

### **“I See a Cherub Who Sees Them”: Olivier’s Treatment of Hamlet**

From the beginning of the play *Hamlet*, the title character tells his comrades and the audience that he “shall think it meet / to put an antic disposition on” (1.5.180-81). He implies that from that point on, although he may appear mad, he will actually be entirely in control of both himself and the situations in which he participates. Indeed, the symptoms of his madness are completely sane jibes, jokes, and threats, obscured by seemingly mad language. Just such a sane Hamlet is found in Laurence Olivier’s 1948 film version of the play. Despite his intent to portray an exclusively Oedipal Hamlet, a more illuminating description of Hamlet is as a man who “sees a cherub who sees [the intentions of others]” (3.4). Olivier’s use of creative camerawork and staging proves Hamlet to be more of a distrusting, melancholic detective than anything else.

With his 1948 *Hamlet*, Olivier hoped to utilize the contemporary theories of psychoanalysis and the perception of Hamlet as a procrastinator who “could not make up his mind.” He says in an interview, “I thought it was the absolute resolution of all the problems concerning Hamlet. At least, it gave one a central idea which seemed to fill the great vacuum left by all the crossed ideas about whether he was a man of action” (Tynan 83).

However, if the story of the film is that of a man who cannot make up his mind, Olivier’s depiction of Hamlet is certainly not one of a man who has *lost* his mind. Instead, Hamlet is a participant in nearly all the scheming that occurs in the film. At times, he is the conspirator, as with Horatio when they plan to trap Claudius during the play-within-the-play scene. Most of the time, however, he is a passive participant, silently spying on other plotters without their knowledge. The camera often watches over Hamlet’s shoulder as he listens to conversations he is

not meant to hear, and the audience feels reassured that the hero will not fall victim to the traps laid for him.

The first, and probably most important, scene in which Hamlet collects this type of intelligence is when Polonius describes the cause of Hamlet's affliction as love for Ophelia. The text does not mention Hamlet lurking barely off-stage, listening to the conversation; but in the film, the shot unexpectedly shifts to a view of the hall from behind a pillar, where the audience discovers Hamlet doing just that—lurking. The shot moves on Claudius's line, "How may we try it further," emphasizing the important intelligence that in the coming scene, he should suspect hidden ears to his confrontation with Ophelia (2.2.159). This information gathered, Hamlet leaves the scene to make his entrance with his book. In the ensuing scene, Polonius presents Ophelia with her own book before hiding behind the arras with the King. Ophelia notes where they have gone. Hamlet enters, remarks on Ophelia's presence ("Soft you now, / the fair Ophelia" 3.1.189-90), and looks up and away from Ophelia as he remembers what her presence in the hall most likely means. On his way toward her, he checks the doorway to see if the Claudius and Polonius are hidden so poorly that they might be just around the corner. After checking Ophelia's mild reaction to this behavior, he purposely carelessly brushes the arras with his book. Ophelia reacts strongly to this, confirming for Hamlet both the hiding place of his enemies and Ophelia's knowledge of the plot. Ophelia does not help the cause of the two hidden men by glancing over at the arras several times during her confrontation with Hamlet. By the end of the scene, Hamlet is so sure of the location of Claudius that he dramatically points to the arras on the line "all but / one—shall live" (3.1.150-51). When Claudius and Polonius emerge from the arras after Hamlet's departure, they only begin to suspect Hamlet's knowledge of the plot, despite this dramatic gesture.

Until this first arras scene in the film, Claudius's concern for Hamlet's sanity has seemed mostly paternal. The king has not made any suspicious comments or looked suspiciously at Hamlet; even his request that Hamlet stay in Denmark instead of returning to school seems genuinely familial. However, after the Ophelia confrontation, he begins to feel Hamlet's madness as a threat to his authority. With "madness in great ones must not unwatched go," Claudius announces his concern for his kingly authority and his shift toward mistrust of Hamlet (3.1.191). Like Polonius, he feels there is some sort of threatening method to Hamlet's madness, and this method frightens Claudius, who politically and personally has everything to lose (Coddon 61).

