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# Reading Shakespeare in the Movies

## Non-Adaptations and Their Meaning

Eric S. Mallin

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## Non-Adaptations and Their Meaning

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*For Becky, always*

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# Praise for *Reading Shakespeare in the Movies*

"Clever, timely, and compelling, *Reading Shakespeare in the Movies: Non-Adaptations and Their Meaning* highlights the "disruptive analogies" that emerge from explorations of unexpected Shakespearean resonances in major films, ranging from *The Godfather* and *Titanic* to *Birdman* and *Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri*. The book is a masterful study in the joy of discovery—and recovery—of the surprising affinities, intractable questions, and disturbing continuities that inform popular culture and mass entertainment in Shakespeare's day and our own time."

—Courtney Lehmann, Tully Knoles Professor of the Humanities, *University of the Pacific, USA*

"Eric Mallin prefers films which don't know they're Shakespeare plays, because they're freer and more inventive than yet more adaptations. Some of his readings are unforgettable. And his supple—sometimes funny, often beautiful—prose leads its reader through a maze of moods and morals. Ultimately, his book dares to present 'non-adaptation' as a kind of ethical judo throw which turns Shakespeare's authority and power against his worst ideological effects. This is criticism at its most liberated, sceptical, brilliant, and committed. Read it and think again."

—Ewan Fernie, Chair, Professor and Fellow, *The Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, UK*

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CHAPTER 1

# Shakespeare in the Movies: Meaning-Making in the Non-Adaptation

*Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—*
*Success in Circuit lies*
—Emily Dickinson

## I

This book is about the unacknowledged and unclaimed presence of Shakespearean themes, structures, characters, and symbolic inclinations in selected movies. For the purposes of shorthand, I have sometimes described the work as a study about movies that do not know they are Shakespeare plays. Films are not plays, and they do not know things in any traditional way; but I intend to show something new about the way movies can absorb and reconfigure meaning from, and share significances with, one particularly charged vector in culture. Specifically, I am interested in cinema that has a connection to Shakespeare's work but that lacks any apparent, conscious intention to adapt that work. Or, to approach this interest from the other direction: I examine plays that are absorbed into cinematic culture unexpectedly, unconsciously, or unpredictably. The films take up Shakespearean thematic elements; they perform narrative variations on and from the plays that illuminate their core semantic issues and which they in turn brighten. And they pay no overt homage to Shakespeare.[1]

I reject the idea of calling films that do not refer to or quote Shakespeare, nor claim any alliance to or inheritance from his work, "adaptations," no matter the precedent adjective we use. They do not qualify as adaptations

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of a play in the traditional sense nor even, I would say, as that other capacious category, the "offshoot."[2] These movies do not look to disclose or seek to understand their discovered relationship to Shakespearean plots and figures. Unlike standard adaptations, they cannot be tallied; we cannot know how many of these films exist, as they are produced by *the intentionality of the interpreter*, not that of the writer, director, or studio.

These are analogies, not remakes.[3] I name such films "non-adaptations"; it may be problematic, taxonomically speaking, to identify something by negation, as for example it would be strange to call Shakespeare works "non-Jonson plays," or a bicycle a "non-car." (The problem with naming by negation presents itself at once: Shakespeare plays are also "non-cars.") If "non-adaptation" seems at first an unhelpful categorical term, I mean it to have the effect of a word such as "nonvoter" or "nonresident": something summoned by reason of its negation or its potentiality, its proximate status. A forgetful, unregistered, or indifferent citizen could be a nonvoter; an out-of-towner or an occasional occupant can equally have the status of nonresident. So a non-adaptation is then like a traditional form of cinematic production in that it summons a relationship between (in this case) a Shakespeare play and a movie that can be read through or in that play. But such a film lacks the discursive or extra-textual features of the adaptation: a known, implied, or readily deduced derivation from a prior text. What I assert throughout is the fortuitous, often uncanny, sometimes inevitable ways in which Shakespeare's plays embed their presence in films, and in which Shakespearean meanings flower in the cinema when we least expect to see them.

