Here are some notes on “the Soviet Hamlet,” which many consider the masterpiece of the Russian director Grigori Kozintsev (1905-1973). His credits also include a King Lear (1969) and a Don Quixote (1957).

Whoever approaches the Kozintsev Hamlet from a viewing of Olivier’s Hamlet (1948) will quickly notice sharp differences. In Olivier, writes Jack Jorgens,

The action is theatrically generalized, abstract. What glimpses we get of the world outside Elsinore are distant and stylized—it hardly seems to exist. Kozintsev’s Prince, in contrast, inhabits a crowded castle which has a history and is the center of a society rooted in nature—sky, stone, plains, and the sea. The castle becomes, in effect, one of the Dramatis Personae.

Olivier surrounds his king with toadying, formally dressed courtiers, but Kozintsev also provides glimpses of the common people who are affected by the murderous struggle within the castle. Peasants turn the gigantic wheel which raises and lowers the portcullis. They gather to listen as Claudius’s proclamation is read to them and as the actor recites the Hecuba speech. They walk the road Hamlet walks when he returns after being “set naked” on the shore, are viciously pushed back by soldiers as Ophelia is buried, and at the end look on in silence as Hamlet’s body is borne by. Because there is a context for Hamlet’s action, Hamlet’s problems are social and philosophical as well as psychological. (Jorgens 218-19)

Jorgens goes on to quote some observations from Kozintsev’s chief book on Shakespeare, which includes his production diaries. (I have inserted a few more from that book.)

It is impossible to combine human worth with existence in a society based on a contempt for man. To reconcile oneself, to swim with the current, is ignominy. It is better “not to be.” This tragedy portrays a man who does not find himself between life and death, but between one era and another. . . . As always in Shakespeare, “the times” are expressed both in accurate pictures of the life contemporary to them, and in generalizations that penetrate the depths of an historic contradiction developing in different forms and in a more distant epoch . . . . The conflict between Renaissance ideals and the reality of the epoch of primary accumulation of capital was evident enough. This is the germ that sickened those who had the misfortune to realize the depth of the rift. . . . The society portrayed in Hamlet is frightening neither by its resemblance to the savage existence of beasts of prey nor by the particular cruelty of bloodthirsty fiends, but by its callous emptiness. The noble and the spiritual have vanished from life. It is not bestial crimes that around horror; it is normal human relations which have lost their humanity. (Kozintsev 163, 108, 140).

Kozintsev’s book includes a critique of “Hamlet and Hamletism,” the name he used for a historically emergent attitude toward life and toward Hamlet of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
Goethe wrote of Hamlet, "A beautiful, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which makes the hero, sinks beneath a burden which it can neither bear nor throw off." The elegaic Hamlet of the second half of the eighteenth century received new and highly important traits. He staggered under the weight of the burden that had fallen on his shoulders. According to this new approach, the main point of the play was that Hamlet could neither refuse to fulfill his duty nor could he fulfill it. The story of the Danish Prince became that of a soul, beautiful and noble, but by nature incapable of action. (112)

This view of the character reached a mannered condition in the late nineteenth century.

A feather in the hat, velvet clothes, and beautiful melancholy . . . had nothing in common with Shakespearean description. Hamlet’s doublet was unbraced, his stockings were fouled and falling about his ankles, his expression wild. The beautifying of the Prince was a product of French Hamletism.

When it came to Hamlet even Arthur Rimbaud, who found poetry in a search for lice, called him “the pale cavalier.” He appeared as such on the stage. Critics celebrated his beret with its ostrich plumes, the velvet of his costume, and even the silk handkerchief with which he wrapped his hand before picking up the skull from the ground. Elegance and picturesque posing had become a tradition. (128)

Such affectation was alien, Kozintsev thought, both to Shakespearean and to modern reality. "The screen must convey the enormity of history, and the fate of a man determined to talk with his epoch on equal terms, and not be an extra, with no speaking part, in one of its spectacular crowd scenes. There will be no necessity for emotional little scenes.” (Kozintzev 232).

Of Ophelia, Kenneth Rothwell writes this:

The film’s most strikingly original contribution to the Hamlet legend . . . may be the probing portrait of Ophelia as an innocent and pathetic victim of both her father and Hamlet. She is first seen dancing like a mechanical doll to the tune of a tinkling child’s music box. Later, when being prepared by her swarm of attendants to attend her father’s funeral, she is ceremonially encased in an iron corset and farthingale like a bullfighter being prepared to go into the thing . . . . Ironically, the wronged Ophelia’s debasement in death, her “maimed rites,” as it were, contrasts with Hamlet’s enoblement as Fortinbras’ four captains bear his body aloft up the sweeping stone stairways. This is the man who has helped to destroy Ophelia and whose ineptness as an avenger has caused multiple deaths. (Rothwell 185-87)

One wonders, though, if this comment does not tend to shift the burden of “Hamletism” from the male to the female lead. — SD