With scenes like these, the film's audience comes to expect an omnipresent Hamlet, one whose talents for musing are rivaled by his aptitude for espionage. In contrast to them, however, Oliver's presentation of Claudius and Laertes' plot to murder Hamlet becomes one of the most tragic, if not the most tragic, scenes in the entire film by emphasizing their conspiracy and Hamlet's unawareness of the trap (Manvell 42). While Claudius and Laertes plan the demise of Hamlet, the camera slowly zooms out diagonally, an action that may at first confuse audiences as it is a technique new to the film even at this late stage. However, when a pillar comes into the shot, the audience is reminded of the first plotting scene when Polonius and Claudius agreed to be behind the arras for Ophelia's conversation with Hamlet. The audience is relieved to know that this pillar will reveal Hamlet lurking as before. However, this time, the camera comes to rest on the back of a pillar where Hamlet is conspicuous only by his absence. The shot cuts back to Claudius and Laertes, who are adding back-up plans and safety nets to their scheme. The camera zooms out diagonally again, and the audience feels sure that this time Hamlet will be there, that the first time was just an accident. Again, viewers are disappointed when the until-now

successful spy does not appear. The shot once more cuts back to Claudius and Laertes who have decided that in the proposed sword fight Laertes will have a sharpened sword, the blade will be envenomed with an unction Laertes bought from a mountebank, and Claudius will be waiting with a cup of poisoned wine for Hamlet to drink if Hamlet is successful in the fight. The plight of Hamlet appears desperate, and as the camera frantically zooms out looking for him one more time, the audience knows he will not be found. Indeed, the camera turns many corners and must travel up a flight of stairs to find Hamlet, who tragically remains ignorant of the one plot that undoes him.

One of the unfortunate aspects of Hamlet's detective role in Olivier's production is that he finds he cannot trust anyone. Elsinore is full of mistrustful characters like Claudius, who Hamlet's prophetic soul suspects even before the appearance of the ghost, and Polonius, whose oily attempts at favor-gaining Hamlet rejects outright, but Hamlet also loses faith in people who are already close to him. For example, following the first scene with the ghost, he demands secrecy from Horatio and the guards, not trusting them to stay quiet about what they have heard. He questions their confidentiality several times before making them swear on his sword to not tell what they've seen this night. Even after they swear to this and Hamlet's further demand that they not give away his antic disposition, he leaves them with no further information about what the ghost has said. Horatio, Bernardo and Marcellus must leave the battlements with no more information than they already had and find they must trust young Hamlet to take care of the situation. In a play that has been dramatically reduced from the original text, Olivier keeps this scene nearly intact to emphasize Hamlet's mistrust of others. Also, as discussed earlier, Hamlet loses faith in Ophelia after the first arras incident where she clearly knows where her father and the king are hiding. Hamlet does trust Horatio throughout the play, although it is unclear to what

depth Horatio understands the situation. Shakespeare never writes a scene in which Hamlet reveals the ghost's information, but Horatio must be somewhat informed to make a judgment in the Mousetrap scene. Finally, supporting the claim that Hamlet is a man who cannot make up his mind, Olivier's Hamlet seems to mistrust himself in his soliloquies, interrupting the voiceover to contradict what he was just thinking himself. The audience must wonder whether they can trust Hamlet as a sympathetic protagonist if he cannot trust himself.

Hamlet is not the only character who is sparing with his trust in Shakespeare's play and Olivier's film. On one early occasion, Olivier has Polonius check the door before telling Ophelia to stop seeing Hamlet. This turns out to be a good move on Polonius's part because Hamlet is in fact seated just down the hall from where he and Ophelia stand, and Polonius is able to turn her around before ordering her not to be so liberal with her affections. In another scene, Polonius asks Claudius if he has ever known him to have "said 'Tis so,' / When it proved otherwise," and Claudius's reply of "Not that I know" may be interpreted as mistrust, especially in Olivier's production when Claudius pauses momentarily before his response. Later in the play, Claudius and Polonius do not trust Gertrude to speak with Hamlet unaccompanied, and Polonius assigns himself to be her spy. As with his first plot to hide behind an arras to listen in on Ophelia, Polonius's plan backfires, this time resulting in his death, which ironically occurs behind an arras with an image of a king on it even as Hamlet assumes it is the king himself behind the arras.

