Assembling the Ophelia fragments: gender, genre, and revenge in Hamlet

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In responding to Carol Thomas Neely's "Feminist Modes of Shakespearean Criticism" Elaine Showalter has analyzed the risks taken by feminist approaches to Ophelia: "To liberate [her] from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends; to dissolve her into a female symbolism of absence is to endorse our own marginality; to make her Hamlet's anima is to reduce her to a metaphor of male experience" (77). Indeed, feminist studies of Ophelia after Showalter have tended to read the other characters in the playas a set of victimizing circumstances against which she must go mad to protest, (1) some finding in that madness the piteous condition of the unmarried Elizabethan girl, and others making of her a silent hero who finds a powerful voice of critique. (2) While many of these studies provide insight into the contribution she makes to the play as a "different" female voice that "counterpoints" Hamlet's tragedy, their treatments tend to "re-appropriate her for our own ends" or "reduce her to a metaphor of male experience." (3) Critics have very little of Ophelia, either on stage or in the words of other characters, with which to work. In contrast to the carefully voiced and staged development of the hero, her role proceeds more in isolated fragments--receiving cautionary orders from a brother and father, giving a description of a rejected lover, being paraded as bait to "catch the conscience" of the hero, singing bits of "old lauds," drowning. Despite this rather piecemeal presentation, the play does supply enough clues, in terms of genre conventions, to suggest a cohesive trajectory that an audience versed in those conventions could easily discern. The conventions Ophelia's story suggests do not belong fully to the tragic form Hamlet is generally understood to follow, however, so that scholars whose interest is in genre have focused universally on the revenge plot and its male characters. (4) Yet Ophelia's story is not only an enriching female version of the vengeful process engaged in by Hamlet but also an enactment of a courtly love tragedy, an alternative dramatic form whose conventions supply its female protagonists a scope for tragic conflict and resonant action. Examining the Ophelia fragments, those few moments that Ophelia appears on stage in person or in the dialogue of other characters, clarifies how thoroughly she undergoes, in feminine form, not only Hamlet's struggle between the twin impulses toward murder and self-destruction but also the ambiguous resolution of the conflict between what he calls in "To be or not to be" "conscience" or "resolution" and "opposing" or "suffering." Ophelia, in other words, takes an ambiguously achieved revenge, as does Hamlet, but from within the form that is most appropriate to her gender, the courtly love tragedy. (5)

Her story and the form through which she enacts it interact in several ways with Hamlet and the revenge tragedy into which he is catapulted by the Ghost in the first scenes of the play. For example, her love tragedy is truncated and distorted by the demands of his revenge plot so that she must enact her role alone. Her co-participant in the love story, unbeknownst to her, has become incapable of fulfilling his role, although all his "antic" behavior--the accusations of unchastity on one hand and bawdy flirtation on the other and especially the toying with and killing of Polonius--could be understood from within Ophelia's point of view in a love tragedy as the desperate behavior of a lover suffering the effects of love madness that culminate in the removal of the obstacle to his love. To understand the way interactions like these enrich the play in more subtle ways, we must first recognize the conventions of revenge tragedy as Thomas Kyd popularized the form in the late 1500s.

Hamlet stands at the center of revenge plot, the features of which Howard B. Norland has explained, were adapted and integrated by Kyd from French, English, Greek, and especially Senecan models and sources in The Spanish Tragedy. Among these features, Norland identifies "the son's obligation to redeem his father's honor" as his "primary duty" (75; though in The Spanish Tragedy, Kyd reverses son's and father's roles) and the "delay" brought on by "grief and frustration when relief is not forthcoming" (80), a delay that involves "self beration" (81), the temptation to commit suicide (76), and the "deception adopted by the revenger" to achieve his vengeance (culminating in The Spanish Tragedy, as in Hamlet, in a play-within-a-play) by which the revenger comes to resemble the villain and must be punished by death (83). (6) While these features are easily recognized in Hamlet's condition and in the structure of the play, the responses contributing to the delay are especially important in understanding Ophelia's role more fully. Ophelia's death is a more complex exploration of the feminine suicide-for-revenge presented in the earlier Spanish Tragedy, in which the suicide of Isabella follows directly upon her mad "vengeance" against the arbor in which Horatio was hanged, and which, along with that of Belimperia during the play-within-a-play, results from "grief and frustration" over Hieronimo's failure to take his revenge quickly enough (Norland 81). Incipient in these cases is not only the madness leading to suicide that we see in Ophelia, but also the vengeance her death takes upon the revenger as well as the flawed society that has blocked the fulfillment of her love.

