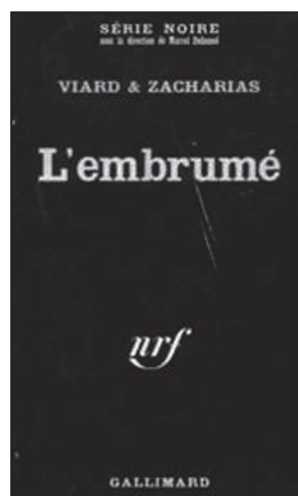




## “I’ve been killed, but I’m not dead”: Remains of *Hamlet* in the French telefilm *L’Embrumé* (1980)<sup>1</sup>

Sarah HATCHUEL, Nathalie VIENNE-GUERRIN

*L’Embrumé* was shown for the first time on French television on 21 September 1980 on Antenne 2 (channel 2), in prime time. It was broadcast again on 21 June 1987 and 4 November 1990, on the same channel, still in prime time, which seems to suggest that it was successful and well received by TV viewers. It was directed by Josée Dayan (known for her televisual adaptations—and remakes of adaptations—of literary classics)<sup>2</sup> with a script by Josée Dayan, Henri Viard and Malka Ribowska, itself adapted from a second-rate detective novel, *L’Embrumé*, by Henri Viard and Bernard Zacharias (see Plate 1)<sup>3</sup>.



**Plate 1: Henri Viard and Bernard Zacharias’s novel  
1966 *L’Embrumé***

1. Many thanks to Mark Thornton Burnett, Ramona Wray, Courtney Lehman, Rob Ormsby and Jennifer Drouin for making precious comments on early drafts of this essay.
2. Other TV adaptations of literary classics by Josée Dayan include *Le Comte de Monte-Christo* (1998), *Les Misérables* (2000), *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (2003), *Les Rois maudits* (2005). Dayan began her career as a TV director in the mid-70s, less “adapting” than “revisiting” former TV adaptations, often bringing a personal touch that infuriates the specialists of the literary works. *L’Embrumé* would definitely have appealed to her desire to revisit something that was already “re-appropriated”. As an openly gay figure, Dayan might also have been attracted to the “queering” of the *Hamlet* story.
3. Henri Viard and Bernard Zacharias, *L’Embrumé*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966.



Inspired by *Hamlet*, this telefilm is, to this day, France's latest TV adaptation of a Shakespeare play. From the 1980s onwards, Shakespeare seems to have lost his bankability and power of attraction for French TV producers, in a televisual environment that has come to rely more and more on audience rates and less expensive programming<sup>4</sup>.

The telefilm (and novel)'s French title, *L'Embrumé*, could be translated as "The Fogged-up Man". The original title of *Hamlet* is, reflexively, lost in the fog and replaced by a neologism which conveys ambiguity with a meaning that is difficult to grasp out of context, though it may have been influenced by Laurence Olivier's 1948 film, in which Hamlet is literally lost in the fog as he looks for his father's ghost.

In an interview given in 1980, the authors of the detective novel, Viard and Zacharias, explained that the inspiration for *L'Embrumé* came directly from *Hamlet*, and that the title, as well as the characters' names, brought this influence out into the open:

The main character is called Henri Elsen. Elsen... and the mist? Does that ring a bell? The mist of Elsen... There you are! The mist of Elsinore has opened your mind, so to speak. *L'Embrumé* is a transposition of *Hamlet*<sup>5</sup>.

What is under scrutiny here, therefore, is the adaptation of an adaptation. The telefilm derives from a 1966 novel which itself derives from Shakespeare's play. *Hamlet* experiences a succession of filters, which are both aesthetic and ideological. The telefilm version that we had access to at the Inathèque<sup>6</sup> is a recording of the 1990 broadcast in the series "Le policier du dimanche soir" ("Sunday's Whodunit"). The fact that this telefilm was presented in such a series is anything but fortuitous. The purpose of this paper, which is part of ongoing research on French TV adaptations of

4. See Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, "Remembrance of Things Past: Shakespeare's Comedies on French Television" in *Television Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of Michèle Willems*, ed. Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, Rouen, Publications des universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2008, p. 171-197.

5. Interview with Viard and Zacharias, "Henri Viard et Bernard Zaccharias : *L'Embrumé* nous a été inspiré par *Hamlet*", *Télé 7 Jours*, 20-26 September 1980, p. 47 (p. 46-47). Our translation from the French: "Le personnage principal s'appelle Henri Elsen. Elsen... la brume ? Cela ne vous rappelle-t-il rien ? La brume d'Elsen... Vous y êtes. La brume d'Elseneur vous a, si l'on ose dire, ouvert l'horizon : *L'Embrumé*, c'est une transposition d'*Hamlet*".

6. The Inathèque is an independent collection inside the building of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which holds the French Television Archive. The telefilm being unavailable elsewhere, we think it helpful to include a number of screen captures, even if the quality of the pictures is not very good.



