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Olivier, Hamlet, and Freud

by Peter Donaldson

That Laurence Olivier was influenced by Freud in his 1947 film of *Hamlet* is well known.¹ It is hard to miss the suggestion of Oedipal malaise in the erotic scenes between Olivier and Eileen Herlie as Gertrude, the phallic symbolism of rapier and dagger as Olivier presents them, and other indications of a robust and enthusiastic interest in psychoanalysis. It is more difficult to specify exactly how the film uses psychological ideas, and to say what it achieves by doing so. The present essay attempts a reassessment of the psychological dimension of the film, making use of several new or overlooked resources.

Olivier's autobiography, *Confessions of an Actor*,² provides a helpful account of the director's consultation with Ernest Jones regarding *Hamlet*. Freud himself had written briefly on *Hamlet*,³ and Jones, a prominent British psychoanalyst, had expanded Freud's suggestions into a full-scale interpretation of the play in an article first published in 1910 that was to undergo several revisions and republications, finally appearing in 1949 as *Hamlet and Oedipus*.⁴ Olivier's remarks indicate how the director understood the Freudian approach to *Hamlet* and establish that his use of it in the film was intentional. But the *Confessions* throw light on the film in more subtle ways as well. Olivier's life story is full of Shakespearean allusions: quotes, misquotes, conscious and unconscious parallels. Echoes of *Hamlet* are particularly frequent, and reveal how central this text was in Olivier's conception of himself and in his construction of an autobiographical persona. Finally, the *Confessions* offer a candid account of the psychological tensions, Oedipal and other, of Olivier's early life in ways that are relevant to his work on the *Hamlet* film. In fact, as I shall suggest, Olivier's treatment of the Oedipal theme in *Hamlet* was influenced as much by his own early memories as it was by contact with Jones. Both the elaborate visual symbolism of the film and its emphasis on the main character's alternation between passivity and grandiosity bear a close relation to early sections of the autobiography.

Several aspects of Olivier's address to psychological issues in *Hamlet* do not conform to the Freud/Jones view, but are illuminated by other psychoanalytic texts. Oedipal conflict in the film often has a passive character, and, though Freud elaborated a theory of the negative Oedipus complex, in which conflict is resolved by a "feminine" or passive submission to the father,⁵ he never applied this theory to Shakespeare's play. For other aspects of the film we must turn to

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post-Freudian work for elucidation. Olivier's Hamlet is a character of a markedly narcissistic cast, in whose makeup isolation, depression, rage, and fantasies of uniqueness and omnipotence play their part. Recent psychoanalytic literature is particularly rich in its treatment of narcissism, and of the ways in which Oedipal conflict can screen or mask deeper issues concerning the coherence or worth of the self, and this aspect of the film may therefore be more accessible now than in 1947.⁶

Olivier went beyond his sources in Freud and Jones, creating a version of *Hamlet* in which a manifest, intentional and obvious Oedipal rivalry provides a structure, and in some respects a screen, for an engagement with issues that had been unresolved in the director's early life, as he describes it in the *Confessions*, specifically with his unsatisfactory and conflicted relationship with his father, and with deep and persistent doubts about the coherence and value of the self. The subtlety and power of the film, as well as its value as an interpretation of Shakespeare, owe much to its address to the theme of the fragility of the self, and to Olivier's boldness, not only in proposing a Freudian reading to the film-going public, but also in recasting that reading in personal, even autobiographical terms.

Olivier first became interested in the Freudian approach to Hamlet in 1937. Preparing to play the role at the Old Vic, he visited Ernest Jones along with Tyrone Guthrie and Peggy Ashcroft:

He had made an exhaustive study of Hamlet from his own professional point of view and was wonderfully enlightening. I have never ceased to think of Hamlet at odd moments, and ever since that meeting I have believed that Hamlet was a prime sufferer from the Oedipus complex—quite unconsciously, of course, as the professor was anxious to stress. He offered an impressive array of symptoms: spectacular mood-swings, cruel treatment of his love, and above all a hopeless inability to pursue the course required of him. The Oedipus complex, therefore, can claim responsibility for a formidable share of all that is wrong with him. There is great pathos in his determined efforts to bring himself to the required boiling point, and in the excuses he finds to shed this responsibility.⁷

Olivier never mentions Freud here or elsewhere in the *Confessions*, though, of course, Jones's "own professional point of view" was that of Freudian psychoanalysis. Olivier's compassion for Hamlet as one suffering from an emotional disorder is succeeded by a more negative attitude when he remembers that Hamlet was an actor like himself: "Apart from Hamlet's involuntary pusillanimity, there is another factor in the character-drawing—his weakness for dramatics. This would be reasonable if the dramatics spurred him to action, but unfortunately they help to delay it. It is as if his shows of temperament not only exhaust him but give him relief from his absorption in his purpose, like an actor who, having spent all in rehearsal, feels it almost redundant to go through with the performance."⁸ The passage raises the question of whether, for Olivier, acting can ever be a form of "action," or preparation for action, or whether it must always be a sign of weakness. Does the career of a successful actor celebrate mastery of Oedipal conflict or merely give evidence of Oedipal evasion and repetition?

Olivier's account of the 1937 Old Vic *Hamlet* and the reviews suggest several ways Guthrie and Olivier tried to implement a Freudian approach to the play. According to Freud, Oedipal conflict was universal. Hamlet's particular problem lies in the fact that his uncle has acted upon precisely those desires that for Hamlet must remain repressed. Hamlet delays in his mission of revenge because Claudius's deeds confront Hamlet with his own unconscious wishes and fill him with self-hatred: "The loathing that should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience that remind him that he is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish."⁹ An important consequence of this theory for the acting of the role is that it provides a rationale for playing Hamlet as a decisive, vigorous personality, *disturbed* by the intrusion of these special and psychologically distressing circumstances: "Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man who shows Hamlet the repressed wishes of his childhood realized."¹⁰ Though none of the critics of the Old Vic production detected a psychoanalytic subtext, they did respond to Olivier's decisive departure from the delicate-souled dreamers and thinkers of nineteenth-century tradition. This was a daring and agile Hamlet who could, as Freud said he could, "do anything,"—except kill the king. The *Times* critic noticed a "special tenderness of sympathy" in Hamlet's scenes with Gertrude, without suspecting pathological excess.¹¹ Developing Freud's notion that Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because to do so would be to punish himself, Ernest Jones had claimed that Hamlet's turn to action at the end of the play was in fact suicidal:

In reality his uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself. This solution, one closely akin to what Freud has shown to be the motive for suicide in melancholia, is actually the one that Hamlet finally adopts. The course of alternate action and inaction that he embarks on, and the provocations that he gives to his suspicious uncle, can lead to no other end than to his own ruin and, incidentally, to that of his uncle. Only when he has made the final sacrifice and is at death's door is he free to fulfill his duty to avenge his father, and to slay his other self—his uncle.¹²

Olivier's acting was already notable for an athletic daring near to folly,¹³ and the hint of reckless physical risk in the reviews may indicate that he used this aspect of his style to convey Jones's sense of Hamlet's self-destructiveness.

In regard to the film, we can be more certain: the actor believed that he had actually risked his own life in the fourteen-foot leap onto the stunt man standing in for King Claudius: "The dangers involved for what I had conceived for this moment presented themselves to me in the light of the following five possibilities: I could kill myself; I could damage myself for life; I could hurt myself badly enough to make recovery a lengthy business; I could hurt myself only slightly; or I could get away with it without harm. The odds seemed to me to be quite evenly disposed among these five alternatives."¹⁴ Thus the actor came close to replicating, at least in his memory of the event, the "final sacrifice"

Jones had spoken of as the enabling condition of Hamlet's heroism in the last scene. Such a leap could not have been a regular part of the 1937 production.¹⁵ Even the stunt men for the film were only willing to demonstrate the move once before Olivier's attempt, and the stand-in for Claudius was knocked out.¹⁶ In other ways as well, what was merely a Freudian intention in the stage production is salient in the film: the royal bed, immense, rumpled, and suggestively canopied is treated as a female anatomical symbol; Hamlet's rapier and dagger are often treated in a way that underscores their potential phallic significance; and Hamlet and Gertrude kiss like lovers, aligning the film with the Jones reading.

