

The Mediation of Poesie: Ophelia's Orphic Song

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AS SHAKESPEARE SCHOLARS HAVE EXPLORED THE MATERIALITY of dramatic production and used this framework to ask how early modern drama theorized and defined itself, they have returned to *Hamlet*. In its acutely self-conscious way, marked by twenty-nine instances of the word “matter” (more than in any other play by Shakespeare), *Hamlet* seems to insist that every conceivable type of signification—oral slander, professional acting, humanist rhetoric, printed books, manuscript epistles, reported speech, death warrants, directives from the dead, lyrical utterances, popular balladry—finds its way concretely onto the stage. All of these acoustic and written endeavors compete for dominance in the play's complex metadramatic struggle, which (as scholars as diverse as Jonathan Goldberg, Peter Stallybrass, and Robert Weimann have shown) includes a fascination with scriptive “matter.”¹

But is it enough to say that *Hamlet's* theorization of drama depends finally upon material artifacts? What happens in *Hamlet* to verses and utterances that vanish into thin air, that refuse to be set down in writing, or that constantly shift and adapt? What have we missed, in particular, about Ophelia, a character whose mad, unscripted, thoroughly performative song-speech is divorced from conscious control yet continues to produce powerful forms of influence and meaning? We know that the play continually dramatizes and questions its own fundamental properties. As Weimann suggests, “In *Hamlet*, more than anywhere else in Shakespeare, the question of mimesis is central. The play contains the most sustained theoretical statement on the subject that we have in Shake-

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¹ Jonathan Goldberg, “Hamlet's Hand,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39 (1988): 307–27; and Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, J. Franklin Mowery, and Heather Wolfe, “Hamlet's Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 55 (2004): 379–419. In *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), Robert Weimann contextualizes *Hamlet's* obsession with poetic remembrance in terms of a wider cultural shift toward “a new epistemology empowering writing as the dominant aspect of knowledge, inspiration, and meaning” (58).

speare's whole *oeuvre*."² These concerns famously emerge when Hamlet describes "the purpose of playing whose end . . . was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to show virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.20–24).³ He expresses the period's dominant account of drama as the secondary imitation of a permanent reality, but also opens it to question, since neither Hamlet (with his "antic" jesting) nor the players (with their collaborative, extemporaneous performance style) quite follow these rules. We know, furthermore, that intense doubts about the power of drama to "catch" anything, including the conscience of a king, emerge in a play obsessed with the problem of acting in a consistent or meaningful way. Yet we continue to assume that *Hamlet* understands drama as an endeavor that inevitably materializes into an enduring artifact or group of artifacts, whether script, performance, printed book, or series of versions and editions.

Historians of the book have helped to nuance our understanding of the ways in which early modern drama endures and fails to endure.⁴ We have learned that written media themselves are frequently volatile and unstable: Hamlet's erasable "tables" or commonplace book, for example, provides a means not only to remember but also to *forget*; the tablets are "technologies of erasure" that can render writing more fleeting than memory, the "book and volume of my brain" (1.5.103) that Hamlet tries (and fails) to wipe clean.⁵ These and other insights of book history have challenged new historicist readings of scriptive power in *Hamlet*, including Margaret Ferguson's, which emphasizes the process of "incorporating" that results from "*materializing the word*."⁶ Book history has allowed us to see *Hamlet* less as a register of the permanence of print and script than as a troubling reflection on the impermanence of all signification in a culture where

² Robert Weimann, "Mimesis in *Hamlet*," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 275–91, esp. 279.

³ Unless otherwise noted, quotations of *Hamlet* are taken from the edition of Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), which is based on the second quarto (1604/5). Quotations of other Shakespeare plays are taken from G. Blakemore Evans, gen. ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁴ See, for example, Leah Marcus, "Bad Taste and Bad *Hamlet*," in *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (London: Routledge, 1996), 132–76, which helped establish the importance of close attention to differences between *Hamlet*'s first three (extant) printed editions.

⁵ Stallybrass et al., 415.

⁶ Margaret Ferguson, "*Hamlet*: Letters and Spirits," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, 292–309, esp. 299, 292. See also Goldberg, 323: "Suborning his father's seal, making himself the image of Claudius, Hamlet achieves, momentarily, the form of power within the scriptive world which replaces (which has already replaced) the oral in the course of the play. Claudius, recall, murders the old king by pouring poison in his ear. Hamlet dies by the hand—the poisoned tip of a sword."

drama was printed, if it was printed at all, in relatively ephemeral punch-hole pamphlets that made up a small fraction of the overall print market.⁷

In the process of bringing out the great variability of the book's cultural meanings, however, scholars have often essentialized writing as inevitably more stable and enduring than performative media. David Scott Kastan's suggestion that print "conserves in a way performance can not," for example, does not fully explain how a well-established theatrical culture would be considered less durable than the notoriously short-lived playbook.⁸ Such assumptions derive from the old idea that ephemeral orality can be divided from the enduring "technology" of writing, and they have not gone unnoticed.⁹ W. B. Worthen has critiqued Shakespeare scholars' continued preoccupation with print posterity, for example, and Gina Bloom has emphasized "the materiality of spoken articulations" during the period, questioning "the tendency of many scholars to limit 'matter' to visible and tangible realms."¹⁰ Further refinement of our vocabulary for dealing with the fleeting and often insubstantial nature of early modern media is necessary, since the designation "material" often obscures instead of illuminates. As David Ayers observes, "The concept of the material has come to occupy an important but largely inexplicit and unanalyzed position in literary and cultural studies."¹¹ Ironically, materiality has become "the ultimate abstraction, since it denotes every real or conceivable iota of the actual."¹²

Ophelia, whose mad utterances Laertes describes with the suggestive phrase "This nothing's more than matter" (4.5.168), challenges the assumption that

⁷ Lukas Erne notes that during Shakespeare's career, playbooks accounted for 3.3 percent of printed books and approximately one-seventh of all literary titles; see *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 16. On the printing of Shakespeare's plays, see David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare and the Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001).

⁸ Kastan, 7.

⁹ This division has been expressed and maintained most influentially by Walter Ong; for example, see *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

¹⁰ W. B. Worthen, "Prefixing the Author: Print, Plays, and Performance," in *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 212–30; and Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2007), 2, 5. On the interactive relationship between print, script, and speech during the period, see Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500–1700* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000). On the porous relationship between writing and performance in Shakespeare's theater, see Robert Weimann and Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance: Stage and Page in the Elizabethan Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010); and W. B. Worthen, "Intoxicating Rhythms: Or, Shakespeare, Literary Drama, and Performance (Studies)," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62 (2011): 309–39.

¹¹ David Ayers, "Materialism and the Book," *Poetics Today* 24 (2003): 759–80, esp. 763. See also the other essays in this special issue, including James A. Knapp and Jeffrey Pence, "Between Thing and Theory," which argues that the category of the "aesthetic" helps to nuance strictly materialist criticism, since it "properly describes that transformative space in between the poles of prescriptive abstraction and materialist description" (641–71, esp. 644).

¹² Ayers, 777.

drama, poetry, and song exist “in” matter, that they can be defined exclusively in terms of their concrete and stable manifestations. Laertes’ phrase refers primarily to the idea that Ophelia’s verses have no fixed content and produce an excess of meaning, yet it hints at the superfluity of her bodily presence. Hamlet associates Ophelia with corporeal “country matters” (3.2.110), and her mad appearance with her “hair down, singing” (as the first quarto has it) is among the most embodied spectacles of the early modern stage.¹³ Yet she is portrayed as a character who speaks, thinks, and is “nothing,” in the sense that her speech is unintelligible (“Her speech is nothing” [4.5.7]) and in Hamlet’s bawdy pun on the “nothing” of her genitalia (3.2.111–14). A similar paradox is built into the term “matter” itself, which (then as now) carried the double meaning of concrete substance and significant content.¹⁴ The term was linked to the Latin *mater*, reminding us of the mixture of overabundance and lack that early moderns saw in the female body.¹⁵ Ophelia’s distinctively feminine madness exposes early modern anxieties about how bodies and other types of “matter” come to signify, asking us to reconsider how drama simultaneously resides in physical substances on the page or in the air, amounts to insignificant and impalpable nothings that disappear as soon they are uttered, and signifies so multifariously as to exceed matter entirely.¹⁶ Through the extremes of materiality and immateriality with which she is associated, Ophelia forces audiences to confront the ways in which, as Judith Butler puts it, “Think[ing] through the indissolubility of materiality and signification is no easy matter,” querying an unexamined reliance upon (or, worse, fetishization of) materiality.¹⁷

¹³ *The First Quarto (1603)*, in Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, eds., *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 13.14.

¹⁴ The Latin *materia* already denoted both physical elements and significant content; throughout the early modern period, “matter” retained both meanings; see *OED Online*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, September 2011; online version, December 2011), <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/115083?rskey=ALLpij&result=1> (accessed 6 January 2012), s.v. “matter, *n.*”

¹⁵ See Ferguson, 295: “As we hear or see in the word ‘matter’ the Latin term for mother, we may surmise that the common Renaissance association between female nature in general and the ‘lower’ realm of matter is here being deployed in the service of Hamlet’s complex oedipal struggle. The mother is the matter that comes between the father and the son.” See also Patricia Parker’s discussion of female *dilatatio*, or copious discourse that never becomes meaningful action and threatens to overwhelm male signification, in *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: Methuen, 1987), 8–35.

