JAMES HIRSH

To Take Arms against a Sea of Anomalies: Laurence Olivier's Film Adaptation of Act Three, Scene One of *Hamlet*

Act Three, scene one of *Hamlet* presents serious difficulties for post-Renaissance stage and film directors. This scene contains both the "To be, or not to be" speech and the so-called "nunnery scene" which, despite its name, does not constitute a separate scene. Indeed, the chief problem faced by modern directors is precisely the fact that these passages are part of a single continuous episode. Hamlet delivers his famous speech in the presence of three other characters, two in hiding and one in full view. In the original staging of the episode, the elements of the scene that now seem unrelated were very tightly integrated. When the play was revived in the Restoration period, the staging of the episode was changed, and this adaptation completely supplanted the

original staging. But the post-Renaissance version of the episode created a number of glaring anomalies. Stage and film directors have devised an array of strategies to eliminate or obscure these anomalies. In his 1948 film version, Laurence Olivier employed traditional as well as new, specifically cinematic devices to accomplish this task. In order to explain why Olivier made these adaptations, it will be necessary to analyze in some detail the original design of the scene in Shakespeare's play, particularly as that design has been obscured by later theatrical and critical traditions. This analysis may seem tactless, but there is no tactful way of pointing out that the Emperor has no clothes.

As the evidence will show and as I have argued elsewhere,[1] the "To be" speech was designed to be understood by playgoers in Shakespeare's theatre as a feigned soliloquy, spoken by Hamlet to mislead Ophelia, her father, and ultimately the King about what is on his mind. For example, a moment before Hamlet enters, the King tells Gertrude, "We have closely sent for Hamlet hither."(3.1.29)[2] The obvious implications of this line have been ignored ever since the late seventeenth century. Everywhere else in the play Hamlet is consumed by hatred for the King, and Hamlet has come to suspect him of having murdered Hamlet's father. The notion that Hamlet arrives at the location to which he has been summoned by his hated enemy but fails to be alert and on his guard is absurd. What Hamlet finds at this location is Ophelia, walking about and nervously pretending to read a book. Elsewhere in the play Hamlet is portrayed as both very intelligent and highly suspicious. Hamlet would have to be both obtuse and naive if he assumed that Ophelia's presence in the location to which his enemy has summoned him is a mere coincidence. In the immediately preceding scene (2.2), Hamlet quickly deduced that his former friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, had been enlisted into the camp of Hamlet's enemy.

When they were momentarily evasive about whether they were "sent for" (261), Hamlet apostrophised them in an aside, "Nay, then I have an eye of you" (275). In the very next scene when Hamlet finds Ophelia at the location to which he has been sent by his hated uncle, it is obvious that his former sweetheart has likewise been enlisted, presumably by her father, the King's chief henchman. As Hamlet well knows, Polonius is extremely meddlesome. Polonius would certainly not rely on his young daughter's *ex post facto* account of her meeting with Hamlet, so it is also obvious that Polonius is eavesdropping.

But the situation provides an opportunity for Hamlet to turn the tables on the agents of his enemy. Hamlet pretends to give them precisely what they have been seeking, a reliable account of what is troubling him. He pretends to speak to himself but actually allows Ophelia and her presumably eavesdropping father to overhear his words. In his feigned soliloquy Hamlet puts on exactly the same disposition that he put on in his encounter with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as soon as he concluded that *they* were agents of his enemy. He here continues the pretense that his odd behaviour is the result merely of temperamental melancholy. In the preceding scene he told the agents of his enemy that he has lost all his "mirth" (280) and regards the earth as a "sterile promontory" (282-83). In the present scene he allows the agents of his enemy to overhear a supposedly self-directed and hence sincere speech in which he declares that to him life is a "sea of troubles" (59). Hamlet also takes this opportunity to counteract a possibility that was earlier a matter of his deepest concern. In Act One, scene five Hamlet was in a state of hysteria as he swore his companions to secrecy about the Ghost. But Hamlet cannot be sure that they have kept their oaths, nor can he be sure that these men are the only inhabitants of the castle to have seen the Ghost. If a report that the Ghost of Hamlet's father has reached the ears of the King, the King

would suspect that old Hamlet has returned to inform young Hamlet of the murder. Therefore, Hamlet includes in his feigned soliloquy an expression of an unequivocal disbelief in ghosts. He refers in passing to death as "The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns" (79-80). Hamlet also attempts to lull Claudius into a false sense of security by declaring himself incapable of taking action. The speech is eloquent and thus dramatises the profound and profoundly disturbing fact that there is no necessary correlation between eloquence and sincerity. After thus attempting to mislead the agents of his enemy by means of a feigned soliloquy, Hamlet then tries to create the impression that only now does he notice the presence of Ophelia. He pretends to speak to himself in an aside but still allows the others present to hear his words when he says, "Soft you, now, the fair Ophelia" (88-89).

