

Shakespeare's Toys

Chase Hockema, University of Georgia

Abstract

Skull Attack Jack, an iteration of the *Last Action Hero* action figure line released by Mattel, Inc., reimagines the character Jack Slater as Hamlet. Armed with a sword, knife, utility belt, and the ability to launch a skull from his hand, the so-called Action Hero Hamlet served as a marketing campaign for the film *The Last Action Hero* (1993), in which Jack Slater jumps from movie to movie and briefly acts in the role of Hamlet. By virtue of its standing as an adaptation of both the film and the play *Hamlet*, Skull Attack Jack serves as a useful focus for a consideration of objects as a form of media. While the toy functions as a medium in its own right and as a remediation of its source texts, Action Hero Hamlet also reveals the essentially parodic reduction and distillation of Shakespeare's texts as they move from stage to screen to toy.

The Toy

Skull Attack Jack remediates Hamlet into an action hero, amplifying the Hamlet of Act 5. Standing about five inches tall, Jack Slater's Hamlet is dressed in black boots, leggings, and a sleeveless vest; draped across his shoulders are gold cords and a purple sash. Arnold Schwarzenegger's face, beneath close-cropped brown hair, sits atop the muscled neck and body of this ready-for-war Hamlet. In true Barbie-figure fashion, Hamlet is ready to accessorize with a utility belt and a knife, and in his left hand he wields his sword. Action Hero Hamlet's signature trait, however, is Yorick's trigger-release-firing skull which can be launched from Hamlet's right hand (fig. 1). This action figure's limbs can be moved, and its head turns from side to side. As described on the box, Hamlet is ready to answer "To be or not be?" with a resounding "Not to be" (fig. 2).

The Toy as Media

Marshall McLuhan argues that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium" (McLuhan 1966, 23); the content of the action figure is the character of Hamlet as portrayed in *The Last Action Hero*, and the content of that Hamlet is the character of Hamlet

as depicted in *Hamlet* the play. The action figure neatly fulfils McLuhan's poetics of media: a medium extends or amplifies, obsolesces, retrieves from the past, or reverses some aspect of its content. Action Hero Hamlet aligns with these poetics by treating the character as an actionable thing that remains after the closed loop of the narrative has ended, extending user interaction with the character, and obsolescing the passive viewership encoded in the media of *The Last Action Hero* and *Hamlet*. In its nested, entangled double-media, the toy extends how we can interact with the source material. The visual source media treats the audience as an object to be acted upon, while toys themselves demand user input and position the audience as the operator of the media. Perhaps most simply, the action figure retrieves the character of Hamlet from the past—both the Renaissance past and the 1990s past. The most important and primary poetic of media that the toy satisfies, however, is in how it amplifies some aspect of the source media, namely Hamlet as a revenge hero. The toy exists as the exaggerated essence of the revenge-tragedy hero embedded in Hamlet. Removed twenty years from the film, Skull Attack Jack (TM) makes its meaning as the amplification of one limited facet of Hamlet, a facet itself derived from a function of the character type of which Hamlet is an (adapted) instance.

The Toy as Parody

Maurizio Calbi's *Spectral Shakespeares* provides a useful term for media generated by turning texts into objects: Shakespeare in the extreme. *Spectral Shakespeares* conceives of adaptations that have certain qualities greatly exaggerated or that render other aspects nearly unrecognizable as "extreme": borrowing from Tom Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, Calbi discusses the "reframing of earlier reframings" becoming tangled and "extreme" as a result (Cartelli and Rowe 2007, 26; quoted in Calbi 2013, 7); in much the same way, this toy reframes and tangles *The Last Action Hero*, *Hamlet*, and the action-figure franchise, thereby becoming an example of Shakespeare in the extreme. Calbi also allows for extreme Shakespeare adaptations, such as toys, to be intentionally problematic or impure reproductions, and in extremifying—or to stay truer to McLuhan's poetics, amplifying to the extreme—one characteristic of the textual Hamlet, the action figure problematizes itself. In *Hamlet*, the character is conflicted and complex, rash and vengeful and hesitant and contemplative; he's multifaceted in a way the action figure is not.

In reducing Hamlet to a single character feature, the toy becomes a parody. Linda Hutcheon thinks of parody as "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion....Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 1985, 6). For an object to be a parody, it must have the proper proportion of similarity to difference; if an object is too similar, it is merely a representation of the text,

not a parody. If, however, an object is too different, it risks not being identifiable as an iteration of the text it is parodying. The parody must be understandably derivative of the source while simultaneously differing significantly from it. The significant difference between Hamlet in *Hamlet* and Skull Attack Jack arises largely from Yorick's skull. Holding the skull is iconic of *Hamlet* the text and Hamlet the person, but the quick-release projectile-skull introduces a jarring dissonance to Hamlet and acts as the engine of parody. Hutcheon also points out that "parody's transgressions ultimately remain authorized—authorized by the very norm it seeks to subvert. Even in mocking, parody reinforces its source material" (Hutcheon 1985, 75). Parody relies on the original form as its authority to exaggerate something from the text. This is why Skull Attack Jack is more fully a parody of the text, rather than just an extreme adaptation of it—the toy overtly points to the revenge tragedy—character and *topoi*—inherent in *Hamlet* as its authority. It simultaneously capitalizes on the source text and reduces it to a single aspect. As divorced from Shakespeare's textual *Hamlet* as Skull Attack Jack seems, at its core the toy reinforces both the revenge hero tradition in *Hamlet* and Hamlet's heroic characteristics—its extremeness is authorized by the text it seeks to distance itself from, thereby sealing its position as parody.

Compare two separate physical object-Hamlets: Skull Attack Jack and the statue of Hamlet the Thinker in Stratford-upon-Avon (fig. 3). In both cases, Hamlet is pushed to one extreme or another—either angry and rash, or methodical and scholarly. These two modes of Hamlet's character are one of the central conflicts throughout the play: Revenge Hero Hamlet declares, "Now could I drink hot blood," while Hamlet the Thinker ponders, "To be, or not to be?" (Shakespeare 3.2.422; 3.1.64). In the play, Hamlet has the ability to embrace both of these aspects of himself. Yet in the process of turning the text into objects, the revenge hero and the philosopher become trapped in stagnant positions, forever one or the other, but unable to be both. Even the physical attributes of these object-Hamlets reflect their singular identities. Hamlet the Thinker is sitting down, holding the same skull as Skull Attack Jack. But in the statue, the skull is inseparable from his hand, and Hamlet is immobile on his seat. This contrasts sharply with the action figure, which can move all its limbs and is designed to be active; most telling, of course, is the trigger-release-firing mechanism that launches the skull from his hand and physically rejects the deaths that haunt Hamlet the Thinker. Action Hero Hamlet is an object constantly moving, one intended for movement; Hamlet the Thinker must sit forever paralyzed and unactionable.

Each figure is an instance of a text turned into an object, and both illustrate the necessarily reductive process of that remediation which results in an exaggerated and extreme adaptation. When cooking, a reduction is made by thickening or intensifying some substance. In a similar way, thickening and extremifying Hamlet's character results in a reductive version of the text.

References

- Calbi, Maurizio. *Spectral Shakespeares: Media Adaptations in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Cartelli, Thomas, and Katherine Rowe. 2007. *New wave Shakespeare on screen*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 1985. *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*. New York: Methuen.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media*. Second edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. The Folger Shakespeare. Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. Folger Shakespeare Library, December 21, 2020. <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/hamlet/entire-play/>