Shakespeare's play that we hope to pursue over the years<sup>7</sup>, is twofold—to study how *L'Embrumé* turns the play of *Hamlet* into a detective film story, as well as to examine the stakes and consequences of such a transformation. A review in *Télé 7 Jours* (a popular weekly TV magazine in France) claimed, in 1980, that the film “was no Shakespeare, but a good whodunit”, perhaps so as not to discourage potential viewers<sup>8</sup>. This assertion, that seems to oppose Shakespeare and a good detective story, raises the question of what remains of *Hamlet* after such a translation. What is left of *Hamlet's* (and Hamlet's) mysteries under these circumstances? Is it not a long shot to impose upon a play which revels in unresolved ambiguities the filter of a detective story which, as such, ends up solving every problem? What does the statement “this is no Shakespeare” reveal about the reception and promotion of a telefilm which, nevertheless, still appears as a Shakespeare film through the very negation of its Shakespearean ascendancy?

Translating *Hamlet* into a detective story initially implied, for the creators of the novel and the film, that the readers and spectators should be aware of the telefilm's dramatic origin. If the characters are renamed, the onomastic work remains transparent: Claudius becomes Claude Elsen; Gertrude, Gerty; Polonius, Pierre-Paul Pollon; Ophelia, Felly; Horatio, Lauratit; Rosencrantz, Rosen; Guildenstern, Stern. For informed spectators, there can be no doubt that what they are watching is a remake of *Hamlet*. All the main characters are present and utterly recognizable in their dramatic functions.

Most of the plot is also easy to see through. *L'Embrumé* offers the story of a son (Henri Jr, see Plate 2) who wants to avenge his father (Henri Sr) who, beyond death, has sent him on a mission against his uncle (see Plate 2)—a mission which will lead Henri Jr to pretend he is mad (and drunk), to murder Pollon (see Plate 3), Rosen and Stern, to confront his mother in her bedroom (see Plate 4), to drive Felly into committing suicide and to fight with her brother during her funeral. The story ends in a family bloodbath from which Gerty will, however, come out alive.

7. This work is now part of an ongoing research programme on Shakespeare on screen in Francophonie led by the Institut de Recherche sur la Renaissance, l'âge Classique et les Lumières, Montpellier, UMR 5186 CNRS, France.

8. “Ce n'est pas Shakespeare, c'est un bon polar”, *Télé 7 Jours*, 20-26 September 1980, p. 57.





Plate 2: Henri Jr and Claude in Josée Dayan's 1980 *L'Embrumé*



Plate 3: Pollon in Josée Dayan's 1980 *L'Embrumé*



Plate 4: The closet scene in Josée Dayan's 1980 *L'Embrumé*

However, the “whodunization” of *Hamlet* has twisted the original play into a traditional police investigation, ending with the settlement of every mystery, as if the plot had tried to answer literally the play’s first lines, “Who’s there?” (1.1.1) and “Stand and unfold yourself” (1.1.2). The questions that the spectators are now being invited to ask themselves are: Did Henri’s father really commit suicide three years earlier? Is his brother Claude guilty of murder? Who keeps saying “I’ve been killed but I’m not dead” over the phone? Is Henri’s father dead or alive? Suspense and mystery are notably created through the presence of an anonymous figure (always dressed in a raincoat) that we see from the start, and whose appearances punctuate the film. Could this be Henri Elsen Sr, who managed to fake his suicide and is still alive?

In *The Invention of Suspicion*, Lorna Hutson stresses “the narrative importance of the play’s detective element”<sup>9</sup> and delineates a “connection between English revenge tragedy and detective plot”<sup>10</sup>. *L'Embrumé*

9. Lorna Hutson, *The Invention of Suspicion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 67.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 68.



reflects and fully exploits this dimension of the play as it lays stress on every aspect of the typical detective story. Three characters of policemen (Cisco, Volmand, Cornil) are made up, with a Chief Constable constantly putting pressure on them to unveil the truth (see Plate 5). Henri Jr is tailed discreetly by the police; the characters keep receiving anonymous phone calls and letters to be deciphered; Henri premeditates and commits the murder of Pollon (who, we are encouraged to think, helped Claude plot the murder of his brother); Henri craftily creates an alibi for himself, is interrogated by the police but cleared of any charge; and the murder of Henri's father is even reconstructed by the cops (in an astute rewriting of the play-within-the-play).



Plate 5: Policemen in Josée Dayan's 1980 *L'Embrumé*

All these elements of “whodunization” come with a modernization of the plot. Henri is thus cross-examined in what was meant to be a state-of-the-art police station in the 1980s—the script (available at the Inathèque) describes it as “ultra-modern”<sup>11</sup>, with new telephones and recording devices. Details are added to give the telefilm the feel of an episode from the US series *Columbo*, a widely popular show on French TV at the time. Pollon's death is precisely dated; Henri's mobile and alibi for Pollon's murder are respectively weighed and checked; his blood alcohol level is tested; all the gory details of Henri's father's death are given (his decomposed body was found in a swamp, with his jaw blown away by a bullet, thus making identification impossible).

The ins-and-outs of the case end up being solved; all the loose ends are eventually explained. Henri's father was, indeed, still alive. Three years earlier, he managed to shoot the man, Henri Leroy, who had been hired by Claude to kill him. He then chose to disappear by usurping Leroy's identity, and used his son as his revengeful arm. He makes a final appearance during the film's final bloodbath and is killed by Claude. His son Henri escapes the police, but not death, shot as he is by his uncle.

