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Ophelia's Reflection

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OPHELIA'S REFLECTION

By

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of the Requirements for
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Thesis Summary

This project examines Ophelia's role in the thematic exploration of the nature of the individual self in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. First, I discuss the different models of subjectivity and virtue that Ophelia embodies and by which characters around her judge her actions. Her father, Polonius, espouses a form of Renaissance humanism that Shakespeare counters throughout the play. He believes the imitation of noble qualities can affect inner goodness, and he demands Ophelia's obedience of his instructions regarding noble conduct. In contrast, Hamlet locates moral authority within the individual, and he dismisses Polonius' notions of elite self-presentation as vulgar performances. Both men privilege the development of the individual as the highest goal in ethical action, and Ophelia counters their ethics in two ways. First, she embodies a different mode of subjectivity that privileges connection with others over self-promotion or self-preservation, and she conceives of natural communion where Hamlet insists on the impossibility of surmounting the barriers of self-interest between discrete selves. Second, her fate registers the potential destructiveness of Polonius' and Hamlet's ethics: Polonius' restrictive guidance fails to secure her a husband or to ensure that others treat her with dignity and respect. Hamlet's single-minded pursuit of his personal conception of justice discards her feelings, her reputation, and father's life as collateral, and her poignant madness undermines his self-conception as a sincere individual suffering at the hands of corrupt others.

Next, I dive further into the ways in which Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia exposes problems in the groundbreaking conception of individualist subjectivity he espouses. Shakespeare uses Ophelia to register Hamlet's anxiety about the impossibility of accessing the interiority of others and to underscore. His inconsistent attempts to repel and control her

underscore his feelings of isolation and futility. I analyze the ways in which Hamlet's preoccupation with Ophelia's virginity and Gertrude's womb contributes to a new iconography that frames a discourse around his mode of subjectivity.

Additionally, I argue that Ophelia counters Hamlet's authority as a judge of character and as the play's tragic center. Ever a conduit for symbolic orders that originate outside herself, she channels alternative iconographies into the play both through her sustained association with classical myth and pastoral comedy despite her location in a Machiavellian court and through her importation of popular balladry into an elite play. I compare her true madness to Hamlet's feigned madness and argue that Ophelia counters Hamlet's authority as tragic center in the play's dramatic arc and suggests the possibility of an alternative form of tragedy in which there could be room for restoration.

Finally, I explore the ways in which Ophelia contributes to and destabilizes the play's depiction of individual character on the meta-dramatic level. The bodily immediacy of her madness complements the play's thematic meditation on the problems of self-presentation by underscoring the mediation of the actor. Just as the character Ophelia challenges the cogency of moral codes that involve the unidirectional channeling of male will through obedient female bodies, the body of the actor that plays her foregrounds the possibility for players to exert authority over the playwright's script. Thus, on multiple levels she destabilizes a presumed hierarchal order of meaning-making and, through her madness, suggests that performances and expressions which are suggestive without resolving themselves into a fixed meaning have the greatest affective and dramatic power.

I. Introduction

All conflict in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* hinges on the unbridgeable gap between abstract, unverifiable truth and material, observable manifestation. The first and most foregrounded iteration of this problem is the ghost's suspect appearance, and its revelation of Claudius' treachery develops in Hamlet an obsession with verifying the real, hidden meanings behind physical communications, signals, and events. Hamlet's distress regarding the impossibility of accessing the interior thoughts of other people isolates him as it emphasizes the “spokes” of manipulation that shape relations within Claudius' sycophantic court (3.3.19). Ophelia is an interesting figure in this network of social performances because her interiority is peculiarly opaque even in the shadowy, uncertain world of the play. Her immediate enactment of Polonius' paternal directives and complete embodiment of her society's gender ideals obscures her inward character. To Hamlet, Ophelia is “nothing”, a blank slate onto which he projects his anxieties about the unknowability of inherent truth and the constructedness of moral and symbolic order without much interference from her manifest personality (3.2.128).

Shakespeare locates Ophelia at the point of disjunction between sign and meaning in both the central conflict of the play and its meta-dramatic exploration of genre and theatrical production. Hamlet and Shakespeare both aim to translate an inward potentiality into embodied reality—Hamlet to realize his plan for revenge and Shakespeare to transpose a story from inward conception to embodied dramatic production, and both playwright and protagonist appropriate Ophelia as a mediator for their respective aims. Hamlet uses Ophelia to manifest his inwardly conceived plan in reality, and she mobilizes his lies. Shakespeare employs her as a medium for communicating meaning, both at the level of the script, in which she conveys thematic message

through dialogue and action, and at the level of performance, in which the body of the actor who plays her—made uniquely noticeable through the physical spectacle of her madness—delivers the script to the audience. At all of these levels of the play, Ophelia registers problems with projects of transmission, foregrounds the processes of mediation they involve, and, in doing so, destabilizes both Hamlet's and Shakespeare's claims to authority and credibility.

