The Camera in Gertrude's Closet

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MAURICE CHARNEY, in "HAMLET WITHOUT WORDS," POINTS OUT THAT TO AN Elizabethan "closet" meant a private apartment, not a bedchamber. Yet modern stagings of the closet scene in Hamlet have included a conspicuous bed, inviting audiences to look upon the exchange between Gertrude and her son within the intimacy of the bedroom. Charney argues that the "ponderous marriage bed that usually dominates this scene is entirely out of place."1 Literary purists, and even those with a stage orientation, might also feel that a television or film camera in Gertrude's closet, or in any part of a Shakespeare play, is similarly out of place. Yet in this century there have been a sizable number of television and film productions of Shakespeare. Moreover, the ready availability of videocassettes has not only directed unprecedented attention to the plays as theater but provided scholars with the luxury of repeated viewings and opportunities for comparative analyses.

Our own interest in camera-ready Shakespeare has guided us through the sequences and scenes of Shakespeare's plays in three stages: first through the consideration of problems inherent in a literary understanding of the scene, then through an identification of the signals the text provides for staging, and, finally, through a close look at the ways in which film and television productions have staged—and hence interpreted—the scene. Following is a literary and theatrical look at act 3, scene 4 of Hamlet, with the 1948 Olivier film camera and then the 1980 BBC television camera in Gertrude's closet.

The Enigmatic Text

The closet scene in Hamlet is a drama of conflicting motives and frustrated intent. Gertrude has summoned Hamlet to the interview "in most great affliction of spirit,"2 according to Guildenstern, and she assures the eavesdropping Polonius that she intends to be "round" with
her son. If maternal concern could previously accommodate collaboration with the King and Polonius, it has now been compounded with “amazement” at Hamlet’s insulting behavior on the occasion of the play-within and with distress at her threatened husband’s distress. Gertrude means to confront her son with his offense and to get to the bottom of it. She means also to reassert her claim on Hamlet’s obedience. After all, the last time she did so, in act 1, scene 2, he had assented: “I shall in all my best obey you, madam.” For Hamlet, of course, the “matter” of the meeting is not his own offense against Claudius but his mother’s offense against his father and himself. He goes to Gertrude’s chamber not to be probed but to probe, not to be instructed but to instruct. This is the first private moment Hamlet has had with his mother in the play, and, having just tested the Ghost and the King through the play-within, he is determined to expose her sin. As A. C. Bradley describes Hamlet’s disposition in the closet scene, his “whole heart is in his horror at his mother’s fall and in his longing to raise her.”

Neither Gertrude nor Hamlet intends that the closet be a place of death, but within moments of Hamlet’s entrance, Gertrude cries out for help, fearing her son will murder her, and Polonius lies slain by an impulsive thrust of the sword that was earlier paralyzed. With the eavesdropper dead, Gertrude is without protection; condemning the “rash and bloody deed,” she defends herself by twice challenging Hamlet to explain why he has treated her so unkindly. Hamlet’s first response, an eloquent indictment of her infidelity, brings only her second defensive question; but his next reply, a comparison of the two husbands, humbles her, leaving her thrice begging that he speak no more. Her motive frustrated, Gertrude yields any claim to her position of dominance in the exchange. Hamlet’s intention prevails.

But Hamlet’s intention, to shame his mother into reform, becomes either too insistent or too elaborate for the Ghost to endure. Having counseled Hamlet to “Leave her to heaven,” it reappears when Hamlet persists in his reproaches, even in the face of Gertrude’s pleading. Hamlet immediately thinks it has come to chide a tardy son, which it does do, but it has come as well to protect a wife for whom love still urges kindness: “O, step between her and her fighting soul! / Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works.” Whether the Ghost’s intervention is prompted by Hamlet’s growing excitement or, as J. Dover Wilson proposes, by Hamlet’s imminent disclosure of the particulars of the murder, the Ghost succeeds in altering Hamlet’s behavior and Gertrude’s perception of it. Once the Ghost departs, Hamlet’s counsel is that Gertrude confess herself to heaven, that she “Assume a virtue,”
avoiding Claudius's bed until use changes "the stamp of nature." Clearly Hamlet has cleft his mother's heart in twain, and she has acknowledged her fault.

But just as clearly Gertrude is prepared to yield to Hamlet's demands before the Ghost appears. Gertrude's original admission of the "black and grained spots" in her soul comes as the consequence of a drama as purposefully staged as Hamlet's more famous play-within-the-play. Early in the closet scene, Hamlet instructs his mother to sit down and remain seated. As in The Murder of Gonzago, he plans to hold a mirror up to nature, this time to catch the conscience of the Queen. In this drama, Hamlet presents his mother with the "counterfeit presentment of two brothers" that she may see the difference between them. Even as he inserted a speech of "some dozen or sixteen lines" in the Gonzago play and interrupted the Players with explanatory notes, now he accompanies the images with an interpretive monologue, drawing the moral conclusion he wants his mother to draw. Acting on Hamlet's direction, Gertrude studies the godlike man who was her husband and the "mildew'd ear, / Blasting the wholesome brother," then pleads, "O Hamlet, speak no more! / Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul."

Despite the success of his second play-within, Hamlet is not content. The emotional intensity of this intimate scene in his mother's chamber once again urges him into overreaction. Earlier, hearing Polonius's echo of Gertrude's cry for help, Hamlet had run his sword through the curtain and the anonymous torso behind it. Now, though Gertrude admits she has seen her sinful soul and enjoins her son to speak no more, Hamlet elaborates his catalog of reproaches, forcing her to beg him to be silent—and forcing the ghost to intervene.

On the one hand, the Ghost's appearance seems itself tardy, since Hamlet has already indicated his mother for her poor judgment in men and mentioned the murder. If the Ghost's injunction to leave Gertrude to heaven was intended to secure Hamlet's silence about her "o'erhasty marriage," Hamlet's "Such an act / That blurs the grace and blush of modesty" should have been sufficient cue for it to intrude. If the warning was meant to exclude her from implication in or knowledge of the murder, then the Ghost should have materialized even earlier, at Hamlet's pronouncement on Polonius's death: "A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king, and marry with his brother." On the other hand, the Ghost's appearance could not be more timely. For its intrusion deflects Hamlet from his headlong course, substituting a distraction that his unseeing mother thinks "the very coinage of [his] brain." Its appearance offers Hamlet a more acceptable tack: urging Gertrude not to excuse her own trespass as his madness but to confess
herself to heaven. In effect, the Ghost saves both Gertrude and her son from Hamlet's excess and renews its injunction as well.

Ironically, Gertrude is left to implement her program of abstinence alone, for Hamlet, at Claudius's order, "must to England." The Ghost's reappearance may well have served to restore its injunction about Gertrude, but Hamlet's departure neutralizes its more potent command: Hamlet can hardly avenge the death of his father if Claudius has sent him from court. The final appearance of the Ghost signals the end of the long sequence of fits and starts that has defined Hamlet's reaction to the mandate for revenge. The visitations of act 1, scene 5 and act 3, scene 4 create a frame for the inaction and bungled action that have compromised the avenger and frustrated the Ghost's intent. Now Hamlet's threats are directed not at Claudius but at his schoolfellows, "Whom I will trust as I will adders fang'd, . . . And blow them at the moon."

