Esprit de corps: The Uses and Abuses of Shakespeare in *Renaissance Man*

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> *One recognizes the superiority of the Greek man and the Renaissance man—but one would like to have them without the causes and conditions that made them possible.*
>
> —Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 882

The ending of *Hamlet* brings the advent of soldiers and the triumph of the military ethos in more than one sense: as the soldier Fortinbras takes over, reestablishing a sense of normality in the Danish court, he insists on giving the dead prince a military burial, thereby retrospectively transforming his story into one of heroism.

> [...] Let four captains
> Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage;
> For he was likely, had he been put on,
> To have prov'd most royally: and, for his passage,
> The soldiers' music and the rites of war
> Speak loudly for him. (V. ii. 410-14)

Penny Marshall's 1994 comedy *Renaissance Man* might be said to repeat Fortinbras's gesture: it vindicates the supremacy of the military ethos in and through *Hamlet* by posthumously defining—and misrecognizing—Hamlet the humanist-individualist as Hamlet the soldier, recontaining Hamlet within what I shall refer to as a "military identity." It is this conflict that is in the centre of the film: the chief question is that of the adequacy of *Hamlet* as a cultural product or teaching material that would be instrumental in producing better soldiers.[1] In this paper, I shall address some aspects of the way *Renaissance Man* uses Hamlet, *Hamlet* and Shakespeare in general in order to accomplish its ideological mission.

Success story

Four Shakespeare plays are directly quoted from or referred to in *Renaissance Man*. *Hamlet*, of course, is ubiquitous; there are two extensive quotations from *Henry V* in the last third of the film, Bill Rago performs a part of Juliet's balcony soliloquy in his—successful—attempt to persuade Davies to accept the role/char-

acter of Gertrude, and *Othello* is borrowed by Hobbs from the prison library (*Othello* might be present in other ways: Bill Rago's second name is one letter away from Iago, and his military opposite number is called Sergeant Cass, short for Cassio). Largely as a result of the presence of *Henry V*, Rago can also be seen as a kind of anti-Falstaff, bragging about his non- or anti-heroism. Thus, whatever the film is about, it certainly relies heavily on Shakespeare texts and on Shakespeare as a cultural icon. Although *Renaissance Man* uses, quotes or appropriates Shakespeare in a rather unlikely environment, at first sight it seems to reiterate well-known aspects of the popular cultural "use" of Shakespeare. As Douglas Lanier claims, "Shakespeare's appearances in popular culture typically involve interplay between two cultural systems—high and pop culture—that operate in parallel realms, two bodies of reference, sets of cultural institutions, canons of aesthetic standards, modes of constructing cultural authority" (16). This interplay, says Lanier, takes many forms, from harmonious to antagonistic, but at its heart is a "contest for authority between the two cultural systems and the institutional interests they represent" (16). As Richard Burt suggests (21), given the contemporary state of this cultural hierarchy, "Shakespeare" has become the mark of the outmoded loser. *Renaissance Man* seems to challenge this notion: the enterprise of teaching Shakespeare to a bunch of uneducated underachievers, unlikely as it is, eventually pays off. Read as an allegory of the conflict between high culture and popular culture, *Renaissance Man* offers itself as a spectacular success story of reconciliation on many levels. I shall begin with a sketch of this success story before turning to the less explicit, but much more disturbing elements of the uses and abuses of Shakespeare in Penny Marshall's film.

By stressing the split between high culture and popular culture, the first appearance of Shakespeare in the film seems to invite a reading along these lines. In utter despair as to what he is supposed to do with his nearly illiterate pupils, Bill asks the DDs to bring and discuss some reading material in the class. When they arrive at the class, Bill is sitting at his desk, engrossed in a big, old-looking tome. The pupils, predictably enough, bring things like *Archie* comics, *Sports Illustrated*, slick magazines: all of them iconic specimens of popular culture. As they are unenthusiastically struggling to formulate questions about their stuff, one of them (significantly, the only female DD, Miranda) asks Bill what he is reading. Although she is dismissed by Bill, another pupil, the ex-footballer Leroy Jackson, instead of discussing his sports magazine, reiterates his question, and Bill is then more or less bullied into talking about his book. The volume turns out to be *Hamlet* (or rather, an edition that includes *Hamlet*), and it is important that Bill is not reading a paperback edition but a dusty, venerable-looking volume, which, contrasted with the glossy magazines, confirms by visual means the sense of the cultural divide. This is further reinforced by the fact that Bill is reluctant to talk about his book, and his reasons seem to be all too familiar: it is "too complicated" for them, he says, they would not understand, etc. When he is eventually provoked into talking about it—perhaps relying on his own experience in

advertising (which raises the question of his complicity in producing the mass cultural products he so obviously despises)—he starts by explaining things to them using analogies from popular culture: *Hamlet* is about "murder, incest, sex, insanity"; it is a *play*, and a play is like "TV without the box"; in Shakespeare's time, he goes on to say, there was no TV, no movies, very few books, so everyone went to the theatre. At this point, one aspect of the film's rather confused cultural politics of using Shakespeare stands revealed, for Rago seems to subscribe to the currently widespread myth of Shakespeare as popular culture, or, rather, as an organic cultural synthesis (a myth widely disseminated by *Shakespeare in Love* and also subscribed to by cultural critics like Marjorie Garber; for a critique of this view, see Lanier (23)). As Bill explains, in Shakespeare's time everyone went to the theatre, from kings and queens down to the "working stiffs," which almost sounds like DDs; thus, although his explicit behaviour stresses the cultural divide between himself and his pupils, he implicitly defines Shakespeare as exciting, and so adequate reading for the DDs.