To his sources Shakespeare added that obstacle to love presented by a corrupt society. The sources tell the story of an "obliging maid" who loves Amleth and who colludes with him to defeat the corrupt king and court of the Amleth in Saxo Grammaticus and Belleforest and the Amlothi legends of the Kalevala. (7) Shakespeare took from these sources only the love between the "obliging maid" and Amleth and the king's use of her as bait to entrap him. Gone are her knowledge of and active collusion with Amleth's feigned madness, and newly added is almost everything that we think of as "Ophelia" (including her name): the father of whom she is bereft, the hotheaded brother who wants to avenge that father's death, the confusion with which she encounters Hamlet's treatment of her, her madness, her death, and her burial. Clearly, these supply to "the obliging maid" the context for the love tragedy in which she enacts her own tragic revenge.

We can see this intertwining of revenge and love motives most clearly if we tum to the political dimension of the play's central conflict. Leonard Tennenhouse suggests political conflict rests upon Gertrude's body: Claudius can claim the crown and lands by possessing it in marriage, while Hamlet can claim them by virtue of the royal blood which passed through it to him (112). (8) If Hamlet, therefore, has been regarding Ophelia or encouraging her to regard herself as a Gertrude-in-the-making, as his future queen, her body would begin to be perceived as a vessel that must ensure the passing of the royal blood to Hamlet's heirs. Such a vessel must be kept pure, a lesson she hears from the father, brother, and lover among whom her body is in contention, from her first appearance on stage until she sings the mournful "old lauds" in the last moments of her life. But with the lover a banished murderer under sentence of death, the brother absent, and the father a murder victim, what other way could a female who is forbidden by her gender "to take arms" and whose only asset is her pure body exact restitution for her injuries than by destroying the one thing that has value because the men must stake their patrimony upon it?

The death of her father is not the only injury for which Ophelia might seek vengeance. Her father's transparently opportunistic and selfish handling of her love affair seems almost equally injurious. If he's so anxious about her virtue, why parade her before the lover who threatens that virtue for king and court to watch? That Ophelia senses this inconsistency is suggested after the nunnery scene, in which she describes herself as "of ladies most deject and wretched" because she has witnessed "that noble and most sovereign reason / Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh" (3.1.15-60). She expresses the burden of that knowledge by declaring, "O woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.162-3). Cannot that "see what I see" apply both to the lingering image in her mind's eye of her altered beloved and to her father's exploitation of her romantic torments for political gain? Terry Eagleton has observed that Ophelia "lives at the point of tension between seeing herself as the obedient daughter of Polonius, subject to his will, and asserting her authentic self in her love for Hamlet" (43). He argues that this tension is clearly contextualized by the conflict between Ophelia's desire to achieve revenge on Hamlet for her father's death and thus authenticate herself as "the obedient daughter of Polonius" and her simultaneous love for Hamlet, a feeling that damages her own self-image as that daughterly "authentic self' and obstructs her pursuit of a conventional stage revenge like the one pursued by Henry Chettle's Clois Hoffman or Thomas Middleton's Bianca. In view of her treatment by this father, the working out of her fate in madness and equivocal death can be construed not as a botched attempt but as a perfect act of revenge, devastating to lover and family but equally powerful as a memorializing of her love for them.

This double force is expressed obliquely in her mad scenes, not only in the aggressiveness with which she accosts the other characters, "Where is the beauteous Majesty of Denmark?" (4.5.21) and the rather dismissive remark about that oppressive father, "They say a made a good end" (4.5.183), but also in the symbolic meanings she gives to the flowers she distributes, which exhort her interlocutors, like the ghost of Old Hamlet, to "remembrance" and "thoughts," to "rue" and all the rest. (9) But Ophelia's fate carries not only this vengeful feminist force; it also enacts that self-destruction that must occur in the revenger if he is to become the killer of another. In this way, Ophelia's madness and death explore in a feminine key the frenzy and loss of humanity that Hamlet also endures in the course of his story. (10)