The Ghost's sudden entrance is, of course, a highly theatrical event, providing Hamlet with a terrifying reminder of his charge and the audience with a fourth encounter with the supernatural. But the presence of the Ghost in Gertrude's chamber also provides a stage image of a family that has been fragmented by lust and murder. Though Gertrude does not see the Ghost, the audience does, and the tableau of husband, wife, and son in Gertrude's chamber, the Ghost (at least in Q1) in his nightgown, gives corporal form to the domestic trinity that for thirty years was Denmark's royal center. The audience has been presented with several stage images of the now prevailing three, with Hamlet sulking off to the side, as in act 1, scene 2, or scheming to undo the King, as in the play-within. But with Claudius wearing the crown, the audience does not see the compassion or the "piteous action" that, despite distraction and amazement, it sees in Gertrude's room. In a sense, the image of old Hamlet's family is being held up against the image of Claudius's family, in much the same way that Hamlet held up the "counterfeit presentment of two brothers" to Gertrude.

But the image of husband, wife, and son is for the audience's eyes, not Gertrude's, for, when the Queen looks upon the ghostly form, she sees only "th' incorporeal air." Assuming the Ghost does have physical presence, as entrance and exit lines urge, why does Gertrude not see it? Most critics accept or offer variations on the standard moral perspectives that the Ghost is sparing the Queen's feelings, Bradley's view, or that Gertrude is not worthy of the vision, Dover Wilson's view. Some endorse W. W. Greg's speculation that the Ghost is indeed the coinage of Hamlet's brain. In act 1, though, the Ghost is visible not only to Hamlet but to Horatio and the sentries as well, suggesting that there are no moral—or psychological—prerequisites for the vision and that the
Ghost is not simply Hamlet's invention. Still, the Ghost has not always assumed an individual corporal form or identity in production. In Tony Richardson's 1969 version, with Nicol Williamson, the presence of the Ghost was manifested by bright light and a disembodied voice. In the 1986 New York University production, in which five actors simultaneously played Hamlet, the entire supporting cast became the Ghost in act 1, positioning themselves in a grid formation before the frightened Hamlet to chant its admonitory lines, while the Hamlets themselves became the Ghost in the closet. In the 1985 American Shakespeare Repertory adaptation, Douglas Overtoom's Hamlet fell to the floor, contorting his body in a shaft of red light, and spoke the Ghost’s part with a gravelly, unearthly voice, in a spectacular display of demon possession. Though exciting and imaginative theater, the commitment to any of these renderings in act 1—or to the position that, while the Ghost has physical presence in act 1, Hamlet hallucinates in act 3, scene 4, as in the 1964 Kozintsev film—neutralizes this domestic stage image in the closet scene and the corollary that Gertrude's failure to see is part of that image.

Gertrude, by Hamlet's account in his first soliloquy (1.2), was a devoted wife, and yet before “the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,” she married her husband's brother. Hamlet imputes this appalling reversal to “Frailty,” by which he evidently means a failure not only in virtue but in judgment and even simple perception: “My father’s brother, but no more like my father / Than I to Hercules. . . .” The shocked Hamlet's early reflections anticipate both the “counterfeit presentment of two brothers” and the stage image created by the appearance of the Ghost in the intimate atmosphere of the closet. Gertrude's inability to see that her devotion to this “Hyperion” should have kept her from the “incestuous sheets” of a “satyr” now finds a physical correlative in her inability to see the apparition of her husband at all. As Harley Granville-Barker points out, the visitation of the Ghost in act 3, scene 4, seen by Hamlet, unseen by Gertrude, presents a “picture of mother, father and son, united but divided, together, but in understanding curelessly apart,” implying that Gertrude's inability to see the Ghost is emblematic of her spiritual blindness.

Certainly Gertrude is no moral giant. But, because Shakespeare is kinder to her than his sources are to her counterpart, the actual extent of her guilt remains in doubt. Interestingly, the Q1 version of the play is more generous and less elusive in its treatment of the Queen than the received version derived from Q2 and F. In the Q1 closet scene, Hamlet is explicit in identifying Claudius as the murderer of old Hamlet: comparing the portraits of the two brothers, he asks, “can you looke on
him / That slew my father, and your deere husband, / To live in the
incentuous pleasure of his bed?” (p. 602). And Gertrude, following the
exit of the Ghost, is explicit in disavowing the deed: “I swear by heaven,
/ I never knew of this most horride murder” (p. 602). Moreover, she
promises to support her son in his quest for revenge:

Hamlet. And mother, but assist me in revenge,
And in his death your infamy shall die.

Queene. Hamlet, I vow by that majesty,
That knowes our thoughts, and lookes into our hearts,
I will conceale, consent, and doe my best,
What stratagem soe’re thou shalt devise.

(P. 602)

In the received text, there is no such clarification or confirmation of
Gertrude’s position. She remains a morally ambiguous figure. She may
be merely obtuse and self-indulgent. She may be a servant of time and
circumstance as shaped by Claudius. Or she may be worse.

The narrative of the Ghost, in making the revelations of act 1, scene 5,
is so structured as to suggest that Gertrude’s infidelity preceded her
husband’s death. Moreover, the specific language of the text reinforces
that impression. The Ghost styles Claudius “that incestuous, that adul­
terate beast,” and Hamlet reviles both his mother (“O most pernicious
woman!”) and his uncle (“O villain”) in his response to the Ghost’s
story.8 Hamlet’s charge that Gertrude’s behavior “makes marriage-vows /
As false as dicers’ oaths” may likewise be taken as evidence of her
adultery. And yet the case against her is never really clinched. Hamlet’s
penchant for generalizing about his mother’s betrayal of his father blurs
distinctions among kinds of infidelity. And Gertrude herself proves to
be an enigmatic commentator on her own guilt, admitting the “dark and
gained spots” that infect and, in act 4, scene 5, the anxiety that afflicts
her “sick soul” but never specifying the nature of her sins. Similarly,
her reactions on other occasions fail to resolve the issue. Speaking to
Claudius alone in act 2, scene 2 on the cause of Hamlet’s distemper, she
makes no apparent reference to an illicit liaison between them: “I doubt
it is no other but the main, / His father’s death, and our o’erhasty
marriage.” Her response to Hamlet’s interruption of the play-within—
“The lady doth protest too much, methinks”—seems simplicity itself:
the Queen may be objecting to the redundancy of the dialogue, to the
strident assertions of the Player Queen, or, perhaps embarrassed by her
own recent history, to the devotion that death, she has learned, negates.
When Claudius rises, calling for lights, she expresses interest only in
the welfare of the King.

