Offstage Noise and Onstage Action: 
Entrances in the Ophelia Sequence of *Hamlet*

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The unit of action that we call the “Ophelia sequence” begins with the opening of 4.5, in which a Gentleman and Horatio\(^1\) convince a resistant Queen that she should receive the distracted Ophelia, and concludes with the end of 4.7, in which the Queen announces Ophelia’s death. Not seen since 3.2, when her line “The King rises” signaled Claudius’s departure from the play-within-the-play scene, Ophelia appears and reappears in this sequence, before becoming the subject of Gertrude’s lyrical report. In her initial appearance, she has interviews first with the Queen and then with the King, in her second with her brother, Laertes. Each in turn reacts to the young woman’s distraction: Gertrude ineffectually with two interrogatives and an interrupted objection before she points out Ophelia to her entering lord; Claudius protectively but alertly, as he gives command to “Follow her close. Give her good watch, I pray you”; and Laertes hyperbolically, as is his wont, expressing his extravagant grief and reiterating his promise of revenge.

Between Ophelia’s two entrances in 4.5, her brother bursts through the castle doors, confronting Claudius with his demand for his father. And between Laertes’ encounter with his sister and Gertrude’s reappearance in 4.7 with the news of Ophelia’s death, the King and Laertes meet in private to discuss the means of Laertes’ revenge. The sequence is a rich one, recording the final moments of Ophelia’s life through her own poignant songs and Gertrude’s epitaph and providing the motive and the cue for passion in others. It is upon hearing of Ophelia’s distraction that Gertrude admits (conventionally, in an aside) to her “sick soul.” It is upon witnessing Ophelia’s distraction that the King laments, “O Gertrude, Gertrude, / When sorrows come, they come not single spies, / But in battalions.” Ophelia’s second appearance in the sequence becomes an added impetus for Laertes, already incensed over the death of his father, to seek revenge and an occasion for Claudius to counsel treachery to an especially receptive ear. Even as the Ophelia sequence moves toward completion, it sets up (with the interrupting scene, 4.6, in which Horatio receives Hamlet’s letters)
the sequence that will accomplish Laertes’, Claudius’s, Hamlet’s, and the Ghost’s revenge.

The Ophelia sequence embodies the destructive consequences of Claudius’s deed and of Hamlet’s refusal to exact immediate revenge. Crushed first by Hamlet’s appearance in her closet, which she relates to her father in 2.1, then by Hamlet’s abuse of her in the nunnery scene (3.1), where she laments the “noble mind” that “is here o’erthrown,” and again by Hamlet’s cruel innuendoes during the play-within (3.2), Ophelia can inventory her own battalion of sorrows, the most recent her father’s death by Hamlet’s hand and unceremonious burial. Here in the Ophelia sequence, the young woman succumbs to the distraction that Hamlet either feigned or himself endured as well, mourning her dead father and crudely reflecting on men’s love. Gertrude’s sustained and lyrical account of the garlanded Ophelia floating in the brook, her “clothes spread wide” until the heavy garments pulled her to “muddy death,” stills the stage, as onstage and offstage eyes and ears give full audience to the Queen. Nowhere is the penalty of Hamlet’s delay more poignantly felt than in Ophelia’s epitaph, reenacted in abbreviated form by Gertrude at the graveside for Hamlet to hear: there, the grieving Queen decks Ophelia’s bride bed/grave with flowers before the corpse is lowered into the ground. In 4.7, in the concluding moment in the Ophelia sequence, the lyrical passage connects speaker and subject, the two women whom Hamlet loved and abused. The balances that are apparent between the nunnery scene (3.1) and the closet scene (3.4) and Hamlet’s own equation of the woman he had hoped to marry and the mother who married his uncle resonate as the Queen, privileged with knowledge of the young woman’s “doubtful” death, tells Laertes, Claudius, and the audience her sad tale. Her narrative is the culminating moment of the sequence that began with Gertrude’s reception of the distracted Ophelia, the brief but only moment in the play in which the maiden “incapable of her own distress” and the Queen appear together without Hamlet or the King.