Shortly after he begins to speak with his former sweetheart, however, Hamlet loses his composure. She returns his gifts with the well-turned aphorism, presumably scripted by her father, "Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind" (101). This arouses Hamlet's outrage. It was Ophelia after all, not Hamlet, who broke off their relationship, and at this very moment she is acting as an agent of his enemy, yet *she* has the effrontery to call *him* "unkind." Even though it undermines the deception he has just perpetrated, Hamlet cannot prevent himself from implicitly calling attention to her current participation in an eavesdropping plot against him. In the course of a diatribe, he abruptly asks her, "Where's your father?" (3.1.126) and thereby forces "the fair Ophelia" to come up with an embarrassing lie, "At home, my lord" (127).[3]

Plentiful external evidence also points to the validity of this account of the episode. Shakespeare often constructed elaborate eavesdropping episodes, many involving overheard soliloquies,[4] some involving eavesdroppers being misled,[5] some involving feigned soliloquies,[6]

and some requiring playgoers to deduce what is occurring simply on the basis of the dramatic context.[7] The Renaissance was the great age of eavesdropping in drama. Many other playwrights of the period created intricate and imaginative eavesdropping episodes. The "To be" speech is also one of countless episodes in Shakespeare's works that dramatise the disturbing fact that eloquence can be employed to mislead or deceive listeners.

The staging of the "To be" episode was radically changed when the play was revived in the Restoration period after an eighteen-year lapse in theatrical activity because of the English Civil War and Puritan rule. The leading actor in the revival was Thomas Betterton, whose major claim to fame, according to Colley Cibber, was his talent for "harmonious elocution."[8] The eloquence of the "To be" passage provided a magnificent opportunity for Betterton to show off this talent, but only if it was presented as a sincere speech. Betterton's performance as Hamlet was lavishly praised. Singled out for particular praise by Samuel Pepys and others was Betterton's rendition of the "To be" speech as a sincere expression of Hamlet's feelings.[9]

Many impediments have prevented the recovery of the seemingly obvious implications of the episode. One is the widely held post-Renaissance sentimental view of the character of Hamlet. Although Hamlet takes great pride in his cunning deception that brings about the deaths of his two hapless former friends, the notion that the eloquent "To be" speech is also a deception would have been unthinkable to Horatio-like admirers of the sweet prince. Another impediment is that no later age has shared the Renaissance love of elaborate eavesdropping episodes. The very fame of the speech is yet another impediment. It was Betterton's performance of the speech as a sincere expression of Hamlet's deepest feelings that made the passage famous, and in that guise it eventually became the most famous passage in world literature. Like the purloined letter, the

original dramatic function of the "To be" speech has been concealed by the very visibility of the passage. Since the age of Betterton, no one in his right mind would suggest that Shakespeare designed the most famous passage in world literature as a stratagem on the part of the character who speaks the lines.

The transformation of the "To be" speech from a feigned soliloquy to an opportunity for harmonious elocution, however, created a large number of glaring anomalies, including the following: (One) The post-Renaissance Hamlet arrives at the spot to which he has been summoned by his deadly enemy but does not bother to look around and thereby fails to notice the presence of Ophelia, who has been instructed by her father to keep in motion in this spot so as to attract Hamlet's attention as soon as he arrives. (Two) The post-Renaissance Hamlet decides to speak to himself about abstract philosophical issues in the location to which he has been summoned by his deadly enemy. (Three) This utterly impersonal speech, in which Hamlet never once uses a first-person singular pronoun, is radically different from all of Hamlet's genuine soliloquies, in which he is utterly absorbed by his personal situation. In his long list of the calamities of life, for instance, he does not bother to mention either of the two particular calamities with which he has been obsessed, the hasty remarriage of his mother to his uncle and the suspected murder of his father by that same uncle. (Four) At the very end of his immediately preceding appearance at the very end of the immediately preceding scene, Hamlet exuberantly declared, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (2.2.557-58). But now in his very next speech, the post-Renaissance Hamlet sincerely declares himself incapable of "enterprises of great pitch and moment" (3.1.86) without even bothering to mention that he has thus abandoned his enterprise to prove that the present King murdered his father. (Five) The post-