Nonetheless, as Hamlet prepares for the interview with his mother,
he is in a violent mood. Pausing to soliloquize, he articulates his wrath:
"Now could I drink hot blood, / And do such bitter business as the day /
Would quake to look on." Though he fails to kill Claudius when he
discovers him at prayer, his savage anger persists, expressed now in
imaginings of Claudius in hell. Once in Gertrude's closet, he suggests
what neither the Ghost nor Claudius nor Hamlet himself has spoken
before: that Gertrude was an accomplice in the murder of the king. The
killing of Polonius is "A bloody deed—almost as bad, good mother, / As
kill a king, and marry with his brother." In interpreting this line, critics
have assumed, with Dover Wilson, that Hamlet is putting Gertrude to
the test and that her "astonished" response "As kill a king!" "acquits"
her. It is, of course, also possible, as Harold Jenkins urges, that the
testing is not deliberate but rather incident to Hamlet's "not dis­
tinguish[ing] the elements of killing and marrying in what he appar­
tently regards as one composite crime."10

As the closet scene progresses, it is clear that Gertrude has seen her
fault in Hamlet's mirror. Imploring Hamlet to be silent, she anguishes in
shame—until the Ghost intervenes. Before the visitation, Hamlet had
labored at getting Gertrude to see what he saw, and he was successful.
Now, despite his excited descriptions of the apparition, Gertrude is
unable to see what her son sees, and she concludes that Hamlet is mad.
Whether she retains that opinion until the end of the scene or permits
Hamlet to persuade her that "It is not madness / That I have utt'red"
remains unclear. Hamlet closes the closet scene with three long
speeches of counsel before his parting lines. The first of these, a defense
of his sanity, ends with his urging his mother to repent. Gertrude's
single line response is "O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain."
Are these the words of a still repentant Queen acknowledging the
trespass shown her by one whose "pulse, as [hers], doth temperately
keep time, / And makes as healthful music"? Or is this the expression of
a deeply saddened mother who has witnessed the "ecstasy" of her son?
Hamlet's second speech, which importunes Gertrude to repudiate
Claudius's bed, is punctuated by three of Hamlet's four good nights and,
finally, by "One word more, good lady." Gertrude's response to Hamlet's
guidance in moral remediation and to his erratic attempts to leave is,
simply, "What shall I do?" Is she so humbled at having provoked such a
schooling from her son that she can say no more? Or is she protecting
her own person by lending a seeming ear to Hamlet's preposterous
counsel, daring to say no more? Hamlet's third speech is a tauntingly
ironic injunction to secrecy, lest his mother reveal to the "bloat king"
that "I essentially am not in madness, / But mad in craft." It secures
Gertrude's cryptic promise: "Be thou assur'd, if words be made of
breath, / And breath of life, I have no life to breathe / What thou hast said
to me." Whether she follows Hamlet's instructions in reporting the interview remains questionable in act 4, scene 1, where she tells Claudius that Polonius is slain and that her son is mad. She may be keeping Hamlet's secret, or she may herself believe in Hamlet's distraction.

Nor is it certain after the encounter in the closet is over and Hamlet has departed for England that Gertrude no longer goes to Claudius's bed. The signals she gives are mixed. In act 4, scene 5, just before the entrance of Ophelia, she professes the chastened consciousness of sin that Hamlet has inspired, but, in the same scene, at the entrance of the incensed Laertes, she becomes the determined protector of Claudius, putting herself in danger to shield him from assault. When Laertes makes the demand for his father and the King replies that he is dead, Gertrude quickly adds, "But not by him." Such solicitous concern hardly seems the mark of a wife who has alienated herself from her husband. When Hamlet appears at Ophelia's grave, challenging Laertes to match his love for the dead girl, Gertrude speaks of her son's ranting as one privileged to know what it imports and what its course will be:

This is mere madness,  
And thus awhile the fit will work on him;  
Anon, as patient as the female dove  
When that her golden couplets are disclos'd,  
His silence will sit drooping.

(5.1.284–88)

Does Gertrude believe her son mad, which would neutralize his earlier counsel to her, or is she playing the protector once more?

Textually, Gertrude remains a mystery. She will appear one more time, in the final scene, to drink from the poisoned cup, knowingly or accidentally, and so die, leaving unanswered the questions concerning the extent of her guilt and the extent of her repentance. Yet these are questions that must be addressed in production and in some measure answered. Gertrude will become a compelling theatrical reality only when a coherent sequence of theatrical signals is associated with her presence on the stage, particularly in the pivotal closet scene.

Theatrical Cues

Before we turn to see how the Olivier and the BBC productions handle the character of Gertrude as well as other opportunities for interpretation, it is worth looking at some of the signals the text itself provides for playing the scene. The closet scene, like so much of Shakespeare's dramatic writing, is chary of stage direction, recording
entrances and exits and an occasional action. But this scene (again, like so many others) is rich in verbal clues and cues that variously guide and prescribe the action that supplements, prompts, and validates words.

There is, for example, no stage direction that says Gertrude neither sees nor hears the Ghost. Yet Gertrude's language leaves no doubt that she does not. In response to Hamlet's sighting, she cries, "Alas, he's mad!" When, at the direction of the Ghost, Hamlet inquires after his mother's welfare, she replies, "Alas, how is 't with you, / That you do bend your eye on vacancy, / And with th' incorporeal air do hold discourse?" Convinced of her son's distemper, she asks, "Whereon do you look?," then "To whom do you speak this?," and, finally, she confirms she sees "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see" and hears "nothing but ourselves."

The encounter with the Ghost is otherwise prescriptive in its language. Hamlet's words reflect fear and excitement and offer a description of the Ghost's appearance and behavior: "look you how pale he glares? . . . Look, where he goes, even now, out at the portal!" Even without reference to the Q1 specification of a "night gowne," we still know from Hamlet that the Ghost is dressed "in his habit as he lived." While Hamlet is describing the Ghost to his mother, his mother is describing Hamlet, whose eyes are wild ("Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep") and whose hair "like life in excrements, / Start up and stand an end," the second a bit difficult to play.

There are other moments in the scene in which dialogue clearly specifies action but any number of stagings could be managed. Hamlet's presentation to this mother of the two "counterfeit presentments," for example, must find its shape in production. On the New York University stage, one of the five Hamlets held up the palms of his hands in turn, providing no picture but verbal description. In the 1984–85 Royal Shakespeare Company's Hamlet, Roger Rees pointed to two imaginary paintings on the wall. Ian McKellen's Hamlet compared an oval framed picture of Claudius from a side table with one of his father that he pulled from his shirt. Nicol Williamson wore a locket containing the miniature portraiture of his father around his neck, which he held next to the likeness of Claudius around Gertrude's. How forcibly Hamlet imposes his lesson upon his mother remains a directorial decision as well. In the NYU production, Hamlet stood threateningly over his seated mother, forcing her head back so that her long red hair cascaded in the air. In ASR's contemporary staging, Hamlet held a pistol to Gertrude's forehead as he spoke of the act that "takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love / And sets a blister there. . . ." As Gertrude pleaded with him to speak no more, Hamlet pinioned his mother, pressing his fingers into her neck.
Similarly, how Hamlet discovers that it is Polonius he has slain may also be variously staged. At line 27, Hamlet asks whether he has killed the King. By line 32, he knows it is Polonius: “Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell! / I took thee for thy better.” Does Hamlet lift up the arras and see Polonius, as the editorial direction in several modern editions suggests, or does the falling body brush the curtain aside to lie within view as soon as Hamlet turns to discover it?

Throughout the closet scene, Shakespeare provides verbal cues for physical action, ranging from the prescriptive (Hamlet, about to wring his mother’s heart, notices she is wringing her hands) to the suggestive (might Gertrude press her hands to her ears at “O, speak to me no more! / These words, like daggers, enter in my ears. / No more, sweet Hamlet!,” preventing her from hearing Hamlet’s condemnation of Claudius as “A murderer and a villain”?). There is one moment in the closet scene, however, in which action prompts language and Shakespeare’s text provides neither stage direction nor apparent cue. We are referring to Gertrude’s cry early in act 3, scene 4: “What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me? / Help, ho!” Textually, there seems to be little motivation for Gertrude’s unfortunate presumption, the consequence of which is Polonius’s death. But the Queen must have had cause to be afraid, and, in the absence of language signaling that cause, it is only in production that an audience can know why.

