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# Shakespearean Star: Laurence Olivier and National Cinema

**By Jennifer Barnes**

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Laurence Olivier was one of the most famous and idolised actors of the 20th century. Theatrically trained, Olivier's career on the stage and screen spanned for more than six decades and is stocked with an incredible assortment of roles, which range from clowns to kings, priests to doctors, murderers to detectives, and generals to stable boys. Yet, in spite of his extraordinary portrait gallery of performances, Olivier is most widely recognised and celebrated for his Shakespearean projects, mainly the films *Henry V* (1944), *Hamlet* (1948), and *Richard III* (1955), which he both directed and starred in.

In *Shakespearean Star: Laurence Olivier and National Cinema* (2017) Jennifer Barnes argues for Olivier's rightful recognition as a Shakespearean star in both the fields of Theatre Studies and Film Studies. Analysing the mechanisms of Olivier's "Shakespearean" image through a discussion which links culture, politics, and industry with the actors' own affiliations with Shakespearean works, Barnes offers a paradigm to be employed in identifying Shakespearean stars. In doing so, she aims to investigate what it means to be a Shakespearean star, and the functions that this particular star model offers within a specific national context.

Barnes' thesis is sparked by the general public discourse which followed Olivier's passing in 1989 that centred on the question of whether the British actor Kenneth Branagh would be the next Olivier. Barnes advances that the Branagh-Olivier comparison arose through Branagh's own close professional involvement with Shakespearean projects, mainly his acting in and direction of *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Hamlet* (1996). Identifying that the point of equivalence between the two actors is Shakespeare—and considering the questioning of Olivier's Shakespearean heir—Barnes makes the case that Olivier's own engagement with Shakespeare is fundamentally responsible for the configuration of this very specific model of celebrity: the Shakespearean star.

Building towards a definition of what is meant by the term 'Shakespearean star', Barnes refers to the Shakespearean critic Graham Holderness to argue that Shakespeare, the dramatist, exists in public,

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historical, and cultural consciousness not only as a figure of cultural authority, but also as a vast cultural enigma. Therefore *Shakespeare* (the enigma), for both Holderness and Barnes, functions a site of continuous inquisition and debate. It is through this line of thought that Barnes observes how the cultural enigma of *Shakespeare* has been managed by a temporary star (in this case the image of Olivier), as hegemonic cultural values articulated through Shakespeare are sanctioned and interpreted through the star's true image.

Since Olivier's true image is imperative to unpicking the meaning and definition of the design and function of a Shakespearean star, Barnes argues the necessity of autobiographical study alongside her analysis of *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. In doing so, the inclusion of Olivier's autobiographical material allows for the (re)reading of these films to best reinterpret and comprehend how the Shakespearean body and identity have been configured through his performances in these films. Therefore, by looking at and studying Olivier as a physical presence and identity across these films, one is also looking at and studying Shakespeare, as it is through the actor's appropriation of Shakespeare that certain truths and resolutions are manifest.

Barnes recognises that Olivier's involvement with Shakespearean projects extends beyond *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, with his performances in Paul Czinner's *As You Like It* (1936), Stuart Burge's *Othello* (1966), John Sichel's *The Merchant of Venice* (1973), and Michael Elliott's *King Lear* (1973), but argues that the development of the actor's Shakespearean star persona is embedded in the historical, political, cultural and industrial context of the 1940s and 50s. Olivier's involvement with *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III*, and *Macbeth* was threefold as actor, director, and producer, during a period of intensified national crisis and cultural upheaval. Barnes highlights the significance of the study of these films as they serve as sites in and with which to understand the formulation of his Shakespearean star image.

The four core chapters which make up *Shakespearean Star* have been produced through rigorous archival research, and offer extensive historical, cultural, industrial and autobiographical contextualising of Olivier's Shakespearean directorial projects. The work is organised chronologically, beginning with the three filmic adaptations which made it to the screen: *Henry V* in 1944, *Hamlet* in 1948, and *Richard III* in 1955. The final chapter of the book is written on Olivier's last Shakespearean project, *Macbeth* (intended to be produced in 1958), which until recently was considered a "lost text" as it remained unexamined in the Laurence Olivier Archive at the British Library, London.

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Olivier's close, lifelong association with Shakespeare has long been acknowledged in academic and cultural discourse, yet his function as a Shakespearean star has not been openly certified until now. Barnes' *Shakespearean Star* recognises Olivier's influence in the configuration of the Shakespearean star, as it is through his longstanding affiliation with the Bard's work that the actor has come to embody the meanings and values of Shakespeare. Establishing this argument through rich analysis of the foundational film texts which elevated Olivier to his Shakespearean star status, Barnes offers a template with which to make meaning of Shakespeare, and perhaps discern who may be the next Olivier.