

## CHAPTER 6

# The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias

*Kendra Preston Leonard*

With the exception of Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, billed (disingenuously) as the first-ever "full-length" version of the play on film, major English-language cinema productions of *Hamlet* have reduced the screen time, dialogue, and singing allotted to Ophelia by nearly half since Laurence Olivier's film of 1948. In purely statistical terms, Olivier's Ophelia is accorded 803 words, Franco Zeffirelli's allowed only 456, and Michael Almereyda's a scant 447. In contrast, Branagh's Ophelia has 1233 words, standing as the only popular-cinema Ophelia to retain her sole soliloquy in Act 3. Increasingly, we see Ophelia being treated by directors as an object only marginally necessary for the plot. In Almereyda's *Hamlet* of 2000, her inclusion is both minimal in terms of spoken dialogue for the actor and for the impact her actions have on the rest of the characters; in this production, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are afforded more presence and weight than Ophelia. It is not unlikely that a future *Hamlet* may well dispense with the speaking parts of her character—or with Ophelia altogether.

Ophelia is generally shown in cinematic adaptations of *Hamlet* in three sequences: when Hamlet accosts her in her chamber in 2.1; when she is used as bait by Polonius and Claudius in 3.1; and in her Act 4 scenes of madness. As I will discuss in detail, all three of these appearances are truncated in the Olivier, Zeffirelli, and Almereyda *Hamlets*, which represent three of the four most widely screened English-language *Hamlets* of the twentieth century. In

Zeffirelli's and Almereyda's films, the text of Ophelia's report of Hamlet's appearance in her closet in 2.1 is omitted and shown in visual treatment only; all three films eliminate her 3.1 soliloquy and cut her spoken and sung lines in Act 4. These cuts necessarily also reduce Ophelia's screen time: Olivier's Ophelia gets 23:15 minutes, Zeffirelli's 14:15, and Almereyda's 13:13 (in comparison to Branagh's 35:00).<sup>1</sup> While Olivier's Ophelia speaks in all of her appearances, Zeffirelli's and Almereyda's are often mute, such as Zeffirelli's scriptless 2.1 and Almereyda's silent Ophelia—already fantasizing about drowning—in his adaptation of 3.2. The silences afforded Ophelia in Zeffirelli's and Almereyda's presentations of 2.1 provide early clues to the level of vocalicity that will be permitted her throughout the film as well as explain their rationale.

None of these Ophelias is granted her 3.1 soliloquy, disempowering her by eliminating the sole display of her mental faculties before she succumbs to madness. For Olivier's Ophelia, her silence in this scene is a result of both her extreme emotional distress caused by Hamlet's rejection and the presence of Polonius, who tells her to be quiet, and Claudius, who ignores her entirely. She is a nonentity already, in the eyes of these characters, a creature without reason. Zeffirelli's Ophelia displays a simplicity of mind combined with fear of Hamlet, a much older man; Almereyda's Ophelia finds herself under constant surveillance by Polonius, Claudius's men, and even by Hamlet himself, who videotapes her reading in bed. In both cases, Ophelia's agency—in the form of vocalicity—is suppressed by the men who surround her.

Within the text, Ophelia's role is an important one, advancing the investigation into Hamlet's apparent madness and later offering the audience crucial information as to the true state of corruption within the court. When Ophelia's lines are lost through cuts made by the director or scriptwriter, her role as a commentator or, as Foucault would have it, the truth-teller about the actions of the court, is muted.<sup>2</sup> Despite her delusions and irrational behavior during her mad scenes, Ophelia is evidently enough in control of her faculties to attempt to communicate through symbolic spoken and musical means. Because Ophelia sings and recites fragments of songs, proverbs, and folklore that are familiar to contemporary audiences, the meanings of her texts were plain for early modern theatergoers. A contemporary audience would have well understood that Ophelia's gift of fennel and columbine to Claudius was an insult, as these represent flattery, foolishness, and adultery. "Ophelia's madness is represented almost entirely through fragmentary, communal, and thematically coherent quoted discourse," writes Carol Thomas Neely, "She recites proverbs, formulas, tales, and songs that ritualize passages of transformation and loss—lost love, lost chastity, and death."<sup>3</sup> To Gertrude

she gives rue, a commonly known abortifacient also associated with adultery, and then declares that there is no one to whom she can give her daisy, the symbol of innocence. Indeed, more than one careful reader claims that these lines also hint at Ophelia's pregnancy: she and Gertrude are to wear their rue "with a difference" (4.5.174–76)<sup>4</sup>—Gertrude's difference being to admit her sin, Ophelia's to remove the effects of hers.<sup>5</sup> Ophelia's vocality thus empowers her, particularly in her madness, allowing her to express herself through powerfully suggestive references.

