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A Meditation on Mediation: A Close Reading of Olivier's Cough

The 1944 film version of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, directed by Sir Laurence Olivier, provides the material for a rich study of a narrative's transference across multiple media forms. The story has been transferred from the written play text (where the film's narrative was inspired from) to the Elizabethan stage (where much of the action is set in the film) to the film version the audience is watching. The film's opening sequence grounds the audience's experience by making the viewer aware of these forms, by presenting the beginning of Shakespeare's text verbatim, by framing the film in its opening through a wide high angle shot of Elizabethan era London from a bird's eye view, and by focusing the opening sequence on the various levels of society in the Elizabethan crowd.

The film cannot recreate the experience of attending a live theatrical production of *Henry V*, although the filmmakers attempt to capture this dynamic as actively as possible in a series of shot/reverse shots between the actors and the audience in Act I, Scene 1, with the two bishops. However, the following sequence demonstrates best what the filmic representation of the staging of *Henry V* can accomplish and perhaps acts as the film's very thesis. The camera follows the actors backstage—an example of "restricted access" for the film viewer, in that audience members at a play are not allowed to see behind the curtain.

Here, Olivier and his team actively state their goal for the film, not only to recreate and reshape the story of *Henry V* but to study the process that makes this repurposing possible. The scene builds in dramatic tension as the camera surveys the process of staging a play and climaxes with the first appearance of the film's star and director, a moment that both celebrates—and commentates—on the feature film's reliance on a star image and the changes the narrative

undergoes in these distinct storytelling forms. That moment—the nervous cough—contains the crux of the film’s meaning. A close reading of this short sequence, only 1:15 in duration, reveals the ways in which the film handles these issues of adaptation and mediation across multiple media forms.

When the initial scene between the two bishops concludes, both actors exit through the balcony curtain. The film shifts to a shot underneath the backstage stairs to the balcony, with the two actors filmed coming down. In this backstage area, the film’s viewers become aware that these men are no longer the bishops but are now the stage actors who play these roles, as they begin changing costumes. Here, the suspension of disbelief accomplished for the spectator of the stage is lost. Thus, first seeing the bishops on-stage and then immediately seeing the actors who play those roles backstage, engulfed by a sea of other actors changing their costumes, focuses the viewer’s attention not on the narrative of Shakespeare’s work but on both the “magic” and the limitations of a stage representation.

The camera shifts its focus from the two actors playing the bishops to two boys who are preparing to play female roles. Here, the film focuses again on the differences between the experience of “reading” *Henry V*, which Olivier and his team probably figures a significant portion of the audience has done prior to watching the film, and the experience of the Elizabethan stage. One boy contemplates whether to stuff his chest with fruit to appear to have a larger bust line, while the other boy, already dressed in women’s costuming, shaves. The limitations of a stage production—as opposed to a reader’s imagination earlier invoked in the verbal introduction—may be most visually apparent in this moment.

The third major camera shift focuses on several “layers” of actors preparing to step onto the stage, as their characters signal the imminent arrival of the king. Here, the film switches

from being aware of the artifice of the stage to becoming most aware of the artifices of the cinema. While the music and characters signal the arrival of the king on stage, the film viewer is anticipating the arrival of its marquee star and director. As each successive row of actors steps into the left side of the frame to head onto the stage, it encourages the viewer to study their faces, searching for Olivier. Finally, Olivier “unassumingly” steps into the shot. He quietly walks into the left side of the frame, giving the audience the gratification of the star image. Unlike the previous score of “non-stars,” Olivier does not share the scene. Yet, at the moment he fulfills the audience’s desire of the star image, he complicates its fulfillment with a nervous cough.

In the germs of that cough arrives the film’s thesis. For, in that moment, Olivier makes several statements simultaneously—commentary on the film that follows, a filmic representation of the journey from text to stage to film. In relation to the stage, we see a private moment with the actor who plays Henry V, the nervous cough distinguishing him from the eloquent king he is about to play. In relation to the film, we see Olivier deny the gloriousness of the star image while also giving viewers what they may perceive as a private moment, possibly a hint at who the “real” Olivier is. Furthermore, since Olivier is both star and filmmaker, we get the statement that the production, this filmic representation, is going to bear his stamp. Finally, the cough—as if it were Olivier caught unawares—promotes the type of gracious humility that Olivier’s star image exudes even as it conflicts with the air of supremacy which sets Henry aside from the other, unnaturally comic actors.

Olivier steps out onto the screen, where he becomes Henry V, both for the audience in the film and for the film’s audience. But, at the moment of the cough, he simultaneously projects no less than five separate identities—Olivier the filmmaker, Olivier the star, Olivier the private human being, the unnamed stage actor Olivier is playing, and the representation of Henry that is

to come. It is this one moment, Oliver's cough, which embodies these divisions and highlights the film's ability to examine these various layers of mediation simultaneously.