

Prologue
The Next Olivier

In 1996, Richard Olivier – the son of the actor-director Laurence Olivier – published a book that charted the problematic relationship that existed between himself and his famous father. The book, *Melting the Stone: A Journey Around My Father*, opens with an account of Laurence Olivier’s memorial service at Westminster Abbey in October 1989. This is described as a lavish and official ceremony, a rite of national mourning in which Olivier’s status as the nation’s greatest actor was both celebrated and hotly protected. In his account of the events leading up to that day, Richard Olivier describes how invitations to the Abbey service were extended to selected members of the royal family, with Prince Charles the preferred senior attendee. Unable to be present, Prince Charles told the Olivier family that he had ‘asked Kenneth Branagh to represent him’ instead. Branagh had acted in and directed a cinematic production of *Henry V* the year before (a production that was just about to be released) and, as a result, he had been widely touted as ‘the next Olivier’, a comparison that was evidently supported by Prince Charles. The younger Olivier describes the wider implications of Charles’s suggestion and imagines how Olivier’s peers might have responded to the possibility of Branagh’s officiating:

According to Royal protocol, the representative carries the same position in etiquette as the Royal he or she represents. Therefore, as the invitations stood, Mr. Branagh – as senior Royal representative – would be the last person to enter the Abbey. He would be met at the door and escorted by the Dean, while the entire congregation, including Prince Edward, stood until he was seated. Frankly, I think several surviving senior Thespians would have passed away on the spot. Moreover, those close to Larry knew him to be not entirely selfless and to have gone to the grave firmly clutching whatever laurels he had earned. The last thing he’d want at his memorial would be the apparent crowning of an heir to his throne.

The Olivier family declined the proposed substitution and insisted that the ‘press-safe’ Richard Attenborough represent the absent Prince Charles; Branagh was not invited to attend.¹

In 2000, Kenneth Branagh – now actor-director of three Shakespeare adaptations, *Henry V* (1989), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993) and *Hamlet* (1996) – visited the University of Reading in order to introduce a screening of his fourth Shakespeare film production, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. As Samuel Crowl notes, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was to be the first production in a ‘three-Shakespeare-picture deal’ signed with Miramax, the others to consist of ‘a version of *As You Like It* set in Japan, and a reimagining of *Macbeth* in modern Manhattan’.² The screening took place in October of that year, by which time *Love’s Labour’s Lost* had had to weather a storm of unfortunate reviews in the US. Branagh was despondent yet defensive about the film’s reception. In a post-screening interview, Branagh told the representative for the student newspaper that, while he particularly wanted to film *Macbeth*, he doubted that a studio would finance the production.³ Indeed, following disappointing critical reactions to *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Branagh’s agreement with Miramax, since lapsed, was not renewed.⁴ In a review of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in *Time* magazine in June 2000, Richard Corliss questioned Branagh’s status as Olivier’s heir: ‘it’s time to wonder what happened to this Great Hope of the British Theatre, this jack-of-all-arts, this next Olivier’.⁵

In November 2011, Simon Curtis’s film adaptation of Colin Clark’s memoir, *The Prince, the Showgirl and Me*, in which Clark details his experiences working as an assistant on the 1957 Olivier film, *The Prince and the Showgirl*, was released. Titled *My Week With Marilyn*, the official website for the film claims that it focuses on the ‘collision of [two] worlds – old England and new Hollywood’ apparently represented respectively by Olivier and Monroe.⁶ In *My Week With Marilyn*, Kenneth Branagh plays Laurence Olivier. An image of Branagh as Olivier was released in September 2011 as a teaser for the forthcoming film (Figure 1).

Branagh’s casting – and his decision to accept the role – initially caused something of a furore and instigated a particularly vitriolic outburst by Joe Queenan in the *Guardian*. In his article, ‘Kenneth Branagh: The Star who Forgot how to Shine’, Queenan castigates Branagh’s apparent failure to live up to his initial billing as ‘the next Olivier’. Citing *My Week With Marilyn* as ‘misguided’, Queenan concludes: ‘I am sure [Branagh] will be very good in the part [of Olivier]. He will bring his trademark intensity. He will huff and puff. But there is something bittersweet about this turn of events. Branagh was supposed to be the next big thing, the new Olivier.’