The inclusion of Ophelia's musicality is as important as her spoken dialogue. Although, as David Lindley notes, the exact sources for all of Ophelia's songs have not been found, they "clearly belong to the popular ballad tradition."<sup>6</sup> English stage history records that, in Shakespeare's time, the actor playing the part sang many lines to popular tunes, including "Bonny Sweet Robin," "Robin Is to the Greenwood Gone," and "Walsingham," all of which appear in William Chappell's *The Ballad Literature and Popular Music of the Olden Time*, a nineteenth-century source for music featured in early modern theater productions.<sup>7</sup> Ophelia's song "Bonny Sweet Robin" is a lament for a dead lover ("robin" is also slang for penis and used frequently in songs in this context). Altering the lyrics to "Walsingham"—"How should I your true-love know / From another one? / By his cockle hat and staff, / And his sandal shoon" (4.5.22–26)—Ophelia shifts the gender of the original protagonist in order to sing of a male lover's departure. Interspersed with these fragments and variations on more serious airs, Ophelia sings the entire text of one bawdy song, "To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day," representative of seventeenth-century ballads telling the story of a woman's seduction by her social superior.<sup>8</sup> Ophelia herself could well be the maid let in "that out a maid / Never departed more" (54–55).

The very act of singing is also important in underscoring Ophelia's condition. Susan McClary writes that "women who sang [of their own accord] in public . . . were regarded as courtesans and were pressured to grant sexual favors in exchange for being permitted to participate in cultural production."<sup>9</sup> For women presumed chaste, song was, instead, the purview of the madwoman, and this aspect of a disturbed woman's behavior was especially emphasized on the stage. Audiences who may have missed the actor's initial physical cues would certainly have recognized the character's distraction, given her insistence on singing in the presence of the court.<sup>10</sup> As Leslie Dunn has shown, Ophelia's act of singing suggests both her courage and torment:

In Shakespeare's dramatic construction of Ophelia as madwoman, the discourse of music has a privileged place: Ophelia's songs dominate her mad scene, not only in their profusion, but in their disruptive and invasive

power. From her first entrance Ophelia uses singing to command attention and confuse response, frustrating Gertrude's attempts to contain her utterance within the bounds of polite conversation.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, song lyrics provide Ophelia with a certain power even in her very unraveling. Foucault has written that the role of the fool or madman in early modern drama is often that of the truth-teller: "he speaks love to lovers, the truth of life to the young, the middling reality of things to the proud, to the insolent, and to liars."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this is Ophelia's role beginning with the onset of her madness in 4.5. None of her words are trivial, all of them imparting information or moving the plot forward; musically, Ophelia's text is a rich and complex tapestry of deliberate references.

Over the course of time, the musical aspects of Ophelia's role have been subject to the changing tastes of stage practice—from the Elizabethan era, when the role was performed by a boy or young man playing a lute, to modern-day staging, in which actors rarely play the instrument or speak all of Ophelia's lines, much less sing any of them. Women first took on the role in the eighteenth century, at which point it appears that Ophelia no longer played the lute, although her songs may have been supported by a small ensemble.<sup>13</sup> During the first part of the eighteenth century, Hardin Aasand writes, "Ophelia's entrance resulted in a censored script that removed the bawdiness of her madness for a more refined, more operatic impression. In fact, the performance history of Ophelia shows an ambiguous regard for her character."<sup>14</sup> By the late nineteenth century, actors considered the part an essential element of staging repertoire and singers were rarely, if ever, engaged for the role. Stage performances at this time usually featured Ophelia's full text with her songs presented musically, usually unaccompanied.

Modern filmmakers, however, have not generally followed the old stage practices for presenting Ophelia's mad songs, instead relying on the actor to sing *a cappella* and embellishing her other scenes with new music. There are several explanations for this discontinuity in Ophelia's musical presentation: the lack of continuity inherent in musical practice generally as it shifted first from stage productions to silent film, next to early sound film, and thence to modern cinema; the desire for new film scores; and the rise to primacy of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* score. While staging and acting techniques were often imported whole cloth into silent films from the stage, sound was not. Silent adaptations of Shakespeare only rarely had accompanying sheet music or sound cylinders (Sarah Bernhardt's *Hamlet* was accompanied by these, containing spoken dialogue and the sounds of dueling only).<sup>15</sup> More often, cinemas employed organists or small orchestras to accompany the films shown there; the majority of these relied on canned cues that could

be repurposed for a number of different movies. Early silent films of the play were, thus, widely accompanied by a house pianist or organist who selected suitable pieces to accompany the action. With titles like “Sorrow,” and “Lovers’ Embrace,” and “Grand March,” these short works, often sold in collections of twenty to thirty pieces, could be used for any number of films. The creation of readily accessible musical accompaniment was a boon for cinema musicians; it also established the common musical signifiers still used in narrative film music.<sup>16</sup>