Renaissance Hamlet has had the memorable experience of encountering what seems to be the ghost of his own father but now states unequivocally that death is the "undiscover'd country from whose bourn / No traveler returns." (Six) Although the post-Renaissance Hamlet has no suspicion that there may be eavesdroppers in the place to which he has been summoned by his deadly enemy, in the middle of his dialogue with Ophelia, he incongruously asks her about her father's whereabouts. (Seven) In the very next scene (3.2) the post-Renaissance Hamlet exuberantly resumes his plan for catching the conscience of the King without expressing relief that he has now miraculously recovered from his temporary abandonment of enterprises of great pitch and moment in the preceding scene. (Eight) The post-Renaissance view of the episode entails the assumption that Shakespeare clumsily inserted a long, incongruous expression of Hamlet's innermost thoughts into the middle of an elaborate eavesdropping episode. (Nine) The post-Renaissance view entails the assumption that no one in Shakespeare's company noticed these anomalies or cared enough to get Shakespeare to make changes. The history of commentary on this scene is a history of ignoring or summarily dismissing these anomalies. The performance history of the scene is a history of makeshift attempts to eliminate or obscure these anomalies that were created by Betterton's transformation of the "To be" speech from a feigned soliloquy to a sincere expression of Hamlet's innermost thoughts.

In his 1948 film adaptation, Laurence Olivier took arms against several of the anomalies by radically rearranging the sequence of events. He transposed the "To be" passage and the nunnery passage. The "To be" passage thus no longer occurs in the midst of an eavesdropping episode. And as Jack Jorgens has noted, the painfulness of Hamlet's encounter with Ophelia during the nunnery episode now provides a rationale for the suicidal melancholy Hamlet expresses in his

subsequent "To be" speech.[10] Olivier also relocated the arrival of the players. Instead of occurring before the "To be" passage, it now comes afterwards and thus eliminates two incongruities: Hamlet's radical and unmotivated change from excitement about the plan to catch the conscience of the King to a total rejection of action along with complete amnesia about his abandoned plan of action; and then his radical and unmotivated change to renewed excitement about the plan and complete amnesia about his temporary abandonment of action. In Olivier's film Hamlet does not devise the plan to catch the conscience of the King until after the "To be" monologue. Olivier's film skips directly to the nunnery episode from an exchange between Hamlet and Polonius that occurs early in Act Two, scene two of the play. Some filmgoers familiar with the play may be shocked at the apparent omission of the "To be" speech and then relieved when it shows up at a later point. The film version of Act Three, scene one begins with a shot of Ophelia, approaching from the end of a long corridor. After she crosses the large lobby of the castle toward the camera, an arm is thrust into the frame, and we hear Polonius say, "Read on this book" (44). We then see Polonius and Claudius take their places behind the arras.

Because Olivier has removed the "To be" speech from the eavesdropping episode into which Shakespeare unaccountably inserted it, Hamlet can now exhibit suspicion about the presence of eavesdroppers from the moment he enters without bringing into question the sincerity of that speech. But Olivier also eliminated the first forty two lines of Act Three, scene one, including Claudius's line, "We have closely sent for Hamlet hither," so Olivier had to find another way to imply that Hamlet suspects the presence of eavesdroppers. Olivier adopted a manoeuvre apparently invented by Herbert Beerbohm Tree for an 1892 stage production.[11] In the film Hamlet overhears Polonius's initial presentation of the eavesdropping plan to the King and Queen in Act

Two, scene two, although in no early text of the play is Hamlet on stage at the time. Thus, when Olivier's Hamlet arrives, he immediately sees Ophelia, carefully surveys the area, looks down a side corridor, and slyly touches the arras, the only likely hiding place for eavesdroppers. Only then does he address Ophelia. When she employs an aphorism to accuse him of being "unkind," he looks back at the arras and thus indicates his recognition that the remark was composed for her by her father. Just before he asks her, "Where's your father?" he once again looks at the arras. In response to her blatant lie, Hamlet loses control, shouts, struts about, and eventually manhandles Ophelia. As she lies weeping on the stairs, however, he tenderly presses some strands of her hair to his lips.[12] He then leaves her and races up the steps.[13]