Figure 1 Kenneth Branagh as Laurence Olivier in a publicity shot for *My Week With Marilyn* (dir. Simon Curtis, 2011)

Queenan implies that Branagh's decision to perform as Olivier articulates a failure to replace him, an inability to fulfil the requirements expected of 'the *next* Olivier' [my emphasis].⁷ Queenan evokes a particularly nationalistic discourse here, his denigration of Branagh apparently related to the latter's connection with mainstream Hollywood, which is unfavourably juxtaposed with Branagh's prior cinematic Shakespearean career. For his own part, Branagh claims that he was drawn to the role for a very specific reason:

I was incredibly impressed by the screenplay and wanted to play this man who just happened to be Sir Laurence Olivier – but who was a fascinating human being to play at this point in his life . . . The script was a fascinating study of a very fine artist coming up against an equally fine one and the fireworks that result.⁸

Here, Branagh asserts a connection to Olivier 'at this point in his life', a claim that seems particularly relevant in light of the fact that Branagh's early career is characterised by an attempt to distinguish himself from – and even distance himself from – Laurence Olivier. For me, it is significant that 'at this point in his life', Olivier was organising the production of what was to be his fourth and final Shakespeare adaptation, *Macbeth*; a production that, like Branagh's, failed to materialise. In performing Olivier, Branagh may well be performing or enunciating *himself*, privileging the sense of correlation between the two men urged in earlier comments on Branagh's Shakespearean career, rather than, as Queenan does, emphasising a failure to live up to the comparison.

Ultimately, Queenan's article connects with the wider cultural discourses that inform both Olivier's and Branagh's constructions as particularly Shakespearean stars, while Branagh's comment implies a much more personal relationship to those constructions. In fact, Queenan's and Branagh's different responses to the actorly task of playing Laurence Olivier map onto what Christy Desmet (after Michael Bristol) understands as constituting 'big-time' and 'small-time' Shakespeare: "Big-time Shakespeare" serves corporate goals, entrenched power structures and conservative cultural ideologies. "Small-time Shakespeare" . . . emerges from local, more pointed responses to the Bard.⁹ I am interested in how these concepts of 'big-time' and 'small-time' Shakespeare overlap through the very specific interface that is the Shakespearean star. Such an overlap is certainly exemplified here in the different ways in which Kenneth Branagh's star image can be seen to mean in relation to that of Laurence Olivier, both for Queenan and for Branagh himself. Accordingly,

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Branagh's role in the 2011 film – and contemporary critical reaction to it – invites me to ask the question that is at the heart of this book: what exactly does it mean to be the 'next Olivier'? Or, more pertinently, not to be?

Shakespearean Star: Laurence Olivier and National Cinema tells the story of what it means to be (or not to be) the 'next Olivier' by tracing Laurence Olivier's construction as a Shakespearean star through his cinematic adaptations, *Henry V* (1944), *Hamlet* (1948), *Richard III* (1955) and the unmade *Macbeth* (1958). These films were not only produced or planned at key moments in the development of the British film industry, but they reflect and inform the wider national-cultural landscape from 1944. It is not for nothing that the statue that commemorates Olivier outside the National Theatre remembers him in a film: the 1948 *Hamlet*. This, then, is a particularly national story. It is also a personal story. Olivier's own engagement with Shakespeare in his contemporary life-writing and later autobiographies sheds light on the mechanisms that produce the very specific model of celebrity that he comes to embody. It is precisely by paying attention to this dialogue between the 'big-time' and the 'small time', to the interweaving of the political and the personal in the construction of Laurence Olivier's Shakespearean star image, that our own significant cultural investment in that construction can be acknowledged. And it is in and around Olivier's cinematic Shakespeare adaptations that that investment is so powerfully evidenced. Laurence Olivier, as a Shakespearean star, performs for us – continues to perform for us – a very important national-cultural function.