Critical opinion is divided over whether the amatory passion in love tragedies is pathological or transcendent. (11) In either reading, however, the central conflict that motivates the tragedy is an essential incommensurability between the demands of the love and the demands of the world. (12) Like revenge tragedy, love tragedy explores the vexed relations between individual desire and conformity to social duty, particularly as this issue was manifested in the institution of marriage and the effects upon it of the impulses to individualism seen more generally in the Protestant Reformation and the rise of the middle classes. (13) This conflict between individual and society, desire and duty, is represented in the love tragedy as opposition between the individual lovers and their communities resulting in the liebestod that ends the tale. Specifically, the surrounding family or community of one lover defines itself against the community surrounding the other lover. Both sides exact a conservative loyalty to their own group, while the lovers are prone to a radical individualistic impulsiveness that provokes their alienation from the traditions of those families or that community. In response to its authoritarian abuses they act disastrously--often with deception or in secret. In Romeo and Juliet, these conditions are clearly mapped out across the feuding families of Verona, but they are also at work in Antony and Cleopatra through the conflict internalized within the lovers who must each work through competing loyalties to love and to Egyptian and Roman polities. (14)

As the context in which she can enact her courtly love tragedy, Shakespeare gives Ophelia a family that opposes her erotic desires on the grounds of social rank. In Act 1, Laertes reminds Ophelia that Hamlet's "will is not his own. / For he himself is subject to his birth" (1.3.17-18). Both he and Polonius insist that Hamlet is only toying with her virtue rather than seriously considering alliance. We also see, briefly, Ophelia's resistance to this family opinion in her mild objections to Polonius's and Laertes's characterizations of her lover: "No more but so?" (1.9), "My lord, he hath importun'd me with love / In honourable fashion"(11.110-11), "And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord, / With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (11.113-114). 15 Significantly, this scene is sandwiched between the two scenes in which Hamlet is similarly exhorted to proper filial honor and duty, first by Claudius in scene two, and then by the Ghost in scene four. The three scenes together constitute a triple commentary on this question of filial duty and honor in both revenge and love plots. (16)

Moreover, in love tragedy, the lovers' flaws contribute to the tragic demise of their union. These flaws stem from the individualism of their desires--desires that are in this way quite similar to those of a revenger bent on taking illegal private revenge. At first in "Hamlet and Ophelia," the inconstancy of the lover and the threat of the maiden's dishonesty, themes voiced by or enacted in the corrupt communities that surround the lovers, invade the lovers, poisoning their union. Antic Hamlet presents an inconstant face to Ophelia and sees it in her, while filially obedient Ophelia betrays Hamlet to the court--she gives his letters to her father, who shows them to the King and Queen, who then turn her into the bait for their trap. Hamlet's preoccupation with the corruptible and corrupted flesh that his mother's marriage has raised in him causes a failure of faith in Ophelia because of her appearance to him of dishonesty and corrupt flesh, just as Romeo loses hope at the sight of what appears to be a dead Juliet and kills himself too hastily. This complex of suspicion and spying constitutes the material of Act 2, in which Polonius sets a spy on Laertes and requires a complete revelation from Ophelia of all her relations with Hamlet. In the following scenes, which return to the revenge plot, several forms of surveillance are begun by the men: Claudius sets Rosencrantz, Guildenstem, Polonius, and even Ophelia to spy on Hamlet, while Hamlet plots "The Mousetrap" with the visiting Players to "catch the conscience of the king." The act as a whole provides a double commentary on the vexed relations between world and individual, as played out in both revenge and love tragedy versions. (17)

