‘Either for tragedy, comedy’:
Attitudes to *Hamlet* in
Kenneth Branagh’s *In the Bleak Midwinter* and *Hamlet*

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During the mid-1990s, the British actor-director Kenneth Branagh, in association with Castle Rock Entertainment, made two films based on *Hamlet*. *In the Bleak Midwinter* (1995) is a low-budget, feel-good comedy set among a troupe of actors rehearsing and performing *Hamlet* in a disused church. *Hamlet* (1997) is the fullest version of the play ever committed to celluloid, running at over four hours and stuffed with special effects and star cameos. While on the surface the two films could hardly be more different, they are, in fact, intimately connected. Both films have a particular *fin-de-siècle* self-consciousness about their Shakespearean material: explicitly in the case of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, implicitly in the case of *Hamlet*. A close analysis of *In the Bleak Midwinter* reveals some of the ways in which it anticipates and allegorizes the contemporaneous pre-production travails of Branagh’s ambitious *Hamlet*, at the same time as it mediates the broader relationship which has vexed a century of Shakespeare on film, that between theatre and cinema. Most crucially, it is also an attempt at a scapegoat, diverting what is potentially ridiculous and laughable about the play itself, siphoning off *Hamlet’s* dangerous proximity to comedy, and leaving the film of *Hamlet* as generically pure and serious high art. Together, the two films recapitulate a century’s filmic encounter with the *Hamlet* play, an engagement perpetually pulled between deferential homage and irreverent parody. As Branagh admitted in an interview, “When people ask, ‘Why do *Hamlet*?’, I say all the answers are contained in *Bleak Midwinter*.”

Serious, ‘straight’ *Hamlets* on film *often*, it seems, *need to have* their comic supplements. The pretensions of the play teeter on the brink of burlesque — long, histrionic speeches, acts of rash, almost casual violence — and, in order to retain its serious character, this potential
laughter needs to be diverted. The tradition of Shakespearean burlesque from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre has been adopted and extended by its successor, the cinema. In the earliest days of British Shakespearean film, for example, Cecil Hepworth’s aspiring Hamlet of 1913, featuring the recently knighted stage actor, Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, was followed by his parody animations, Ophelia and ‘Amlet (1919). The silent era, with its appetite for burlesque comedy, actually saw more Hamlet parodies than straight versions, including When Hungry Hamlet Fled (US, 1915), Pimple as Hamlet (GB, 1916), Colonel Heeza Liar Plays Hamlet (US, 1916) and Hamlet Made Over (US, 1916). More recently, Laurence Olivier’s Hamlet (1948) and, more obliquely, Mel Gibson’s action Hamlet (1990) were parodied by Arnold Schwarzenegger in Last Action Hero (1993). The familiarity of the play’s central premise, the resonances of its high declamatory acting style and the recognizability of its most famous lines make it ripe for parody. Even its length, which was a special feature of Branagh’s film of Hamlet, has been a source of much humour in, for example, Tom Stoppard’s A Fifteen-Minute Hamlet and the Reduced Shakespeare Company’s bravura five-minute stage Hamlet, speeded up to 45 seconds, and then, in a fine spoof of the reversing trick encore of the early cinema projectionists, replayed backwards. Just as Hamlet has been a prime role for the greatest actors of the century, so Hamlet burlesques have exercised the greatest comedians. Alongside Henry Irving, Laurence Olivier, John Gielgud, Ralph Richardson and Derek Jacobi must therefore be allowed Buster Keaton, Eric Morecambe, Tommy Cooper, Les Dawson and Benny Hill: every serious actor is flanked by his comedic counterpart. What is potentially comic about the serious role is drawn off by the parody, and the parody is funny because it identifies and magnifies those elements of the ridiculous which productions of the play must attempt to suppress. Much of the laughter at Hamlet spoofs arises from audience recognition and relief, but, in presenting the play as a source of comedy, parodies betray an uncertainty about how to approach canonical high art in an age of ironic aesthetic detachment.

Branagh’s approaches to Hamlet in the 1990s combine the two strains of classical theatrical acting and pantomimic burlesque, bringing previously bifurcated traditions into postmodern collision. In the Bleak Midwinter serves as the comic forerunner, purging the play of its ridiculous elements in order to preserve Hamlet as epic, sober and permanent. Whereas In the Bleak Midwinter as a film is as transient as the ragged Hamlet it describes, the film of Hamlet has altogether more