

## Notes for Watching Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948)

To what extent is Olivier adapting *Hamlet* as a film rather than staging a play on film? Are there theatrical elements in his film?

### **Olivier's interpretation:**

Olivier stresses Hamlet's psychology, particularly his Oedipus Complex. As a result, he eliminates most political meanings; cuts Fortinbras, Voltimand and Cornelius, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; downplays Hamlet's concern with honor, fame, reputation; and emphasizes Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude.

Olivier makes his psychological interpretation clear from the beginning: After the opening credits, Olivier reads the slightly cut speech about a personal defect (I.4.23-36); the text appears against shifting fog (why use fog?). Olivier then announces, "This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind."

### **Additions:**

Flashback of King Hamlet's murder, mime of Hamlet in Ophelia's closet, the presentation of Ophelia's death and Hamlet's sea battle with the pirates

### **Setting:**

The castle is vast and imprisoning. Often it is unrealistic, particularly in some long shots.

Shadowy, labyrinth-like hallways and winding stairs reflect Hamlet's confusion and his point of view. Rooms, halls, stairs are generally empty, except for the court scenes.

Hamlet's chair, the King's throne, and the Queen's throne are often empty. The old King and the old order are gone.

Only essential furniture is used; there is a sense of barrenness.

The sets are unstable; furniture sometimes changes position from one scene to another, as do the huge columns, which are on wheels. The position of the lights may change in the same scene. Thus perspective is sometimes unclear in the great hall, reflecting the theme of appearance and reality.

The mist and fog of the battlements and lighting effects create a sinister, mysterious feeling and parallel the theme of appearance and reality (what is real?). The fog feels alive and at times completely envelops the Ghost, representing his being otherworldly; the other actors are mainly in clearings surrounded by fog or seen through a very light mist.

In the prayer scene (III.3), Hamlet is stopped by a statue of Christ in the foreground; the religious image echoes Hamlet's holding his sword as a cross before him as he follows the Ghost in Act I.

As Hamlet rants over Ophelia's grave, Claudius is on the other side of the grave, separate from everyone else; he is in the foreground with his back to us (V.1).

At the end, Hamlet is positioned on a height several times: after the duel, when he leaps on to the King; as king, when he stands by the thrones and the other actors kneel; and with his funeral procession, which ends on the tower.

### **Camera:**

Deep focus shots are used consistently; one effect is to show Hamlet's alienation.

Long shots and high angle shots (looking down) reinforce the powerlessness and vulnerability of people in this corrupt court.

The camera moves often, with panning and/or tracking shots. (Some critics complain it is too active.) Shots tend to be longer than usual in a movie; there are few quick cuts; one use of quick cuts occurs when Horatio and Barnardo cry out, after the Ghost disappears, “‘Tis here!” (I.1 )

Panning from one room to another emphasizes the size of the sets/Elsinore.

The movie opens with a long overhead shot of Elsinore and Hamlet’s body surrounded by soldiers and Horatio, then dissolves into a flashback. The movie ends with Hamlet’s funeral procession climbing a steep staircase, elevating Hamlet to the highest point in the castle. Stairs are repeatedly associated with Hamlet’s father and revenge.

After the opening dissolve, the camera swings down stairs, through corridors, various rooms, to linger over Gertrude’s bed, which is a focal point of Olivier’s interpretation (several critics describe the bed as vaginally hooded). The camera abruptly cuts to Claudius drinking (I.2). Gertrude first appears with her back partially to us, leaning toward Claudius. Notice the interplay between them—his kissing her hand, her leaning toward him throughout the scene, the way they look at each other.

Hamlet first appears in the foreground, slightly off center, looking at nobody; the deep focus leads the eye down the table to Claudius at the other end of the room; Hamlet is balanced by Laertes at the far right. Everyone is looking at Hamlet.

How does the King react to Gertrude’s kissing Hamlet? Does he jealously re-possess her?

The court leaving the hall in Act I is shot from a high angle, emphasizing Hamlet’s isolation and powerlessness. While “speaking” (voiceover) the “Too sullied/solid flesh” soliloquy, Hamlet wanders around the empty thrones and balances himself between the royal couple’s thrones.

In deep focus, Hamlet watches from a height Polonius telling the King and Queen of his plan to spy on Hamlet using Ophelia (III.1). Does this mean he knows their plot to use Ophelia?

Also in deep focus, Hamlet sees Ophelia in the distance standing framed by light in an arch; then the camera, still using deep focus, swings to Ophelia’s point of view of Hamlet in his chair in darkness. Does this use of light and dark contribute to characterizing Hamlet and Ophelia?

In the nunnery scene (III.1), Hamlet looks at the arras several times, suggesting he knows Polonius is hiding there. After he throws her down on the steps, the camera looks down on her, pulls back from her, her hand outstretched after Hamlet, as his hand is after the Ghost in his mother’s bedroom. While Ophelia sobs on the stairs, Hamlet silently expresses his love by gently lifting a lock of her hair and kissing it. As the camera moves up with Hamlet to a shot of the cloudy sky and a turbulent sea, Hamlet begins his “To be” speech. His speaking it *after* the confrontation with Ophelia (rather than *before*, as in the play) makes it, at least in part, a reaction to his rejection by Ophelia.