The crisis that unravels the plot of Ophelia's love tragedy is the hasty and impulsive murder of her father at the hands of her lover, an instance of hyper-individualism, like Romeo's killing of Juliet's kinsman Tybalt, which brings on the catastrophes in both love and revenge tragedies: Hamlet's banishment and death sentence and Ophelia's madness. Unlike Juliet, of course, Ophelia has no Friar Lawrence and no secret potion, nor even, apparently, the continuing love of her lover. Her only recourse is the lunacy she expresses so floridly throughout Act 4. We can see Ophelia's madness as a literal enactment of Hamlet's loss of humanity--his pretending to be "beside himself" or, as Claudius will later say of Ophelia, "divided from [him]self and [his] fair judgment"--demonstrated not only in the killing of Polonius, but also in his callous and cavalier treatment of the body when he's questioned about it by the king (4.5.85). These key scenes of Act 4 demonstrate the way revenge and love tragedies can become commentaries upon each other and subplots for each other. Justas Hamlet contains a love story we might call "Hamlet and Ophelia," so does Romeo and Juliet contain Romeo's revenge upon Tybalt for the killing of Mercutio. Indeed, they give rise to each other: Ophelia's love tragedy provokes the little revenge plot of Laertes against Hamlet. Taking an even broader view, Hamlet's revenge plot itself is originally motivated by the Ghost's tale of what we can understand (looking at the story from Claudius's point of view) as a "worldly love tragedy" in which the lover becomes "desperate enough" to "murder the husband" (Brodwin 25) for whom "society will demand vengeance" (350). (18)

Ophelia's death is tinged with vengefulness not only as the realistic psychology of an individual character, but also because such associations are part of the conventions of the genre in which she is the protagonist. Citing Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy and Chapman's The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois, Leonora Leet Brodwin notes that in courtly love tragedy quite often the love-death itself "acts as an instrument of revenge" (360). Such vengefulness tinges the deaths of other love tragedies as well: "O, couldst thou speak, / That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass / Unpolicied!" laments Cleopatra to her asp (5.3.306-08). The vengeful impulse in Antony and Cleopatra is here more directly voiced than it ever is in Romeo and Juliet or "Hamlet and Ophelia," where it comes through most clearly in the expressions of remorse by the surviving, but chastised, members of the opposing communities: "All are punished" proclaims the Prince at the end of Romeo and Juliet (5.3.295). "I had hoped thou wouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (5.1.237), belatedly laments Gertrude over Ophelia's grave--clearly expressing not only the private burden of grief and remorse, but also alluding to the political burden of the royal female body previously discussed.

Thus, the drama of star-crossed love enacts as clearly as that of private vengeance the vexed conflict between individual desire and social constraint. Ophelia's love tragedy presents the enactment of a dilemma that is almost synonymous with the quandary regarding those twin destructive impulses, one toward the fatal act of vengeance, the other towards the fatal act of despair Hamlet voices in "To be or not to be." However, as he contemplates whether "to take arms against a sea of troubles" (3.1.59) or make his "quietus" "with a bare bodkin" (11. 75-76), Hamlet also entertains a third possibility, "whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (11. 57-58). Since both love and revenge subgenres represent theatrically the simultaneous impulses to self-destruction and to vengeance, it would not be surprising to find that they are both responding to the conflicted and ambiguous responses to the guilty actions of revenge and suicide in the surrounding culture.

As Rowland Wymer argues, Hamlet comes to a kind of trust in providential arrangements, or a "middle way" expressed as the famous "readiness" that allows him to act justly, to find a way of taking action that is not quite guilty because he has achieved the understanding that "providence can be trusted to provide opportunities to act on behalf of justice in ways which are not morally tainted" (29). But how can Hamlet, guilty not only of the murder of Polonius, but also the killer of Laertes and Claudius and the plotter against Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, be understood to operate "in ways which are not morally tainted"? One answer to this quandary can be found in the ambiguous and conflicted early modern legal and moral ideas about revenge to which the immense popularity of revenge tragedy at this moment in English literary history is a response. Legally, under Elizabeth's rule, crimes were punishable by the crown, not by the families of victims. Evidence of premeditation in a murder determined the level of guilt. Murder with malice prepense, as it was called, meant the death sentence with no possibility of royal pardon, while manslaughter, which included all killings without premeditation--"sudden quarrels, joining others who murder" and, most important in Hamlet's case, "the instantaneous reaction to an injury" (Bowers 10)--carried the possibility of royal pardon. Revenge, because it was understood to be premeditated, carried the ultimate sentence. Interestingly, Fredson Bowers points out that if a murder plot is directed at one person but strikes another, the perpetrator is still guilty of murder with malice prepense. Claudius, for example, is the one guilty of first-degree murder when Gertrude and Laertes die of the poison he has intended for Hamlet (Bowers 9). Similarly, if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern had made it to English shores and suffered the fate designed for Hamlet there, Claudius could be considered guilty of their deaths as well. Conversely, the deaths caused by Hamlet are pardonable--all "manslaughter," since the cases of Laertes and Claudius are unplanned reactions against injury and the case of Rosencrantz and Guildenstem is a deflection of a murder plot directed against him. Even the killing of Polonius is merely a "tragic error" committed in a moment of passion (Bowers 99).

