

Gertrude and Ophelia

by Margaret Clarke

Act 1, Scene 1

The setting is a rehearsal for the play, "Gertrude and Ophelia." The actors are working without scripts. The stage is arranged in two spaces that represent Gertrude's "bedchamber" and Ophelia's "bower" (an outdoor setting near a river). "Playwright" enters, looking for just the right place for the white veil that Gertrude will be embroidering during the action. Gertrude's embroidery, along with the pages of the "new script" belonging to the "Actor" and the basket belonging to Ophelia are the three visible "icons" around which the play's action circles. Scene changes occur without interruption, but music, or the play's songs may be used to indicate transition.

The Playwright hears the voice of the Actor .

Actor: Have you read it?

Play: Read what?

Actor: *(he enters holding up several pages of script)* I placed it right in the middle of that bed this very morning, where I knew you couldn't miss it and now I find it shoved in with the props.

Play: It wasn't "shoved in" anywhere. I just left it on the prop table for a minute to do something on the set.

Actor: What's wrong with the set now?

TPlay: Who are you? My inquisitor?

Actor: John is getting a little snippy just lately about how much time you spend rearranging his set.

Play: His set!

Actor: Calls you "the housewife." He is the director after all.

Play: I wonder if John has forgotten that when we decided to do this, he not only agreed that I would play Gertrude, but I would be involved in the whole production. I am a professional actor, you know, and this is my play. I wrote it.

Actor: Yes and you also agreed to workshop it. Workshop means changes.

You're a feminist. You believe in all this process stuff. And remember we all decided the second act needed ... something.

Play: Something, yes, but....

Actor: Did you read the new scene ... did you like it?

Play: It's a piece of shit, pandering to the patriarchy.

Actor: Well! Unlike you, I never claimed I was in Shakespeare's league...

Play: You wrote this?

Actor: *(without hearing her)* I'm just the boy hired to play Horatio, the one who gets as few lines in your play as in Hamlet!

Play: You wrote this? I thought John I'm not saying it isn't good. I mean, you have gotten Prince Hamlet to the life. He is just that ... that

Actor: Full of himself?

Play: Exactly *(she reads Hamlet's lines)* "You are very grave, mother. You do not fool me. You are the grave." Graves make nice puns, don't they? You don't need this third "grave." If they don't get it by then, they don't deserve to get it.

Actor: Right.

Play: Now this is really good: "All that come near you sin and die, sin and die." I like the sound of that "sin and die, sin and die."

Actor: Did you like the way I worked in the "fool" motif?

Play: Excellent. Gertrude as fool, speaking the unspeakable. It works. But here's your best line: "You are the grave of all my hopes."

Actor: *(speaking his "Gertrude" line)* "Am I, my child? I had meant to be the womb of all your hopes."

Play: There, that's where it goes wrong. Gertrude wouldn't say that.

Actor: Gertrude is always saying that!

Play: Maybe Shakespeare's Gertrude. Look, what you don't understand is that as "The Mother," Gertrude is like an ideological sponge. The crap and piss left over from shaping the play, is sucked up into the Gertrude character, where we can safely feel all the disgust and contempt we want. Then we're supposed to identify like crazy with Hamlet and his pals, feeling our ever-so-neat fear and pity, because all the nasty bits have been displaced into her. Well, I'm here to tell you it's a crock. I identify with Gertrude and I don't like the bad press she's been getting. Your scene, no matter how well

written, just undercuts everything I want to say.

Actor: But when we workshopped the play you yourself said it needed something ... something to represent the men who are missing from the action.

Play: I didn't mean a whole new scene, one I didn't write, with Hamlet prancing around, yelling ...

Actor: *(interrupting)* He doesn't yell. I think I've made him very dignified!

Play: Yes! With a large broomstick up his ass, which he waves about while telling his mother she's a whore!

Actor: Well, isn't she?

The actress who will play Ophelia enters the bedchamber carrying a basket of flowers. She waits for their exchange to end and rehearsal to begin. Noticing her, Playwright and Actor momentarily attempt to lower their voices.

Play: You don't understand, do you? You're acting in this play and you don't for one minute comprehend ... you can't conceive ofThere is more in heaven and earth Horatio, than is dreamt of in your ideology.

Actor: You talk about "ideology!" Can you hear yourself? It's not John and me and the patriarchy that are putting on the ideology, honey. It's you and that rabid band of feminists you keep parading in here to whisper to you while we are trying to work. I'm sure one of them is a lesbian *(drops his voice, indicates the actress)*, I saw her with that poor girl the other day. That dyke had her in tears.

Play: So, in this brave new world of yours its not little boys, but lesbians who make the little girls cry? Come on. Don't you think I know that divide and conquer trick? How do you get the feminists to run scared? Bring up the lesbian boogeywoman. Next you'll be offering to help me protect the girl from a life of perversity! I would expect this from John, but not from you.

Actor: O.K. I'm sorry. Lesbians are fine. You're right, it was a male chauvinist trick. I'm ashamed. My dear, can you imagine, me, cuddling up to those awful fellows! Joke? Laugh? Look, all I'm saying is, if you think any part of my scene can be rescued, maybe there's something we could do with it ... together. Everyone

agrees. Your play needs a Hamlet. Just read it once more. You said you liked my writing. Give it one more...

Play: She's waiting. I have to go.

She goes to the bedchamber, he exits.

Act I Scene 2 Gertrude's Bedchamber

The physical relationship between the women is tender in these early scenes. Gertrude loves to touch people and Ophelia is hungry for affection.

Gertrude: It is the time, child. Not you, but the time.

Ophelia: I wish it were. But he says ...

Gertrude: He says! What has he not said in the past weeks. He makes grief flood through our flesh again each day with his ... words. Always words.

Ophelia: Just this morning I tried to tell him, "Do you want to go down into the grave with your father? You will kill yourself with going over it all like this, as if it were a play that you must memorize."

Gertrude: And what was his reaction to that?

Ophelia: I dare not tell you.

Gertrude: You dared to scold him, as if you were his mother ... so tell his mother what he said.

Ophelia: Madam, he ... he would not wish me to.

Gertrude: Ophelia, we have been through this before. Everything depends on your honesty. If it is to finish well for us, for him, you must tell me everything.

Ophelia: I want to be honest ... with ... everyone.... (*deciding*) He said it was not the play past, but the play to come that was in his mind.

Gertrude: And what in Heaven's name does that mean?

Ophelia: I cannot say.

Gertrude: Cannot or will not? Did he say nothing else, make no gesture that would let you know his mind? Don't cry again, girl. You

must learn to be more controlled if you are to marry a Prince.
Now what else did my son say?

Ophelia: Nothing.

Gertrude: Then do?

Ophelia: He put his hands under my skirt.

Gertrude: My dearest! That is not the act of a grieving man. My son did that? This morning, while the rest of us were at chapel? He spoke about the play to come and put his hands? But don't you see, Ophelia, what he meant? This is a good sign. He has stopped mourning if he thinks again of such games with you.

Ophelia: His hands were not playful.

Gertrude: My dearest child, all men's hands are rough at first. They think they must behave like soldiers wrestling for a prize. They wish to ... impress us. Now, the important thing is, what did you do?

Ophelia: I ran from him ... I ran to chapel.

Gertrude: You did nothing else? Spoke no words. Gave him no other sign?

Ophelia: No Madam. How could I?

Gertrude: How could you? But a woman must manage these things. Really Ophelia, you do show the lack of a mother's teaching. When you feel the hands against your flesh, it is absolutely necessary that you ... running away is completely unattractive. The best thing, I think, would have been ... 'embarrassed pleasure'. "Oh my Prince, what do you mean by this!" There, you see - you neither reject nor accept, but he must give you some answer - and things go on from there. But running away to chapel! That accomplishes nothing!.... For two years now, since first you began to bring me your flowers for my rooms, we have talked of this ... of this feeling you have for the Prince

Ophelia: You thought me a very silly girl then.

Gertrude: Not for your feeling, but only because others - not knowing your sweet nature and thinking you ... strange, because you took so much time to teach yourself of plants and blooms - others had told me ... but I soon found them wrong. I know you now Ophelia, and know you are no fool.

Ophelia: Thank you.

Gertrude: Have I ever failed to be your ally, ever given you bad advice?

Ophelia: No, Madam.

Gertrude: Tell me dearest, has he never ... touched you before?

Ophelia: Just the kisses I have told you of.

Gertrude: Never tried to touch your breasts?

Ophelia: Sometimes he plays with the ribbons on my dress as if he would undo them, but it is ... absentmindedly ... as he talks.

Gertrude: My poor motherless child! Let me tell you sometime about what men do when their minds are absent! Now, look lively. We must dine with the court soon, and you must make yourself attractive.

Ophelia: What does it mean when a man makes a fist ... between your legs?

Gertrude: What?

Ophelia: He felt with his hand until he found ... the place, then he made a fist and pressed, not hard He knelt before me as if he were in chapel. His eyes were closed. He struck and said "the play to come" then laughed, then sighed, then again, "the coming play."

Gertrude: It grows late. There is no more time for talk. Go and ready yourself for the court.

Ophelia exits. Actor enters.

Actor: I've been thinking of a kind of compromise

Play: You're harder to get rid of than Hamlet!

Get...out...of...my...play. I mean it. Later maybe. Not now.

Actor exits.

Act 1 Scene 3 Gertrude's Bedchamber and Ophelia's Bower

Gertrude: *Begins singing "The Fate of Bold Women," (Yoric's song of Gertrude's mother) as she moves to the bower.*

""In the time of old
 When women were bold
 And warned men of their follies
 My mistress went forth
 To the good king's court

To scold him and his soldiers"

"With her voice full strong

She faced these men

My Lady, Queen and ruler ..."

(she breaks off as she sees Ophelia) . I knew if I looked long enough on this bend of the river I would find you!

Ophelia: Madam! *(putting her basket aside she curtsies)*

Gertrude: That looks so foolish in this place. Come, stand up girl! Why do you treat me so. I have not seen you for days and now you grovel on the ground as if I were about to have you imprisoned.

