

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

April 2014 Vol. 5, Issue- 2

5th Year of Open Access

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The Interplay of Cinema and Theatre in the Shakespearean Trilogy of Lawrence Olivier

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William Shakespeare is arguably the best known name in literature and drama, the singular artist whose works have been the subject of constant scrutiny and innumerable re-workings. Subsequent artists have attempted to personalize Shakespeare's works, through techniques ranging from faithful translations and adaptations, to quirky offshoots, political responses and parodies. Mikhail Bakhtin cites Shakespeare as the quintessential example of a writer whose works transcend contemporaneity and exist in "great time, and...their lives there are more intense and fuller than their lives within their own time". (Bakhtin, 4) The vast body of work that has emerged taking Shakespeare as the starting point ensures that Shakespeare's body of work will never be outdated or outmoded.

Shakespeare's greatness, according to Bakhtin, lies in the fact that his works contain elements which reveal themselves in different ages- "The semantic treasures Shakespeare embedded in his works exist in concealed form, potentially, and are revealed only in semantic cultural contexts of subsequent epochs which are favorable for such disclosure." (Bakhtin, 5) For instance, the post-colonial potential of plays like *The Tempest* and the anti-Semitism in *The Merchant of Venice* had existed in Shakespeare's works but are only being recognized in a post-colonial and post-Holocaust context respectively. Moreover, Shakespeare's own works too, have been the product of extensive literary and cultural accumulation, and his plays have sources as varied as the Histories of Plutarch and folk-tales of popular culture. The Shakespearean canon is therefore a living, constantly evolving entity, which though celebrated, is nevertheless fraught with anxieties.

The primary anxiety in the appropriation of Shakespeare is the idea of Authorship. Michel Foucault, in his essay "What is an Author" had claimed that Authorship is only a construct, a symbolic authority conferred upon an individual. In this context, the massive amount of work done on Shakespeare is indicative of an overarching desire to partake in this authority that Shakespeare has been awarded with, to share his greatness, imitate him, even subvert his works. But the constant return to Shakespeare suggests that his works remain the central focal point, highlighting a deep-rooted anxiety about them. These works nevertheless occupy an important position within the Shakespearean canon, and have the ability to influence how Shakespeare's works are perceived.

Another major concern in Shakespeare adaptation is the effect of different media. Shakespeare's works have been appropriated across a multitude of art forms, ranging from literature to theatre, film, television and visual art. This has led to critical debates about the effects of such changes on the quality of Shakespeare's plays. The most predominant artistic medium which has appropriated Shakespeare in the twentieth century is cinema. With its universal accessibility,

technical innovation and massive economy, cinema is, as Walter Benjamin predicted in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, the quintessential modern medium. According to Benjamin, the cinematic medium, by virtue of its mass production and distance from the viewer, is antithetical to theatre, a concern which is voiced by many Shakespeare critics. Early responses to Shakespeare’s films have been generally unfavorable, focusing upon the differences between cinema and theatre. For instance, Graham Greene’s review in *The Spectator* claims that he was “less than ever convinced that there is an aesthetic justification of filming Shakespeare at all”.¹ A major cause of dissatisfaction amongst filmmakers was also the fact that Shakespeare films did not have a wide market, and for a large part of the early twentieth century, films on Shakespeare were relegated to the category of the art-house film. Russell Jackson, in his essay “From Play-script to Screenplay”, argues that the primary cause for such skepticism was the belief that cinema, with its overarching emphasis on the visual, and constraints of time, will compromise on Shakespeare’s language. Jackson claims- “the anxiety about the visual image usurping the spoken word’s legitimate function has often dominated commentary on filmed Shakespeare.” (Jackson, 24) Occupying the other end of the spectrum are Shakespeare scholars Jan Kott and Charles Marowitz, whose book *Roar of the Canon* has them boldly declaring that “the future of Shakespearean production lies in abandoning the written works of William Shakespeare and devising new works which are tangential to them, and the stronger and more obsessive the Shakespearean establishment becomes, the more it will hold back the flow of new dramatic possibilities which transcend what we call...the canon.” (Marowitz, 35)