However, even if these films are not adaptations, I read them as if they were—which is to say, as if their liveliest acts of significance occur in a dialogue with other works, not in soliloquy. Because of the fundamentally relational (or intertextual) and variegated character of this kind of cinema, I adduce several other designations for non-adaptations: I shall, throughout the book, call them interchangeably "slant," "circuit," and "bias" productions. The first terms, "slant" and "circuit," stand in homage to Emily Dickinson's epigraph; along with the third label, "bias," I wish to imply that these films get to a truth about Shakespeare plays that can best be approached in indirect or roundabout representational ways.[4] Shakespeare himself deploys "bias" to refer to the curve or parabola on which a ball in the game of bowls must travel to find its target. Bias texts, then, swerve twice: *from* originary language, character, and setting as their structures of meaning bend *toward* a Shakespearean similitude. Something about those

metaphors and images, however, does not quite scan: they suggest that these films actually have a target in the prior text, or an axis off which they purposively slant and so forth, but that is not my contention. Rather, the non-adaptation forms something entirely new that pays no heed to the determinate, reproductive responsibilities of adaptation.

When I described the subject of my book to a colleague, he asked a wise question that I wish to address, even if an answer is elusive. Typically my précis of the project draws the response: Which movies don't know they are Shakespeare plays? But with both frankness and incisiveness, my colleague, Zachary Hines, wanted to know instead: "What's a Shakespeare play?"[5]

This has become, for numerous reasons, an unexpectedly difficult question to answer, and it lurks on the margins of my readings. As the editors of the recent and relevant *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare* collection have recognized, a Shakespeare play might manifest as a "corollary" in the form of another play, show, story, material object; but more importantly, this appearance

> can be a matter of perception rather than authorial intention (audiences may detect Shakespeare where the author disclaims him or may have difficulty finding him where he is named); it may equally be a product of intertextual and intermedial relations, processes that work on the level of semiotics and material substrate, apart from more overt processes of influence and reception.[6]

For the purposes of this book, a Shakespeare play is a well-known, usually illustrious object of literary thought and feeling, attached to that familiar name which confers a degree of prestige and a set of expectations. It represents or promises (for a receptive audience) a theatrical, linguistically imaginative, entertaining, and educational experience, ideally all at once or in rapid succession. The difficulty with knowing what a Shakespeare play may be lies not only in the complexity of an infinite range of readers' perceptions, but more broadly in the omnipresence and the multiple manifestations of the name "Shakespeare," its centuries of presence and influence. Therefore a play that bears that name is always much more than a single identifiable artifact. A "Shakespeare play" may be the thing you think you know and do not; it amounts to an idea and an experience waiting to be alienated from familiarity.

I am counting on a modicum of alienation. *Hamlet* is this book's paradigm of "a Shakespeare play," owning that stature as a result of its vast cultural and narrative familiarity, achieved through centuries of theatrical and now cinematic performance.[7] Yet it also offers a useful caution about definitional questions and identifications, because the play itself scarcely presents a stable or selfsame work. In its first print appearances *Hamlet* splits between (perhaps) performance and reading versions, either of which may be authorial or questionable—the first quarto of *Hamlet* (Q1, 1603) is a little more than half the length of the second quarto (Q2, 1604). The vivid differences between the texts extend beyond line count; they comprise character name and motive, poetic form, symbolic language, and other crucial elements.[8] Both of these early *Hamlet*s are, as well, already multilayered *adaptations*. They remake strains of near-contemporary revenge drama (a legendary "*Ur-Hamlet*" and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*); a German source (*Der Bestrafte Brudermord*); a Danish legend (Saxo Grammaticus's story of Amleth); and political, theatrical, and philosophical currents of the time (early Stuart history, wars of the theaters, family biography, countless influences from the humanist past and present).[9] Shakespeare was always a restless, seemingly desultory adapter, and his *Hamlet*s bear the imprints of many other texts and traditions, effectively perplexing our sense not only of "Shakespeare," but the probable ontology of *a* Shakespeare play. Even one play seems several.