Paradoxically, making a detective story out of *Hamlet* has implied not creating more puzzles but rather solving all the play's unresolved

11. Original script of *L'Embrumé* by Josée Dayan and Henri Viard, unpublished, p. 78 (available for consultation at the Inathèque).

enigmas, thus going against the play's ethos of ambiguity. *L'Embrumé* explains and elucidates, unveils and makes explicit, somehow inducing the feeling of watching an anti-*Hamlet*, or rather a photographic negative of *Hamlet*, with all the "hidden" scenes revealed—a kind of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* played in the tragic mode. A flashback is added, for instance, to disclose Pollon as a true villain, and the closet scene becomes an opportunity to present Henri's Oedipus complex as absolutely certain. The following exchange takes place on Gerty's bed, while the mother is tenderly stroking her son's head:

- My little one...
- You don't love me, Mummy. The only person you love is Claude.
- No, my darling, I love you<sup>12</sup>.

This strategy of transposition which consists in oversimplifying and freezing meaning is repeated in the interpolation of a meeting between Henri and Felly in which he admits to having murdered her father (see Plate 6):

- But didn't you hear what I've said, you stupid bitch? I'm the one who killed your father!
- Are you mad?
- And I killed Stern and Rosen too, and believe me, it's not over. The dance of death is only just beginning<sup>13</sup>.



**Plate 6: Henri Jr admitting to the murder to Felly in Josée Dayan's 1980 *L'Embrumé***

12. Our translation from the French:

- Mon p'tit...
- Vous ne m'aimez pas, Maman. La seule personne que vous aimez, c'est Claude.
- Non, mon chéri, je t'aime.

13. Our translation from the French:

- Mais tu as pas entendu, conne, c'est moi qui ai tué ton père !
- Tu es fou ?
- Et Stern et Rosen aussi, et crois-moi c'est pas fini. La danse des morts ne fait que commencer.



Felly runs away, and is next seen dead at the morgue, having committed suicide. No scene of madness is actually shown. It is as if the film revealed what *Hamlet* usually conceals or leaves unspoken, while masking what *Hamlet* exhibits. Henri becomes a critic of the play, unveiling its fundamental themes (such as “the dance of death” or an excessive love for the mother); but he distances himself from the “original” character by openly acknowledging his passion for Gerty or proudly claiming the murders he committed. As opposed to Hamlet, it is very easy to “pluck the heart” of this Henri’s “mystery”.

In a telefilm working on unequivocal revelations and streams of rhythmic actions, no doubt is left lingering over any issue and Henri’s acts are not delayed by any kind of procrastination. Postponement and hesitation are only generated by the three years which have passed by since Henri Sr’s “death”, but those elapsed years are not dramatized in the film. The whole film, starting as it does with Henri Jr’s plan of revenge three years after his father’s disappearance, constitutes a hastened form of enactment instead of a pondering and deferment of personal action.

Since it weaves the murder case of Henri Sr with that of Pollon, the story is not only a regular “whodunit” around Henri’s father and the identity of his possible killer. Just like an episode of *Columbo*, the telefilm also works on the inverted-detective-story format, as the spectators witness, contrary to the original play, Henri Jr preparing his alibi and killing Pollon on purpose. The interest of the plot comes to rely upon the way the perpetrator, whose guilt is already known, might finally be exposed by the police. However, the police end up solving the mystery of Henri Sr, which was not initially defined as a murder case, and eventually fail to arrest Henri Jr for the murder of Pollon.

Though shot and broadcast in 1980, the film is already deeply embedded in the popular culture of the ensuing decade, which was fascinated with power and wealth. The kingdom of Elsinore becomes the world of Parisian high finance, in a transposition which is slightly reminiscent of Akira Kurosawa’s *The Bad Sleep Well*<sup>14</sup> (1960) and which will find astonishing echoes in Aki Kaurismäki’s 1987 Finnish *Hamlet Goes Business*<sup>15</sup> and Michael Almereyda’s 2000 *Hamlet*, all set in a corrupt corporate environment (though Kaurismäki’s sardonic, distanced and twisted presentation can hardly be matched). Claude, after his brother’s death, took the head of the family-run bank, thus depriving his nephew of his inheritance. Evolving in a background which “should immediately transpire both tra-

14. Original title: *Warui yatsu hodo yoku nemuru*, meaning literally “The Worse You Are, the Better You Sleep”.

15. Original title: *Hamlet liikemaimmassa*.





dition and big money”<sup>16</sup> (see Plate 7), Henri/Hamlet appears as a “young, technocratic go-getter”<sup>17</sup>, but also as a misfit, a lost soul fighting against his family and so-called friends and rebelling against a world he finds utterly “rotten” (“pourri”). This disillusioned attitude (conveyed through such claims as “It’s too late now”, “the ‘after’ has begun” or “the process is now at work, nothing can stop it”<sup>18</sup>) is reinforced through a metafilmic distance: the character, in another uncanny resemblance with Almercyda’s interpretation of Hamlet, films his family.



*Plate 7: “Tradition and money” in Josée Dayan’s 1980 L’Embrumé*

During the police’s reconstruction of his father’s death, Henri holds a film camera through which the spectators witness some of the scene, including close-ups of his mother and uncle, who are obviously uncomfortable with this voyeuristic gaze (see Plate 8).



*Plate 8: Henri Jr filming his family in Josée Dayan’s 1980 L’Embrumé*

16. Our translation from the French: “on doit d’entrée de jeu respirer la tradition et le gros argent”, unpublished screenplay, p. 13.