This recreation of the canon depends, according to Kott and Marowitz, on those who create these “tangential” Shakespeares. The role of the artist is therefore of the utmost importance in any study of Shakespearean adaptations. Many artists have been extensively involved with the recreation of Shakespeare, like Orson Welles, Kenneth Branagh, Peter Hall and their own personalities and sensibilities have not only influenced their own adaptations, but has also left an indelible impression on the way Shakespeare is perceived. This paper attempts to explore the Shakespearean legacy of Sir Lawrence Olivier, the one artist whose contribution has been phenomenal in the reception of Shakespeare on the stage as well as the screen. Olivier’s versatility is evident in his sustained engagement with theatre, film and television, and his endeavors as a Shakespearean actor as well as director. This paper will attempt to examine the reciprocal dynamic of Olivier’s Shakespearean works, specifically the three films he directed, in relation to the aforementioned anxieties concerning adaptation: namely, the relation of the artist vis-à-vis Shakespeare, and the effects of different media on Shakespeare’s works and their implications.

The primary aspect of focus in an analysis of Olivier’s role in the Shakespearean canon would be to examine whether his work has been a contribution or a debt, or both. That Olivier owes his massive stardom to his early mastery of Shakespeare on stage is an assessment most critics agree on. It was post his success on the British stage that Olivier was able to make the transition to Hollywood, and his subsequent roles in blockbusters like *Rebecca* and *The Prince and the Showgirl* retain the powerful intensity he had developed playing Hamlet and Richard III on stage. Olivier began on the London stage as Katharina in *Taming of the Shrew*, giving early glimpses of his genius. He first found acclaim alternating the roles of Romeo and Mercutio alongside Sir John Gielgud for the Old Vic Theatre in 1935. His lifelong association with the British stage, and recurring performances of Shakespeare bear testimony to the actor’s immense

talent, as well as to the tremendous influence Shakespeare's works exerted on his art. On the other hand, Olivier was instrumental in the entry of Shakespeare into mainstream Hollywood. The excessive dependence of the cinematic medium on mass appeal and profits ensured the marginalization of early Shakespeare films. According to statistics provided by Jackson, Shakespearean productions of the silent-film era "were hardly a staple of the new and burgeoning cinema business: it was comedy, melodrama, the Western and the exotic romances which were considered bankable." (Jackson, 3) Even after the advent of the talkies, subsequent film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays failed commercially. Olivier's *As You Like It* too, directed by Peter Czinner and heavily publicizing Olivier's star status in Britain, though acclaimed did not make enough money. It was Olivier's 1944 film *Henry V*, his first directorial venture, which was the first Shakespeare adaptation to have bridged the chasm between critical acclaim and commercial success. Anthony Davies, in the essay "The Shakespeare Films of Lawrence Olivier" claims that critical assessments of Olivier's Shakespearean work, which seek to limit his influence to a particular period or mode of filmmaking are inadequate. "Olivier's Shakespeare films", he claims, "liberated Shakespeare's language and his dramatic energy from the confines of the theatre, the classroom, the lecture-hall and cultivated them in the public mind with an immediacy and to an extent that no other film-maker has ever equaled." (Davies, 180) With powerful performances, innovative picturization and a unique juxtaposition of the strengths of both theatre and cinema, Olivier managed to endear *Henry V* to an entirely new audience: those who went to the cinema for entertainment. The feature separating Shakespearean theatre and cinema was the intellectualism that had gradually been thrust upon the former. It is in the destruction of this binary that Olivier's genius lies. Olivier, like Shakespeare, combines the 'high' with the 'low', popular culture, juxtaposing Shakespeare's language with visual Technicolor extravagance. He recreated the universality of Shakespeare, no longer limiting him to the realm of 'high' art. This sentiment had also been voiced by Helen Fletcher, in her 1944 review of the film in the *Sunday Graphic*- "Through *Henry V*, Olivier has given Shakespeare back to the groundlings, to you and me, to the people he wanted to belong to."²

