

Olivier's Hamlet: A Creature Swimming

By Rachel Zlatkin



Olivier observed that his 1948 film production of *Hamlet* is Hamlet's point of view, and that if Hamlet is not in a scene, then it is Hamlet's imagination. He makes a "study" of Hamlet, as he came to say in defense of his choices to cut Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Fortinbras. The scope of the play becomes a character study that places all other characters in question, situated as they are in what Olivier interprets as Hamlet's point of view. His film is simply not the play, and yet much of the criticism is based on the expectation that it is.

In part Olivier's choice to thus focus the film production is due to his insistence on the Oedipus Complex as a means to understanding Hamlet's character and his relations with Ophelia, Gertrude, the ghost, and Claudius. Olivier was admittedly convinced by the theory since before the theater production at the Old Vic in 1937, more than 10 years before the making of the film. While the play was in pre-production, Olivier, Tyrone Guthrie, and Peggy Ashcroft visited Ernest Jones, the foremost Freudian in the U.S. at the time, to discuss his analysis of Hamlet (*On Acting* 77-78). The discussion reviewed Hamlet's "inner involvement with his mother" and "excessive devotion to his father." Olivier argued afterward that "Nobody's that fond of his father unless he feels guilty about his mother, however subconscious the guilt may be" (78). Olivier went so far as to say, "Hamlet's worship of his father is manufactured, assumed; he needs it to cover up his subconscious guilt." Jones's proposition was, to Olivier's view, an "airtight case" and provided the "absolute resolution of all the problems concerning Hamlet" (Burton 19).

However, Olivier is no Method actor. In a 1966 interview with Kenneth Tynan, Olivier offered his thoughts on the Method and hinted at what inspired the growth of his own. He remained unconvinced of Strasberg's argument that interiority provides the means to motivation, to truth in action, even as the number of students at the Actor's Studio grew in New York sometime later. [In] Olivier's view, the Method proved most insufficient when applied to a Shakespearean tragic character "because you've got so many facets, so many angles, and so many considerations to contend with" (Burton 24). In contrast, Olivier describes his own method [this way]: "with one or two extraneous externals, I begin to build up a character, a characterization. I'm afraid I do mostly work from the outside in. I usually collect a lot of details,

a lot of characteristics, and find a creature swimming somewhere *in the middle* of them” (23 *emph added*). It's from this quote that I get my title, “Olivier's Hamlet, a Creature Swimming.” Notably, it's a title one might assume refers to the psychic, especially with regards to Hamlet's relationship with his mother – the womb, the water, the swimming – but Olivier's creature swimming is also imaginatively built from his idiosyncratic collection of externals. He creates a thing *in the middle*, held in the maternal and drawn from the outside. Why describe his process in such a way?

Olivier shared two stories with Tynan about his beginnings in theater that prove relevant to his concept of the craft and his approach. The theatrical and the religious, for young Olivier, were intricately interwoven. When Olivier mentioned to his father, a high-Anglican clergyman, that he would follow his brother to India to work on a rubber plantation, his father looked down at him and stated: ““You're talking nonsense, you're going to be an actor”” (Burton12). The number of actors who have experienced this kind of naming from the great Victorian Symbolic, a clergyman nonetheless, are few. Thus was Olivier set on his course to the stage, a course fostered by his high-Anglican upbringing, along with his social circles. By the time Olivier was writing his second memoir, *On Acting*, he insisted on recording the material, rather than sit alone and write. Especially in such an introverted activity, Olivier's process required its social elements.

In the second story told to Tynan, Olivier reflected on his role as a “boat boy” during services and his ambition to be a thurifer, the person who swings the incense boat during a mass (12). On the one hand, the ritual, costume, and camaraderie enacted in this symbolic activity inspired his love for theatricality and ceremony. On the other hand, these same people gave him his first role as Katherine in *Taming of the Shrew*, a role he performed, significantly, at Stratford upon Avon. Through his clergyman father to his church ceremonies, Olivier was guided toward the stage, in contrast to the altar. His attention even later in his life to such familial and religious experience indicates how it supported and fostered his inclinations toward the dramatic and ceremonial life he developed in the theater. Later as a more experienced actor, Olivier calmly asserted that if he had ever failed as an actor, only the military would have quenched his thirst for costume, ritual, and camaraderie, something he referred to as “the band of players.”