But, as I have suggested, the film's psychological explorations are also informed by autobiographical pressures, and to approach these, several aspects of Olivier's life story need to be reviewed. Olivier was the third and youngest child of his parents, and his birth in 1907 coincided with important changes in their relationship. The Oliviers had been partners in the running of a school, but by this time Gerard Olivier had changed careers, becoming an Anglican minister of a rather strict and fervent kind, a change that necessitated a move to the working-class neighborhood in which the father's parish was located. The baby born in the midst of these changes became a focus of parental quarrelling, as all accounts agree.¹⁷ His older sister Sybille describes their father's temper as "a storming, raging tornado which he'd turn on Larry in a way he never did on my brother Dick and me. Father didn't like Larry, and Larry was terrified of him," whereas "Mummy was just everything to Larry . . . she adored Larry. He was hers."¹⁸ Kiernan reports a close family friend as saying that the young Laurence Olivier learned to provoke his father's attacks in order to win affection from his mother. Agnes Olivier not only focussed her attentions on "the baby," but also, when he was about five, had a small curtained stage built for him in the home, and encouraged him as a theatrical performer even at this early age. Such attention could not help but exacerbate the other tensions in the family.¹⁹

Olivier's mother died in 1920, when Laurence was in school. He had already had remarkable success as an actor: at nine, his schoolboy interpretation of Brutus in *Julius Caesar* had been praised by Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, and Ellen Terry is said to have written in her diary that "the small boy who played Brutus is already a great actor."²⁰ When Agnes Olivier died, she asked the twelve-year-old boy to promise to become a great actor "for her," and, in his next role he took a major step toward becoming one with his extraordinary portrayal of Katherine in *Taming of the Shrew*, a role in which, according to a number of accounts of the performance that survive, he modelled himself so closely upon his mother that those who knew her were astonished at the resemblance. His father walked out on the play, muttering about the blasphemy of bringing the dead back to life. Sybil Thorndike, a friend of the family, saw the performance and later commented on Olivier's resemblance to his mother.²¹ Olivier's sister Sybille reported that Gerard Olivier was so distressed that he forbade Laurence ever to act again, a command that was later rescinded.²²

The portrait of the father offered by the *Confessions* is preponderantly

negative. The book opens with an account of his miserliness: he saved and scrimped on coal, on food, on toilet tissue, and, most degradingly for the young Laurence, on bathwater—to save expense the boys in the family had to bathe in their father's dirty bathwater, and Laurence was last in line. Although this practice was fairly common for the period, the young Olivier experienced it as an assault, and describes the dirty water with disgust. Years later, he took the trouble to check the 1923 water rate with the borough authorities²³ in order to offer his readers objective evidence of his father's stinginess. Yet it was also in the shared bathwater, which Laurence was still using when he was sixteen, that the only instance of paternal nurturance recorded in the *Confessions* took place, on the occasion of the departure to India of Richard Olivier, Laurence's older brother, to begin a career as a rubber planter:

Lowering myself into the water, which was, I noticed unhappily, a little cleaner than usual, I snatched the hot tap on for the allotted number of seconds, and after a minute or so I asked my father how soon I might reckon on being allowed to follow Dickie to India. My father's answer was so astonishing that it gave me a deep shock: "Don't be such a fool; you're not going to India, you're going on the stage." "Am I?" I stuttered lamely. "Well, of course you are," he said; and as he went on I realized not only that he had been thinking of me quite deeply, which was something I had long before decided he never did, but that he had been following these thoughts through in pleasingly creative and caring ways.²⁴

This was an important moment. So far, Laurence had succeeded at acting, which his mother sponsored, and had failed at sports, disappointing his father. His acting is accepted here as an equivalent to his brother's manly activities.

A central theme in Olivier's account of his school days concerns his attempts to be manly and free himself from the imputation of passivity and femininity. Yet, the paradox in the stories he tells is that most of his attempts at acceptance involved dramatics, which he himself thought of as a feminine enterprise. Again, his own account is echoed by family members, his brother Richard commented that "by the time Larry was nine he began to get a sense of himself as a male."²⁵ This was the time of his entry into All Saints School, where he was to have his first triumphs as a performer. But at this school, Olivier, a choirboy and an exceptionally well-favored child, soon became the center of homosexual and sadistic attention. Olivier's descriptions of his beatings, both at All Saints and at St. Edward's, Olivier's public school from 1921-23, make very clear that he considered the punishments he received to have an erotic component and to have been a response to his sexual attractiveness. Recounting his mistreatment by a singularly cruel master who was soon discharged for his excessive beatings, Olivier explains, "I reportedly sang like an angel and was as pretty as was needed to bring out the worst in certain males."²⁶ Olivier achieved some measure of acceptance²⁷ among the boys through his stunning acting successes, but it is not so clear that they helped to clarify his sexual identity. He was often given female or unmasculine parts, and these roles placed him in a relationship to the masters, particularly to the great dramatics teacher who was his first mentor at All Saints,

that was in some sense a benign analog to the "attention" he received from their more brutal colleagues:

The following year came Petruchio and Katharina's main quarrel scenes from *The Taming of the Shrew*; Geoffrey Heald was a stunning Petruchio and I was allowed to be his Kate. In the subsequent year the whole play was undertaken. Father Heald's direction was brilliant, and he injected into my consciousness a conviction that I was, in fact, being a woman.²⁸

This was the occasion, referred to earlier, on which all who saw the production noted Laurence's uncanny resemblance to his recently deceased mother. The Freud of "Mourning and Melancholia"²⁹ might have attributed his extraordinary ability to impersonate his mother to the introjection of the object, the internalization of a beloved and mourned-for person, but Olivier's own account stresses Father Heald's impregnating and feminizing influence. Here, as in the bathwater story, his acting powers, with their feminine associations, derive from or are confirmed by an intimate contact with a father. Acting is consistently associated in these stories with a passive, or feminizing, resolution of Oedipal tension, as well as with a narcissistic merging with the mother. The story of the development of young Olivier's extraordinary artistic gifts often, therefore, also conveys his sense of fundamental defect, related to uncertainty of paternal approval.

One story is of special importance here because it may have influenced the imagery of the *Hamlet* film. Describing his adolescent experiences at St. Edward's school, where he "very soon caught the attention, rapidly followed by the attentions, of a few of the older boys," Olivier explains that unwelcome sexual advances had plagued him since his first day at his previous school:

I did not in any way welcome such attentions; I knew well enough what they spelt. My first experience of that had been a somewhat frightening one. Calling at the All Saints church house one day before I joined the choir, I was stopped by a large boy, an old choirboy, who offered to show me the stage upstairs where the choir school plays were performed. I was dressed in my kilt, Kerr tartan (my second name, as was my father's, is Kerr; no one has ever found the Scottish connection), with the velvet jacket and silver buttons, a customary Sunday outfit inherited from my brother. This boy flung me down on an upper landing, threw himself on top of me and made me repeat again and again, "No, no, let me go I don't want it." This I did willingly enough, but it only increased his ardor. His "exercises" were getting more powerful when to my relief he thought he heard someone coming up the stone stairs. He pushed me down these steps and himself disappeared farther up towards the top of the building. I rushed down, tearful and trembling, in search of my mother, into whose arms I gratefully flung myself. On the way home she asked me the lad's name, which she recognized; a year or two back he had come to a birthday party for me to which Mummy had invited all fourteen boys. She made me promise to tell her if anything of the kind should ever happen again.³⁰

The kilt here is a dangerous paternal gift: supposedly conferring a grandiose masculine identity and offering connection to brother, father, and distant Scottish kinfolk; it actually looks very much like a skirt, feminizing its wearer and exposing

him to rape. Interest in acting, Olivier's childhood sphere of grandiosity, sponsored to this point principally by his mother, also exposes him to deflation and assault. Despite Agnes Olivier's comfort after the incident, Laurence in some measure blamed himself for this incident, for he continues: "The reactions I provoked two years later, at St. Edward's, were seemingly shared by the entire school, quite instantaneously. I was ostracized. I was a flirt."³¹

As a young adult, Olivier married and pursued an extramarital affair that led to divorce and remarriage. As far as we know, he never had a sexual relationship with a man, but the stories he tells about this period make it clear that his adult adjustment entailed a measure of guilt, and homosexuality continued to be an issue. In fact, he expects his readers to disbelieve his denials, as in this account of his attraction for an older man, apparently Noel Coward:

I had got over like a spendthrift sigh my nearly passionate involvement with the one male with whom some sexual dalliance had not been loathsome for me to contemplate. I had felt it desperately necessary to warn him that, dustily old-fashioned as it must seem, I had ideals which must not be trodden underfoot and destroyed, or I would not be able to answer for the consequences and neither would he.

It must be exceedingly difficult to believe that, in spite of my history as a pampered choirboy, and the attentions paid to me at the next school (which, no matter how unwelcome, unfairly labeled me as the school tart), I felt that the homosexual act would be a step darkly destructive to my soul. I was firm in my conviction that heterosexuality was romantically beautiful, immensely pleasurable, and rewarding in contentment.

It is surprising that this faith should have withstood an onslaught of such passionate interest, and that this, together with the disillusionment that followed the initial experience of my early marriage, did not throw me off course or even make me waver—well, perhaps I must allow that it did do that.