Shakespeare's language, of course, proves to be an enormous stumbling block. Although Lanier claims (77) that *Renaissance Man* addresses this issue adequately by offering glimpses of the DDs grappling with the notions of oxymoron, simile and metaphor, one feels that the film glosses over this problem relatively smoothly: the "timeless" concepts of what Bill calls "poetry" and rhetoric—implying reading skills that can be acquired in the supposed cultural vacuum of the classroom reminiscent of New Criticism—serve to replace the specifically *historical* difficulties of understanding Shakespeare's language. A historical and cultural difference is thereby transformed into a "timeless" technical difference that can be overcome by means of a crash course in rhetoric, the acquisition of a few simple reading skills. This is also indicated by the fact that the xerox copies distributed to the students are probably copied from Bill's old-fashioned edition, without the copious explanatory notes present in all contemporary editions designed for educational purposes, the implication perhaps being that such scholarly apparatus would put off the DDs. The broader issue here concerns the film's educational politics: such academic notes are simply unnecessary, a hindrance to the DDs' spontaneous encounter with Shakespeare's genius.

In the course of Rago's teaching, with the gradual erosion of the sharp boundary between high culture and popular culture, we are offered instances of various ways in which Shakespeare is culturally appropriated, including instances of new cultural production: the film's best-known episode is probably the *Hamlet* rap created and performed by the DDs, a successful instance of what Mary Louis Pratt calls "transculturation": a process whereby "marginal or subordinate groups select and create new cultural forms from materials of the dominant culture" (qtd. in Singh 124). The *Hamlet* rap, the text of which, as Lanier suggests, sets *Hamlet* within the conventions of the gagsta revenge narrative, targeting incest (77), is part of a by now fairly long tradition of Shakespeare raps; Lanier documents the frequency of such efforts in attempts to free Shakespeare from associations of elitism by bringing out the performance

aspect rather than the textual, thereby foregrounding the strong rhythmical beat behind blank verse (73; see also Richard Shusterman about rap as originally a highly sophisticated but genuinely popular culture). The theatrical production of *Henry V* they all go to see over the border seems to be a very traditional "elitist" one, yet it is thoroughly enjoyed by the DDs; this experience, the encounter with yet another Shakespeare text, apart from indicating that the members of the group have successfully acquired the necessary high cultural reading skills and are able to transpose them to other Shakespeare texts as well, leads in turn to another act of cultural production: the Bronx trainee Benitez's recital of the Crispin's Day speech during night training, crawling in mud, defying the drill sergeant's attempt to humiliate the Shakespeare scholars. This recital is entirely the outcome of his own personal effort: he has bought a copy of *Henry V* in the theatre and has been reading it on his own.

Shakespeare is thus used as a text that bridges the gap between high and popular culture. The high cultural authority of his texts is not directly challenged, and Bill's teaching strategies seem to alternate between the high cultural formalist "pure gaze"—including the New Critical emphasis on the "difference" of poetic language—and alternative strategies that stress the text's relevance to real life situations, participation and involvement with the plot (Lanier 58, 60); that is, with a strategy bordering on drama therapy. For instance, when he hands out the xeroxed copies of the play, he assigns the roles to the DDs, and this automatically makes of the classes a production of the play (this class is like a first rehearsal) as well as making *Hamlet* a kind of subtext, with the viewer of the film hunting for parallels between the characters and situations in the play and those in the movie.

In the success story reading of the film, the DDs evolve into a genuine community, acquiring a strong group identity and a sense of solidarity (which helps them acquire a collective identity in the larger community of the army and in the still larger group of Americans): by the end of the film, and already in the rap, they are proud to embrace a DD identity, transforming the pejorative denomination into a cause for pride.

This is not all, however: the imaginary reconciliation between high culture and popular culture (Lanier's term is "intercultural rapprochement" [12]) brought about by Shakespeare is also a success story at another level, that of the Bildung of the protagonist: it seems to be the chief factor in healing Bill Rago's internal split, which might have been the reason for his relative lack of success thus far. Writing advertisements for foodwraps (mass culture) and having a passion for *Hamlet* (high culture) are two sides of his personality that he has been unable to reconcile. The *Hamlet* experience seems to bring about an acute sense of an existential crisis—the climactic moment is the half-comic scene when Bill, having mounted Victory Tower, is trying to abseil down, hanging in mid-air, the two ends of the rope held by two of his pupils—and, eventually, a magical synthesis, a cure for all his problems.