In some cases, these prepackaged sets of accompanying tunes were meant to be ironic or satiric while still conveying some superficial information about the plot. Comedian George L. Fox’s early *Hamlet* (likely based on his 1870 burlesque *Hamlet Travestie*) for the nickelodeon, contained the following popular tunes:

After a duet of Thomas Moore’s “You’ll Remember Me,” in the second scene, Ophelia sings and dances the minstrel tune “The Girl with the Golden Switch.” The third scene features Marcellus and Bernardo singing “Beautiful Night,” an offstage chorus intoning “Johnny Fill Up the Bowl,” and Hamlet warbling “I’m a Native Here.” The mousetrap [sic] induces the chorus to sing “Shoo Fly,” and the graveyard scene features both “Five O’clock in the Morning” and “Why Do I Weep for Thee?”<sup>17</sup>

Ophelia’s scenes would have been given predictable treatment by a performer reading the cues for “Melancholy” or “Turmoil” rather than singing the original lyrics themselves; this shift represents the first instance of the character’s vocality being subverted by musicians playing according to type, establishing Ophelia as an “entire[ly] lyrical” being, in Toshiko Oshio’s words.<sup>18</sup> As film and sound technology developed, directors and producers sought out specialist composers to write new music for their sound productions. Some filmmakers subscribed to the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to film music: a score that was highly continuous over the course of the film, including the use of leitmotifs to help audiences identify characters and their emotions and actions. Scott D. Paulin has written about how European directors in particular found *Gesamtkunstwerk* scoring useful:

the Wagnerian model, with which filmmakers including Sergei Eisenstein and the French Impressionists (including Abel Gance) were sympathetic, allowed an analogy to be made from the relationship between music and drama in opera, to the relationship between cinema (defined as the visual elements and techniques specific to film) and narrative in the motion picture.<sup>19</sup>

This method was familiar to theater and opera audiences and provided an easily understood means of character identification for those unfamiliar with the roles or the plots of films. However, as with canned music, scores that traded heavily in leitmotif also promoted the use of stereotyped or generic music. There was little room for composers to incorporate the oft-disparate tunes, set pieces, and songs from stage tradition into a score that called for an organic and holistic set of themes and structures.

With production houses allocating greater budgets for film scores, it became clear that Hollywood offered composers the chance to earn significant money, and high-profile modernist composers including Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and other classically trained musicians began working in the field. They, too, were more focused on the creation of new music—written to provide a full-length, organic score for each film—than in partnering Shakespearean characters with their original music. Traces of “Robin is to the Greenwood Gone” and “Walsingham,” Ophelia’s traditional melodies, remain, but they are, as I will show, obscured, cut, or transformed into spoken presentations. It is paradoxical that at the time new technologies emerged to provide cinematic Ophelias the opportunities to be heard on film, her lines and songs were being reduced even beyond what eighteenth-century theater censors had done, thus reducing the power and impact of Ophelia’s nascent filmic aurality.

### *Olivier*

Cinematic Ophelias begin to appear in full-sound productions with the advent of Laurence Olivier’s 1948 *Hamlet*. As Bernice Kliman has pointed out, Olivier’s film is more of a fantasy upon themes of *Hamlet* rather than a true rendition of the play. This is due mostly to the nature of film aesthetics at the time: its somewhat uneasy mingling with the values and traditions of stage productions, as well as Olivier’s own desire to present something more akin to a theater-going experience for his audience rather than exploit the new medium’s presentational capabilities beyond filming staged plays. Kliman writes that “the relationship between stage and film was somewhat more complicated; the film is a hybrid form, not a filmed play, not precisely a film, but a film-infused play or a play-infused film, a form Olivier conceived as being the best possible for presenting the heightened language of Shakespeare.”<sup>20</sup> Shakespeareans note that the text is heavily cut, omitting a number of major soliloquies, not to mention entire scenes and characters, including Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. For Olivier, the text is fluid and can be altered and reshaped at will; the goal of the film is simply telling the story in a dramatic fashion. Olivier’s alterations to the play

are significant: the “nunnery scene” takes place before the “to be or not to be” speech; secondary plot lines are eliminated; and Olivier’s editing is an attempt to reconcile what some critics and readers view as Shakespeare’s own confusion of events.