It would be dreadfully wrong if any of this should be taken to imply that I ever found anything in the remotest unrespectable about homosexuality. . . .³²

These remarks display a great deal of ambivalence despite their liberal tone. Homosexuality is both "darkly destructive" and perfectly respectable; sexual orientation is presented as a matter of principle and conviction, rather than of feeling. The imbedded reference to *Hamlet* is instructive: "spendthrift sigh" is Claudius's phrase, its context being the king's attempt to persuade Laertes to act upon his desire for revenge:

That we would do,
We should do when we would: for this "would" changes
And hath abatements and delays as many
As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents,
And then this "should" is like a spendthrift sigh
That hurts by easing (4.7.117-22).³³

The spendthrift sigh is an unmanly evasion of self-realization. Hamlet is not present, but Claudius's words also apply to Hamlet's difficulty bringing himself (in Olivier's

words) "to the required boiling point." There is thus not only an undertone of regret in Olivier's account of his refusal of homosexual relations, but also, paradoxically, an imagined paternal reproach.³⁴

The circumstances around his first marriage to Jill Esmond speak to a related confusion. His father would not officiate because the couple had chosen a church in which divorced persons had been permitted to marry.³⁵ After the wedding, Laurence broke completely with religion, supposedly because his conscience would not allow him to practice birth control while remaining a member of the Church.³⁶ The marriage, which he describes as motivated by the desire to relieve sexual frustration,³⁷ seems to have occasioned feelings of guilt, which attached themselves to the issue of contraception and marked another failure in his relations with his father.

The marriage to Jill Esmond was not a happy or sexually satisfying one, and, in 1937, at the time of the Old Vic *Hamlet* production, Olivier began an affair with Vivien Leigh. There is no reason to doubt Olivier's account of the beginning of the affair, which emphasizes Leigh's attractiveness and the love he felt for her. Nevertheless, the timing is significant. Jill was pregnant when it began, and by the time the child was born, Olivier had become an infrequent visitor in his own house. The relationship with Leigh may have therefore been, at least in part, a flight from fatherhood. Olivier had great difficulty, in later years, being close to the son born at this time, and even the name he chose for him—Tarquin, supposedly an old family name—suggests by its association with rape and treachery that Olivier was uneasy about having a male child.³⁸

The love affair with Vivien Leigh was an illicit one by Olivier's standards, but his description of it sometimes alludes to greater sins than those committed. After appearing in *Hamlet* in Denmark, Leigh and Olivier traveled openly together for the first time: "After all this work, Vivien and I gave way utterly to damned luxury, as old King Hamlet's ghost describes it: eight weeks in France driving from Boulogne straight down what has since been named *la route gastronomique*."³⁹ The giving way utterly must have involved more than cuisine. In Old King Hamlet's English, "luxury" meant sexual sin. In addition, Olivier misquotes, forgetting the ghost's anger at the royal bed's use as a "couch for luxury and damned incest" (I.v.83). At this point in his narrative, Olivier recalls with horror that when he revisited the same towns after the war, a restaurateur who had been particularly kind to him and Vivien in 1937 had been killed by the French authorities, his eyes put out for collaborating with the Germans. But "no such hateful episode occurred to blight that idyllic first journey, which allowed the glowing fulfillment of every desire of the wayward lovers."⁴⁰ The description of this "honeymoon" begins with a suppressed reference to incest and ends with the punishment of Oedipus.

Olivier began work on the film of *Hamlet* nearly ten years later, a year after he had acted the role of Oedipus to universal acclaim. His relationship with Vivien Leigh had been regularized by marriage in 1940. His father had died in 1939. He was a successful film actor, and his *Henry V* had gained the

first ungrudging critical success accorded any Shakespeare film. He was at a plateau of success and respect. Yet the *Hamlet* film was in some ways the boldest of his enterprises, for in addition to playing the lead and directing the film, he drastically cut Shakespeare's text and imposed on it a powerful interpretation, partly Jonesian, partly his own. His daring was not without its doubts, hesitations, and denials of the significance of the enterprise. Apologizing for the extent to which the text had been reworked, Olivier preferred to call the film "an essay in *Hamlet*."⁴¹ He describes his playing the lead in terms that are simultaneously self-effacing and grandiose: he would have preferred another actor "of sufficient standing to carry the role, or one upon whom I could have imposed my interpretation without resenting it"; his own gifts were for "the stronger character roles"; in the end he found it "simpler" to play Hamlet himself: "but one reason why I dyed my hair was so as to avoid the possibility of Hamlet's later being identified with me. I wanted audiences seeing the film to say, not, 'There is Laurence Olivier, acting Hamlet,' but 'that is Hamlet.'"⁴² The wish to distance himself from the role may have been partly due to the Freudian interpretation he intended to give it: though Olivier was forty, he cast Herlie, at twenty-seven, as Gertrude, a choice that nearly reverses the generational direction of the incestuous subtext. In addition, Olivier was concerned about too close an identification with Hamlet's irresolution, passivity and failure:

Perhaps he was the first pacifist. Perhaps Dr. Jones is sound in his diagnosis of the Oedipus complex, perhaps there is justification in the many complexes that have been foisted on to him—perhaps he just thought too much, that is, if a man can think too much . . . I prefer to think of him as a nearly great man—damned by lack of resolution, as all but one in a hundred are.⁴³

Such a description, while conveying the author's wish to be resolute where Hamlet had wavered, inscribes irresolution in its own interpretation, backing away from the Freudian theory while proposing alternatives that upon examination are merely restatements of the question. The film itself pursues a similarly self-cancelling strategy, offering an undeniably Freudian reading while proclaiming that "this is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind" as if such a pronouncement were itself an interpretation rather than that which for centuries has seemed to require interpretation. Oedipal interpretation, like the Oedipal fantasies it explains, tends to generate itself as one of its own consequences, proposing polysemy and ambiguity as meaning, disguising decision as evasion, blurring the distinctions between fathers and sons, texts and their interpretations.

It is interesting that while Olivier could be somewhat evasive in what he said about interpretation and character in the film, he was much more direct about the genesis of its visual structure: "Quite suddenly, one day, I visualized the final shot of 'Hamlet,' and from this glimpse, I saw how the whole conception of the film could be built up."⁴⁴ This shot is a long shot of Hamlet's funeral procession climbing a steep staircase to the top of a bare tower. The film begins with a closely related shot, a high-angle view of this tower, the bearers having reached the top. The human figures then dissolve out of the image as the action

of the film begins in flashback. The narrative is thus framed by this ascent, by the elevation of Hamlet in death to the highest place in the castle, a place from which there is nowhere to go, even to complete the funeral. The procession vanishes from the screen at the end as it had in the opening sequence. One of the ways this complex symbol functions in the film, therefore, is to intimate the futility of Hamlet's success in his grandiose mission: he accomplishes the revenge his father's ghost had charged him with, reestablishes an intense connection to his mother, and even momentarily takes possession of the throne. With this solemn funeral, Hamlet's completion of his task is acknowledged in a way that reminds us that it is achieved at the cost of annihilation.

The final shot of the film does more than give this frame to the story. As Olivier explained, it is the generating image for the film as a whole, the last of a long series of staircase shots and sequences that occur throughout the work. These are consistently associated with Hamlet's meetings with his father and his attempts to fulfill his father's commandment to revenge. Staircases are often the setting for violence, the locus of a repeated pattern in which someone is thrown down upon the steps, and the attacker flees upward leaving the victim in an ambivalent state in which elements of reproach and pain are mingled with feelings of loss. Thematically, this motif points to the well-studied problematic of revenge in *Hamlet*, whereby the revenger takes on the moral taint of his victim in a compulsive and cyclical pattern. Psychologically, it is used to explore Hamlet's passivity, his oscillation between grandiosity and depression, and the blurring of his own identity in a partial fusion with the ghost. As we shall see, various aspects of the staircase motif as it is used in the film evoke, with surprising literalness, the traumatic incident the director suffered at All Saints in 1916 and first made public in 1982.

The towers and external staircases of Elsinore are introduced at the start of the film. The castle first appears directly after the credits, which are shown against a background of crashing surf. It has two towers, one in the middle of the castle and one at the near corner, overlooking the sea. As in the opening shots of *Henry V*, there is some confusion between these two architectural features.⁴⁵ The camera moves in upon the corner tower from a high angle, and stops. There is a fade to mist, as Olivier in voice-over recites, "So oft it chanceth in particular men," while the text is displayed on the screen. After Olivier's somewhat reductive addition, pointing the moral ("This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind"), the central tower reappears, filling most of the image, and the camera moves in, as if continuing the movement begun before the speech, on four soldiers carrying Hamlet's body, his sword laid out upon his chest, his face invisible to us as his unsupported head droops back, the body appearing almost headless from our point of view. The procession then dissolves from the image while the tower remains, and, in a rapid series of cuts, we are shown parts of the exterior of the castle, emphasizing the steep external staircases that give access to the ramparts and the towers.

It is on these that the sentries challenge one another as the guard changes,

and on which Hamlet is soon to ascend for his colloquy with the ghost. The ghost appears on the ramparts as Bernardo narrates to Horatio, "Last night of all . . .," and his first appearance establishes him as a numinous and intimately invasive presence. The camera moves in from a high angle to the terrified face of Marcellus (Anthony Quayle) in a disturbing stop-start rhythm, losing focus and regaining it as we hear an exaggeratedly loud, pounding heartbeat in accompaniment. Since we cannot assign with certainty the beating of the heart and the loss of focus either to the ghost or to Marcellus, this treatment effects a blurring of the boundaries between the apparition and the human self to whom it appears. When the camera securely assumes Marcellus's point of view again, we see the ghost as a helmeted figure, with hollow-eyed face half-shrouded in mist. It will not speak to the guards, and as it disappears, there is a cut to the roaring surf.