Thus, the plot of cultural reconciliation is mapped onto a narrative concerned with self-knowledge and self-definition. The film juxtaposes two contrasting ways of

defining or attaining self-identity: the liberal, humanist one, where identity is individuality, difference from the herd, and the military one, where identity is a "we" before it is an "I". In his book on German identity, cultural theorist Norbert Elias juxtaposes two ways of defining identity: what he calls "army identity" is totally defined in terms of hierarchy and relations of subordination (a code of honour); "cultural identity," conversely, is a self-definition based upon human values, morality, an ability to identify with the—individual—other. The representatives of the canon of honour, claims Elias, had no interest in laying down their code of behaviour, or generalizing it in literary form. In a sense, we could suggest that this is what is sought in Shakespeare: what starts out as a search after "cultural" self-identity becomes a completely different thing by the end of the film.

The first sequences that relate Bill's introduction to army life (sinister, phalanster-like sequences: a jungle of pointless abbreviations, trainees chanting senseless marching songs, new recruits being branded, drill sergeants yelling at intimidated volunteers, trainees bayoneting straw figures while rhythmically shouting "Kill!") contrast his individualistic humanism to the dehumanizing, machine-like workings of the army. We are clearly invited to see things from the civilian, decidedly *normal* perspective of Bill the intellectual, and by the adoption of its perspective, the film seems to offer and approve of humanist individuality as a site of resistance (against Vietnam, against the whole military ethos, against identity defined as a collective identity). The narrative of the film, on this level, is a correction of this powerfully established dichotomy, an attempt to reconcile these two contrasting ways of defining identity. The contrast is gradually eroded as, for instance, the increasing militarization of the relationship between Bill Rago and the group, instead of depriving this relationship of its human charge, actually suggests its increasing authenticity, a growing appreciation for each other. The initial opposition between guns and culture is definitively over when a military marching chant borrows as its text the plot of *Hamlet*, and Bill happily marches his DD squad around the army base.

This seamless, twofold success story is obviously an inadequate account of the film: *Renaissance Man*, perhaps *malgré lui*, complicates the issue of the cultural split by placing it in a narrative concerned with identity politics. Although the material is tightly controlled, the film is symptomatic of a certain predicament in which cultural politics and identity politics are often at loggerheads with each other: the type of identity suggested by the authority of high culture (being a "Renaissance man") is not necessarily adequate in or even tolerated by the social formation that seems to grant high culture its authority over the definition of subjectivity and is therefore apparently predicated upon the same identity. Thus, the larger conflict behind the narrative is that between a democratic, liberal humanist ("cultural") conception of the self, encapsulated in the idea of the Renaissance man, and the capitalist system that, although it seemingly approves of this conception, is in its operation predicated on a very different (let us say, "military") conception of the subject. The army is a place where the military conception of the self, the secret basis of capitalist society, is allowed to

appear in its undisguised form. This larger conflict does not lend itself to an easy solution. Thus, in spite of the comic tone and happy dénouement, the vast uncertainty as to the use of Shakespeare looms large in the background (one may wonder, for instance, about the sheer adequacy of using a tragedy as a subtext for a light comedy), and suggests an even larger uncertainty concerning identity politics. Going back to what has been suggested previously, we can say that the mapping onto each other of the two kinds of contrast—the apparent conflict between high culture and popular culture, and the contrast between two kinds of identity—creates tensions in the seamless texture of the film which are bound to surface every now and then, most conspicuously in the educational narrative, the "point" of teaching *Hamlet* in the army.

"Victory starts here"

In order to see the cultural and political stakes more clearly, it has to be noted that the film is set in an army base in a particular cultural moment, shortly after the Gulf War, to which there is only one explicit reference in the film (Bill is reading that week's *Time Magazine* while he is waiting for Captain Murdoch, and then makes a trite remark about the war). If we consider *Renaissance Man* as gentle war propaganda, and examine the way ideological interpellation is treated and accomplished in it, the uneasy interplay between its cultural and identity politics becomes clearer.

The slogan of Fort McClare is "Victory starts here"; the pride of the base is called Victory Tower (claimed to be the highest of its kind in the country), and victory is clearly an important part of the whole ideological package that goes into military training and the imparting of military identity. Tom Engelhardt's 1995 book defined post-Vietnam America as "the end of Victory culture," the end of a cultural (national) identity predicated on expansion, a tale of expanding and disseminating democratic freedom and manifest destiny (necessary in justifying exploitation and territorial or economic expansion). With the trauma of Vietnam and the collapse of the USSR, the basis of victory culture was undercut, and there ensued what Engelhardt calls a "societal crisis of storylessness" (qtd. in Farrell 155), coupled with a "crisis of heroism" (Farrell 157). Farrell's argument is that, instead of disappearing, the victory narrative has evolved into new forms and opened up spaces in cultural imagination for compensatory tales, like the one developed by President Reagan: according to this narrative, the US had indeed suffered traumatic injuries externally, but only because the nation had been weakened internally, degenerating into a self-indulgent "*compassionate state*" (the expression was used by George Gilder, one of Reagan's chief theoreticians [Farrell 159]): welfare meant great internal expenditure, enfeebling social and economic progress, a perverse generosity breeding a race of parasites. Thus, Reagan inaugurated Spartan cuts, sacrificing "the weak" in order to restore "vitality" to the whole organism. The winners

were yuppies, entrepreneurs, and, significantly in the context of *Renaissance Man*, warrior heroes; one of Reagan's symbolic strategies was to reinflate warrior heroism (154). This Spartan logic of Taigetos introduced a doctrine of social Darwinist competition that inevitably favoured the strong (159).