¹⁶ On the gendered qualities of Ophelia’s excess of melancholy, see Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), 50–56.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 30. I am influenced here by recent work in Shakespeare studies to articulate more capacious theories of materiality; in particular, see Jonathan Gil Harris, who shows how materiality in Shakespeare amounts to a “polytemporal” process in *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2009); and Michael Witmore, who suggests that “finding our way to a truly Shakespearean metaphysics . . . should not be an exercise in transcen-

Despite Ophelia's relevance to recent work on the material text, scholars have tended to isolate her from *Hamlet's* metadramatic conflict. Goldberg traces Hamlet's own "career continually invested in scriptive gestures"; Weimann demonstrates Hamlet's "ambidextrous capacity for both recommending and undermining the self-contained Renaissance play"; Stallybrass and other historians of the book show how Hamlet himself "obsessively stages erasures of memory."¹⁸ Scholarship that takes Ophelia as its primary subject tends to remove her from the play's brooding over signification, including Elaine Showalter's influential argument that Ophelia is a blank slate "deprived of thought, sexuality, language" and that it is necessary to defer to the later history of her representations in order to tell her story.¹⁹ Leslie Dunn, Nona Feinberg, and others have suggested that Ophelia's song-speech asserts a performative agency that poses a threat to Denmark's patriarchal structure, but they do so by replacing the notion that Ophelia is the empty receptacle of male projections with the notion that she is the nonsemantic other to male speech.²⁰ By denying Ophelia access to language and representation, scholars have remained unable to account for how her mad, musical utterances refuse to take a stable material shape yet continue to be significant.

dence, but an attempt to unearth a new and different kind of materialism, one that is grounded in bodies but emphatic in asserting the reality of their dynamic interrelations," in *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2008), 2.

¹⁸ Goldberg, 311; Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, 24; and Stallybrass et al., 418. In "*Hamlet*" without *Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), Margreta de Grazia warns against taking her title too literally, since "little would remain" if the play were to be considered without "the most valued character in our cultural tradition" (1). See also W. B. Worthen, *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), who consigns Ophelia to the most evanescent and nonlinguistic of performative repertoires; she is "the axis of histrionic excess in the play, an object lesson perhaps in the consequences of performance liberated from writ" (109–10).

¹⁹ Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, 77–94, esp. 78. On Ophelia's role as an object of symbolic meaning, see Bridget Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia," *English Literary History* 44 (1977): 60–74.

²⁰ On Ophelia's female agency, see Nona Feinberg, "Jepthah's Daughter: The Parts Ophelia Plays," in *Old Testament Women in Western Literature*, ed. Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik (Conway, AR: U of Central Arkansas P, 1991), 128–43; and Sandra Fischer, "Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in *Hamlet*," *Renaissance and Reformation* 26 (1990): 1–10. On the musical aspects of Ophelia's mad scenes, see Leslie C. Dunn, *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 50–64, esp. 62; see also Heather Dubrow, *The Challenges of Orpheus: Lyric Poetry and Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008), 215–27; and Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, the Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006), 86.

This essay proposes that media studies—attuned to the complex mixture of transience and immediacy that characterizes our own web of physical interfaces, wireless networks, and digital “clouds”—present an opportunity to reconsider Ophelia, whose mixture of concrete embodiment and abstract significance has not been fully appreciated.²¹ Ophelia’s frenzied song-speech is composed of anonymous ballads in common circulation, and her emblematic flowers are cryptic and befuddling. Yet her madness provides a poignant expression of personal suffering and captivates the imaginations of her auditors:

She is importunate—indeed, distract. . . .
 She speaks much of her father, says she hears
 There’s tricks i’th’ world, and hems and beats her heart,
 Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
 That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
 Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
 The hearers to collection. They yawn at it
 And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts.
 (4.5.2, 4–10)

These lines draw attention to the absence of any discernible “shape” to Ophelia’s song-speech, its lack of a stable origin, and the multiplicity of re-interpretations to which it is subjected. We are introduced to the urgent, engrossing qualities of her “half sense,” with its disquieting implications about Elsinore’s festering corruption, in which the dead go unremembered and young women are abandoned by their lovers. In the scenes that follow, Ophelia works to undermine the standard early modern belief that drama (and representation in general) consists of an abstract intention that is subsequently manifested in physical artifacts. She shows instead that art involves a continual process of *mediation* in which technologies, ideas, bodies, and other structures and forms all, in no preset order, make their mark.

By mediation I refer not only to the material forms that communication takes but to the entire range of activity involved in its transmission. The concept of mediation has emerged alongside contemporary experiences of “mediatization” or oversaturation in digital and other mass media.²² In a mediatized world,

²¹ On the ways in which media studies can help rethink Shakespeare, see the Fall 2010 special issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, “Shakespeare and New Media.” On the value of media studies for literary scholars of all periods, see Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); and N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005).

²² The media concept is predicated on that of communication, which emphasizes the transfer of informational content from sender to receiver without positing an external realm of origin or significance. As Frederic Jameson suggests in *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late*

textual meaning is embedded in process: rather than enduring artifacts or concretized meaning, we are confronted with a constantly adapting media nexus. Mediation encompasses the entire ecology through which meaning unfolds—including the aural recitations, written recordings, theatrical infrastructures, bodily affects, environmental landscapes, visual affordances, and musical adaptations that facilitate art's transmission and shape its significance.²³ Ophelia provides an excellent example of mediation because it is precisely the lack of a definitive source for her recycled song-speech, and its refusal to congeal in writing, that allow her to become so affecting. She reveals that the question of art's implication in an overwhelmingly mediatised environment (which we associate with postmodern culture) is already at the heart of early modern drama's best-known play.

Hamlet's self-consciousness about theories of art is grounded in the distinctive type of mediation at stake in the early modern theater, with its continual interaction between what Christopher Marlowe calls the "jyging vaines of riming mother wits" on the stage and the "high astounding tearms" of dramatic writing.²⁴ Marlowe's concern about "jyging vaines" was widely shared throughout the period, when "jibes," "gambols," and "songs" provided a disorderly influx of ideas and sensations into fictional worlds.²⁵ Theatrical music, in particular, had long enjoyed a reputation for unsettling the Aristotelian category of *muthos*, or formally coherent plot structure.²⁶ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle expresses frustra-

Capitalism (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), "The traditional fine arts are *mediatized*" when they "come to consciousness of themselves as various media within a mediatic system in which their own internal production also constitutes a symbolic message and the taking of a position on the status of the medium in question" (162). The term "mediatize" is derived from Jean Baudrillard, who uses it to describe the consolidation of mass media together under a single code in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981), 175–76. See also Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000); and John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36 (2010): 321–62.

²³ My use of the term "ecology" to describe a broad field of environmental and social activity is informed by the work of Tim Ingold; for example, see "The Temporality of the Landscape," in *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 189–208: "To bring the perspectives of archaeology and anthropology into unison through a focus on the temporality of the landscape . . . might enable us to move beyond the sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space" (189).

²⁴ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I*, in *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, vol. 5, ed. David Fuller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 6.

²⁵ These are Hamlet's terms for jesting (5.1.179–80).

²⁶ See Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (1986; repr., Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998): "*Muthos* in this new sense [as articulated in the *Poetics*] can be loosely rendered as 'plot,' but only provided we understand by that not simply the contingent contents of a play or poem, but the formal organization which is purposefully produced and fashioned to coherence by the poet" (24).

tion with tragedians since Agathon because “the songs in a play of theirs have no more to do with the Plot than that of any other tragedy.”²⁷ Shakespearean singers exploit this tradition, disorienting the audience from a coherent sense of the plot with jokes, diversions, insinuations, malapropisms, and “sweet ditties.”²⁸ Indeed, it is through the “jygging vaines” of song and its potential for destabilization and disruption that Ophelia is able to unsettle standard early modern theories of drama.

I

Music was one of the most prominent threshold experiences of the early modern theater. It ushered playgoers in and out of the fiction; it accompanied the jigs and jests that came after a performance in the outdoor theater; it provided lengthy interludes between each act in the indoor theater; and it punctuated a play with strains, flourishes, dances, vocal songs, and instrumental tunes that related ambiguously and often indirectly to the plot. Theatrical music is often *paratextual*, not unlike a preface to a printed book, because it “makes present” a fictional universe, as Gérard Genette puts it, “offer[ing] the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back” from the text proper.²⁹ Music is generally closer to the fictional world than a written preface and less clearly distinguishable from it, however, since it is often incorporated into the plot. Iago’s singing to get Cassio drunk in Act 2, scene 3 of *Othello*, for example, is a feature of the dramatic action, ostensibly performed by a fictional character. But even here, music retains a liminal status, since Iago sings a popular song of Scottish origin about a “King Stephen,” undermining the sense that Cyprus is wholly apart from London. Theatrical music thus renders it difficult or pointless to distinguish between what is represented and what is producing or performing that representation.