Hamlet takes up a model of individualist ethics, and he appropriates of Ophelia as an instrument through which he can realize his inwardly conceived scheme of revenge in material reality (Crocker 39). In order to justify his destructive manipulation, he must convince himself of the inferiority or nonexistence of Ophelia's inner character, and he frames her alternately as a frigid virgin and empty-hearted artificer. A discarded intermediary in a struggle of masculine will, Ophelia cannot survive. However, her poignant madness suggests something of the character that lies beneath the multiple and contradictory projections that obscure it and suggests that some great potential is lost because she is denied the right—which Hamlet claims without any reservations—to express her own inner will.

Ophelia also counters Shakespeare's claims to authorial authority at the level of the meta-drama by highlighting the power of the actor over the impact of a production. Moreover, her incongruous association with neoclassical symbols and her disjunctive importation of popular ballads onto the elite stage destabilizes *Hamlet's* claims for the superiority of the play as a dramatic form by foregrounding its imperfections as a “mirror” to society and contrasting its particular distortions with the assumptions of other dramatic modes (3.2.23).

II. Ophelia's Sincerity

Hamlet and Ophelia begin the play in analogous positions, both bound by loyalty to the

directives of a paternal figure whose claim to authority is uncertain. Ophelia's unquestioning obedience to Polonius despite his generally acknowledged stodginess and senility foils Hamlet's reluctant reception of the ghost's orders, which trouble him because of the ghost's uncertain identity and the incompatibility of its violent command with his own temperament. In contrast to Hamlet's isolation, Ophelia figures as an extreme dependent, controlled by male characters to the extent that examining the ways in which she responds to and attempts to negotiate the various influences of masculine will in her life is essential to understanding her subjectivity.

Throughout most of the play, Ophelia's thoughts and motivations remain concealed, surfacing only in glimpses of expressed emotion that are either completely unobserved or entirely discounted by other characters. Yet the language with which she describes Hamlet's "mad" episode in her chamber is vivid, imaginative, and emotional; she reports that he appeared "with a look so piteous in purport / As if he had been loosed out of hell / To speak of horrors" (2.1.78). She expresses profound grief for Hamlet's sake when she witnesses his apparent madness—"O, woe is me / T' have seen what I have seen"—and she makes her mournful remark after Hamlet has made his exit and cannot hear her, indicating that she expresses a genuine feeling (3.1.174). Thus, in contrast to Hamlet's accusation in 3.2 that she lies and "jigs", Ophelia's demeanor registers only mystery and a quiet, ineffable dignity, for, unlike her ridiculous father, she speaks with simplicity and intelligence (3.1.156).

However, Ophelia's internal feelings, from what little the text reveals of them, are often incongruous with her external expressions—her words, gestures, and actions. The first question that Hamlet asks Ophelia is, "Are you honest?" (3.2.105). Ophelia is confused because the term "honesty" has multiple meanings—goodness, truthfulness, and chastity. While during the rest of

the exchange Hamlet interrogates Ophelia based on the latter form of honesty, the question's location in the context of their conversation also registers Hamlet's uncertainty about Ophelia's truthfulness. It is likely that Hamlet wonders why she abruptly ends their courtship then implies through the vulnerability of her statement that his poetry was “of so sweet breath compos'd / As made the things more rich” that she is still to some extent infatuated (3.1.100). While she does not seem, as Hamlet suspects, artfully duplicitous, she also does not seem sincere.

Sincerity, in the words of Lionel Trilling, is the “congruence between avowal and feeling”, and it is a virtue that concerns an individual's self-presentation to others (Trilling 3). Ophelia's character is not easily decipherable as one of sincerity or insincerity because her choices and expressions convey too little about her inward desires for other characters to gauge the honesty of her self-presentation. When Polonius orders her to end her courtship with Hamlet, she responds only by expressing the fervor and apparent genuineness of Hamlet's love gestures, saying nothing of her own feelings, and ultimately defers with little resistance (3.1.110-114). In her account of Hamlet's theatrical visitation to her chamber, she does not report to have said or done anything but stood passive and “affrighted” throughout the encounter, and she tells Polonius that she does not discuss her decision to cease romantic communication with Hamlet but only “did repel his letters and denied his access” to her (2.2.121). She participates in Polonius' self-serving plan to spy on the prince in service of the King and Queen apparently without any statement of opinion on the scheme, and her involvement is legible both as loyalty to Polonius and as disloyalty to Hamlet; it suggests nothing of her internal character other than her passivity. More than Claudius, whose insincerity involves a plain misrepresentation of inward reality in the familiar form of the classic Elizabethan villain, or Polonius, Rosencrantz,

Guildenstern, and the various other self-serving dissemblers whose motivations for deceit are recognizable, Ophelia registers the existence of an unbridgeable gap between visual sign and concealed truth. It is never clear how much Ophelia refrains from expressing, and because Shakespeare never completely unveils the unseen truth about her inner self—not even through dramatic irony—she foregrounds the disjunction between inwardness and manifest representation.