This account resonates uneasily with some elements of the film. For instance, one of the more disturbing elements in the movie is Captain Murdoch's sinister touch of apocalyptic zeal when he, with a strange glint in his eyes, is sharing his cultural politics with Rago: since both families and schools let down the kids, Murdoch is convinced that the country is going to the dogs and that only the army is left to rescue and redeem a community heading for chaos and disaster ("hell" is the metaphor he uses). Significantly, Murdoch is not at all keen on the idea of helping the DDs by means of remedial teaching.

It is also in this context that the film's references to Vietnam should be understood. On the one hand, *Renaissance Man* casually and retrospectively disqualifies Bill Rago's anti-Vietnam protest, making it into a kind of *trahison des clerques*, simply by pointing out that, although he might have believed that by demonstrating in a military cemetery, waving the name of a dead soldier on a board, he was representing the humanist ethos of individualism, he did not even take the trouble of memorizing the soldier's name: what he cared for was not at all the individual soldiers but his own self-image of being a humanist and therefore supporting the anti-Vietnam cause. On the other hand, the figure of the *hero* looms large in the film, through the incapacitating personal crisis of one of the DDs: Brian Davis Jr. cannot recover from the loss of his father in Vietnam, or rather, the film makes us realize that his pathological fixation upon his father is the result of the country's betrayal of Davis Sr. (a frequent motif of Vietnam films), whose heroism has not been properly acknowledged, and therefore the work of mourning could not be terminated successfully. Davis's father is in a sense the Ghost of the Father, appealing to his son to restore his reputation and thereby enable himself to stop mourning and start his own life (the first quote from *Hamlet* that we encounter is in fact Gertrude's appeal to her son: "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off, // And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark" [II.ii. 68-9]). Davis is first cast as Gertrude, which is fitting, because he is too close to his mother, but at the end of the course his examination question—the questions can be seen as a second casting after the beneficial effects of the Hamlet therapy—, appropriately, is the Ghost; that is, in order to live a "normal" life, he has to come to terms with the ghostly presence of his father (replaced in the end by the general, the big Daddy of all, who, when handing over his father's posthumous medal to Davis, inevitably calls him "son").

The film seems to run counter to the ideology of the culling of the unfit. After all, the whole idea of the DDs' supplementry education is the result of the "state of compassion": money spent on those who would otherwise be unable to cope, on the unfit, the hopeless cases; even though literature is not part of the original plan (there is no plan apart from employing a teacher), the role of literature (*Hamlet*, Shakespeare) is

to help them catch up, to facilitate their integration, to prevent their dropping out and going to the dogs, joining the losing, for instance, criminal crowds. Nevertheless, the idea of Spartan culling surfaces in the film every now and then, for instance in the title,[2] which contains many of the contradictions of the film.

First of all, the title is inevitably read as a naming of the protagonist. However, the evoking of Bill Rago (Danny de Vito) immediately invests it with rather ruthless irony, indicating by contrast that not all the implications of being a Renaissance man are altogether democratic: the contrast between de Vito's physical features and the ideal invoked in the title signal that "Renaissance manhood" requires physical prowess, while also evoking the reigning military ethos of that age, the fact that warriorship was all in a day's work. In light of this, one of the most bizarre details of the film is surely the fact that Bill Rago is asked in all seriousness on at least two occasions whether he has been in the army. One look at him is enough to ascertain that, for all his versatility, he is physically unfit for military service (and thus disqualified at the start in the project of becoming a Renaissance man, physical beauty being a requisite). For a time, as long as he fancies himself as the self-styled critic of military ethos, persistently heckling Sergant Cass, Bill's shortness (shortage) is like an inverted form of Falstaff's bodily excess; it is also the mirror image of the psychic shortage (or excess) of the DDs, and suggests that teacher and pupils have something in common.

This aspect of the film gives strange and fairly sinister resonances to the title, which is already heavily charged: Bill used to work in Detroit's famous Renaissance Center, and he is a Renaissance man in the sense of being spiritually reborn during the film. Shakespeare and Hamlet are also obvious possible eponymous candidates, but in very general terms the title indicates that what is at stake in the film is acquiring or attaining a kind of identity that is traditionally considered to be the ideal for all of us. In its most widely disseminated version, the modern and somewhat elegiac notion disseminated by Jacob Burckhardt, the notion of the Renaissance man traditionally stands for a bygone versatility and fullness (developing to perfection all our faculties; Bill Rago mentions Rafael Battista Alberti to Leroy Jackson, the failed football player, and Alberti comes off as a "smart sportsman"), the importance of training and education (the liberal arts), and the idea that, with talent and energy, one can shape one's life and transform it into a work of art (Slavoj Zizek sees Foucault's emphasis on the aestheticization of ethics, on building one's own mode of self-mastery, harmonizing the antagonizing powers within oneself and inventing oneself, as the latest version of this ideal [*Sublime* 2]). Alberti's famous motto ("A man can do all things if he will") is uncannily echoed by the army poster that attracts the attention of Miranda: "Be all you can be."