Ophelia: *(indicating a boulder)* I have no other chair for you Madam.

Gertrude: This will do fine. I have sat on worse in my time. Have I ever told you of when I rode two days on the back of a donkey?

Ophelia: You did?

Gertrude: I did. When I was close to my time with the Prince. My dear mother was supposed to come to me, but she injured her hip. I was very young then and determined to be with her. The King was away with all his court. Those were the old times when he traveled throughout the land settling disputes and bringing his laws to the people. There was no horse for me and no men I would trust to carry a litter. So with no better guard than Yoric, our court jester - that was his song you heard me singing just now, the song he wrote for my mother, his queen - he was my fool, my mother's jester sent with me as part of my service when I married Anyway, we set out, he on a mule, I on the donkey, because it had a broad back, and I was pretty broad myself by then. We did the whole journey in two days, resting the night by a stream, much like this one. Yoric told me jokes and sang his naughty songs until I thought I would go into labor just from laughing. *(She pauses, remembering)*.

"A young man's love

Is frost and fire

Hard and hot combining

But if a girl

Yoric and his songs! We reached my mother's lands the evening of the second day and when my mother and her women sighted me from her highest balcony, she was the only one who would believe it was me, coming so unaccompanied. "Open the gate," she said, "Her Majesty, my daughter, will be more than uncivil if she does not get her supper soon".... "More than uncivil!" That was my mother for you.

Ophelia: It must have been pleasant for you Madam, to be with your mother.

Gertrude: Of course it was, Ophelia, for my old mother was one of the few people who did not treat me as formally as you do now, as if I, becoming Queen, had lost my humanity. My old mother used to hate formalities, especially when she had to bow to men of rank. She would tell me, "When you've had them at your breast, man or child, you cannot ever bow the knee with quite so meek a heart as is expected." Come Ophelia. Do not let me go on making a fool of myself, telling you funny stories, only to have you look as if they will make you cry. Tell me what I have done to offend you and keep you from my rooms?

Ophelia: It has not been my choice, but I remembered as you spoke that I have been told not to see you.

Gertrude: By whom?

Ophelia: My father's request, Madam.

Gertrude: Oh, stop "madaming" me Ophelia. People are madaming me to death lately. What reason did your father give?

Ophelia: Only that I might annoy the king.

Gertrude: Now that the king and I will marry? Your father should know me better. The last king did not choose the women I had around me, and neither will this one. I keep the women whom I want. Tell your father that.

Ophelia: He meant no insult to you. He only thought the king would not be pleased with me, because ... because of the Prince.

Gertrude: The Prince? What has he to do with it? Oh! Because the Prince disapproves of my new marriage, and because you are seen as an "acquaintance" of his? And how does it go - your friendship with my son?

- Ophelia: He does disapprove. He comes to me, tells me, gets angry as he speaks of it, then weeps, weeps in my arms
- Gertrude: Oh yes. He would be the kind to weep in your arms. He was always tender-hearted, and too scrupulous for his own good. When he was a child he wept in my arms for the death of Yoric, whom the king had killed because he could not hold his tongue. Now my son's jests are as dangerous.
- Ophelia: This danger is the reason my father gives me for staying away from both of you.
- Gertrude: Until your father sees which way the wind blows. Is that it?
- Ophelia: I do not know. I only obey.
- Gertrude: And what if I say, I want you at my wedding, that I want you and your lovely flowers as my only company. No women of the court, only you.
- Ophelia: I would obey you, because you are my Queen, but do not make me, or my father and your son will not forgive it.
- Gertrude: Trust me Ophelia, your father will not only forgive it, he will be bragging to the court about it the day following. As for my son, what did he say he objected to in the marriage?
- Ophelia: You would not want to hear.
- Gertrude: I would. You must trust me. Listen. Your father loves you, but he is a courtier with a courtier's ways. My son is a man, and men do not always see the needs of their women as different from their own. But I am a woman and respect a woman's heart. I want the best for you and my son. Do you believe me?
- Ophelia: I do.
- Gertrude: And I love you, as if you were my own daughter, my own sweet daughter, who will come to my wedding bearing flowers for me.
- Ophelia: Oh, my Queen ... My Mother. I will bear flowers at your wedding and I will not care what any man says!
- Gertrude: These men do not know what is good for them. But we women do. Shall I tell you a secret Ophelia?
- Ophelia: If you trust me.
- Gertrude: Promise on our friendship that you will speak to no one

concerning this.

Ophelia: I promise on the soul of my dead mother, I shall keep your secret to the grave.

Gertrude: Well, perhaps you will not need to keep it that long. Perhaps only until you are Queen yourself one day and you tell your maids, as they gather flowers beside this stream, how the old Queen loved you. Do not doubt it; you will be Queen. I will guarantee it with my marriage.

Ophelia: How, by your marriage?

Gertrude: Here is the secret. It is not such a hard one, for anyone with a brain can see it. You know that I have no other children, only my son. He is all that is left to me. Oh, my mother attended me more times than with him, but they all died. The last one was a little girl. So perfectly shaped she was. But dead at birth with the cord around her neck. And that was ten years ago and since then, I cannot conceive.

Ophelia: Poor Mother.

Gertrude: You still do not understand, do you? I cannot conceive. If I cannot conceive, then my husband cannot have a legitimate heir. There can be only one heir - my only son, his step-son and his nephew. And after him only one line - my son's and yours, Ophelia.

Ophelia: Does the King know of this?

Gertrude: Yes. It is settled between us. If I marry him, he will name the Prince his heir. It is the best way. For both of us. There are some that would have gone with the Prince after his father's death, but they were the young men, none of the older men would have supported him against Claudius, the rightful brother of the dead king. There would have been blood spilled. I have prevented that and my son and your sons after him will rule.

Ophelia: Can I tell him? Would you? He would then see that you are not a wh ...

Gertrude: I can guess what he says ... but never mind. He is just upset because it is seems soon after his father's death, and priests have been whispering to him of silly rules about brothers

marrying brother's wives, rules which no man of sense and certainly no woman heeds. And no, we cannot tell him; he would make rude jests before the king. You know how foolish he can be with words. Let it all rest. It will become as plain as day in time that my marriage is the best thing for everyone. Now I must go and you must think about which flowers are best for my wedding.

Gertrude leaves Ophelia, humming "Bold Women" song, and seeing "Actor" with new scene in hand enters the bedchamber as "Playwright".

Play: Out! Out! We agreed to run Act 1 straight through.
 Actor: I'll only be a moment. I've looked at my Hamlet scene again and taken your advice, removed that too humble line of Gertrude's, tightened it a bit. I think you'll like ...
 Play: We're just getting the act rolling. You'll make us lose the momentum.
 Actor: You don't have to stop now. Just take it; read it between the acts. See what you think. That last scene; It's picking up. I liked the songs.
 Play: Get out of here. You know how she gets all atremble before this scene. If you delay us, she'll be in a state.
 Actor: I'm leaving, but
 Play: But what!
 Actor: Just try not to dismiss my scene ...
 Play: We call it "rejection" in our trade, and you'll learn to take it like the rest of us. *(Pause)* I promise to reconsider it if you stop interrupting. Now go.

He exits.

Becoming Gertrude , Playwright gets into bed , taking the embroidery with her.

Act 1 Scene 4 Gertrude's Bedchamber

Gertrude: *(calling out)* Do not make her wait, send her to me.
 Ophelia: Madam?
 Gertrude: Over here, little one, I am still in bed. No, no, child. Do not

leave, I am awake and working, see (*shows the embroidery*). If it is the King you are worried about, he has been gone from here for an hour.

During these last words Ophelia rushes across the room and throws herself onto Gertrude's bed, burying her body, fetus like, in the older woman's body.

What's this. Did you miss me so much in ten hours. You looked beautiful last night at my wedding supper. And your flowers were a delight. What is it girl? Ophelia, what is it?

Ophelia: I came to see if Your Majesty was well.

Gertrude: You speak very formally this morning. Were you worried that becoming a wife to a king again, would spoil our friendship?

Ophelia: Did Madam sleep well?

Gertrude: You mean did I have a pleasant wedding night?

Ophelia: I did not mean to ask such a thing.

Gertrude: Do not worry, my child. Come (*she moves over in the bed, gestures for Ophelia to join her, tucks the girl in beside her*) Let me tell you a little story. For people like myself and the King such nights are not what they might be for one as young and sweet as you. Do you know, though, I think the King was as nervous as a youth. When we retired from the wedding supper, he ordered more food and wine. I hinted at bed, but he ate and drank and talked, yes talked, as if his life depended on it, as if he, a man of his years and experience, were afraid of a woman's bed. What upsets you so, girl? Is it because I speak so openly of my wedding night, or my not-so-wedding night. Do not be shocked. The King drank too much wine and there was no wedding night.

Ophelia: Forgive me ... I

Gertrude: Never mind, my child. He managed this morning what he could not last night. I made sure he did not leave this room until he had. Ah! Now I do shock you, I see that I do. Listen, girl, you have too innocent an attitude to men. What I just told you is important. You should store away such knowledge, for your own future. Men are not the hot goats they all pretend to be and if they fail at love ... they always find a way to blame that failure on the woman. Oh, do not look at me like that. I have

seen it more than once, and things can take a nasty turn if a woman is not wise. So it is important, when you come to wed, no matter what it means for you, he must succeed My love, my child, what is it?

Ophelia: Oh, mother! Your son!

Gertrude: My son? What is it with my son? Is he hurt?

Ophelia: No, he is not hurt, no not he!

Gertrude: What has he done now. He was a beast at our supper. Sitting there staring at us, never eating, not rising for the toasts. Has he been rude to you too?

Ophelia: Yes, indeed Madam, he has been rude. He has been very rude.

Gertrude: Do not speak to me in riddles, girl. Tell me exactly what has happened to make you so unhappy. Now speak. And tell me only the truth.

Ophelia: I never lie, Madam

Gertrude: I know you do not lie. Speak.

Ophelia: The Prince came and sat with me after you left the supper. He spoke words to me, made offers ... cruel taunts.

Gertrude: What words? What offers?

