As Marvin Rosenberg remarks about Laertes in The Masks of Hamlet, “Not much attention has been paid to him by scholar-critics and theatre observers” (253). It is usually thought sufficient to note that he represents a foil to the protagonist and to summarize familiar differences. But, as Rosenberg adds, “there is more to Laertes than difference”; there is also identity with Hamlet that gives the role “dimension and subtext” (253–54). This identity of the two characters in the context of difference is what engages us here and what we seek to develop as it is manifested in the texts of Hamlet and as it may be realized in performance. While taking into account Shakespeare’s deployment of Laertes in relation to Hamlet at earlier points, we shall concentrate on the two sequences in act 5 that involve their direct interaction, the encounter at Ophelia’s grave (5.1.217–302) and the climactic duel that proves fatal to both (5.2.223–362). It is these sequences that deepen the design of the Laertes/Hamlet connection and offer the “subtextual resonances” (253) that the production may exploit.

In this essay, we employ an analytical model that we adopted as scholars for a book on King Lear, and as teachers for a course we team-taught at Lafayette College that covered several Shakespearean plays in different genres. It is essentially threefold. Like other readers, we are preoccupied with patterns and problems of meaning, but we pursue these by scrutinizing the text for the signals that may guide production. When we identify moments that represent textual and performance cruxes, we analyze those moments and the sequences of which they are a part to suggest possible ways of realizing them in performance and thus of shaping and sometimes fixing meaning. We then turn to actual productions for a close look at ways in which performance has in fact staged and interpreted text. Our purpose is not the writing of production history but rather a performance-oriented “reading” of Shakespearean plays.
Enraged at Hamlet as the cause of two deaths and manipulated by Claudius in the venting of his wrath, Laertes will resort to the treachery of a poisoned sword, reinforced by a poisoned drink, to exact revenge. Hamlet, after his "tow'ring passion" in the graveyard, will moderate his own rage but strengthen his resolve; he knows the villainy of his uncle and finally understands the part of providence in all affairs.

When Hamlet and Laertes meet in the last scene of the play with the court assembled to witness their duel, Hamlet asks pardon of Laertes, blaming his madness, not himself, for his misdeeds. Accepting Hamlet's apology, Laertes yet insists on protecting his "honor." Thus reconciled and unreconciled, they choose their foils. Accomplished swordsmen, they fight with aplomb, Hamlet gaining the edge while unaware of the dishonorable plot against him. Once he and Laertes are both doomed by the envenomed sword, the two exchange forgiveness, and Laertes proclaims, "the King's to blame," cueing Hamlet to kill his uncle. In the final scene of the play, both Hamlet and Laertes achieve their revenge, and Fortinbras, the third avenging son, whose father was killed by Hamlet's father on Hamlet's birthday, arrives to claim the crown at Hamlet's death, even as silence grips Laertes and Hamlet eternally.

Clearly, at least part of the strategy of the final scenes is to counterpoint the two avenging sons and to prepare the way for the third. But further dramatic parallels and ironies are suggested in these final encounters between Laertes and Hamlet. A production sensitive to the complexities of their graveyard grapple and "brothers' wager" can provide a number of visual articulations of the Laertes/Hamlet connection, all suggested by the implied stage directions of 5.1 and 5.2.

From the moment of Laertes' return to Elsinore, the text has urged identification of the pair. A reader encountering the Danes' heralding of Laertes as Claudius' successor can hardly avoid recognizing that Laertes has assumed Hamlet's role. Endorsing the quick action of this irate son, the crowd, by the Messenger's account, "call him lord":

They cry, "Choose we! Laertes shall be king!"
Caps, hands, and tongues applaud it to the clouds,
"Laertes shall be king, Laertes king!"

(4.5.109–11)

Backed by "a riotous head," Laertes, not Hamlet, threatens Claudius, choosing words with an ironic ring for an audience still wait-
ing for Hamlet to end his delay: “O thou vile King, / Give me my father!” (119–20). Even more ironic are the figures Laertes chooses to describe the drop of blood that might restrain him, for they mock the would-be avenger Hamlet, who indeed may say (and, in essence, has said) what Laertes theoretically poses:

That drop of blood that’s calm proclaims me bastard,
Cries cuckold to my father, brands the harlot
Even here, between the chaste unsmirched brow
Of my true mother.

(4.5.121–24)

Claudius’ treatment of Laertes in 4.5 recalls, by contrast, his treatment of Hamlet in 1.2. In 1.2, Claudius gives Hamlet audience only reluctantly and scoffs at his grief, calling it unmanly. Reasoning with his nephew/son, the King reminds him that this father lost a father and that his father lost his; Hamlet’s continuing grief is a “fault to heaven, / A fault against the dead, a fault to nature” (101–2). Claudius admonishes him to “throw to earth / This unprevailing woe” (106–7). More fatherly to Laertes than to his nephew/son, Claudius in 4.5 permits Laertes voice, inviting the furious young man to articulate his wrath so that he may neutralize it. Reasoning with Laertes even as he positions himself as accomplice, the King wins the young man’s confidence, praising him as “a good child and a true gentleman” (153). Where in 1.2 he relies on Gertrude to prevail upon Hamlet to stay in Elsinore, knowing his credibility with his nephew/son slender, with Laertes he twice reprimands Gertrude for intervening, preferring a man-to-man talk. And, after Ophelia’s display of madness, he endorses Laertes’ revenge as a legitimate and desirable pursuit of filial grief: “Laertes, I must commune with your grief. . . . And we shall jointly labor with your soul / To give it due content” (205, 214–15).