The camera follows the route taken by Hamlet up the winding stairs to the tower, while the music on the soundtrack becomes increasingly frantic. When the camera reaches the tower platform, it peers over the edge and down to the crashing waves far below.[14] According to Roger Furse, the set designer, this locale was constructed to seem especially perilous by the lack of any wall on the perimeter of the tower platform.[15] A self-destructive or careless person could simply walk off the edge to his death. The frantic soundtrack and perilous setting confer relevance on Hamlet's subsequent consideration of suicide in the "To be" passage. He has presumably raced up to the tower after his traumatic encounter with Ophelia in order to throw himself to his death. Another feature of this setting that radically differentiates the film from the play is the extreme privacy of the tower. In the play Hamlet speaks the "To be" passage with three other characters within earshot, one of whom is in full view. In the film version, Hamlet is not merely alone but has fled to the most isolated locale in Elsinore.[16] Once the locale and its implications have been vividly established, filmgoers are shown the back of Hamlet's head which is then briefly replaced

on screen by the startling image of a human brain. It is at this point that we hear the famous words "To be, or not to be" spoken by Olivier in a voice-over as an interior monologue. In two different ways Olivier has thus made literal the post-Renaissance cliché that this speech represents Hamlet's "innermost thoughts."[17] A moment later, Hamlet does speak some of the lines, and the remainder of the words alternate between speech and voice-over interior monologue. When Olivier says the words "end them" (3.1.59), he takes out a dagger to add to the impression that Hamlet is genuinely suicidal.[18] Apparently in order to make certain his suicide attempt succeeds, Olivier's Hamlet plans to stab himself as he falls from the tower to the rocks below. In contemplating death, Hamlet slips into a trance-like state, exhibited by languid speech and a reclining pose.[19] He momentarily closes his eyes. But he breaks out of this trance when he considers the possibility of life after death—"perchance to dream" (65). Deterred from suicide, Hamlet loosens his grip on the dagger, which falls from his hand to the crashing waves below.[20] He eventually rises, turns away from the precipice, and walks toward the stairs and into the fog.[21]

Despite Olivier's best efforts, his film adaptation still retains conspicuous anomalies that cannot be eliminated as long as the "To be" passage is treated as anything other than a feigned soliloquy. The anomalous impersonality of the speech remains. It does not make sense that a man who had sworn to revenge his father's murder would fail to mention this particular enterprise in the process of concluding that he is incapable of action. Nor does it make sense that someone who has encountered a spirit that looks exactly like his dead father would assert unequivocally that death is: "The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns." The ghost of Thomas Betterton's transformation of the "To be" passage from a feigned soliloquy into a grand opportunity for "harmonious elocution" haunts Olivier's film, as it has haunted the entire critical

and performance history of the play since Betterton's time.

Notes

1. James Hirsh, "The 'To be, or not to be' Scene and the Conventions of Shakespearean Drama," *Modern Language Quarterly* 42 (1981): 115-36; and "Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies," *Modern Language Quarterly* 58 (1997): 1-26.

2. *Hamlet*, ed. Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

3. Even the garbled version of the play in Q1 clearly indicates that the "To be" speech was meant to be feigned. Hamlet shows his awareness of the eavesdroppers by asking "Ofelia," "Wher's thy father?" (895). Hamlet expresses an utter disbelief in ghosts when he refers to death: "From whence no passenger euer retur'nd" (841). Earlier in Q1 Hamlet expresses his intention "To put an Anticke disposition on" (629) presumably whenever an agent of Claudius or Claudius himself is within earshot. Although at the point in Q1 when Hamlet speaks the "To be" passage he has not yet devised his plan to trick the King into revealing his guilt, Hamlet still has a strong motive for misleading the King about his frame of mind. Passages from Q1 quoted above can be found in *The Three-Text Hamlet: Parallel Texts of the First and Second Quartos and First Folio*, ed. Paul Bertram and Bernice W. Kliman (NewYork: AMS, 1991).

4. For example, Romeo overhears Juliet in the balcony scene (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.2); three characters overhear Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* 2.5; Falstaff overhears Hal in *Henry IV, Part One* 5.4; two characters overhear Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene (*Macbeth* 5.1). Characters report soliloquies that were overheard off-stage, for example, in *As You Like It* 2.1 and *All's Well That Ends Well* 1.3. A great many more examples from all genres and all periods of Shakespeare's career can be found in the essays cited in note 1.

5. For example, Benedick by Don Pedro and others in *Much Ado about Nothing* 2.3; Beatrice by Hero and others in the next scene; and Othello by Iago in *Othello* 4.1.