Ophelia: I do not remember easily. He says words which seem rude. I take offence. Then he riddles them another way so that I am foolish to take offence.

Gertrude: What were the words?

Ophelia: Some fooling on a maiden's head.

Gertrude: This offended you?

Ophelia: He made me dance with him in front of all the company, dance without music.

Gertrude: You did not need to dance against your will.

Ophelia: Madam, he is the Prince!

Gertrude: Tell the rest.

Ophelia: Prince or no, I left him and ran from the room, not even asking my father's leave. After my maid had readied me for bed, I dismissed her. I should have had her sleep in my room as I usually do, but I knew she laughed at me for being the Prince's fool. I could tell by the way she undid my hair.

Gertrude: What then?

Ophelia: He came. I knew it was not my father's knock, nor my servant's.

Gertrude: Go on.

Ophelia: He told me he jibed at me because he was angry at my betrayal. "What betrayal, My Lord." Says he: "You scattered flowers at my mother's sin." "What sin My Lord? Your mother is rightly married." "Married yes, but not rightly. She goes to his bed to wallow as a pig in mire. He breathes on her a contagion more horrible..."

Gertrude: Forget his words; what did he do?

Ophelia: His breath on me. His hand at my neck. I did not know it ripped so easily ... that cloth. I had made the bodice lace myself... myself. And then just one tear ... so weak.

Gertrude: Did you fight him?

Ophelia: He caught my arm, swung me. He swung me with both his arms, off my feet. I thought it some strange dance. My head - I have the bump, just here, where the bedpost struck as he swung me. My feet left the ground, my head hit, and then my back was on the bed, all in a moment.

Gertrude: Did the blow make you unconscious?

Ophelia: No Madam. It made me ... quiet.

A long pause

Gertrude: Is your body hurt?

Ophelia: *(touches her head)* It will heal.

Gertrude: I meant *(she touches Ophelia's skirt, below her waist)*

Ophelia: *(pushing Gertrude's hand away)* It will heal.

Gertrude: *(holding her)* ThereThereThere. It will be all right. I will make it right. Trust me, Ophelia. I will make it well again.

Ophelia: Oh, my dear Mother. I did not know he was so strong. I did not know he was so cold. I did not know he was so cruel.

Gertrude: No, no. It does not do to say such words. Such words make no help for us. They are all cold. All cruel. But they are as children strong with temper. It goes in a little while and they are loving again. And come and put their heads in your lap like pets. I tell you Ophelia, he will be contrite soon. You must say nothing, to

him or to anyone.

Ophelia: I would die before I spoke.

Gertrude: You spoke to me.

Ophelia: If I had not told you, I think I would have killed myself.

Gertrude: You did the right thing. He must be your husband now. No. This is the day on which you grow up and see the world as it is, not as you would like it. Every girl imagines she will marry her beloved, a gentle man who will never hurt her. But the same hurt - listen to me girl, I know this from my own life - the same blood, would come to you on your wedding night as came last night. You are his wife now, with or without the words of the church. Now we must simply add the words.

Ophelia: He spoke no words. He stood over me and stared, then shuddered, as if I were ugly and then went without a word. The Prince of words, had no word for me, for this small piece of flesh that is my body.

Gertrude: My daughter, try not to dwell on it. Some day you will be a mother and know that such things make mothers and therefore must be borne.

Ophelia: Oh my lady, surely I will not be with child!

Gertrude: Probably not. But if you are, it will be as the Prince's wife that you will bear it. I promise you. Now you must listen carefully. When you meet him again, as you must in the court, act as if nothing had happened, be your usual gentle self. But do not let him come again to your bed. This is important. He must not think he can have easy access. Make some excuse to your father to have a guard put on your door. We will wait now until the King declares him officially his heir.

Ophelia: Oh, my dear m... mother. Could we not

Gertrude: Could we not what?

Ophelia: Oh, it is foolish. But I wish you and I could build a shelter in the woods and live there together, away from the world.

Gertrude: Like simple shepherds? Yoric used to talk such foolishness to me.

Ophelia: Could we, like the country people ...

Gertrude: My daughter, I am from the country people. It may seem to

you that living in nature, away from the court ... believe me, there are no simple lives.

Ophelia: None?

Gertrude: None. Go now. Do not be alone. Be with your father, your brother or your servant. And be as Ophelia always has been. The sweetest maid at court.

Ophelia: I can never be the maid Ophelia again.

Gertrude: To me, you will always be the sweetest of maids.

Ophelia: Thank you, my mother.

Gertrude: Bless you, daughter.

Ophelia exits

Act 1 Scene 5 Gertrude's Bedchamber and Ophelia's Bower

Gertrude: (*sings as she embroiders the veil*) "A young man's love
 Is frost and fire
 Hard and hot combining
 But if a girl
 Embrace that frost
 And give that fire a dwelling
 Then heat and frost do make new life
 Her son, her pride, her power."

(*She does not notice "Actor" has entered*)

Actor: I bet Gertrude sang lullabies to her son when he was small.

Play: Get ... out ... of ... my ... play.

Actor: When Gertrude is telling Ophelia about Hamlet's childhood, we could have a flashback, she sings ... he appears as a boy, they ...

Play: GET OUT OF MY PLAY!

Actor exits and while Playwright sings she becomes Gertrude as she moves to the bower, searching for Ophelia.

Gertrude: "With voice full strong
 She faced these men
 My Lady, Queen and ruler

"You may take my wealth
 My cattle, my sheep
 My gold, my silver, my jewels

She raised high her hand
 As the king came forth
 To claim a victor's spoils
 "Take all that I own
 But leave me my lands
 To nurture my poor people"

She sees Ophelia trying to run away.

Gertrude: Stop, girl. Speak to me. Tell me what is wrong.

Ophelia: Did you not urge my father and the King to set me spying on the Prince?

Gertrude: Spying! To think of our love ... as spying!

Ophelia: Did you not approve that I should meet the Prince as if it were by accident, so that the King and my father could overhear his words.

Gertrude: We fear for his mind, Ophelia. We wish only to help him. I, the king, your father, are his only guardians, his family.

Ophelia: I did it because you, his mother, his only real family, approved it and now ...

Gertrude: You did right, child. When your father came to me afterwards and told me of my son's threatening madness, I knew we had done the right thing. Now we will take the right steps to counter this mood that grief has put in his head.

Ophelia: Now I feel it is you who is the child and I the woman. For If you knew your son's mood you would know the madness to be of such a bitter kind, nothing they can do will help. The prince especially dislikes my father and calls him fool! No one should have heard what he said I should not have obeyed them.

Gertrude: No, Ophelia. You did right to obey your father and your King.

Ophelia: I want to obey you madam, only you ... for you love him as I do. It was wrong to appeal to the king and my father. They plan to send the Prince to England.

Gertrude: To England! But this cannot be. Why to England?

Ophelia: He spoke of the English tribute, and thought a sea-voyage would do the Prince good. But madam, if we are right and he is mad, how much worse will he be away from his home.

Gertrude: The King told me nothing of this plan.

Ophelia: Perhaps it came to his head only as he listened to the Prince insult me and you.

Gertrude: How did the Prince insult me?

Ophelia: It was only in his anger and his madness, he did not mean it.

Gertrude: What did he say, Ophelia.

Ophelia: Madam, if I tell you, it will be as if I spied twice.

Gertrude: Nonsense. If the King has heard, I must hear also.

Ophelia: Madam, I am not disloyal, have always done my duty towards all my loved ones, but I realize now that he saw my attendance at your wedding as disloyalty. The night he came to my room, it was my own fault ... I should not have accepted his love tokens and his gestures. I should not have accepted ... and then been suddenly so cool, avoiding his company.

Gertrude: You were only obeying your father.

Ophelia: That was wrong, I should have known ... and we should know better than to spy.

Gertrude: Ophelia, we can afford no such scruples. If I am to work to save the Prince from this exile, I must know whatever the King knows.

Ophelia: Madam, you pull me in two; I feel my heart will break in two.

Gertrude: Then you truly are a woman now, in every way.

Ophelia: Yes, perhaps I am He denied his love for me, claimed he never loved me, questioned my honesty, told me to go dwell in a nunnery.

Gertrude: And me? What did he say of me?

Ophelia: He said there would be no more marriages, and that of those that are married all shall be allowed to live, except one.

Gertrude: How did you know that was of me?

Ophelia: The anger in his eyes could be for no other.

Gertrude: Do you think him mad, Ophelia?

Ophelia: Then, in the terror I felt when he cursed me, I did. But now that I have thought on it, I think he has been ill-used so much, he

has been driven to distraction.

Gertrude: It is not we who have misused him. But it is we who will get the blame. There is more to this than we know. There is always more than we know.

Ophelia: But we can only live by what we know, and we know he must not be sent to England He spoke of taking his own life.

Gertrude: His life. How?

Ophelia: What better place than at sea on the way to England. He could throw himself overboard in a storm. My eyes have pictured nothing else since the King spoke of a sea voyage. We must keep him here.

Gertrude: Does the King know of this talk of suicide?

Ophelia: I do not think so.

Gertrude: I will speak to the King.

Ophelia: No, Madam. Perhaps the King does not mean him harm, but I do not think he wishes him well either.

Gertrude: The king has promised me my son's succession. He will keep the Prince here if I wish it. I must speak to him. You have done well to tell me of this. And do not make yourself the cause of all his misery. He said himself he hates my marriage. And how can we know what other thoughts plague his mind, what with his grief for his father, the intensity of which I cannot comprehend. They were constantly at odds during his father's lifetime.

Ophelia: I thought the old king was his hero?