The ghost is ponderously slow, dignified, sorrowful and stately, but his effect on others is violent. The heartbeat, the blur of focus, and the insistent, pulsing downward movement of the camera are repeated when the ghost makes his second appearance, this time to Hamlet, whose response is to fling himself violently backward into his companions' arms. A low-angle shot follows, from behind the human group, looking up several shallow steps to the ghost. As Hamlet questions it, the ghost begins to ascend, and Hamlet, reaching out his hand to it, begins to follow, in a long, slow climb, lasting nearly two minutes of screen time, punctuated by dissolves as we pass from one landing of steps to the next. At the top of the central tower, Hamlet, his sword-hilt held before him, stops and declares he'll "go no further," but this limit-setting gesture is made ironic in the film, because there is nowhere further to go.

Hamlet kneels as the ghost speaks, and the revelation of the murder, partly spoken by the ghost, and partly rendered visually in a flashback to the murder scene, is shot from behind him, looking toward his father. As the queen's infidelity is revealed, the ghost fades out and, in the ambient mist, the royal couch fades in briefly, so that Hamlet's gesture, his hand outstretched to the apparition, becomes ambiguous, as his longing for his father becomes confused with the question of his relation to the incestuous bed his father's discourse evokes. Such a treatment derives from Jones, but the connection between the poignant absence of the father and the Oedipal impulse is Olivier's own.⁴⁶

His charge to his son complete, the ghost fades in the morning air as Hamlet reaches forward to touch him. The camera pulls high above him as he stands and falls full length backward, overcome with what he has seen and heard. As he revives, his rage against his uncle and his vows to revenge his father are delivered in a manic tone: the depressed and affectless mourner of the opening sequences becomes the precipitate revenger his father wants him to be—yet, even in his assertions of murderous anger, there are elements of passivity. Shakespeare's text suggests at this point that becoming a revenger entails a kind of self-obliteration for Hamlet: he offers to wipe clean the tables of his memory, leaving a blank page for the word of the father to be written upon. Olivier

develops this, making his commitment to revenge with his eyes blazing and sword brandished while still on his knees. At the climax of the vow, "Yes, *by Heaven*," he throws his rapier down upon the stones, a gesture that registers his anger, but that also, as with similar actions later in the film, leaves him without a weapon at the very moment when his thought of using one is strongest.

In a way, what the reappearance of the father visits upon Hamlet in both film and text is a kind of abuse. Hamlet's potential for independent life is compromised, and he becomes a mere agent of paternal aims, important himself only insofar as he is able to "do what is required of him." Even though Hamlet loves his father and accepts his commandment to the point of self-obliteration, he is flung back, hurled down, and invaded, while the ghost, inaccessible to Hamlet's longing reach for contact, ascends higher up the steps and finally disappears. The abusive character of the interaction becomes even clearer when one notices how closely the main features of the imagery in which Olivier renders the visit of the ghost resemble the incident of sexual assault the director had suffered as a nine-year-old on the staircase of All Saints. Not only the actual assault on the stairs, but also the curious detail about the attacker fleeing further up are reprised in the film. Like the childhood memory, this sequence is presented as a kind of feminization, with the symbolic casting down of the sword replacing the kilt as its emblem, and with the sense that Hamlet has been invaded by the ghost replacing the near-rape. The father replaces the older boy as the abuser.

This pattern—assault on a staircase followed by flight upward—is repeated in the scene in which Ophelia is rejected by Hamlet. Ophelia has been set by the king and her father as "bait" to discover whether or not Hamlet's madness is a result of love. Polonius and Claudius observe from behind an arras as Ophelia returns Hamlet's love tokens. Following Dover Wilson's *What Happens in Hamlet*,⁴⁷ Olivier has Hamlet overhear the plan to spy on him, and feels betrayed by Ophelia's complicity in it. But there is also a purely visual earlier sequence invented for the film, that establishes a background for the rejection. In the Council chamber, Hamlet customarily sits in a chair at the foot of the table, a special chair marked by distinctive decoration, pulled back from the others in distance and distaste. It is the chair in which he sits in sullen rejection of the court and its endorsement of his mother's marriage, and in which he remembers and mourns for his father. But it is also strategically placed in relation to Ophelia's chamber: by looking over his shoulder he commands a view of a long corridor leading to her room. After Polonius warns Ophelia not to accept Hamlet's love, Olivier, using the resources of deep-focus photography to the full, staged what he was to call, somewhat inappropriately, the "longest distance love-scene in history."⁴⁸ Ophelia, in distress, looks down the corridor to Hamlet, seated in his chair some one hundred feet away. Hamlet cannot see her father, and he registers her refusal to come to him as a rejection. Thus, even before he learns of the plot, he has begun to feel that Ophelia has turned away from him. This sequence links the failure of trust between the lovers to something already present in Hamlet's character. He is paralyzed, not only by grief, but also by the opportunity

the empty chamber affords for imaginary sovereignty. His inability to rise and approach Ophelia manifests the power of his Oedipal resentments and grandiose fantasies. Because he cannot leave the empty chamber, he mistakes Ophelia's reluctant giving in to paternal command for rejection.

This Hamlet comes to the scene in which Ophelia returns his tokens with realistic suspicions as well as fettered emotions. He is moody, wary, and in distress; yet he tries to establish a basis for trust by speaking candidly to Ophelia about his low opinion of himself: "I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven?" This is spoken in a quiet, reflective tone, partly to preserve the possibility of an intimate exchange despite the spying of the king and Polonius behind the arras, and partly because he recognizes that his own low self-esteem and guilt feelings constitute a barrier to intimacy. He glances frequently at the arras and then back to Ophelia, as if to see whether she will lie to him or accept his offered confidence. She does lie, and the tone and pace of the scene shift: "crawling between earth and heaven. We are arrant knaves all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. Where's your father? [still in a quiet tone]. *Ophelia*: At home, my lord. *Hamlet*: [now loudly and in anger]: Let the doors be shut upon him then, that he may play the fool no where but in's own house." Here he shoves her away violently and his discourse shifts from self-castigation to condemnation of women. When she attempts to embrace him, he throws her down on the steps to sob and flees up them. The camera, in a series of backtrackings and vertical cranes approximating the point of view Hamlet would have if he were looking back down the stairs, pulls back and up from the prostrate figure of Ophelia, her hand still extended after Hamlet, as his own hand was after the fading apparition of his father. In this complex sequence, as the camera cranes out of sight with Hamlet, Ophelia disappears, then briefly reappears in a longer shot as the backward and upward ascent of the camera reaches another landing.

The circling ascent of the camera continues, as if following Hamlet to the top of the castle until, suddenly, there is a cut to a shot of the cloudy sky above the castle, filling the screen, and then a rapid crane down, so that Hamlet's seated form rises abruptly into the image. He is seated on the parapet of the tower that overlooks the sea, his back to us. The camera next moves in to an extreme close-up of the whorl at the top of his head, and, as if entering his skull the inward movement continues with a dissolve to the rocks and crashing surf he is contemplating.

This is Olivier's introduction to the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, which he has repositioned, placing it after the encounter with Ophelia and making it a reaction to the failure of that meeting to reestablish trust. In the text the scene comes earlier, just before Ophelia enters to him (III.i.90), and is a more diffusely motivated meditation. Olivier's delivery of the speech offers a sharp contrast to

the fury at Ophelia's betrayal that immediately precedes it; in fact, the moment at which the camera movement reverses its upward ascent marks a transition from rage to depression, from a grandiose and "noble" anger to deflation. Here he is at his most languid and limp, dangling his "bodkin" above his breast with a weak, three-fingered grasp, while half reclining. At the end he proves too enervated or distracted to hold on to it, and looks bemusedly after as the tiny dagger falls into the sea far below. In this interpretation the meditation on suicide has no heroic quality, but is played as an escapist reverie, marking Hamlet's return to impotence and passivity.

In some sense, Hamlet takes the place of the ghost in this sequence. It is he who casts down, and ascends, and is finally inaccessible, reached after in fear and longing. Yet, at the top of the stairs, when the cut to the heavens likens him most closely to his father's ascending spirit, there is a sudden reversal to passivity and depression. The summit of the tower marks his mortal limits. Beyond is the air into which the ghost had vanished, and below is the rocky surf. Retracing his father's path brings him to the prospect of self-annihilation.

The analogy between the ghost's treatment of Hamlet earlier, and Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia here, also suggests a reason, different from the Freud/Jones reason, for Hamlet's turn from sexuality. For this Hamlet, erotic response and abuse are closely linked. One is either abuser or abused, and there is little room for erotic shadings of activity and passivity that do not tend to extremes. One is either the mad figure who attacks and runs away, or the figure left alone and hurt on the stairs. What the ghost does to Hamlet, which is in part a reenactment of a key incident of abuse the director suffered as a child, is the cause of what he does to Ophelia. He cannot break the cycle of abuse the ghost's visit initiated.