²⁷ *Poetics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (1941; repr., New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1456a. Aristotle goes on, “Hence it is that they are now singing intercalary pieces, a practice first introduced by Agathon. And yet what real difference is there between singing such intercalary pieces, and attempting to fit in a speech, or even a whole act, from one play into another?”

²⁸ As Mortimer (who speaks no Welsh) says of his Welsh wife (who speaks no English): “thy tongue / Makes Welsh as sweet as ditties highly penn’d, / Sung by a fair queen in a summer’s bow’r, / With ravishing division, to her lute” (*The First Part of Henry the Fourth*, 3.1.205–8).

²⁹ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1987; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 1–2. I am influenced by William Sherman’s updated use of the term in his work on terminal paratexts in early modern books; see “On the Threshold: Architecture, Paratext, and Early Print Culture,” in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2007), 67–81.

Music's tendency to overstep the boundaries of representation allows it to expose the tenuous links between a play's fictional world and the performative devices and practices surrounding that fiction. Characters such as Amiens in *As You Like It* and Balthasar in *Much Ado about Nothing*, who have no significant role except to sing, draw attention to the many elements in the theater that operate in excess of the plot: it is as though musicians from the gallery happen to be onstage. In such cases, music blurs the distinction between performer and character, laying bare theater's infrastructure, as well as the acoustic culture outside it, especially since so much Shakespearean music was imported from a familiar, popular repertoire. Music allowed ideas and feelings of London's ballad culture and courtly love songs sung by the sweet voices of boys to migrate into Cyprus or Egypt, and it brought audiences from London, Sicilia, or Athens into Bohemia and Fairyland.³⁰ Autolycus of *The Winter's Tale* is a balladmonger, a roguish wanderer, and a creature of disguise who belongs in Bohemia no more or less than he belongs anywhere else. He claims to have been in Prince Florizel's service and pretends to be a courtier, but another of his alter egos is a cutpurse who "haunts wakes, fairs, and bear-baitings" (4.3.102)—landmarks of early modern London. His songs are in a musical language that moves freely between court and street, allowing him and his listeners to traverse a range of environments. Ballads such as "When daffodils begin to peer," with its birdsong, "tumbling in the hay," and "quart of ale" (4.3.12, 8) evoke a pastoral escape, a courtly idiom, and a popular English soundscape all at once.³¹

Because it underscores the thresholds and breaking points of a play's fictional world, music offers the opportunity for metatheatrical reflection and self-consciousness about the interpretive position of the audience. For Shakespeare, music forces questions about the fine and oscillating line between the protocols and codes that facilitate representation, and the speech, sounds, props, gestures, bodies, performative events, iterated practices, and social meanings "in" the fiction. Vocal song is a particularly rich site for exploring and theorizing theatrical representation because a character's voice is inseparable from its immediate musical context. A singer is often left, as in Balthasar's "Sigh no more, ladies,"

³⁰ Singing voices tend to be described as "sweet," as in Cloten's request for a "sweet air" in *Cymbeline* (2.3.18), and sometimes "warbling," as in Jaques's request that Amiens "Come, warble, come" in *As You Like It* (2.5.37). Cleopatra describes the sound of a boy actor's voice more pejoratively when she imagines that she "shall see / Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I th' posture of a whore" (5.2.219–21).

³¹ David Lindley points out that "it is often—and rightly—said that the introduction of song in [act 4, scene 3 of *The Winter's Tale*] is a vital ingredient in transforming the tone of the play after the claustrophobic atmosphere of Leontes' court," but he goes on to show how Autolycus's songs take on a courtly style as well; see *Shakespeare and Music* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 165ff.

with "One foot in sea, and one on shore" (*Much Ado about Nothing*, 2.3.64), in the sense that he exists partly within the plot and partly in the *mise-en-scène* of a tune that carries a distinctive set of performative conventions and traditions. Even Desdemona's Willow Song, which seems intimately suited to its singer's state of mind, is an "old thing" (*Othello*, 4.3.29) sung by her mother's maid and marked by the collective memories of its previous instantiations, including versions of the song transcribed in mid-sixteenth-century manuscript lute songbooks.³² Shakespeare often draws attention to the dramaturgical hybridity of song, leaving characters and audiences intrigued but baffled by Autolycus, Feste, Ariel, and Ophelia. Are Shakespearean songs expressions of a character's state of mind? Do their words fit coherently within the context of the dramatic action or bear a meaningful relationship to it? Are they opportunities for setting a scene, personal sentiment, generalized lament, or gratuitous entertainment?

Answers here are almost never as clear as they would be for other verbal acts in the theater, and the critical history of Shakespearean songs has been dominated by the question of how—and if—they fit within the fiction around them. W. H. Auden highlights "Shakespeare's skill in making what might have been beautiful irrelevancies contribute to the dramatic structure," while F. W. Sternfield makes the case that among his contemporaries Shakespeare had a unique "skill in integrating music into the structure of his plot."³³ But those who maintain that Shakespeare closely incorporates song into the fiction acknowledge that singers present a distinctive, often irreverent perspective on the play. Feste's epilogue song to *Twelfth Night* provides a good example of this tendency, since its unsentimental and melancholy quality jars uncomfortably with the play's comedic ending. After Orsino repeats his offer of marriage to Viola, the clown remains on stage to sing "When that I was and a little tine boy," with its dreary refrain "With hey ho, the wind and the rain . . . For the rain it raineth every day." Each stanza describes a stage of life from youth to old age in which rain (and presumably sorrow) remain constant, until Feste reaches a concluding appeal for applause that sounds like an abrupt afterthought:

³² See Bruce R. Smith, "Shakespeare's Residuals: The Circulation of Ballads in Cultural Memory," in *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 193–217. On the several possible sources for *Othello's* Willow Song, see F. W. Sternfield, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 23–52. Ross W. Duffin chooses a version from the Lodge Lute Book (ca. 1559–1575) for his reconstruction in *Shakespeare's Songbook* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 467–70.

³³ W. H. Auden, "Music in Shakespeare," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962), 500–27, esp. 516; and Sternfield, 24.

A great while ago the world begun,
 [With] hey ho, [the wind and the rain,]
 But that's all one, our play is done,
 And we'll strive to please you every day.
 (5.1.405–408)

As David Lindley points out, “Many commentators in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries felt [Feste’s epilogue] to be an inappropriate and extraneous addition”: in 1747, William Warburton wrote, “This wretched stuff not *Shakespeare’s*, but the Players!”³⁴ The epilogue has inspired much consternation since, including a “determination to make it fit thematically into an overall view of the play,” but this debate has created something of a false choice, since the epilogue sits within *and* without Illyria.³⁵ The song has much in common with the jig performed after a play, and audiences may have imagined it less as a fictional construct than as a performance by Robert Armin, the clown who first played Feste and whose jibes they had paid to see. For that matter, audiences might have had similar feelings about all of the music in *Twelfth Night*, a play that continually exploits the liminal status of song in order to explore the boundaries of its own representational endeavor and to pursue its broad thematic interest in “fancy” and “play.”

Feste’s music thus reveals Shakespeare’s tendency to exploit the representational indeterminacy of song, allowing singers to expose or develop unresolved or unresolvable problems at the heart of the dramatic structure. If Feste’s epilogue song takes any speaking position, it is surely Malvolio’s, the one character emphatically isolated from the comedic resolution, who vows at the end of the play, “I’ll be reveng’d on the whole pack of you” (5.1.378). Malvolio hates music and would undoubtedly take exception to any association with it, but Feste’s melancholy sentiment “the rain it raineth every day” provides an ironic expression of Malvolio’s outlook. While Feste’s epilogue may seem calculated to resolve the play into comic relief, its effect is rather to amplify the sense of unease with which Orsino attempts to deal with loose ends. Stressing that it is necessary to “entreat [Malvolio] to a peace” (5.1.380), Orsino appears to recognize that a secure comedic resolution cannot ignore the moral and legal propriety with which Malvolio is associated. Feste’s epilogue thus stubbornly tugs against the generic movement around it in a way that recalls the music of *As You Like It*, where Jaques remarks, “I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs” (2.5.12–13), or the Fool’s songs in *King Lear* about the recklessness of

³⁴ Lindley, 215; and William Warburton, ed., *The Works of Shakespear*, 8 vols. (London, 1747), 3:206n.

³⁵ Lindley, 216.

kings and fathers.³⁶ These examples accentuate and dilate upon a sense of alienation from the main theatrical structure and resist the narrative arc around them, whether toward comedic integration or unavoidable tragedy.