Gertrude: Hero, yes, but having a hero for a father is not always a blessing. When the Prince was very little, he used to hide behind my skirts, he was so afraid of his father dressed for battle. The boy was sent too early to be squire. Time and again he would run away, come back to me in tears, complaining how he hated battle. Even Yoric begged the king to make the prince's apprenticeship less hard, to allow more books. The jester was more father to him than Anyway ... great men can be hard men too. My husband was not a gentle man. The only compromise he made was to allow Yoric to go with the boy the last time he sent him out to squire. In those

- day's it was Yoric who held first place with the prince.
- Ophelia: And did his company make the prince content?
- Gertrude: The Prince and the fool ran away together! And to make matters worse the jester tried to make a joke of it when the King questioned them. And my son was as unwise with words then as he is now. That was a desperate time. As desperate as now Do you remember when I sang you Yoric's song, "The Fate of Bdd Women," the song he wrote for my mother, Ophelia?
- Ophelia: Yes.
- Gertrude: It has a verse about desperate times *(she sings)*
 "When foolish tongues
 Spill truthful words
 It's said earth's belly wants seeding
 So men of pow'r
 Do feed her maw
 With woman, child or servant."
- Ophelia: You sing of death, Madam.
- Gertrude: That terrible time ended with Yoric's death. I fear there is no fool to stand sacrifice for my son this timeThe boy cried so hard that my skirt was wet clear through to my skin. We cried together my son and I for the loss of our ... fool. It was the only time that I defied my husband.
- Ophelia: What did you do?
- Gertrude: I took my child to my mother.
- Ophelia: And she protected you?
- Gertrude: My mother told me to go home to my husband.
- Ophelia: Your own mother had no sympathy?
- Gertrude: *(After a pause)* Do you know that old song that little girls sing at their play?
- She sings, Ophelia joining her when she remembers the words.*
 "Mother, Mother, on my knee
 I beg you for your blessing
 Give your child a feather bed
 Robe and roof and safety

Daughter, daughter, on my knee
 I can offer naught but wishes
 A pretty face, a silent tongue
 A strong back for your labor."

Do you know what my mother said to me, Ophelia? "I have made the best bed I could for you daughter. Now you must lie in it as well as you can." I was so angry that I struck her. But my mother was no longer Queen of her lands in her own right as in my childhood. Yes, Ophelia, she had sympathy, but the power was gone ... gone to kings.

Ophelia: And so you learned to lie in your bed, returned with the Prince and obeyed the king.

Gertrude: I had no choice. Do you think I had a choice, Ophelia?

Ophelia: Do we have any choice now? Will this King not send the Prince to England as that king sent him to squire. He is the brother, after all, of the Prince's father, your husband.

Gertrude: Ah! You have said the word, Ophelia, the word that matters - husband - when I returned from my mother's house I understood where power lay, and I filled my husband's bed with words. I filled his ears with his son every waking moment, and sometimes even when he slept. My love and my words won and he sent the boy to school at Whittenberg. The laugh of it all is that the boy thanked his father for the mercy, not me. He had moved away from me after the time at my mother's. How could I tell him I had won him Whittenberg with my kisses.

Ophelia: And is that how you will win him the right to stay in his own land?

Gertrude: A mother does what a mother must do.

Ophelia: I see.

Gertrude: I hope you do begin to see. Only men may have noble reasons; women obey necessity.

Ophelia: What you say is that I must, like you, "lie in my bed" or lose all. And if I do not learn to lie in my bed, will my only choice then be to become like some poor stray upon the road, begging my

food?

Gertrude: No. I say your choice is less. The stray at least makes his choice of field or wood for his bed. If you do not lie in the bed provided by your masters, you will have no bed at all. But do not despair, my daughter; I will make sure that your bed is as soft as these flowers, as sweet as the water flowing in this stream.

Ophelia: Oh my dear Queen! When you speak to me with such honey in your words, I would believe anything!

Gertrude: Let us hope the King finds me as sweet. I must go now to the place where I make my bed.

Gertrude leaves the bower singing as she goes to the bedchamber.

Gertrude: "She raised her hand
As the king came forth
To claim a victor's spoils
Take all that I own
But leave me my lands
To nurture my poor people

From his throne and crown
And sovereign's height
Came a Christian king's promise
Keep your wealth and lands
And all your powers
I desire but one possession"

(sees the Actor and becomes Playwright)

Play: What now! Maybe you would like a flashback to the execution of Yoric.

Actor: I never noticed that in the script before, all that about Yoric.

Play: That's because you only read your own lines

Actor: Did he and Gertrude have a thing going?

Play: Maybe. It doesn't matter, not in terms of the mess these women are in now.

Actor: But what if Hamlet were not his father's son!

Play: All men are their fathers' sons. They are just not all privileged to know who their fathers are. The only sure knowledge we have

is who are mothers are. And mothers can even lie about that. In the end, only women know the truth; all of patriarchy rests on the honesty of the women it enslaves. Now that I've told you the facts of life, can I get on with my play?

Actor: I think Yoric is a problem in the play. You should clarify his role or take him out altogether.

Play: He will remain exactly what he is - Gertrude's fool. Now go.
Actor exits and Playwright becomes Gertrude and takes up her position for the next scene. She is distraught, frightened.

Act 1 Scene 6 Gertrude's Bedchamber

Ophelia: Mother? Madam? You left the great hall in such a rush. Are you well? My Queen?

Gertrude: Whose Queen am I, Ophelia? Am I the Queen of the living King, who reigns with my husband's blood on his hands? Could it be, as the players mimed it? No! But the way Claudius looked when he saw the scene ... so guilty. The violence of men exceeds my imagination!

Ophelia: Do not believe the Prince and his silly plays. To show a brother killing a brother! Madness. His hatred of your marriage, his grief for his father, his anger at my actions are so great that he seeks to strike at any, at all, even those who love him. You said yourself, he is not well, he knows not what he does.

Gertrude: Claudius called for light and left the hall.

Ophelia: The King knew the insult that was offered. He is not stupid.

Gertrude: Then why did he not stay, to scold the boy who gave the insult?

Ophelia: He was embarrassed for you, for himself, for all of us. Mother? What shall we do now? Have you a plan, a thought? Shall we now beg the King, together perhaps, to keep the Prince at home?

Gertrude: Foolish girl! There will be no safe place for my son now, no matter who we beg.

Ophelia: Oh my Queen, do not say that ... for If there is no place for

- him, then there is no place for me, for what we feared has happened. I carry his child.
- Gertrude: Perhaps if I convince the King to send some of his friends with him, Rosencrantz perhaps ... or some others of his age.
- Ophelia: Did you not hear me?
- Gertrude: Quiet girl, I am trying to think.
- Ophelia: To think of what ... madam?
- Gertrude: Of how to save the Prince's life. Know you this - no King will let such an insult as tonight pass, be it true or no. We will speak no more; I worry that we may be heard. I must think, I must think how to save my son. If the King could be persuaded that
- Ophelia: Madam, should I speak to my father of my trouble?
- Gertrude: If I speak to the Prince first, tell him straight that he must pretend respect, if I tell him his life depends on ...
- Ophelia: Madam, my father, should I ...
- Gertrude: Your father? Yes, he will advise me. He knows them both, and knows the court. Go girl, and send your father to me.
- Ophelia: Mother, I want you to... I wish you ... could ... could you ...
- Gertrude: There is no time, Ophelia, do as I say, go now. Are you dead girl? Go now and send your father here.
- Ophelia exits. Taking up her embroidery, Gertrude's hands shake too much to perform a stitch.*

Act 1 Scene 7 Ophelia's Bower

The time is later the same night. A full moon is shining. Ophelia is standing staring at the moon, rigidly clutching the empty basket to her belly with both arms. Gertrude enters.

- Gertrude: My child. My poor, dear Ophelia, the servants told me that you fled when you heard of this terrible accident, which leaves your father ... dead. Ophelia, look how your gown is soiled. Do not stay here. It grows cold. The Prince leaves for England.

That is the best thing now.

Ophelia: The sea air will be pleasant for him.

Gertrude: He did not mean to ... he did not know who was listening in my room. He did not know it was your father.

Ophelia: I hid to hear him once, he spoke of killing and I was afraid. But it was only himself that he wished to kill. Only himself, no other.

Gertrude: From the bottom of my heart, accept my deepest My son and I offer you our ... *(she reaches out to Ophelia)*.

Ophelia: *(escaping from Gertrude's attempt to touch her)* Go from me witch. Take your devil son and go from me.

Ophelia who searches among the undergrowth for something, flees Gertrude each time she approaches.

Gertrude: How dare ... Ophelia, have you lost your senses? This is not witchcraft, the Prince meant no harm to your father. It was a terrible mistake. I know this is difficult now, but when you have had time to think, you will forgive. He is the father of your child. I am its grandmother. Yes, I did hear what you told me before ... before ...

Ophelia: I saw some here just the other day. Where is it now? No, that is rue. We have no need of rue. And here beside this rock. Is this where I saw you sweet plant? No, here is only daisies. We have had enough of daisies. And here columbines. The world fills with the stink of daisies and columbines. Weeds, all weeds. Where is my precious bane? I need your power now. I saw you here

Gertrude: What do you search for? Ophelia, leave off this wildness. You must return to your rooms, away from this night madness. No. No. I know what that is for! You will make no brews, girl. You will not rid your body of my son's child.

(They struggle. Ophelia breaks away)

Ophelia: *(Ophelia taunts Gertrude while staying just out of her reach)*.
 "Young men will do it, if they come to't; by cock, they are to blame." Pick you rosemary, my Queen, for remembrance. Remember. Re-mem-ber. Remember my father, who spied upon my lover. Remember my lover who killed my father.

Remember all that are gone. Remember me who spied upon my love. Ah, that was murder indeed. This is but a little destruction that I do now.

Gertrude: *(having lost her completely)* Ophelia. Ophelia. Do not poison yourself, your womb. We need this child. It will be our deliverance from all this trouble. The son of a King. Do not, oh Ophelia, do not. Let me care for you. I will be as your own mother

Ophelia voice, a long animal howl between misery and anger is heard off.

End of Act I

Act 2, Scene 1 Ophelia's Bower

Gertrude is calling out for Ophelia, as if there has been no intermission.

Gertrude: Ophelia. Ophelia. Do not poison yourself, your womb. We need this child. It will be our deliverance from all this trouble. The son of a King. Do not, oh Ophelia, do not. Let me care for you. I will be

Instead of Ophelia's voice we hear a male directorial voice: "thank you. that was fine. take five minutes, then right into Act 2" . "Actor" enters, carrying his costume pieces for the second act. He has his new scene in hand.