At the same time, I'm counting in my readings not only on alienation, but recognition. Against the odds these non-adaptations maintain a kind of continuity with the plays across time and across media, which is what enables me to bring film and drama into analogical relationship. In his assessment of the most famous Western play and renowned European painting, Graham Holderness speaks of the "identity" of the work in a way hospitable to my study:

> …[D]espite the ontological distinction between their respective modes of existence as text, both *Hamlet* and the *Mona Lisa* exist in exactly the same universal way, in the form of millions of copies distributed around the globe.…
>
> But do not *Hamlet* and the *Mona Lisa* also exist in a different way, one much more difficult to define, as the visible or invisible source of their own copies? Somewhere there is a heart of silence, a blank space, that is uniquely *Hamlet*, that is incommensurably the *Mona Lisa*…[10]

These gaps and blanks are hard to read, but they are productive. I endorse Holderness's notion that in spite of the efflorescence of copies, versions, performances, parodies, adulterations, adaptations, "something endures, something alters yet remains itself" (71). The unique and incommensurable nature of the Shakespearean work can then give it intelligibility in divergent contexts and forms over many years. The films under discussion in this book have their own identities entirely separable from Shakespeare, which makes recognition of that Shakespearean presence contestable. But not only do they speak to some of Shakespeare's most intense meanings, they replicate the playwright's own frequent adaptational (compositional) processes, which often tilt his plays on the bias from nearby and far-flung predecessor texts.[11] His plays bring creative complications of and surprising semantic departures from the prior texts he deploys. In this way, several of the works in his canon turn out to be in my terms non-adaptations: stories that stray substantially from hard-to-recognize predecessors. In some sense, then, the slant or bias form is more a norm than an anomaly; as Thomas Leitch mentions, "all texts quote or embed fragments of earlier texts…typically without explicit acknowledgment, often without conscious intention, and never with any attempt at straightforward replication of the original's force."[12]

Film adaptation theorist Patrick Cattrysse also addresses the general point: "if one accepts that nothing comes from nothing, an insight Shakespeare already shared with his predecessors, then every original should be considered to represent a pseudo-original. In other words, every phenomenon that functions as an original represents in fact a hidden or 'secret' adaptation."[13] Cattrysse goes on to note, apropos of this book, that because an adaptation often does not announce itself as such, "pseudo-originals or hidden/secret adaptations [must] greatly outnumber overt adaptations" (123). The thing you think you know, a particular Shakespeare play framed in a particular way, could surely exist or reappear covertly in another form, and could pass undetected; chances are, it already has.

The algorithm for a particular cinematic text's distance from Shakespeare has yet to be written. Such measures can vary widely, and the films I discuss in *Reading Shakespeare in the Movies* have a flexible relationship to the plays. In the remainder of this introduction I shall discuss some implications of bias or circuit meanings, and I'll finish with an assessment of the most intellectually distinguished reader of non-adaptations; but I shall begin my illustrations with a brief account of *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and its reconfigurations of Shakespeare. In Chap. 2

I examine *Memento* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2000) and its ties to *Hamlet* through the thematics of revenge, insufficient memory, and disturbed temporality. In Chap. 3 I entertain a test case for a liminal category, the close slant version, or the not-quite adaptation: a film that tells a story uncannily parallel to a Shakespeare tale in a new context with different characters. There I read *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron, 1997) as a critical revision and incorporation of *Romeo and Juliet*, the closest I verge in this book to studying a consciously reworked Shakespeare text. But even within the parameters of a formal declension—again, in the complete vacuum of referentiality—Cameron's film shows as a vital *refusal* of adaptation, exhibiting an admirable unwillingness to accept the consequences of a love tragedy tradition. In Chap. 4, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* undergirds my reading of an exploration of theater, magic, and fatherhood: *Birdman or (the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (dir. Alejandro Iñárritu, 2014). The stage-to-screen transitions are fairly legible there even though *The Tempest* is never invoked, and again, the film wanders far from, while offering a devastating critique of, the regime of direct adaptation.[14] But in Chap. 5 I leave the referential Shake-sphere entirely to look at the tragic ecological subtext of the seminal horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1974), which I find prefigured in Shakespeare's early gore-fest *Titus Andronicus*. I conclude the book with an examination of a recent and also overtly non-Shakespearean film, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (dir. Martin McDonagh, 2017), returning to the problem of the revenge tragedy.