17. Our translation from the French: “Jeune loup technocrate”, unpublished screenplay, p. 8.

18. Our translation from the French: “Il est trop tard maintenant”, “l’après a commencé”, “la machine est enclenchée”.



During this film-within-the-film (which appears as an equivalent of the play-within-the-play), Henri is asked why he is filming the scene, only to reply “Well, it’s the final dress rehearsal; haven’t you ever heard of set photographers?” before asserting “You’re all actors in a bad play”<sup>19</sup>. Reflexively, this play on fiction takes place during the reconstruction of a fake and illusory death, as Henri’s father will turn out to be alive and using the name of Henri Leroy (Henri the King)—a decoy which, at the same time, hides and betrays his identity—and may work as a wink to the camp scene in the “French” play *Henry V*, in which the king wanders at night among his soldiers, introducing himself as Harry Leroy.

This reflection on illusion and acting is also developed through the transformation of Rosen(crantz) into a drag queen dancing and singing in a gay night club (see Plate 9).



Plate 9: Rosen as a drag queen in Josée Dayan’s 1980 *L’Embrumé*

One night, Claude comes to meet him and invents a story about Henri suffering from leukemia. He tries to convince Rosen to spare his friend the last phase of his disease by finding a way to kill him. Rosen is removing his stage make-up, putting the stress on disguise, deceit and play-acting at the same time as he accepts the deal against a great sum of money.

The fact that Rosen and Stern are presented as a gay couple<sup>20</sup> has mixed consequences. On the one hand, it links Henri, through their friendship, to Paris’ night life and blurs his sexual orientation in a bold and interesting move springing right from the end of the seventies. On the other hand, Rosen and Stern’s actions against Henri associate homosexuality<sup>21</sup> with

19. Our translation from the French: “eh bien quoi, c’est une répétition générale, vous n’avez jamais entendu parler des photographes de plateau ?”, “Vous êtes tous des comédiens, et votre comédie, elle est mauvaise !”. See also the novel, p. 95.

20. Turning “Guildestern” into “Stern” and of “Rosencrantz” into “Rosen” might also be seen as emphasizing the possible Jewishness of the two characters—thus furthermore insisting on their marginality.

21. On Rosen and Stern’s homosexuality, see the novel where they are called “pédérastes” (p. 106).

deception in a reactionary way. This ambivalence reaches its peak in a scene where the couple is comfortably settled in bed (see Plate 10), enjoying their warm and easy relationship, but also discussing how they could obtain Claude's promised extra money once the "job" is done.



*Plate 10: Rosen and Stern in Josée Dayan's 1980 L'Embrumé*

Henri's connection with the Parisian "underworld" is part of an interpretation that presents the hero as out-of-sync with the bourgeois system to which his family belongs. This difficulty to determine which world he should live in leads him to be always on the move, both literally and figuratively. Even Lauriot, the psychiatric doctor who treats his depression, keeps asking him "Where are you?" (maybe as a rewriting of the opening line "who's there?") every time he notices that Henri is lost in his thoughts. These absences have a narrative function: they allow us to see, in flashbacks, what Henri witnessed, notably the plot between Pollon and Claude to get Henri Jr out of their way. Just as the play of *Hamlet* is spectrally invaded by the Ghost, the film is haunted by these memories in flashback and by the sentence "I've been killed but I'm not dead" which is obsessively repeated anonymously over the phone (see Plate 11) as well as by the characters who heard it.



*Plate 11: Lauriot and Gerty receiving anonymous phone calls in Josée Dayan's 1980 L'Embrumé*

This sentence, making the past present again, generally triggers the flashbacks, calling trauma into the narrative. Gerty, listening to the anonymous call, is sent back to the day her former husband understood she was being unfaithful (“You want to leave me, don’t you?” The rats are leaving the ship.”<sup>22</sup>), before trying to strangle her in his rage. Her relationship with Claude, on the contrary, is presented as one of love and protection (“With you, I’ve been the happiest woman for three years”<sup>23</sup>) (see Plate 12).



Plate 12: Gerty and Claude in Josée Dayan’s 1980 L’Embrumé

The anonymous phone calls and letters, the flashbacks, as well as the raincoat-clad figure without a face (see Plate 13), contribute to importing the original spectral motif into the film. One of the cops even concludes that “ghosts can only leave the earth when those who love them die in their turn”<sup>24</sup>.



Plate 13: The rain-coat-clad figure in Josée Dayan’s 1980 L’Embrumé

22. Our translation from the French: “Vous voulez me quitter, hein ? Les rats quittent le navire.”

23. Our translation from the French: “Avec toi, depuis trois ans, je suis la plus heureuse des femmes”.

24. Our translation from the French: “Les fantômes ne peuvent quitter cette terre que lorsque ceux qui les aiment meurent à leur tour”.

When faced with the lack of any serious lead in the Pollon murder case, a policeman wonders about the person who makes the anonymous phone calls, a “Mister X hidden somewhere” that he chooses to call “Chadoze”<sup>25</sup>. When asked by another cop the reason behind this choice, he answers: “Because, in English, ‘Chadoze’ (‘shadows’) is evocative of an apparition, of a ghost. Henri Elsen Sr could have faked his suicide to disappear temporarily”<sup>26</sup>. Likewise, *Hamlet* the play becomes a shadow that vanishes in the background but hovers, both dead and alive, throughout the whole story. What is turned into a ghost is the play itself: *Hamlet* is made anonymous, as unidentifiable as Henri’s father’s corpse in the swamp. The writing strategy seems to be to exploit Shakespeare’s plot and motifs while negating and demystifying the play’s structure and words.