Clearly, the Ophelia sequence is dramatically significant in a number of respects, but what interests us particularly is the strategy it employs to accommodate the various entrances that move it through its beats. Within the course of the sequence, several entrances are marked by an offstage noise and some by the directive “Let her come in.” The persuasion beat between the Gentleman and Horatio and Gertrude that begins 4.5 ends with Gertrude’s acquiescence: “Let her come in.” Following Ophelia’s interviews with Gertrude and with Claudius, the King delivers his long and personal lament to his Queen, cataloging his griefs. The speech ends with the stage direction “A noise within,” after which the Queen inquires of the entering Messenger, “Alack, what noise is this?” A second “A noise within” ends the Messenger’s reply, which reports on the unruly crowd who want the wronged Laertes for their king, and Laertes, with others,
bursts through the doors. The young nobleman’s interview with the King is interrupted by “A noise within” and the directive “Let her come in.” As Laertes puts the question “How now, what noise is that?” his sister enters. Similarly, in 4.7, the private discussion between Claudius and Laertes, in which the two plot the death of Hamlet, ends with Claudius’s “But stay, what noise?” signaling the entrance of the Queen, who reports that Ophelia has drowned.

When the rabble are at the gates crying “Laertes shall be king,” the noise clearly emanates from the restless crowd, a “riotous head,” demanding a hearing. But Ophelia’s entrances and the Queen’s are also heralded by noise. What is the “noise within” that causes Laertes to ask “what noise is that?” and, upon Ophelia’s entrance, compels him to recognize her madness? What causes Claudius to break off his dialogue with Laertes to ask “But stay, what noise?” as Gertrude enters with her grim news? Since the sequence is punctuated by such noises, might a noise open 4.5 as well, causing Gertrude at first to refuse to speak with a distracted Ophelia clamoring at her door and creating a ruckus? It is the offstage noises, specified or implied, marking the entrances of Ophelia and Gertrude that we want to scrutinize, particularly in the context of the variations among the First and Second Quarto and the Folio Hamlets. For production must decide at each point how to express and to attach significance to the noise.

Like the 4.7 interview between Claudius and Laertes, which is begun in 4.5 and begun again in medias res, the conversation that opens 4.5 is already in progress. Gertrude’s “I will not speak with her” (1), a short line matched by the line that frames the opening beat, “Let her come in” (16), is manifestly a response either to a request that she speak with Ophelia or to some nonverbal imperative. Because the pattern of entrances throughout the sequence is to anticipate them with an offstage noise, it is plausible that Gertrude’s opening remark is prompted by such a noise. Ophelia’s entrance during or immediately following Gertrude’s four-line aside suggests the young woman is not far away. Indeed, she may be just outside the closed door or outside an open door being restrained. The Gentleman who describes her demeanor speaks of her as “importunate, / Indeed distract” and warns that her wild speech has an audience in the court, those who attach meanings to suit their thought. At Horatio’s intervention—“‘Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds” (14–15)—the Queen acquiesces: “Let her come in.” Has she been persuaded by Horatio’s political wisdom to admit Ophelia, or has she simply acted to quiet the noise?

The questions are intriguing, particularly since most conflated texts differ significantly from both Q1 and F and even from Q2, on which they are based. In Q2, Horatio’s speech continues with “Let her come in,” making the decision his rather than Gertrude’s, and Ophelia enters before
or during the Queen’s confession. In this rendering, Gertrude fears the encounter: “Each toy seemes prologue to some great amisse.” Guilt, not politics, is on her mind. In F, Horatio and the Queen are alone. Horatio, not a Gentleman, describes Ophelia’s condition. In this version, the Queen speaks Horatio’s Q2 lines, “‘Twere good she were spoken with, / For she may strew dangerous conjectures / In ill breeding minds,” and continues, “Let her come in.” This is a politically astute and authoritative queen, who decides it best to speak with Ophelia to quell the danger of others’ misconstruing her words. Yet in this version, the lines set off by inverted commas in Q2 and conventionally spoken as an aside continue the Queen’s speech (with no exit marked for Horatio), which is, finally, followed by the stage direction “Enter Ophelia distracted.”