To begin my case for the meaningful relation of Shakespearean drama to films that will not quote or sustain an obvious debt to it, let me turn now to perhaps the most elegant bias conception of *Hamlet* ever deployed, in one of the most critically celebrated of all American films: Coppola's *The Godfather*. This movie's connection to the best-known Shakespeare play describes a relationship of texts that is, in a word, haunting.

## II

There is a Ghost in *The Godfather*.

I'd heard that a spectral face floats into the scene of Don Corleone's funeral in *The Godfather*, *Part One*, but I did not believe it. I had seen the film numerous times and never noticed any such thing. Still, after hearing about it, on my next viewing I grew alert for the presence of ghostly figures. And sure enough, just as the new family leader, Michael Corleone,

takes his seat at the funeral service, watching the arriving guests with his usual predatory caution, there she is.[15]

Yes, she. A woman's face appears on the back, then the lapel, of Michael's jacket. She seems familiar, yet hard to place; her skin hued reddish brown, her expression floating between sleepy and sad. Her age, too, cannot be gauged. This female ghost, appearing unapologetically if secretly at one of the many largely male ceremonies that constitute the film, dislodges the movie from its intense locality and plausibility, its flawless construction of a time and place; she removes it, however momentarily, from the real.

When you spot her, Coppola's ghost jolts. Not merely for the surprise of the image, but for the impression of mistake or accident it conveys. For typically, and archetypally, the death of the powerful father generates the father's *own* ghost. But in *The Godfather*, Don Vito Corleone's death authors the ghostliness of someone else. On one level, this makes some sense. After all, the Don need not bother to become a spirit: prior to his demise, he had already grown ghoulish and unearthly. Earlier in the film, he absorbed five near-fatal gunshot wounds which caused him to evaporate; his voice became even more whispery than it had been, and power clung to his name alone, not his physical person. At that point, Michael, the inheriting son, begins to take on the father's force and threat. The great patriarch, prior to his death, becomes embodied, even encorpsed in his son. Moreover, the inevitable psychological haunting obviates itself here: father and son are not separated for long, and when they are—when Michael escapes the country—he sojourns to the name of the father, the hamlet of Corleone, Sicily.

The funerary ghost is no ordinary apparition: neither a speaking wraith who calls passionately for revenge, nor a politically interested spook. She does not even appear diegetically to the living, cannot make herself known, and scarcely seems present even to the viewer. Distinguishing her from most ghosts, she has neither language nor desire. The face, invisible in a VHS tape (the first format in which the film was commercially available), and a mere play of light at the edge of a computer screen on the DVD version, only becomes undeniably fixed when viewed in the widescreen format of a digital video on a television screen. The image may not have been present or noticeable when the film was shown in theaters.

Many meanings could attach to this spectral countenance. If intentionally placed, its debut comments on the fragility of presence itself in this world: it vanishes almost before we can process it. And if a woman's

mournful image attaches itself meaningfully, covertly to the patriarchal inheritor of a lethal clan, we might read that superimposition as a rebuke of a male coven that generally protects and excludes women from its precious, profitable secrets. The fact that the ghost disappears just as we begin to notice her resonates with those gender conditions largely unrelated to the plotline: the marginal yet morally complicit station of women in the film. Connie, Kay, Lucy, Mama Corleone—all have meaning in Coppola's world at its phantom edges, and they are accorded little of the pathos, respect, or representation that even the foulest men receive. Possibly then, the female face that appears on Michael's jacket represents less a particular haunting than an allegory of social conditions: women in the film are forceless and difficult to notice.

