

Laurence Olivier in *Hamlet* (1949)



In the late 1930s and early 1940s, when Samuel Goldwyn, MGM, and David Selznick were wooing him, Laurence Olivier chose not to become a movie star “like dear Cary.” After playing Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* (1939), Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), and Maxim DeWinter in *Rebecca* (1940), he appeared in Hollywood pictures sparingly and tried to avoid a fixed persona. He nevertheless became the symbol of what midcentury America thought of as a distinguished actor, and was the most successful English theatrical type in the movies. He wasn’t romantically flamboyant (Orson Welles was closer to that), he wasn’t a naturalist like the students of the Method, he wasn’t a Brechtian, and he wasn’t the sort of movie actor who plays variations on a single character. He belonged instead to a school of disciplined, tastefully romantic verisimilitude, and within that school was a master. He was also the best-known Shakespearian in films.

Olivier often said that his favorite movie role was the working-class comedian Archie Rice in *The Entertainer* (1960), but his performances in the Shakespeare films that he directed are more representative of his skills and more significant in film history. Based on canonical texts with a long performance history, they foreground his stylistic choices

and make his influences relatively easy to identify. His version of *Hamlet* (1949), for example, seems to derive pretty equally from the English romantics, Sigmund Freud, and William Wyler. These sources are not so eclectic as they might appear. Romantic-realist ideas of narrative shaped nearly all feature films of the period; Wyler had been the director of *Wuthering Heights* and at one point was scheduled to direct Olivier's production of *Henry V*; and Olivier's conceptions of character and performance are similar to the ones that shaped Hollywood in the 1940s, when Freud was in vogue.

Of course Olivier's conceptions weren't the same as Shakespeare's. Shakespeare and his fellow players had evolved from the first professional thespians in England—the travelling groups who worked in the courtyards of inns during the late middle ages—and their style had little in common with modern theatrical realism. True, Hamlet advises his players to “hold the mirror up to nature,” and the Globe theater aspired to a relatively unforced, “natural” behavior for which it was praised. But Shakespeare's “nature” was specific to English culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The text of his plays is heavily rhetorical, requiring declamation and occasional direct address; in his day, acting was synonymous with the “action” or gesture of oratory, and players were probably influenced by the many Elizabethan guidebooks to public speaking.

By the late-sixteenth century, there was growing criticism of overacting or flamboyant gesture. Nevertheless, stage acting involved a good deal of formal interplay with spectators; the dramas were filled with direct, expository asides to the audience and requests for them to use their imagination—and the audience complied, implicitly asking the actors to tell them a story and indicate rather than completely embody emotions. People were accustomed to seeing boys play the roles of women, and the plays took a generalized approach to motivation, making little attempt to show how the accumulated weight of an individual's past might have influenced behavior. The chief job for the performer was not to disappear into the role, suggesting motives or “subtext,” but to oscillate between speeches to the other players and speeches to the audience, between moments of open self-questioning, when the character reasons “internally” in the style of public debate, and moments when the character's passions overrule reason.

But even though Shakespeare's acting was ceremonious by today's standards, it also required an emotional conviction that contributed to the development of individual acting styles. As Bernard Beckerman has argued, "Shakespeare gave his actors too rich a variety of emotions of too fine a subtlety to permit them to rely on a stock rendition of outworn conventions." That was exactly why he appealed to the early nineteenth-century romantics, and why his theater produced a rudimentary star system, with Richard Burbage specializing in the tragic parts, Will Kemp in the clowns, and Shakespeare himself in the old men. At the same time, his plays elicited a sense of distancing, not only because they were rhetorical but also because they were set in faraway times, foreign locales, and mythical places. They were somewhat like pageants, and their combination of emotional acting and convention must have resulted in what Beckerman calls a "double image, a removed intimacy."