III. Polonius', Hamlet's, and Ophelia's Models of Subjectivity

Hamlet initially finds Ophelia opaque because she does not express her inward states but mimes Polonius' instructions, and for much of the play she espouses her father's humanist conception of right conduct. Polonius conceives of virtues as abstract ideals that exist outside the self and that can be attained through instruction and mimesis (Trudell 46). He articulates his philosophy to Laertes before his departure, urging him to carefully mediate his expressions of inward thoughts: “Give thy thoughts no tongue, / Nor any unproportioned thought his act. / Be thou familiar but by no means vulgar” (1.3.68). This advice articulates an ethics that involves kindness to others within certain boundaries of individual interest and emphasizes the cultivation of the individual moral character through observation and learning rather than embodiment of virtuous impulses such as generosity, or, in Ophelia's case, love. However, he does not extend the promise of the transformative effect of this kind of mimetic virtuousness to Ophelia; while Laertes may hope to achieve through virtuous living a state in which he is true to both his own self and his fellow man, Ophelia's short “tether” does promise her a way to realize her inward character and achieve harmony between it and the material world, but only to set her “entreatments at a higher rate” and raise her value as a commodity (1.3.131-134).

Ophelia's response to Laertes' "good lesson" regarding her chastity reveals that she has been given an extensive education in the importance and methodology of this humanist mode of self-expression and conduct; she urges him to avoid becoming a hypocrite who "recks not his own rede", indicating her sense that both she and her brother are participants in a linked economy of instruction and advice and illustrating her adeptness "in humanist styles of thought" (Trudell 64). She takes this humanist tenet of miming the directives of a superior to a singular level. When she exchanges Hamlet's letters for Polonius' prayerbook, she substitutes Polonius' directives for Hamlet's messages figuratively and literally and demonstrates that she sees herself as a "repository" for these instructive messages (Trudell 64). Ophelia's fate suggests the consequences of this mode of thinking: the disjunction between Ophelia's prior deportment and mad presence in Act IV underscores the fact that her exemplary noble conduct fails to "effect the transition from daughter to wife" and leaves her vulnerable and grieving (Bialo 301).

In contrast to Polonius' belief in the primacy of outward excellence, Hamlet privileges the internal to the extent that he believes his inward intentions excuse the consequences of any actions he takes to accomplish them. After killing Polonius he tells Gertrude:

Forgive me this my virtue,
 For in the fatness of these pury times
 Virtue itself of vice must pardon beg,

Yea, curb and woo for leave to do him good (3.4.173-176).

Hamlet locates both meaning-making and moral action absolutely within himself and imagines an individualist model of subjectivity in which, as he tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (2.2.268-269). Thus, according to Hamlet,

all trustworthy meaning and legitimate signification comes from within the bounded space of the individual mind, into which no aid can come in the form of advice nor relief come in the form of friendship or love. He literalizes his intention to shut out advice when he tells Ophelia to physically cage her maxim-spouting father: “Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house” (3.1.144). Thus, to enact his will according to this model, he cannot collaborate with others, but must dominate them. He attempts to “instrumentalize” other characters, to render them “crude” matter that he can manipulate (Trudell 73). While Polonius justifies his control over Ophelia by infantilizing her, insisting she think herself a “baby”, Hamlet denies her personhood entirely: she is not a sinner but a “breeder of sinners”, he protests that women like her “nickname God's creatures”, implying not only that she is not herself one of God's creatures but also that she does not properly understand or engage with them (3.1.157). Hamlet intends these dehumanizing figurations of Ophelia to justify the primacy of his individual subjectivity and thereby excuse his domination of others.

It is thus fruitless for Gertrude to hope in the potential affective power of Ophelia's embodied goodness introduces a formulation of subjectivity and moral action that differs from either Hamlet's or Polonius'. It suggests that virtues are inwardly generated qualities that manifest in material excellence as virtuous actions: they “grow organically, connecting body and soul, human and divine, subject and community” (Crocker 36). According to this view, goodness may be spread through communion:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
 That your good beauties be the happy cause
 Of Hamlet's wildness: so shall I hope your virtues

Will bring him to his wonted way again,

To both your honours (3.1.42-46).

Ophelia affirms the Queen's view in this scene, and she further illustrates her belief in the circulation of virtue when she addresses Hamlet in 3.1. Her statement that “Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind” suggests that outward excellence borrows its beauty and “perfume” from inward goodness (3.1.108). Moreover, as Rebecca Laroche points out, her distribution of flowers in Act IV not only registers as a condemnation of the faithlessness of the court she addresses but also as a literal attempt to heal herself and others by circulating herbs with natural medicinal qualities (LaRoche 215). Her attempts to circulate cures registers her madness as a more revealing embodiment of Ophelia's inner mind—broken though it is—than her prior obedience. Moreover, her mad utterances evidently attempt to describe what has happened to her and further illustrate that she is trying to give voice to her inward emotions as she does not when she is sane. However, as Holly Crocker points out, “this play’s relentless focus on the individual prison of harms [...] means that Ophelia’s virtues cannot circulate” (Crocker 45). Shakespeare illustrates the consequences of Hamlet's enclosed isolation: his mind becomes stifling and corrupt—an echo-chamber of misery that breeds distrust and violence rather than goodness and honor. Likewise, the dark, enclosed space of the castle, fortified against invaders, allows that which is “rotten” (1.5.100) to fester until there is immense destruction and “havoc” (5.2.403).