Another possibility exists: the ghost signifies nothing except randomly disposed data—noise in excess of a signal. For she may well be an industrial accident, a visual glitch, imported by the act of transferring film to digital media. When asked online by a film critic about the image, Coppola replied: "Gee, I know nothing about this. Will look, I guess. The funeral scene was shot really quickly, and I was disgruntled that they removed one day from its schedule. So nothing elaborate was done: we shot it as fast as we could."[16] Coppola later commented that actress Morgana King (Mama Corleone), whose likeness this allegedly is, "was not supposed to be in the shot, but had gotten into it by an accidental reflection in the optics, probably off a filter (hence the tint) in the matte box."[17]

So much for the mystery. Should we believe him? Insofar as she appears at the Godfather's funeral, and at no other point in the film, this evanescent mourner picked an impeccably apt time to show up. The ghost in *The Godfather* can be an arbitrary element with respect to authorial intention, but cannot be arbitrary with respect to signification. Her appearance marks the end of a death ritual and the beginning (in the following scene) of a bloody, empire-building event, one of the most celebrated in the film: the murder-baptism sequence, in which the son, Michael, arranges the deaths of all five of the competing crime families' leaders. The ghost then seems like a muse for Michael's imminent murders, a tragic inspiration for and memorial to the great Don's legacy of death. Her appearance *fits* and gives a fleeting female place to the death-drenched formalities of the (male) epic film. But because the image is dislodged cleanly from authorial intention, the ghost is also effectively undecidable: perfectly placed, evidently accidental.

Even after you see a ghost, it can still be hard to credit. *The Godfather* is twice spooked; if the first seems a tenuous visitation, the second seems more substantial, if not always easier to see. The truly omnipresent ghost in the film is actually a narrative, a famous archetype. That ghost and its habits of reluctant and undisclosed manifestation can be taken as a guide to this book.

* * *

Let us consider the deep-structure similarities between *The Godfather* and *Hamlet*, the Shakespeare play it most closely resembles. Both works tell of a son's transformation from innocence or virtue into dedicated criminality. Shakespeare's prince is a university student; Coppola's prince, Michael Corleone, has been to college and to battle, having returned from World War II with his naiveté relatively intact. Both sons undertake soul-threatening revenge for a divine-like father cut down by demonic forces of wickedness; this pursuit produces a transformation that passes beyond criminality into monstrosity. In both cases, the transformation or descent is narrowly justified by immediate circumstances and broadly excused by a supposed moral or transcendental imperative. Both *The Godfather* and *Hamlet* conjure similar details about the son's alteration: possessed by violence, each young man strays farther and farther from his former virtue and in so doing, takes on the name, position, and the persona of the corrupt father ("Don Corleone"; "This is I,/Hamlet the Dane"—5.1.257).[18]

This persona not only distinguishes the hero from the other players in the drama; it effectively redacts and incorporates them as well, productively integrating others' unhappy fates and character traits into those of a successful fiend. So in Coppola's work, Michael's older brother Sonny is passion's slave, ever subject to lust and anger. These attributes serve him well when it comes to the limited project of waging vengeful war, but they cause him to lose control (and therefore to be overmastered). Sonny plays the film's Laertes, a character to whom Hamlet refers figuratively as his "brother" (5.2.244), but so dedicated to revenge against Hamlet that he would mindlessly "cut his throat i' th' church" (4.7.126), a comment that seems to surprise even Claudius. Such passion opens Laertes to the king's manipulations. Polonius's son nurtures an intemperate revenge—a seemingly concentrated displacement of Hamlet's own vicious but more carefully modulated desires.[19] In this way, Sonny blazes like an ember set off against Michael's ash-cold intents. The apogee of the hero's calculated

violence comes in that baptism sequence. In the church, repeating the priest's Latin and renouncing the works of the Devil, perhaps lying about the renunciation, Michael performs piety as his henchmen murder the other mafia leaders. How foolish to cut a throat in the church, when cutting five enemy throats *from* the church can secure triumph.[20]

