing of their body and their behaviour, corruption and debasement:

Panoramique découvrant le nonnes nues dans un grand décor de livres empilés. Kate, apeurée, s'en va rejoindre les autres. Hamlet s'approche. Gertrude porte une coiffe rouge. . . . Hamlet s'éloigne. On le retrouve dans une lumière sombre et il neige. Plongée sur Orazio qui tourne brusquement la tête. Au-dessus de lui, Hamlet se détourne. Il donne une claque sur les fesses d'une nonne. Orazio, sous la neige, tourne encore la tête vers le haut. Hamlet feuillette un livre dans la bibliothèque. Il est maintenant sous la neige et lance avec mépris un autre papier à Orazio. Le papier tombe sur la neige près de Orazio qui le ramasse et commence à le lire "Être ou ne pas être, telle est la question." Hamlet traverse vite la bibliothèque. (Bene 1976: 16)

[Pan shot discovering the naked nuns in a setting full of books. Kate, scared, joins the others. Hamlet approaches. Kate wears a red headdress. . . . Hamlet leaves. He reappears in a dim light. It's snowing. It falls over Horatio who suddenly turns his head. Above him Hamlet leaves. He claps on a nun's buttocks. Horatio, in the snow, turns again his head up. Hamlet leafs through a book in the library. Now he is in the snow and throws with contempt another paper to Horatio. The paper falls on the snow near Horatio who picks it up and starts reading it: "To be or not to be, that is the question". Hamlet crosses quickly the library.]

¹⁹ "Qualcuno ha preso sul serio questo Freud nell'*Amleto*. Ma io lo ho messo in bocca a Polonio proprio per denunciarlo... per dire: Fuori! questo qui deve restare fuori" (Bene 1978: 169).

Hamlet is surrounded by the nuns, and a voice-over prompts him, correcting him when he does not remember or does not play his lines properly. The original text is played with insertions from the “To be or not to be” monologue, and Bene/Amleto ironical overlappings: at a certain point, Horatio picks up a letter where Hamlet has written his monologue and, after playing the first line, he bursts out laughing. Amleto/Bene replies “to have or not to have, that is the question”.²⁰ This line is taken from the Circe episode in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where Stephen, Bloom, and Lynch go to Bella Cohen’s brothel. In this episode, which also suggested to Carmelo Bene the setting of the scene, there are references to *Hamlet* (“To have or not to have that is the question”, 1960: 502; “Aha! I know you, granmer! Hamlet, revenge!”, 524), to *Othello* (“The beast that has two backs at midnight”, 504; “I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter / and the Moor are now making the beast with two / backs”, *Othello*, 1.1.117-9) and even to Shakespeare who appears reflected in a mirror invoking Jago (“Iagogo! How my Oldfellow chokit Thursdaysmum. Iagogo!”, 508).

Hamlet, in the snow, sees someone faraway: “*King Claudius is also in the snow, escorted by Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, with their heads bandaged*”.²¹ The exchange between the King and the two Knights is taken from the opening of 3.1 and is followed by a close-up on Horatio who reads the paper thrown to him by Hamlet: “to die: to sleep / No more, and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousands natural shocks” (3.1.59-61), and then comments on it with sarcasm: “That’s crazy!”.²²

The nunnery scene is set as a rehearsal with Ophelia dressed as a nun, half-naked, and Kate, who prompts all the lines to Hamlet and speaks Ophelia’s lines:

KATE. Comment s’est porté Votre Honneur, tous ces jours?
(*Hamlet fait plier Ophélie en riant, tandis que Kate est toujours là coiffée de rouge.*)

HAMLET. (*off*) Je vous remercie humblement. Bien, bien, bien.
(*On voit Hamlet gifler Kate-Ophélie qui tombe par terre.*)

KATE. [GERTRUDE] Monseigneur, j’ai de vous des souvenirs qui je brûlais de vous rendre, les voici.

(*Hamlet, pendant ces temps, cherche encore à faire tomber Kate par terre.*)

HAMLET. (*à Kate*) Je ne vous ai jamais rien donné.