Subjectivity and Theatricality

The characters of *Hamlet* create and interpret outward expressions according to their respective views of subjectivity, individual goodness, and the possibility of connection. Polonius' conception of identity is based primarily on social rank and roles and he believes self-

presentation forges and preserves that identity. He advises Laertes to conduct himself nobly not to express an inherent noble wisdom or goodness but to attain these things through practice. His axiom that clothing “oft proclaims the man” suggests not only that he sees a deep connection between outward expression and inwardness but that he privileges outward expression over inward states and believes that external behavior can affect inward goodness (1.3.78). He frames Ophelia's sympathy with Hamlet as a lapse not only in judgement of social strategy but in her very understanding of her inner self: “You do not understand yourself so clearly / As it behooves my daughter and your honor” (1.3.97-98). In his view, outward expressions must assure the inheritance of unified wisdom through learning and remembering, honor filial superiors, and preserve social reputations. Moreover, he believes language and expression must delineate and preserve “sumptuary order” and maintain instructive superiority across hierarchies of gender and class (Trudell 64).

Ophelia espouses Polonius' view of right conduct for much of the play. Hamlet and Ophelia's encounter in 3.2 occurs when she has freshly reaffirmed her link to the “humanist economy” of noble, instructive speech through her submission to her father. She trusts, if not in the sincerity of communication—the congruence between a message and its sender's inward thoughts—then in her ability to at least locate the source of a message and understand her relationship with the sender and, by extension, her place in an ordered social world (Trudell 65). Her confusion when Hamlet accosts her in 3.1 reveals her belief that expressions in the social world correspond to inward feelings, obscured only by the simple misdirections of lustful men as her father warned her; her conception of social communication is not deeply problematic as Hamlet is. Her attempt to return Hamlet's “remembrances” underscores her preoccupation with

generative source of messages; she feels compelled to neutralize the effect of Hamlet's suit by returning the messages to their creator. Hamlet denies authorship, making these letters the second example in the play of expressive matter without a legible source and highlighting Hamlet's mounting concern over the unreliability of the ghost's command. Material that cannot be traced back to a source is divorced from verifiable meaning, leaving it subject to interpretation. Ophelia's belief that "to the noble mind / Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind" underscores the fact that she expects expressions to correspond to inward, noble intentions, and her association of this ethic with her possession of a noble mind reveals that she understands the relationship between expressive matter and source as a part of the economy of legitimacy to which she belongs.

Ophelia's mournful response to Hamlet's performance of madness in 3.1 hinges on her understanding of how his feigned madness departs from that aristocratic legitimacy:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
 The courtier's, scholar's, soldier's, eye, tongue, sword,
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
 The observ'd of all observers,—quite, quite down! (3.1.167).

Her evaluation of Hamlet's madness suggests that in her view, or rather in Polonius' view, the noble mind is one that mimics elite ideals that denote the elevated status of the "courtier, scholar, soldier" in a way that is coherent and pleasing, and she understands his madness in terms of his unmooring from modes of thought and discourse that connect the inner self to this sense of order (3.1.168). This portrait of nobility suggests that noble communication should enable princes to

imitate the substance of their thoughts in such a way as to make them “worldly”, and that this unified transmission of the unidirectional momentum of his will is how he might “princely governance” in the material world (Trudell 65). His loss of faith in this ability to bridge the connection between inwardness and reality via communication is central to his new, isolated notion of subjectivity. He also signals his rejection of the inherent significance of language when he tells Polonius in the previous scene that he is reading “Words, words, words”; Polonius' inquiry about the “matter” of the words foregrounds Hamlet's distrust of the stabilizing proposition that word and significance are concomitant (2.2.210). Hamlet tells Polonius he reads “Slanders” of a “satirical rogue”, suggesting his literary engagements are outside the bounds of legitimate instructive endeavors (2.2.214). His suggestion that the book's “mockery” of ridiculous old men is true but inappropriate—“I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down”—suggests that that the serious and noble “matter” of the works Polonius would have been expecting a Prince to read gloss certain parts of reality and form a representation of the world whose nobility and cogency necessitates a selection of fact (2.2.220). Hamlet thus discounts the performance of noble virtues as mere performances rather than legitimate moral endeavors.