Like Feste, Ophelia reproduces snatches of songs from the streets of London. Like Lear's fool, she accumulates well-known proverbs and distributes them to monarchs. Like Jaques, she performs a bitter and ironic critique of those around her. Yet few Shakespearean singers offer as stark a counterpoint to their surroundings as does Ophelia in her mad scenes. For Elizabethan audiences, the spectacle of a noblewoman with her hair down, singing fragments of popular songs, would have been uniquely jarring. As we have seen, the attending gentleman's account brings out Ophelia's difference, describing her as an invalid who "speaks things in doubt." Later, the priest emphasizes that "Her death was doubtful" and orders a funeral without "requiem" or other music so as not to "profane the service of the dead" (5.1.216, 225–26). And Hamlet works vehemently to banish Ophelia from the main plot by subjecting her to misogynistic attacks about the frailty and impurity of women, mocking her return of his letters, bitterly insisting, "Get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.134–39), and abandoning her.

Like other Shakespearean singers, Ophelia is not easily dismissed or removed from the action; such attempts only reinforce her disruptive influence. Ophelia is Hamlet's foil: her madness offsets his ostensibly feigned "antic disposition" (1.5.170), and her death connects to Hamlet's contemplations of suicide, neutralizing some of his most sacrilegious moments through her actual self-slaughter. But she is not subordinate to him: even in death, Ophelia occupies a position that is highly objectified *and* uniquely authoritative. Her grave functions for Hamlet and Laertes as a space of difference on which to project lasting and meaningful elegy, a female void on which they "mouth" and "rant" hyperbole in the hopes of conjuring "the wandering stars and mak[ing] them stand / Like wonder-wounded hearers" (5.1.272–73, 245–46). Yet her dead body and frail singing are also reminders of the impermanence of all signification, a quandary that Hamlet acknowledges when he mocks Laertes' empty rhetoric inside the grave ("eat a crocodile? / I'll do't" [ll. 265–66]). The graveyard scene has traditionally been understood as a backdrop for Hamlet's ethical and metaphysical deliberations, but Ophelia casts the longest shadow over it, provoking the clowns' incisive commentary on voluntary and involuntary death, the controversy over funereal rites, and the conflict between Hamlet and Laertes over how to remember her.

³⁶ I am thinking, for example, of "Fools had néer less grace in a year, / For wise men are grown foppish" and "I for sorrow sung, / That such a king should play bo-peep, / And go the [fools] among" (1.4.166–67, 176–78). In another example of song's tendency to exceed a dramatic fiction, the Fool speaks or sings a verse of Feste's epilogue song in Act 3, scene 2 of *King Lear*.

The elegies at Ophelia's grave are among the many reactions to her madness and death that have established her as one of the most frequently represented characters in literary history.³⁷ Ophelia is enveloped in a transhistorical media nexus—a seemingly endless process of recurrence in theater, visual art, opera, photography, and film which, as Martha Ronk puts it, “not only postdates the play's production, but also is embedded in the play itself.”³⁸ The opening image of Gertrude's famous report of Ophelia's drowning—“There is a willow grows askant the brook / That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream” (4.7.164–65)—draws out the indirect, projected, engrossing nature of the episode. It is no coincidence that its reflecting image is of a willow, a tree that Margreta de Grazia calls “the bleak inverse of the genealogical oak” and connects to the distress of “a patrilineal system which can imagine nothing more tragic than genealogical extinction” (an association that will come back to haunt Shakespeare's audiences in Desdemona's Willow Song).³⁹ Ophelia's drowning fascinates and disturbs us, especially given the onlookers' perplexing failure to intervene. We wonder how much of Gertrude's portrayal of Ophelia as a harmless aesthetic object “incapable of her own distress” is calculated to subdue Laertes and the rebellious mob at his heels—especially given Elsinore's climate of manipulation and conspiracy, of which Claudius reminds us: “How much I had to do to calm his rage! / Now fear I this will give it start again” (ll. 176, 190–91).⁴⁰ And we are intrigued by an undercurrent of corrosive threats that cannot be confined to the political, which appear (for example) in Ophelia's language of flowers:

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
(ll. 166–69)

³⁷ See Showalter: “Though she is neglected in criticism, Ophelia is probably the most frequently illustrated and cited of Shakespeare's heroines” (78). On the history of Ophelia's visual representations, see Carol Solomon Kiefer, ed., *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia* (Amherst, MA: Mead Art Museum, 2001); and Alan Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts, 1709–1900* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2002), 279–345. On Ophelia's representations in film, see Kendra Preston Leonard, *Shakespeare, Madness, and Music: Scoring Insanity in Cinematic Adaptations* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 35–68. On the influence of Ophelia's musical madness upon the operatic tradition that stems from Shakespeare, see Daniel Albright, *Musicking Shakespeare: A Conflict of Theatres* (Rochester: U of Rochester P, 2007), 6–10. On Ophelia's continued relevance in global popular culture and new media, see Alexander Huang, “The Paradox of Female Agency: Ophelia and East Asian Sensibilities,” in *The Afterlife of Ophelia: Reproducing Shakespeare*, ed. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave, 2012), 79–99.

³⁸ Martha Ronk, “Representations of Ophelia,” *Criticism* 36 (1994): 21–43, esp. 21.

³⁹ De Grazia, 119, 149.

⁴⁰ On scandalous and slanderous “noise” in *Hamlet*, see Kenneth Gross, *Shakespeare's Noise* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001), 10–32.

The convergence of sex and death in Ophelia's wild orchids—whether they are called “dead men's fingers” or the shepherds' obscene, unnamable alternative—may imply the sorrowful lament of an abandoned lover, the excessive melancholy of a sex-crazed madwoman, recrimination against the cruel Danish prince, or perhaps a broader condemnation of the patriarchal system that cast her aside.⁴¹ There is no way of knowing for sure; the “fantastic” imaginative possibilities of Ophelia's garlands remain enigmatic, keeping her would-be interpreters guessing and helping to inspire innumerable evocations and responses.

The combination of the “grosser” prurience, “cold” chastity, and graphic morbidity in Ophelia's “fantastic garlands” harks back to the themes of her mad utterances and the arresting power of her music. By calling up the “snatches of old lauds” and “melodious lay” that Ophelia chants while she is drowning (ll. 175, 180), Gertrude reveals how Ophelia's music resonates through *Hamlet* before it begins to be remediated through future decades and centuries.⁴² Ophelia's songs are experienced anxiously by Gertrude and Claudius (“Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss” [4.5.18]), channeled by Laertes as a motivation for revenge (“Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge / It could not move thus” [ll. 163–64]), and imitated by the first gravedigger:

In youth when I did love, did love,
Methought it was very sweet
To contract-a the time for-a my behove,
O, methought there-a was nothing-a meet!
(5.1.57–60)

Like the ballad of Desdemona's childhood maid—recycled by Desdemona and again by Emilia when she determines valiantly to “play the swan, / And die in music. [Sings.] ‘Willow, willow, willow’” (*Othello*, 5.2.247–48)—Ophelia's songs are as infectious as they are poignant. As Amanda Eubanks Winkler has suggested, Ophelia becomes a musical “prototype for alluring female madness” on the seventeenth-century stage, a model for the Jailer's Daughter in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, and an influence upon melancholy female singers including Desdemona and Aspasia (who sings a lamenting willow song in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*).⁴³ Ophelia's musical performances become as influential and enduring as her scripted lines—lines which are, in any case, snatched from a conventional ballad repertoire.⁴⁴

⁴¹ On Ophelia's floral language, see Harold Jenkins, ed., *Hamlet* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1982), 536–42.

⁴² On remediation as a term for recycling, refashioning, or rehabilitating other acts of mediation, see Bolter and Grusin, 53–62.

⁴³ Winkler, 63–113, esp. 86.

⁴⁴ My use of Gertrude's term “snatch” to refer to the movement of a performative moment or metonymic association through a culture derives from a paper by Leslie C. Dunn, “Catches

Despite Ophelia's prominence in later (especially nineteenth- and twentieth-century) visual cultures, she is "endued" (4.7.177) into *Hamlet's* media ecology, above all, through her music. The ambiguous dislocation of Ophelia's madness from the rest of the play borrows from the general paratextual tendencies of Shakespearean song, and her death scene leads naturally to the caustic jesting of the gravediggers because, as singers and clowns, they are particularly well equipped to draw out the troubling significance of her mad utterances. Yet Ophelia's music is closest of all to the abandoned and melancholy female voices of the ballad tradition, and the *drowning* in mediation that this implies. Ballads were ubiquitous in early modern culture: Tessa Watt estimates up to four *million* ballad sheets in circulation by the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴⁵ They were a fundamental mode of social experience, acting as feedback loops between print and oral cultures, learned aristocrats and illiterate laborers; and they allowed singers to adopt an enormous variety of subject positions, including lovesick maidens, impetuous heroines, and murderesses.⁴⁶ Bruce Smith has shown that ballads were constantly moving "within, around, among, of, upon, against, within" physiological, acoustic, social, political, and psychological levels of early modern experience, including an "'autopoietic' system of communication, self-referential and self-reproducing."⁴⁷ The notion of autopoiesis is particularly relevant to Ophelia, whose drowning scene involves a shocking degree of alienation from social and (indeed) human worlds:

and Snatches: Tuning in to the Early Modern Song Network," delivered at the conference "Performing the Book: Multi-Media Histories of Early Modern Britain," Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, 11 February 2011.