It is, however, the Nietzschean echoes of the title, coupled with the discourse on the "compassionate state" and the Spartan cuttings, that seriously undermine the collective bliss enveloping all the characters—except Hobbs—at the end of the film. Nietzsche's notion of the Renaissance man was worked out as his antidote to the culture of Christianity, morality and egalitarian liberal democracy he so profoundly

despised, and it is basically one version of his idea of the Sovereign individual or Übermensch, characterized by overflowing power and strength. The entire notion of the Renaissance man is inserted by Nietzsche into a sinister metaphorics of strength and weakness. For him, the complete (Renaissance) man includes all the good and all the evil (see *The Will to Power* par. 881), not simply the harmony of the good bits (and he suggests that Shakespeare was one of these persons [*The Will to Power*, par. 966]), thus, it is definitely not a moral category.[3]

Nietzsche did not even try to hide his delight upon seeing the military development of Europe, the blossoming once again of personal manly *virtu* (*Tüchtigkeit*), *virtu* of the body (*Leibes-Tüchtigkeit*), and waxed lyrical over the fact that "beautiful men" are again "possible" (*The Will to Power*, par. 317). He talks enthusiastically about his project of reestablishing the order of rank (*Will to Power*, par. 854), the rights of "natural aristocracy." The clearest account of what he meant by Renaissance manhood is perhaps the second section of *The Antichrist*:

> —What is Good?—All that enhances the feeling of power, the Will to Power, and power itself in man.
> —What is bad?—All that proceeds from weakness.
> —What is happiness?—The feeling that power is *increasing*,—that resistance has been overcome.
> —Not contentment, but more power; not peace at any price, but war; not virtue, but efficiency [*Tüchtigkeit*] (virtue in the Renaissance sense, *virtù*, free from all moralic acid). —The weak and the botched shall perish: first principle of our love of humanity. And they ought even to be helped to perish.
> —What is more harmful than any vice?—Practical sympathy with all the botched and the weak—Christianity. (*Twilight* 128)

Nietzsche appeals to the Renaissance as to the last period in history when European man had not yet chosen the mistaken path of Christianity, that is, the path of eulogizing compassion and weakness, equality before God, and so on (see Elias 108).

The sinister echoes and military connotations of the concept of the Renaissance man are related to the contradictions of the film referred to earlier: the contradiction between the kind of identity that is predicated upon individuality and the delectation of literary artefacts on the one hand, and, on the other, the military identity, based on strength, that is asserted at the end of *Hamlet* by Fortinbras.

One of the places in the film where these symptomatic rifts between contradictory impulses become visible is the episode in which the beat of the blank verse is demonstrated to Melvil, the DD who is asleep all the time (as it turns out, sleeping is an escape from a violent stepfather). Melvil—cast ironically as Polonius—is stumbling through Polonius's instructions to Laertes, getting the blank verse beat entirely wrong. Invoking the help of the group's two amateur percussionists, Bill demon-

strates the correct beat of the line Melvil is faltering with. The demonstration is so successful that it develops into a manic chanting of the line by the whole group, including Melvil. By the end, they are all reciting madly: rhythm takes over, and the meaning of the line is totally forgotten. What is ironical, of course, is that the line chosen for the demonstration happens to be the famous assertion of individual identity as continuity and (moral) consistency: "This, above all, to thine own self be true."[4] The assertion of individual identity thus becomes an occasion for the dissolution of identity and individuality in a ritualistic, ecstatic chanting (the gradual convergence of Shakespeare's poetry and marching songs is a striking feature of the film).

Interpellation and therapy

If we look at the role of teaching Shakespeare in terms of the dynamics of appeal and interpellation, the film once again looks like a success story: inadequate trainee soldiers, after having gone through a course about *Hamlet*, are now fully equipped to deal with the challenges of the army—and, by implication, of "real life." Given the nature of the venture, it is no wonder that the camera never seems to capture the magical moment when the study of *Hamlet* is transformed into better performance in training.[5]

Bill's job is practically to find something that would appeal to the DDs, to *interpellate* them as useful members of their community, in ways that help them overcome their difficulties. In Lanier's reading, *Renaissance Man* is caught up in the problems of assimilation, suggesting that Shakespeare can transcend class and race (and, let us add, gender) antagonisms,[6] but having difficulties specifying what the DDs are learning *Hamlet* for (77-78; e. g. Hamlet's passivity). Thus, another Shakespeare play, *Henry V* is invoked to achieve the final reconciliation between Shakespeare and the army.

Lanier is right as far as he goes, but he forgets to add that at the end of the film the authority of *Hamlet* over the film is reasserted: it is the material of the examination, and the test questions also imply a significant *recasting*. The questions are characters from the play (none of the DDs has to identify metaphors or oxymorons, since they are all supposed to be "beyond" this level of relating to literature), and most of them seem particularly appropriate for the candidate: Benitez, who started out as an unlikely Horatio, is now Yorick (the fool who has learned to channel his exhibitionism into poetry recital); Davis, instead of his former role Gertrude, is recast as the Ghost, thus symbolically occupying his father's place; Leroy advances from a callow and confused Laertes to speculations about death, replaced by Haywood, who started out as Claudius; Miranda remains Ophelia, but no doubt a more mature one; Melvil, growing out of his somnambulism as a means of escape, has acquired survival skills from Shakespeare, and it is his task to clinch the happy reconciliation between cultural and military identity in the film by discovering it in *Hamlet*: to a Bill Rago beaming with satisfaction, he concludes that in the play, "only the soldier and the student survive." *Hamlet*, then, is posited as a *total book*: a conduct book, a manual for life, including all possible situations: even those who are left out (Hobbs) are recu-

perated by Shakespeare: not because Hobbs is thrilled to find that Shakespeare wrote a play about a black soldier, but because, as I shall try to show, his disappearance from the success story is also already contained in *Hamlet*, although not necessarily in a way the film is aware of.