A debate usually generated by films on Shakespeare, or any other adaptation of a theatrical work onto the screen is about the relationship between the two media. Such a debate is unavoidable in the case of Olivier, whose films are marked by an overarching presence of the theatre. In another essay, "Shakespeare, Films and the Marketplace", Jackson argues that, "Films made from Shakespeare's plays exist at a meeting point between conflicting cultural assumptions, rival theories and practices of performance, and- at the most basic level- the uneasy and overlapping systems of theatre and cinema." (Jackson, 8) The cultural tensions that Jackson alludes to are the conflicts that occur when the Shakespearean play is displaced onto a particular socio-historical context. Elizabethan stage conventions necessitated the use of minimalist props and stage equipment. As a result, the stage was mostly bare, and the dramatic effect had to be created solely by performances by the actors, and the "suspension of disbelief" by the audience. Film, on the other hand, has the opportunity of creating virtually any backdrop, an aspect which has been considered both as an asset and a disadvantage. Elaborate settings have been used in Shakespeare adaptations to establish the context. This detail to the setting, considered dispensable during Shakespeare's time, has been according to Jackson, widely criticized as diverting from what should be the real focus: the plot and the language. Performance in theatre and film is also remarkably different. The spontaneity and interactiveness of theatre is not required in film, where, as Benjamin claims, an actor's role is "composed of many separate performances", being disconnected by camera cuts. (Benjamin, 8) Moreover, the intensity of theatrical performances

and tropes like soliloquys may seem unnatural and contrived on a film screen. There is, however, a dynamic, inter-textual framework which has been established between the two media, and any extreme position about their relationship is simplistic and reductive. As Jackson says, “It is as much of a mistake to ask whether film can do justice to Shakespeare’s plays as to reproach Shakespeare’s plays with being inappropriate material for film. Neither are stable entities, reducible to a simple set of definitions, but two bundles of techniques and opportunities that can be mixed together with more or less enjoyable opportunities.” (Jackson, 9) Olivier’s films are perfect examples of this, which manage to beautifully invoke the theatre, while making use of cinematic innovations.

The film which best highlights this aspect of Olivier’s cinema is *Henry V*. Released in 1944 during the midst of the Second World War, *Henry V* was created on a visibly nationalist ideology, to glorify the British Armed enterprise, through a recreation and celebration of the English victory over the French at Agincourt. Olivier’s equation of Shakespeare with English national history is significant, and is represented in the film’s use of the Shakespearean trope of meta-theatre. The beginning of the film presents the viewers with an aerial shot of Shakespeare’s London, gradually zooming in on the Globe Theatre, where the play *Henry V* is being staged. The camera then spans the inside of the theatre, where people of all classes begin to assemble and the play commences. The starting of this film is extremely inventive, and presents Olivier with the perfect platform for intertwining aspects of film and theatre. For instance, when the curtain (a decidedly theatrical prop) is raised and the Stage-Manager addresses the audience in the style of Elizabethan Stage-Managers, the camera suddenly zooms in on his face, pushing the theatre audience out of visibility, reminding the audience that they are, indeed, watching a film. This resonates what Andre Bazin had claimed in his book *What is Cinema*—“the screen is not a frame like that of a picture, but a mask which only allows part of the action to be seen.”³ By juxtaposing elements of theatre and cinema, Olivier seems to highlight the possibility of coexistence of the two, in a way which utilizes the strengths of both. For instance, the spatio-temporal transition that Olivier presents is a feature of cinema, achieved through the camera. The film continues to highlight other theatrical tropes as the movie progresses, for instance the audience is often shown, and their laughter heard at appropriate instances, which abruptly stops when the cinematic aspect of the film takes over. The setting is largely composed of the inside of the theatre, but outside shots, like the flag flying at the top of Globe Theatre and the waves in the sea are routinely shown, as reminders of cinema’s potential. While the first half of the movie is predominantly shot in a theatrical set, the battle scenes at Agincourt suddenly shift the scene outdoors, with long shots of vast countryside scattered with dead-bodies to illustrate the magnitude of battle, which shifts back to the stage as the battle ends. *Henry V* thus becomes, not only a tribute to England’s glorified history, but also of its theatre and cinema. Shakespeare here becomes synonymous with English history for Olivier, and he presents three different images of English society (the period of Henry V’s reign; the age of Shakespeare and the contemporary period of World War II with its cinematic developments) separated by the camera-frame but joined by a common heritage. The central focus of the film is on performance, especially Olivier’s. It is here that Olivier’s theatricality is most pronounced: Olivier’s mannerisms and dialogue delivery, especially in the scene where he courts Katharine, belong to the stage. His use of the theatrical frame in the movie can thus also serve the purpose of validating his own acting technique. Another interesting feature of Olivier’s adaptation has been the changes that he has made to the Shakespearean dialogue. Olivier has, for the most part retained the dialogue of Shakespeare’s play, but has shortened it drastically in order to shorten the play to acceptable