The Shakespearean Star: Towards a Definition

The concept of the Shakespearean star or Shakespearean stardom has not been fully examined either within a film studies context or a Shakespearean performance studies context. It is also the case that while models of stardom have been variously proposed and developed within the disciplines of film studies and theatre studies, these modes of thought have not yet been made to speak to each other.¹⁰ This has led to something of a gap in terms of critical attention to the specifically Shakespearean 'star' – the (usually) theatrical icons that make the transition from stage to screen to the extent that they enjoy an equally large yet seemingly more culturally legitimate celebrity status than that afforded their film star contemporaries. Barbara Hodgdon has remarked on the slipperiness of the term 'Shakespearean star' as one which, despite implying a rich performance history, is problematically modern, 'less associated with classical theatre

than with the rise of modernity and mass communication and with the politics of large-scale industrial cultures'.¹¹ For me, however, it is in this very slipperiness that the Shakespearean star's cultural power resides.

To expand on Desmet's useful binary, the Shakespearean star is produced through the interaction that takes place between cultural, political or industrial appropriations of the national poet and a sense of a star's personal affiliation with Shakespeare (both as it is constructed through broader star discourses and by the star's own direct enunciations). These modes of appropriation, for a variety of different reasons, draw on Shakespeare's cultural authority and established formulations of 'Shakespeare' in national culture; these are the myths that Graham Holderness argues work to '[contain] consensus and [sustain] delusions of unity, integration and harmony in the cultural superstructures of a divided and fractured society'.¹² I stress the distinction between Shakespeare (the early modern dramatist) and *Shakespeare* (Holderness's conceptual alternative) from here on in. But if Shakespeare is widely celebrated as an icon of cultural authority, he also represents a vast cultural enigma, the site of consistent interrogation and contestation, a *desire to know*. It is here that the 'slippery' Shakespearean star – a paradoxical conflation of the 'classical' past and present 'modernity' – steps in. Through a complex process of negotiation, the enigma that is Shakespeare maps directly onto the enigma that is the star.

Our *desire to know* Shakespeare has a direct counterpart in the 'present-day star phenomenon', a phenomenon that, as Hodgdon succinctly asserts, is characterised by 'the complex desire to see – even to know everything about – an extraordinary actor'.¹³ For Richard Dyer, this desire to know what a star is 'really like' is satisfied by multiple media manifestations that work to create an effect of authenticity. This authenticating process constitutes something of a paradox: the star image appears 'truer, more real . . . than an image' precisely because such media manifestations are both manifold *and* contradictory.¹⁴ In convincing us that the star is 'truer, more real . . . than an image' the authenticity effect then proliferates to such an extent that 'the other particular values' embodied by the star likewise appear to be authenticated, whatever those values might be'.¹⁵ This deceptively simple process by which multiple and contradictory images work to authenticate the values embodied by a particular star is amplified when it comes to the Shakespearean star, who authenticates for us the varied and evolving hegemonic cultural values that are articulated by the concept of *Shakespeare*. This is because the authentication process is supported and rendered even more powerful by the fact that the star

expressly narrates his or her own identity through the intimation of a formative or inherent connection to *Shakespeare*, an interaction that, in turn, authenticates for the star a particular and treasured conception of selfhood.

What this ultimately tells us is that the Shakespearean star can be understood to embody and authenticate the hegemonic cultural values that are enunciated by *Shakespeare* precisely because these values appear to be authorised by the star's true self. While it remains the case that the surfeit of information that works to authenticate the star image paradoxically drives the desire to know rather than offering satisfaction or a solution to the question of what the star is 'really like', it is through an acknowledgement of this self-defeating dialectic, this sleight of hand, that the wider cultural currency of the Shakespearean star can be most clearly explicated. Through a process of referral, the Shakespearean star *appears* to offer a solution (however temporary and illusory) to the desire to know what Shakespeare is 'really like', promising access to coveted Shakespearean meaning and authenticating (and performing) a wider cultural memory of the national poet.¹⁶ The cultural enigma that is Shakespeare can thus be understood to be temporarily managed through the nominated star; in this instance, through the surrogating image of Laurence Olivier. It is the project of this book – in asking what it means to be (or not to be) the next Olivier – to demonstrate precisely how this paradigm (applicable to subsequent and even preceding stars) works through Laurence Olivier and is developed for specific ends in and around his cinematic Shakespeare adaptations.¹⁷