The sequence begins with the quick exchange between Hamlet and his mother, Hamlet challenging Gertrude’s charges with barbed accusations of his own. Exhausted by her son’s caustic cleverness and dismayed by his wish to deny her maternity, the Queen concludes, “Nay, then, I’ll set those to you that can speak,” to which Hamlet retorts, “Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge. / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you.”

Action is clearly demanded here: Gertrude, moving away from Hamlet, either to recall Polonius or to fetch her husband and his attendants, is prevented from doing so by Hamlet, who insists she sit down and not budge until she has recognized her fault. His “Come, come” might at first appear to be merely an invitation to sit, albeit a firm one. But the Queen’s extraordinary reponse demands that it be more. Q1 offers guidance. In her account to Claudius of Hamlet’s behavior in her closet, Gertrude reports: “Whenas he came, I first bespake him faire, / But then he throwes and tosses me about, / As one forgetting that I was his mother” (p. 603).

That Hamlet is in a violent mood has already been established by his readiness to “drink hot blood” and by his wish to secure Claudius’s damnation. Moreover, his swift slaying of Polonius immediately after Gertrude’s cry at least confirms that mood and may even be taken to
indicate that killing was on his mind. Traditionally, in production, Hamlet is rough, even brutal with his mother, pushing her down and restricting her movements with force, the assumption being that a sufficient show of Hamlet's physical superiority and of his intemperance will leave Gertrude fearing for her life.

Production may even provide a more tangible cue for Gertrude's cry. Hamlet tells his mother he plans to "set you up a glass" wherein she may see her fault. While no property is mandatory here since Hamlet's mirror is metaphorical, he might hold up an actual mirror or, in the absence of one, the reflective edge of a sword. Though offered as the glass that will expose her soul, the sword may terrify the Queen, who concludes that Hamlet has drawn it to slay her. Or Hamlet may draw his sword or rapier to restrain his mother from leaving. Either reading provides the ancillary benefit of an already drawn weapon with which to slay Polonius.

But even without the menacing weapon or the throwing and tossing that did not find its way into Q2 or F, Gertrude's cry might be explained in either of two ways. The first brings us back to the question of Gertrude's guilt. Her "What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me?" may be prompted not by Hamlet's behavior but by his plan to undress his mother's soul. If the Queen knows the blackness within and fears that Hamlet knows or will soon know as well, her frightened cry may be the culmination of a mental drama in which she recalls her deeds and anticipates Hamlet's response. In such a reading, her readiness to conclude that Hamlet will murder her may be presumptive evidence of the enormity of her guilt. Her "As kill a king!" need not be so astonished—or exonerating—an exclamation as Dover Wilson assumes but, rather, a tentative expression of what she most fears Hamlet knows: that she was accomplice in her husband's murder. Her ensuing questions, imploring Hamlet to identify her deed, become a test of the extent of her son's knowledge. That Gertrude is not satisfied by Hamlet's reference to false marriage vows in his first response lends credibility to such a reading, for though she should now know what Hamlet accuses her of, she still seeks more: "Ay me, what act, / That roars so loud and thunders in the index?" In such a reading, Gertrude's response to Hamlet's comparison of the two brothers would leave her contrite but relieved that Hamlet was claiming no more.

But even if Gertrude is not guilty of the terrible crime Hamlet is about to suggest, her cry and the ensuing action have an arresting effect on an audience that previously did not associate Gertrude with her husband's death. The small but suggestive patch of drama begins with Gertrude's "Thou wilt not murder me?" and ends with her "As kill a king!" In between these outcries, the audience is provided with a stage image of
death, in the form of the slain Polonius, whom Hamlet first thought the King. The drama would seem to be urging the audience into considering the possibility of Gertrude's complicity, a possibility that, while never made patent, invites more careful scrutiny of the Queen.

The second approach in effect renders gratuitous the psychological paradigm inherent in the first. But demanding psychological accountability or consistency in Shakespeare's characters may not always be warranted. Alan C. Dessen makes this point in his excellent book *Elizabethan Drama and the Viewer's Eye*. Taking care not to repudiate our traditional sense of dramatic character, he argues that our sense of character may at times be "superseded by some other principle we may not take into account." More specifically, he proposes that characters "can for a moment cease to be important as individuals but instead can participate in some larger, shared effect. . . ." Gertrude's cry in act 3, scene 4 may well be a moment that is unjustifiable within a psychological matrix. Connecting as it does with the pent-up fury of Hamlet's soliloquy on his way to his mother's room, it may find its most reasonant validation as one of Dessen's larger, shared effects. For an audience carrying the verbal images of Hamlet's self-appraisal with them into the closet, Gertrude's cry prompts and articulates its own astonishment and fear.

Hamlet, we know, has emotional warrant to kill as he approaches Gertrude's room. In his present mood, he is capable, by his own account, of terrifyingly "bitter business." Yet, in a prayer as potent as Lady Macbeth's plea that the spirits unsex her, he prays that the soul of Nero not enter his bosom, that he be "cruel, not unnatural," that he "speak daggers to her, but use none." This is the Hamlet who had advised the Players in act 3, scene 2 to "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action." Now he urges on himself a hypocritical division between "tongue and soul": "How in my words somever she be shent, / To give them seals never, my soul, consent!" An audience recognizing the pattern would, when it hears Gertrude's cry, fear that Hamlet's action will, after all, match his word; he will speak daggers to her and use one.

In Dessen's own analysis of the closet scene, he concentrates on Hamlet's rash and bloody frame of mind and on the way theatrical images may reflect on the state of Hamlet's soul rather than Gertrude's. The larger pattern he identifies consists of visual analogues linking the First Player as Pyrrhus brandishing his sword over the doomed Priam, Hamlet lifting his sword over the praying Claudius, and Hamlet thrusting his sword into the shrieking Polonius. Here the use and abuse of the revenging sword, as a symbolic stage property, becomes the focus of interest. "What would be the effect on an audience," asks Dessen, "if the director left Polonius's body, covered with blood, in full view and left
the sword, also bloodied, in the hero's hand throughout much if not all of the scene?" The suggested answer is that much of Hamlet's commentary on Gertrude's corruption would apply ironically to the commentator, for he "has himself been tainted with the disease and disorder of the world he has sought to cure, and the blood on the sword becomes an apt visual symbol for that stain or implication." Dessen's recommended staging is, of course, a reading of the play, and that is just the point. An actor who lets the curtain fall on the dead Polonius and casts aside his weapon to turn his attention to Gertrude will create a different and probably more favorable impression of Hamlet, at Gertrude's expense. The given in the text is the stage property and its bloody use. How a director reads this textual signal will determine how the closet scene takes shape.

**Productions**

Since the Laurence Olivier film version of *Hamlet* features the director in the role of the protagonist, the production is to an unusual degree under the control of a single creative personality. Olivier chose to film in black and white, for example, "to achieve through depth of focus a more majestic, more poetic image, in keeping with the stature of the verse." While he managed to recruit a remarkable cast, including Eileen Herlie as Gertrude and Felix Aylmer as Polonius, he was still "prepared to take on the entire responsibility" for the result.