⁴⁵ Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 11. On the ubiquity of ballads throughout the period, see Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 225–327: "The ballad was a remarkably flexible art-form. In musical terms, the infectious tunes lent themselves to a range of differing performance styles. They were simple enough to be learned by 'Foot-boys and Link-boys' in the street, yet interesting enough to stimulate the creative energies of England's finest and most famous courtly composers. . . . The texts of English ballads were just as appealing and malleable. They presented a continuous set of variations on a number of stock tales and types, stimulating simultaneously the cultural tastebuds of those who craved novelty and those who found security in similarity" (276–77).

⁴⁶ On the longstanding associations of balladry with women, see Dianne Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650–1850* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), as well as the essays collected in *Ballads and Broadsides in Britain, 1500–1800*, ed. Patricia Fumerton, Anita Guerini, and Kris McAbee (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

⁴⁷ Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), 172–73. Smith draws the notion of "autopoietic" communication from the work of Niklas Luhmann, including *Ecological Communication*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989).

Her clothes spread wide
 And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
 Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
 As one incapable of her own distress,
 Or like a creature native and endued
 Unto that element. But long it could not be
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death.

(ll. 173–81)

After she is (in Claudius's words) "Divided from herself and her fair judgment, / Without the which we are pictures or mere beasts" (4.5.85–86), Ophelia becomes a picture endlessly represented by others. She enters a liminal, "mermaid-like" state in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman, agency and resignation, personal expression and technological structure, author and medium, are probed and undermined.

Ophelia's drowning marks a passage between the human and its environment, a movement into the forms and physical particularities that surround her and that constitute her song-speech, from the infectious timbre of her voice in the air to its dampened inundation in water. Subsumed at the moment of their greatest personal significance into an impassive natural world, Ophelia's songs force us to ask whether human expressions bubble up from the world around them only to be absorbed just as quickly. She raises the possibility that *all* communication is embedded in the fluid, highly distributed ecology of ballad transmission, in which singers do not author or control their verse. Yet she reveals that a ballad-singing maiden rendered "most deject and wretched" by male cruelty is nevertheless able to make meaning that captures the imaginations of generations of auditors (3.1.154).

II

Ophelia's uncanny ability to make herself heard draws not only on the liminal status of Shakespearean music, but also on the conventions of *poesie*, the principal early modern category for literary and dramatic "making." It is difficult to describe her as an author, since she does not compose her "old lauds," and her madness robs her of conscious design. Her fragmentary "snatches" hint vaguely and opaquely at present circumstances, making them appear to be distracted messages rather than authorial presentations. Ophelia's song-speech seems distinct from the other poetic moments in the play, including the love lyrics that Hamlet writes for her and the play that he stages, making it difficult to see how her utterances are meaningful.

Yet Ophelia's verses are only marginally more imitative and derivative than Hamlet's conventional lyrics ("Doubt truth to be a liar, / But never doubt I love" [2.2.116–17]) or *The Mousetrap*, which is adapted from an old tale in order to stir emotions in the present. Her gathering and distribution of "posies" of flowers link her song-speech to the governing term for the literary arts, from Gascoigne's *A Hundreth sundrie Flowres bounde vp in one small Poesie* (1573) to Dryden's *Of Dramatic Poesie, An Essay* (1668). Although Ophelia loses her capacity to read and write, she continues to recycle and produce poesie, a category that traced its origins to ancient Greek *poiēsis* and referred to imaginative making across a variety of media. While "literature" denoted *any* kind of writing during the early modern period, from theology to history, poesie calls up a specific genealogy from Homer and Sappho to Virgil and Ovid, and it implies no necessary bias toward script.⁴⁸ Poesie is thus a helpful term for describing the range of endeavors in which early modern poets were implicated, from writing and versifying to oratory and song.⁴⁹ In mythological terms, poesie was linked to Orpheus, the foundational figure for lyric poetry, whose name resonates phonetically with Ophelia's, and whose captivating voice and lyre resemble the first quarto's description of Ophelia "*playing on a lute, and her hair down, singing.*"⁵⁰ The attending gentleman draws out this association when he suggests that listeners eagerly "yawn" and gape at Ophelia's "winks and nods and gestures," implying a connection to Orphic *furor* and its power to compel and allure (4.5.9–11). Indeed, Ophelia has much in common with the long-haired maenads who destroy Orpheus, overtaking him and drowning out his song. Ophelia's erotomania and drowning evoke the most troubling aspects of the legend, including the sexual frenzy that culminates in Orpheus's severed head floating down the Hebrus.⁵¹

Ophelia thus emerges as a versifier at the margins of early modern poesie—an extreme type of poet who does not exactly "author" her song-speech yet

⁴⁸ *OED Online*, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109080> (accessed 28 December 2011), s.v. "literature, *n.*"; and Raymond Williams, "Literature," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 183–88.

⁴⁹ The question of which endeavors come under the umbrella of "poesie" during the period is not straightforward; texts such as Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesie* (ca. 1582) and George Puttenham's *Art of English Poesy* (1589) operate in part as prescriptive definitions of what the category does and does not include. The period is full of controversy over what activities can be associated with or attributed to poets.

⁵⁰ *The First Quarto* (1603), 13.14. On the relationship between Orpheus, the early modern lyric tradition, and issues of gender, see Dubrow, 15–26.

⁵¹ Ovid's version of the legend emphasizes the "mindless rage" and "mad fury" of the "raving mob of Thracian women." See *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, trans. Charles Martin (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 369.

exerts a cogent force over its meaning. She participates actively in the conflict over representation and remembrance that is at stake in *Hamlet*, and her mad utterances should not be isolated from Hamlet's instructions about drama in the players' scenes or from the play's general fixation on the problem of controlling and perpetuating meaning. That Ophelia is not a writer by no means disqualifies her from being a poet, a role that was commonly understood to include performance. For all the importance that writing assumed in humanist culture, poesie retained an important acoustic dimension (recall that neither David nor Orpheus, the twin paragons of Renaissance poetry, ever picks up a pen). In an ironic way, Ophelia summons up Philip Sidney's ideals about poesie as an ethical, humanist endeavor when she repeatedly commands her auditors to "mark" and "remember" the emblematic significance of her songs and flowers (4.5.28). Laertes' description of Ophelia's song-speech as "A document in madness—thoughts and remembrance fitted" (l. 172) has a curious resonance with Sidney's account of poesie as an instrument of instruction proceeding from the "divine fury" or inspired wit of the poet, inflected by the "thoughts" of moral philosophy and the "remembrance" of history but confined to neither.⁵² Similarly, although Ophelia's lyrics are bawdy and coarse and the significance of her flowers is obscure, the lyrics and flowers resemble George Puttenham's description of pastoral poesie that operates "under the veil of homely persons and in rude speeches to insinuate and glance at greater matters."⁵³ That Ophelia's "greater matters" are enigmatic brings out Puttenham's later contention that all figurative language involves "abuses, or rather trespasses, in speech, because [figures] pass the ordinary limits of common utterance, and be occupied of purpose to deceive the ear and also the mind, drawing it from plainness and simplicity to a certain doubleness."⁵⁴

Yet Ophelia undermines these influential theories of poesie even as she invokes them. Her mad utterances bring out Puttenham's damaging concession about the doubleness of poesie, as well as Sidney's admission that England has become a "hard stepmother to poets," where only "base men with servile wits undertake it."⁵⁵ Ophelia summons up the antipoetic and antitheatrical traditions to which Sidney and Puttenham respond, including Stephen Gosson's decrying of the "vanitie" of those "so foolish to taste euery drugge, and buy euery trifle" of

⁵² Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesie," in *Sir Philip Sidney: Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 212–50, esp. 249.

⁵³ George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Cornell UP, 2007), 128.

⁵⁴ Puttenham, 238.

⁵⁵ Sidney, 240–41.

poetic “trashe” on the market.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly, Gosson and his peers focus on the London theaters, which—due to their banishment outside the City, their tendencies toward collaborative authorship, and their absorption of popular traditions including the jibes of clowns—had a reputation for being anathema to upright humanism. *Hamlet* is well aware of the unsavory reputation of these traditions: as Weimann has demonstrated, jibes and jests are a crucial means by which the play lays bare “a world marked no longer by a secure, fixed language of identity *qua* social rank and sumptuary order,” in which there is no reason to expect that poetic imitations will remain true to noble, elite intentions.⁵⁷

The genteel humanist traditions of learning, remembering, and public speaking remained a potential refuge from such concerns. But unlike Hamlet, who remains a nimble thinker and orator even during his supposed madness, Ophelia takes humanism to a disturbing new level. Before Laertes’ departure to Paris, she absorbs and memorizes her father’s and brother’s maxims designed to lock up her “chaste treasure,” taking the metaphor of a repository so far as to tell Laertes that his warning is “in my memory locked / And you yourself shall keep the key of it” (1.3.30, 84–85). Ophelia shows herself adept in humanist styles of thought when she responds to her brother’s “good lesson” with the witty rejoinder that he avoid becoming a hypocrite who “recks not his own rede” (ll. 44–49).⁵⁸ And she returns Hamlet’s letters after appearing with the prayer book that her father has given her, demonstrating in a literal way her promise to replace Hamlet’s “tenders” of love with Polonius’s advice (l. 98). As de Grazia has observed, Ophelia continues to play the mimic in her mad utterances, which harp on dead fathers and resemble Polonius’s sayings.⁵⁹ Ophelia is not antihumanist, then, but *more* than humanist, and her tragedy and self-destruction are rooted in excessive loyalty to paternal *logos*.