Laurence Olivier's Shakespearean Stardom

The negotiation between the 'big time' and the 'small time' and the related fusion of enigmas that underwrites the Shakespearean star is made especially coherent when we look at Laurence Olivier. This is because Olivier demonstrates an intensely personal investment in the construction of his star image, an investment that is matched by his lifelong tendency to articulate a sense of a coherent identity that is aligned to a stabilising *Shakespeare*. This tendency is evidenced frequently in his life-writing, in and around his Shakespearean feature films, and in his two published autobiographies, *Confessions of An Actor* and *On Acting*.¹⁸ The countless ways in which these multimodal materials interact inform the approach that I take towards documenting the evolution of Olivier as a Shakespearean star in this book, which draws on contemporary media

and personal and professional archival material alongside Olivier's cinematic texts and his life-writing. In placing a firm emphasis on the role that life-writing and autobiography play in producing the Shakespearean star, I am building on the work of Peter Donaldson whose *Shakespearian Films/Shakespearian Directors* (1991) examined Olivier's *Henry V* and *Hamlet* as auteurist productions, stressing a heavily psychoanalytical (and, ultimately, autobiographical) reading of these particular film texts. Although Donaldson limits his study to two specific tableaux as described by Olivier in *Confessions of an Actor*,¹⁹ his work remains to date the only sustained critical consideration of the interaction that takes place between Olivier's Shakespearean adaptations and his later autobiographical work. Yet this relationship informs all of Olivier's cinematic Shakespeares. Donaldson's 1991 study therefore marks an important and lone milestone in drawing attention to the fundamental role that the autobiographical plays in the complex process of surrogation that comprises Shakespearean stardom. At the same time, it opens up a related and radical space for reading Olivier's Shakespearean film adaptations as autobiography. Indeed, *Confessions of an Actor* and *On Acting*, in their reappropriation of Olivier's Shakespearean roles both as narrative and image, work to counteract Elizabeth W. Bruss's denial of the possibility of cinematic autobiography in her famous maxim 'there is no eye for "I"'.²⁰ Bruss is referring specifically here to the autobiographical *cinematic* text, but reading Olivier's autobiographies alongside the film adaptations invites us to consider, instead, the reappropriation and re-reading of film within the *autobiographical* text. Approaching Olivier's cinematic Shakespeares through the lens of the autobiography in this way offers us a remarkable window onto the previously invisible authenticating mechanisms that produce the Shakespearean star.

Autobiography, by its very nature, engenders a performative construction of selfhood and, in Olivier's case, the autobiographical self is constituted not just through appropriations of Shakespearean meaning but through various textual configurations and photographic records of his Shakespearean body on screen. As Leanore Lieblein tells us, the Shakespearean body is a Bakhtinian classical body, a body 'whose excesses are a product of the actor's choice, discipline and skill'.²¹ Indeed, it is this normative, culturally authoritative body that is recalled in Olivier's autobiographical writing, usually in order to narrate moments of personal and professional crisis. It is recalled by way of the narrative and photographic reappropriations of Olivier's Shakespearean roles that are then mapped onto his life experiences in order to interpret or contain them, to stabilise

their 'excesses' by referring to 'the actor's choice, discipline and skill' in navigating them.²² Over the course of this book we will see how this construction of a Shakespearean body works in Olivier's autobiographical material to reinterpret and to fix Olivier's presence or autobiographical identity in his cinematic Shakespeares. By reconfiguring the Shakespearean body on screen throughout the autobiography, Olivier asks us to (re)read his Shakespeare adaptations as texts that very much express him-*self* and, in doing so, he supplements the life narrative with a culturally charged presence.