running-time. A crucial change that Olivier makes is to remove Henry's threat of "rape" in Harfleur. Olivier's deliberate removal of an unfavorable quality of Henry's is immensely criticized by later critics, especially the realist Kenneth Branagh, as presenting a biased, intentionally glorified view of Henry, deviating from Shakespeare's original intent and imposing his own nationalist politics upon the play. This anxiety about the adapter imposing his subjective interpretation highlights the conflicted authorship which underlies most adaptations. What we see in the film then, is Olivier's interpretation of Shakespeare's play. Such an approach highlights the dual concern that has plagued adaptation, but at the same time *Henry V*'s importance in the Shakespeare Canon cannot be denied. Countering such criticism of *Henry V*, Davies claims that he is not only providing British with a simplistic glorification of their martial history, but is presenting a far more complex ideology in the face of international calamity- "It is the union of England and France, and not the annexation of one by the other that Olivier aims to reveal as desirable, and as finally achieved." (Davies, 179) Indeed, the film's tremendous success in the United States indicates that its relevance wasn't limited to England, but like Shakespeare's works, had an element of universality in it.

Olivier's second Shakespeare film as director, *Hamlet*, is the one most fraught with conflicts of adaptation. Olivier's *Hamlet* is visibly interpretative, and focuses on the play's psychological potential, which is brought about through theatrical acting combined with cinematic picturization and symbolism. One of the most striking aspects of the film is its use of cinematic tropes like the creation of the set and the use of camera angles to highlight Hamlet's interiority. Olivier's setting reflects a combination of realist and expressionist traits, where the dark labyrinth of the Elsinore castle has been regarded as being the signifier of Hamlet's inner turmoil. That the setting is more than a mere backdrop is made evident by Olivier's choice of shooting the film in black-and-white in 1948, and in the way the camera is used to repeatedly capture the exterior as well as interior of the Castle from different distances and angles. The opening scene itself, with an aerial shot of Elsinore, which slowly comes into view through a dense fog, sets a tone of foreboding. Davies claims that "In *Hamlet*, Olivier not only appropriated the codes of German Expressionism, to make Elsinore with its narrow torturous passages, winding stairs and shadowy interiors an architecture of Hamlet's mind, but also those of the American Noir film of the 1940s". (Davies, 171) Olivier's influences thus, ranged from movements in American cinema to those in European literature and visual culture, emphasizing on an inter-textuality amongst these art forms. The film begins with Olivier's voice reciting a part of Hamlet's soliloquy, which is followed by the statement- "This is the tragedy of the man who could not make up his mind" while Hamlet's dead body is shown on the roof, carried by mourners, with Horatio standing beside them. The background score of tolling bells too, intensifies the grimness of the scene. This music is repeated when Marcellus tells Horatio- "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark", juxtaposing the physical landscape of Denmark with an internal corruption. The film thus begins by firmly establishing the approach it is going to take: by revealing Hamlet's 'hamartia' right at the outset, it prepares the audience for a particular response. It is this facet of Olivier's film: his privileging of a certain critical perspective, which complicates its position in relation to Shakespeare's play. There are several other changes which Olivier has made. While changes like turning Hamlet's soliloquies into internal musings seems like a cinematic necessity there are major changes like the doing away with the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (who have become subjects of intense focus in the later part of the twentieth century, especially after Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*). Olivier's main approach is psychoanalytical, as shown in the highly pronounced oedipal strain in the Hamlet-Gertrude

relationship. Jack Jorgens finds deeply symbolic elements in the film, calling it “an oedipal cinepoem”. (Jorgens, 217) Hamlet’s sword for instance, which he often raises but never uses, is seen as a symbol of phallic frustration, as are the pillars of the Elsinore tower. The repeated presence of Gertrude’s bed and Hamlet’s visible discomfort to her physical proximity are significant. The first banquet scene has Hamlet darting a quick glance at his mother’s bosom, as she bends to embrace him and the scene when Hamlet confronts his mother in her chamber has them kissing each other’s lips. Such overt symbolism thus seems like a superimposition of a particular interpretation. Yet, Olivier’s powerful performance as Hamlet is the film’s strongest point, and instead of a portraying Hamlet as a self-pitying brooder, Olivier invests Hamlet with mid-twentieth century heroic values of physical and mental strength and intensity. As Davies claims- “Olivier went far beyond the limits he would seem to have imposed on the play when he prefaced his film as ‘the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind’. His is a Hamlet of exceptional dignity and nobility who gives to everything he touches a significance and a meaning.” (Davies, 175) Perhaps the same could be said about Olivier, who has lent significance and meaning to Shakespeare for innumerable people.