Conversely, Ophelia's “devotional reading” in 3.1 registers as a distinctly humanist engagement with an art object, because Polonius directs both the action of reading and the choice of text. Moreover, the act of reading a prayer book registers as a pursuit of knowledge acquisition that is firmly within the bounds of humanist aristocratic tradition (Trudell 64). That she reads only to fool Hamlet in accordance with Polonius' scheme underscores the way in which Ophelia's mimetic mode is “*more* than humanist” – her mimesis of noble pursuits does not

imagine a path to attaining nobility of her own, much less to achieving the alignment of thought, speech, and social power necessary to manifest her will, but simply to mime her father's directives (Trudell 64). Her mimesis of Polonius' instruction is so performative as to suggest the obedience of an actor to a director; Polonius gives her the the prayer book like a prop and gives orders for how she is to move and act when Hamlet encounters as if he were giving stage directions.

The kind of aristocratic social performance Polonius encourages parallels the player's performance of Priam's speech in 2.2. The actor integrates himself into the performance to the extent that he feels the emotions of the character whose role he is playing. This constitutes a kind of backward sincerity that impresses Hamlet even as it counters his belief that the inward feelings of the individual are the highest sources of meaning. The idea that theatrical performances can evoke emotions in performers as sincere as those connected to real events counters Hamlet's insistence on the emptiness of Ophelia's apparent "honesty" and undermines his claim for the higher reality and cogency of his own internal feelings (3.1.122). He posits that he has a greater "motive and cue for passion" than the player, but because of the uncertainty of the ghost's true identity it is possible that he, too, is driven by a "nothing" just as the player weeps for "Nothing!" during his performance. Moreover, his reluctance to act and apparent anxiety over his relative lack of passion-driven agency suggests the possibility that Hamlet's fury—contained entirely in his mind though it is—may also be a mere performance. Thus, *Hamlet* suggests that the most earthly creatures can say about the sources of the meanings that constitute individual and cultural reality is that they come from "nothing"; thus, according to Scott Trudell, "we are forced to confront the play's generalized sense of paranoia that actions, ideas, and works

of art are fully embedded in their environment, leaving limited opportunity for individual will” (Trudell 74).

While Hamlet questions the sincerity of all expressions and the legitimacy of outward expressions, he believes—or wants to believe—in the primacy of higher, prior meaning generated within the individual. While he decries the social performances of his peers as vulgar deceptions and denies the ability of communications to facilitate connection between individuals, he believes he can force others to be forthcoming by staging theatrical traps that expose their concealed inwardness with emotional impact. In contrast, Ophelia demonstrates an impulse to communicate with others through outward expressions of goodness and affection in her reception of Hamlet's seemingly “honourable” love displays and, later, her distribution of healing herbs (1.3.119). These expressions show that she envisions possibilities of wholesome connection rather than manipulation or instruction, and Polonius rebukes and Hamlet discounts and exploits this emotional receptivity.

Ophelia's appropriation of popular ballads constitutes an even more radical break from respectable discourse than that of Hamlet's feigned madness, and it counters Hamlet's conception of theatricality by coupling a more stylized, performative mode of expression with a stronger and more coherent indication of genuine emotion. Without Polonius' will to guide her, Ophelia seems to tap into a reserve of cultural knowledge in search of a voice. The gentleman who brings word of her madness denies that she is attempting to communicate real meaning and says “her speech is nothing”. His view and Gertrude and Claudius' attempts to quiet her suggests that those around Ophelia do not consider what inner significances her words might have and that they define her, as her father did, by her capacity to absorb information from the world outside herself (Lyons

69). Ophelia has lost the person who kept the “key” of her mind in the sense that he controlled her education (1.3.93). Now that Polonius does not hand her books to read and does not tell her when to read them, the repository of her mind rejects not the lowest “lauds” (4.7.202). Given Polonius and Laertes' associations of chastity with prudent “thrift” in the economy of sex, Ophelia's channeling of multiple sources registers as a kind of ideological looseness rather than an anarchic passivity (Lyons 69). Hamlet's insulting comparison of Rosencrantz to a “sponge” that soaks up the praise and instruction of others befits this formulation of her character and subtly prefigures Ophelia's saturated, sinking death at the end of Act IV (4.2.12). Gertrude's framing of Ophelia's drowning as a passive act by a woman “incapable of her own distress” figures her death as a surrender to the pull of gravity which also registers as an absolute acceptance of all happenings, all forces, and all significations through the medium of her body (4.7.203).

Although her madness prevents her from expressing herself in her own voice, Laertes' belief that the “nothing” of her speech is “more than matter” rings true—using voices appropriated from popular ballads, she expresses the sorrow of a woman abandoned by a suitor and grieves the dead (4.5.198). Although she must use scripts that originate from outside herself, her mediation invests them with poignant if unfixed meaning. In subtler ways, many other characters in the play take up this same process of expressing inwardly generated emotion with outwardly defined expressive language and ritual—even Horatio, who Hamlet identifies as the character who best embodies his own unshowy moral uprightness casts himself as an ancient Roman.