Both versions represent a considerable departure from Q1, in which the King and Queen speak of the state of affairs: Hamlet is shipped for England (King); Ophelia is “quite bereft of her wittes” (Queen); and Laertes is come from France (King). The Queen then notices, “O see where the yong Ofelia is!” at which Ophelia enters “playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing.” Although this stage direction (still respected in productions that do not otherwise follow Q1) is not in Q2 and F, it may explain the implied offstage noise. Ophelia’s lute and her songs may emanate from outside the door during the opening beat, forming the background and the occasion for the Queen’s conversation with the Gentleman and/or Horatio over whether to let the young woman in. When Ophelia enters in Q1, her loose hair, the lute, and her song immediately signal her distraction. Indeed, as Alan C. Dessen, among others, has pointed out, to Shakespeare’s audience, loose hair on a woman, in and of itself, was a conventional theatrical sign of madness. But in Q2 and F, where no such signals are provided, Ophelia’s entrance line is “Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?” (21). The query might simply be directed to the Gentleman or Horatio, as he admits her, but it might also accompany some expression of the young woman’s confusion. Without her lute and undone hair, Ophelia’s madness might be expressed through her inability to discover the Queen, though only two men (or one) and Gertrude are there.

Ophelia’s entrance must at once convey the young woman’s distraction and Gertrude’s reaction. The politically astute Gertrude of F, who changes her own mind about refusing to speak with Ophelia, may not be moved. While Ophelia sings, in both Q2 and F the Queen speaks only three lines, two of them short: “How now, Ophelia?” (22), “Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?” (27), “Nay, but Ophelia—” (34).

When Claudius enters, her “Alas, look here, my lord” (37) may acknowledge that she no longer sustains the politically superior position but that, with the King onstage, she can yield power to him. In fact, it is the King who continues the interview with Ophelia, and Gertrude says nothing more
until she hears the offstage noise preceding the entrance of the Messenger. The Gertrude of Q2 may yet not want to speak with Ophelia, as her laconic comments could suggest; she has been put in this position by Horatio, who might even have spoken his “Let her come in” not as advice to Gertrude but as a direction to the Gentleman. Only the Gertrude in modern texts (and F), who at first will not speak with Ophelia but finally agrees to “Let her come in,” may be willing actually to speak to the distracted woman. Which of the early printed texts a production selects surely makes a difference both in its portrait of the Queen and in its handling of offstage noise.

An explicit stage direction for noise and an ambiguous directive “Let her come in” mark the second entrance of Ophelia, once her brother has come. Here modern texts not only specify the stage direction but have Laertes ask, “How now, what noise is that?” (158), after which Ophelia enters, presumably in the pause created by the short line. But modern texts vary in their treatment of the directive “Let her come in”—and with good reason. The stage direction in Q2 is “A noyse within. / Enter Ophelia,” after which Laertes says, “Let her come in. / How now, what noise is that?” But F records Laertes’ spoken directive in Q2 as a stage direction: “A noise within. Let her come in. / Enter Ophelia.” No standard modern edition accepts either Q2 or F. All regard “Let her come in” as a spoken line, though the imperative form of “let” is familiar in the stage directions of the time; and yet none assigns the line to Laertes. Some give the line to the King, as the commanding presence in the scene (Bevington, Jenkins). Others alter F as follows: “A noise within: ‘Let her come in’”—with Ophelia entering after Laertes’ “How now . . . ?” (Riverside, Pelican, Signet, Edwards, Hoy). Still others make the implied speech attribution explicit: “A noise within. / VOICES (within) Let her come in” (Hibbard, Norton, Penguin). In short, editors who do not assign the line to the King identify the offstage noise with the shouts or murmurings of a crowd outside the door, so that Ophelia’s entrance here, like Laertes’ earlier in the scene, is forced upon the onstage characters.