Ophelia articulates her distinctive form of humanism by continuing to shadow and offset Hamlet’s struggles: his vexed relationship to his father’s directives, feigned madness, consideration of suicide, and career in theatrical and scriptive gestures. Ophelia’s devotional reading in Act 3, scene 1, mirrors Hamlet’s reading of “Words, words, words” in the previous scene, placing into relief

⁵⁶ Stephen Gosson, *The Schoole of Abuse* (London, 1579), sig. D3r.

⁵⁷ Weimann, *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice*, 164.

⁵⁸ In Q1, Ofelia spars on more equal footing with Leartes, who speaks only ten lines of advice (as opposed to thirty-nine lines in the 1604/5 quarto [Q2]). While Ophelia’s response in Q2 and the First Folio (F) is subtle, although still witty, the Ofelia of Q1 uses pointed and even aggressive rhetoric: “my dear brother, do not you / Like to a cunning sophister / Teach me the path and ready way to heaven / While you, forgetting what is said to me, / Yourself like to a careless libertine / Doth give his heart his appetite at full / And little reckes how that his honour dies” (3.14–20).

⁵⁹ De Grazia, 108–14.

his book's "Slanders" of a "satirical rogue" (2.2.189, 193). Her bewilderment at the meaning of *The Mousetrap*—"What means this, my lord?"—sharpenes the malice and "mischief" that Hamlet intends by its performance (3.2.129, 131). We might even compare Hamlet's fascination with the speech about Priam's murder to Ophelia's recycling of ballads, since the First Player's description of Pyrrhus's sword which "*seemed i'th' air to stick*" (2.2.417) corresponds in a tantalizing and yet imperfect way to Hamlet's dilemma, just as Ophelia's songs, with their allusions to old men's dead bodies and young gentlemen who abandon maidens, hint strongly but ambiguously at her grievances. Yet important differences emerge in their respective poetic styles: Hamlet begins the play with a penchant for destabilizing wordplay and performative jesting, but he gradually develops a desire for permanent inscription that includes his forgery of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's death warrant. Ophelia, meanwhile, begins the play firmly situated within a humanist economy of glossing and remembrance, and leaves it as a performer and distributor of popular songs and withering flowers, acoustic and organic "nothings" that cannot be described as scriptive. In this way, she outlines a movement *away* from the deadliness of writing, toward an aural, performative type of poesie.

Ophelia emerges, that is, not simply as a foil for Hamlet's gravitation toward scriptive formations that fix, control, or authorize meaning, but also as an agent and adversary in this dilemma. It is thus fitting that she offers one of the play's most incisive portraits of the undoing of humanist ideals at work in Hamlet:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,
 Th'expectation and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 Th'observed of all observers, quite, quite down.
 (3.1.149–53)

Ophelia recognizes the unmooring of the central humanist tenet that the noble mind is able to imitate its ideas through worldly instruments and thereby achieve princely governance. But, unlike Hamlet, she does not see the outcome of this crisis in monarchical seals and palpable hits:

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,
 Now see what noble and most sovereign reason
 Like sweet bells jangled out of time, and harsh—
 That unmatched form and stature of blown youth
 Blasted with ecstasy.
 (ll. 154–59)

It is in Hamlet that Ophelia hears this musical sweetness “jangled out of time” (or, in the First Folio text, “out of tune”) and “Blasted with ecstasy,” but she later reproduces it in her own mad utterances. For her, that is, the alternative to a decaying humanist economy of “sovereign reason” and controllable imitation is a “harsh” cacophony of ecstatic song.

Ophelia hears a related type of *furor* in her other account of Hamlet’s antic disposition, when he visits her closet looking “As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors” (2.1.80–81).

He raised a sigh so piteous and profound
As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
And end his being. That done, he lets me go
And with his head over his shoulder turned
He seemed to find his way without his eyes
(For out o’doors he went without their helps)
And to the last bended their light on me.
(ll. 91–97)

Ophelia’s depiction of this encounter alludes to Orpheus’s second loss of Eurydice; L. M. Findlay notices verbal echoes particularly of Ovid’s account of the myth.⁶⁰ The speech places Hamlet in the role of Orpheus, “loosed out of hell” while his lover remains there, but the fact that we experience the loss from Ophelia’s perspective links her to the legend as well. As in the previous passage, what Ophelia imagines as Hamlet’s “piteous and profound” expressiveness anticipates her own tragic singing, which (if we change the gender of the pronouns) “did seem to shatter all [her] bulk / And end [her] being.” In her mad scenes Ophelia takes this ecstatic mode of expression even further, summoning up not only Orpheus’s pitiful, watery death, but also the frenzy of the Thracian women who tear him apart.

In both her commentaries on the undoing of humanist ideals in Hamlet, then, Ophelia envisions a transition from a lost world of ideal figuration toward an Orphic form of poesis. Her songs about deflowering and death act out this vision, echoing the confluence in the myth between Orpheus’s lovesick, entrancing music and the sexualized violence that is its culmination. Hinting indeterminately and often simultaneously at Hamlet and Polonius, the songs are sometimes quite bawdy—“Young men will do’t if they come to’t: / By Cock they are to blame” (4.5.60–61)—and sometimes strike a tone of elegiac lament:

⁶⁰ L. M. Findlay, “Enriching Echoes: Hamlet and Orpheus,” *Modern Language Notes* 93 (1978): 982–89.

And will 'a not come again?
 And will 'a not come again?
 No, no, he is dead,
 Go to thy deathbed.
 He never will come again.
 (ll. 182–86)

Little of the enchanting sweetness that the Renaissance idealized in Orpheus emerges here: Ophelia's song-speech may be "melodious" in Gertrude's recollections, but her mad scenes are bleak and corrosive even when compared to the rest of *Hamlet*. She brings out the darker aspects of the passionate "stupor" (or as Arthur Golding translates it, "stound") of a poet caught between earth and hell, whose song is at home in the "stilnesse of [Pluto's] waste and emptye Kingdome."⁶¹ Although she fascinates and allures her auditors, Ophelia is closest to this victimized side of Orpheus, who after Eurydice's second death is like one "stricken in a sodein feare and could it not restreyne / Untill the tyme his former shape and nature béeing gone, / His body quyght was ouergrowne, and turned intoo stone."⁶² Ophelia's immersion in the natural world, fragmented utterances, madness, futile death, and persistent association with "nothing" tie her to Orpheus's two most memorable and tragic failures: when he is unable to charm the maenads who overtake and mutilate him, and when, overcome with desire, he glances back at his lover only to find "nothing": "He retching out his hands. / Desyrous too bée caught and for too ketch her grasping stands. / But nothing saue the slippry aire (vnhappy man) he caught."⁶³

The constellation of tensions that Eurydice's second death evokes—the effeminizing threat of amorous desire, the vacuousness of the female body and its representations, the complicity of verse and music in tragedy—find dynamic expression in Ophelia's first song:

"How should I your true love know
 From another man?"
 "By his cockle hat, and his staff,
 And his sandal shoon.

White his shroud as mountain snow,
 Larded with sweet flowers,
 That bewept to the grave did not go
 With true lovers' showers."

⁶¹ Arthur Golding, trans., *The XV. Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis* (London, 1567), sigs. R3v–R4r.

⁶² Golding, sig. R4v.

⁶³ Golding, sig. R4r.