Olivier tries to capture these effects in parts of *Henry V* (1945), which begins by recreating a performance of the play at the Globe, gradually introduces greater degrees of cinematic realism until it reaches the outdoor battle of Agincourt, then returns through various degrees of stylization until we find ourselves once more inside Shakespeare's "wooden O." In the strictest sense, however, Olivier never abandons movie realism. From the first, we're invited to enter a full-blown Elizabethan world, as if we were actually in Shakespeare's theater. We see the different levels for the audience and different playing areas on the stage, and we go backstage, where we see boys stuffing oranges into the bosoms of their dresses. The actors wear rouge, strike poses, and walk down stage to address the groundlings. But we never see Olivier's camera and crew at work, and when the Chorus figure steps forward to address the audience in the movie theater, asking them to let their "imaginary forces work," the film gives him realistic makeup, backing him with a proscenium curtain and non-diegetic music from a studio orchestra. Thus, while Olivier is more charming and historically accurate than Griffith or DeMille, he operates under the same imperatives, and for all his persuasiveness in the role of the young king, he's subtly condescending toward his actor-ancestors.



Significantly, Olivier's chief contribution to the filming of Shakespeare was the internal monologue, which converts the Elizabethan soliloquy into something resembling offscreen narration in film noir. The use of such a device is consistent with a desire for psychological realism, and it has important consequences for Olivier's acting, especially in *Hamlet*. Before exploring those consequences, however, consider *Richard III* (1955), an excellent film in which he avoids inner monologue. Here his style is more in keeping with the original text, perhaps because he wants to stress the play's melodramatic qualities. *Richard III* is the product of Shakespeare's early career, when he was under the influence of Kyd and Marlowe, and has never been much admired by psychologically-minded critics, some of whom have questioned its authorship. It's nevertheless a gift to actors who enjoy playing villains. The legendary eighteenth-century actor Colley Cibber scored a major hit in the play and made psychologically inconsistent, *Macbeth*-like additions to it; Olivier has retained them, as if to emphasize his departure from conventional realism.

The most important aspect of Olivier's performance as Richard is his decision to play the soliloquies *as* soliloquies. Richard calls them his "thoughts," but they function more like a confession to the audience that he's a theatrical personality, a man who relishes fooling the other characters with his crocodile tears and feigned innocence. He claims he's as good an actor as any in his day: "Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian, / Speak and look back, and pry on every side, / . . . ghostly looks/ Are at my service, like enforced smiles." He's a master stage manager, manipulating events, bringing about

horrors, then letting the helpless audience in on his tricks. He wants not simply to gull do-gooders in the play, but also boast about it to their representatives in the theater. Like Norman Bates, who suddenly grins at the audience in *Psycho* (1960), he wants to send a melodramatic frisson through us, disturbing our complacency.

At the beginning of the film Olivier delivers Richard's long soliloquy ("Now is the winter of our discontent . . .") directly to the movie audience, and in the process gives one of his finest readings of Shakespeare. He performs it in a sequence shot, with the camera occasionally tracking forward, panning, or tilting down to glimpse Richard's misshapen shadow on the floor; and because he's speaking to the camera, he seems to direct it, indicating where to "spy my shadow in the sun." At the start of the soliloquy, a door seems to open of its own accord to reveal Richard standing beside the throne he plans to capture. Wearing dark clothes, posed gracefully in the distance, he looks almost like a handsome but sinister leading man; then he speaks to us, stepping down from the platform of the throne, moving into medium range, and revealing his deformity.

This Richard isn't the runty, twisted fellow described in the early British historian Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (one could imagine Charles Laughton playing such a character), nor is he the swaggering gallant played by the relatively short, stout Richard Burbage in the original production of the play. Olivier derived the look of the character from the Walt Disney version of the Big Bad Wolf and the face of American theatrical producer Jed Harris, under whom he claimed to have suffered in New York. The makeup and costuming are essentially the same as in his highly successful 1944 stage portrayal of the character, but with a less exaggerated nose (which might have had anti-Semitic connotations for some). The result is a satisfying instance of acting as caricature, with Richard's personality emerging from what Olivier once called "externals," of the kind found in cartoons or painterly expressionism. But Olivier's Richard is only partly grotesque. His aquiline nose and Prince-Valiant hair give him a kind of beauty, and his hunchback is partly concealed by his elegant dark clothing, which signifies both vanity and villainy. His limp is subtle, and not until much later do we realize that he has only two fingers on one hand—the hand he will use whenever he orders a murder.