In 4.7, the King and Laertes devise their treachery against the prince: an unbated sword, an envenomed tip, a poisoned cup. But even here, where Claudius reveals to Laertes Hamlet’s dangerous demeanor—“he which hath your noble father slain / Pursued my life” (4–5)—and urges revenge, an audience is reminded of the similar circumstance in 1.5, where the Ghost reveals Claudius’ treachery to Hamlet—“The serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown” (40–41)—and urges revenge. An audience’s knowledge that poison was the instrument of old Hamlet’s murder in the garden and is now to be employed in Claudius and Laertes’ design further encourages the connection between these two per-
suasion sequences, which culminate in pledges of revenge: in 1.4 by Hamlet—"Now to my word: / It is 'Adieu, adieu! Remember me.' / I have sworn 't" (111-13)—and in 4.7 by Laertes—"But my revenge will come" (30).

**THE GRAVEYARD SEQUENCE IN THE TEXTS**

If the strategy of the final two scenes is further to impress upon the audience the connection between Laertes and Hamlet, then the graveyard encounter between the two young men becomes especially significant, for it is here that the audience sees the two together for the first time since 1.2. The altercation with Laertes over or in Ophelia's grave provides the best opportunity for a stage image of this connection, and we shall discuss that moment shortly. But even before the graveyard grapple, the arrangement of the verse and the repetition of language support the connection. While the mourners continue still unaware of Hamlet's presence, for example, the lines of Laertes and Hamlet are juxtaposed:

Laertes. What ceremony else?
Hamlet. That is Laertes, a very noble youth. Mark.
Laertes. What ceremony else?

(223-25)

And hereafter the two share verse lines. From Hamlet's discovery of the identity of the corpse—"What, the fair Ophelia!" (242)—through his altercation with Laertes, after which Laertes speaks no more in the scene, the first or last line of either's speech completes the pentameter line begun by the other. But even were their lines not shared, the linguistic connection between the two would be apparent. Laertes, leaping into Ophelia's grave, calls for dust to be piled upon them, to form a mountain "T' o'ertop old Pelion or the skyish head / Of blue Olympus" (253-54). Hamlet, proclaiming a commensurate willingness to be buried alive with Ophelia, uses the same imagery:

And if thou prate of mountains, let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart!

(283-86)

In their graveyard scuffle, Laertes' fingers find Hamlet's throat, to be met by the latter's warning that he too is dangerous and should
be feared. In response to Laertes' extravagant expression of the grief occasioned by his love for Ophelia, Hamlet hyperbolically challenges that love: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (272–74).

Hamlet, in short, will not let Laertes "outface" him. Nor will he allow Laertes to assume his part. Upon the grieving Gertrude's lament that she had hoped Ophelia would be her Hamlet's wife—"I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid, / And not t' have strewed thy grave" (245–46)—Laertes leaps into the grave atop his sister, pleading with those participating in her maimed rites to "pile your dust upon the quick and dead" (251). Incensed at Laertes' histrionic display of brotherly love for Ophelia, Hamlet (as he admits to Horatio in 5.2) experiences a "tow'ring passion" and makes his move.

Whether that passion prompts Hamlet to plunge into Ophelia's grave after Laertes remains problematic. The Q1 stage directions have Laertes leap into the grave and Hamlet leap in after him; the Q2 directions are silent; F directs Laertes, but not Hamlet, to leap into the grave (Bertram and Kliman, 238–41). John A. Mills, in Hamlet on Stage: The Great Tradition, records the behavior of distinguished actors at Ophelia's funeral: Edwin Forrest, Edwin Booth, Henry Irving, and John Barrymore did not leap into the grave after Laertes; Edmund Kean, Richard Burton, and Nicol Williamson did (84, 120 passim). Though in over three hundred years of stage tradition, Hamlet has often leapt into the grave, and in contemporary productions he often continues to do so, Harley Granville-Barker objects to the Prince's descent. Not only would two men struggling on the top of a coffin be incongruous, but Hamlet's leap into the grave upon his announcement "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (257–58), the only point at which it would be practical, would neutralize the "royal dignity of the phrase." Moreover, Hamlet's leap would make Hamlet, not Laertes, the aggressor, which the language suggests he is not (1:139n).