By wisely suspecting other castle inhabitants, Hamlet proves himself a worthy adversary in the political espionage of Elsinore. Although other characters try continually to overthrow him, they do not succeed until Claudius takes the drastic measure of sending Hamlet to England for his secret execution. Hamlet even thwarts this design by substituting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and escaping on a pirate ship. After Hamlet's return home and confrontation with

Laertes over Ophelia's grave, Hamlet leaves the graveyard. This time, Claudius takes control of the situation and tells Horatio to go watch Hamlet. Then he assigns Gertrude to set a watch on her son, and everyone else in the graveyard disperses, leaving Claudius and Laertes alone. Instead of cutting to act 5 scene 2 with Hamlet and Horatio at this point, however, Olivier extends the scene to include Claudius's conspiracy with Laertes. With Hamlet being closely watched by Horatio, Gertrude, and what seems like most of the population of the castle, Claudius and Laertes are free to plot without Hamlet lurking in a corner or behind a pillar. Although the camera searches for Hamlet throughout the scene, especially once they enter the hall where Hamlet does his best surveillance, Hamlet misses the vital information about the scheme until it is too late and Laertes has already drawn blood with the poisoned sword.

While Olivier's Hamlet proves himself quite sane with his secret operations, he quite rightfully does have a lot on his mind: his father has died, his mother has remarried, a ghost of his dead father tells him that his uncle murdered his father, and his relationship with Ophelia is being strained by her father and brother. Any one of these items would be enough to make a person sad or angry, but Hamlet must deal with all of them simultaneously. Instead of falling into an irretrievable madness, however, Olivier's Hamlet comes much closer to what Carol Thomas Neely describes as "melancholy" in her book, *Distracted Subjects*. Olivier captures her description of the humor-induced malady nearly to the letter with his Hamlet "presented as fashionably introspective and melancholy" (54). Between his reconnaissance missions through the castle, he muses to himself in dramatic voiceovers interrupted only by himself as he proclaims the occasional line out loud. He is also serious and thoughtful, joking only when making fun of other people, such as Polonius and Osric. Furthermore, Neely emphasizes that early modern "sufferers of mental distress were viewed as divided, diverted, disassembled—as

beside themselves—*temporarily*” (3). She claims that in contrast to Ophelia’s incurable madness, Hamlet is “freed from melancholy and passivity” by the end of the play (55). Olivier once again matches this portrayal of Hamlet. When he returns from his encounter with the pirates, he has finally “cast [his] nighted color off” (1.2.68), most likely because he has been literally “set naked on [Claudius’s] kingdom” (4.7.44). He appears in loose-fitting, obviously borrowed clothing, and his spirits seem high upon meeting Horatio. Even after the emotional set-back of witnessing Ophelia’s burial, he appears in lighter colors, lighter moods and lighter lighting until the end of the film. He even manages to treat the foolish Osric with a more good-natured version of the ridicule he had previously thrown at Polonius. It would seem that he has been cured of his temporary melancholy, although it comes too late, as he has missed the vital information about Claudius and Laertes’s plot. To heighten his sense of victory over both his illness and his enemies, however, Olivier allows Hamlet a triumphant death in the king’s throne with the whole court bowing down to him.

In Olivier’s *Hamlet*, Polonius could not have been more wrong when he tells Gertrude and Claudius, “Your noble son is mad... / That he’s mad, ‘tis true; ‘tis true ‘tis pity, / And pity ‘tis ‘tis true” (2.2.92, 97-98). Olivier’s Hamlet may be a self-described man who cannot make up his mind, but he has not lost it. He proves himself a canny player in the spy game of Elsinore; indeed, Claudius and Laertes are only able to “win” because Hamlet is preoccupied with his homecoming and subsequent guarding as they lay their plot. Furthermore, Olivier’s Hamlet fully recovers from his temporary bout of melancholic disposition and becomes a more forceful, purpose-driven figure because of his introspection. The only pity the audience feels at the end of the film is that for a talented, feeling man killed ruthlessly by his uncle and lover’s brother after seemingly overcoming all the occasions that did conspire against him.

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