With this history in mind, I turn to Olivier's 1948 film production of *Hamlet*. What kind of Hamlet is Olivier's Hamlet, Freudian influences set aside? What else does Olivier's *Hamlet* bring to the table? What happens when a theater actor, an actor steeped in the sensory, in the

physicality of expression, in embodied symbol systems, an actor who insisted on an exercise regimen so that he might “keep his instrument healthy” and leap from a platform onto King Claudius, an actor whose imagination kept alive the image of the burly silent film actors – their broad shoulders, the long gesture of the swashbuckling hero playing alongside the broad swinging of the incense boat – what else does that actor bring to Hamlet? And *Hamlet*? I ask not how Olivier's film suits the Oedipus complex, but how his interpretation and portrayal signify outside of it, in a pre-Oedipal phase.

I don't mean to diminish the importance of the Oedipus Complex to Olivier's production in this contextualization, but I am consequently requiring a different psychoanalytic lens than that included in Ernest Jones's *Hamlet and Oedipus*, a book finally published in 1949 but including work from as far back as 1923. Jones's project with Hamlet was a long and accepted one. However, my analysis is guided by an appreciation of object-relations theory, most especially D.W. Winnicott's work. Winnicott has an interest in the space between external and internal realms that complements Olivier's own assertion that he creates a “creature in the middle.” Most important to my thesis is D.W. Winnicott's note that the child's transition from “me”-objects (the breast and I are one) to “not-me” objects (my mother is a person of her own and not-me) is facilitated during a “holding” phase in which the child's sense of external space transitions from matching the internal realm to a recognizable external realm different from but always connected to the child. Objects become “usable” only after they have been destroyed and survive that destruction, for only then can the child recognize the object as “other” than him- or herself. Winnicott refers to such objects as “transitional objects” and a child's play with them as “transitional phenomenon.” Mature religious, cultural, and social experience rely on such “object-usage” and become possible through transitional phenomena, so it is of special interest to me that Olivier continued to refer to his childhood ties to the high church as an avenue to his career in theater, a more social cultural art form.

What does Winnicott's work mean for what critic Bernice Kliman called a “film infused play”? (qtd. Rothwell 57). Contemplating the film with Winnicott's theory in mind highlights aspects generally overlooked when emphasis is placed on the influence of Ernest Jones and the Oedipus Complex. One might go so far as to say that Olivier “destroys” the play (cutting Fortinbras would be one common complaint), and finds a “creature swimming” other than himself. After all, Olivier makes a deliberate effort to recreate Hamlet's “imagination” as the

subject of his film, not his own. This effort of Olivier to recreate Hamlet's imagination and psyche cannot be overlooked. If we take Olivier at his word, then he does not intend his film production of *Hamlet* as the play, but rather as a creative engagement with a space neither here nor there, but in between.

Frankly, the film is better at object-relations theory than it is the Freudian Oedipus Complex, perhaps because the object-relations interpretation is not conscious or deliberate, whereas the Freudian obviously is. The castle pillars, windows, arches, long halls and stairwells, and the lack of a ceiling create a theatrical space perfectly aligned with Hamlet's psychology, a psychology Olivier confessed he found more complex than any other of Shakespeare's tragic characters. Yet the graphic depiction of Gertrude's bed draped by the vulvic curtains so literalize the deeply psychic that it's difficult to take the complex seriously, because it is so obviously not repressed in the set architecture. Likewise, the lengthy kisses between Hamlet and Gertrude (played by Eileen Herlie, 11 years Olivier's junior) reveal a lack of appreciation for the function of the repressed and the disguised fashion of its return. By design, the characters are more universal than personal: Olivier dyes his hair blond so as to portray the "archetype Dane," and Claudius and Gertrude's costumes are of the King and Queen of "universal playing cards" (*On Acting* 286). Olivier's symbol system is anything but repressed, and if his childhood is taken seriously as an influence that should come as no surprise.