It is an active camera that introduces us to the scene. The opening moments show Hamlet's shadow ascending a winding stairwell, Gertrude and Polonius conversing in the spacious chamber, Hamlet himself on the stair calling "Mother, mother, mother," and Gertrude rising to conceal Polonius in a curtained archway stage-right, then moving left to face the entranceway and the camera. With the frame fixed, Hamlet suddenly appears in it. In deep focus, we see Hamlet's back in the foreground as he enters the room and Gertrude in the distance standing in front of her bed. Having established the authority of the camera, Olivier makes bold use of it to shape the scene and to regulate both the perspective and the responses of the audience.

Thus, though Hamlet on the stairs calls quietly, even tentatively, to his mother, he moves steadily, inexorably toward the camera. When he enters the room for the first exchange with a self-possessed Gertrude, bareheaded but regal-looking in her elegant *robe de chambre*, the camera remains on his back as he pauses in the entranceway and then slowly bears down on her, reaching her on his wish that she were not his mother. When Gertrude attempts to come forward to get those that "can speak," Hamlet seizes her by the arm and throws her backward on
the bed. The camera now makes a series of suggestive switches and movements. From behind the bed, it shows Hamlet in the act of throwing Gertrude down, follows her as she lands, her robe parting in the violence of the fall, and lifts to reveal Hamlet standing over her with his sword drawn. The angle is then reversed, with the camera looking at Gertrude over Hamlet's shoulder, the point of his sword poised at her naked throat, while he expresses his determination to expose her "inmost part." It is this gesture that motivates Gertrude's terrified "Thou wilt not murder me?" and Polonius's echoing "Help!" Viewed again from the front, Hamlet is exhilarated at the cry of the outsider who, he thinks, is the King. As he turns to Polonius's archway, the camera switches to that perspective for Hamlet's onrush, eyes wide and glaring, and his lunge with the sword almost into the camera's eye.

The manipulation of the camera in this opening sequence is clearly meant to dramatize the progressive violence of Hamlet's demeanor and his quick seizure, by force and terror, of the dominant position in the scene. For an audience primed by Hamlet's reflections in soliloquy in the two previous scenes, he is obviously yielding to his rash and bloody mood and seems ready to give it full scope. The camera invites the audience to share the shock of Gertrude and Polonius at Hamlet's towering excitement and precipitate actions.

When Hamlet stabs through the curtain and Gertrude screams behind him, his face is a mask of manic glee. Turning slowly toward the distraught Queen, he shouts defiantly, "Is it the King?" The camera switches angles, holding the weeping Gertrude in the foreground and her son, with head thrown back, by the archway. As Hamlet delivers his comment on the "bloody deed," he stands in his murderous pose, right arm outstretched, the sword in the curtain and in the body, now carefully watching his mother's startled reaction to "As kill a king. . . ." On "Ay, lady, it was my word," he withdraws the weapon and pulls the curtain, and Polonius topples into view. Casting his sword upon the body, Hamlet leans forward over the camera to utter a disappointed and contemptuous farewell to the "busy" old man. Though the body remains exposed, the camera will not return to it until late in the scene. Attention is fixed on Hamlet and Gertrude.

An unarmed Hamlet, but still a violent one, turns back to his sobbing mother, now in the center of the frame, her writhing hands folded as though in hysterical prayer. When Hamlet seizes her by the shoulders as she tries to rise, abruptly sitting her down again, she recovers from her weeping to shout angrily, "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" During Hamlet's indictment, she looks appalled, stifling sobs as she stares into his face; she starts her second question, "What act . . .?," only to have it cut short when
Hamlet grabs at the picture of his father hanging from his neck and that of Claudius hanging from hers to begin his comparison. Gertrude studies the image of old Hamlet as the son celebrates the virtues of his father. But, when Hamlet speaks of “An eye like Mars, to threaten and command,” she raises her own languid eyes to gaze fixedly, lovingly on Hamlet’s face. The spell is broken only when his disgust at his stepfather’s image becomes disgust at her. This Hamlet’s obsession and the sexuality of the woman who inspires it are made visually evident by the appearance of Gertrude as she sits on the bed, her robe open wide to reveal a full, firm body in a thin, clinging shift. In his pain and fury, Hamlet tears Claudius’s picture from his mother’s neck and stalks away, rounding on her with “O shame, where is thy blush?” Gertrude herself turns away at this reproach, into a closeup camera that frames her in a crouched position, the bottom portion of Hamlet’s torso in the distance. Her contrite acknowledgment of her soul’s “dark and grained spots” seems to solicit a tender response, but her son becomes only more incensed. Leaning forward on her bed, he assails his mother with images of corrupt sensuality. Holding her hand to her cheek, the beleaguered Queen turns back to Hamlet and throws her arms about his neck to beg “no more.” His response is to grab her by the wrists and to deliver another verbal assault, which leaves her sobbing uncontrollably and screaming in anguish for relief. As a climax to the sequence, Hamlet seizes the panting Gertrude by the throat, but he is arrested in his physical assault by the ominous sounds of a drum.

With the drum pounding like a heartbeat, the camera rests on Hamlet’s paralyzed face, then on the pleading face of Gertrude, whose lips move inaudibly. We are locked during an extended pause in the traumatized consciousness of Hamlet. Then, as abruptly as it stopped, the action resumes, with Hamlet roughly pushing his mother backward on the bed. She lies there mute, her arms outstretched, watching in amazement as her son turns away, looks upward, and prays to “heavenly guards” for protection, even as the sounds of the swelling winds accompany the ominous drum to signal the visitation of the Ghost.

This Ghost, however, does not assume corporal form. Though old Hamlet had appeared in his armor on the battlements, now he remains a disembodied voice. Here, as in act 1, Hamlet drops to the floor at its presence, as though felled by a blow, twisting his body and craning his neck to behold and address the apparition. Gertrude, sitting up to observe the spectacle of her son, concludes sadly, “Alas, he’s mad!” The failure of the Ghost to materialize lends credibility to her judgment and eliminates the symbolic stage image of family reunion. But Olivier compensates for the loss of the Ghost as a physical presence and secures comparable effects by means of the camera. During most of the
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visitation, the camera becomes the Ghost. Hence, Gertrude no sooner reaches her conclusion than the prone Hamlet appears in a long shot, speaking and reaching toward the camera. When the father reminds the son of his "almost blunted purpose," the camera is fixed on the chastened Hamlet; but then it swings slowly stage-left to fix on Gertrude and returns to Hamlet for the Ghost's admonition, "But, look, amazement on thy mother sits." Never taking his eyes from the camera, Hamlet reaches toward Gertrude to ask, "How is it with you, lady?" When she counsels patience and questions him, "Whereon do you look?," Hamlet urgently points at the camera—"On him, on him!"—and describes the figure he sees. Finally, as Gertrude bows her head in weary conviction, he stretches toward the camera on his elbows to plead, "Do not look upon me, / Lest with this piteous action you convert / My stern [ intents]."