“He is dead and gone, lady,
 He is dead and gone.
 At his head a grass green turf,
 At his heels a stone.”⁶⁴

With its interest in dead bodies and the materials by which they are recognized and remembered, Ophelia’s ballad refuses to reduce elegy to scriptive matter. Harping on the tragic gulf between the signifiers that identify the lover’s body and the “true love” as he lived, the first stanza employs the pilgrim’s trappings as a *memento mori* that singles out the lover by marking a radical difference from his life, acknowledging the gap between human identity and its materials in a manner that anticipates Hamlet’s encounter with Yorick’s skull. Meanwhile, the “sweet flowers” that cover the lover’s body are subject to decay, and his “shroud as mountain snow” implies melting, especially given the image of weeping that follows. The irregular line “That bewept to the grave did not go,” which adds an emphatic “not” that is jarring in both meter and sense, disallows the dead lover the fleeting tribute of “lovers’ showers.” And in the final stanza, the dead body is wedged between distinctive types of matter, the earthy “grass green turf” which (as Hamlet will remind us in his description of Alexander’s progress through the earth) the body will literally become, and a “stone,” presumably a gravestone that carries an inscription.⁶⁵ In this way, Ophelia’s song brings out a paradox between different forms of *poesie*, a word that denoted artful verses and “sweet flowers” as well as inscriptions in stone and other hard surfaces, and, as Heather Dubrow has observed, inspired “a turning between two very different images of the material world: the evanescence suggested by wordplay on ‘leaves’ [or pages of poetry] and the solidity suggested by rocks.”⁶⁶

Ophelia’s songs are thus an acute example of *poesie*’s characteristically mixed state—matter that is both solid and ephemeral; signification that fails or vanishes yet uncannily persists and compels. She undermines any sense that the materials of writing and performance need to resolve into a concrete state—insisting instead that *poesie* disappears into airy nothingness, exceeding its physicality. And she demonstrates how these ephemeral qualities are no

⁶⁴ Q1, 13.15–26. Q2 and F place the third stanza before the second, confusing the sense of development. I quote the version of the song given in Q1 because it proceeds uninterruptedly and in a more logical sequence. There are a number of additional textual disparities in this scene: the songs unfold in a slightly different order; Ophelia is interrupted only once in Q1, while Claudius and Gertrude interject comments more often in the other two texts. And while Gertrude attributes Ophelia’s madness to “this mischance of old Corambis’ death” in Q1 (13.6), there are multiple and conflicting interpretations of her madness in Q2 and F.

⁶⁵ The final stanza in Q1 comes second in Q2 and F.

⁶⁶ Dubrow, 39.

grounds for dismissing or ignoring a poetic endeavor, since even fleeting balladry has the potential to adopt an Orphic mantle and resonate meaningfully through its environment. Indeed, Ophelia helps to show how poesie *must* evanesce in order to be meaningful—that it is precisely its negotiation between immediate particularity and absent signification that renders it poetic.

III

Ophelia's insight that a medium must escape its own materiality in order to communicate is a key premise of communication theory, and it returns us to the relevance of mediation to literary study. Following Marshall McLuhan, mediation is generally taken to refer to the imposition of a work's technological structure upon its meaning.⁶⁷ What is often overlooked is the general concept upon which mediation is predicated: that of communicating a message from sender to receiver. A medium fulfills its intersubjective promise not by standing for its meaning or remaining as a record of it, but by seeking to disguise the "noise" that disturbs its "signal." When we say "hello" on the telephone, for example, we perform the belief that the conversation is immediate or local, not the lackluster transmission of the sound of the voice over a long distance. As Lisa Gitelman puts it, "Media become authoritative as the social processes of their definition and dissemination are separated out or forgotten, and as the social processes of protocol formation and acceptance get ignored."⁶⁸ It is only when something goes wrong—a computer crash, for example—that we are forced to come to terms with the material particularities of mediation: recognizing that executing a command to "save" is not an abstract means to ensure that the file will be "there" but an electromagnetic process by which ions are configured in a hard drive or online.

By focusing our attention on how media render themselves absent, Ophelia reveals that poesie can never be "saved" as a static artifact. There is no strict analogue to digital saving in early modern culture, but Hamlet manufactures a related desire for script that is physically robust, immutable, and meaningful all at once. Ophelia exposes the futility of this desire, unraveling, in her ecstatic and Orphic manner, the very possibility that noble humanist inventions result in concrete objects impervious to change and decay. She leads us to a theory of the continual process of mediation to which poesie is subjected, a process

⁶⁷ McLuhan's famous suggestion that "the medium is the message" first appears in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

⁶⁸ Gitelman, 6–7. Bolter and Grusin describe this phenomenon as "the logic of transparent immediacy," which "leads one either to erase or to render automatic the act of representation" (30, 33).

that includes not only physical structures but also “protocols,” which Gitelman describes as “a vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus.”⁶⁹ Both theater and song can be included here, since they involve an interaction of technological and bodily matter (the proscenium stage, the amplification of the larynx) and cultural protocols (the practice of clapping to conclude a play, the expectation of a refrain in a song). But we must acknowledge the special qualities of an embodied medium like the theater, which comes into being through actors, singers, props, and other forces that constantly intrude upon and reshape what they mediate. A play like *Hamlet*, and Ophelia’s mad utterances in particular, require a broader theory of mediation that accounts for inanimate materials as well as the larger diversity of elements that constitute theatrical representation. Indeed, because she actively shapes the contingent, situational way in which her song-speech produces meaning, Ophelia is *herself* a kind of medium, or what Bruno Latour would call a “mediator”:

An *intermediary*, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs. For all practical purposes, an intermediary can be taken not only as a black box, but also as a black box counting for one, even if it is internally made of many parts. *Mediators*, on the other hand, cannot be counted as just one; they might count for one, for nothing, for several, or for infinity. Their input is never a good predictor of their output; their specificity has to be taken into account every time.⁷⁰

Latourian sociology and media studies are distinct theoretical terrains, but Latour helps us see how media formats and technologies cannot be cleanly separated from the humans who inflect and perform them. A notion of mediation that includes technologies and protocols, *as well as* active “mediators” and obedient “intermediaries,” allows us to acknowledge the mixture of human and nonhuman elements that constitute any social formation and, in turn, to appreciate the wider stakes of *Hamlet’s* metatheatrical conflict. In combination with media theory, Latour helps us recognize the extent to which ideas, structures, physical substances, and humans all play a role in “reassembling” poesis, which (like Latour’s theory of the social) involves “a trail of *associations* between heterogeneous elements.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ Gitelman, 7.

⁷⁰ Bruno Latour, *Resembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 39.

⁷¹ Latour, 5. I am influenced here by the work of Henry S. Turner on the ways in which Latour can be used to rethink early modern literary form; for example, see “Lessons from Literature for the Historian of Science (and Vice Versa): Reflections on ‘Form,’” *Isis* 101 (2010):

A more capacious theory of mediation that does not insist upon dividing the human from the nonhuman is apropos for a play fixated on the problem of transmitting messages not only through erasable commonplace books and other communication technologies, but also through human bodies. The primary conflict of *Hamlet* is after all the Danish prince's complexly delayed translation of his father's commandment through an ostensibly willing body. And, as Michael Almereyda brings out in his film adaptation of *Hamlet* (2000), Ophelia can be seen as an extreme type of *intermediary* at the outset of the play. Set in a version of contemporary New York City oversaturated with filmic, surveillance and countless other media technologies, the film portrays Polonius (played by Bill Murray) as an overattentive pedant who infantilizes and manhandles his daughter. In the film's version of the nunnery scene, Polonius goes so far as to reach underneath Ophelia's shirt and plant a wire there, literally appropriating her as a medium for the purposes of recording Hamlet. Through the vocabulary of film and contemporary media culture, Almeredyda draws attention to the ways in which Ophelia is already portrayed as an intermediary in Shakespeare's play, a living commonplace book who contains her father's precepts.⁷²

It is fitting that Almeredyda's emphatically mediatized *Hamlet*, in which humans themselves become technologies, arises in film: as Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe have observed, "Film has always borrowed from and been conditioned by other media," and as such it can provide unique insight into "how Shakespeare's own plays allegorize (consciously represent and reflect on) their relation to media that were both new and old at the time of their earliest performance and publication."⁷³ Scholars of recent Shakespeare adaptations on film and in mediatized stage performance (notably the 2007 *Wooster Group Hamlet*) have accordingly been among the first to argue for the relevance of media theory to early modern studies.⁷⁴ As is frequently the case in media theory, contemporary habits and technologies make explicit problems that were there all along.

578–89. See also Turner's discussion of dramatic character as a form of artificial life in "Life Science: Rude Mechanicals, Human Mortals, Posthuman Shakespeare," *South Central Review* 26 (2009): 197–217.

⁷² On Almeredyda's film and its oversaturation in media, see Douglas M. Lanier, "Shakescorp 'Noir,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 53 (2002): 157–80; and Thomas Cartelli and Katherine Rowe, "Hamlet Rewound," in *New Wave Shakespeare on Screen* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007), 45–68.

⁷³ Cartelli and Rowe, 41, 52.

⁷⁴ On the avant-garde Wooster Group's reprisal of Richard Burton's 1964 *Hamlet* (which was recorded "live" on Broadway and intended for a television audience), see Thomas Cartelli, "Channeling the Ghosts: The Wooster Group's Remediation of the 1964 'Electronovision' *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Survey* 61 (2008), 147–60; and Worthen, *Drama*, 123–38.