Actor: Act I is still a bit long, but that last scene really moves.

Play: Was that John?

Actor: Yes.

Play: What has he sent you to convince me of now?

Actor: I do have a scene with you coming up, you know. Finally. A scene in your Act 2.

Play: Yes, my Act 2, the one I wrote to be performed without a Hamlet.

Actor: John agrees with you.

Play: What! I thought he lived and breathed the need for a Hamlet in my second act!

Actor: When I tried to show him how my scene would fit very neatly between the "Horatio brings some bad news and some good news" scene and the "Gertrude tries prayer" scene, he had quite another suggestion.

Play: Well?

Actor: I told him you would like his idea even less than my Hamlet scene. That's why he sounded so nasty just now. We had a bit of a disagreement. You and the radical femmies are quite right. The man's a beast.

Play: There's something going on that I don't know about. Don't be coy

with me young man.

Actor: I'm only the humble messenger, a poor sort, who will do to swell a scene or two.

Gertrude: (*goes to him, touches him*). There. There.

Actor: What are you up to?

Play: Come cuddle in bed with Mama. Tell her your troubles Tell her everything. Don't be shy. Isn't this what your Gertrude would do?

Actor: O.K. O.K You win, I'll tell you everything.

Play: See, little boy, you mustn't try to strategize with me or with John, and especially you shouldn't try to play the mediator between us, a not disinterested mediator I might add. You'll get burnt. We're both much older and more wicked than you can imagine.

Actor: I believe you.

Play: Tell.

Actor: John has marked several places in the script where he wants to insert ... not scenes or characters, but ... implications, shadows from the real ... from Shakespeare's play.

Play: Do you mean dumb-scenes?

Actor: No, shadows, projections on a screen. He calls them "contextualizers."

Play: And where would these "contextualizers" occur, and what would be their content?

Actor: He thinks the "morning after the not-so-wedding night" scene, could be "contextualized" - that's his word not mine - by figures from the wedding supper, like a shadowy trace from the other play, the Hamlet play.

Play: I have an even better idea for a "con-text-u-al-iz-er." Why not have a rape scene. While Ophelia describes, it can be acted out, by a couple of mimes!

Actor: I don't think that is exactly what John has in mind.

Play: Your damned right it's not what John has in mind. What he has in his mind, what they all have in their minds, like some eternal male script, is the playful Hamlet, the wordy Hamlet, the philosophical Hamlet, the heroic Hamlet, the tragic Hamlet, the suicidal Hamlet, even the mad Hamlet ... but never the guilty Hamlet, never the fleshy mess such men leave around their clever words.

Actor: His other idea is - when Gertrude recalls the play within a play

scene - we should see a projection of the murder of the king.

Gertrude: Why not stage the murder of the girl's father, that would give us "action, action, action" wouldn't it? Isn't that what John really wants, a little swordplay, some manly action, a little blood? Well, this play has blood, lots of blood, coming right up .

Actor: I don't think its violence he's after. Your play is too concerned with realism, he wants a little ... a little relief from all that female realism.

Play: Of course! He wants tragi-comedy, he wants us to deconstruct the bard with our playful postmodern wit, he wants to expose the pointlessness of all language acts. He wants word-play, he wants pastiche, he wants ... Stoppard! Damn that man. He's been reading his Stoppard as well as his Shakespeare. Tell him if he wants Stoppard, he can pay the royalties for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead. Tell him that Gertrude and Ophelia come cheap, but they don't come easy. Wait. Tell him the only Stoppardese I'll give him is a running gag in which Hamlet hauls the body of the girl's father round and round the stage, at suitable intervals, whenever John thinks we've had too much female realism. Tell him that.

Actor: In the end, you know you'll have to make changes if you want this play to draw an audience. I think it will either have to be the shadow scenes or a real Hamlet, my Hamlet. Everyone agrees. You yourself admitted as much in the workshop. No play can stand on its feet just on the strength of two women talking. You have to have action. Real dramatic action. You're the playwright. You'll have to decide.

Play: I'll try your scene.

Actor: Yes!

Play: Just one scene, mind you. I'll not have Hamlet popping up everywhere.

Actor: He's at sea for most of the action.

Play: He certainly is.

Playwright exits. Actor prepares for their first scene together as Horatio and Gertrude.

Act 11 Scene 2 Gertrude's Bedchamber

Gertrude: *(Entering and going to Horatio who has been waiting for her)*

There, there, Horatio, we are old friends, are we not?

Horatio: Madam, if a man's duty to his Queen is not soiled by such words, yes we are "old friends."

Gertrude: Yes. Be that as it may. You are my son's good friend, are you not?

Horatio: I serve him after I serve the King and yourself, Madam, in his turn. But of course we are companions in study, and games.

Gertrude: Quite prettily said. Activities that suit your age and place.

Horatio: Madam?

Gertrude: Never mind. Since you are my son's friend, are you willing to serve him by serving me?

Horatio: My Queen, you may command my life.

Gertrude: I do not wish your life. I do not even ask your duty to me as Queen. I ask a very personal service, one that you do the Prince as much as me.

Horatio: Madam ... mother of my friend, ask anything, and if it means one hair of his head shall lie more comfortably on its pillow, I shall do it.

Gertrude: Good. But it is a private matter, Horatio, and must remain so between you and me.

Horatio: And the Prince.

Gertrude: Of course, and the Prince, when he is here again. But send no letters, I fear ...

Horatio: I have no means at present to send letters.

Gertrude: You look for such means? That is, a private means ...

Horatio: As all friends do, but he is at sea, but quite safe and well ... I have no doubt. Until his voyage is over ... I cannot ... we cannot. At any rate, I send nothing by official means. I have nothing to send.

Gertrude: And I will give you nothing to send. I give you only family business, things too private for letters in pouches.

Horatio: I understand, Madam.

Gertrude: I must speak to you of the Prince's love.

Horatio: His love?

Gertrude: The Lady Ophelia.

Horatio: The King's chief man, Polonius, that Ophelia?

Gertrude: How strangely you refer to her. She has no father, and she is the Prince's love.

Horatio: The Prince said nothing of ...

Gertrude: The Prince was too much the boy before he left to speak of such a thing without embarrassment. But he has left a man's work behind him, let me tell you, and there is only you and I to do his duty while he is away.

Horatio: Madam, surely we cannot believe The girl's father was ambitious for her. You know there is always someone willing to compromise a Prince. We must have the Prince's word on this.

Gertrude: My good, correct Horatio, you certainly do understand what I speak of when you need to, do you not? I have not spoken fifty words on the subject, and already you have tried the girl, her dead father, found the Prince innocent of any wrong, and begun to mount his defence. Correct and honorable you may be, my fine young lord, but you are a man also.

Horatio: Madam, I do not understand you.

Gertrude: What I mean, my dear young man, friend of my son, loyal servant of your Queen, is that like most men, you have only one reaction to a woman's trouble.

Horatio: You judge me harshly, madam. I said only that I need the confirmation of the Prince. If you wish me to help the girl, I will.

Gertrude: I certainly do wish you to help the Lady Ophelia. Understand Horatio, that if you fail to help us, my son will not forgive you quickly if his son is the price.

Horatio: What does Your Majesty wish?

Gertrude: First, the absolute strictest confidence.

Horatio: Done.

Gertrude: No attempt to speak to the Prince on the subject until I tell you so.

Horatio: If he returns, I cannot promise, but while he is away, I will send

- no communication.
- Gertrude: Fair enough. I want you to find Ophelia.
- Horatio: Find her?
- Gertrude: After her father's death, she fled from me into the woods north of here, near the river. You know the area. You have hunted there with my son. I wish you to find her without anybody knowing of the search. Find her and bring her to me.
- Horatio: Madam, what made her flee?
- Gertrude: Now I see why my son keeps you near him. He must find you a relief from too much subtlety at court.
- Horatio: I only meant, Madam, that it makes no sense, to run from you. Surely the girl knows her protection and her ... interest, lie close to you.
- Gertrude: Perhaps women do not always see the same sense as men. Perhaps when one's father is dead, one's lover gone, the King enraged ... the Queen in shock, perhaps I only know that the girl is in great need Horatio, in great need of a friend. She no longer trusts me. Perhaps you can be her friend. Assume for a while that it is what my son, your friend, would want.
- Horatio: Yes ... yes, Madam. I will.
- Gertrude: Then go now and search quietly.

Act II Scene 3 Ophelia's Bower

Ophelia is on her knees, legs apart, her body slightly rocking. The basket is directly in front of her. The front and back of the skirt is visibly stained with her blood as are her hands. She is having very painful uterine contractions intermittently throughout this scene. She is trying to remember the words of a song.

- Ophelia: "Mother, Mother, on my knee (*gasping in pain*) ... your blessing"
- Horatio: (*entering*) My lady Ophelia? I come on the Queen's request. Her Majesty worries about you. Wishes you to come to her. Lady? Do you hear me? The Queen wishes your presence. She ... commands it.

- Ophelia: Tell her kind Majesty, that she does me too great an honor. I am unworthy to come to her.
- Horatio: Lady, you are hurt! Lady, can you hear me? Do you wish me to go for help? Lady?
- Ophelia: Who do you call lady? There is no lady here. I am no lady sir! I am only a bag of guts waiting to spill into a hole in the earth.
- Horatio: Ssh! Ssh! Do not say such things.
- Ophelia: Do you not like my jibes. Surely you know word play. I make a joke on the word "lady", a simple one, but surely I deserve a small smile. From you, the servant of the King of Jibes.
- Horatio: I will go now Lady Ophelia. I will get help. I will come again.
(He exits.)
- Ophelia: *(She finds a daisy. As she recites, her hands pull at the petals)*
He loves me. He loves me not. He loves me ... me ... me ...
who is this "me". I know her not. Her father is dead. Her mother is dead! Her brother is far away. Her lover My love is gone gone ... gone sailing. Oh yes. He is on the sea, and rides the waves, laughing at me, silly me, here on the earth. Silly me, who cannot go to sea. I rime. Silly silly girl! To make rimes. At such a time ... to make rimes. Do you hear me love? As clever as you with my words. I will make words, like you, and be the victor ... over *(she mouths words which have no sound. Finally giving into the pain, sound does come from her in the form of a long howl and then as the spasm subsides, she pants)* . She had a lover once. But he is gone. She had a brother once. But he is gone. She had a father once. But he is gone. Such wise heads! All, all, goneThere was a lady once, who loved me. *(Sings)* " ... your child ... a feather ... roof and robe and safety." Gone. Gone. But I shall make words. Words. Words. And be the winner over pain. The fight is not fair! The devil has all the words! Oh Lord. Oh my gooooo Loooooord *(She faints. Gertrude enters with Horatio close behind)*.
- Gertrude: It is as I thought. She has tried to abort herself. The girl thinks that because she knows the names of pants she owns their power. She knows nothing of the strength of such potions.