The staircase motif is again used in a thematically significant way after the "Mousetrap" scene, when Hamlet makes a long ascent to his mother's chamber. Midway he comes upon the king in prayer and raises his sword for revenge—"now might I do it"—but hesitates as the thought of sending his father's murderer to heaven detains him. Here the visual treatment of the scene again intimates a close relationship between the victims of violence and its perpetrators. As Claudius meditates upon his guilty hand, he turns it over slowly, palm up, in extreme close-up, just as in the flashback to the murder old Hamlet's hand slowly turned over and opened at the moment of his death; and, when his prayer fails, Claudius slumps from the altar, sliding to the floor in the posture in which King Hamlet had fallen from his bench in the orchard. Hamlet continues upward to his mother's bedroom, in a slow, menacing ascent, his dark figure outlined against the jagged shadow of the overhanging steps, while his mother makes plans with Polonius to spy on him.

The bedchamber scene takes place after a climb, not during one, but is in other ways related to the scenes of abuse we have been examining. The scene is markedly violent and erotic, with the ghost's appearance dividing it into two sections, converting Hamlet's murderous threats into incestuous tenderness. In the opening exchange, the text calls for an unfilial degree of roughness: "Come,

come and sit you down, you shall not budge/You go not till I set you up a glass/
Where you may see the inmost part of you" (3.4.17-19). Modern audiences may miss the insistent impropriety of the repeated plural pronoun, but the verbal affront is otherwise clear, and is intensified in the film as Olivier flings the queen backward on her bed, and, in close-up, presses his dagger across her ample bosom to her throat. As she cries for help, and Polonius answers, Hamlet looks up with a maniacally rigid smile, runs to the arras, stabs through it, and delivers his next lines with the point stuck in the still-standing body of his victim behind the curtain. Returning to his mother, he lets the body and his dagger fall as he resumes his reproaches and his attempt to force his mother to come to terms with her complicity in the murder of the king. As he compares Claudius with his father, he works up to a rage again and throws her down upon the bed, as, simultaneously, he hears the heartbeat that signals the approach of the ghost.

Herlie's performance during the threats and revelations of this scene is important to its meaning. Early in the film, she had established Gertrude as a seductive mother, willing to use a passionate, lover's kiss as part of her plea that Hamlet remain in Elsinore. This creates a triangle that Claudius registers by angrily pulling her away and dissolving the council. Here, as she struggles with the mix of emotions that Hamlet's wild discourse evokes (fear, remorse, confusion), her expression returns repeatedly to erotic appeal. We see here how she could have remained ignorant of the murder and the moral implications of her remarriage: her response to ethical difficulty is to seek the comfort of a sexual response, even from her son.

As Hamlet casts her down and looks up from her to find the ghost, the camera repeats a movement from the ramparts scene, moving to a high angle close-up of Hamlet as he half swoons and falls to the ground. As he listens to the admonition of the ghost, he remains on the floor, propped on one arm as the other reaches toward the vision, a posture precisely that of Ophelia as she looks after the fleeing Hamlet, who has cast her down on the stairs. This shot, with its evocation of that parallel, is repeated four times, intercut with Gertrude's wonder and incomprehension as she sees her son gazing upon a presence she cannot perceive. It is the ghost who asks Hamlet to return to Gertrude: "But look, amazement on thy mother sits:/O step between her and her fighting soul:/Speak to her, Hamlet." At this point Hamlet's violence toward Gertrude, symbolically phallic all the while, becomes openly erotic, as his appeal to her to abstain from intercourse with Claudius succeeds, and mother and son seal their union against the usurper with a fiercely passionate embrace and kiss, accompanied by a romantic, circling movement of the camera in keeping with a cinematic convention reserved for lovers.

The influence of Jones is strongest here, for we see Gertrude trying to evoke an erotic response which she ultimately gets, and we see how closely intertwined are the violence expected of Hamlet and his desire for his mother from which he cannot dissociate that violence. To approach his revenge is also, somehow, to approach his mother's bed, and to be loyal to his father somehow entails flinging

her down upon it. Also central to Olivier's conception of the scene, however, are elements that are not derived from Jones, but from his own engagement with the issue of passivity and the compulsively cyclical character of abuse. As he had taken the place of the ghost in certain ways in the rejection of Ophelia, so here, at the point of violent assault upon his mother on her own bed, he is himself cast down by the apparition of his father. He gazes with a mixture of dread and longing that evokes Ophelia's response to his earlier abuse. In addition, the ghost's intervention does not put an end to the Oedipal energy of the scene, but is rather the signal for its conversion from violence to tenderness. In fact, the ghost seems actually to sponsor the merger of mother and son that is established here. "But look — amazement on thy mother sits, / O step between her and her fighting soul," effectively annuls the earlier commandment to "leave her to heaven," and permits Hamlet to recover the quasi-romantic, spiritual union with his mother that had been breached by her remarriage. From this point, she rejects Claudius's offers of intimacy and acts as Hamlet's ally, even to the point of knowingly joining him in death by drinking from the poisoned cup.

Hamlet's climb to meet the ghost, his flight from Ophelia to the tower, his ascent to his mother's chamber, and the framing device of the funeral procession at the highest point of the castle: these are the principal uses of the elaborate, narrow, winding staircases Olivier and Roger Furse, the set designer, planned for the film. These stairways to the upper reaches of the castle are contrasted with the ceremonial double staircase that dominates the council chamber, winding down from each end of the balcony that overlooks the chamber to the floor below. This staircase figures prominently in the Mousetrap scene, the fencing scene, and the final scene. In each case its use marks a stage in Hamlet's struggle with Claudius for mastery of the public space of the council chamber. At the beginning of the Mousetrap scene, the king, followed by his court, comes down these stairs to Walton's processional music. He is holding Gertrude's hand. Hamlet, master of the revels, waits at the bottom, and, with an air of triumph, takes his mother's hand and leads her to her seat. The staging is almost exactly repeated, to the same music, at the start of the fencing match, when Claudius leads Laertes, not Gertrude, down to the floor, while Hamlet, the camera moving with him, descends an analogous staircase in the foreground. The overall effect is of a double spiral downward as Hamlet goes to meet his fate: "Here, Hamlet, take *this* hand from me." The hand now is not that of the mother, but of Laertes, his opponent and executioner. The final conflict between Hamlet and Claudius also involves this staircase, which Hamlet climbs for his daring leap in the last moments of the film. The ceremonial stairs are associated with Hamlet's public struggle with the king, while the steeper and darker stairs are reserved for his encounters with the ghost of his father.⁴⁹

If the staircases are important to Olivier's complex approach to the Oedipal dynamics of *Hamlet*, so too is the persistent use of vacant chairs and empty rooms. This aspect of the film's style, the frequent absence of human figures from the image, is related to Olivier's interest in Hamlet's self-absorption and

to the special way in which his Oedipal confusion manifests itself in an irresolution of roles and meanings. As early as our first introduction to its interior, Elsinore is presented as a series of spaces empty of people and yet pregnant with significances we cannot yet fully grasp. After the first visit of the ghost, who is himself an absence and a silence that portends significance but does not yet announce it, Marcellus speculates that his appearance is linked to “something rotten” in the state of Denmark. He glances off-screen, and the camera, in a long series of invisible cuts intended to be read as a single take, follows the direction of his glance, apparently searching for the source of corruption. It moves slowly down the winding staircases of the castle, pausing at several locations that suggest that the locus of corruption has been found: the royal bedchamber, an empty room that turns out to be Ophelia’s, and the empty council chamber are visited in turn. In the last of these locations, the camera lingers on an ornate empty chair, perhaps left vacant by the death of Old King Hamlet. But this sequence, with its slow and tentative camera movement, ends with a more definitive shot, a tight close-up of the new king, intemperately swilling wine from an immense goblet. He tosses the emptied cup to an obsequious attendant, and a close-up of the smoking cannon’s mouth “respeaking earthly thunder” tells us definitively that the rottenness in Denmark centers in the king, his appetites, and his sanctimonious court.

The sites visited on the way to this revelation—each a possible though cryptic indication of the kind of corruption Marcellus had in mind—are not yet definitive; they provoke us to interpret or guess. At each site we hear a musical motif that will *later* have meaning in the narrative. We do not yet know that the smaller chamber is Ophelia’s and the sunny musical passage her theme, and that the chair is Hamlet’s (most viewers guess that it is the empty chair of the murdered king, and, though it is later identified as the chair Hamlet uses, it retains a fluidity of association, and is often shown empty). We do guess whose the bed is, and this rumpled symbol, in close proximity to the phallic cannonade, is a kind of declaration of the film’s Freudian intentions. The large chamber seems almost certainly the set for the scene to come. The chair, the bed, and the chamber are all presented vacant to point to some further meaning. In the course of the film, we come to understand them more fully, but they remain, at least partly, private symbols charged with meaning for Hamlet, and not always for others. The queen’s bed, with its “incestuous sheets” is on Hamlet’s mind during the first soliloquy, even before the ghost has appeared, and it never becomes an object of special attention for anyone except Hamlet and the film audience. The symbols we learn to interpret are Hamlet’s symbols, and therefore, through much of the narrative, we share with him not only a dramatic point of view, but an orientation toward the significances of the world of Elsinore that is privileged and private.