Whether or not the two struggle in the grave, clearly the two grapple, for Hamlet warns Laertes to "take thy fingers from my throat" (261), and Claudius commands they be plucked asunder. Their altercation, though, could take place with Hamlet outside the grave and Laertes within or with both outside. In speaking his challenge to Laertes ("What is he whose grief / Bears such an emphasis? . . ." [254–55]), Hamlet might stand at the lip of the grave, leaning or kneeling to shout, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane," at which point Laertes could clench his fingers around Hamlet's
neck. Or Laertes might leap out of the grave to confront Hamlet, beginning the scuffle with "The devil take thy soul!" (259). The stage image that results from the two joined so closely in their grapple that someone must pluck them asunder becomes proleptic of the similar image in the duel scene when Claudius must again call out, "Part them! They are incensed" (5.2.305). By the same token, the grave as the setting for their scuffle looks to their own joint deaths in 5.2, obliquely predicted by Hamlet when, at the funeral, he pledges to fight with Laertes "Until my eyelids will no longer wag" (270). Though their love for Ophelia is the cause of their graveyard altercation and the "theme" upon which Hamlet promises further fight, 5.2 reveals that Laertes and Hamlet have more in common than their professed love for the dead Ophelia.

When they meet in 5.2, an audience will not only recall their quarrel over who loves Ophelia more, but hear also Hamlet's regretful admission to Horatio: "For by the image of my cause I see / The portraiture of his" (5.2.77-78). The two young men who embrace the "brothers' wager" in 5.2 are brothers in deed and in death. Though their grappling outside the grave may be an effective visual articulation of this kinship, the stage image of the young mourners fighting in that narrow, sunken space that houses the dead till doomsday and in which Ophelia lies seals the connection between the brothers/lovers/avenging sons/dead men with staggering force.

THE GRAVEYARD SEQUENCE IN THE BBC HAMLET

In the BBC-TV production, directed by Rodney Bennett, Derek Jacobi as Hamlet completes his graveyard musings on death by smelling his hands, which have recently held the skull of Yorick. But his lesson in mortality is incomplete. As he turns to Horatio (Robert Swann), he spies the funeral procession crossing upstage against the horizon: a Priest (Michael Poole), in white vestment and black shawl, followed by black-robed and hooded pallbearers carrying a litter that is bed for a body wrapped in white. Even before the royal party enters the frame, Hamlet recognizes the King (Patrick Stewart), the Queen (Claire Bloom), and the courtiers. He does not at once see Laertes (David Robb), who walks alongside the litter. Hamlet and Horatio move from their downstage position on the gravesite to conceal themselves stage right behind a gray sarcophagus as the camera cuts to the procession, now approaching and stopping at the newly opened grave, bordered on
the remaining three sides by a low fence. The pallbearers go about their business, depositing Ophelia (Lalla Ward) above the aperture and holding onto the cloth strips with which they will lower her into the grave. Upstage, facing the camera, are the Priest and Laertes, behind them the Queen and the King. At Laertes' "What ceremony else?" the camera cuts to Hamlet and Horatio, sitting against the sarcophagus, their backs to the mourners, for Hamlet's surprised recognition of the voice belonging to the "noble youth."

Laertes and the Priest grimly discuss the "maimed rites" offered for one whose death was "doubtful," facing not each other but the grave, which rests between them and the camera. At Laertes' command, the pallbearers lower the body into the grave, the camera following the figure in the winding sheet, her face exposed, to the dirt floor. When Laertes rebukes the "churlish priest" with the innocence of "my sister," the camera cuts again to Hamlet to register the shock and pain of his recognition that it is Ophelia who is being buried. Returning to the funeral party, the camera shows Gertrude casting her "sweets" upon Ophelia and then moves into the grave to spy on the resting form, with funeral sprigs now deck­ing the white cocoon. Laertes turns his head sharply toward Ger­trude at her wistful reference to Hamlet. Provoked and resentful, folding his hands and looking once more at his dead sister, he curses the man responsible for his sister's—and his father's—death. With the cry "Hold off the earth awhile," he stays the gravedigger's ready shovel and descends into the grave, tenderly kissing his sister and pulling the white cloth over her face, then emotionally calls for the earth to be piled on the two of them. This is Hamlet's cue to advance.

Moving round the sarcophagus toward the funeral party, the shouting Prince challenges Laertes' grief, as the stunned and motionless mourners look on. Crouched in the grave, Laertes listens in amazement to this ranting voice. When Hamlet identifies himself, Laertes snarls "The devil take thy soul!" and, matching the fury of the Prince, leaps out of the grave to clutch at Hamlet's throat. Their scuffle is brief but violent, Hamlet throwing Laertes to the ground (an action he will later repeat in the dueling se­quence). They are parted when Horatio grabs Hamlet and moves him upstage of the grave and two of the pallbearers seize Laertes, holding him in the right foreground. Still shouting his challenges, Hamlet, restrained now by his mother in the upstage left corner of the space, professes his love for Ophelia, even as Laertes, confined in the downstage right corner, struggles to break free. Clau­dius briefly enters the space between them to pronounce, "O, he
is mad, Laertes,” to be followed by Gertrude, who approaches Laertes as Hamlet, at last standing free, sustains his angry hyperbole. It is to a breathless and agonized Laertes that she also offers the assurance “This is mere madness.” Finally, Hamlet approaches Laertes to ask, “What is the reason that you use me thus?” Upon the Prince’s “I loved you ever,” Laertes literally spits his defiance at the enemy who claims to be a friend. His passion spent, Hamlet responds to the gesture dismissively, “But it is no matter,” and, turning away, almost casually issues his exit threat: “The cat will mew, and dog will have his day.”