(*Kate mord le doigt d’Hamlet. Hamlet cherche à éloigner Ophélie qui s’accroche et voudrait l’embrasser.*) (Bene 1976: 16)

²⁰ “Avoir ou ne pas avoir, voilà la question!” (Bene 1976: 16).

²¹ “*Le roi Claude est lui aussi sous la neige, escorté par Guildenstern et Rosencranz, la tête enveloppée de bandages*” (Bene 1976: 16).

²² “Cose da pazzi!” This line is not in the French script.

[KATE. How does your honour for this many a day? // (*Hamlet makes Ophelia bend, laughing, while Kate is always there headdressed in red.*) // HAMLET. (*voice off*) I humbly thank you, well, well, well. // (*Hamlet slaps Ophelia who falls down.*) // KATE.²³ My lord, I have remembrances of yours // That I have longed long to redeliver. // (*Meanwhile, Hamlet tries again to make Ophelia fall down.*) // HAMLET. (*to Kate*) I never gave you aught. // (*Kate bites Hamlet's finger. Hamlet tries to get Ophelia away from him. Ophelia holds on him and would like to hug him.*)]

Then, the king asks for information about the performance (“Do the rehearsals go ahead? Will the performance take place or not?”), the First Knight assures him (“It will, it will”),²⁴ and the king invites him to continue to delight Hamlet:

1^{ER} CHEVALIER. Il m'a chargé de prier vos Majestés d'y assister.

CLAUDIUS. De tout mon cœur, gentils amis! Aiguisez son ardeur en encourageant sa volonté de se divertir.

[FIRST KNIGHT.²⁵ He beseeched me to entreat your majesties / To hear and see the matter. // CLAUDIUS. With all my heart, it doth much content me / To hear him so inclined. / Good gentlemen, give him a further edge / And drive his purpose into deep delights. (3.1.22-7)]

The rehearsal also continues with Kate who speaks only a line (“A la maison”, “At home”). The rehearsal ends with “I say we will have no more marriages; those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go” (3.1.148-50).²⁶ It follows the real performance of the scene, which is not the one we have seen in the rehearsals, but a dialogue between a husband and his wife caught with another man in La Madeleine, the most social church of Paris. The story is taken, literally, from Laforgue’s poem *Complainte de l’époux outragé* (“Complaint of the Outraged Husband”, Laforgue 1958: 66-9) and develops the theme of fidelity, which is one of the major topics of Bene’s play: (un)fidelity to Shakespeare, to Laforgue, to himself.

The scene in the TV adaptation follows the film script, with some displacements of scenes (for example the First Knight speaking with Claudius is set before Hamlet and Kate rehearse the nunnery scene, whereas in

²³ The French script assigns, wrongly, these lines to Gertrude. In emphasis the right speech prefix as it is in the movie.

²⁴ “CLAUDE. Est-ce que les répétitions se poursuivent? Et cette représentation, elle aura lieu ou non? // 1^{ER} CHEVALIER. Si, si”.

²⁵ In Shakespeare the lines are assigned to Polonius.

²⁶ These lines are not in the French script, but they are spoken, in Italian, in the movie.

the film the dialogue is divided into three parts throughout the scene). The main difference is the absence of the naked nuns: Hamlet rehearses the scene with Kate, and Ophelia, half-naked, listens to it. Then, Hamlet speaks his lines to Ophelia.

The film ends with Hamlet who, before leaving for Paris, wants to go to his father's tomb:

Kate, attends-moi une minute. C'est pour la tombe de mon père qui a été assassiné, le pauvre homme! Je te raconterai. Le temps de cueillir une fleur qui nous servira de signer quand nous relirons mon drame et que nous serons forcés de l'interrompre dans des baisers. (Bene 1976: 56)

[Wait me a minute, Kate. It's for the tomb of my father, who has been murdered, the poor man. I'll tell you all about it later. I'll be back in a moment. Just to pick up a flower, a simple paper flower, that we can use as a bookmark when we read my drama and we are forced to interrupt the reading to kiss each other.]

On his way to the cemetery, he meets Laertes who first stabs him and then kisses him on his mouth calling him "Comrade". Kate, seen Hamlet dead, comes back to her fellow comedians. All the characters, including Claudius, Gertrude and Laertes lock themselves into the actors' trunks. The film ends with knights approaching the throne where a faceless knight takes off his helmet and wears a crown. Wagner's music from *Tannhäuser* plays in the background.