Carry her, Horatio. We will go through the north entrance. Pray that no one sees us. Take her straight to my rooms. I will do what I can.

Horatio exits carrying Ophelia. As Gertrude picks up the basket and as she returns to the bedchamber she sings, slowly as if just relearning the words of an old song.

" From his throne and crown
and sovereign height
Came a Christian king's command
Keep your wealth and land
And all your powers
I desire but one possession
"A queen's sweetest crop
Will fill all my need
The body of your daughter"

Act II Scene 4 Gertrude's Bedchamber

The basket is filled with bloodied sheets. Ophelia sleeps on Gertrude's bed in a clean nightdress.

Gertrude: "Tiny bird, pretty bird
Your branch a swaying cradle
We are home, safely home
Mother guards your slumber"

Horatio enters.

Horatio: You sing her lullabies as if she were your child.

Gertrude: I would wish it so. Lullabies are for the innocent, for those who need rest from harm. So I sing for her.

Horatio: So should you sing for all that are innocent.

Gertrude: Find me one more innocent than she and I will sing anthems to him.

Horatio: Had you no one with you? Did you tend the girl yourself?

Gertrude: I did. And no one better than I, nor more silent than I, could she find to do her service. No one must know. Not the

churchmen, not the King or the court and not my ladies.

Horatio: But surely she needed medicines.

Gertrude: And how long do you think we could keep this secret if I had called the court physician? All she needed was a knotted rag to bite on, and my hands to do the rest. I have not lived my life surrounded by women for nothing. Do you think this is the first woman of the court to have spent a night like this?

Horatio: She will live?

Gertrude: Yes, poor lamb, though she will perhaps wonder what for when she wakes. Tell all that enquire that she has a fever and that the Queen, out of love for her and respect for her dead father, tends her personally in her rooms. That is what I told the King.

Horatio: As you wish.

Gertrude: No, it is not as I wish. Nothing is as I wish it. You do this for your precious Prince. He would not want shame to come on him or the girl. Do you understand?

Horatio: Yes, Madam.

Gertrude: Then think of the Prince when you bury that *(she points to the sheets in Ophelia's basket)* in the woods.

Horatio: Madam, I ...

Gertrude: There is only you and I to do her service or else we have to share the secret with a servant. I have done my part. If you do not bury that, I will have to do yours too.

Horatio: *(He walks hesitatingly to the basket, takes the corner of one piece of cloth and raises it slightly; what he sees makes him draw away)* Are you sure she needs no physician?

Gertrude: I learned long ago that their cures are worse than their illnesses here at the court. She has lost much blood. But she is young. If we keep her here and feed her well she will be healthy. I will show you a way out where none will see you. Come. Take up the basket.

(Horatio exits)

"Child of mine, girl of mine
I hear your heartbeat quicken
Sleep in peace, rest in peace

Mother guards your slumber."

She begins to work on her embroidery

Act II Scene 5 Gertrude's Bedchamber

Gertrude: (*sings*) "A queen's sweetest crop
Will fill all my needs
The body of your daughter"

"When foolish tongues
Spill truthful words
It's said earth belly wants seeding
So men of power
Do feed her maw
With woman child or servant"

Ophelia has awakened and Gertrude helps her from the bed to a chair.

Gertrude: There. There. Sit here in this patch of sun. It will help heal you child. Let us see what we can do about these tangles in your pretty hair.

Ophelia: (*While Gertrude is getting the comb, Ophelia picks up the veil. As she studies the pattern carefully, she whispers like a child playing a quiet game.*) Why, these are not daisies. (*She puts them to her nose as if to smell them*) No, nor violets either. Columbine! They are columbine! Wicked flower, stay away from me.

Gertrude: Pardon, Ophelia. Did you speak to me.

Ophelia: No, my dear Madam. No ... no one, nobody spoke.

Gertrude: Let me comb your hair and you will be presentable again. It is time you were among people. I shall take you with me and the other ladies to see the new stoneworks the King has begun. Would you like that?

Ophelia: Yes, Madam.

Gertrude: I see you have been looking at my embroidery. Do you like it?

Ophelia: Yes, Madam.

- Gertrude: Can you imagine what it is for? ... I have been working at it for some time It is to be part of your wedding dress Ophelia.
- Ophelia: It is too beautiful.
- Gertrude: Nothing is too lovely for you. See here. The posies. It is an old pattern. And not easy. How it strains my eyes when I work too long at it.
- Ophelia: Put it away. I do not wish you should hurt your eyes.
- Gertrude: Very well. I will put it with my own veils until you are ready to see it againThe King cannot stop in his efforts to please me. Guess what he does now? ... I am to have a tower room, just for me and my women, for our tapestries and our leisure. It will have light from everywhere. Much more open than this place. There will be a view of the valley in all directions. Think how it will be, on the day that the Prince comes home. Looking out the window toward the sea I will see the Prince And then I will see you, running from your place by the river, your arms filled with flowers. We will be happy then! These sickly thoughts and night fancies will be gone. Will they not my child?
- Ophelia: Did you know me when I was a child?
- Gertrude: Why ... yes my dear. Why do you ask?
- Ophelia: Was I a good child?
- Gertrude: An angel, a true angel!
- Ophelia: Did my mother love me?
- Gertrude: What a question! She loved you as if you were sent to her straight from heaven.
- Ophelia: And for her trouble I sent her straight to heaven.
- Gertrude: Do not jest with such matters, girl.
- Ophelia: I do not jest.
- Gertrude: Get these thoughts from your head. Your mother died from a sickness that took a member of every family throughout the land that year. It was not childbed she died of, but a common illness. Whoever told you different, was a liar.
- Ophelia: It was my father who told me. He said my mother gave her life for me.
- Gertrude: Oh, it was just his way of speaking. He meant well, I am sure.

He merely wanted you to appreciate her love. But she did not die from having you, but weeks later, from the disease.

Ophelia: She was not strong. If she had not had me, she might have lived.

Gertrude: Why must you make yourself the cause of every dire happening. You make yourself too central to everybody's woe. It is a kind of pride my child. One that you must rid yourself of if you are to stay well.

Ophelia: I only know that my mother is dead and my father is dead, and if I had never been born they would ...

Gertrude: Stop that right now! It is almost blasphemous. You were meant to be born, and no being but God has the power to give and take life (*stops short, realizing the implications*)

Ophelia: I am a very great sinner, am I not my Queen?

Gertrude: We are all very great sinners in this world, Ophelia. We live in sin with our men, we birth in sin, and raise our children in sin. Our lives are filled with sin, with sin and woe and terrible responsibility. But God must understand when we are driven, burdened as you were. God must know what it is like to bear up so much creation, until we can bear no more, and must like God, destroy a little for mercy sake.

Ophelia: It is you who blaspheme now, my poor Madam. We will have much to confess when we next go to the priest.

Gertrude: No girl, listen to me. If confessing is to be done it must be to each other. I will be your priest, you will be mine. Do you understand?

Ophelia: Why Madam, do you think our sins so great that they would kill yet another life in just the hearing of them.

Gertrude: Do not fool with me child. Listen. I learned long ago that to live a woman's life is to not be free, even in confession. There are some things that do not go straight from your woman's lips to the priest's ears to God's mercy.

Ophelia: You blaspheme more and more Madam. Do you say that our priests would break their vow of secrecy?

Gertrude: I say only that there are things that men do not forgive of women, and a priest is a man as well as a priest.

- Ophelia: Then you tell me I must carry this burden of sin, carry it to my grave, Madam.
- Gertrude: No. I said we would be each other's confessors. Come. Let us do it Ophelia. You will feel better afterwards. I will feel better.
- Ophelia: Madam, I would like to leave these rooms ... go to my place by the river. Can we go there to make our confessions?
- Gertrude: Yes. Yes. That would be the proper place, the safe place. I will get Horatio to help you. You are too weak to walk alone. It will be like an adventure. Your first day out since your illness. Shall we pick flowers too? And perhaps some greenery for my dull rooms? *(Gertrude exits to find Horatio)*
- Ophelia: *(taking up the veil)*. Yes, 'tis columbine, but 'tis pretty *(she begins to hum and then to sing)*.
 "And will she not come again?
 No, no, she is dead.
 Go to thy death-bed.
 She will not come again."
 Those are not the words, I mistake the song. I knew the words just yesterday.
- Gertrude: *(coming in with Horatio and hearing the last of the song.)* She is slipping away. We must help her find herself again or she is lost. Come Horatio, we will take her into the sun.
They help Ophelia to the bower as she sings snatches of songs. Horatio exits.

Act II Scene 6 Ophelia's Bower

- Gertrude: You are right. This is much nicer. So peaceful. So green. Here you would hardly know it is past mid-summer. The growth is so rich.
- Ophelia: It is well past, well past. The flowers begin to rot.
- Gertrude: No, Ophelia, Look! Here are daisies and violets still. The whole riverside is filled with blossoms. Here child, I'll bring you some. *(She brings a handful to Ophelia who holds them briefly and lets them go.)* What is it girl? Do you have pain?
- Ophelia: Yes. Pain. Always pain.

Gertrude: Where? Where does it hurt?