The other Shakespeare plays that are invoked are like adjuncts, supplements: in fact, Shakespeare and literature as such are supplements, filling in the empty space that opens up by offering special, supplementary treatment for the DDs. *Henry V* interpellates the DDs differently. In the theatre episode, we first see a few traditionally produced war scenes, enjoyed by some of the DDs in a rather unruly fashion, but then we have Henry's first major speech to his soldiers, before the battle of Harfleur: when he addresses the gentlefolk, urging them not to disgrace their nation and their family ("be copy now to men of grosser blood"), we see the stage. When Henry turns to the yeomen, however, the camera leaves the stage, and focuses on Bill Rago, who, instead of enjoying the play, is anxiously scrutinizing his pupils, eager to see how they react to "high art." Thus, when the camera begins to pan one by one over the faces of the DDs, we are also adopting Bill's perspective. The pupils all respond in the most appropriate manner: they are so many enthusiastic "you's" to King Henry's "I":

> For there is none of you so mean and base
> That hath no noble lustre in your eyes. (III. i. 29-30)

Thus, the experience of art becomes, in true humanist fashion, the assertion of a shared humanity—or rather, of a shared identity, since the noble lustre is presumably not shimmering so much in the eyes of "mean and base" French peasants. Thus Henry's speech appeals to the common soldiers as sharers of a collective identity (as members of an army and of a nation). This appeal to collective identity is something that is missing from *Hamlet*, but, as the authority of Shakespeare has already been established, and since *Henry V* is also a Shakespeare text, this other kind of identity now also bears the hallmark of absolute authority. Benitez's performance of the St. Crispin's day speech toward the end of the film confirms the success of this act of interpellation. Benitez does not simply accept his place as one of the common soldiers, but, in his heavy New York accent, he recites the King's speech to Sergeant Cass and, more importantly, to the fellow DDs, a speech rhetorically based not on an I—you dichotomy, but on the assertion of a triumphant "we" that includes all who fight at Agincourt, overriding all other differences. It is more than ironical, an almost parodistically self-defeating gesture towards Shakespeare's universal appeal, that a Bronx drop-out finds the adequate words for expressing his troubled but consolidating American identity in a patriotic speech from a Renaissance English play.

There is, however, for all the successful acts of interpellation, an unmanageable surplus or excess in the film. Roosevelt Hobbs, the smartest among the DDs is, by this time, out of the class and out of the army. Bill notices his intelligence (he suspects that Hamlet's madness is a disguise), and he alerts Captain Murdoch

to the wasted talent, suggesting Hobbs as officer material. His good intentions, however, backfire when it turns out that Hobbs (Nathaniel Hobbs is his real name) is a crack dealer on the run from the law, hiding in the army. Hobbs is the figure who is culled; even though he is reading *Othello* in prison (thus recuperated by "Shakespeare"), his loss remains marked through several episodes. He is cast as Hamlet in the original set-up, and thus it is precisely Hamlet, the centre of the play, who is left out of the successful appeal (just like the military burial at the end of the play *Hamlet*, which, in a sense, is also a missing of Hamlet the individualist). We the viewers do not learn who takes his role in the group, and it could be argued that, from this moment, it is the ghost of Hamlet/Hobbs that hovers over the classroom.

After the Hobbs episode is over and he is taken away, Rago starts his next class by saying: "Okay, so we have finished the play within the play." In *Hamlet*, the play within the play is about exposing the King's crime, and in general terms plays within plays are "about" things that cannot be said by the main text. If this is the case, the Hobbs story, as the play within the play, suggests something about *Renaissance Man* that the film is unable to tell or show. According to Zizek, *Hamlet* is a drama of failed interpellation (*Sublime* 120): the ghost interpellates Hamlet and incites him to revenge, but adds that he must not do anything that would harm his mother. This is precisely Hamlet's problem: the desire of his mother. Maybe she is actually enjoying her promiscuous, incestuous relationship with Claudius; thus, what hinders Hamlet is not his own desire, but his doubts concerning the M/Other's desire.