Filmed with a cast of well-known British actors, including Jean Simmons as Ophelia and Ellen Herlie as Gertrude, Olivier’s *Hamlet* took most of its interpretative cues from Tyrone Guthrie’s 1937 West End production, in which Olivier had played the title role.<sup>21</sup> Guthrie and Olivier relied heavily on a Freudian, Oedipal reading of the text, drawn primarily from Ernest Jones’s *Essay in Applied Psycho-Analysis*.<sup>22</sup> In an interview with Kenneth Tynan, Olivier discussed this approach:

I thought it was the absolute resolution of all the problems concerning Hamlet. At least, it gave one a central idea which seemed to fill the great vacuum left by all the crossed ideas about Hamlet, what he really was, what he really wasn’t, whether he was a man of action, whether he wasn’t a man of action. He could safely be a man of action under the auspices of that particular idea, that he couldn’t kill the king because, subconsciously of course, he was guilty himself.<sup>23</sup>

Much of the film focused on Hamlet’s apparent inability to relate normally to women according to early-to-mid twentieth-century heterosexual norms: an obviously Oedipal relationship to his mother is introduced early on, with a lingering mouth-to-mouth kiss between them that moves on to Gertrude’s ever-solicitous stroking of Hamlet’s brow, hands, and torso. (Herlie, as Gertrude, was twenty-eight at the time of filming, to Olivier’s forty-one and Simmons’s sixteen.) Hamlet’s intensely sexual confrontation with his mother in her chamber during the film’s staging of 3.4 seems on its way to full consummation when they are interrupted by the Ghost.

Hamlet’s relationship with Ophelia is likewise troubled, albeit in the opposite way: he is aloof with her, as though her female presence is physically distasteful. Peter Donaldson notes that Olivier’s staging of 3.1 is influenced by Dover Wilson’s interpretation, in which Hamlet overhears Polonius instructing Ophelia: because his erotic ideal is embodied in his mother, and because of his foreknowledge that Ophelia is a pawn in Claudius and Polonius’s game, Hamlet has no more use or respect for her.<sup>24</sup> Kenneth S. Rothwell writes in his overview of Olivier’s film that “Hamlet shows only coldness without a trace of tenderness for the poor, beleaguered young woman, who remains the ultimate female victim.”<sup>25</sup> She becomes the least important of the play’s four major characters, leaving Gertrude as the sole sane female figure before Ophelia’s actual death.

Olivier's adaptation is scored by William Walton, who had also provided the music for Olivier's *Henry V*. In examining the use of music and Ophelia's songs in this *Hamlet*, it is important first to note that critics had earlier condemned Olivier's excess of music in *Henry V*.<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, Olivier privileges *Hamlet's*—and Hamlet's—text over any kind of musical dramatics; in scenes with multiple actors present, Hamlet's words are unaccompanied by music, so that they might better stand out. In solitary moments, however, such as the soliloquies, Hamlet's lines garner accompaniment even when music is not indicated in the text, and not always effectively; Charles Hurtgen, writing in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, complained that there was too much music behind the speeches, making the film overly operatic in nature:

Evidently, the composer and Olivier felt that the words even of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy required music to aid the imagination, for the speech has been liberally orchestrated. [. . .] Olivier may have hoped that this passage would sound less like a soliloquy with these orchestral punctuations. But, in effect, the speech has been turned into a *recitative*.<sup>27</sup>

This contrasts greatly with the comparatively unmusical treatment of Ophelia's decidedly musical text. After all, Ophelia's singing of popular and bawdy songs had been one of the key elements in constructing her madness on stage; the songs she sings are ambiguous but necessary clues to her relationship with Hamlet and her understanding of what has happened in Elsinore. When they are altered, Ophelia's agency is reduced and also denies the audience her individual point of view borne out by the text. This establishes a "male aurality" that accompanies director Olivier's male gaze, the combination of which effects Ophelia's even greater marginalization.

Although Laura Mulvey's classic definition of the male gaze as framing women in a gendered manner is somewhat dated and its more Freudian aspects have been disowned by Mulvey herself, the core theory is still pertinent, serving as a basis for establishing an aural counterpart.<sup>28</sup> As Robyn Stilwell has written, "One need not even buy the psychoanalytic trappings of such an argument to recognize the camera as an extension of male directors and male cinematographers working for an audience in which the male perspective is not just presumed but assumed to be the norm."<sup>29</sup> Given that, as of 2005, women make up only seven percent of the film industry's population of directors and secure less financing for their projects, it should come as no surprise that every major *Hamlet*—generally a costly endeavor—to appear on screen has been directed by a man.<sup>30</sup> It is also unsurprising, then, that the images resulting from male-led enterprises

often objectify or, as Mulvey termed it, create a “to-be-looked-at-ness” for the female characters.