Olivier heightens the sense of Richard's theatricality by employing a framing motif in which he's shown opening doors or windows like a tour guide, directing our attention to some distant action on which he comments. At the same time, he avoids the chuckling, hand-rubbing clichés of theatrical villainy and shows respect for the oratorical, elocutionary beauty of Shakespeare's language. He delivers the soliloquies with a note of calm, icy derision, suggesting a man who hates the world, who is already in hell, and who feels a certain superiority because he knows how hell feels. Behind all this is a feeling of sexual self-contempt transformed into murderous revenge: "I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks, / I, that am so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I [limp] by them, / . . . since I cannot prove a lover, / . . . am determined to prove a villain."

Because Olivier has followed out the theatrical metaphor of the play so completely, he also makes Richard a protean figure. His performance is remarkable for its shifting bodily imagery. In some moments Richard seems hideously ugly, but then, with nothing more than a turn of the head, he becomes perversely charming. During his seduction of Anne (Claire Bloom), which literally takes place over her murdered husband's coffin, he displays all the sado-masochistic bravura of a character from John Webster's seventeenth-century revenge tragedies. Elsewhere, he seems witchy. Occasionally he has a wrinkled flabbiness around the neck, a drag queen's fondness for jewelry, and a tendency to rising, sing-song inflections accompanied with licked lips and rolling eyes. And yet in the battle scenes, he's completely persuasive as a warrior. He utters his ironic, desperate cry on the battlefield-- "My kingdom for a horse!" —with the clarion beauty of Hotspur (whom young Olivier famously played on stage), but soon afterward he looks like a wounded snake, writhing pitifully on the ground as he's stabbed by a ring of knights from the opposing army.

Compared to Olivier's version of Richard, his Hamlet is a less dynamic characterization, keyed to psychological realism. The approach is unsurprising, since from the mid-eighteenth century onward there was a general tendency to think of "reality" as grounded in individual experience. Shakespeare himself stood midway between a vestigial culture of the middle ages and a modern culture of population growth in London,

mercantile wealth, and Protestant religion; and *Hamlet* appeared at the beginning of a century that fostered Cartesian logic and British empiricism--a century in which new representational conventions began to emerge, including the term "personation" for acting, monocular point-of-view in painting, novelistic prose, and eventually proscenium theater. Shakespeare's plays are therefore an unstable mix of rhetorical language, morality-play characters, and psychological drama. For later critics, the last of these qualities became increasingly important, and in nineteenth and twentieth-century critical writing about Shakespeare's plays there was a good deal of emphasis on individual character analysis. Olivier was a student of that critical literature. When he played Othello in Stuart Burge's 1965 film, he wrote to thank F. R. Leavis, explaining that his performance was indebted to what Leavis and T. S. Eliot had argued about the character (both thought that in Othello's final soliloquy he was trying to buck himself up by rationalizing the murder of Desdemona). Predictably, Leavis wasn't interested in the opinion of a movie actor and didn't answer.

Of all Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* has been most subject to character analysis and psychological speculation by critics, no doubt because a great deal of the text is devoted to the private, troubled musings of the Prince. At the same time, it has other aspects: a language influenced by the rhetorical eloquence of public speech; disruptions of tragedy with near-absurdist comedy; and bloody action that looks back to the violence in the dramas of Seneca, Marlowe, and Kyd. In the eighteenth century, Voltaire and Dr. Johnson thought this strange mixture lacked decorum, but in the nineteenth century the play fascinated romantics, who loved Hamlet's inward debates as much as they disliked Elizabethan stage conventions. For the German poet and critic Friedrich Schlegel, *Hamlet* was essentially a tragedy of reflection and irresolution, the story of a man "who could not make up his mind." Others agreed, and increasingly they thought staging of the play got in the way of the sublime poetry in Hamlet's soliloquies. For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "These profound sorrows, these light-and-noise abhorring ruminations, which the tongue scarce does utter to deaf walls and chambers, how can they be represented by a gesticulating actor, who comes and mouths them out before an audience, making four hundred people his confidence at once!" For William Hazlett, who thought Hamlet "the

prince of philosophical speculators” and “as little of the hero as a man can well be,” the problem was much the same: “We do not like to see our author’s plays acted, and least of all, *Hamlet*. . . . He is, as it were, wrapped up in his reflections, and only *thinks aloud*. There should be no attempt to impress what he says on others by a studied exaggeration of emphasis or of manner; no *talking at* his hearers.”