In the TV adaptation, after Claudius and Gertrude lock themselves into the actor's trunk, a knight in armour closes the trunks, then he takes off his helmet: he has no head, he wears a crown that seems floating over his body. Wagner's music from *Tannhäuser* starts, the knights fade out, followed by the closing titles.

3. *One Hamlet Less* ²⁷

According to Carmelo Bene, each performance of *Hamlet* reduces by one unit the number of its possible performances; it is also another step forward in the removal of the text which Bene continuously tries to deconstruct, through a process of subtraction, which, in Gilles Deleuze's word, is a process of amputation (1993: 204). By amputating parts of the text, by reducing and cancelling the functions of the characters, Bene builds up the

²⁷ The title is also a quotation from the closing lines of Laforgue: "One Hamlet the less does not mean the end of the human race. Of that you can be sure" (1956: 137). ("Un Hamlet de moins; la race n'en est pas perdue, qu'on se le dise!", 1894: 50).

play on different levels, both from a proairectic and a dramaturgical standpoint. He develops, as is the case with Mercutio in his *Romeo and Juliet*, unexpected solutions. Gilles Deleuze notes how “in Shakespeare’s tragedy, Mercutio was only a virtuality. Mercutio dies soon in Shakespeare, but in Bene’s play he does not want to die because shortly he will make up the new play” (204).

The 1962 *Hamlet* at “Teatro Laboratorio”, for instance, presents a three-fold perspective:

Scale buie e copioni sui leggii (copioni di *Amleto* o di Amleto?). In primo piano Amleto. Di fronte a lui Laerte. Secondo piano, in salire: Ofelia, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, Polonio, servi, la regina, il re. Terzo piano in salire: Marcello, Bernardo, Orazio, Francesco, lo Spettro, i merli, un cielo notturno di un verde indefinito. (Bene 1995: 632)

[Dark stairs, scripts on the lecterns (scripts of *Hamlet* or Hamlet’s scripts?). At the first level Hamlet, opposite him Laertes. At the second level, in order, Ophelia, Guildenstern, Rosencrantz, Polonius, the servants, the Queen, the King. At the third level, in order, Marcellus, Barnardo, Horatio, Francisco, the Ghost, the merlons. A nocturnal indeterminate green sky.]

Each from their own level, careless of the other two, the characters play Shakespeare’s lines throwing them to the audience. Hamlet, Claudius, Marcellus, Francisco, and Barnardo set up a vocal ensemble overlapping their lines:

AMLETO. Oh così questa troppo solida carne si fondesse
[HAMLET. O that this too too solid flesh would melt (1.2.129)]

CLAUDIO. Benché la memoria sia ancor verde del nostro caro fratello Amleto re...

[CLAUDIUS. Though yet of Hamlet our dear Brother’s death / The memory be green (1.2.1-2)]

ORAZIO. Parla
[HORATIO. Speak to me (1.1.132); O speak (137)]

Similarly, in the third act, Hamlet, Claudius, and Guildenstern set up an ensemble that is a collage from *Hamlet* 3.1:

AMLETO. Essere...
CLAUDIO. E non potete voi per via indiretta, trargli di bocca...
AMLETO. ...o non essere... Sognare, forse.
GUILDENSTERN. È un pazzo furibondo, svicola sempre...
CLAUDIO. ...che peso è questo per la mia coscienza...
AMLETO. ...coscienza fa di tutti noi vigliacchi...

[HAMLET. To be . . . (3.1.56) // CLAUDIUS. And can you by no drift of conference . . . (3.1.1) // Get from him. . . (3.1.1-2) // HAMLET. . . or not to be . . . Perchance to dream (3.1.56, 64) // GUILDENSTERN. With a crafty madness keeps aloof. . . (3.1.8) // CLAUDIUS. . . How smart a lash that speech doth give to my conscience! (3.1.50) // HAMLET. . . conscience does make cowards of us all . . . (3.1.83)]

Bene's journey through the different performances of *his* Hamlet and through the different versions of *Hamlet* is a process of 'dis-Hamletization' where all the certainties of the original are cancelled. These certainties, Carmelo Bene writes (1995: 1354), can be summed up with the following lines:

Questo dramma per me non è nulla.
L'ho concepito e vi ho lavorato fra
repellenti preoccupazioni domestiche.
(ibid.)