In the 1 hour and 27 minutes of film, direct textual allusions are rare. Though fervently expected, “To be, or not to be” is never uttered. The adjective “rotten” is repeated a few times, and Henri Jr calls Pollon a “fish-monger” (“maquereau”). During his confrontation with Gerty in her bedroom, he tells her that he has only “offended [her] husband” while she has greatly “offended [his] father”<sup>27</sup>, and admits to her that “People think that I’m mad because I play at being mad, but no one is more sensible than I am: when the wind starts blowing, I pretend to mix everything up, but when it abates...”<sup>28</sup>, a sentence that is strongly reminiscent of Hamlet’s “I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw” (2.2.361-362). At the end of the film, Henri also sees his “father in [his] mind’s eyes” as he is dying and catches a glimpse of Henri Sr (who has suddenly appeared alive in front of him).

If direct allusions are so rare, it is because the film is the fruit of three stages of erasure of Shakespeare’s play—from the play to the novel, from the novel to the screenplay, from the screenplay to the film.

25. The exact spelling could be inferred from the unpublished screenplay, p. 97.

26. Our translation from the French: “je l’appelle ‘shadows’ car en anglais ‘shadows’ veut dire ombre, apparition, fantôme. [...] Henri Elsen père a pu truquer son suicide pour disparaître provisoirement”. In the novel, p. 85, one finds the following comic passage: “Dans la langue de Shakespeare, shadows, ça veut dire ‘ombres’, ‘apparitions’, ‘fantômes’ !—Va pour M. Shadows, dit Volmand en riant. Il avait prononcé ‘Chadoze’, et ça lui avait paru un nom familier, réel, vaguement Savoyard, pas du tout mystérieux. Pour lui, M. Chadoze avait des yeux bleus, riait fort, buvait du pastis et pêchait à la ligne. Pas sérieux pour un fantôme !”

27. Our translation from the French: “j’ai simplement offensé votre mari, c’est tout ; or vous, vous avez gravement offensé mon père”.

28. Our translation from the French: “On me croit fou parce que je joue au fou, mais personne n’est plus sensé que moi : quand le vent se lève, je fais semblant de tout mélanger, mais quand il se calme...”



The 1966 novel *L'Embrumé* contains many traces of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which are primarily concentrated in the paratext. They disappear completely at the stage of the screenplay. The book opens with two quotes which constitute a dialogue between Shakespeare and the authors, Viard and Zacharias:

"To be, or not to be—that is the question"

*Shakespeare*

"Not to be—there's the answer"

*Viard and Zacharias*<sup>29</sup>

One cannot but notice the comical discrepancy between the mythical quote from the most renowned playwright in the world, and the rough answer provided by the two rather unknown French novelists. In an essay on the novel, Vianney Gallant claims that this "conversation across the centuries"<sup>30</sup> is "polysemic"—at the same time parodic and "polemical" in its attempt to "settle a score" with an author and a play that are too often quoted. For Gallant, Viard and Zacharias put a stop to Hamlet's "useless hesitations" and bring an answer at last.

Following the quote, a list of characters is provided, as if we were about to read a play. As it translates Shakespeare's first names into credible French surnames, it makes the Shakespearean legacy explicit, while openly modernizing it:

HAMLET *Henry Elsen Junior, 20 ans*  
CLAUDIUS *Claude Elsen, 51 ans.*  
GERTRUDE *Gerty Elsen, 40 ans.*  
POLONIUS *Pierre-Paul Pollon, 53 ans.*  
LAERTE *Jean-Louis Pollon, 22 ans.*  
OPHÉLIE *Felly Pollon, 17 ans.*  
L'OMBRE *Henry Elsen.*  
HORATIO *Docteur Laurat, 46 ans.*  
VOLTIMAND *Commissaire principal Volmand.*  
CORNÉLIUS *Commissaire Cornil.*

29. Our translation from the French:

"Etre ou ne pas être, voici la question"

*Shakespeare*

"Ne plus être, voici la réponse"

*Viard and Zacharias*

30. Vianney Gallant, "*L'Embrumé* de Viard et Zacharias: *Hamlet* de Shakespeare en roman policier", *Urgences*, n° 25, 1989, p. 51, <<http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/025543ar>>: "Et pourquoi ne pas parler de charge: on te règle ton compte, Shakespeare, à travers un palimpseste de ton Hamlet trop souvent cité. Plus d'hésitations inutiles, plus de questions. Une affirmation. Une réponse. Mais, dans ce cas nous glissons vers ce qui, implicitement, relève de la polémique [...] Elle s'avère donc largement polysémique, cette petite conversation par dessus les siècles".

ROSENCRANTZ *Jean Rosen*.  
 GUILDENSTERN *Guy Stern*.  
 BERNARDO *L'inspecteur Bernard*.  
 FRANCISCO *L'inspecteur Cisco*.