Should it seem that Hamlet's monstrosity could not match Michael Corleone's at its operatic peak, consider how he behaves after his Ghost encounter. He stabs the eavesdropping Polonius through an arras (perhaps thinking it's the king, though probably not), then jokes about his death; seems to think it a good thing that 20,000 soldiers will die for a meaningless plot of ground in Poland (4.4.46–56); arranges for the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; kills Laertes in a swordfight, bids his poisoned mother a harsh farewell ("Wretched queen, adieu"), and then slays Claudius twice, once by poisoned sword, then by forcing him to drink the poisoned wine. Many of these acts can be justified as retributive, however unequal the retribution. But more disturbingly, and in his way surpassing Michael Corleone, Hamlet seems dissatisfied with mere murder. Thus he refuses the chance to kill Claudius at prayer, so that he can send the King to Hell when "he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,/Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,/…or about some act/That has no relish of salvation in't" (3.3.89–92). Although this desire compounds transgressions, the prince does not quail. The idea of killing his uncle while the man is having sex with his mother, twisted as it is, pales before the blasphemy of timing a murder so that it has the best chance of damning a soul. Hamlet reinforces the impression of spiritual savagery in his commission to kill his boyhood friends, stipulating that they be executed when they deliver the king's letter, "not shriving [confession] time allow'd" (5.2.47). Hamlet grows into the prototype of the corrupt revenger, whose violence is often measurably worse—more devious, unjustified, *interested*—than that which has been visited upon him.[21]

The devolution of Michael into a distilled version of his father's worst traits begins as an expression of love. He wants to protect the Don, who has been shot and whose life remains in danger. Yet the Avenger-for-Love has always been an unconvincing participant in this genre. Rather, Michael chiefly welds two other revenger archetypes. The first is the relentless amoral savage whose crimes speak to the deceptive demands of primitive, reciprocal blood lust disguised as justice, or "strictly business," as the Corleones are accustomed to calling their instrumental murders. The second type is more in Hamlet's mold, the calculating purveyor or restorer

of order, which is to say, a political *artist* whose tidy retributions establish the sense of higher, almost aesthetic justice. For instance, having addressed Claudius as "My mother" because "man and wife is one flesh" (4.3.52), Hamlet later pointedly asks "Is thy union here?" (5.2.326) when he shoves a poison-steeped pearl (a "union") down his uncle/stepfather's throat at play's end. This thematic sensitivity describes the playwright in the murderer.[22] For such a revenger, an influential type in later tragedy and figured by Vindice, Bosola, DeFlores, and other malcontented courtier-killers, style points matter as much as results ("I limned this night-piece, and it was my best" says Lodovico over the carnage in John Webster's *The White Devil*, 1612). Hamlet offers a model both for Michael's moral descent and his craft. The prince's decision to edit, stage, and serve as chorus for *The Murder of Gonzago* (Act 3, scene 2) pivots him critically toward his revenging career, as I shall discuss in Chap. 2.

Speaking against this artistic figure, however, are Hamlet's remorseless and apparently unproductive, self-sabotaging attacks on nearly everyone at court, especially those who are more or less innocent of his father's death. This happenstance thrusting out, emblematized by the stab at Polonius through the arras ("Is it the King?"—3.4.26), suggests not only an incoherence in the avenger, but the possibility of a counter-movement: that he was never quite in control in the first place, or at least, not since the Ghost poisoned his ear and disturbed his mind. Not until Act 5 does Hamlet partially recover, famously loosening his grip on the plots he makes ("There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/Rough hew them how we will"—5.2.10–11), allegedly allowing God the credit for the well-finished providential product. The tendency to ascribe personal design to transcendent providence may be the most influential legacy Hamlet bequeaths. For while Michael Corleone never relinquishes control, he similarly imagines his artistic vengeance—brought to bear with the panoply of Coppola's cinematic brio—as sacred, or divine-sponsored. In Coppola's vision of the coup d'revenge, Michael may genuinely regard his mass murder as an extension of the baptism of his nephew, not a contravention of it (Fig. 1.1).[23]

For both acts—the violence and the religious ritual—simultaneously make him "Godfather." Revenge can take on sacred tones when you're inside its charmed circle, cavernous muteness from without, as Michael's wife Kay experiences it in the movie's nearly soundless closing frames. Both *Hamlet* and *The Godfather* make roughly the same point about the way of revenge: no matter how neatly and fitly performed, even at its most

**Fig. 1.1** Michael at the baptism, probably not renouncing the work of the devil. (*The Godfather*, 2:36:40)

aesthetically fulfilling, it has no hallowed character, no proper boundary, no unambiguously positive outcome. And its actors are morally degenerate.