As Olivier contrives the scene, it is difficult to disbelieve in the Ghost just because we don't actually see it. And Gertrude's perception of nothing but "vacancy" remains as fully a comment on her moral disability as it is on Hamlet's distress. Similarly, though the domestic stage image is sacrificed, the audience is invited to share the perspective of the dead father in his last encounter with the two people he loved most in life. The impact of this cinematic device, in contrast to the stage image, is psychological rather than symbolic, a poignant expression of alienation and loss. In the final moments of the visitation, the camera separates itself from the Ghost's perspective and then adopts it again to reassert the effect. In closeup, Gertrude asks, "To whom do you speak this?" We next see Hamlet and Gertrude in turn, now from behind the bed, each on the margin of the space where the Ghost presumably stands, Gertrude descrying nothing and Hamlet pointing at the archway. When woodwinds signal the departure of the Ghost, Hamlet, now in closeup, looks and lunges to his right, calling, "Why, look you there, look how it steals away!" The camera is already moving away from Hamlet as he lunges and crawls after it, pulling himself with one arm and reaching out with the other. The Ghost/camera retreats, holding the writhing Hamlet in sight until the darkness of the corridor closes it in.

In the aftermath of this extraordinary episode, Gertrude walks alone through the spacious chamber toward its empty archways, looking for "nothing." As she pauses to peer in the direction of the corridor, a peal of chimes indicates the return of ordinary reality, much as the knocking at the gate does in Macbeth. Coming back downstage, she looks and crosses left, where Hamlet is discovered sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. "This," she comforts him, "is the very coinage of your brain."

At the imputation of madness, Hamlet rises to insist calmly on his own sanity and firmly on his mother's trespass. But this Gertrude is no longer interested in what Hamlet has to say. Consistent with this inter-
pretation, Hamlet says a good deal less; Olivier makes his heaviest cuts here in the final panel of the scene, reducing Hamlet's lines by more than half (from nearly ninety to forty). Refusing to meet her son's eyes, she turns her head to the side and looks downward, then walks slowly away, saddened and resigned. As she reaches the bed, she sits down and weeps, not in terror as earlier and not for herself. These tears are for her distracted son, whose madness, not counsel, has cleft her heart. In the meantime, Hamlet comes up behind her, but the touching between mother and son is no longer cruel: Hamlet holds her tenderly at the shoulders, and she reaches her hand back to touch his. As he tells his mother to throw away the "worser part" of her divided heart, he rests his head on hers, then gently touches his lips to her forehead. Though his voice takes on an edge when he asks that she not return to Claudius's bed, Gertrude shows no resistance, turning to him afterward to hold his face and kiss him on the lips. This pair are like lovers making up rather than mother and son. Hamlet's "I must be cruel only to be kind" is gently said. It occasions a full embrace, after which Hamlet rests his head in Gertrude's lap, receiving her caresses. When he announces his imminent departure for England and his intention to remove Polonius's body, they once again face each other for a long meaningful look and a truly passionate kiss. For all that has happened in this remarkable encounter, the end of the scene recalls the beginning. In deep focus, we see Hamlet's back in the foreground as he drags out the body of Polonius and Gertrude in the distance standing by the richly draped bed. At last alone, she sits down for the fade-out.

The Oedipal suggestions in Olivier's rendering of this scene endorse the position popularized by Ernest Jones in Hamlet and Oedipus. In 1937, ten years before he made the film, Olivier, in the company of Tyrone Guthrie and Peggy Ashcroft, went to visit Jones. According to Olivier:

I have never ceased to think about Hamlet at odd moments, and ever since that meeting I have believed that Hamlet was a prime sufferer from the Oedipus complex—quite unconsciously, of course, as the professor was anxious to stress.

It is the Oedipal premise that provides a coherent sequence of stage images. Even if this production were a Hamlet without words, the premise would be apparent. We could clearly discern the sexual energy in the closing embraces and kisses of mother and son, consummated on Gertrude's bed. Moreover, we could also see the external expression of the matricidal impulse, first examined in detail by Frederic Wertham and accommodated in Jones's analysis: it is signaled in the escalation of
Hamlet's violence when he grasps his mother's throat. The Ghost's intervention thwarts it. The Ghost may thus be taken as the correlative of a self-imposed restraint, appearing just as Hamlet is about to yield to his murderous urge and become "passion's slave."

Perhaps because the Oedipal pattern makes it clear that Gertrude will be guided by a son who has established his tacit right to demand the fidelity that she has betrayed, Hamlet's instructions to his mother about what she should tell Claudius are cut, as is the scene (4.1) in which Gertrude makes her report. Also cut is her anguished aside in act 4, scene 5 ("To my sick soul . . .") and her protection of Claudius from Laertes' wrath later in that scene. Yet here in act 4, scene 5, Gertrude twice rejects Claudius's touch, the second time poised at the base of a flight of stairs as the King laments, "O Gertrude, Gertrude, / When sorrows come, they come not single spies, / But in battalions. . . ." The messenger from act 4, scene 7 appears in a coda to act 4, scene 5, presenting separate letters from Hamlet to the King and to the Queen. As the Queen reads hers, she begins her ascent up one staircase; Claudius, pausing to look at the absorbed Queen, reads his as he ascends another. Olivier has extended the division suggested by Hamlet's separate letters to a potent theatrical image of the division between the pair engendered by Hamlet as Oedipal son.

The effect of Hamlet's lesson in the closet becomes fatally apparent in the final scene when Gertrude knowingly drinks the poisoned wine intended for her son. Starting at Claudius's dropping of the pearl into the drink, she sits in silence, the camera holding her and the hand that holds the cup in its frame. She looks to the cup repeatedly, as though planning her course. Then, before Claudius has a chance to intervene, she drinks. Olivier moves the Queen's toast—"The Queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet"—to a position following her apology to Claudius—"I will, my lord; I pray you pardon me"—diminishing further the possibility that Claudius's "Gertrude, do not drink" can come in time. Her farewell to Hamlet, abbreviated to "No, no, the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet," spoken gently and with a fragile smile, ignores the exclamation points of modern editions. This Gertrude knows what she has done and sees her own death as a gesture of atonement, of protection, and of love.

As in the Olivier film, the "ponderous marriage bed" that draws Charney's wry objection is a feature of the closet scene in Rodney Bennett's BBC Hamlet. There is some difference, however, since the apartment of Claire Bloom's Gertrude is divided into two chambers, her closet and her bedroom, joined by a curtained opening. In the course of the scene, she moves between these spaces, first with Eric Porter as Polonius and then with Derek Jacobi as Hamlet. The movement is
suggestive. Gertrude intends to conduct her interview with Hamlet in the closet, yet before long she finds herself being dragged into the bedroom, the more appropriate place for Hamlet’s recriminations. Like Olivier’s, Jacobi’s Hamlet, in attempting to expose his mother’s inner part, at the same time exposes his own; his moral disgust is also informed by sexual outrage. Still, despite this similarity and the presence of the marriage bed in both productions, there are important differences in the portrayal of this mother-son pair.

Bloom’s Gertrude begins the scene by primping before an unseen mirror, removing her rings and touching her loose auburn hair, while Polonius in the doorway behind her adjures her to be firm with Hamlet. Turning, she sweeps past Polonius, from bedroom into closet, and sits in a chair facing the curtain at stage-right, where Polonius conceals himself at Hamlet’s offstage cries of “Mother.” Dressed in a copper-colored robe over a white nightdress, she seems composed, though she breathes rapidly. When Hamlet enters, from far upstage, he is disheveled. In contrast to the sober dignity of Olivier’s mourning habit, even without his doublet, Jacobi’s costume manifests neglect; with an open shirt tucked loosely into rust breeches and one boot drooping to his ankle, his appearance recalls Ophelia’s account of his visit to her closet in act 2, scene 1. On this occasion, he carries under his left arm both sword and dagger.