After the close shot of the king, the vacancy discovered by the traveling camera gives way to busy plenitude. Now cutting and camera movement function more conventionally to support the narrative, following the dynamics of the

king's interaction with the court. In a series of shots of increasing distance, the council chamber is re-introduced as the sphere of Claudius's power. The brooding, solitary, and symbolic mode of Hamlet, associated with the long take, the vertical movement of the camera, and the empty room is contrasted with the political, interpersonal mode of the king, whose central importance in the busy court is emphasized by horizontal camera movement and cross-cutting.

Most of the scene is shot from the foot of the long council table, looking toward the raised thrones of the king and queen at its head. Hamlet's armchair, distinguished from the others by ball-and-point ornamentation, is at the right foot, pushed some distance away from the council table, at right angles to the thrones and to the screen. This is the empty chair of the earlier sequence, but we do not see it, or Hamlet sitting it, until the council scene is well under way. In contrast to theatrical productions of the play where Hamlet must be present from the start, the film stresses his absence: he is the reason for the king's anxious manipulations, but he is not present in the image until Claudius expresses his affection for Laertes: "Take thy fair hour, Laertes; time be thine,/And thy best graces spend it at thy will!" "Time be thine" is the cue for the discovery of Hamlet in his passive and sullen mourning posture as, with a cut, the camera pulls back to a shot of the full room. Claudius is on the throne with Polonius at his right hand and Laertes standing stage left in the foreground. Hamlet is excluded from the complex father-son-king affiliations implied by the *mise-en-scène*, though he dominates the scene by his foregrounded position, his dress, his posture, and his striking blond hair. In some sense, time will belong to Laertes, and never to Hamlet, in the film. The contrast between them as sons is one of the film's most successful exploitations of the implications of the Oedipal theme. Time (and timing) can only be mastered by a young man who finds his place in a temporal succession from father to son.

Space, on the other hand, seems to belong to Hamlet. If Old Hamlet haunts the ramparts, Young Hamlet is the ghost of Elsinore's interior. The freedom of the camera to explore at will is often associated with him. He stalks Elsinore's corridors, overhearing, as Dover Wilson thought he should, the plan to use Ophelia to unravel the cause of his madness, and, whereas the spying of others is always prepared for by elaborate and explicit conspiring, Hamlet just seems to be there when something is to be overheard. In fact, even when he is not there, we expect him. During the plotting of the death of Hamlet by Claudius and Laertes, the camera cranes three times far above the speakers to privileged nooks above the chamber where we have learned to expect the prince. On this fatal occasion, however, the camera's access to the secret is *not* matched by Hamlet's, and he enters in the background after Claudius and Laertes depart, unaware of his fate. In the council scene he remains nearly motionless and passive until the court departs, and then reveals to us how much the empty room is his domain and how much its emptiness is the condition for his access to his feelings and his inner life. Vacant, the thrones can evoke the imagined happy union of his parents, as they do when he stands between and links them with his hands, leaning on

them for support against his sorrow; or they can stand for the present, detested union of his mother and his uncle; or they can intimate his hopes for succession, and his fantasy of a closeness to his mother untroubled by Claudius's intrusion.

One function of the film's emphasis on emptiness, then, is to suggest the narcissistic dimension of Hamlet's Oedipal difficulties. He is often the sole inhabitant of a large unpeopled space, isolated and grandiose, but unable to sustain the conflicts that might lead to his finding a place in the sequence of generations. The empty furniture so prominent in the film also intimates that there is a way, although one closed to Hamlet, by which Oedipal tensions are normally resolved. Because the roles in the Oedipal situation are shifting, with sons becoming fathers in their turn, the Oedipus complex is normally terminated when the son identifies with the father and defers his wish for primacy until it can be satisfied in adulthood by a substitute love object of his own generation. Such a resolution requires, however, that empty chairs be occupied, vacant rooms possessed, and ambiguous meanings clarified. The vacancy of space in Elsinore, like the ambiguity of its symbols, is congenial to Hamlet, but prevents his succession to his father's rights. A symbolism that invests its signs with a meaning that is private, numinous, and unique may be the expression of a sensibility that cannot relinquish claims of uniqueness and transcendent value in the family.

A consideration of the player scene and its failure to resolve Hamlet's dilemma may make this relation between Olivier's stylistic choices and his Oedipal theme clearer, for it, too, offers us a vacancy or emptiness that seems pregnant with significance, although it proves impotent and self-enclosed. The sequence begins after the "To be or not to be" soliloquy. Hamlet sits in his chair—seen in a medium shot with his back to us—in a depressive, hand-in-chin posture. As Polonius announces to him the arrival of the players, he takes on his most joyous and elated mood. He holds this mood until his "Mousetrap" plot is fully laid, when he pirouettes wildly in the empty chamber—the council chamber which will now become the theater for the "Murder of Gonzago," confident that "the play's the thing." In his joyous, animated, and highly professional direction of the players, Hamlet's special chair shifts significance once again, becoming a meta-cinematic figure, standing for the director's chair which it resembles in its bare, crosslegged wooden outline. From this chair, Hamlet advises the players leaving it to impart specific instructions but then retiring back to it to address the whole company as its temporary leader. Hamlet has been an actor; now he is also a director. Thus, he doubles for Olivier himself, directing and starring in his own *Hamlet*.

The symbolic associations of the set become especially important in the player sequence. Hamlet's chair remains the director's chair, and one end of the immense council room is taken over as a theatrical space. As Hamlet completes his instructions, the props and costumes are moved behind the arras—now not the place behind which Hamlet is spied upon, but a tiring-house curtain or even, anachronistically, a theatrical curtain before which Hamlet stands in confident mastery, as if ready to deliver a prologue to the play that will unkennel his

uncle's guilt. This *mise-en-scène* climaxes the sequence between Hamlet and the players, and it is significant that this moment of mastery is, typically, presented with Hamlet alone in the empty chamber. During the preceding sequence, as Hamlet gains confidence that his theatrical ploy contains the solution to his real life difficulties, the camera has almost ignored the double thrones that symbolize Claudius's status in the family and in the state. Hamlet's own chair dominates the set. But at the moment of his greatest poise, when he seems to have subsumed the powers of the stage in his own person, confidently awaiting the arrival of the court, there is a dramatic cut to a reverse, low-angle shot from behind him. The juxtaposition of the two shots shows us that if from one point of view he is master of the revels, from the other he is still the hieratic son, standing humbly below the looming empty thrones that dominate the room even in Claudius's absence.

As in Olivier's life, the theatrical solution to the Oedipal dilemma is a dubious one, in which real mastery and narcissistic refuge are hard to distinguish. The visual treatment shows us that, despite its energy and liveliness, Hamlet's theatrical experiment is another attempt to people the empty spaces of Elsinore with a cast of his own devising. In contrast, though rooted in evil intentions, the use of the empty room by King Claudius represents a mature and powerful appreciation of the relativity and contingency of power and its dependence upon establishing the bonds of trust and alliance between fathers and sons.

Basil Sydney's Claudius, an uneasy yet powerful monarch in the early scenes, and an affecting failed penitent after the "Mousetrap," comes into his own as a character in the scenes with Laertes in the last half of the film, converting Laertes' rebellion into loyal alliance. The groundwork of this alliance is laid before Hamlet returns from his sea voyage, when Claudius simply asserts his personal authority to deflect Laertes' rebellious threats. This encounter is filmed in extreme long-shot, so that Laertes' murderous rage seems little more than a minor personal quarrel taking place in one corner of the castle, while the mad Ophelia, the real focus of our concern at this point, wanders poignantly distracted in another. By the time Laertes sees her, his anger against the king has already been defused. The opportunity for Claudius not merely to placate, but to use Laertes comes in the graveyard scene, where he assists Laertes in converting grief for a dead father into a commitment to revenge, succeeding where the Ghost had thus far failed.

As in the Council scene in the beginning of the film, so here the figure of Hamlet dominates the foreground, while the real nexus of power occupies a more modest part of the screen. As Hamlet realizes that Ophelia is to be buried in the fresh grave, he challenges Laertes: "What is he whose grief bears such an emphasis?/It is I, Hamlet the Dane." Here, Hamlet, his back to us, immense in our foreground perspective, his arms spread, looks sharply down from a hillock on the tiny figures of Laertes and the king, grouped around a stone cross at the grave. After the tumult of Hamlet's mad challenge and his leap into the grave, the significance of the king's quiet placement of himself in relation to the cross

and in relation to Laertes becomes clear. They are left alone on screen, Laertes kneeling in mourning, the king standing before the cross so that he insinuates himself in the place from which mourning is sanctified—an assertion of paternal power by *mise-en-scène* far more effective than his verbal attempts to occupy the same place for Hamlet in the first scene. Laertes' submission to his grief becomes, through this placement, an implicit submission to the king, to whom he also seems to kneel, so that when Claudius places a comforting hand on his shoulder and gestures him to rise, grief for the dead is replaced by acceptance of the Law, as embodied in the king. "Laertes, was your father dear to you, or are you like the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart?" The funeral, of course, is that of Ophelia, not Polonius, but it is the death of the father that is the motive for a revenge directed against Hamlet, and the basis for the symbolic bond of sonship to Claudius. It is this bond which, despite the many ironic parallels between Laertes and Hamlet, distinguishes Laertes, who can "do what is required of him" from Hamlet, who cannot.