There seems to be an obvious disjunction in Q2 between Laertes’ “Let her come in,” which implies knowledge, and his “How now, what noyse is that?” which implies the opposite. But it is possible that he is not responding to the offstage noise when he sees his sister. He may respond with recognition to the sight of Ophelia but with dismay at the sound of her. In Q1, Ophelia enters “as before”—with loose hair, playing on a lute and singing—and, interestingly, the line he greets her with signals both recognition and nonrecognition: “Who’s this, Ofelia? O my deere sister!” It should also be noted (as Hibbard does—305n) that, despite modern editions, in all three early texts Laertes does not speak until after Ophelia has entered.

Whether Laertes, the King, or the offstage crowd speaks the line “Let her come in,” or even if it is not spoken but simply a stage direction, his initial
failure to comprehend what he sees and hears remains a “subtle and highly dramatic effect” (Hibbard—305n). Moreover, if the sound of a young woman’s melodic voice and lute anticipates and accompanies Ophelia’s entrance, it punctuates the supposed crowd noise here and counterpoints the noise of the intervening beat—the cries of the populace—that announced Laertes’ coming. Certainly, as with her earlier entrance, when she asks for the beauteous majesty of Denmark, the signs of her madness must be clear in production. If the signs are not those of Q1, then some other form of costuming and stage business must define her condition—first to cause Laertes’ consternation and then to provoke his grief. As soon as he understands what he beholds—on the heels of his question—he exclaims, “O heat, dry up my brains! . . . / By heaven, thy madness shall be paid with weight / . . . is ’t possible a young maid’s wits / Should be as mortal as an old man’s life?” (159–65). The speech makes it manifest that Ophelia is a “document in madness” (182). As her condition has previously been demonstrated to onstage and offstage audiences, it registers forcibly with her brother now.

Yet another entrance preceded by an unspecified noise begins the final beat of the sequence. At least, this is the case in Q2 and in modern texts based on it, for once again there are notable differences among the three early texts that entail choices not only for editors but for production. In 4.7, it is Gertrude who enters, intruding upon the extended, private, and treacherous conversation between Laertes and the King. In Q1, Claudius is the instigator of the treachery and Laertes his willing accomplice: the King proposes the fencing match with the unbated, poisoned rapier and the poisoned cup as failsafe, a plot Laertes only welcomes. But in Q2, F, and modern editions, Laertes takes an active role: when Claudius proposes the unbated foil, Laertes urges the application of poison to its tip, a suggestion that prompts the King to add the poisoned drink. Whether endorsing Claudius’s treachery or himself taking the initiative to enhance it, Laertes is determined to have his revenge by slaying Hamlet. And the King is absolute in his desire to rid the court of the returning Hamlet, who threatens his kingship and his life. But even with the abundant proof of Claudius’s villainy, Gertrude’s entrance can significantly contribute to the audience’s judgment of the King.

In Q1, the King is alerted to Gertrude’s appearance by Laertes’ “Here comes the Queene,” a short line that gives Claudius time to shift from the long and devious conversation with the would-be killer of Hamlet to the reception of his wife: “How now Gertred, why looke you heavily?” In F, Claudius is permitted no time to make the mental shift. His “how sweet Queene” completes the line that seals the triple treachery of their scheme: if Hamlet escapes the unbated foil and its envenomed tip, “Our purpose may hold there” (in the poisoned chalice). The sudden yet agile transition from
securing the death of his wife’s son to sweetly greeting his wife astonishes even those who have no inclination to underestimate the supple villainy of the King. In Q2 and the modern texts based on it, Claudius need not change faces so suddenly. His final line is completed not with a greeting to the Queen but with what Steve Urkowitz has described as a “guilty lurch”:

“But stay, what noise?” On this cue, the Queen enters and begins her tale.