The concept of male aurality is based on Mulvey’s essential observation that in the construction of a work created by a male subject, his aesthetic will dominate the integration of art forms as a totality. With this consideration in mind, it is not too difficult to understand how music—just as much as visual renderings—can be used to situate, delimit, and control women within film. For this particular essay, male aurality refers to the use of music to privilege or emphasize male characters and their actions to the diminishment of female characters and their actions. The most common manifestations of male aurality in *Hamlet* films discover either themes or motifs that announce the presence or actions of male characters but fail to do so for female roles of equal stature; a marked lack of or less complex corresponding musical material for female roles; and/or the use of musical expression to define female characters as less serious, stable, or crucial to a film than their male counterparts.

At the beginning of 4.5, Olivier omits Ophelia’s first stanza from “Walsingham,” and instead she sings “He is dead and gone, lady,/ He is dead and gone,/ At his head a grass-green turf,/ At his heels a stone” (29–32) to its traditional tune. As in earlier scenes, Ophelia is perceived in a contradictory light that both reduces her character’s maturity and emphasizes her physical beauty. The song is interpolated with an infantile, high-pitched crying, which is juxtaposed with Olivier’s sexualizing shot of Ophelia’s bare upper thigh while she writhes on the ground.

Continuing on, Olivier changes Ophelia’s lines from “Which bewept to the ground did not go” to “Which bewept to the *grave did* go” (39, emphasis added) in order to emphasize that, at this moment, Ophelia is focused on her father’s death rather than on Hamlet’s actions towards her. That she is thinking of Hamlet is driven home further with the virtual omission of Ophelia’s second song, “Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s Day,” the very clear narrative of a woman who has lost her virginity to a man she trusted who shuns her for having done so (in a common double-standard):

To-morrow is Saint Valentine’s day,  
 All in the morning betime,  
 And I a maid at your window,  
 To be your Valentine.  
 Then up he rose and donned his clo’es,  
 And dupp’d the chamber-door,  
 Let in the maid, that out a maid  
 Never departed more.

.....

By Gis, and by Saint Charity,  
 Alack, and fie for shame!  
 Young men will do't if they come to't,  
 By Cock, they are to blame.  
 Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,  
 You promised me to wed.'  
 [He answers.]  
 So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,  
 And thou hadst not come to my bed.

(48–55; 58–66)

Ophelia does sing a small excerpt of “St. Valentine’s Day,” but it occurs after she has been placed under Horatio’s watch; only Horatio and the two sailors delivering Hamlet’s letter to him hear her—even the film’s viewers cannot clearly hear or understand her. She paces about her terrace, picking up and setting down flowers, singing as she walks away from Horatio and the soldiers, away from the camera. Lyrics are muffled to the point of abstraction and reduced to a vague tune, fading rapidly while the camera focuses on the three men. Horatio speaks over Ophelia’s singing, dismissing it entirely, and then leaving her alone. Olivier’s removing of this song from its original rehearsal in front of the entire court and shortening its performance obscures its meaning and diminishes the potential sexual origins of her madness. By prohibiting Ophelia from singing fully of her sexuality, her agency as a sexual being is sublimated, not by the pressures of the character’s situation, but by Olivier himself, who alters the text in order to keep the character pure and under male control. Furthermore, suppressing her words and singing reduces the force of her madness. If song is meant to be a clear signifier of madness on the early modern stage, reducing its appearance diminishes the power of Ophelia’s madness to shock and affect, within the text and for the audience.

In these scenes, Olivier creates a male auralty by discounting song as a signifier of madness and eliding the possible, personal meaning of the song for Ophelia. This Ophelia is a sad but minor inconvenience to the court, not a voice of earthy truth in recounting her experiences with Hamlet and her observation of the goings-on at Elsinore. The original text’s fuller explanation of Ophelia’s bewildering actions is removed by Olivier’s editing in order to focus more on the adventures of Hamlet with the pirates. In fact, Ophelia’s material is cut short while Olivier interpolates a swashbuckling-and-fighting interlude only reported in the play but shown with great drama and swagger in the film. This episode reinforces the primacy of Olivier himself in the film and the lack of interest he has in the women’s roles in the play. As I will

show, this gendering through vocality and music by Olivier is but the beginning of a larger trend among directors of cinematic *Hamlets* and film more broadly to control the agency of female characters and their actions.

Ophelia sings again from “Walsingham” (still very briefly), before and after bequeathing her flowers to Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes. Before she gives the flowers to the assembled group, she sings once more, facing away from the camera and microphone, making her words difficult to understand and easily ignored by players and viewers alike. Visually, she appears in the scene as a potential seductress, offering Laertes a kiss that threatens to go into decidedly unsisterly territory. Physically, she is depicted wearing loose and revealing clothes, the camera’s focus on her breasts making her a sexualized object, but since Ophelia, for Olivier, cannot actually *be* a sexual being, her words pointing to such an identity are diminished by the words of the men present. Even when Ophelia interrupts Claudius and Laertes’s conversation, her song—“Robin is to the Greenwood Gone,” replete with its double entendres—is once more obscured by Laertes’s comments.