In this production, the visual connection between Hamlet and Laertes in the graveyard is understated. Hamlet does not leap into the gaping grave to join the grieving brother, and, when they grapple, they are quickly parted. But the strategy of the staging is nonetheless to establish the connection, first through generating stage parallels that complement those the language already suggests and, secondly, through directing the energy of the sequence toward Hamlet and Laertes’ efforts at physical contact.

Hamlet does not see Laertes when the funeral procession enters; he discovers the identity of both Laertes and Ophelia by listening to Laertes’ voice. Similarly, Laertes does not see Hamlet when he advances from behind the sarcophagus; the grieving brother leaps out of the grave only after Hamlet’s voice proclaims himself the Dane. Just as Hamlet appears to materialize from the sarcophagus that concealed him, so Laertes materializes from Ophelia’s grave. The brief scuffle between the two is tremendously animated, but the stage image of the two being parted and restrained prevails over the quick, almost blurred, struggle that momentarily joins them.

From the point of their parting, the intention of each of the two actors is to get at the other, the obstacle being one or more characters restraining them. The stage image of Hamlet in the upstage left corner and Laertes in the downstage right suggests a boxing or wrestling ring, in which the refereeing forces unfairly keep the two from coming together. Both strain toward the arena between them, where the two meet only in expectations. Finally, with Hamlet unharnessed and Laertes still in tow, Laertes can only spit at Hamlet over the distance that separates them, unable otherwise to establish contact with the opponent for whom circumstances, intention, and fate insist on the connection.

At the end of the sequence, when Hamlet walks off, Claudius immediately turns to the now unleashed Laertes first to scold him and then, having dismissed Gertrude, to stand face-to-face with his confederate, his arms in a reassuring gesture resting on the
young man's shoulders. The stage image of this conspiring pair, who in the aftermath of the graveyard altercation remind themselves of their plot against Hamlet's life, becomes the one consummated physical connection in the sequence. But the other image, of the straining and restrained angry brothers in grief, is also telling. If the two could not connect in 5.1, surely the fencing match of 5.2 will provide satisfaction.

**The Graveyard Sequence in the Olivier Hamlet**

In the graveyard sequence in the Laurence Olivier film, with Olivier directing and playing the central role, Hamlet and Horatio (Norman Wooland) crouch at the newly dug grave that yielded Yorick's skull. As Hamlet completes his musing on this relic of the court jester, with significant reference to "my lady's chamber" (the Alexander passage is cut), a tolling bell alerts him to the advancing procession. Tossing the skull into the grave, he joins Horatio in mounting a rise in the foreground where they conceal themselves alongside a tomb. Upstage, the figure of the Priest (Russell Thorn-dike) moves steadily toward the grave, followed by soldiers carrying the unenclosed body of Ophelia (Jean Simmons) atop a litter. From their position by the tomb, their backs now to the camera, Hamlet notices the King (Basil Sydney), the Queen (Eileen Herlie), and the courtiers and wonders who is being buried with such "meager" rites. (In this production, it is Horatio who explains that the diminished ceremony betokens a suicide.) Where in the BBC version Hamlet had no view of the funeral from his hiding place, here he watches every movement, pointing and excitedly repeating "Mark," both before and after he recognizes Laertes (Terence Morgan) on the latter's question "What ceremony else?" Only distance prevents him from identifying the body. After the exchange with the Priest, an overhead shot shows Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius standing by the grave while soldiers lower the white-clad body into it. As the body disappears, Laertes raises his voice to rebuke the Priest, and the camera cuts to Hamlet and Horatio clutching each other in recognition.

Laertes' leap into the grave is more histrionic in the Olivier production than in the BBC. When Gertrude has strewn her flowers, and after the grieving brother, gazing intently into the grave, has pronounced his curse, a spade suddenly passes before the camera from which the Priest in the right foreground plucks and casts a handful of dirt. Laertes abruptly halts the burial, flinging up his
arm, and drops from the frame. In a long shot, he is seen descending into the earth and then lifting Ophelia in his arms, so that the heads of the two are visible above ground level. First scattering at the gesture, the funeral party then gathers and stoops at the head of the grave. All are startled by the dominating voice of Hamlet, which sounds before he appears. The King bolts upright, and all eyes turn upward from the brother’s embrace to the materializing Dane.