Claudius, with fatherly concern, leads Laertes into the council chamber, on the way revealing to him candidly his own weaknesses and limitations—his dependence on the queen, which is unkingly, but which must be acknowledged, and his fear of an uprising in favor of the more popular Hamlet. He acknowledges his need for an alliance with the younger and more daring man. In the council chamber, exploring the possibilities of an attempt on Hamlet, he seats Laertes in Polonius's chair, while he himself takes one of the armless benches further down the table. In the symbolic tableau Olivier has provided, the potential double meanings in the king's speech reveal, not merely an ironic relation to Hamlet, but a complex and troubled self-understanding on the part of Claudius: "That we would do we should do when we would, for this 'would' changes, and hath abatements and delays" is delivered with the king in medium shot, his hand knowingly laid upon Hamlet's empty chair. It is not only a piece of advice to Laertes which brings to mind Hamlet's temperamental incapacity for action, but also an invocation (for us, not for Laertes), the king's own decisive but guilty act in pursuing his desires, an act to whose consequences he is still unhappily bound. In this context, Hamlet's chair again becomes for a moment the empty chair of the murdered king, from which the tragic action took its rise.

The special function of the Laertes-Claudius subplot in the film, then, is to offer an alternative within the world of the play to the way Hamlet conceives of the father-son relationship. Instead of abuse, there is comfort; instead of distance and idealization, there is human contact and admission of paternal weakness; instead of condemnation to empty spaces and imaginary relationships, the son is seated in his father's place by an authority that symbolically takes precedence over his father. For Laertes, the conflict between generations is stabilized. The death of the father provides the key to the resolution of Oedipal conflict. For Hamlet, however, the deceased father has become a ghost, compromising the son's autonomy and contributing, finally, to the tragic Oedipal resolution of refusion with the mother. The value of this normative succession from father to

son as an alternative to Hamlet's malaise is, however, negated by its origins in murder and its resort to treachery in the use of the poisoned foil. In a sense, the film's exploration of the father-son bond between Claudius and Laertes remains limited by Hamlet's perspective. The film offers an instance of psychological health, but one so morally compromised as to invite us to prefer Hamlet's deeply brooding Oedipal perfectionism.

Hamlet's "reconciliation" with Laertes before the fencing match is played so as to emphasize the unbridgeable distance between the two, Hamlet's exaggerated deference ("I'll be your foil, Laertes") masking contempt as does his patronizing apology for Polonius's death: "Did Hamlet wrong Laertes? Never Hamlet. Hamlet *denies* it. . . ." The mockery here is partly motivated by Hamlet's awareness that the positive relation to the father implied by the king's sponsorship of Laertes is closed to him. His challenge of the pretentious term *carriages*, which Osric uses for the thongs attaching the sword to the belt, likewise displays a rejection of manhood conceived as phallic competition. Hamlet understands the phallic symbolism of the rewards the king offers him for victory in the fencing match: "The word would be more germane to the matter if we might carry a *cannon* by our side: I would it might be 'hangers' till then—but on," the last two words spoken with a mocking lilt.

The contrast between Hamlet and Laertes is pressed home in Olivier's interpretation of the fatal touch. Laertes' weapon is, as we know, unbated and poisoned, and he is considered the better fencer, so that the king in order to make the wager credible has bet on Hamlet, but only with a substantial handicap as security. Nevertheless, Laertes cannot score a touch in fair combat, and it is only when trapped between the scornful disappointment in his manhood of Osric on one side and Claudius on the other that he strikes out during a time-out in violation of the rules—"Have at you *now*." The shame he feels when confronted with paternal disappointment is not unlike that which Hamlet has internalized, but it is momentary and calls forth instantaneous, mindless action.

There is a note of victory in the death scene that follows: in Olivier's version, though not in Shakespeare's, the queen drinks the poison knowingly and almost joyfully, defying the king and seizing on this opportunity for suicide as a kind of triumph in which she extricates herself from the king and affirms her union with Hamlet. The pattern of being cast down and reaching after the attacker with reproach and longing recurs here—Hamlet and Laertes, both dying, reach out for one another. And the motif of the extended hand now signals mutual forgiveness, and a recognition that "the king's to blame." The king himself, fatally wounded by Hamlet, repeats the gesture, but his reach is toward the crown he has lost and the lifeless queen. Olivier's fourteen-foot leap is the climax of the action, and a summative use of the staircase as a symbol of violence visited from above—a violence with which Hamlet now identifies himself. The leap exemplifies a pattern in Olivier's life and art in which the fear of passivity and indecision is allayed by a masculine daring which offers only an equivocal solution because of its association with self-destruction. It seems in place that for the final

act of this character, whose uniqueness is so much a part of both his pathology and his greatness, Olivier should have chosen an acrobatic move impossible to do over.⁵⁰

The film ends with an extended reference to the opening sequence: Hamlet's body is carried up the narrow, winding steps to the top of the central tower. On the way, the camera trails the procession, as if it were a mourner following the bearers, and as they ascend, it breaks off from their upward course several times to revisit for the last time the symbolic locales—Hamlet's chair, seen close-up in an upwardly spiralling camera movement, Ophelia's chamber, the chapel, and the queen's bed. But we recognize that there is no mind other than Hamlet's for whom these scenes will have the same importance. The brooding consciousness that gave meaning to these vacant spaces is absent. Death has changed the endless play of possibility to nullity, and we, as audience, have understood Olivier's Elsinore from a point of view so close to that of Hamlet himself that the loss of his central and animating consciousness is experienced as a loss of meaning. In this context, the final shot of the staircase to nowhere takes on its full value as an emblem of narcissistic self-enclosure: the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind is the tragedy of a self which, for reasons we are meant to feel as valid and powerful, cannot give up the illusion of its own centrality and uniqueness, cannot invest itself in a symbolic order based on filial succession and the substitution of objects, and for whom, therefore, death is the destruction not only of the physical self, but of the world of significances the self has sustained.

Olivier's film is thus firmly grounded in the Freud/Jones reading of *Hamlet*. It incorporates the central insights of that reading: the erotic treatment of the mother-son relationship, the attribution of Hamlet's delay to an implicit equation between usurper and would-be revenger, and the understanding of Hamlet's final "success" as a kind of self-destruction. But the tragic quality of the film, and its value as an interpretation of Shakespeare, derives at least as much from the director's exploration of aspects of the play's Oedipal theme that had special relevance to his own early life. The tragedy here is located in the failure of Hamlet's relation to his father, which leaves him with a sense of fundamental defect, uncertain boundaries, and a powerful impulse toward merger (an impulse evident in his identification with the invasive ghost early in the film and in his mystical bond with his mother later). Olivier's Hamlet displays both the greatness of spirit and the tragic waste of his gifts that Shakespeare's text calls for. He is vigorous, courageous, intellectually powerful, and ethically sensitive. But neither his mission nor his factitious Oedipal victory can supply a firm sense of worth, or provide a stable connection between this brilliant but isolated character and the human world around him. This *Hamlet*, unlike Freud's, is not a tragedy of guilt, but of the grandiose self and its unmet need for context and validation.

Notes

1. See, for example, John Ashworth, "Olivier, Freud and Hamlet," *Atlantic Monthly* 183 (May 1949): 30; Jay Halio, "Three Filmed Hamlets," *Literature/Film Quarterly*

- 1 (Fall 1973): 317; Bernice W. Kliman, "The Spiral of Influence: 'One Defect' in *Hamlet*," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1983): 159-66.
2. Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1982; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1984). Cited hereafter as *Confessions*.
3. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 4: 264-66. Cited hereafter as *S.E.*
4. "The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery," *The American Journal of Psychology* 21 (Jan. 1910); *Das Problem des Hamlet und der Oedipus-Komplex* (Leipzig and Vienna: F. Deuticke, 1911); *Essays in Applied Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1951; rpt. New York: International Universities Press, 1964), vol. 1, chap. 1; *Hamlet by William Shakespeare with a Psycho-analytical Study by Ernest Jones, M.D.* (London: Vision Press, 1947), 5-42 ["The Problem of Hamlet and the Oedipus Complex"]; *Hamlet and Oedipus* (London: V. Gollancz, 1949; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).
5. See Freud, *S.E.*, 17:6, 27-28, 35-36, 45-46; 19:3; Irving Bieber, *Homosexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 1962).
6. The current literature on narcissism and related issues is voluminous, but, see especially, Bela Grunberger, *Le narcissisme* (Paris: Payot, 1975); Otto Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1975) and *Internal World and External Reality* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1980); Heinz Kohut, *The Restoration of the Self* (New York: International Universities Press, 1977); Lynne Layton and Barbara Schapiro, eds., *Narcissism and the Text: Studies in Literature and the Psychology of Self* (New York: New York University Press, 1986).
7. Olivier, *Confessions*, 101-2.
8. *Ibid.*, 102.
9. *S.E.* 4: 265.
10. *Ibid.*, 4: 265.
11. "Hamlet at the Old Vic: Mr. Tyrone Guthrie's Production," *The Times* (London), 6 Jan. 1937, 8. See also Ivor Brown, "Old Vic *Hamlet* (in Full) by William Shakespeare," *The Observer*, 10 Jan. 1937, 15; "Hamlet in Full by William Shakespeare," *The Manchester Guardian*, 6 Jan. 1937.
12. Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus*, 88.
13. See John Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 89-90, 110, 113, 134-35, 308.
14. Olivier, *Confessions*, 152.
15. The most daring move in the theater came earlier, during the play scene, when, at the line, "Let the stricken deer go weep," Olivier leaped from the raised throne platform, a much lower height than the balcony in the film, to the stage, and rolled forward three times to the footlights (Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, 120). This more moderately acrobatic moment was one that could be repeated each night.
16. Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, 153.
17. Thomas Kiernan, *Sir Larry: The Life of Laurence Olivier* (New York: Times Books, 1981), 3-11.
18. Kiernan, *Sir Larry*, 11.
19. Grunberger offers a valuable account of the potential for narcissistic disorder in men whose mothers preferred them to their fathers as children. "Success" in Oedipal rivalry in such cases only serves to underscore physiological incapacity, thus creating a narcissistic trauma. See his discussion of "Jean" in *Le narcissisme*, chap. 1.
20. Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, 19.
21. Logan Gourlay, ed., *Olivier* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), 24.
22. Kiernan, *Sir Larry*, 22, citing *Saturday Review of Literature*, 13 Sept. 1946.