Only when she resumes speaking in prose as she doles out the flowers does Olivier let the camera refocus on her face and her voice be heard. Still, in the last instance of Ophelia’s singing, she again has her back to both onstage and viewing audiences; as before, her song is scarcely audible. Gertrude, Claudius and Laertes watch her leave the castle without a single gesture to indicate their concern. Ophelia looks back twice to see if they are following her to help her or give her comfort, but her arched eyebrow indicates that she realizes they will not. From this point onward, the court—including her own brother—considers her pitiable but unimportant. She tells them, from a distance, “God be with you,” and very deliberately exits the room. A moment later, Ophelia floats downstream past the camera in a singular, grotesque moment reminiscent of Millais’s famous painting of Ophelia. She sings, and unsurprisingly, her speech is distorted, broken up with childish giggles and sighs.

Olivier’s Ophelia is quite obviously made to suffer an accidental death; the singing, childlike creature in the water lacks the knowledge and determination to commit suicide. She is rendered speechless by Gertrude, who is, after all, at least a narrative witness to the drowning, the queen’s own mind perplexed by the recent events at her court. Overall, Gertrude’s words are given greater importance, heard more clearly and less interrupted than Ophelia’s. Throughout the film, Ophelia’s appearances and text have been minimized to place her at the very bottom of the social order at Elsinore. Even the Gravedigger is allowed to sing uncensored, a full and lusty preamble to Ophelia’s burial.

### *Zeffirelli*

Franco Zeffirelli presses on with the silencing of Ophelia in his 1990 *Hamlet*.<sup>31</sup> His Ophelia is provided with a text that is cut by almost half in comparison to Olivier's already attenuated role, retaining only 456 words of her First Folio lines. In this version, Ophelia begins singing long before she succumbs to madness; in fact, she is singing "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day" even as she threads a sewing needle just before Hamlet enters for the closet scene. Yet Zeffirelli's intent in having her sing this so early in the action is not to suggest that she is sexually experienced, but rather to highlight the opposite. Frightened by the disheveled Hamlet as she sews, she suggests no hidden relationship with Hamlet through song, made clear by Helena Bonham-Carter's wide-eyed expression. In a discussion about the film, actor Mel Gibson could not imagine Ophelia in a physical relationship with his character, professing himself

shocked when asked if Hamlet and Ophelia had a sexual relationship. Ophelia is still a child. . . . while Hamlet is . . . thirty. . . . In this production, Ophelia is fourteen years old and just beginning to awaken sexually. . . . She is too young to be sexual, and besides, Hamlet would never use her in that way.<sup>32</sup>

Her song here, truncated by Hamlet's appearance, does not serve to illuminate the audience or the court as to the nature of their relationship. It is merely a ditty sung by a childlike young woman. It is not surprising, then, that Ophelia willingly gives Claudius the letters she has received from Hamlet and follows his instruction in baiting her erstwhile suitor. The encounter, using a heavily cut 3.1, loses much of its meaning. Zeffirelli breaks up this scene, removing Hamlet's command to banish her to a nunnery and placing it, instead, later in the film, just before the performance of the Mousetrap. Ophelia is denied her "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3.1.149) soliloquy, and Claudius does not discuss Hamlet's madness as a threat to the body politic. With her text so cut, this Ophelia can convey only a fraction of her emotions.

She begins her mad scene by singing to a guard; no members of the court can hear her rhythmic declamation of the song "Walsingham." Instead, Gertrude watches from her chamber window, unable to discern what Ophelia might be saying; the fact that she might be singing instead—which would cause serious concern for her auditors if handled authentically within the film's medieval setting—cannot be transmitted to Gertrude at all. Like Olivier, Zeffirelli dismisses the weight of Ophelia's words by

obscuring their impact and altering their delivery to the court. As she next approaches Gertrude, Ophelia's lines from "Walsingham" clearly refer to Polonius. Neither Gertrude nor Claudius nor Horatio hears her sing again from "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day" as she exits. Only the audience hears this particular song in the film, which excises it as a potential comment on her real or imagined relationship with Hamlet. Like Olivier, Zeffirelli disprivileges Ophelia's agency by limiting the extent of her vocality within the text and its audience.