If Laertes’ gesture in leaping into the grave was flamboyant, Hamlet’s appearance is equally so. Striding into and almost filling the frame, his back to the camera, Hamlet stands among the tombstones with his arms outstretched, yards away from the funeral party, which appears above the line formed by his arms. Laertes and Ophelia appear in the angle formed by Hamlet’s right arm and side. It is from this position that Laertes, dropping his sister and scrambling from the grave, charges up the rise toward Hamlet. In the struggle that ensues, Laertes wraps his fingers around Hamlet’s neck and drives him downhill. But the camera leaves the grappling pair for a tracking shot of the King commanding “Pluck them asunder” and Gertrude rushing to Hamlet. He is now by the grave, where others are holding the young men apart. Hamlet pauses in his fury only long enough to tell his mother, “I loved Ophelia.” As in the BBC production, he breaks free before Laertes, in time to show he “can rant as well as thou.” He then turns away while Gertrude intervenes with Laertes but returns with the question, sincerely put, “What is the reason that you use me thus?” When a silent Laertes offers him no satisfaction, he turns away again, this time for good, speaking his exit lines with his back to everyone as he leaves the cemetery. The others follow, leaving Laertes crouched at Ophelia’s grave, weeping, and Claudius standing above him, ready for the plotting of Hamlet’s death.

As in the BBC production, Hamlet does not leap into the grave with Laertes, but there are complementary movements that otherwise establish the connection between the two young men. Just as Hamlet drops Yorick’s skull back into the open grave after caressing it, so Laertes drops the body of Ophelia, whom he held in an embrace. The grave had indeed become “my lady’s chamber.” In the embrace between brother and sister, Laertes plays not only loving brother but lover as well—the image of the bridal bed union of Hamlet and Ophelia that Gertrude wished in her epitaph. The two men do, of course, come together in the struggle, though the camera chooses not to linger upon them. And, as in the BBC ver-
sion of the graveyard sequence, they strain to reach one another when others pluck them asunder.

Perhaps the most significant difference in Olivier's treatment of the Laertes/Hamlet connection is a consequence of his cuts and transposition of scenes. Thus he makes the plotting of Hamlet's death, 4.7 in Shakespeare's scripts, the immediate sequel to the graveyard scene. The change strongly colors the interpretation of Laertes. While Shakespeare shows Laertes to be a willing confederate of Claudius, with an independent taste for treachery, even before he learns of his sister's death, Olivier turns Laertes into an avenging conspirator as a direct result of Ophelia's death and of his confrontation with Hamlet at her funeral. The design is pointedly realized as Laertes and Claudius in the aftermath mount the steps to the castle and Laertes pauses at the arched entryway to look back on the gravesite. Framed by the arch, he reflects, in lines lifted from the beginning of 4.7, "And so I have a noble father lost, / A sister driven into desperate terms. . . ." At this point, the camera reverses angles to show Laertes from the back in the doorway and over his shoulder the gravedigger covering Ophelia with earth, as the young man continues to celebrate "her perfections." On these words, he turns to enter the castle, vowing "But my revenge will come." In short, Olivier shapes a Laertes that is powerfully motivated to engage in the treacherous enterprise of the dueling sequence.

THE DUELING SEQUENCE IN THE TEXTS

From the brief but passionate struggle in the graveyard, Hamlet and Laertes move in the final scene to the dishonorable duel of honor that will bring vengeance, forgiveness, and death to them both.

The dueling sequence in this final scene contains several opportunities for the visual articulation of the connection between the two young men. Opening the sequence with an invitation to Hamlet—"Come, Hamlet, come and take this hand from me" (5.2.223)—Claudius puts Laertes' hand into Hamlet's. (In Q1, Hamlet offers his hand himself—Bertram and Kliman, 256.) Though modern editions often provide the gratuitous stage direction "The King puts Laertes' hand into Hamlet's," none speculates as to when the two part. They may, in fact, retain the posture throughout the verbal exchange—Hamlet's apology and Laertes' acceptance—that ensues. An audience, knowing Laertes' plot, may
find the image of the two young men hand in hand in a gesture of trust an ironic comment on Laertes' dishonor and on Hamlet's naïveté or his disingenuous apology. Laertes may drop Hamlet's hand when Hamlet lamely blames his offense on his distraction, registering skepticism and distrust. He may drop the hand before his own reply—"I am satisfied in nature" (242)—unable to retain the gesture through his lying. The two may part as quickly as Claudius joins them, or they may continue to touch flesh through Hamlet's endorsement of this "brothers' wager." Once Hamlet calls for the foils (Claudius does so in Q1—Bertram and Kliman, 258), it seems that they would, in anticipation of the weapons, drop hands; yet when Hamlet praises Laertes' swordsmanship and Laertes thinks he is being mocked, Hamlet affirms his sincerity by referring to their clasp—"No, by this hand" (256)—or, perhaps, by offering his hand again. Clearly, the hand-joining is an opportunity for both of the characters to express the emotional complexity of the moment, but so also is it a visual reminder to an audience of the connection between the two.