However, Hamlet decries the insincerity of these kinds of appropriations of emotive

performance throughout the play: in his first lines he protests that the ritualistic expressions of grief do not “denote” him truly, and the “bravery” of Laertes' grief sends him into a “tow'ring passion” because it strikes him as theatrical (5.2.89). However, his refusal to use any put-on expressions to embody his grief masks his own anxiety that all of his grief, too, is really performed and he struggles to confirm and understand his own emotions. That Ophelia's performative grief is loosed by her insanity while Hamlet's madness is feigned further undermines Hamlet's claims to greater sincerity and to the occupation of the centered position of tragic hero (Pollard 1062).

IV. Ophelia on Hamlet's Stage

The Problem of Female Minds

Hamlet's undertaking of individualist ethics necessitates his ability to maintain control of those around him. His inability to confirm what other people are thinking or feeling threatens and isolates him, and the loneliness and misery it causes drive the play's tragic pathos. While this “problem of other minds” colors almost all relationships between characters in the play, Shakespeare foregrounds Hamlet's anxieties about Ophelia and Gertrude's hidden inwardness (Maus 6). For Hamlet, Gertrude's betrayal is more deeply traumatic than Claudius' villainy because while Claudius is the primary object of Hamlet's wrath, his betrayal does not upend a previous, deeply held “construction of interior discourse” as does Gertrude's inconstancy (Maus 6). The fact that he is a self-serving dissembler through-and-through makes his betrayal legible as an act with a kind of congruence between Hamlet's external perception and internal reality. Hamlet hints that Claudius was never generally respected in Denmark before his coronation: though the common people now give “five, twenty, forty, fifty, a hundred ducats apiece for his

picture in little”, they “would make mouths at him while my father lived” (2.386-389).

Moreover, Shakespeare establishes from the outset of the play that Hamlet has never placed Claudius in high esteem; even before the ghost tells him of Claudius' treachery, Hamlet expresses his sentiment that his father is to Claudius as a “Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2.144).

Hamlet's conversation with Horatio and Marcellus after the ghost's visitation underscores the fact that Claudius' duplicity is not the most interesting part of the play's examination of the gap between sign and that which is signified; when Hamlet reports that the ghost informed him “There's never a villain dwelling in all Denmark / But he's an arrant knave”, Horatio replies that this truism “needs no ghost, my lord, come from the grave / To tell us this” (1.5.137-140).

Rather, it is Gertrude's “frailty” that most affects Hamlet, and when he hears the ghost's revelation, he responds first to his mother's treachery: “O most pernicious woman!” (1.5.106).

Hamlet's quip in 3.2 that Ophelia could make monsters of good men smacks of real resentment but precedes any real aggravating action on Ophelia's part. The obliqueness of his insults reveal that Hamlet's distrust is an extension of his generalized resentment and suspicion of womankind which is rooted in his resentment and suspicion of his mother. Moreover, Hamlet's doubt regarding Ophelia's “honesty” and his accusation that she couches “wantonness” in “ignorance” underscores his preoccupation with her unverifiable virginity (3.1.158). The mystery and primacy of Ophelia's virginity foregrounds the play's examination of the problematical distinctions between the abstract and the material; virginity registers this gap because it is a bodily state that is so deeply hidden within the body that it is as invisible and unverifiable as thought.

Hamlet is also preoccupied with women's capacity to manipulate men through sexual

allure, and he accuses both Ophelia and Gertrude of the shameful deception of wearing makeup. To Ophelia, he says, “I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another”, speaking once more as if she were a representative for her sex (3.2.154). When speaking to Yorick's skull, Hamlet says of Gertrude, “let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come,” registering a dark satisfaction that death will one day surmount all attempts to conceal a truth, even one so seemingly innocuous as a woman's true face (5.1.201). Claudius, too, demonstrates this kind of anxiety regarding the possibilities of feminine misrepresentation when he compares the measures he takes to hide his treachery to the use of “plastering art” and “painted word” to conceal the rouged falsity of the “harlot’s cheek,” (3.1.50–52).

Women as Mediums

The gap between inwardness and external, embodied reality not only distresses Hamlet because it prevents him from seeing the hidden interiority of others—women in particular—but also because it prevents him from effectively channeling his inward will into the material world. Even Hamlet's mistaken act of killing Polonius requires a “medium”—in this case it is the arras that comes between himself and the material consequences of his actions (Trudell 73). Hamlet first achieves this process of mediated outward projection through *The Mousetrap*, which successfully verifies Claudius' guilt. This enterprise is successful because Hamlet is adept at manipulating the medium of art. However, when art has fulfilled its highest purpose to “show virtue its own feature” and revealed Claudius' concealed guilt, Hamlet needs a new medium to manifest his verified purpose.

Thus, Hamlet's obsession with verifiability takes on a different register in his interactions

with female characters because he seeks not only to confirm their inward state but also to control them and verify his control. Hamlet's first attempt to manipulate a woman is his appropriation of Ophelia as an intermediary for establishing belief in his feigned madness at court. His first act after seeing the ghost is to make his appearance in Ophelia's bedroom, where he begins his sustained theatrical performance of insanity. Ophelia's description of this encounter underscores the marked physicality of his manipulation of her:

He took me by the wrist, and held me hard;
 Then goes he to the length of all his arm;
 [...] Long stay'd he so;
 At last,--a little shaking of mine arm,
 And thrice his head thus waving up and down,--
 He rais'd a sigh so piteous and profound
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk
 And end his being: that done, he lets me go" (2.1.99-113).