In contrast, when Olivier's decision to insulate the film in Hamlet's imagination is given due attention and object-relations theory is considered as implicit in his approach, the castle space becomes just as much a vital character as Hamlet himself. The castle, too, is iconic. It depicts Hamlet's psychology as an iconic template for the movement of every character walking the set; in so doing, every character becomes a subject of Hamlet's perception, fear, and intuition. The other characters are not actually "other" anymore than Hamlet. From the opening credits, William Walton's musical score crashes with the turbulent sea surrounding the castle cliffs, the jagged rocks rising from the depths. Hamlet peruses these waves from a raised circular platform, and the camera shot blends a close up of his face and/or the back of his head with the churning waters below. Overtly, the camera angle links the waves to Hamlet's tumultuous mind, but such a depiction also reveals concern with the mother-child dyad and the collapsibility of the boundaries between self and other.

If the ocean is viewed psychoanalytically (whether according to Freudian or object-

relations theory), then it represents the mother womb. What is of interest to me is the apparent confusion over the identity of the mother versus that of her son. When Hamlet's face and head blend with the waves below, Olivier presents a mind consumed with the womb, a mind for whom the waters deep are the self, no boundary between self and (m)other. This is not a person able to move beyond his own omniscience, as the very castle design asserts. Winnicott would note Hamlet's desperate need for a third space where he might recognize difference. Ironically, there are moments in the play when Hamlet longs to destroy his mother. Should Gertrude be destroyed and survive such destruction, Hamlet would meet his first "not-me" object. He would recognize her difference from him, and grow into a self capable of mature interaction with others and his environment. Unfortunately, the ghost (Hamlet's own guilt complex, to this view) pulls him back from his hate, and he is never able to reconcile it.

Olivier's use of black and white film, the deep shot, and the traveling camera also emphasize the psychic aspects of the castle space by permitting a clear focus on spatially distant characters, as if played in an imagination and not in a film. The floating tableaux have a similar effect; Ophelia's review of Hamlet's visit to her closet floats in the film, for example. She pauses over her embroidery and looks up, as the imagined scene plays to her voice over. Once Hamlet leaves her closet and the imagined visit is complete, she looks down and continues sewing with no concern for the content of her vision, no signs of disturbance. The moment simply drops from her consciousness, as if someone else placed it there, watched and heard her remember, and then, in a turn, finished with her. Olivier removes Ophelia from Shakespeare's script and from the dialogue she shares with her father in 2.1. Instead, he uses her description of Hamlet's visit to create a scene supposedly "without Hamlet" who is not present in Ophelia's closet while she embroiders. In so doing, Olivier redeploys the closet scene as an imaginary moment that plays as Hamlet's – Hamlet imagining Ophelia imagining him. Once she is finished remembering him, she is of no importance. Ophelia is only as significant as she is Hamlet. Frighteningly, Hamlet's imagination claims so much of the film in this tableau that it is easy not to see how present Hamlet's imagination is in Olivier's design. The lack of boundary between self and other finally affect how one is able to view the film. The audience, too, becomes a subject of Hamlet's imagination. The clear focus of distant objects and Hamlet's absent presence create a different set of challenges for a critical viewing of the film than if one relies purely on Olivier's more obvious use of Ernest Jones's work on the Oedipus Complex.