All eyes in the state chamber and in the offstage audience are fixed on this agile pair for the minutes that sustain the duel. However the fight is orchestrated, with Hamlet scoring two hits and a draw, the climactic third hit—Laertes' wounding of Hamlet—and Hamlet's increased riposte provide an animated image of the two fiercely fighting for their honor, their revenge, and their lives. Though modern editions often suggest that Laertes' "Have at you now!" (305) signals his touching of Hamlet with the poisoned sword, the exact moments of Laertes' hit, of the exchange of swords and of Hamlet's retaliation are undefined in Q2 or F. Q1 is more specific: it eliminates the tie bout and provides a stage direction after the abbreviated interaction between Hamlet and Laertes that follows Gertrude's drinking of the poisoned cup: "They catch one anothers Rapiers, and both are wounded, Leartes falles downe, the Queene falles downe and dies" (Bertram and Kliman, 262). Presumably, as soon as Hamlet is hit, he knows that Laertes' rapier is unbated and therefore forces the exchange of weapons in the "scuffling" that is called for in the F stage direction (ibid., 263). Laertes' touch and Hamlet's are usually played as two distinct hits, accomplished somewhere within the four half-lines that separate Osric's "Nothing neither way" (304) and Horatio's "They bleed on both sides" (307) (both absent from Q1). The second of those half-lines is the King's "Part them! They are incensed" (also absent from Q1), which may punctuate both of the fatal blows, sustained in the grappling that recalls the graveyard scuffle. In production,
this portion of the duel may last several minutes, with each touch separately profiled. But staging the twin touches with the poisoned weapon as the consequences of their grappling lends force to the hapless connection between the young men.

Having both sustained fatal hits, Hamlet and Laertes bleed. Laertes informs Hamlet they are dead, tells him the "King's to blame," endorses Hamlet's slaying of Claudius—"He is justly served. / It is a poison tempered by himself" (329-30)—and exchanges forgiveness with the Prince. His last lines provide yet another opportunity for the joining of him and Hamlet. He may reach out his hand to connect with Hamlet's, as Q1 indicates: "Hamlet, before I die, here take my hand" (Bertram and Kliman, 264). Or Hamlet, after killing the King, may make his way back to Laertes for his "I follow thee" (334)—into the grave in the graveyard scene, into death in earnest now.

**THE DUELING SEQUENCE IN THE BBC HAMLET**

The dueling sequence in the BBC production opens with a somewhat formal tableau: Claudius, who first has the camera's attention in a close-up, stands behind the clasped hands of Laertes and Hamlet, whom he has just joined. The camera backs up to reveal the young men and, assembled upstage behind them in the spacious chamber, Gertrude and a full panoply of courtiers and attendants symmetrically arranged to observe the central action. Though the camera tarries on the extended arms and clasped hands of Hamlet and Laertes, who both wear under their dueling vests white shirts with abundant folds of material in the sleeves, even before Hamlet has completed his first line, "Give me your pardon, sir. I have done you wrong," the hands drop to the men's sides. The two stand facing each other a few feet apart, Hamlet on the right and Laertes on the left, framing the King, as Hamlet proceeds with his apology. Just after his proclamation of madness, Hamlet moves upstage left to continue his lines while holding his mother's hand, which he lightly kisses, as though apologizing to her as well. Returning to his original position, he glances at Claudius as he passes him on the phrase "Hamlet's enemy" and ends his speech facing Laertes again. The camera moves in on Laertes for his response. While Laertes delivers his lines coolly and emphatically on the issue of "no reconcilement," he then becomes more conciliatory and distinctly uncomfortable as he promises not to wrong Hamlet, virtually swallowing the words. To signal the "good faith" among them
before this public competition, Claudius approvingly places his left hand on Laertes' right shoulder, while Hamlet extends his hand once again to Laertes. As they break, it is apparent that Claudius' right hand has been touching Hamlet. For an instant, the frame contains the image of hands touching in a three-way connection of villainous camaraderie and unsuspecting trust. This early orchestration of hands will characterize the strategy of this final sequence in establishing the connection between Laertes and Hamlet—and their broken connections with the King.

The duel itself develops a tension between the participants that gives a special, if unintended, force to Hamlet's remark "I'll be your foil, Laertes." The difference in demeanor is at once apparent. While Hamlet's approach to the match is high-spirited, almost lighthearted, Laertes' is deadly serious. Through the first three bouts, Hamlet's composure and flexible skill are met by Laertes' murderous daring and reckless agility. Thus, in the brief first bout, Hamlet takes Laertes by surprise, striking his dagger from his hand and, as he retrieves it, touching him on the arm. During the protracted second bout, Hamlet avoids the thrusts of his lunging opponent, knocks him down, and, when he rises, feints and stings him in the derriere. In the short but rough third bout, Hamlet again disables and disarms Laertes, bringing him to the ground, only to have Osric (Peter Gale) intervene with "Nothing neither way." Through these bouts, as the action of the combatants fills the playing space, there are several moments of body contact. But the real opportunity for connecting the two visually comes in the incensed scuffle that prompts Claudius to command their parting, a struggle that culminates in bleeding "on both sides."