Ophelia: Here (*she touches her heart*)

Gertrude: Ah, my dear, that is why we came here. To relieve our hearts. To do our confessions. Shall we begin? Here. I'll sit with my back to you, and you will be as private as with a priest Well, go ahead. Make your confession. Make a good confession, my child.

Ophelia: I wish ... I wish to confess everything. From the start.

Gertrude: That's right, everything.

Ophelia: When first I brought flowers to the Queen, it was not for her I did it.

Gertrude: Yes ...

Ophelia: It was to be near her - when the Prince came home -near her to be near him.

Gertrude: That is no sin ... nothing to confess. It is natural ...

Ophelia: I brought flowers to the Queen and listened to her stories, and all the time I hated her.

Gertrude: No child, you do not mean ...

Ophelia: I hate her I hate her. She walks through the great halls, her lovely gowns going ... swish swish swish All bow. All bow. She never sees me. Never speaks to me. Only to the King, the Prince. Never to me.

Gertrude: Ophelia, That was years ago. You were just a child. Surely you understand. I had not the time for every ...

Ophelia: She never saw me, until the Prince saw me. Never. Never. When the Prince smiled, she looked. Oh with those cold, cold eyes. She looked at me, like I was mutton. "Who is that girl?" she said. As if I had not been in front of her eyes all my life. Beneath her gaze.

Gertrude: Oh my sweet! You must understand. Being a Queen means measuring, always measuring. What is the mood at court today, what will please the King, is he angry at the Prince. Which courtiers seek favours, deserve help. It is easy to lose one little girl among so many.

Ophelia: Oh, but when the Prince looked, everyone saw: the King, the Queen, the court, my father. Ha. Even my brother found time

from hunting and fighting to give advice. Everybody saw little Ophelia, the mouse, because the Prince saw her. Oh then I was in the sun!

Gertrude: What if it were so! Ophelia, forget the past. I see you now. The Prince will come back and all will be well.

Ophelia: Oh yes. The Prince has come before. He will come again. Then there will be an Ophelia again. He will fill her up! I do not want the Prince to come again. Never. Never. Never. He is cruel. Cruel!

Gertrude: Forgive him, Ophelia. There is another Prince above his madness. He loves you.

Ophelia: He loves only himself and you!

Gertrude: What a thing to say!

Ophelia: What a thing! Yes, what a thing to say. I say it. With you I hear nothing but the Prince. And he, when he comes to court. Does he see me? No, only his mother. His scheming, primping mother. Always so careful for him. Always making her boy's life cozy, close, her own. Even now, even now. Do you fill this King's bed with the name of Hamlet.

Gertrude slaps Ophelia.

Gertrude: You must come to your senses now. You have gone too far.

Ophelia: If only once, in all those years, if you had once looked at me and smiled - at me. At O-phel-i-a!

Gertrude: Come, you are too close to the edge. Let us find Horatio and return.

Ophelia: Here, smell this, my Queen. This is the flower I should bring you. This is your scent, your stench. Come taste it. It is the bitter cup you gave to me. Come! Come!

Gertrude attempts to flee but Ophelia prevents her. They fight.

Gertrude: Horatio! Horatio! ... You do not know to whom you speak.

Ophelia: I know. I know very well. It is Gertrude the whore. Whore of the court. Who sleeps with a King to get a crown. That's what your son called you once. Your precious son. What if he knew the crown you whored for was to be his own. Come, Gertrude the whore. Is it not worth a little sacrifice, a father or two, a daughter, to get a son a crown? Come, Gertrude the whore.

Take the lovely flowers from the silly little girl. The one beneath your notice. The one you once called to the Prince, "Polonius' weak-brained girl". Never deny. Never deny. I heard. I hear. You think I have no ears. I have ears. Ears and eyes and heart and brain. But who would see that, know that, in a place where you reign. To see pansies among the rue. As easily smell roses on a rotting corpse! (*She throws the flowers at Gertrude's face*)

Gertrude: (*striking Ophelia, who falls to the ground*) Hear me. You hear me girl. Have you sense to hear what is good for you?

Ophelia: Yes, I can hear. I did not hit my head against the bed-post this time. What do you and your devil son wish to do with me now.

Gertrude: You have no gratitude. None for all I did. You take leave of your senses!

Ophelia strikes back at her with unexpected strength and Gertrude runs from her, exiting.

Ophelia: What odd words, "take leave". My senses take leave of me. My senses cannot bear to live in this silly frame. My mind is losing me. "I am your mind, Ophelia and if you do not start listening to me, I will leave you girl." "I am your senses Ophelia, if you offend me more with your Hamlets and your Gertrudes, I will take leave of you." "Oh, I have no use for you. Leave me in peace. I never used you, so I shall not miss you." There. I make plays like my Prince. Am I not clever? Do I not play well enough to catch the conscience of a Queen? Where are you, my Queen? Where are you, my Queen. You were to be my priest. I have confessed. I need your absolution. My Queen? I need ... Am I to die in sin. Come back. You promised me absolution. (*she sings*) "roof and robe and safety ... naught but wishes ... pretty face ... silent tongue..." (*she exits*)

Act II Scene 7 Gertrude's Bedchamber

Play: This is not the moment. He isn't even back from being at sea yet.

- Actor: But I've been thinking. This next scene ... is it really necessary?
Why not just jump right to the homecoming scene.
- Play: Your homecoming scene. We can't. I need this scene. Gertrude needs this scene. The girl needs this scene.
- Actor: The girl is dead.
- Play: Ophelia may be dead, she may even have to die offstage, but I will not have it passed over with some bracketed phrase - "She should have died hereafter; there would have been time for such a word."
- Actor: What?
- Play: Macbeth, act five, scene five. Look it up. women are always dying in asides. I need this scene. Now do it and do it right. I don't want to see a dry eye in the house when Horatio brings the news to Gertrude.
- Actor: O. K! Calm down. Let's do it.

They compose themselves and begin

- Gertrude: No, tell me no more news of the girl. I cannot hear it. She breaks my heart, Horatio.
- Horatio: Each time she has escaped from her keepers, I have sought her, for your sake Madam. Knowing your interest.
- Gertrude: My interest! There is no "interest" any longer. She has seen to that. She curses me and the Prince, roams the court whenever her servants forget to lock her in - which they do quite often it would seem. Were you there when she threw flowers in our faces and pawed the King like a harlot? And such looks she gave me! The girl is mad. Seeing me must bring some harder memory close, for she is worse in my presence. No Horatio. I will not see her. Do not ask it.
- Horatio: Madam, you will not see her ... she ...
- Gertrude: Good. Her brother can be her keeper. If he took less time for his self-righteous anger at my son and more care for his sister, perhaps she would be well today. Take her to Laertes.
- Horatio: I have, Madam.

- Gertrude: Good.
- Horatio: My Queen, I have taken her body to her brother. The Lady Ophelia is dead.
- Gertrude: Dead? How? Dead?
- Horatio: I told Laertes only that she drowned, but Madam I know it was by her own will.
- Gertrude: Her own will. The girl has no will. She is ... was crazed with grief.
- Horatio: When you commanded me to watch her, to follow her closely, I did Madam. And brought her back from the forest several times. Even after her brother returned, the servants came straight to me when she escaped, even this last time. I went to search for her down by that place on the river where you and she used to go. There I found her wading out into the current. I called, she turned and laughed at me, went on. She was singing. Singing a babble of things, of fire and frost, of robes and roofs, of branches and babies. As the stronger current took her, her skirts bore her up for a few moments and I heard her crying out ... for her mother ... but soon she sank and was swept away. We found her body an hour later at a bend in the river. She had become so thin in the time of her madness I carried her body so easily ... as if she were no weight ... a feather Madam, you are fortunate not to have seen her
- Gertrude: It seems madness now, but I thought she would be my Hamlet's wife. She could not have been a Queen. *(She rolls up the white veil and puts it in Ophelia's basket)* Too delicate for the strain of it. Too delicate altogether.
- A pause while they both realize her death*
- Horatio: Madam, it is a terrible time. But there is hopeful news as well. I have letters from the Prince.
- Gertrude: The Prince! Is he safe?
- Horatio: Safe upon these shores and headed home.
- Gertrude: These letters. Is there one for me?
- Horatio: Yes, Madam. Here it is. I have read the one he sent to me and the messengers wait to take me to him.
- Gertrude: Wait a moment before you go until I have read my son's letter.

- I have to decide what you should tell him of the girl. How coldly he writes! Horatio, how was your letter. The tone of it.
- Horatio: Madam, full of sense. The Prince seems well and ready to tell me much of what had alarmed and mystified me.
- Gertrude: Horatio, he must not know about Ophelia. Not yet. Not until I have spoken with him and told him all the circumstances. Promise me you will not tell him.
- Horatio: Madam, you know I cannot promise.
- Gertrude: Then keep silence if he does not ask.
- Horatio: I will. I would rather any but me tell him that news.
- Gertrude: I want your silence in one more cause.
- Horatio: Yes?
- Gertrude: I intend to tell the court that I was with you in your search for Ophelia and that I saw the girl slip and fall into the river, where the stream runs fast, and none could save her. I intend that she should be buried in hallowed ground, with her parents, not with the paupers and the suicides. This is the least I can do for her.
- Horatio: Should you take such a ...
- Gertrude: Such a lie upon my soul? I have taken worse. It is what a Queen does to survive. She commits small sins. Do I shock you Horatio? Better the small ones I do than the larger ones that poor girl will answer for. Mine are done to avoid the larger ones.
- Horatio: Are you sure, Madam?
- Gertrude: Yes, I am.
- Horatio: Then you have my silence. I will go now. My silence best accompanies my absence.
- Gertrude: Tell the Prince my heart is filled ... with his home-coming.
- Horatio exits.*

Act II Scene 8 Gertrude's Bedchamber

Actor rushes in with black veil and two scripts.

- Actor: This will help you get in the mood. *(throws the veil over her*

face) Just let yourself ... feel it.

He exits

Play: (reading) "Into the grave! Into the grave with her! Horrible. Horrible! Grappling over her corpse like two demons. In the grave! In the grave!" (*she rips off the veil, throws it from her.*)

Actor: (*Off-stage*) Is there anything wrong?