Hamlet’s first line cues the camera to begin the sequence of alternate closeups that accompanies the mother-son exchange. Hamlet is swift in his retorts, Gertrude sure but a bit hesitant in hers. At “Have you forgot me?,” she stands to face her son, who responds with withering sarcasm: “You are the Queen, your husband’s brother’s wife.” Stung by the insult, she angrily slaps Hamlet on the face and provokes him to a snarling conclusion, “And—would it were not so!—you are my mother.” Gertrude immediately heads upstage to fetch assistance, but Hamlet crosses her path with his sword, preventing her progress. Backing away fearfully, she cries out, “Thou wilt not murder me?,” and calls for help. Her astonished son, who despite his menacing manner had no such intention, throws down his dagger on the instant and looks with bewilderment at his drawn sword. When he responds to Polonius’s voice, he shouts “A rat?” as though he is frightened also and stabs frantically, then furiously thrice into the curtain. As Gertrude screams at him, he stands hugging the curtained form, asking doubtfully, “Is it the King?” There is no note of triumph in the question, as there was in Olivier’s. Clearly, both Hamlets are dangerous, but they are so in different ways. While Olivier’s Hamlet is actuated by a determined fury, which may overmaster him, Jacobi’s acts on impulse and seems completely unpre-
dictable. He responds, literally, to the moment, and if he terrifies Gertrude, he also terrifies himself.

Still hugging the unseen body, Hamlet becomes truculent again in response to Gertrude's condemnation of the deed—"almost as bad, good mother, / As kill a king"—yet he casts his eyes downward instead of studying Gertrude as she meekly repeats the charge. At "Ay, lady, it was my word," he pulls out the sword, stepping back, and when the dying Polonius falls out, he drops the sword and practically sings his surprise, "Thou wretched, rash, in-truu-ding fool. . . ." Then, kneeling over the body, he caps a gentle "farewell" with a contemptuous "too busy," while Gertrude stands behind him whimpering and clasping her hands before her face. So mercurial a Hamlet makes for a very uneasy audience.

To set up the "counterfeit presentment of two brothers," Hamlet backs his mother into the chair, leans over her, and inveighs against her fault. "What have I done?," she demands, and "Ay me, what act . . .?" Both protests are vigorously spoken, with an angry sob, the camera singling her out for the second, but they represent the last vestige of defiance in Gertrude. When Hamlet kneels to show her the images, worn about their necks as in the Olivier production, his voice softens, and Gertrude breaks down, breathing painfully and weeping quietly. Unlike Herlie's Gertrude, this one does not look at the image of her dead husband or at her son; she closes her eyes and turns away toward the camera. Similarly, when Hamlet becomes vicious again, battering her with his words and moving behind her to shove the picture of Claudius in her face, she doesn't want to see it and throws back her head in agony. Finally, as her son rounds on her to display both images—"what judgment / Would step from this to this?"—she wails, leaps up, and runs from him out of the frame. Shouting reproaches, Hamlet pursues her, first as she stands fretfully and next as she paces erratically around the room, cupping her hands over her ears, trying to escape the wounding diatribe. There is no escape for Gertrude. At length, Hamlet catches her by the wrists, staring into her face for "O shame, where is thy blush?," then strides left dragging her to the inner chamber, where he throws her on the bed. The camera follows the pair through the opening, before it switches frames for Gertrude's rough landing.

On her back in the foreground, Hamlet standing over her, the rumpled Gertrude is especially vulnerable now, and Hamlet is intolerably cruel. In a sudden movement, he mounts the bed and his mother, his hips jerking in mock intercourse as he chides her "compulsive ardor." When he falls by her side, he is only apparently exhausted. For, when Gertrude begs that he speak no more and, wracked by sobs,
confesses her fault, he resumes in near frenzy his verbal and physical pummeling of the thrashing woman for her corrupt sexuality. At her second plea for mercy—"These words, like daggers, enter in my ears"—he pulls himself up over her head and shouts directly into her ear, "A murderer and a villain." As he continues, he yanks her from behind into a sitting position, her skirts around her thighs, and pinions her arms at her back, her long hair spread over her weeping face and wrenched shoulders. Had Gertrude concluded here that her son was about to kill her, she could not be accused of overreacting. An audience is as relieved as Hamlet is amazed and shaken at the Ghost's intervention.

The figure of the Ghost, framed by the open curtains at the entrance to the bedroom, seems nearly translucent in sharp blue light, shimmering as though in an aura. In this manifestation, played by Patrick Allen, the Ghost's "habit as he lived" is not a nightgown but the armor of the earlier visitations, only now it bears helmet in hand. A strain of music in muted monotone accompanies its appearance. The camera, as it did early in the scene, again alternates shots, switching between the Ghost and the mother-son pair, never showing all three in tableau. Pushing away his mother with a gasp, Hamlet comes to the foot of the bed and drops to his knees to address the apparition. Seated behind him, Gertrude witnesses her son's distress and, frowning in her pity for him, concludes that he is mad. Meanwhile, reacting to Gertrude's concern, the Ghost steps farther into the room to admonish Hamlet to speak to her. Still looking up, eyes fixed on the shade of his father, Hamlet does so quietly and draws an affectionate but incredulous response. Though the camera documents Hamlet's insistent claims with shots of the Ghost looking down at him, Gertrude perceives nothing. Then a curious thing happens. In a long shot, the kneeling Hamlet turns from the Ghost to his mother and, imploring her to see and hear, points to vacancy. It is just enough to create an ambiguity about the Ghost. A moment later, as Gertrude rises to comfort her son and Hamlet turns back to the Ghost with "Why, look you there," the camera shows the steel blue form backing away. When the frantic Hamlet finally identifies "My father," the effect on Gertrude is stunning: she screams in horror, pressing her hand to her mouth, and collapses in tears. A final glimpse of the Ghost's retreating figure leaves Hamlet downstage staring after it and his mother on the floor behind him sobbing hysterically, "This is the very coinage of your brain."

Just as Bloom's convulsive outcry contrasts with Herlie's tender reading of the line, so the reconciliation of mother and son proceeds on rather different terms. It is a seemingly pensive Hamlet who swings on his knees toward the distraught Gertrude to confute the charge of
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madness. Alerted by the change in tone, she looks up with a quizzical expression. Calmly and deliberately, Hamlet remonstrates with her, slowly closing the distance between them. When he brings his face up to hers, the camera focuses on Gertrude as he counsels her to confess and repent. Looking searchingly into her son's eyes, for the first time, she shows pain and sadly tells him that he has cleft her heart. Then, with Hamlet in closeup, he clenches her hands and, for the first time in the scene, speaks lovingly to his mother, joyfully urging her to throw away the "worser part." The moment ends with the camera on Gertrude, winding her arms around her son and clasping him tightly, her head cradled in the recess of his shoulder.