This list, located at the start of the book, creates a hybrid literary object which oscillates between a dramatic and a novelistic text. In a 1967 interview, Viard actually stated that he preferred his books to be defined in terms of *mise-en-scène* and wished he had “a Shakespearean director’s ability to speak informally with his actors to explain simply to them what is really taking place”.<sup>31</sup> Each chapter of *L’Embrumé* is subtitled with a quote from *Hamlet*<sup>32</sup>. But, beyond these quotes, Viard and Zacharias refer to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in more or less cryptic ways—references which are absent from the screenplay and the film. For instance, in Chapter 1, Superintendent Volmand reads a report resulting from the tailing of Henri during eleven days. Young Henri is said to have arrived completely drunk at the university library. While burning a book by Claudel, he is supposed to have exclaimed: “The excess of words by this obscene old man interferes with my silence, just as cars block the Place de la Concorde at 6 pm”<sup>33</sup>. The meeting (in 2.2) between Polonius and Hamlet, who proclaims that he is reading “words, words, words” (2.2.192) and mocks old men with

31. Jérôme Couturier, “Viard et Zacharias. Les iconoclastes de la série noire”, *Magazine littéraire*, Paris, n°3, janvier 1967, p. 43, quoted by Gallant, p. 48: “Viard préfère ‘qu’on parle d’explication de texte pour définir ses livres, ou même de mises en scène ; il voudrait avoir le langage d’un metteur en scène de Shakespeare qui parle familièrement à ses comédiens pour leur expliquer sans emphase comment se passent réellement les choses”.
32. Chapter 1: “La bise est âcre et j’ai le cœur transi”, Acte Premier, Scène I (“’Tis bitter cold,/ And I am sick at heart” [1.1.7-7]); chapter 2: “Je vois mon père avec les yeux de mon âme, Horatio” (“Methinks I see my father [...] In my mind’s eye, Horatio” [1.2.183-184]), Acte Premier, Scène II; chapter 3: “Tiens ! Un rat !” (“How now, a rat?” [3.4.23]), Acte III, Scène IV; chapter 4: “Brise-toi, mon cœur, car je dois me taire...” (“But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” [1.3.159]), Acte Premier, Scène II; chapter 5: “Seigneur, une bête sans esprit aurait souffert plus longtemps” (“O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer!” [1.2.150-151]), Acte Premier, Scène II; chapter 6: “Je ne suis fou que par vent de nord-nord-ouest. Quand le vent est au sud, je sais distinguer la poule de l’épervier.” (“I am but mad north-north-west; when the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw” [2.2.361-362]); chapter 7: “il y a quelque chose de pourri dans le royaume de Danemark.” (“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” [1.4.67]); chapter 8: “J’aimais Ophélie, la tendresse de quarante mille frères n’égale pas mon amour” (“I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not, with all their quantity of love,/ Make up my sum” [5.1.254-256]); chapter 9: “Oh ! Mort ! quelle fête dans ton infernale demeure !” (“O proud Death,/ What feast is toward in thine eternal cell” [5.2.308-309]).
33. Our translation from the French: “L’excès de mots de ce vieillard obscène encombre mon silence, comme à six heures le soir, les voitures embouteillent la place de la Concorde” (p. 22).



their “grey beards” and “wrinkled faces” (2.2.197), is thus rewritten into a police report and woven into the down-to-earth metaphor of the Place de la Concorde. Similarly, in Chapter 2, Henri’s psychiatrist (who stands for Horatio) reflects on his patient who, according to him, mixes “a depth of mind with apparent absurdity”, “logical with illogical thoughts”<sup>34</sup>, reminding the readers of Polonius’ famous statement “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (2.2.203-204).

The Shakespearean legacy is finally asserted in the novel’s last sentences, when Henri Sr’s letter is disclosed and comes to solve the case:

The director put the letter down, read the letter in turn and put it on his desk.

In a good-natured way, he said:

– ... And to say that it was no more complicated than that.

Volmand, with a faraway look, dropped:

– I’m 48, and I’ve just come to understand it.

The director looked surprised. He failed to see the connection between the superintendent’s age and the conclusion of the Elsen case.

– Understand what?

– What Shakespeare meant when he wrote: ‘Methinks I see my father in my mind’s eye, Horatio’.

The director was no longer surprised; he was astonished. He would never have guessed that one of his superintendents valued poetry. He asked:

– What’s Shakespeare got to do with all this?<sup>35</sup>

The end of the novel appears as a two-fold revelation—not only is the case resolved, but the origin of the story is disclosed metafictionally. Just as Mr Chadoze’s identity is uncovered, the spectral presence of *Hamlet* is unveiled. The ironic question “What’s Shakespeare got to do with all this?”

34. Our translation from the French: “ce mélange de profondeur d’esprit et d’absurdité apparente. De logique et d’illogique” (p. 42).

35. Our translation from the French:

Le directeur posa la lettre, lut la lettre à son tour et la posa sur son bureau:

Il dit d’un air bon enfant :

– ... Et dire que ce n’était pas plus compliqué que ça.

Volmand parut absent. Il laissa tomber :

– J’ai quarante-huit ans, et je viens seulement de comprendre.

Le directeur prit un air étonné. Il ne voyait pas le rapport entre l’âge du commissaire et le dénouement de l’affaire Elsen.

– De comprendre quoi ?

– Ce que Shakespeare a voulu signifier quand il a écrit : “Il me semble, Horatio, que je vois mon père avec les yeux de mon âme.”

L’étonnement du directeur se mua en stupéfaction. Il n’avait jamais soupçonné qu’un de ses commissaires prisât la poésie.