Richard III, Olivier’s final Shakespearean directorial venture, also achieved favorable reviews, though it didn’t succeed commercially. *Richard III* was also the subject of an experiment in publicity, as it simultaneously released in theatres and on national television, which generated a viewership of forty to fifty million. This overwhelming statistic though, did not impress Olivier, who felt that television distorted many of the film’s crucial aspects and cut many scenes to make it suitable for family viewing. His statement in *The Times* reflects his attitude on the relation between television and cinema- “this film is not made for television, which calls for the creation of its own productions. The varying long-shot and close-up effects were almost lost on television screens. The impact of color was lost because only a few thousand sets in the U.S. could receive color.”⁴ It is interesting that Olivier had himself worked extensively for television, signifying that his opposition was not to the medium, but to the fact that its dynamics of functioning are different, highlighting an inter-textual tension between the two media. Like his previous films, *Richard III* also combines theatrical and cinematic conventions to create artistic ingenuity. And like *Henry V* and *Hamlet*, Olivier makes subtle changes into the script, which reflect his own cinematic sensibilities. The most visible change is in the characterization of Richard. Historically considered a cruel, deformed Machiavellian, in the film Richard is presented as an almost comic, though frighteningly cruel man, who is putting up a show for the audience. There is a self-reflexive charm in the way that Richard delivers his early monologues directly to the audience with sinister enjoyment. Richard, aware that his relation to the audience is mediated through the camera, always looks right into it while devising his plans, while in presence of other characters his dialogues are delivered in a more cinematic way. H.R. Coursen claims that it is this theatricality that is the definitive feature of Richard’s character, which ultimately withers in the absence of more roles to play- “Pretense is his identity- as he tells us from the first...he’s an outsider who makes his way in, but has nowhere to go from there, nothing to pretend” (Coursen, 100) Olivier lays a lot of emphasis on the development of other facets of Richard’s character, and every aspect of his personality- his deformity and limp; his ability to influence people; his excessive insecurity about his hunchback and his final desperation as his crown thrown off in the battlefield- is palpable. More than his two previous films, Olivier’s focus here is on spectacle. The setting is much grander than the theatre interiors of *Henry V* or the shadowy Castle in *Hamlet*.

The last Shakespearean film that Olivier acted in was *Othello* in 1965, where he portrays the moor. This film was even more visually theatrical, as Olivier used the same set on which the stage production for the National Theatre had been performed. In addition, Olivier worked on a number of stage and television productions, especially with his then wife Vivienne Leigh, with whom he collaborated on a number of international Shakespeare tours as the Head of the Old Vic and later of The National Theatre. Olivier's Shakespearean endeavors were thus a product of his artistic sensibilities, as well as his professional and personal experiences. He therefore brings to Shakespeare an ingenuity that cannot be adequately categorized.

Olivier thus, has been a central figure in twentieth century adaptations of Shakespeare, one whose involvement has revolutionized Shakespearean re-workings on the stage as well as the screen, without which any comprehensive study of Shakespeare is now incomplete. Olivier's works, though they deviate from the Shakespearean plays at certain crucial junctures, ultimately function in reaffirming the greatest aspect of Shakespeare- the adaptability of his works. As Marowitz states- "what is essential in the better works of Shakespeare is an imagery-cum-mythology which has separated itself from the written word and can be dealt with by artists in isolation from the plays that gave it birth." (Marowitz, 35) It is in recreating this imagery in a manner distinctly his own that Olivier's greatness lies, which highlights the tremendous potential that Shakespeare adaptation holds.

Notes:

1. Taken from Russell Jackson, "From Play-Script to Screenplay". *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 21. Print.
2. Taken from Anthony Davies, "The Shakespeare Films of Lawrence Olivier". *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 165. Print.
3. Taken from Jackson, 24.
4. Taken from Davies, 177.

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