6. For example, Edmund misleads his brother about his frame of mind in *King Lear* 2.1; and Iago deceives Othello about his frame of mind in *Othello* 3.3.

7. For example, in 3.3 of *Othello*, when Iago and Othello enter and observe Cassio depart from Desdemona and Emilia, Iago says, "Ha, I like not that" (35). *Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Iago here pretends to speak to himself but actually allows Othello to hear his words in order to deceive Othello about his frame of mind. Iago does not explain his tactic in a genuine aside. Shakespeare depends entirely on the ability of playgoers to understand Iago's tactic merely on the basis of the general dramatic context.

8. Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Written by Himself*, ed. Robert W. Lowe, 2 vols. (London: Nimmo, 1889), 1:105.

9. See *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Lanham and William Matthews (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 5:320.

10. Jack J. Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 208.

11. Arthur Colby Sprague, *Shakespeare and the Actors: The Stage Business in His Plays (1660-1905)* (Cambridge; MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), 146-47. John Dover Wilson argued that the device Tree had hit upon was actually an element of Shakespeare's design that was lost in textual transmission. See *What Happens in* Hamlet (1935; 3rd ed, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 106-07.

12. This was another bit of business that Olivier copied from Herbert Beerbohm Tree. See Sprague, *Actors*, 155.

13. Olivier omits Ophelia's speech beginning "Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (144-55) perhaps because it would have now come almost immediately before the relocated "To be" speech. Olivier may have felt that two nearly consecutive long soliloquies separated by only a brief exchange between Polonius and Claudius would have overtaxed the patience of filmgoers. If one of the soliloquies had to go, it would certainly not be the "To be" speech. Bernice Kliman suggests an additional or alternative explanation for the omission. Jean Simmons reported that Olivier wanted to suggest that Ophelia's madness originated in the nunnery scene. Kliman speculates that Ophelia's soliloquy at the end of the scene is perhaps "too rational for a girl on the edge of madness." *Hamlet: Film, Television, and Audio Performance* (Rutherford; NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988), 34, 36n12.

14. Roger Furse, the set designer, noted that this locale is the same as that of the opening and closing of the film, which depict Hamlet's corpse borne by soldiers, and with the early appearances of the Ghost. "Designing the Film 'Hamlet'" in *Hamlet: The Film and the Play*, ed. Alan Dent (unpaginated; London: World Film, 1948), [30]. According to Jorgens, the tower platform is thus "linked to Hamlet's sense of disorientation, to the ghost and to godlike knowledge, and to freedom and aspiration as opposed to the world of compromise, deception, and imprisonment below." *Shakespeare on Film*, 211. But the platform is more overtly and more strongly linked with death.

15. Furse, "Designing" [30].

16. Anthony Davies argues that the film promotes a very specific symbolism of architectural levels and that, if the "To be" speech had been located as in the play at ground level, "the symbolic importance of the castle's architecture would have given that soliloquy dimensions considerably smaller than those it gains with the spatial suggestions of openness, isolation, and vertical consciousness with which the film invests it." *Filming Shakespeare's Plays: The Adaptations of Laurence Olivier, Orson Welles, Peter Brook, and Akira Kurosawa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 54. One dimension lost in the relocation of the passage is the set of implications deriving from the setting of the passage in the midst of a down-to-earth eavesdropping episode.

17. As Olivier explained his intention, "it seemed the most natural thing in the world to have Hamlet's soliloquies as words in his head, with his 'To be or not to be' uttered to the sound of a roaring sea, like the sounds which fill the ears of troubled spirits" *On Acting* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 290. The film script fashioned by Alan Dent also explicitly equates voice-over with interior monologue: "part of the soliloquy...is thought." *Hamlet: The Film and the Play*, [3.1.60].

18. According to Sprague, Edwin Booth was the first actor to use a dagger as a prop during the speech. *Actors*, 151.

19. According to Sprague, Booth was also the first actor to deliver at least part of the "To be" speech while seated. *Actors*, 150.

20. Jorgens suggests that Hamlet's loss of his dagger is a "symbolic castration" and thereby associates it with the Freudian elements of the film. *Shakespeare on Film*, 214.

21. Dale Silviria has noted the contrast between the frantic race up the stairs at the beginning of the episode and the slow dissolve at the end: "While the prologue...uses the moving camera, the...epilogue is a fade, as the returning fog envelops the battlements." *Laurence Olivier and the Art of Film Making* (Rutherford; NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 154.