When Ophelia's second mad episode takes place, the original text is altered once again to hide its potential meanings. She gives her "flowers"—bones and straw—to the assembled crowd, but in a reversal of the traditional disbursement. Instead of giving fennel and columbines to Claudius in an accusation of his adultery, she gives these to Gertrude. Gertrude, who normally receives rue, watches as Ophelia gives this herb, associated with women for its abortifacient properties, to Claudius. Perhaps in her innocence and distraction, Zeffirelli's Ophelia no longer remembers the associations her chosen flowers and herbs bear; surely Zeffirelli knew their meanings despite his changes to the text. Yet, Laertes gets rosemary and pansies: somehow this Ophelia knows that he will be the keeper of her memory and thoughts now that she cannot keep them herself. The last images of Ophelia alive show her running and skipping through a meadow on her way to the brook where she will drown. She is shown in the water only from a distance, her status uncertain. What is for certain is that Zeffirelli's Ophelia has had very little to say or do in this adaptation. Because of the cuts to her text and the dismissal of her musical vocalizations, she serves neither as Foucault's knowing fool nor as a particularly compelling character in her own right.

### *Almeryda*

Michael Almeryda's *Hamlet*, set in a twenty-first century New York, features Julia Stiles as Ophelia.<sup>33</sup> Stiles, who has spent much of her career in recent Shakespearean adaptations (including *10 Things I Hate About You* [*The Taming of the Shrew*] and *O* [*Othello*]), was cast as a teen favorite with name recognition. Despite Almeryda's description of Stiles as possessing a "calm seriousness, a sense of unbudgeable inner gravity," the Ophelia he directs is without *gravitas*, alternately independent and babyish in her presentation.<sup>34</sup> As for the other cinematic Ophelias, much of her text is whittled down, even more drastically so than it is for her predecessors: Stiles speaks but 447 words.

Depicted in this adaptation as a photographer and presumably, given her age and activities, a college student, Ophelia has an uneven relationship

with Laertes and Polonius. She relies on them when she is tired of being self-reliant and tolerates them with petulance, complete with eye-rolling and pouting lips. She is frequently silent in sullenness or boredom; when she does speak, her lines are brief and edited to be brusque. In her discussion with Laertes extracted from 1.3.5–50, it is clear that she is fond of her brother and familiar enough with him such that her jibes about his own sexual behavior are neither shy nor defensive. With her father, Ophelia is at once rebellious and dependent, arguing with him about her relationship with Hamlet yet allowing him to tie her shoelace like a small child. As one of film's most sympathetic and caring Poloniuses, Bill Murray approaches the role as an overanxious father rather more than functioning as the King's primary courtier.

Ophelia is provided with a rich aural landscape through the film's diegetic background music and nondiegetic score, but the text of her own songs is markedly suppressed. Throughout the film, she is surrounded by diegetic music: in her apartment, music plays as she develops photographs; at Polonius's residence, music plays as she and Laertes speak before his departure for France. When she goes mad, however, this background aurality shifts. Instead, Almercyda's script omits all of the song text from "Walsingham" and much of "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day," leaving just a few lines. Instead of using music to signify her madness, Almercyda associates Ophelia's sanity with her own personal soundtrack, leaving more aggressive vocalizations to convey her madness.

Ophelia's breakdown is quite public. It occurs at a cocktail party set in the Guggenheim Museum in New York, amid spiraling balconies and to champagne toasts. Accosting Gertrude with a pleading demeanor, Ophelia quickly gives way to nonverbal screaming that echoes through the museum. She tunelessly recites part of "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day" before being hauled off by security guards. There is no music to accompany her, only the ambient noise of the party. Rather than allowing her madness to be signified traditionally through song, perhaps Almercyda interprets screaming as the modern-day equivalent of distracted vocality. For this twenty-first century Ophelia, screaming in public rather than singing becomes the taboo vocality; by violating the taboo of public silence, Ophelia conveys her emotional crisis in a way more familiar to contemporary viewers.

Ophelia appears in a corridor for the remainder of her scene. No longer agitated to the point of screaming, she is now quiet and resigned, speaking softly. In lieu of flowers, she tosses Polaroids into the air for invisible recipients. She never approaches Claudius and Gertrude, nor makes eye contact with either of them. There is nondiegetic music to accompany her words, a soft and slow blues-like guitar line that reflects Ophelia's own sadness and

Laertes's as he tries to comfort her. It is highly reminiscent of the diegetic blues guitar music playing at Polonius's home previously, linking the two scenes shared between the siblings together through the genre of the blues.

Almeryda's Ophelia is given the fewest lines of any film *Hamlet* discussed up to this point. Nor does she receive her traditional elegy provided by Gertrude: Gertrude tells Laertes only that his sister is drowned; only the audience witnesses a security guard pull her body from a shallow fountain. This Ophelia is most obviously a suicide; there are no heavy skirts or long weeds to pull her to unwitting death. Although she is, ironically, perhaps the most cared-for Ophelia of all the cinematic *Hamlets*, she is also the least allowed to speak, be heard, and be seen. If this production stands as a reflection of modern culture, then the women's voices have never been more silenced.