Play: Everything. If you expect me to play this melodrama at least let me play it with out having my mouth stuffed with lace. Talk about silencing the female voice!

"Actor" enters with a black cape over his shoulders, indicating he is Prince Hamlet.

Play: Hey! You look real sexy in that cape!

Actor: O.K., we can play it without the veil.

Play: Great. (*without warning, she switches into Gertrude, melodramatically murmuring*) "In the grave! In the grave!" (*"Actor" has not quite realized she has given him his cue line, so she comes out of character to announce sarcastically*) In the grave, that warm and friendly place, the grave?

Actor: (*reading*) "What better place to pledge love that lasts beyond death. But what would you know of that."

Throughout the "new scene", Playwright overplays the lines, presenting the most "Freudian" of Gertrudes. As well, during Actor's lines she upstages him for comic effect in all the subversive ways that an experienced actor can. He, on the other hand, empowered at last as Prince Hamlet, glories in speaking his own lines aloud.

Play: "Oh my son! I meant that you should hear the terrible news from me."

Actor: "Did you mother? And your plans went wrong? Like all your plans? I heard of my father's death from a school mate, my mother's new love from a servant, and now Ophelia's death in the angry threats of a grieving brother. What other news do you have? And where shall I hear it? Will the housemaids tell me of my mother's next infidelity?"

Play: "Hamlet, my son, the times are too full of trouble and grief for

our quarrels. Let us put them behind us and think of the future."

Actor: "What future mother? A life of days spent in lying, of nights lying, waiting for the blow to come while my mother lies with a murderer."

Play: "Is there nothing changed between us? All is as bitter as before? The same suspicions? Oh my dear child, if you could see into my heart (*she places his hand on her breast, he pulls it away as if burnt*), you would know that only one care rules there, a mother's care."

Actor: "I have seen your heart mother. It cares only for its own comfort."

Play: "Why do you hate me so bitterly?"

Actor: "I do not hate you mother. I love you. And hate myself bitterly that I can not stop loving such a woman. To be such a man! To love such a woman as you! I thought I had hardened my heart against you, but while I was away I softened and felt once again as I did when I was a child. Then you were my angel-mother. I forgot your recent sins, Forgave your frailty. Then my first sight when I return is you like some black spider, crouched over her grave, strewing flowers like poison venom on her sweet body."

Play: "My son, my child, if you only knew all my efforts to keep her healthy. But she had suffered too much and was not strong to begin with. Her mind ... her mind began to go. She ... she ... "

Actor: "Tell me no more! No more! You took the easy path again. Did you not, mother? Is it boring being a Queen mother and not a Queen? Then marry a King. No matter of the insult at the King just dead. Is it tedious to have a son who raves? Send him to England. Arrange a disappearance. Is it inconvenient to have the care of a young girl who no longer amuses you? Toss her out. Let her save herself. Shall I lift this veil ..." (*realizes there is no veil on the now sweetly smiling face of "Play" and throws up his hands*). Damn!

Play: (*prompting*) "and show the world's corruption in the face of a woman?" Gosh, I know your scene better than you do. That

Hamlet kid sure does take the moral highground!

Actor: You are ruining my scene. You are doing it deliberately.

Play: Of course I am. What do you expect me to do. You're a writer. How would you feel if this was happening to you?

Actor: I would want to get my play produced in the best venues possible. Let's face it. Your play will wear itself out on little stages like this ... what is this place ... a gas station, a fire hall?

Play: A pumphouse.

Actor: Whatever. This play is never getting onto a mainstage without a Prince Hamlet.

Play: My dear, dear young man. Don't you think I know all of this? All the ways one gets on the mainstage? Believe me, I do know, and it's all beside the point. We cannot have your scene, because your scene is Prince Hamlet's scene and I will not have him in my play.

Actor: But you already have him; he permeates your play. These two women are obsessed with him.

Play: Yes, they are, but it is their obsession that I want present on the stage, not his, not his body on the stage, his flesh invading my play.

Actor: You make it sound like a rape!

Play: The words of the play are of my body, they come out of my body. They are my flesh made words.

Actor: You are a very strange woman.

Play: And you will be a very strange man if you keep writing. But do keep writing. Don't let this stop you. You could be very good, but you must stop writing inside other people's plays.

Actor: But that's exactly what you are doing? Writing inside Shakespeare play.

Play: Yes, but I'm doing it to write myself out of the world that Shakespeare had to write in. The world we still live in because of the power of his plays. It's not easy; its a world with many seductions, including the mainstage.

Actor: And John? He who knows his Shakespeare and his Stoppard so well?

- Play: I make it my business to know my Shakespeares and my Stoppards better than all the Johns do. You'll have to too if you are going to be a writer.
- Actor: Do you want me to tell John the bad news?
- Play: I think the "bad news" has been arriving for some time now. You don't need to make yourself the messenger.
- Actor: And you will have no Hamlet in your last scene.
- Play: No, it has to be all mine, mine and Gertrude's and the girl's. But I could use a little help from my friends, you and Horatio. Come, let's do those last lines of your scene. They do lead quite nicely into mine.
- Play: *(they play the lines straight)* "Will you come to me again?"
- Actor: "We will see what the day brings."
- Play: "My blessings go with you."
- Actor: "I wish it were ever so" *(He exits)*.

Playwright picks up the scattered sheets of the "new scene," places them in the basket with the veil and studies the effect for a moment. She notices the black veil and experimentally places it over her head, leaving her face uncovered. She tries out a formal prayer position, once more as if experimenting, and then, becoming Gertrude, she prays.

- Gertrude: If I knew the first misstep, when events began to turn. Then I would know for what I am to blame. I did all from love. What else was I to do? Sit helpless, a heap of squat, benign flesh - as my son would have it - breathing smiles on all the world. Never to take a hand and mend! If I had never moved the kingdom with my love, where would he be now Where indeed. This prayer is pointless. *(throws off the veil)* I am out of the habit. And I am not contrite. I was never raised to play the passive Queen. Perhaps the misstep was my mother's in marrying me to this. Perhaps, it was Yoric's fault ... for teaching me too much of tenderness to be satisfied with a queen's life Perhaps it was the girl's for being so ... she was too frail for her part ... too sweet. No. She was not sweet. The way she spoke to me! Such filth from one so frail! Stop,

Gertrude. You will make yourself mad with your own questions. You did what you had to do. You did it for your only child. As a mother should. Did I?... It comes to me just now that I am tired of doing for my son. I must finish with being a mother. Let him build his own world. What have I accomplished in building for him? He is still alive! That at least I did! They would have killed him surely, without my alliance with Claudius. Claudius! Each day reveals more than I could have imagined. Now he feeds the anger of the girl's brother. How to keep him from my son. There. I am at it again. It is not my business anymore What will I be when I stop being his mother? Well, I shall find out. I cannot even remember the girl I was. The girl who was not his mother. She is nothing. Will I be nothing again? ... *(a sound)* Who is there?

Horatio: *(entering)* Madam, I come away for only a moment to warn you. They have begun to set up the tables, arrange the great hall, any moment the trumpets will call you. I must hurry. I second the Prince.

Gertrude: Second ... then Laertes has challenged?

Horatio: It is set. And I do not like the looks of it. There are too many hovering. I must go inspect the weapons. I suspect ...

Gertrude: Yes go. But what is the Prince's mood. Is he, fearful? Angry?

Horatio: No Madam. He is calm, he is ready.

Gertrude: Go then.

Horatio: Come immediately at the trumpets. We are only two against many that wish for the other side, whether they say it or not. We both must watch carefully for treachery.

Gertrude: My eyes will be as keen as when I was a mother watching my child play beside the river.

Horatio: Bless you, Madam. I have not served his interests and yours as well as I would have liked, but I hope now to be his and your true man.

Gertrude: We shall both serve him now as a Prince deserves. *(He exits.)* So much for "not doing". Perhaps after this, when he is safe again, I can stop. *(She goes to pick up the basket, but in doing so the white veil and the pages of script spill out onto the floor.)*

She kneels to pick them up, but the moment she touches the embroidery of the veil her mood changes) Oh girl, my poor lost child! I should have used this as your shroud (*She straightens out the fabric by tossing it the way one flicks a bed sheet, then lowers it slowly. As she speaks she shapes the cloth lightly with her fingertips until it resembles the shape of a woman*). I would have clothed you in banks of flowers on your wedding day. You would have smiled on me then, become my daughter, become my own sweet child (*begins to sing as she gathers the fabric to her as if cradling a child*). "But if a girl (*she cannot sing "embrace".*)

No, those are not the words.

(*sings*) "But if a man bring only power
To the fire of her dwelling
Then heat and frost do make her life
Her grief, her pain, her dying. "

They have killed you child. They ... he ... I ... we. We have all killed you. I too, as surely as I pricked my needle through this cloth. Made your shroud as I made your bridal veil. We will have no more marriages! No more marriages! No more babies! No more deaths. No more. (*She calms on the last words and taking the fabric in her arms like a child, carries it to her bed where she lays it out*) I would be with you girl rather than where I must go. (*The trumpets sound, distant*) Ophelia. If you hear me. If such a place exists where you can hear me. Forgive me. You knew that all I did was for him. It was never for you. I could not play your mother. Although we would both wish it so. In being true to him, I wronged you. I was as true and as wrong as any woman can ever be.

"Gertrude and Ophelia" ends here. After Playwright finishes Gertrude's final monologue she becomes aware that the actor who plays Ophelia, no longer in costume, has been watching and listening from the bower.

Play: That's a tough one.

Actress: YesThanks for the rewrites on my scenes.

Play: You like them?
Actress: Yes, I do. The guys have all gone. Shall I lock up?
Play: I'll do it when I've finished.
Actress: I'll wait for you.
Play: That would be nice (*she turns back to the bedchamber set*)
Actress: (*physically encouraging her to leave*) Everything's fine. (*They begin to leave*) Everything will be fine.
Play: Oh, I hope so.
They exit together

The End