In the process of reimagining Shakespeare, film adaptations often place into relief key differences in historical experiences of mediation. The sense in Almereyda's film that characters have the freedom to manipulate the ways in which they are mediated, for example, says more about contemporary culture than it does about the early modern theater. While Almereyda's Hamlet seeks to record and render his life entirely in film (using *The Mousetrap* as a form of autobiography), Shakespeare's Hamlet can only evince an unfulfilled desire to transform his mind into his father's book:

Remember thee?
 Yea, from the table of my memory
 I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
 All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
 That youth and observation copied there.
 (1.5.97–101)

Hamlet's hope here, in response to the Ghost's first visitation, is to refashion the medium of his memory into the bibliographic instrument of his father's *logos*. But the cascading series of failures and delays in this project begins immediately after Hamlet's attempt to transcribe the Ghost's instructions into his commonplace book. Hamlet comes to believe that the "play's the thing" that will enable his revenge (2.2.539), but in practice *The Mousetrap* complicates and stymies the Ghost's directive. Despite the Ghost's emphatic command that Hamlet "Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught" (1.5.85–86), *The Mousetrap* is concerned above all with the infidelity of the Player Queen. And Hamlet's brief appearance with Claudius in the prayer scene, in which his thoughts quickly turn to "th'incestuous pleasure of [the king's] bed" (3.3.90), rapidly gives way to his anguished confrontation of Gertrude in her closet.

The closet scene—the culmination of an act that begins with Claudius's self-castigation for using the "plastering art" and "painted word" of the "harlot's cheek," and continues with Hamlet's virulent dismissal of feminine "paintings" (3.1.50–52, 141)—reaches a crisis in the play's theme of embodied artifice. Hamlet is unable to manifest his filial duty without his mother's physical presence, and his Oedipal struggle is colored by his conviction that he can act or perform ideas only through the intermediary of her body. Even the misguided action that he does accomplish in Gertrude's closet, murdering Polonius, is made possible by the additional medium of the arras that conceals the wrong man. This disaster motivates Hamlet to a radical obsession with his mother's body, which he (ironically) places before a mirror in the hopes that a reflection will provide complete self-knowledge: "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" (3.4.17–19). Still unsatisfied, Hamlet forces Gertrude to look upon the "picture[s]" or "counterfeit presentment of two brothers," using them to frame her as a creature of crude sensation (ll. 51–52):

What devil was't
That thus hath cozened you at hoodman-blind?
Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all.
(ll. 74–77)

All of this work to instrumentalize his mother by means of reflections and depictions signals Hamlet's growing desperation for media he can immobilize and control, and that promise to link his judgment to the sensory world. Yet the result of Hamlet's desire, especially when the impatient Ghost reappears to admonish him alone, is a greater sense of isolation from the matter that he perceives as necessary to render his ideas substantial:

HAMLET	Do you see nothing there?
QUEEN	Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.
HAMLET	Nor did you nothing hear?
QUEEN	No, nothing but ourselves.

(ll. 128–31)

Confronting Hamlet with the possibility that his beliefs are founded on "nothing" and derive from nothing higher or more significant than "ourselves" and "all" that can be seen and sensed, Gertrude turns him toward a recognition of the base materiality that all bodies perform. Accordingly, Hamlet follows this scene with some of his most graphic commentary on the rudest of all bodily mediations, the transition from life to death—he jokes about Polonius's decomposition, suggesting that "a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar," and soliloquizes his resolution to become like soldiers "That for a fantasy and trick of fame / Go to their graves like beds" (4.3.29–30, 4.4.60–61).

Gertrude thus anticipates the idea, expressed in Ophelia's final scenes, that mediation inevitably involves both shifting, intangible "nothings" and baser "matter"—gross bodies full of idle fancies that have no definitive source or ideal. When Gertrude asks Hamlet why "you do bend your eye on vacancy / And with th'incorporal air do hold discourse?" and suggests that the Ghost "is the very coinage of your brain. / This bodiless creation ecstasy / Is very cunning in" (3.4.113–14, 135–37), she touches the nerve that has brought Hamlet to her closet. Gertrude makes explicit the fears that have consumed Hamlet all along: that he cannot verify a prior paternal directive, that his actions are subject to an endless host of contingencies, and that because of this he may as well be mad, since there is nothing separating him from an abject "ecstasy" like Ophelia's:

[Ecstasy?]

My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time
 And makes as healthful music. It is not madness
 That I have uttered. Bring me to the test
 And I the matter will reword, which madness
 Would gambol from.

(ll. 138–42)⁷⁵

Protesting too much that his struggle derives from definitive “matter,” Hamlet alludes to the myth that human bodies are healthful insofar as they imitate the music of the spheres, a heavenly harmony that mortals can mimic but never reach or hear. Implicit is the possibility that what Gertrude sees as “ecstasy” and Hamlet as a “gambol” or extemporaneous dance has nothing to do with a higher state. We are forced to confront the play’s generalized sense of paranoia that actions, ideas, and works of art are fully embedded in their environment, leaving limited opportunity for individual will. The scene in Gertrude’s closet is thus another register of *Hamlet’s* skepticism about dominant early modern theories of representation, in which authorial inventions may be altered by their expression in the world but nevertheless defer to a prior realm of meaning. As Gertrude puts it, reassuring Hamlet that she will not repeat what he has told her, “Be thou assured, if words be made of breath / And breath of life, I have no life to breathe / What thou hast said to me” (ll. 195–97). Conceiving of words as physically contiguous with their speakers, almost as though they are life forms of their own, Gertrude presents a notion of communication that lives only insofar as it is recycled and performed. By contrast, Gertrude implies, words that would seek to become permanent artifacts are dead—delusional “nothings” that vainly seek to determine their significance in advance.

Ophelia takes this line of thinking in a poetic and musical direction, showing that even the most uncontrolled and malleable of art forms can produce topical, individualized meaning. Her songs are a mixture of tragically personal expressions and anonymous, generalized utterances that owe nothing to a dramatic pen. They are dismissed as derivative “nothings” and “old lauds,” yet they summon up pity for her individual plight even from Claudius, who laments, “O, this is the poison of deep grief. It springs / All from her father’s death” (4.5.75–76). The tendency to shift between well-worn imitation and personalized interiority is a staple of the early modern lyric, but Ophelia refashions this generic tradition, strongly linked to Orpheus, to emphasize the ecological process by which poetic meaning unfolds. It is fitting that Ophelia’s songs are punctuated by an “ocean”

⁷⁵ Hamlet repeats “Ecstasy?” only in F.

of “rabble,” the “Caps, hands and tongue” of rebellion that Laertes leads into Elsinore, because they are politically threatening and also because they operate at the threshold of the dominant poetic mode (ll. 99–108). Drawing from a popular and acoustic repertoire rather than a litany of literary conventions, Ophelia’s utterances provide the space for an extrafictional influx of performative practices hovering at the paratextual boundaries of poesie. Ophelia’s song-speech is an ecstatic and improvisatory “gambol”: instead of “healthful music” that imitates ideal harmony, it recycles and recirculates popular sentiments that comment poignantly, if obscurely, on present events. Yet Shakespeare’s play does not allow us to divide Ophelia’s music from higher meaning. Like early modern thinking about music in general, which continually slips between philosophical notions of the music of the spheres and sensuous experiences of “practical” music, her songs move readily between symbolic abstraction and phenomenal perception.

Ophelia’s death comes when her body, like her song-speech, is suspended “mermaid-like” between formal coherence and organic singularity. When “on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds / Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke” (4.7.170–71), the boundaries between Ophelia, her social world, and her physical atmosphere break down, and we witness the tragic outcome of her figuration as “nothing,” the obedient intermediary of her father and lover. Deprived of rational thought and hapless within natural and social currents beyond her control, Ophelia is the victim of her own clothes, which take on the agency to bear her up and then pull her down to muddy death. This moment, the nadir of Ophelia’s conscious agency, is the conventional state in which she is remembered, from Gertrude’s lyrical description to John Everett Millais’s famous painting to Almereyda’s film, where she drowns in the fountain of the Guggenheim Museum. Yet the irony of Ophelia’s apparent passivity is that this episode is her most trenchant insistence upon the contiguity between humans and their environments. The drowning haunts us not least because it demands an acknowledgment of our *immersion* within media ecologies, including the dispersal of personal agency through our most externally determined of markers, our “garments” or social trappings which, in Ophelia’s case, decide between life and death.

Just as the threshold space of theatrical music disturbs the boundaries of a fictional world, Ophelia’s final scenes foreground the ways in which human expressions (and humans themselves) are mediated. Ophelia’s unscripted and performative qualities leave her in an ambiguously marginal position from which she critiques fundamental assumptions about artistic representation, revealing how poesie is less an instantiation of an external ideal than a communication of ideas, sentiments, and events through their environment. Endlessly

mediated and unavoidably poetic, her song-speech is an Orphic assemblage of “poesies” that reminds us of the general tendency for early modern literature to be recycled, improvised, spoken, and sung. In a play oversaturated with media and obsessed with the limits or “quintessence” of material objects, Ophelia asks us to recognize that poesie is *more* than matter.⁷⁶ She draws attention to the complex interaction of forces, bodies, and things at work in literary form, and she demonstrates the potential for song to be topical and affecting even when it leaves no written or recorded trace. Ophelia reveals that what matters about poesie is the continuously adaptive process by which it becomes meaningful.

⁷⁶ It is of course “man” that Hamlet sees as a “quintessence of dust” (2.2.274), part of his fascination with the spectrum between humanity and inanimate matter: “Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till ’a find it stopping a bung-hole?” (5.1.193–94).