In this context of revenge, both texts ring changes on a familiar Western cultural fetish: the oscillating divinization and demonization of the father figure.[24] *Hamlet* takes the theme to worshipful (if ambivalent) extremes. Following the Ghost's request to "remember me," Hamlet asserts that he will wipe away "All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past…/And thy commandment all alone shall live/Within the book and volume of my brain,/Unmix'd with baser matter" (1.5.99–104). Such a promise, even if never kept, effectively supplants the Decalogue's first order: thou shalt have no other gods before me. Although, as I shall discuss, the figure of the nightmarish Ghost shows Hamlet's devout assessment of his father to be bizarrely wrong, Hamlet stubbornly insists—to himself, and especially to his mother—on his father's transcendent stature. To the punctilious thinker, only such an exalted position could justify the act of revenge: why endanger your soul for anyone less glorious? Coppola, too, asserts the supernatural, unexampled virtue and potency of the patriarch, especially in

**Fig. 1.2** Don Corleone, hearing about the completion of a successful project. (*The Godfather*, 33:20)

the father's most violent injunctions. One signature sequence of the film strongly telegraphs the father's uncanny nature and significance: the severed racehorse's head placed as warning in the bed of uncooperative movie producer Jack Woltz. The prized Arabian steed has been decapitated because Woltz, who owned the horse, would not offer an acting part to Don Vito Corleone's godson; the producer awakes one morning covered in blood, and peels the soaked, satiny bedclothes off to discover the remains of the once-beautiful animal (Fig. 1.2).

The editorial cut from the screams of the traumatized producer to a close-up of the peaceful, impassive visage of Don Corleone thousands of miles away creates the impression that the macabre deed had only to be thought and willed in order to be achieved; the director deliberately removes any of the horrible labor (including the command) that must have produced this result, or even the news that confirms it. In this awful moment, his will coincident with his power, both unthinkable in range and ferocity, Don Corleone's supernatural status thrives on film in a way that it cannot in Puzo's humanizing (and therefore, fundamentally non-mythic) novel.[25]

Given this nearly transhuman force, the funereal, female Ghost seems supererogatory, nodding toward obsolescence. By that point in the film we do not have imaginative access to any significant role a woman could play. If we compare for just a moment the narrative and symbolic functions assumed by women in *Hamlet* and *The Godfather*, the texts bind themselves one to the other with this structural principle: Where the father is a god and the son a redeemer (however ironically that mantle is worn), then mother, lover, sister, and daughter dissolve in superfluity or linger as uncomfortable aftereffects.[26] Knowing as they do their limited opportunities for influence, the women in early modern Denmark and modern New York respond in similar ways: silence, the consent of sightless complicity. For Shakespeare, the starkest version of this process comes in Gertrude's poetically detailed, suggestively *eyewitness* account of Ophelia's drowning (4.7.166–83), a reaction that suggests her sponsorship of the tragedy. Coppola's more modern solutions to the question of problematic women include divorce (Kay dissolves her marriage to Michael, in Part II) and co-optation; Connie eventually ignores her brother's murder of her husband Carlo, to become in Part III a full shareholder in the Corleone corporation. Mama Corleone remains largely silent. This state suits with her (if it *is* her) ghostly appearance at her husband's funeral, while she is still alive.

The women, though evidently powerless, do not let Michael's crimes go unchallenged, even if he is not yet (in this installment) punished for them: his sister and wife confront him with accusations about the murders. He denies the charges, of course. But though ineffectual, the women present courage and a potentially salvific virtue. At the end of the film, his power consolidated through massacre, Michael receives tribute in his office from his male crime-family members. Kay spies Michael through his open door, sees homage paid him, and suddenly her point of view becomes ours; for the first time in the film, and not until this shot, a female perspective on the events takes hold of the visual narrative at precisely the moment that women are most fiercely excluded (Fig. 1.3).