In this production, Laertes' "Have at you now," nearly whispered in bitter satisfaction, does not anticipate or coincide with his wounding of Hamlet but rather marks the fatal blow already delivered. Having disarmed his opponent in the third bout, Hamlet lifts the rapier by the blade and extends it to him hilt forward; Laertes accepts it with open hand but only long enough to jab the point into the palm of Hamlet's hand. The astonished Hamlet cries out, still holding the weapon by the blade. Seeing and feeling that the blade has no protective tip, a grim Prince deliberately seizes it by the hilt with his good right hand, slowly advances on his rival, and flips his own rapier with the bated tip to Laertes.

There is at once violent play. The two are no longer fencing but fighting in earnest. This is a wild, two-man melee, with Hamlet whipping and slamming his sword at the terrified Laertes, who is clearly on the defensive. Claudius' "Part them! They are incensed"
is an impotent command in this setting, for anyone attempting to come between these raging fires could well give up his life. The one minute that ensues between Osric's "Nothing neither way," after which Laertes twits his sword in Hamlet's hand, and Horatio's "They bleed on both sides," spoken seconds after Hamlet's weapon touches Laertes' shoulder, is thus filled with exciting but deadly combat. But it is Laertes' touching of the poisoned rapier to Hamlet's hand and Hamlet's touching of that same weapon to Laertes' shoulder, not the physical embrace of combat, that re-unites the pair. Earlier, the two had stood facing each other, the one to apologize, the other to express his satisfaction in nature. Now, their bleeding wounds suggest a perverse replay of that preliminary ceremony, where hands and shoulders were center stage, an ostensible token of trust. As Laertes stands unsteadily, informing Hamlet that they are both dead, that the "treacherous instrument is in thy hand," the camera frames Laertes and the rapier, extended by Hamlet from outside the frame. Like Hamlet, who earlier received the envenomed tip into his hand, Laertes now reaches for it, but he is unable to complete the gesture. As Hamlet recoils, Laertes sinks under the effect of the poison.

The eyes of the assembled courtiers are on Laertes as they form a corridor along the arena in which the dead body of Gertrude lies upstage left, the dying Laertes lies downstage right, and Hamlet and Claudius stand between. Summoning what strength he still possesses, Laertes implicates the King, and Hamlet, hearing the accusation, self-mockingly acknowledges the doubly—trebly—deadly plan. Strangely hopeful that he might still make amends, Claudius approaches Hamlet, his arms outstretched, about to come to rest on Hamlet's shoulders. But this final stage image of the connection between Claudius and his surrogate son is aborted, not only by an audience's recollection of the same embracing posture between Claudius and Laertes in the graveyard—which Laertes has now abjured—but also by Hamlet's response to Claudius' villainy. Smiling ironically, Hamlet turns to the advancing Claudius and drives into his midsection the envenomed sword that has slain both him and Laertes. Then, pursuing the stricken King to a table stage right, the Prince flings him backward across the tabletop and pours the poisoned drink into his mouth, before he contemptuously pushes his body to the floor.

The camera is now low so that it may accommodate the prone Laertes in the foreground, the fallen Claudius, and, upstage of both, a weakened Hamlet leaning on the table. As Laertes calls for Hamlet to exchange forgiveness with him, once again, the hand-
joining becomes a visual image of their kinship. Laertes in death spasms raises his left hand, and Hamlet staggers forward to seize it and pull the struggling man to his knees. Laertes holds on desperately, barely able to speak, and presses his lips to Hamlet's hand as he dies. The two young men, both of whom have lost their fathers and their beloved Ophelia, and have now accomplished their revenge and exchanged forgiveness, die within minutes of each other, victims of the same envenomed rapier that mocks the handshakes and shoulder clasps that the treacherous King insisted begin their fatal duel.

As a postlude to the carnage of so many princes in Elsinore's court, this production offers a stage image that both continues the touching of hands and shoulders and redeems the gesture as one of trust and love. Horatio, holding the dead Hamlet on his shoulder, caresses his friend's head with his hand, uniting the man whose story has so intrigued this audience and the man equipped to tell the story to those who are yet ignorant

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads.

(5.2.383–87)

THE DUELING SEQUENCE IN THE OLIVIER HAMLET

The Olivier dueling sequence begins with the same trumpet fanfare that sounded in 1.2 to herald the royal processional. In the vast court setting, Hamlet and Horatio stand on a downstage platform watching the six trumpeters ranged along the gallery opposite with its sweeping staircase to the main level. They begin their descent as the royal party upstage makes its progress down the staircase to triumphal music. As the more elaborate of the two processions approaches the central space where it will meet Hamlet, it becomes apparent that the King is holding not the Queen's hand but Laertes'. As he and Hamlet approach one another in what will become the playing space for the duel, Claudius transfers Laertes' hand to Hamlet, standing between them as the two stand face-to-face, both of them costumed in tunics and shirtsleeves. (In the graveyard sequence, they were distinguished in appearance, Hamlet in sailor's garb and Laertes in courtier's apparel.) Hamlet holds
Laertes' hand throughout his humble apology, while the court, intent on Hamlet's words, gathers to listen. Laertes' response is cut in this production, replaced by the intrusion of Gertrude, who, taking her son's hand and kissing him, pairs off with him even as the King pairs off with Laertes.