The introduction of the noise continues the pattern begun earlier in the sequence but raises the same teasing question: what kind of noise? In F, Gertrude makes her entrance quickly, perhaps in a rush, such that in modern editions based on F her entrance punctuates the two halves of Claudius’s line (Hibbard, Norton). In Q2 and its derivatives, her appearance is not necessarily so abrupt. Since she is intruding on a very private conversation, she may despite her heavy news knock at the door before she enters. Whether or not there is a sudden and ominous knocking, there may well be vocal noise. The Queen may be whimpering or weeping or wailing as she enters, or her appearance may be accompanied by the vocal noise of others, as entrances were earlier in the sequence, perhaps by “A cry of women,” as in Macbeth when Lady Macbeth commits suicide. Again, just as was true of Ophelia’s entrances in the sequence, Gertrude’s behavior and the state of her attire should be consistent with the noise that heralds her entrance and the shocking revelation she has to make. As Marvin Rosenberg notes about certain productions, “Gertrude has been by the river, and no reason why her dress should not be wet, her skirts muddy. . . . She has been barefoot. She has staggered in, dishevelled, distraught. . . .” However the Queen shares her narrative of Ophelia’s death, with ringing grief or whispered sorrow, all the theatrical signs must announce that something momentous has happened.

Once Gertrude enters, production has another decision to make, guided in part by the particular text. To whom does Gertrude speak her sad tale? In Q1, in response to the King’s question, she seems to address it to him: “O my Lord, the yong Ofelia. . . .” In F, though greeted by the King, and in Q2, where her entrance is only anticipated by him, she seems to address it to Laertes: “Your sister’s drowned, Laertes” (165). Does Q1, which makes no reference to Laertes, imply that she ignores him, or do Q2 and F imply the same about Claudius? It’s of course possible that her opening line and a half in the later texts, “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel, / So fast they follow” (164–65), is addressed to the King, since it echoes his sentiment about battalions of sorrows in 4.5. The shadings in production are important because the plotting of Hamlet’s death in 4.7, with much that has occurred since the closet scene (3.4), indicates that Gertrude’s relationship with the King has entered its critical phase. On the basis of text alone, she seems in Q2 and F to be engrossed by her story and by Laertes and to take little notice of Claudius. Have events decisively separated them, or
are the two reconcilable? The King does not speak again until the grief-stricken Laertes exits, when he is chiefly concerned with keeping the young man under control. Twice, he urges, “Let’s follow, Gertrude” (192, 195). Gertrude’s demeanor throughout this beat and her response to her husband’s urgings at this point remain for production an interpretive crux.

Notes

1. It is a Gentleman and Horatio in Q2 and modern conflations based on it. For variations among the early texts here, see below, page 23. We use David Bevington’s edition to exemplify most modern conflations. See David Bevington, ed., The Complete Works of Shakespeare, updated 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1997).


4. See Alan C. Dessen, Elizabethan Stage Conventions and Modern Interpreters (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 36–37. Dessen notes that a significant number of Shakespearean and other plays use the theatrical signal of loose hair for the “boy actor playing a female figure distraught with madness, shame, extreme grief, or the effects of recent violence”:

“Enter Cassandra with her hair about her ears” (Troilus and Cressida, II.ii, Folio, ll. 1082–83); “Enter the Queen with her hair about her ears” (Richard III, II.ii, Folio, l. 1306); “Enter Ophelia playing on a Lute, and her hair down singing” (Hamlet, IV.v, Q-1, G4v). In the manuscript of Dick of Devonshire, Eleonora, who has just been raped, enters “loose haired, and weeping” (II. 687–89); similarly, in the manuscript of The Swisser, the ravished Eurinia appears “with her hair about her ears” (IV. o.s.d). In Massinger’s The Unnatural Combat, after an off-stage rape, “The Soldiers thrust forth Theocrine, her garments loose, her hair disheveled” (Vii.185 s.d.); in A Warning for Fair Women, after the corruption of Anne Sanders has been acted out in dumb show, Chastity enters “with her hair disheveled” (E3v). Hair about the ears can indicate public shame (2 Edward IV, The Insatiate Countess, The Bloody Banquet, The Emperor of the East) or high passion (Northward Ho) or mourning (Swetnam the Woman-Hater Arraigned by Women) or madness (I The Iron Age, Tom a Lincoln). Although one can note an occasional man with disordered hair (Humber in Locrine, Saturn in The Golden Age), most of the examples are female. (Dessen, 36–37)

5. In an e-mail message dated 9 December 1998.

6. Hibbard has Gertrude enter “[in tears]” (4.7.137); Bevington marks her entrance by “[A cry within.]” (4.7.163 sd).