In 1903, scholar A. C. Bradley wrote an influential study of tragic characters in Shakespeare, arguing that Hamlet suffers from a “sickness of life, and even a longing for death” because his mother, Queen Gertrude, has married his uncle, now King Claudius, very soon after the death of King Hamlet—an “eruption of coarse sensuality” to which Hamlet reacts with “bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human life.” At roughly the same time, a favorite parlor game of literary intellectuals was to speculate not only about the Prince but also about what *Hamlet* reveals of Shakespeare’s own psychology. The phenomenon was brilliantly parodied (or is it a parody?) by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, when Stephen Dedalus goes to the Dublin library and meets with the local literati, tossing off an elaborate, erudite analysis of autobiographical clues Shakespeare left in the play. The most decisive turn toward psychology, however, was prompted by Freud’s analysis, which first appeared in rudimentary form in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and was fully developed in his case history of the “Rat Man” (1909), a patient who suffered from a tendency to “postpone every decision,” an obsession with “fantasies of revenge,” and a “partial paralysis of the will.” This patient, Freud observed, was in many ways like Hamlet (there was even an interesting occurrence of “rat” in Shakespeare’s play), and his neurosis, like Hamlet’s, could be explained by the Oedipus complex.

In a 1919 essay on *Hamlet*, T. S. Eliot dismissed both the Romantics and, at least implicitly, the Freudians. “Few critics,” he observed, “have ever admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary.” The character, Eliot argued, provides artistically talented minds with an excuse to exercise their imagination. “Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge. . . . We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention on this play.” The real problem, Eliot wrote, is that the play lacks an “objective correlative” to explain Hamlet’s emotions. The character is dominated by

feelings “in *excess* of the facts as they appear.” He’s disgusted by his mother, but “his disgust envelops and exceeds her” and “none of the possible actions can satisfy it.” Eliot concluded, “nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot can express Hamlet.”

A Freudian might well have said that Eliot was missing the point. It’s precisely because Hamlet’s emotions are excessive (neurotic is perhaps a better word) that he’s an ideal character for psychological analysis. He was, moreover, ideally suited for films in the 1940s, when popular psychoanalysis fully invaded literature, literary criticism, and Hollywood. *Citizen Kane* (1941) used what Welles called “dollar-book” Freud to explain the central character, and the pre-release version of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) had a clear-cut Oedipal theme. The Selznick/Hitchcock *Spellbound* (1945), which is set in a mental institution, makes pop-psychoanalysis its subject matter and lists David Selznick’s analyst in the credits. Movies of the period were filled with dream sequences and characters suffering from neurosis, obsession, and memory loss. The trend was capped in 1946, when Hitchcock planned a film based on *Hamlet* starring Cary Grant. He described it as a “psychological melodrama” that would tell Shakespeare’s story in a contemporary idiom, but it was never produced.

Olivier had anticipated these developments when, in 1937, he began his association with the Old Vic in London by mounting a full-length *Hamlet* that he later staged at Kroonenberg Castle, Elsinore. Both productions openly acknowledged the influence of Ernest Jones, an associate and acolyte of Freud who wrote two early, English-language essays explaining Freud’s ideas about the play. The success of the Old Vic *Hamlet* eventually led to Olivier’s film. Begun in 1947, it was released in the US in 1949, when it won both Best Picture and Best Actor at the Academy awards (the first of only two times a foreign film has won Best Picture). That same year, Ernest Jones published his book-length study, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, which remains the best-known commentary on the topic.