However, while the law pulled one way, honor pulled another. Morally, the Elizabethan revenger was caught between this modern legal system and loyalty to the older system of honorable private revenge, the wer-gild laws governing Ango-Saxon culture. In this system, the male members of the murder victim's family exacted payment for the death from the perpetrator or his family in blood or money. As this punishment was exacted, the victim and his family's honor was restored. Emotional loyalty to this honor code was powerful still, particularly among the nobility, and Elizabethan audiences would have had great sympathy with it, despite its illegality. (19) The conflict presented to Hamlet by the Ghost's demand for vengeance was almost paralyzingly compelling, not only because it was a well established convention from Senecan drama, but also because of this emotional loyalty to that ancient code of honor. Indeed, one could argue that the Senecan convention took hold so powerfully at this time because of these cultural tensions. In the duel that ends the play, Hamlet reacts spontaneously to an injury and to the plot he discovers has been laid against him, a reaction that insures the guilt for first-degree murder will fall upon Claudius for the deaths of everyone in the room, including those of Hamlet and Claudius himself. In this way, Hamlet gets his revenge and restores his own and his father's honor but without plotting the killings beforehand. He finds the middle way between "taking arms and opposing" and yet "suffering the slings and arrows" in the legal grey area of manslaughter.

Ophelia, too, finds a middle way between guilt and innocence or acting and suffering, and her feminine "quietus" blurs "conscience" and "resolution" as effectively as does Hamlet's masculine vengeance. The few critics who discuss Ophelia tend to read her too starkly as resolute or passive. The former tend to see her madness as a form of power that allows her at last to assert herself as a subject, and her death as the taking of resolute action: a rational choice, given her impossible situation, and the act of a female hero. (20) The others reduce her to a cipher, (21) taking her so far into passive victimization, for example, that they read her as a murder victim, pinning responsibility for her death upon other characters in the play--most notably Claudius, who, the claim goes, has her murdered after seducing and abandoning her or because she "says too much" in her mad scene (Harris; R. B. Jenkins), or even on Gertrude, because she was supposedly the only one present at Ophelia's death (Ratcliffe). Each way of reading sees one side of Ophelia's nuanced presentation, when Shakespeare makes use of both: the presence of important symbolic meanings in the Fool's or Lunatic's speech, but also the emptiness and meaninglessness of folly; the taking of guilty action, but also the passive succumbing to circumstances. (22) The two expressions for becoming a lunatic, going mad and losing one's reason, express beautifully this equivocal status of the madwoman's agency in her condition: One is a willed action (going); the other is a passive failure to act, to pay attention, to keep hold (losing). In the language of the play, other characters voice this dual understanding. Claudius sees the passive, "Poor Ophelia / Divided from herself and her fair judgment, / Without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts" (4.5.84-86); while Laertes expresses more subtly the way the will could still be operative in a broken mind: "O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits / Should be as mortal as an old man's life? / Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine / It sends some precious instance of itself/After the thing it loves" (11. 159-63). He expresses here his understanding of the cause of Ophelia's madness, or, in his expression, the reason "a young maid's wits" can be "as mortal as an old man's life": She loves her father (the "old man") so dearly that her "nature" sends "some precious instance of itself" (her "wits") after him into death. Both these dimensions of Ophelia's condition allow us to understand that it presents as equivocal and complex a balance between--or blend of-"opposing" and "suffering" (doing and being done to) as does Hamlet's, and that together they constitute a fuller exploration in the play of the twin crimes of self-murder and revenge that held such equivocal status in Shakespeare's day.