[This play is nothing to me / I have conceived and worked on it / Among
ghastly domestic concerns.]

This process of 'dis-Hamletization' arrives first at Laforgue version, then at a collage version Shakespeare/Bene/Laforgue, and finally at *Hamlet Suite*, which Bene considers his final *Hamlet*:²⁸

Lo spettacolo testuale di questa *Hamlet Suite* è esecuzione capitale e *somma* di ogni *Amleto di meno*; è *versione-collage* da tutta l'opera (*moralità e poesia*) di Jules Laforgue, "tradita" dalla composizione "ritmica" e, a volte, *librettistica* della necessità scenica-musicale. (Ibid.)

[The performance of this *Hamlet Suite* is a crucial performance and the *sum* of every *One Hamlet Less*; it is a *collage-version* from Jules Laforgue's works (*moralities and poetry*), betrayed by the *rhythmical* composition, sometimes *libretto-like*, of the stage and musical need.]

It is this 'need' that drove Carmelo Bene to the rewriting, which he considers not as an interpretation or a reading (misreading), but a real 'critical essay': "As I have said many times, I do not stage Shakespeare, or my inter-

²⁸ Roberto Tessari has suggested how Carmelo Bene's *Hamlet*, "a contamination of Shakespeare and Laforgue", is a scenario where "the actor-Hamlet sets the Elizabethan tragedy after Laforgue" (1977: 1389). Armando Petrini notes how "the parody of the possibility of the art, present in Laforgue, becomes in Carmelo Bene the parody of the possibility of the theatre and of the interpretation" (2004: 72). See also Magris (2014: 362).

pretation or reading of Shakespeare, but a critical essay on Shakespeare".²⁹ He believed that the artist is not so dissimilar from the critic and that he re-writes because he is a critic and an artist:

L'artista non è altri dal critico, io mi vergogno di scrivere. Mi diverte, mi appassiona riscrivere per la semplicissima ragione che mi ritengo un critico, un artista. Critica è l'ironia più la lirica. Non sarà mai concepibile una critica che non sia al tempo stesso operazione critica, ma operazione critica taumaturgica, cioè opera d'arte di scrittura, di passato, presente avvenire, e la critica si riscrive perché non si può scrivere. Io riscivo perché non sono Eva e tanto meno Adamo, non sta forse scritto che gli ultimi saranno i primi? Riscivo soprattutto perché mi vergogno di appartenere al mio tempo, quando saprò imitarmi sarò morto. (Bene 1970: 140)

[The artist is not dissimilar from the critic. I am ashamed to write. It makes me happy; I am keen to rewrite, simply because I think I am a critic, and an artist. Criticism is irony plus lyric. Criticism will never be conceivable as a critical process, but as thaumaturgical operation, that is a masterpiece of writing, made of past, present, and future. Criticism re-writes itself because it cannot be written. I write because I am neither Eve nor Adam. Is it not written that the last will be the first? I rewrite above all because I am ashamed to belong to my age. When I can imitate myself, I will be dead.]

4. Epilogue

Theatre during its history has presented multiple and incomplete texts, it has made us perceive a dramaturgical practice which is always changeable, which adapts itself to the media at its disposal and to the cultural context. Shakespeare, as Gary Taylor suggests, "reinvented himself almost every day" (1989: 3); similarly, everyone who has approached his plays has done the same. Staging Shakespeare means also reinventing him. Twentieth-century culture raises Shakespeare as a simulacrum, a simulacrum to be quoted, modified, reinvented, rewritten. This is because, as Peter Brook has suggested, Shakespeare's theatre contains "the possibility to engender ever-changing forms", because "there is no limit to the number of virtual forms present in a great text" (1995: 63).

²⁹ "Io non metto in scena Shakespeare – l'ho detto tante volte – né una mia interpretazione o lettura di Shakespeare, ma un saggio critico su Shakespeare" (Bene 1977: 19-20).

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