In this production it is Laertes who calls for the foils, while Hamlet deposits his mother on her throne. As the young men remove their tunics and prepare for their encounter, a subtle Laertes secures the unbaited foil from Osric (Peter Cushing) and glances significantly downstage at the enthroned Claudius. The camera continues to focus attention on the two foils, bated and unbaited, throughout the sequence, underscoring the treachery to which Laertes has maliciously lent himself. Only its fatal exposure will provoke in him the recognition and remorse that make reconciliation with Hamlet possible.

Claudius' toast to Hamlet is ceremonious here, the kettledrums and trumpets responding to his call. A zooming camera finally holds the entire court within its frame, the toasting King on the throne, center stage, Hamlet and Laertes standing downstage on either side. Hamlet and Laertes go through the initiatory moments of the march, after saluting the King and flourishing their rapiers, standing for some time with blades pointed at each other as the drum rolls. The camera moves to Hamlet and his bated point, next to Laertes in the comparable position opposite him, and then focuses on the nearly touching tips of the blades before the duel begins.

This is an animated duel. The first bout is shown in full, and when Hamlet scores his "palpable hit," the King again makes a ceremonious display of drinking to Hamlet, this time dropping the poisoned "union" into the cup. The second bout, however, is heard rather than seen; the camera fixes on the troubled Gertrude and on her preoccupation with the cup of poisoned wine, until the off-camera clashing of swords ceases with Hamlet's announcing of another hit. The Queen's fatal toast, the King's sudden horror, and a grim Laertes' twinge of conscience initiate the third bout. This inconclusive exchange, again shown in full, ends with Hamlet and Laertes chest to chest, their rapiers and daggers locked. As the familiar court music sounds through the interval, the camera focuses first on Claudius staring with chagrin at Laertes and next on Laertes contemplating the dishonorable touch he is about to administer. With a look over his right shoulder at the conspiratorial Osric, he moves slowly to his left and then flashes his sword at the unsuspecting Hamlet on "Have at you now." Hamlet immediately
turns, clutching his right shoulder, and, while the camera cuts from one to the other, the music dies.

Seeing that the tip of Laertes’ sword is unbated, the tight-lipped Prince deliberately takes his waiting weapons from Horatio and advances on Laertes. With a sweeping blow, he quickly disarms his assailant, the rapier spinning upward and falling at his feet. Stepping on it to prevent Laertes from retrieving it, Hamlet offers Laertes his own sword, then claims the unbated weapon himself. Together with Horatio he examines the naked point and gazes at Laertes. Again advancing, he brushes aside Osric’s feeble attempt to “part them” and violently engages his wronger. Finally, backing Laertes up to a column and then onto the steps of the riser leading to the throne, Hamlet delivers the point to Laertes’ left wrist. The flow of blood brings gasps from the court audience, which has been responsive with applause, with cheers, and with expressions of excitement throughout. Horatio’s “They bleed on both sides” is cut from this production. In its place are parallel questions: Osric to the bleeding Laertes, “How is ’t, Laertes?” Horatio to the bleeding Hamlet, “how is it, my lord?”

From the floor of the throne room, caught in the arms of Osric, the dying Laertes confesses and judges himself to a Hamlet now mounted on the gallery above. The camera stays with Hamlet, replicating his perspective on Laertes below or studying his face as he hears the full extent of the treachery. It is, of course, Laertes’ revelations that motivate his spectacular revenge upon the King: the electrifying leap from the gallery to destroy his antagonist below. In its aftermath, Laertes pleads with Hamlet that they exchange forgiveness. Foregrounded in his downstage right position, Laertes, lying Pietà-like in Osric’s arms, reaches out his arm to Hamlet, who stands with Horatio in the upstage left corner of the frame. Though the two do not touch, the angle of the camera is such that Laertes’ outstretched hand is profiled against Hamlet’s white shirt. The Prince turns toward him and reaches out his hand in exoneration. The camera holds the dead Laertes in the foreground as Hamlet walks slowly upstage to the throne. Whereas the court had earlier surrounded the dying Claudius, pointing their swords at the villainous King, now they surround Hamlet, kneeling in obeisance and respect as he speaks his final words, dying in the throne.

Like the scene in which the royal family first appears (1.2) and like the play-within-the-play scene (3.2), the Olivier duel scene collects the entire court into its arena, making the reaction shots of the King and Queen, Horatio, and the courtiers as central as
the Laertes/Hamlet duel. Yet despite the frequent shift in focus, it is the duel that commands attention, the duel that secures the connection between the ill-fated sons.

REFERENCES