Suicide attracted a complex of attitudes that grew, like revenge, out of a conflict between older and newer cultural practices. Generally speaking, the conflicts regarding suicide came between ancient superstitious and folkloric attitudes about the suicide's spiteful ghost and "the eternal canon against self-slaughter" on the one hand, and a newfound admiration for the Roman virtues among sophisticated aristocrats educated in the emergent Humanist values of the Renaissance on the other. Meanwhile, church doctrine was silent. Even Richard Hooker, defending Anglican doctrines and practices against Puritan criticism in Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, says nothing about suicides in his chapter on burial rites, although he enters into explicit and thorough detail in his discussions of the other sacraments (nine chapters on baptism, for example). This silence in canon law also constitutes one of John Donne's important arguments in Biathanatos (1608), in which he demonstrates that there is no church doctrine wherein self destruction is named a heresy. (23)

The legal picture surrounding suicide is equally equivocal. Donne, for example, demonstrates that English and Dutch laws only militate against a "propenseness of that people, at that time, to that fault" and do not imply "heinousness in the fault" (98). We know that according to those laws, the possible verdicts that coroners' juries chose among in cases of "doubtful death" were felo de se ("felon of the self" or self-murder: "self homicide" as Donne calls it), non compos mentis (insanity), "misfortune" (accidental death), or even natural death, which was sometimes returned in cases of delirium or raving madness (MacDonald 313, n 10). As with verdicts for murder, it was evidence of will or intent that signified guilt and determined the verdict of felo de se. In practice, according to the statistics in social historian Michael MacDonald's study of the history of suicide, the verdict of felo de se was returned in 98.4% of cases between 1487 and 1660, while non compos mentis was only returned in 1.4% of cases. He reports more leniency for the nobility and gentry--they received verdicts of non compos mentis at about five times the rate as commoners (310). MacDonald demonstrates that one of the reasons non compos mentis was so seldom returned was that evidence of mental disturbance such as "signs of anxiety and gloom" were usually considered proofs of intentional self-destruction, rather than proofs of insanity (311). He suggests that this verdict was so little returned that "one may wonder how many in the Globe's audience would even have been aware of the non compos mentis option" (313). Indeed, we don't hear about it from any of the many views voiced by the various characters at Ophelia's burial scene.

MacDonald makes clear, then, that the most common argument families of victims could use to avoid a verdict of felo de se was not non compos mentis but accidental death (313). We can read from these facts, as indeed from Laertes's lament for Ophelia discussed above, that in the Elizabethan system the will could still be considered operative in a disturbed mind (though not always), so that where the will to self-murder was debatable, the preferred solution was to claim "misfortune" or "accident," in which victims clearly did not will their own deaths. However, drowning, MacDonald demonstrates, was "the most common form of deaths found to be suicides" for women, even though it was also "one of the most frequent causes of accidental death" because "juries deduced the meaning of the act from its consequences" (311-12). In other words, she drowned because she meant to drown herself--an equivocation upon which Shakespeare plays to great comic effect in the Gravedigger's scene. Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death underscores the ambiguity:

There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke, When down her weedy trophies and herself Fell in the weeping brook. 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 indued Unto that element. But long it could not be Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay To muddy death. (4.7.171-82)

We cannot say that this action is either purely passive or purely "resolute." Do we assign fault to the "envious sliver" that breaks and the garments "heavy with their drink," which seem endowed with more will than Ophelia herself, or, like a good Elizabethan coroner's jury, should we conclude, cutting coldly through Gertrude's lovely rhetoric, that she meant to drown since she did drown? We have no clear way to make a judgment, since we only hear about it through the filter of an interested party's point of view. (24) However, even taking Gertrude's account at face value, we can see in this description neither a clear intent to self-murder nor a clear sense of victimization or "suffering" endured by a helpless victim. Rather, Ophelia falls, floats, and sinks according to two conflicting images. The first shows her "incapable of her own distress," for which "incapable," the Arden footnote asserts, means "not cognizant"--making her the embodiment of the passive victim who doesn't even know she's in trouble. The other portrays her with will and intent "like a creature native and indued / Unto that element"--taking action to return to her native element, seeking the water. These images create both the "doubtfulness" that causes all the debate and much of the anguish expressed at her burial scene, and yet also something like the "fall of a sparrow" in which Hamlet later sees the "special providence" and the "readiness" that allow him to follow his own liminal way between revenge and self-defense in the duel with Laertes and against the king's poisoning plot.

Both characters thus find a middle way between guilt and innocence, Ophelia in an exploration emphasizing the suicidal strand of the play's discussion of revenge, and Hamlet in an exploration emphasizing the vengeful one. Importantly, in the Shakespearean form (tragedy) that is in feminist readings considered the most unkind to female characters because in it they seem the most passively victimized, Ophelia has found her middle way first and leads the hero to his.