If the central *mise-en-abyme* is a story of a failed interpellation, then this obviously affects the success of the interpellation in the main story. It is not by chance that it is Hobbs who questions the absolute authority, the totality of *Hamlet*/Shakespeare. When Rago praises him for his smartness, he replies: "He that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1.18). Rago frowns and asks: "Shakespeare?" Hobbs corrects him and adds: "Even Shakespeare has his superiors," which, apart from questioning the absolute authority of Shakespeare, has a strangely military ring to it.[7]

Teaching *Hamlet* is thus inserted into a complex ideological interplay of two kinds of contrasts mapped onto one another, and literature (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*) becomes the place where the uncertainties, excesses and unresolved tensions of the film's cultural and identity politics become observable. This is so partly because the classroom situation of the film "exceeds" that of the ideological interpellation of the educational process in several ways. First, although Bill applies the traditional humanist appeal of the beauty of poetry, he combines it with an immediate personal use value (appeal) to each of the DDs: the play becomes a terrain where they can symbolically work through their problems. In a way, their problem of dealing with the symbolic is overcome by means of an exercise in the symbolic working through of their actual difficulties. This formulation already indicates that the context of the teaching is also to a great extent therapeutic: the process of teaching/reading *Hamlet* is therapy for Bill,

and it is also essentially a therapy for the DDs: there is obviously nothing *physically* wrong with them, and it is clear that, although they are not well educated and not exceptionally intelligent, they are not at all retarded. Thus, the rather vague definition of Bill's duties—he is supposed to enable them to cope better—might be due to the fact that what they really want is a therapist: whatever is wrong with the DDs, it is something of psychical nature. They do not understand orders, that is, the voice of the Law: their problem is symbolic and it is also a problem with the Symbolic.

This—and the success of the therapy—is also related to the fact that literature (Shakespeare) appears in the context of desire: Shakespeare is his secret passion, which he is reluctant to divulge to anyone, thus, when he is provoked into talking about it, he concedes his control over the situation and becomes one of the DDs, having to talk about that which he reads, not as potential teaching material, but exclusively for pleasure. Thus, the DDs desire *Hamlet* as the object of Bill's desire. It is significant that *Hamlet* is not officially assigned material: there is no curriculum, Bill Rago and the DDs chance upon *Hamlet* (as a result of Bill's passion for it), turning the classroom, at least for a while, into a site of internal resistance within the army base. There is no room here to pursue a psychoanalytic reading of the film, but it is important to note that Bill occupies an intermediary, in a sense, transferential position between Shakespeare and the DDs: he is called William, but his initial lack of genuine authority is indicated by the fact that the pupils call him Billy Boy. Bill, thus, fails to become an authoritative father figure for the DDs, who, as their personal narratives testify, have all been brought up without "proper" families, and thus they have not been successfully Oedipalized (which, of course, brings to mind a further relevance of *Hamlet* as the quintessential play about failed Oedipalization). Instead of this, Bill casts himself—like a good therapist—as fellow-sufferer, sharing with the DDs his pleasure, desire and suffering, and offers, for all of them—including himself—Big Will, William Shakespeare, as the unchallenged symbolic father, the big *sujet supposé savoir*, whom nothing whatsoever escapes.

These "excessive" elements of the teaching situation all indicate ways in which the explicit cultural and identity politics of *Renaissance Man* fail to contain the implications of the narrative situation. Therefore the role of studying *Hamlet* in the "development" or education of the DDs, the interpellated group, remains confusingly multiple, failing to conform to any single agenda (democratization of high culture; Shakespeare as popular—that is, shared—culture; "state of compassion" ideology; reconciliation of individual and collective identity, and so on). Although the visible story suggests total, resounding success, it is—to put it bluntly—not at all obvious why the DDs need this education.

Bill's teaching strategy, combining a New Critical awareness of the subtlety of poetic language with a Leavisite emphasis on the response to literature as a means towards personal maturation, is clearly intended as an apology for the liberal humanist idea of teaching literature, what Alan Sinfield calls "progressive teaching," which has at its heart "the goal of convincing every child that he or she is a valuable person"

("Heritage" 264). This teaching is a humane attempt to offer an antidote to social experience which defines so many of us as "insignificant, disposable, mere units" in a machinery (264). Progressivist teaching—at least as it is defined by Sinfield—carries on the legacy of Renaissance manhood: it stresses "not the acquisition of a given set of standards and body of knowledge but the personal fulfilment of the individual; not training for an established slot in society but the discovery and maturation of an authentic self" ("Give an account of Shakespeare" 171). In this way—to borrow Althusser's terminology—the film stages the conflict between two strategies of interpellation and subject formation embodied in two Ideological State Apparatuses: the army and the school. The happy ending of the film is, in a broader sense, an indication of the fact that the difference between the school and the army, cultural and military identity, is at least questionable. Literature (Shakespeare, Hamlet) is effective because it is able to address and interpellate difference (the difference of each of the DDs), while on the other hand it is an effective ideological tool precisely because it is able to address difference in a way that recuperates it for the collectivity, in other words, it recognizes and caters to difference only to erase it as aberration: having read Shakespeare, the DDs will be able to stand up for themselves, to define and reflect upon their situation, but also they will toe the line.[8] As Lanier also remarks, the film, for all its jubilant conclusion, still has the problem that while at first Shakespeare seems to promise upward mobility or expanding opportunities (49), in the final analysis his work is used here to produce adequate and accommodating soldiers. This contradiction gives a further edge to the "play within the play": the fact that it is the smartest, the most intelligent member of the class that is culled out of the training might indicate the superfluousness and inadequacy of the Renaissance man in contemporary society, or rather the superfluousness of too many Renaissance men: society does not need too many people who are able to quote the Bible as well as its secular counterpart on it.