Olivier’s film takes a full-on Freudian approach, but is also indebted to both *Citizen Kane* and film noir. Like *Kane*, it begins with the camera journeying through mist, its trip punctuated by a series of lap dissolves that lead to a castle and a dead man lying in state; like *Kane*, it flashes back in time, telling the story that leads to the death; and like *Kane*,

it's photographed in deep-focus black and white, using tracking shots to probe the labyrinthine castle, as if exploring the recesses of a character's mind. There are, however, important differences. Welles uses the quasi-Freudian "Rosebud" as a puzzle to keep viewers interested, but partly undercuts its significance by reminding us at the end that a single word can't sum up a man's life. In effect, he travels to the center of a labyrinth only to find it disappearing in a cloud of smoke. Olivier works in an opposite way, pushing the story toward the sort of middlebrow significance one might expect had William Wyler directed *Kane*. At the beginning, his narrating voice tells us, "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind." These are Schlegel's words, not Shakespeare's, and they announce a meaning even before we know the story. They turn the film into a *Kane* without ambiguity, wit, or social satire.

To make the film's debt to Freud clear, Queen Gertrude is played by Eileen Herlie, a sexy young actress (she was twenty-seven and Olivier was forty) who wears a low-cut gown and gives Hamlet a French kiss. Meanwhile the screenplay reduces Shakespeare's lengthy text, eliminating most of its shifting moods and giving it a psychological unity. This was no sacrilege--Welles and many others have cut, re-arranged, and interpolated Shakespeare for their own purposes, and filming the entire play (which Kenneth Branagh tried in 1996) would result in a roughly four-hour movie. Olivier and his collaborator Allan Dent slashed away Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, together with anything else that would decenter the narrative. The result is a sort of Gothic *Kammerspiel*, a low-key, somewhat claustrophobic drama that emphasizes internal monologue and reduces the effect of Shakespeare's rhetoric.

Nowhere is this strategy more evident than in Olivier's rendition of Hamlet's first long soliloquy, which I'll try to describe in detail. In a wide shot, as Claudius's court exits his throne room, the camera moves slowly toward Olivier, who has remained seated. He slumps a bit, one leg extended, one hand draped over his chair in the languid, dejected pose of a nineties aesthete. William Walton's non-diegetic music plays throughout the sequence in a minor key. Cut to an extreme closeup of Olivier's profile, the camera pointing almost at his forehead. Offscreen, we hear his voice speaking for almost the entire sequence in a near whisper. (When I quote the lines, I italicize them and use

punctuation that indicates his delivery.) As he looks out to the right of the frame, a reflective intensity and sadness comes to his eyes.

*“Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!”*

He turns and looks up over a shoulder, neck elongated, teary eyes glinting in the beam of a studio key light as we hear the offscreen, almost whispered inner voice.

*“Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter . . .*

He closes his eyes.

“Oh, God!”

He begins to rise from the chair, moving partly out of frame. Cut on movement (à la Wyler) to a medium shot as he stands, arms limp at his sides.

*“How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world.”*

He indicates weariness with a downcast gaze, turning his back and moving away.

“Fie on’t, ah, fie!”

The camera follows at a slight distance as he crosses the room.

*“’Tis an un-weeded garden that grows to seed,
Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely.”*

He pauses beside Gertrude’s empty chair, looking down at it.

“That it should come to this, not two months dead.”

He turns in our direction and his offscreen voice becomes more intense, emotional.

*“Nay, not so much, not two! So excellent a King,
That was, to this, Hyperion to a satyr.”*

He begins pacing slowly to the right, toward a platform holding the empty table of the King’s court. Framed at a distance, he steps onto the platform.

*“So loving to my mother that he might not suffer
The winds of heaven visit her face too roughly.”*

He pauses, back to us, dropping forward, grasping the arms of a chair and hanging his head. His offscreen voice speaks with greater intensity, but still in a near whisper.

"Heaven and Earth! Must I remember?"

Cut to a large closeup of his profile, looking downward.

"Why, she would hang on him as if

Increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on."

He looks up and speaks the next line aloud, with intensity.

"AND YET WITHIN A MONTH!"

He turns and moves out of frame. Cut on movement to a high-angle wide shot as he steps away from the chair. His whispered offscreen voice speaks sadly.