It is with the significance of this relationship in mind that *Shakespearean Star: Laurence Olivier and National Cinema* is organised chronologically around the three cinematic Shakespeares that made it to the screen – *Henry V* (1944), *Hamlet* (1948) and *Richard III* (1955) – and the fourth – *Macbeth* (1958) – which, famously, did not. This last, *Macbeth*, constituted, until recently, a 'lost' text. Unexamined in the archive, having achieved a mythic status fuelled not least by Olivier himself, *Macbeth* lays bare, more than any other text, the interactive relationship between cinema and autobiography that underwrites Olivier's Shakespearean star image. It is by unpicking this relationship that we discover exactly what it means for us to look at Laurence Olivier. And what becomes clear is that looking at Laurence Olivier means looking at *Shakespeare*. It means uncovering the multivariate and often surprising ways in which *Shakespeare* is appropriated through Olivier's star image throughout the twentieth century. It means understanding how and to what ends concepts of nationhood, national cinema and national theatre are mobilised and developed in 1940s and 1950s Britain. It means directing our attention to the significance of specific contexts of production, something that is often neglected in Shakespearean performance studies. Certainly it is imperative that the development of Olivier's Shakespearean star image be understood as rooted firmly within the industrial contexts within which his Shakespearean feature films are produced. *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and the unmade *Macbeth* are produced – or not produced as the case may be – at pivotal moments in the histories of the British film and theatre industries and, relatedly, pivotal moments in the histories of significant British film and theatre companies: the Rank Organisation, London Films Limited, Pilgrim Pictures, Woodfall Films, the Old Vic, the Royal Court, the National Theatre, to name but a few. They are produced at times of national crisis and cultural upheaval. They are produced at times when, for all of these reasons, our age-old national-cultural *desire to know* Shakespeare is intensified. It is here that Laurence Olivier enters.

With this in mind it is worth mentioning, briefly, texts that I have chosen not to include as part of this study but that many will associate with Olivier's name. The relationship between the development of Olivier's Shakespearean star image and the historical, political, cultural and industrial contexts of 1940s and 1950s Britain is central to the line of enquiry taken here and it is for this reason that I do not include in Olivier's oeuvre texts that are produced after 1960, such as his later television work and filmed theatre productions, including *Othello* (1965), *The Merchant of Venice* (1973) and *King Lear* (1983). Not only do these films not constitute British cinematic feature films but, most crucially, they are not directed by Olivier. It is for this reason, too, that I do not categorise Paul Czinner's *As You Like It* (1936) as constituting part of Olivier's oeuvre. In delineating Olivier's oeuvre, I focus definitive attention upon the cinematic Shakespeare adaptations in which he functioned as actor, director and producer, a unique tripartite role that speaks to a special level of creative control that is both played up in contemporary marketing and further consolidated by Olivier's autobiographical revisitings. Indeed, focusing a spotlight on Olivier's cinematic Shakespeare adaptations means gaining insight into an exceptional relationship between the big time and the small time, the political and the personal: a relationship that underwrites Olivier as a Shakespearean star. Accordingly, and in anticipation of the next chapter, on the cinematic *Henry V* (1944), it is appropriate that I turn at this point to Olivier's early career, to his life-writing and, most importantly, to his own narration of his formative engagements with *Shakespeare*.

‘I felt Shakespeare within me’: A Brief Biography of Laurence Olivier (1907–1942)

Laurence Olivier, born in Dorking, Surrey, on 22 May 1907, was the third and youngest child of Gerard and Agnes Olivier. In the opening pages of his first autobiography, *Confessions of an Actor*, Olivier describes the very different relationships that he had with his father and with his mother, the former fraught and unfriendly, the latter intense and loving, with Agnes Olivier functioning as the young Laurence's protector and sheltering him from the undisguised antipathy of his father. Significantly, as the autobiographical narrative develops, the ‘slight disgust’ directed at Olivier by his father and the ‘frank favouritism’ shown to him by his mother is associated with Olivier's natural talent for acting.²³ In the narrative of his early life, this is evidenced by a propensity for lying and, eventually, by his mother's presence – and his father's conspicuous absence – at the performances he