Ophelia's remark that Hamlet's anguish seems to "shatter all his bulk" underscores the fact that Hamlet feels he cannot contain the ghost's mission and registers this moment as his attempt to displace his will into the container of Ophelia's body. The way in which Hamlet physically handles Ophelia suggests that he is making a symbolic attempt to transfer his own agency through bodily contact. In 3.4, Hamlet physically maneuvers Gertrude's body in front of the mirror, echoing his encounter with Ophelia in her closet and suggesting that Hamlet views women as sites where he can displace the burden of his responsibility as an agent and his "conviction that he can act or perform ideas only through the intermediary" of a woman's body

(Trudell 73).

In animating Ophelia, Hamlet seeks to overcome his distinctly masculine impotence: the inability to control his own destiny and to secure his inheritance of power and property. His inaction makes him feel not only frustrated but emasculated, and he reprimands himself for being a “coward” who “lacks gall” and “unpacks his heart with words” rather than actions “like a whore” (2.2.614). It is thus fitting that he responds to this inertia by attempting to establish absolute control over the women closest to him.

The Womb in the Iconography of *Hamlet*

Hamlet's impulse to execute his father's will through the intermediary of female bodies leads to his fixation on the womb, the “permeability” of which figures the capability to “transfer from inside to outside” (Maus 194). Hamlet's remark to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that “I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams” reveals that his own body is a “prison”, not because it is too small to contain his will but because it entraps the nightmares, doubts, and miseries associated with his willed task within his mind. The force of his will is so great that he cannot contain and mobilize it, and it grows to crippling proportions with his doubt and hair-splitting. After he verifies Claudius' villainy, he despairs that he is “unpregnant” of his cause; the fact that he couches his intent to enact revenge in terms of childbirth suggests that his attempts to control Ophelia and Gertrude hinge on a desire to appropriate their bodily ability to deliver (Trudel 73).

Hamlet despairs of his mother's relationship with Claudius and associates the king's psychological control of his mother with sexual occupation. His language in 3.4 indicates that he views his mother's vagina as a point of access to her that, being occupied by Claudius,

figuratively cuts off his access to her; he is not sure she will listen to him.

...let me wring your heart: for so I shall,
 If it be made of penetrable stuff;
 If damned custom have not braz'd it so
 That it is proof and bulwark against sense (3.4.43-46).

The literal meaning of the “damned custom” to which Hamlet refers is Gertrude's coupling with Claudius, and Hamlet phrases his anxiety that he has lost the ability to penetrate his mother's heart in terms of bodily access, couching his fear that corrupt Claudius' penetration of her precludes Hamlet's access to her as like a “bulwark”. Hamlet's imploration that Gertrude look on the “inmost parts of you” when he holds up the mirror also connects the womb—implicitly referenced through the Biblical term “inmost parts”—to Gertrude's unobservable interiority (3.4.25). Thus, Hamlet's obsession with his mother's body also registers as a response to his frustration over the “problem of other minds” and the impossibility of verifying her inward thoughts (Maus 6). To physically be inside of a Gertrude is the ideal, figurative solution to his distrust of her external communications. The extent of Hamlet's anxiety also illustrates his belief that a woman's interiority is particularly unseeable: “The female interior encloses experiences unappropriable by an observer: adultery, orgasm and so forth are unseeable and possible” (Maus 193).

In addition to symbolizing a capacity deliver that which is formed within to the external world, Hamlet sees in the womb a space that is “appealing” because of its quality of being “protected by opaque bodily parameters” which suggest a figurative insulation from the treachery and unfairness of the external world (Maus 193). Hamlet sometimes expresses his

inability to cope with the misery of his life in terms of his own bodily incapacity: he wishes that his “flesh would melt” and considers ending his life. The body insulates the “vulnerable”, inward center of human identity from the external world, but Hamlet expresses figuratively that the horror of what is contained inside him is so corrosive as to be harmful to his body (Maus 193). For Hamlet, the female body represents a more idyllic refuge for the vulnerable human interiority than his own because it promises another kind of enclosure. According to Katharine Eisamen Maus, for Renaissance men the womb represented a space of freedom within a “clearly bounded and delimited space”, where the limitations of the frontier could afford them the complete control upon which liberty depends (Maus 192). Its recognizable barriers prevent the infiltration of the external world which threatens the integrity of the internal will. Thus, for Hamlet, Gertrude's womb stands in for the nutshell in which he would feel himself “king of infinite space”, and it represents a refuge within knowable limits which promises deliverance from his tortuous moral uncertainty (Maus 193).