Il demanda :

– Qu’est ce que vient faire Shakespeare dans cette histoire ? (p. 185-186.)



sends us back to the quote starting each chapter and to the list of names at the beginning, while inviting each reader to grasp the journey from the original play to the novel.

In comparison with the novel, the screenplay adds several Shakespearean references of its own, but they did not make their way into the final cut. In the script version, Pollon tells Claude that his son's Oedipus complex is shared by many characters in literature: "It is a very old trick. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, Musset, and many others, have used it. There's nothing rotten in Denmark. What's rotten is Hamlet's brain. The proof is that Hamlet's dead and Denmark's still there"<sup>36</sup>. The only sentence in the script which features the name of Hamlet has thus been erased in the final film, suppressing the explicit *mise-en-abyme* and connection between the character of Henri and his fictional predecessors. Likewise, Henri, after having killed Rosen and Stern, was to say "That's it. It's over. *The readiness [sic] is all*. The point is to be ready"<sup>37</sup>. "The readiness [sic] is all" was supposed to be spoken in English, a sentence which came, in the script, with the following marginal note: "Shakespeare in *Hamlet*". The suppression of this sentence in the final version is symptomatic of a film which attempts, in the end, to expunge all Shakespearean words in order to present itself as a simple, marketable thriller.

The *Hamlet* legend is, therefore, smashed in what can appear as an operation of demystification. Henri, the Hamlet alter ego in the film, is nicknamed "Kiki" by his family and friends. In France, "kiki" is a very ambivalent term since it can be linked both to sexuality—as a slang (and often babyish) term for "penis"—and to childhood—as a simple term of endearment for children or, more specifically, as the name of a plush toy baby monkey that was sold with incredible success at the end of the 70s and in the 80s—with the famous advertising slogan "Le Kiki de tous les Kikis"<sup>38</sup>. The plush toy did not exist when Viard and Zacharias wrote the novel and chose to nickname Henri Jr "Kiki", but it was bound to influence the way spectators in the early 1980s received the TV adaptation. "Kiki" is also used in many colloquial expressions such as "serrer le kiki" (to strangle somebody) or "C'est parti, mon kiki!", literally meaning "Here we go!" but

36. Our translation from the French: "C'est une ficelle vieille comme le monde. Sophocle, Shakespeare, Racine, Musset et combien d'autres l'ont... Ce n'est pas le royaume de Danemark qui est pourri, c'est le cerveau d'Hamlet. La preuve, Hamlet est mort, et le Danemark dure toujours", unpublished screenplay, p. 31.

37. Our translation from the French: "Voilà, c'est fini. *The readiness [sic] is all*. L'essentiel c'est d'être prêt", unpublished screenplay, p. 140.

38. See the official website of the plush toy: <[www.planete-kiki.net/](http://www.planete-kiki.net/)>.



whose origin might date from the 30s-40s when prostitutes indicated that they were off with a client (whose name they didn't know)<sup>39</sup>.

The repetition of this ambivalent and polysemic term (that simultaneously infantilizes and sexualizes Henri) comes with the use of a commonplace and coarse language throughout the film: "Kiki" is regularly called a little "asshole", "moron" or "mad guy" ("con", "p'tit con", "tu es fou!"). When cross-examining Henri, the inspector quotes the testimony of a bar tender who saw him drunk and described him as "What a fogged-up guy!" ("Quel embrumé, ce mec!"), a neological expression which plays on the multiple connotations of "embrumé"—"lost in the fogs of alcohol", "who has lost his bearings", and which is close to many French insults phonetically, such as "enfoiré" and "enculé"—equivalents of "buggered"<sup>40</sup>. The neologism thus contributes to emphasize and blur Henri Jr's sexual orientation—turning him into a queer figure that oscillates between the gay community and his *bourgeois* family, but never chooses to belong to either. Just as Stern and Rosen's homosexuality had mixed ideological consequences, the queering of Henri Jr is a bold move that immediately triggers a reactionary psychological interpretation. *Hamlet* is turned into the tragedy of a clinical case: Henri is defined as "a crackpot" by his friends, "schizophrenic, emotionally disturbed and suffering from a violent Oedipus complex" by Pollon, "a mad murderer" by Claude, and "heavily depressed" by Dr. Lauratitot. Henri's family keeps wondering whether he should be confined to Lauratitot's mental institution again, just as he had been three years ago after his father's death. Like Hamlet, "Kiki" is a social misfit: he roller-skates his way to a formal, business dinner organized by his mother and uncle; he plays golf in a cemetery; and he provocatively films his family and friends to send them back a distanced image of themselves. Like Hamlet, he becomes the object of multiple readings and incessant commentaries from others and even from himself. But, unlike what happens in *Hamlet*, these subversive acts and the commentaries upon those acts are only meant to turn "Kiki" into either a wildcat or a kitten—a hysterical murderer or a mummy's boy. These two versions of "Kiki" clash during Lauratitot's questioning by the police superintendent. Lauratitot tries to reassure the policeman: "Let's be serious. [Henri] Elsen

39. See the Expressio website ("les expressions françaises décortiquées"): <[www.expressio.fr/expressions/c-est-parti-mon-kiki.php](http://www.expressio.fr/expressions/c-est-parti-mon-kiki.php)>.