"Frailty, thy name is woman."

He turns and crosses listlessly "upstage," the camera craning down to frame him from a distance as he reaches a stone pillar. He turns, faces in our direction, and tosses his head upward, resting it on the pillar as his offscreen voice whispers.

"Oh God! A beast that lacks discourse of reason

Would have mourned longer."

One could argue that this is more "cinematic" than the soliloquy at the beginning of *Richard III*, and certainly it's an ideal response to Hazlett's criticism of the usual performance of Hamlet, because here the Prince "thinks aloud." But it also deprives us of important features of Elizabethan acting. The Shakespearian actor was required to speak as an orator, even when revealing private thoughts. The body was always in expressive motion, forming words with the mouth, inflecting them with the eyes and facial muscles, enforcing them with the hands. Like today's popular singer, the Shakespearian oscillated between direct address, bringing the audience into his confidence and soliciting their sympathy, and distracted outcries and involuntary displays of "soul" or emotion. Olivier's technique divorces the body from the voice, turning the actor into a model (or classic movie star) who conveys emotion with studied postures and glances. His movements become devices of punctuation or indications of shifts in attitude. The framing and scale of shots, together with the moments when he rises, crosses the room, or leans against a pillar, become emotional signposts. It's as if he's trying to "be" instead of "act," but when he gazes upward or droops his head, the poses look artificial.

Compare the scene I've just described with William Holden's offscreen narration in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). In that case, the "thoughts" are retrospective, delivered in the past-tense, calling up memory images that have a life of their own. Billy Wilder establishes a potentially ironic disjunction between narration and imagery, and gives us a striking visual accompaniment to the words. By contrast, Olivier's long, present-tense monologue gives us very little to look at and diminishes the power of the soliloquy. The temporal match between sound and image requires that Olivier *do* something to match the thoughts, something to accompany the shifts of tone and the branching, analogical language; but because he "thinks" rather than speaks, he has to fall back on a clichéd store of gestures and poses, most of them derived from Victorian painting.

At other places in the film, his lack of emotional conviction is especially apparent. The "To be or not to be" speech is delivered offscreen with a soft, broody introspection that hardly suggests the lacerating conflict in Shakespeare's language, and the accompanying image of Hamlet in blousy white shirt and black tights, posing against a troubled seascape, seems a little more than balletic prettiness. "To sleep," his offscreen voice says quietly, and the camera moves in on his forehead while thumping heartbeats are amplified on the soundtrack. Cut to a wide shot as he falls back on an elbow and completes the line aloud: "Perchance to dream." When he looks down at the breaking waves below Elsinore, he might as well be Maxim Dewinter, wordlessly contemplating suicide while standing over a seaside cliff in *Rebecca*.

Even if we leave aside the soliloquies, Olivier's work leaves something to be desired. The intimacy of the movie camera reveals that he isn't young enough for the character; his scenes with Ophelia (the young Jean Simmons, who deserved the praise James Agee heaped upon her) lack the post-adolescent heat they ought to have, and at times he looks older than Gertrude. Early in the film, when he suddenly glimpses his father's ghost (a Darth Vader-looking spirit, invisible to everyone but Hamlet), he reverts to romantic mannerism, dropping to the ground, legs and toes gracefully extended, raising a hand in delicate entreaty. Here and elsewhere, he seems to have modelled his behavior on the unheroic figure imagined by the Romantics, or perhaps on the potentially homosexual Hamlet of some Freudian interpretation. He tends to underplay expressions

of anger, delivering Shakespeare's most violent lines ("Now could I drink hot blood/ and do such bitter business as the day/ would quake to look on!") in a whispered offscreen monologue that suggests irresolution. And the "look" Olivier devised for the character--a cap of white-blond hair and black-and-white clothing with rich touches of embroidery--suggests a narcissism equal to Osric (Peter Cushing) and a sorrow that knows it's being watched.