The increasing erasure of Ophelia's vocality and agency evident in these examples results in a radical alteration to the original text. If in Olivier's film she is only partially disempowered, she has become all but dumb property in Almeryda's adaptation, a decorative object in the films rather than a meaningful participant. As each of the films progresses—and as films of *Hamlet* are created over time—Ophelia is increasingly silenced by her male counterparts in the play and by cuts to both dialogue and song. Ignored by those around her and excised so casually by directors, she is, ultimately, disposable.

### Notes

1. *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh, perf. Kenneth Branagh, Julie Christie, Derek Jacobi, Kate Winslet, Castle Rock Entertainment, 1996.
2. Michel Foucault, trans. Richard Howard, *Madness and Civilization* (New York: Vintage, 1988) 14.
3. Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) 51.
4. Text references are from *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, Arden Third Series, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).
5. See Alex Epstein, "By the Way, Ophelia is Pregnant," *Crafty Screenwriting*, Mar. 28, 2007 (<http://www.craftyscreenwriting.com/ophelia.html>) and Graham Holderness, "Ophelia Laurence Nowel: *Excerpta Quaedam Danica* (1565)," *Early Modern Culture* 3 (2003), Aug. 11, 2011 (<http://emc.eserver.org/1-3/holderness.html>).
6. David Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006) 155.
7. For a discussion of Chappell's history of English popular songs first published in 1893, see Robert Hapgood, *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 232–33.

8. Vic Gammon, *Desire, Drink, and Death in English Folk and Vernacular Song, 1600–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) 23–26.
9. Susan McClary, foreword, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, by Catherine Clement, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) ix–xviii; xvi.
10. Maurice and Hanna Charney, “The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3.2 (1977): 451–60; 453.
11. Leslie Dunn, “Ophelia’s Songs in *Hamlet*: Music, Madness, and the Feminine,” in *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*, ed. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 50–64; 50.
12. Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 14.
13. David Bevington, *This Wide and Universal Theater: Shakespeare in Performance Then and Now* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 17.
14. Hardin Aasand, “The Young, the Beautiful, the Harmless, and the Pious: Contending with Ophelia on the Eighteenth Century,” *Reading Readings: Essays on Shakespeare Editing in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Johanna Gondris (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998) 224–44; 224.
15. Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968) 305.
16. Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 53.
17. Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) 220.
18. Toshiko Oshio, “Ophelia: Experience into Song,” *Hamlet and Japan*, ed. Yoshiko Uéno (New York: AMS, 1995) 131–42; 141.
19. Scott D. Paulin, “Richard Wagner and the Fantasy of Cinematic Unity: The Idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the History and Theory of Film Music,” *Music and Cinema*, ed. Caryl Flinn and David Newmeyer (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000) 58–84; 64.
20. Bernice W. Kliman, *Hamlet: Film, Television, and Audio Performances* (London: Associated University Press, 1988) 23.
21. *Hamlet*, dir. Laurence Olivier, perf. Laurence Olivier, Jean Simmons, John Laurie, Esmond Knight, Two Cities Films, 1984.
22. Anthony Davies, “The Shakespeare films of Laurence Olivier,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 163–82; 170.
23. Kenneth Tynan, “The Actor: Tynan Interviews Olivier,” *The Tulane Drama Review* 11.2 (Winter 1966): 71–101; 83.
24. Peter Donaldson, “Olivier, Hamlet, and Freud,” *Cinema Journal* 26.4 (Summer 1987): 22–48; 33.
25. Kenneth S. Rothwell, *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 58.

26. Charles Hurtgen, "The Operatic Character of Background Music in Film Adaptations of Shakespeare," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20.1 (Winter 1969): 53–64; 57.
27. Hurtgen, Operatic Character of Background Music 62–3.
28. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Feminist Film Theory: a Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 58–69; 63.
29. Robyn Stilwell, "Sound and Empathy: Subjectivity, Gender and the Cinematic Soundscape," *Film Music: Critical Approaches*, ed. K. J. Donnelly (New York: Continuum, 2001) 167–87; 171.
30. Martha M. Lauzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in the Top 250 Films of 2005," *Movies By Women.com*, Jun. 5, 2008 ([http://moviesbywomen.com/stats\\_celluloid\\_ceiling\\_2005.php](http://moviesbywomen.com/stats_celluloid_ceiling_2005.php)).
31. *Hamlet*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, perf. Mel Gibson, Glenn Close, Alan Bates, Paul Scofield, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1990.
32. Michael P. Jensen, "Mel Gibson on *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare on Film Newsletter* 15.2 (1991): 1–6; 1.
33. *Hamlet*, dir. Michael Almereyda, perf. Ethan Hawke, Kyle MacLachlan, Diane Venora, Sam Shepard, Miramax Films, 2000.
34. Michael Almereyda, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 137.