Although considering only the moments that Ophelia appears on stage (whether in person or in the words of other characters) rather than engaging in speculation about what is not given to us in the text of the play makes her story a fragmentary one, it is, nevertheless, possible to connect the fragments of that role into a coherent and vital narrative while still avoiding the pitfalls that Showalter identified so well in 1985. As the one character in Hamlet besides its hero who "suffers" through and "takes arms against" its central conflicts, she presents a model of proceeding that counterpoints his but also anticipates the kind of resolution he must achieve. In their struggles, they each, in their different kinds of tragedy, explore the dilemma of doing or not doing. Ophelia's version presents most fully the ramifications and consequences of "suffering ... outrageous fortune," while taking a sort of unwilled action, while Hamlet's version presents the masculine requirement to "take arms" while still suffering "the slings and arrows." Both resolve their dilemmas in a blurring of innocence and guilt, action and suffering. Put more strongly, they both achieve what is presented as impossible in the logic of a play whose opening premise is that all action is guilty: They blend the dichotomous terms of action and passivity, guilt and innocence, opposing and suffering, by tingeing passive suffering with guilt and rendering active opposition innocent. Reading the generic clues results in this richer understanding of the play's meanings. It would be interesting, indeed, to understand more of Shakespeare's tragedies--as we already do his comedies--as generically multi-plotted, and to look for more nuanced uses he and his contemporaries might have made of genre and subgenre to complicate and enrich their dramas.

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Notes

(1) See Dash; Neely, Broken Nuptials.

(2) Those who read Ophelia as a piteous victim include Horwitz and Taylor. Stilling more complicatedly observes that Ophelia's acquiescence to her father is "most un-Juliet-like": "[S]he lets herself be used and thus shows a predilection for operating within repressive conventions that suits ill with the development of love" (105). Such repression, however, may simply be the fuel for the simmering resentment of male authority she ultimately subverts through her suicide. Those who read her heroically include Philip; Hamana, "Whose Body"; Leverenz; Oshio; and Dane. Horwitz also comes to this understanding of Ophelia's madness (114).

(3) Neely reads Ophelia's madness as a counterpoint to Hamlet's "antic disposition" or feigned madness in the context of early modern doctors' attempts to distinguish insanity from other "types of aberrance" ("Documents" 319). Her discussion of Hamlet and Ophelia appears on 325-26. Fischer also suggests that "looking at Ophelia offers a feminine counterpoint to Hamlet's tragedy at least; at most, it offers a devastating commentary on the non-particularity of his tragic circumstances" (2). She sketches out succinctly all the parallels in their two circumstances but sees Ophelia as more silenced, shadowy, and circumscribed than she is presented in this essay. In her reading, Hamlet achieves the resolution that Ophelia is denied by her status as circumscribed female. See also Finkelstein.

(4) See, for a few examples, Prosser; Reid; Bowers; Foakes; Ure; Mercer; Hallett and Hallett; Kerrigan; and H. Jenkins's introduction to the Arden edition. All references to Hamlet come from the Arden edition.

(5) Burks also reads the "love story," but from Hamlet's point of view and as a counter to the incest theme (and not as a generic form of tragedy). Other studies of Hamlet and Ophelia as lovers include Brooks and H. Jenkins. Mercer identifies not two genres but two "expressive modes" working in opposition in the play: "the dramatic mode of revenge tragedy" and "the rhetorical mode of satire and complaint" (3).

(6) Norland cites Fredson Bowers on this last point, but the idea of the revenger coming to resemble the villain is a commonplace in Hamlet criticism. Spinrad lists all of these features as "conventions" of revenge tragedy in the introduction to her discussion of Antonio's Revenge (169).

(7) Vest's study of the Ophelia figure includes a thorough account of Shakespeare's sources for Hamlet. How many of the changes to these sources were first made by Kyd in the Ur-Hamlet and then adopted by Shakespeare and how many originated with Shakespeare, we cannot know, of course, without unearthing a copy of that first version.

(8) Tennenhouse also demonstrates that these conflicting claims about the queen's body enact anxiety over the disposal of the crown at a time when Elizabeth's aging body had produced no heirs (85).