Not only has Kay been rendered spectral, as feckless as the funeral mirage; we have become so as well, sharing Kay's viewpoint and despair. Our perch includes the revelation of something that we might have been slow to know: that Michael has irrevocably become Don Corleone. Kay's knowledge of his new identity is now incontestable; Michael's essential transformation registers through the female perspective. When the door closes on her and the screen goes dark, we know that the production of

**Fig. 1.3** Kay sees the new Don Corleone accepting tribute, before the door closes on her and the viewer. (*The Godfather*, 2:52:15)

power which makes women immaterial also furnishes, for men, worldly ascendance and spiritual depletion.[27]

In *The Godfather*, a new patriarchal story emerges, damning the once-noble son, the reprobate husband. We can no longer admire Michael, if we have done so, once we register Kay's stricken look and her exclusion. The *Hamlet* template—the virtuous heir's terrible conscienceless transformation—must be taken differently now, as it is completely shorn of the heroic. A perspective exists beyond it: female, marital, ghostly, cinematic. Kay in some ways emplots the transient specter. She cannot cause Michael's fall as King Hamlet's ghost helps to cause his son's, but in their exclusion, the women underscore Michael's immanent damnation.[28] Kay urged him to stand godfather to Connie's child, and he had resisted; but he decides he can put the sacred ceremony to use. Michael's darkest deed occurs as the *result* of Kay's strongest expression of virtuous will. She implores his religious commitment to his family. He counters her gracious, potentially redemptive urgings with a scheme for slaughter.

The ghostly marginal image might with some strain be said to resemble the nearly invisible presence of Shakespeare in these films. But as *Hamlet*

itself suggests, the ghost must eventually disappear if the creation or the visited subject can achieve any substantial self-identity. When the prince famously holds the skull of the court jester in the graveyard he says, in the *locus classicus* of memento mori lines, “Alas, poor Yorick; I knew him, Horatio” (5.1.202). He seems to be remembering his early sympathies to the spirit—“Alas, poor Ghost” (1.5.4). Hamlet swaps out clown skull for apparition as his object of pity. What haunts him has moved from the uncanny *thought* of death to its too common material presence in the sensory world of smells, bodies, and graves. The salient difference between jester and Ghost is that Yorick never speaks, nor does Hamlet ever quote him. “Alas poor Yorick” memorializes the Ghost while finally silencing it. Just as the specter dissolves from the play and largely from Hamlet’s consciousness after the third act, yet lingers in other forms, so too must the Shakespeare presence evaporate or remain mute in order for films such as *The Godfather* to achieve their unique ends.

We might wonder why we need to posit a shadow Shakespearean interlocutor for Coppola’s great film, given that Mario Puzo’s novel provides the story, most of the relevant details, and some compelling symbology for the movie. But the book is in some ways antithetical to Coppola’s vision, and it is mainly important for its plot rigging. The mythification of the father and his violence in the film have far more in common with the Shakespearean version of the paternal archetype and its deforming, ill-fated potentialities.[29] These bias films may exhibit the *inevitability* of Shakespearean analogy: venturing on similar thematic and mythic ground, they come to share with the playwright symbolic impulses, thematic inclinations, velleities.[30] This claim constitutes only a prolegomenon to a theory of the non-adaptation, but it does suggest that the films are not in any way subordinate or secondary to their forebear. Indeed, to read Shakespeare into or out of *The Godfather* is to increase the gain, heighten the drama of both texts, pro- and retrospectively. No direct adaptation can give us the sensation of immediate danger Hamlet faces, and the abomination he is in danger of becoming, as can *The Godfather*’s portrait of Michael Corleone’s peril and his conversion to soul-dead malevolence. Shakespeare’s version of a sin-laden father and his despoiled son has texture and complexity worth achieving in an “aura of againness,” and it is charted most clearly in the modern story about the corruptions of vengeance and the infection or the something rotten that can threaten a nation.[31]

What’s a Shakespeare play? Before the regime of film adaptation and especially of non-adaptational cinema, it was easier to know. At least we