During *The Mousetrap* performance (III.2), the camera shoots the players from the left side and focuses on them while moving in a semicircle around the room. When the camera is directly in front of the players, the acted murder is framed to the left and right by Claudius and Gertrude, their backs to us. The camera circles behind the thrones, with close shots of the King and Queen’s reactions.

In the prayer scene, Claudius turns his hand out in an extreme closeup, just his brother’s hand turned over, palm up, in the flashback of the murder (III.3).

When the Ghost appears in Gertrude’s bedroom, the camera looks down on Hamlet on the floor and Gertrude on the bed (III.4). The camera focuses on Hamlet with the Ghost in the doorway; then swings to Gertrude and no Ghost in the doorway; the camera is the equivalent to the point of view of the characters. Is their parting kiss a mother-son kiss or a lovers’ kiss? The scene ends with a long shot lingering on Gertrude sitting on the bed.

In the conversation about Claudius's sending Hamlet to England, an extreme close-up shows Claudius's hands convulsed in a strangling motion (IV.3).

After Ophelia's first mad appearance, an alienation between Gertrude and Claudius is suggested by Gertrude's turning away from him after Ophelia leaves; she also pulls away from his embrace and they read Hamlet's letters on and leave by different staircases in a long shot (IV.5).

In her second mad appearance, Ophelia puts a flower on Hamlet's empty chair and says that's for you, love. The camera lingers on Hamlet's empty chair as she moves away. She leaves the room in a long shot of a succession of arches leading outdoors. Then the camera follows through her room to a stream with overhanging vegetation and Ophelia floating, to Gertrude's voice over and truncated speech describing her death (IV.7). A cross appears upon the stream, the background fades, and the cross becomes a grave marker in the graveyard scene (V.1). Many of the tombstones lean in different directions, reflecting disorder.

### **Lighting:**

Shadows reflect Hamlet's disturbed emotions and mind and the corruption of Claudius and his court. The black dissolves between scenes support the sense of evil, of moral corruption. The interplay of shadow and light creates a remarkable depth in the image.

As Hamlet moves toward the stairs to his mother's bedroom, he moves out of shadow into bright light; as he climbs, the light narrows to a diagonal band, with black shadow above and below the band, making a harsh contrast of light and dark. The steep stairs jut in rugged outline, with only the edges lighted. The band of light narrows as he climbs, and Hamlet disappears into darkness at a bend in the stairs. This type of images comes from film noir.

The prayer scene begins with Claudius barely visible in the darkness. It ends with Claudius's left hand emerging from the dark to be lit, so that both his murderer's hands are lighted.

A quick shot shows Hamlet's shadow ominously approaching his mother's bedroom.

As Laertes offers to poison his sword, the camera pulls away for a long shot of them and Laertes' voice is softer; the two look physically small and are morally small (IV.7). Leaving the graveyard, Laertes stands temporarily in light, before walking through the arch into blackness, a visual representation of his agreeing to Claudius's dishonorable plot (V.1)

### **Frames:**

Generally, closed frames reinforce the sense of a claustrophobic and confining world, and open frames suggest freedom to act.

Hamlet praises Horatio's loyalty and friendship as they stand on either side of an arch—and the frame of the image—with a view of clouds and landscape (III.ii).

After Osric leaves, Hamlet and Laertes stand on either side of the frame; between them, in a deep shot, stand the empty thrones.

Gertrude twice gives the poisoned cup a long look; does she drink the cup knowing it's poisoned?

### **Sound:**

William Walton wrote the music specifically to parallel and express the action and characterization. Ophelia has a theme, sometimes played by oboes. Hamlet too has a theme, which is heard in the opening and closing scenes (while his body is carried up the stairs) and as he comes down the steps for the duel.

The Ghost appears to the sound of heartbeats and a downward focus of the camera (note how the parallel-pointing spears of Marcellus and Bernardo frame the Ghost at his first appearance). The

focus of Marcellus's face and Hamlet's face pulsates in and out of focus with the heartbeats. Heartbeats also announce his appearance to Hamlet in Act I and in Gertrude's bedroom in Act III.

**Costumes:**

Gertrude's gowns are low cut, suggesting her sexuality. Hamlet's unvarying black needs no comment. Claudius's garments are particularly luxurious and complex.

Ophelia is modestly dressed in white, but when she goes mad, her light-colored gown exposes her breasts.

**Make-up:**

Both Olivier and Simons are blonde for this movie.

**Theatricality**

Some critics have objected to some business in the movie as too theatrical, i.e., the action is performed as on a stage, using theatrical conventions, rather than adapted to a movie. For instance, Hamlet several times falls to the floor, and Ophelia remains on the floor and reaches out after Hamlet, and Hamlet runs through a corridor to the king's dais, pirouettes, and cries, "The play's the thing."