23. Olivier, *Confessions*, 14.
 24. *Ibid.*, 15.
 25. Kiernan, *Sir Larry*, 14, citing *The Sunday Times* (London), 16 Nov. 1953.
 26. Olivier, *Confessions*, 32.
 27. *Ibid.*, 34-35.
 28. *Ibid.*, 24.
 29. Freud, *S.E.* 14: 237-58.
 30. Olivier, *Confessions*, 31-32.
 31. *Ibid.*, 32.
 32. *Ibid.*, 85-86.
 33. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (New York: Methuen, 1982). The screenplay is printed in Alan Dent, ed., "*Hamlet*": *The Film and the Play* (London: World Film Publications, 1948). Citations of dialogue in the following pages are my own transcription from the film.
 34. This is perhaps the place to note that *Hamlet* was not the only play on which Olivier sought Ernest Jones's advice and adopted a psychoanalytic interpretation: Guthrie and Olivier spent two long evenings (Cottrell, *Laurence Olivier*, 133) with Jones before their 1938 Old Vic *Othello* with Ralph Richardson, and tried to insinuate Jones's theory that Iago was motivated by homosexuality into the production:

Tony Guthrie and I were swept away by Professor Jones's contention that Iago was subconsciously in love with Othello and had to destroy him. Unfortunately, there was not the slightest chance that Ralph would entertain this idea. I was, however, determined upon my wicked intentions, in cahoots with Tony; we constantly watched for occasions when our diagnosis might be made apparent to the audience, though I must say I have never yet discovered any means of divulging something that is definitely *subconscious* to any audience, no matter how discerning they may be. In a reckless moment during rehearsals I threw my arms around Ralph and kissed him fully on the lips. He coolly disengaged himself from my embrace, patted me gently on the back of the neck, and, more in sorrow than in anger, murmured, "There now, dear boy; *good boy*. . . ." Tony and I dropped all connivance after that. (Olivier, *Confessions*, 105)
- Olivier is far more ambivalent about the possibility of using psychoanalytic interpretations in the theater here than in discussing Jones's theories about *Hamlet*, of whose rightness he remained convinced. Perhaps the difference has to do with the directness with which the issue of homosexuality is raised: Olivier's Hamlet has a distinctly female side in many scenes, but Jones's theory did not require this, and in exploring this aspect of the character, the director did not have to resort to such explicit means to convey his interpretation. Even in playing his homosexual Iago, Olivier was thinking of Hamlet's passive relation to his father, for, of course, it is the ghost of Old Hamlet whose countenance is described by Horatio as more sorrowful than angry (1.2.231).
35. Olivier, *Confessions*, 80.
 36. *Ibid.*, 83.
 37. *Ibid.*, 82-83.
 38. Cottrell notes that the name appears in *Macbeth*, which Olivier was studying at the time (*Laurence Olivier*, 111n.). Macbeth thinks of "Tarquin's ravishing strides" as the visionary dagger conducts him to Duncan's chamber (5.1.55). The whole speech is relevant to the psychological issues raised by Freud and Jones in relation to *Hamlet*: Macbeth acknowledges the connection between his assault on the king and the impulses that arise in "wicked dreams," and the reference to Tarquin conflates rape and regicide. Unlike Hamlet, however, Macbeth is able, at great moral cost, to "do what is required of him." Both the psychological relevance of the passage to Olivier's

conflicted feelings about fatherhood and his habit in the *Confessions* of using phrases from Shakespeare drawn from rich and complexly relevant contexts should make us welcome Cottrell's suggestion: an actor internalizes a part in a deeper way than an ordinary reader.

39. Olivier, *Confessions*, 101.
40. *Ibid.*, 104.
41. *The Film "Hamlet: A Record of its Production*, ed. Brenda Cross (London: The Saturn Press, 1948), 12.
42. Olivier, *Confessions*, 15.
43. *Ibid.*, 15.
44. Cross, *The Film "Hamlet,"* 11.
45. The corner tower is the one upon which Hamlet will deliver the "To be or not to be" speech: its location gives point to the possibility of his suicide and to his inability to perform it as he drops his dagger into the sea; the surf crashing on the rocks manifests, metaphorically, the "sea of troubles" he cannot face as well as the annihilation that might "end them." The middle tower is similar in dimensions, but has no decorative crenellation: it is the perfectly flat top of a cylinder. It, too, comes to stand for annihilation, though of a different kind: the nothingness from which the ghost comes and into which he vanishes, the absence from which the film arises and the emptiness with which it ends.

In the first sequences of *Henry V*, the camera moves in on a model of sixteenth-century London, coming in close to one of two similar structures, then, as if correcting an error, moving to the second, which is the Globe Theater. The purpose of this device is to establish the camera as a fallible instrument, much as the theater itself is described in Shakespeare's text as a fallible and "unable" instrument in the prologue that is about to be spoken. In *Hamlet*, the similar hesitation between the sea-tower and the central tower may inscribe a Hamlet-like indecision in the narrative point of view—the story of a man who could not make up his mind will be one in which, visually, we cannot always locate ourselves quickly or unambiguously: furniture changes position, chairs are shifted, and we are not always sure which way, in the immense council hall in which much of the action takes place, the camera is facing. Some of the visual difficulties thus created were criticized in early reviews, but their relevance to the themes of the play was a matter of conscious strategy, as the designer, Roger Furse, makes clear:

In "Hamlet" I have taken liberties with the sets and am sure the audience will allow these liberties without quibbling about details of background. Art departments these days can imitate anything and produce real-life sets; but this seems to me missing an opportunity to create atmosphere. Distortions of actual scenery will not be resented mentally by an audience, but they will be sensed psychologically and will add to the dramatic effect of the film. Thus, in the Council Chamber scenes of "Hamlet," we have put our massive pillars on wheels and, for certain shots, have moved the pillars up and down the room. (Cross, *The Film "Hamlet,"* 36-37)

Apart from creating an appropriate sense of disorientation, wholly in accord with Shakespeare's *Elsinore*, in which sentries are challenged rather than challenge, and in which Sundays and weekdays, funerals and weddings have become difficult to distinguish, the confusion between the towers contributes powerfully to the effect of the final shot: Hamlet's body will not be cast into the sea, as it might have been from the corner tower, in fulfillment of the suicide meditation spoken there. In fact, there is nothing imaginable that can be done with it—the film just ends, at the highest and central point of the castle that has come to seem a mirror of Hamlet's troubled mind.

46. It is significant, too, that the ghost, as well as the main character, was played by the

director, with his voice played back at slower than normal speed. Olivier as director could find no Hamlet other than himself upon whom to impress his strong interpretation, and his Hamlet can, in some sense, find no father but himself. There is thus a self-generative, narcissistic cast to Olivier's treatment of the Oedipal material the text offers at this point.

47. J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 106.
48. Cross, *The Film "Hamlet,"* 12.
49. The council chamber staircase occupies a space that is basically theatrical, whereas the winding staircases that lead to the towers are treated in a more distinctively cinematic way (the proscenium stage offers limited access to the vertical dimension as compared with film). The layout of the council chamber in the film is very similar to the set of the 1937 Old Vic production (see photographs in Harvard University Theater Collection, Angus McBean File, *Hamlet, Old Vic, 1937*): a double staircase with a half turn gives access to a walkway some eight or ten feet above the floor. Details of the film's staging such as the use of this staircase, may well have derived from the Guthrie-Olivier collaboration on that earlier production. But the stage production cannot have invoked the flight upon flight repetition of narrow steps that is the film's dominant visual motif, through which the director makes his distinctive contribution to the interpretation of the play.
50. See note 15 for a discussion of the acrobatics required in the film version.