For my purposes, such use of Hamlet's imaginary space appeals to the character's need for transitional objects, objects that exist in both realms of experience, ground him in each, and provide him the means to actualization and separation from the castle space. Olivier's production allows for this separation through only one avenue, notably, the players, who are not of the castle. The energy changes with the players' entrance because they bring their objects with them. Like the players themselves, these objects are not of the castle, and thus Olivier's Hamlet has a better chance of recognizing them as "not-me." In fact, these objects provide Hamlet the means to externalize what, up to "the Mousetrap," remains internalized. These props are notably iconic in nature: musical instruments, the masks Tragedy and Comedy. They represent performance, but they are also usable. Thanks to the nature of theater, the actors have the luxury of knowing about their objects what Hamlet does not know of his own: the costumes, the props, the Queen's wig, are "not-me" objects. The props function differently than the castle space that tends to push all significance back onto Olivier's Hamlet. For a refreshing change, Hamlet is able to joke and playfully tug the Queen's wig over the boy actor's head during his scene with the "band of players."

Winnicott's view of space is, thus, especially interesting with regard to Olivier's film because there are very few objects, indeed. Whether the castle is taken as a representation of psychic or physical space, its lack of objects is a problem for the hero. There is no map, no chart by which to move, no bridge to the social, no thing to trust. If he's a creature swimming, he's close to drowning. The players provide, for the moment, not just access to the "conscience of the King" (3.1.585), but the means of physical and social engagement. Olivier's Hamlet leaps to the stage for his famous pirouette, as if the stage itself provides him the space he needs to feel alive and apart from the castle. The moment captures the character's excitement over discovering a means to engage with the external realm.

Olivier's film production points to a problem he himself designs, and that's that every castle object hearkens back to Hamlet, from his chair to the book/s he carries. The father is permitted entrance via two forms, the misty ghost and the boisterous player, but only one motivates him to act – and that's the actor dressed as the King. If anything, the ghost keeps Hamlet entrenched [within] his own imagination. Hamlet, wrapped in the ghostly mist, remains material but wears the ghost about him like an airy cloak, reaches toward it as if to fade out himself. In fact, Olivier experiments with the ghost's very existence, having it disappear when

Hamlet closes his eyes, and reappear when he opens them. In contrast, the player materializes Hamlet's "prophetic soul" and places it in a social relation with his family, friends, and the courtly public.

Olivier does not appear to be aware of the psychoanalytic work of D.W. Winnicott, although Ernest Jones certainly was, trusting his own daughter to his care in 1937 (Kahr 72). While Olivier made no study of Winnicott's theories, in the film's best creative moments, he "uses" Shakespeare's *Hamlet* according to Winnicott's precepts. His words and his film reveal sensitivity to Winnicott's concerns with play, transitional phenomenon, and third, or intermediate, space, especially as they pertain to acting and theatrical space. When asked about the experience of being on stage, Olivier recalls "the warmth" and paints a touching portrait, rich in the sensory details of theatrical experience:

People who have never experienced that walk between one wing and another will probably wonder what I mean by warmth. It gets into the nostrils and into the hair; it is a combination of electric light, glue, rancid paint and scent. It is like a favorite Teddy bear, or stepping from an airplane into the warm sun. Once experienced it stays forever, calling the actor back again and again, like a siren's song. ... Memory is one thing, but action is for the immediate man. I still feel immediate. (*On Acting* 84-85).

1. Olivier's description *is* immediate. It captures the vitality of physical sensation, the warmth "that gets into the nostrils and into the hair," messy and tangible. At the same time, it points to an intangible experience that "stays forever" and repeatedly calls one back, not so unlike his Hamlet returning to peruse the waves. He compares the theater to a Teddy bear, an important transitional object, ultimately connecting the child to the mother even as it proves her difference. Winnicott would not stop with the mother implicit in Olivier's poetic description. The Teddy bear, like "playing and cultural experience, links the past, the present, and the future; they take up time and space" (Winnicott 109). The smells Olivier is pointing out, the glue, the rancid paint, the scent, are more than just odors, but are the means to a magical interweaving of external / theatrical and internal / imaginary spaces; they "take up time and space." They unify experience. Upon this intermediary plane, the stage floor, Olivier maintains a third space

for safe play. The 1948 film reproduces such a plane with the players' entrance. Olivier's vitality arguably increases along with Hamlet's at their appearance. The players bring the stuff, the musical instruments, the flags and props, the costumes. More importantly, the actors bring Olivier's Hamlet out of his melancholy, provide him with his first means to act after the ghost's misty news and his felt rejection after Ophelia's long shot at the end of 1.3.