This feeling of to-be-looked-at-ness is in some ways appropriate to Hamlet, who is almost as theatrical a personality as Richard III, but it can be seen in many of the characters Olivier has played. His turns and flourishes, his habit of raising his hand to his brow like a gentleman lifting a teacup, are part of his actor's idiolect and his storehouse of mannerisms that attract the eye of the audience. (Brando has plenty, some he may have learned from Olivier.) He once admitted that when he was a young man, watching Valentino on screen made him realize the importance of narcissism. Sometimes in *Hamlet* he uses it effectively, pushing it over into a state of neurotic hypertension. His overwrought, high-pitched intensity during the play-within-the-play makes him almost giggle at the trap he has laid for Claudius, and he's foppish and catty when he taunts Claudius about the dead Polonius: "You shall nose him as you go into the lobby," he says, airily waving his hand. Elsewhere, however, he's too mannered. Early in the film, he reacts to the thought that his uncle is an "adulterous beast" by daintily biting a knuckle, and his death at the ending is almost worthy of Camille: "The rest is silence," he gasps, eyes closing and head drooping gracefully to one side.

If Olivier never rises to the play's most passionate declamatory moments, he's excellent at small business and at what James Agee described as "middle range" emotions. In the early scene when he greets Horatio and Marcellus, he speaks with an easy, conversational tone that conveys joy at meeting his friends mixed with an undertone of sadness. When he comments on Gertrude's sudden remarriage--"Thrift, thrift"--he tosses off the line but gives it a high-pitched edge. When he learns of the appearance of a ghost, he indicates suppressed excitement by a slow, panther tread along the battlements and a gentle touch of his forehead with his fingertips. Elsewhere, he gives freshness to some of the most familiar scenes in the play. Picking up Yorick's skull from

the dirt, he looks at it with an air of mild astonishment, philosophical curiosity, and love. “Alas, poor Yorick,” he says in underplayed wonder and sadness, then turns to remark offhandedly, “I knew him, Horatio.” As he contemplates the remains of Yorick, he has a bemused expression and manipulates the skull like a sardonic conjurer, at one moment lifting it in the air to let us see a grinning old jester, at the next putting it beside his own face to emphasize bone beneath flesh.

The travelling players scene is equally effective. Olivier pats a dog on the head to the line “I am glad to see thee well” (a longstanding puzzle for editors of the play) and runs down a corridor with adolescent gaiety, spinning and raising his arms beneath a theatrical spotlight as he says, “The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King!” His subsequent lecture to the group has an ironic good humor that saves it from becoming sententious, like Polonius. When he says the purpose of acting is to “hold, as t’were, the mirror up to nature,” he pauses in the middle of the line, turns, and drops his voice as if he were thinking of his deeper purpose: Hamlet is anticipating the exposure of an evil “nature” in Claudius; his chief aim is to stage a politically subversive drama that will exhibit “virtue her own image, and the very age and body of the times.” This gives meaningful context for his stricture against clowns for improvising too much and getting in the way of some “necessary feature of the play.”

In these scenes and others, the most enjoyable thing about the performance is Olivier’s fastidious respect for poetic language. He gives us some of the most audible, lovely, and intelligent readings of Shakespeare ever recorded. Consider his rendition of Hamlet’s early, philosophical conversation with Horatio (“So oft it chanceth in particular men . . .”) which is prompted by the sounds of Claudius’s drunken wassail in the lower part of the castle. Olivier is softly regretful, pitching his voice to a contemplative register, emphasizing the liquid sibilants: “They call us drunkards, and with swinish phrase soil our reputations.” Crossing to a battlement gun rest, he breaks into a sad smile and adopts an attitude of humble introspection. His manner offhand, natural, but notice how scrupulously he observes the iambic meter and marks enjambment with slight pauses.

This kind of actorly work requires a subtle musical skill and a vocal discipline independent of help from microphones and sound mixes. And Olivier has other skills.

Although I've argued that his performance lacks fire and has an excessively introspective tone, I should point out that he's a gifted physical actor who gives us an exciting bit of swordplay at the end. Hamlet's climactic duel with Laertes isn't in the same league with Flynn and Rathbone--a bit too dancer-like--but it creates strong action, reminding us that Shakespeare wrote a philosophical or psychological drama that was also a bloody revenge tragedy.