For Nietzsche, to be a Renaissance man is to overcome self-contempt (Leroy Jackson, Brian Davis, Melvil, even Haywood), to be able to overrule one's weakness (*The Will to Power* par. 98). This connotation of the title places *Hamlet*, a play about a weak man, in a different context. To make the DDs read and interpret *Hamlet* in the terms set by humanist education is to transform them into Renaissance men and women, to educate them to sovereignty, whereas in reality they are trained to be privates who will never need the interpretative skills or the sense of human complexity acquired through the reading of Shakespeare. Throughout the film, there is an increasing sense of the gross inadequacy of the project (even ignoring its unlikelihood in any case): no matter how one defines a Renaissance man, that is the last thing the DDs need to become (unless we take it in the very limited sense of overcoming self-contempt). The most uncanny motif in the film has to do precisely with this: it is the life-size human dummy wearing an army shirt that appears for some unknown reason in the classroom for some reason while the DDs are expecting Bill, who is running late because he has been to a job interview. The dummy most obviously and conveniently stands for the dehumanizing training of the army, as opposed

to Bill's humanist/liberal conception of identity. On the other hand, precisely because it appears as one of the DDs in Bill's absence, it might suggest not simply Bill's indifference, his lack of real concern for the DDs, but the inauthenticity of Bill's (liberal education's) well-intentioned but false humanism, also exposed by the general, a humanism that never sees the individual behind the idea of individual dignity. However, the dummy sitting at the desk and staring at Bill, who, upon his late arrival, is demonstratively deserted by his disappointed pupils, is also the radically contradictory figure of the subject that is the outcome of this interpellation, of this liberal, supplementary education of Renaissance men.

Notes

[1] Here is an outline of the film's plot. Bill Rago, a divorced advertising executive, loses his job (in Detroit's famous Renaissance Center) and is reduced to visiting the Unemployment Office in Detroit where he eventually gets a job at a nearby army base (Fort McClare). It is a teaching job which he is extremely reluctant to accept. His task is to deal with eight volunteers in the training programme who are unable to perform what is expected of them, thus they seem destined to fail. Bill is supposed to teach them basic comprehension; the implication is that they do not really understand the orders and that is why they cannot do their duty. Bill has no clue what to do with the Double Ds (short for "dumb as dogshit"), a kind of untouchable caste among the other trainees. Eventually, partly by accident, he ends up teaching *Hamlet* to the DDs, and the classes, amazingly, seem to work: not only do the DDs begin to improve (as testified by parallel sequences of cuts from *Hamlet* classes and the improving performance of the pupils, connected by jubilant and optimistic soundtrack), but Bill himself undergoes profound change: he begins to be genuinely interested in the DDs and in his job, and, as a result, his relationship with his daughter also improves. Apart from ex-drog-dealer Hobbs, all the DDs successfully pass all tests and are happily marching toward the future, while Bill, reconciled with the stern but efficient and caring Sergeant Cass, signs up for another term in the army.
[2] Alternative titles included "Army Intelligence," "Mr. Bill" and "By the Book." Among these, "By the Book" is the most interesting option, if only because of its Biblical tone and its uncanny echoing of "by the sword." In the film, it explicitly refers to the scene when Bill is told off by the general for heckling Cass and disturbing the work: he is asked to continue with his teaching "by the book." The French title (*Opération Hamlet*) explicitly refers to the major conflict of the film, the one between cultural and military identity.
[3] Nietzsche's definitions of nobility/nobleness (see *Joyful Wisdom* par. 55, *The Will to Power* par. 943, as well as the closing section of *Beyond Good and Evil*) compare interestingly with King Henry's speech that we hear in the theatre episode.
[4] The same line is also important in the film *Clueless* (see Corrigan 158).

[5] The limits of the applicability of literature to life are indicated in the episode when Melvil receives a letter from home, and he and Haywood are delighted to spot a simile in the text. This detail would suggest the triumph of literature as "form," yet, the rest of the letter is concerned with the stepfather's violence, and, faced with an overdose of "life," the desperate Melvil resorts to his usual method of going to sleep in moments of crisis. On the other hand, it can be argued that this episode occurs too early in the story to allow us to conclude the inadequacy of literature in crisis management; by the end of the film, Melvil seems to have overcome his habit of falling asleep and is seeking more practical solutions to his problems.
[6] See Jyotsna Singh about Shakespeare's use in colonial education as an accomodating ideal, a means of reconciling disparities of race and class (124). In the film, the key episode is that in which the DDs cross the Canadian border: when the customs officer asks them about where they have come from, they shout out in unison their shared American identity.
[7] This episode inserts *Renaissance Man* into the old opposition between Shakespeare and the Bible as secular scripture and religious scripture (see. Garber 9, Singh 129-30)
[8] In this way, *Renaissance Man* enters what Garber calls the culture wars: the conflict between "the timeless, ahistorical, universalizing, decontextualizing function of the 'symbol' and the historically contingent, specific, and overdetermined function of the 'symptom.' [...] Literature as symbol is expected to proclaim timeless, universal truths; literature as symptom is embedded in particular historical preoccupations and conflicts, both in its own time and ours" (7).

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