Olivier had ended a run at the Old Vic as Oedipus under the direction of Michel St. Denis in 1946, just before the making of his film, and the role perhaps serves as one more source of detail that Olivier sorts through on his way to developing Hamlet. Thus, he plays Oedipus on stage, he plays Hamlet on stage, he brings both to the film. Between his performance of Oedipus and his reading on the complex, between his collecting of externals and his interest in the internals of the psychic, Olivier finds his Hamlet swimming. This method, by the end, results in a film that is described by some critics as neither theatrical nor cinematic, but something in between, some "hybrid form." In the words of the critic Bernice Kliman, "not a filmed play, not precisely a film, but a film-infused play" (qtd. in Rothwell 57). Olivier's Hamlet is Olivier's collection and Olivier's imagination. His insistence on a theatrical film indicates a real effort to bring this intermediary space into the 1948 production.

The Teddy-bear is not the only object of transition in Olivier's poetic description of stage experience. The moments he includes depict moments of transition themselves. He is in the act of stepping from the plane and into the sun. He begins by walking between two wings. The experience he describes matches what Winnicott has proposed, that the boundary between inside and outside is not only porous, but that there is an intermediary space where both contribute, [where] play, be it a child's or a professional player's, requires acceptance of a paradox: the third space is one in which both internal and external realms are simultaneously merged and separate.

Winnicott, too, uses *Hamlet* in a section of his 1971 *Playing and Reality*, a book that clarifies much of his work. In a chapter titled "Creativity and its Origins," Winnicott imagines an alternative performance of Hamlet's 3.1 soliloquy, focusing specifically on its famous first line¹: "He [Hamlet] would say, as if trying to get to the bottom of something that cannot be fathomed, 'To be,... or ...' and then he would pause, because in

fact the character Hamlet does not know the alternative. At last he would come in with the rather banal alternative: '... or not to be'; and then he would be well away on a journey that can lead nowhere" (83). Ultimately, Winnicott longs for a Hamlet capable of the line: "To be or to do? That is the question." It is a line Olivier's Hamlet thankfully never delivers, but it is a line the film plays *at* to rather stunning consequences.

To pursue the imaginary scope of such play would be a fitting experiment and tribute to Olivier, his Hamlet and their players: If the players had never left the set of Olivier's film, if the musicians continued to dangle over the arches playing the musical score, tangible, visible, and usable, perhaps then Olivier's two realms, the castle set and the character's psyche, would have been more easily differentiated. If the actors clowned, mimicked, gestured, perhaps the audience, at least, would have more easily seen that *Hamlet* was not Hamlet, despite all of Olivier's brave and insulating excisions. The actors' presence might, also, have underlined Hamlet's need to see the play with which he shares a name, if only to see himself as an object, and as different from the film's material. What I'm asking of Olivier is distinctly not Shakespeare's project, but if Olivier's own sense of the intermediary, if his "band of players" had risen into the production, haunted it as much as the Oedipal ghost, perhaps then Olivier's Hamlet would have felt enough immediacy, not in his similitude to the castle, but in his difference from it. Perhaps then Olivier might have destroyed *Hamlet* and discovered a Hamlet living.

NOTES

ⁱ In an argument parallel to my own, Adam Phillips analyzes Winnicott's "object-use" of the 3.1 soliloquy as opposed to Ernest Jones's work in *Hamlet and Oedipus*. See: Phillips, Adam. "Winnicott's Hamlet." *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature*. NY: Basic Books, 2001. 72-91. Print.

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