The reconciliation is interrupted, however, when Hamlet enjoins Gertrude to avoid Claudius's bed. Her expression sobers, and she draws back, looking hurt. Although Hamlet becomes openly persuasive, she looks away, at which he becomes vehement: "And when you are desirous to be bless'd, / I'll blessing beg of you." Ironically, it is Hamlet's reaction, on reentering the closet, to the sight of Polonius that wins her over. Starting, his hand to his mouth, he turns back to his mother, repentent but also resigned to his role as "scourge." Explaining that he "must be cruel only to be kind," he reaches out his hands to her; responding eagerly, she cries out softly when he suddenly withdraws them from her grasp. Returning to the closet to retrieve his sword and dagger, Hamlet pauses as Gertrude follows him in, and, dropping the weapons on the body, he remarks, "One word more, good lady," and sits in the chair. Her "What shall I do?" is unresisting. Indeed, throughout his bitterly snide injunctions to secrecy and his conspiratorial revelation of his plans for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, she kneels by his side, stroking, embracing, and caressing him. She firmly assures him of her silence and shows distress when reminded of his departure for England. Only at the end of his discourse, when Hamlet seems strangely exhilarated by his uncertain prospects, does her face cloud; but even this may be expressive of tender concern. As Hamlet pronounces his benediction over Polonius, trying to be clever but stifling a sob, and drags the body off, uttering his final good nights, Gertrude stands silently, touching his chair.

At the end of the closet scene, this Gertrude does not know for certain whether her Hamlet "essentially [is] not in madness, / But mad in craft." Still, she has been powerfully moved to accept her marital shame and to reaffirm her maternal love. If emotionally exhausted, she remains morally resolved to abide by the lesson of Hamlet's "mirror" and to act in the interest of her son. Hence, in act 4, scene 1, her voice is strained near weeping yet controlled when she tells the King of Polonius's death at the hand of the maddened Hamlet. When Claudius speaks of his own
danger, she is noncommittal, and when he touches her shoulder, she brushes past him to sit in the chair. Although at the end of the scene Claudius appeals to her, "O, come away! / My soul is full of discord and dismay," she remains seated in the place where she sealed her submission to Hamlet.

In the case of this Gertrude, however, the lesson does not hold. While she speaks her guilty aside in act 4, scene 5, later in the scene, when the mad Ophelia enters, Gertrude embraces Claudius and then clings to him as the Messenger reports that the mob is backing the returned Laertes. Her fierce comment on "false Danish dogs" is prelude to her defense of Claudius from Laertes' assault. Though Laertes' weapon is drawn when he enters, she approaches him directly, placing a hand on his shoulder in an effort to pacify him. Claudius must twice tell her to let the furious young man go before she tentatively steps away, to interject firmly that it was not Claudius who killed his father. For Ophelia's second mad scene, Gertrude stands by Claudius again, showing no signs of the separation her son had advised.

Bloom sits on the throne next to Patrick Stewart in the final scene, holding onto his arm as Hamlet and Laertes duel. When Claudius drops the poisoned pearl into the cup, her face shows no suspicion. It is in the spirit of a toast that she picks up the cup and drinks, wanting to celebrate the prowess of her son, and it is in this same spirit that she ignores as inconsequential Claudius's instruction not to drink. Having wiped Hamlet's face, she even offers the cup to him, although he refuses it. In fact, this Claudius might have made a gesture to save his Queen; instead, he stands idly by. Only when the drugged Queen slumps to the floor does she realize that the drink was poisoned. She leaves this life clinging to Hamlet, aware of the treachery of her husband, but unreformed.

In the Olivier production, Gertrude seems incapable of the perfidy attached to the killing of a king. Hamlet may not have been far from the truth when he cynically told Horatio in act 1, scene 2 that it was "thrift" that seduced his mother into a hasty remarriage. This Gertrude is a weak, yielding woman who, as the consequence of Hamlet's traumatizing counsel in the closet, alters the poor judgment that allowed her to move with apparent ease from a Hyperion to a satyr. Though her final fatal tribute to Hamlet risks sentimentality, it completes the sequence of theatrical images—the intimate closet scene, the separate letters, the drinking of the poisoned cup—that together endorse the psychological paradigm of a morally unstructured woman whose Oedipal love for her son reconstructs her. For this Gertrude, Malcolm's epitaph for Cawdor might serve: "Nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it."

The BBC Gertrude, by contrast, might well have assented to the
killing of a king, not because she was in the habit of initiating evil but because, with Edmund in King Lear, she believed “that men / Are as the time is.” The chief quality of this Gertrude is malleability: she adjusts readily to circumstance, assuming the virtue or the vice appropriate to the occasion. In the Queen’s closet, Gertrude is emotionally involved in her son’s anguish and in the recognition of her sin. But virtue readily abandoned is cheaply earned. With Hamlet away from court, Gertrude’s fawning on Claudius continues. Amid the carnage of the final scene, her death, like Edmund’s, is “but a trifle here.”

Notes


2. Quotations are from The Complete Works of Shakespeare, 3d ed., ed. David Bevington (Glencoe, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1980).


8. It is worth noting that in Q1 the Ghost omits the epithet “adulterate” from its imprecation and Hamlet expresses contempt only for Claudius: “Yes, yes, by heaven, a damnd pernicious villaine, / Murderous, bawdy, smiling damned villaine” (p. 588). The implication that Q1 absolves Claudius and Gertrude of the blot of adultery is contravened, however, by Claudius’s admission in the prayer scene (3.3) of “the adulterous fault I have committed” (p. 601).


11. Charney, in “Hamlet without Words,” is amused by the prospect of staging the biological feature of the pilomotor response, the same reaction predicted by the Ghost in act 1, scene 5, when it warns Hamlet that a description of its postdeath experiences would make part his “knotted and combined locks,” causing “each particular hair to stand on end.” Charney notes that the one literal rendering, reported by Arthur Colby Sprague (Shakespeare and the
Actors: The Stage Business in His Plays (1660–1905) [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944], p. 382), was Garrick's: the famous eighteenth-century actor accomplished the effect with a mechanical wig (pp. 40–41).


13. Ibid., p. 98.


15. Hamlet (1948), produced and directed by Laurence Olivier. With Laurence Olivier (Hamlet), Basil Sydney (Claudius), Eileen Herlie (Gertrude), Jean Simmons (Ophelia), Felix Aylmer (Polonius), Terence Morgan (Laertes), Norman Wooland (Horatio), Peter Cushing (Osric), Anthony Quayle (Marcellus), Esmond Knight (Bernardo), John Laurie (Francisco), Harcourt Williams (First Player), Patrick Troughton (Second Player), Tony Tarver (Third Player), Stanley Holloway (Gravedigger), Russel Thorndike (Priest).


17. Ibid., p. 183.


21. Hamlet (1980), produced by Cedric Messina, directed by Rodney Bennett. With Derek Jacobi (Hamlet), Claire Bloom (Gertrude), Eric Porter (Polonius), Patrick Stewart (Claudius), Patrick Allen (Ghost), Emrys James (First Player), Lalla Ward (Ophelia), Robert Swann (Horatio), David Robb (Laertes), Christopher Baines (Francisco), Niall Padden (Bernardo), Paul Humpoletz (Marcellus), John Humphry (Voltemand), John Sterland (Cornelius), Raymond Mason (Reynaldo), Jonathan Hyde (Rosencrantz), Geoffrey Bateman (Guildenstern), Jason Kemp (Second Player), Geoffrey Beevers (Third Player), Bill Homwood (Prologue and Mime King), Peter Richards (Mime Queen), Terence McGinity (Mime Murderer), Peter Burroughs, Styart Fell (Other Players), Ian Charleson (Fortinbras), Dan Meaden (Norwegian Captain), Iain Blair (Sailor), Reginald Jessup (Messenger), Tim Wylton (First Gravedigger), Peter Benson (Second Gravedigger), Michael Poole (Priest), Peter Gale (Osric), David Henry (English Ambassador).