(9) In this context we can best appreciate arguments like that of Fox-Good, who claims that her madness and musical language are "subversive" (232), and Hamana, who argues that the mad scenes are protests against and challenges of patriarchy ("Let Women's Voices" 34-36). See also Feinberg 133.

(10) The destruction of the revenge hero's loss of humanity is explored by Hallet and Hallet, Kerrigan, H. Jenkins, Prosser, and Bowers, to list a few examples.

(11) The exploration of love as pathology receives thorough treatment by Dickey and most recently by Von Koppenfehls in the context of early modern moralistic doctrines on the imagination as an enemy to reason, especially as it becomes "diseased" by passion (69). Brodwin traces the trajectory of tragically transcendant love as "an irresistible, self destructive but exalting passion, defeated by the obstacles that society, chance, or innocence has strewn in its path but rising above them in a final, moving love-death" (3). Durbach and Seltzer also take this view of the love in love tragedy.

(12) This conflict is cited almost universally as a central convention of the form. In addition to Brodwin and Dickey, see Durbach, Seltzer, and Von Koppenfehls, for example.

(13) These broad historical connections between religious doctrine and economic shifts have been well explored by historians of the era, beginning with Weber and continued in the works of historians and literary scholars such as Haller, Trevor-Roper, Tawney, Hill, McKeon, and many others. Two contrasting studies of the Puritan ideal of companionate marriage in connection with Shakespeare's female characters are Dusinberre and Jardine. Brodwin identifies the provenance of love tragedy in part in the "humanist education of women" (26) and the "Lutheran acceptance of sacerdotal marriage" (28) which contributed to a "movement toward a new type of idealized love relationship between companionate equals" (28).

(14) Brodwin distinguishes Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra as the classic types of two different patterns of love tragedy. The first expresses the values and ideals associated with neo-Platonism and the courtly love tradition (the "Courtly Love Tragedy"), in which the lovers die for love in a suicide that at once unites them with the Absolute and redeems the corrupt society that obstructed their love, while the second espouses the values and ideals associated with Aristotelian friendship in tragedies that Brodwin calls "Worldly Love Tragedies." In this pattern, the lovers' conflict comes not between their love and the society around them, but within themselves, between the demands of their love and the demands of their "sovereignty." They die not "for love," which they have already affirmed, but in order to preserve the dignity of this sovereignty. The Duchess of Malfi and Othello are two other examples Brodwin explores.

(15) Horwitz provides a careful and nuanced reading of this conflict in Ophelia between duty and love and the way her passivity and absolute obedience within the context of a corrupt masculine court comes to associate her with that corruption despite her personal purity.

(16) Brodwin notes that in courtly love tragedy quite often the love-death itself "acts as an instrument of revenge" and cites Tourneur's The Revenger's Tragedy and Chapman's The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois as examples (360).

(17) Reid characterizes Act 2 as a system of surveillance, although he doesn't mention Ophelia's scene in that act.

(18) This story is precisely the plot of John Updike's Gertrude and Claudius, of course.

(19) Indeed, it is still powerful today, given current cinema audiences' love of action films, westerns, and cops-gone-solo stories whose plots all turn upon the justification and glorification of private revenge. Bowers explains carefully the strictness with which Elizabeth had to control her nobles on this issue, and also discusses the resurgence of violence, blood revenge, and dueling under James I. See especially 30-34.

(20) See Dane, who reads Ophelia's suicide as a "rational choice" "not to be" (423).

(21) Aside from the long history of Hamlet criticism that virtually ignores Ophelia altogether, Guilfoyle, Kesler, and Taylor consciously read her passivity or status as angelic cipher. Pessoni specifically reads her as the Jungian "Kore" or anima figure.

(22) Neely makes a thorough analysis of the alienated and fragmentary "quoted" nature of "mad speech" in Ophelia, Lear, and Lady MacBeth. She characterizes the special speech of Shakespeare's mad characters as "both something and nothing, both coherent and incoherent" ("Documents" 323). See especially 324-25 for her reading of Ophelia's mad speech.

(23) For a detailed analysis of Biathanatos and conflicting early modern ideas about suicide, see Wymer.

(24) While Ratcliffe takes the odd measure of blaming Gertrude either directly or indirectly for Ophelia's death, his article is an otherwise excellent analysis of the meanings and effects of "reported action."

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