40. The connection between these words is stressed in the novel, p. 78:

– Vous trouvez ça flatteur, pour un homme de votre niveau social, monsieur Elsen, d'être traité d'embrumé ? Imperturbable Kiki répondit :  
– Ce n'est pas mal trouvé. Voyez-vous, dans la vie, monsieur le Commissaire, il y a les paumés, les enfoirés et même les enc... ! Eh bien, moi, je suis un embrumé. Somme toute, je m'en tire à bon compte !

is not a wild beast. Though he's come of age, he is still a child"<sup>41</sup>. But his answer dangerously keeps alive the alternative through the mere evocation of it. The film ends up merging the two visions of "Kiki": Henri, who has just widely triggered a terrible bloodbath, dies in the arms of a cradling and fondling mother, who keeps calling him "my little boy" ("mon petit, mon petit") (see Plate 14).



Plate 14: Gerty cradling a dying Henri Jr in Josée Dayan's 1980 *L'Embrumé*

Having Gerty escape death<sup>42</sup> allows for the creation of a *pietà* moment—it is the last sequence of the film, and so the most lingering one after the show ends. Henri is viewed as a martyred child, which takes the spectator full circle, back to the beginning of the film. As an anticipation of this ultimate emphasis on youth and vulnerability, the film had opened indeed on a quote from the flamboyant French poet, Arthur Rimbaud: "I am young: hold out your hand to me"<sup>43</sup>. The quote encourages a reading of Henri/Hamlet as a young, rebellious, adventurous and romantic artist, but takes part in the disconnection of the film from the play. The telefilm is, from the start, linked to literature and poetry but, ironically, not to *Hamlet*, which makes the explicit identification of the Shakespearean legacy even more complicated. The paradox at work in the film is that the plots and characters of *Hamlet* are simplified, its themes are made more explicit, but the play itself—its name *Hamlet* and the actual text—remains implicit or is only briefly alluded to.

*L'Embrumé*, by insisting on the thriller aspects of *Hamlet*, thus simultaneously rewrites and erases the play. "I've been killed, but I'm not dead"

41. Our translation from the French: "Soyons sérieux, commissaire, Elsen n'est pas un fauve, il a beau être majeur, c'est toujours un enfant".

42. In the novel, Gerty dies, falling in a staircase, p. 162.

43. "Je suis jeune: tendez-moi la main...", in the letter of May 24th, 1870 (which includes verses on Shakespeare's Ophelia), from Rimbaud to Théodore de Banville. Rimbaud was about to be 17. See <<http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/BanvilleE.html>>. Rimbaud's renowned affair with poet Paul Verlaine further imbues the character of Henri Jr with homosexual overtones.



may not be uttered by Henri Sr only, but by Shakespeare's play itself, as the text of *Hamlet* is turned into a ghost<sup>44</sup>. On a metadramatic level, the contradictory sentence epitomizes the process of transposition at work in *L'Embrumé*—a process which constructs a collaborative interpretive relationship between the adaptation and those who receive it. The film seems to lead us far away from *Hamlet*, which it *pretends* to eliminate. The two authors of the novel (from which the telefilm has been adapted) claimed, just before the original broadcast of the film, that "*Hamlet* is the best constructed play among all the dramatic works" before adding "You'll see that *something's still left from it...*"<sup>45</sup>. The film thus raises the question of the degree of change necessary for a work to cease being associated with a specific pre-text. The spectators are turned into detectives *looking for* the play, watching the film as a palimpsest where some remains of *Hamlet* and its words should still be perceived, albeit in the negative mode, albeit through a fog of "chadoze".

*L'Embrumé*, 1980

Length: 1 hours 27 minutes

Broadcast: 21 Sept 80 (20:35, A2), 21 June 1987 (20:30, A2), 4 November 1990 (20:50, A2)

Producers: PRD (Paris) and A2

Director: Josée Dayan

Adaptation: Josée Dayan, Henri Viard and Malka Ribowska

Dialogues: Henri Viard

Adapted from the novel by Henri Viard and Bernard Zacharias

## Cast:

Patrick Bouchitey (Henri Elsen Jr)

Malka Ribowska (Gerty Elsen)

François Chaumette (Claude Elsen)

Jean Topart (Dr Lauratio)

Raymond Hermantier (Pierre-Paul Pollon)

Maurice Garrel (Henri Elsen Sr)

Yves Beneyton (Jean-Louis Pollon)

Stéphane Bouy (Stern)

Jean-Claude Dreyfus (Rosen)

44. At the 2009 British Shakespeare Conference in London, Ramona Wray suggested that it is as if *L'Embrumé* heralded in 1980 that it would be the last Shakespearean adaptation directed for French television.

45. Our emphasis and our translation from the French, "C'est, disent-ils, la pièce la mieux construite de tout le théâtre mondial. Et comme la fantaisie ne perd jamais ses droits, ils ajoutent : 'vous verrez : il en reste quelque chose...'" Interview with Viard and Zacharias, "Henri Viard et Bernard Zacharias : *L'Embrumé* nous a été inspiré par *Hamlet*", *Télé 7 Jours*, 20-26 September 1980, p. 47.

Etienne Draber (Cornil)  
Jacques Galland (Juge)  
Yves Gasc (Inspecteur Cisco)  
Hubert Laurent (Inspecteur Marcellin)  
Nathalie Jadot (Felly Pollon)  
Hans Verner (Bartenschlager)

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