Hamlet's desire to take refuge in the female body is more than a figurative displacement of his sense of his agency but also a register of his despair and self-loathing. Hamlet fixates on the potential for Ophelia's womb to be a “breeder of sinners”, and his admission that “I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me” suggests that his desire to “penetrate” his mother is a part of his desire to undo his sins and return to a state of childhood in which he had no will at all (3.4.44). He desires not only to displace his will and agency onto women but for them to absorb his guilt and adulthood agency. Moreover, the desire for Ophelia's virginal intactness he expresses when he encourages her to go to disbelieve all men and go to a nunnery reveals his desire to make Ophelia's womb a kind of imaginative refuge from sin. He

would like for Ophelia to remain pure, not for later union with himself—for it seems clear that he has no intention of pursuing her—but to provide an embodied ideal of the possibility of an unsullied and innocent person in a fallen world. This desire suggests the possibility of a kind of underhanded pathos in Hamlet's sexual jokes with Ophelia in 3.2, in which he expresses his desire to be between her legs, obsessively brings up her vagina, and wants to lay his head in her lap like a child. Hamlet's figurative desire to reoccupy the womb is a desire for occupation involves more than sex; according to Hamlet, the only pure and honest union between man and woman is realized not through intercourse but when a mother carries her son within her body. Moreover, Hamlet's preoccupation with the womb underscores the fact that he does not see the possibility of any connection between individuals because they are discrete subjects, utterly cut off from one another by the physical boundaries of their bodies; the only connection he can imagine involves the literal removal of this physical separation. This formulation of the self is like an enclosed womb that cannot conceive, and just Hamlet's isolation renders him “unpregnant”, nothing can grow in the walled enclosure of Elsinore (2.2.595). Hamlet's espousal of this model of radically individualistic subjectivity rots his kingdom's generative potential, and Ophelia hails the consequences when she announces that the violets “wither'd all” when Hamlet killed Polonius (4.5.208).

V. Ophelia Counters *Hamlet's* Model of Subjectivity

Hamlet stages the consequences of Hamlet's mode of individualist subjectivity: without meaningful connection between individuals, there can be no restoration or fertility. Ophelia presents a model of tragic protagonist that counters Hamlet's and introduces discourses from outside the play into its oppressive representative world—first from neoclassical tradition, which

affirms harmonies between subjects and nature, then popular ballad tradition, which unites people, especially women, “through a common language of jest” (Crocker 42). Ophelia therefore presents the possibility that art can connect individuals; while Hamlet believes that art can “mirror” nature and draw out inward flaws spectators conceal from others within their discrete bodies, Ophelia invokes an artistic tradition that assumes a collective voice.

Even before her descent into madness, Ophelia counters Hamlet's insistence on the effectiveness of the elite play's capacity to truthfully “mirror” the world (3.2.23). Because she invokes and is associated with different artistic traditions, she highlights the fact that different dramatic discourses involve different assumptions, tones, and implications of event – she calls attention to the fact that insofar as theater mirrors life, it mirrors it with distortions (3.2.23). Ophelia is a particularly difficult character to pin down because she registers these distortions so well, and is treated by different characters so “insistently” based on alternative discourses from different artistic and philosophical traditions (Lyons 69).

Ophelia's Iconographies

Hamlet's outburst at the end of 3.2 reveals that other characters describe Ophelia in terms of multiple, contradictory narratives regarding codes of female conduct. Hamlet is concerned about Ophelia's ability to display the signs of certain qualities—honesty, love, and, especially, virginity—without having the inherent qualities that they represent, but his treatment of her reveals that the signs themselves do not have “stable” associations to cultural meanings (Lyons 62). He suggests that Ophelia should not believe any man because all men are corrupt and later claims that women are the deceivers; he vitriolically decries the deception of female sexual performance immediately after coolly claiming that his romantic pursuit was entirely false. He

seems to believe both that women are weak and foolish because men deceive them and that women are dissembling flirts who deceive men with “paintings”—that women “make monsters” of good men and that men corrupt women because they are “arrant knaves, all” (3.1.141). Thus, Ophelia figures into another manifestation of the gap between signifier and signified meaning, which involves not the gap between what things are and what they appear to be, but rather the unstable connection between visual symbols or behavioral signs and their cultural meanings.

The uncertain symbolic codes surrounding masculine and feminine conduct in Elsinore reveal that there is a disjunction between the corrupt and political reality of Elsinore and the classical world from which it imports many of its symbolic associations. Ophelia is the “persistently” discussed and presented in terms of classical symbolic meanings (Lyons 71). Hamlet associates her with a “Nymph” (3.2.97) and Gertrude describes her appearance during her death as being “mermaid-like” (4.1.201). These references indicate that characters often associate Ophelia with the a notion of virginal innocence rooted in classical myth and pastoral comedy (Lyons 66). However, when Hamlet discusses Ophelia's virginity in the context of Elsinore's alternate symbolic order, he breaks its classical associations with beauty and sweetness, formulating these qualities as oppositional rather than harmonious traits: “the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness” (3.2.121-123).

Ophelia draws contrasting symbolic associations into the world of Elsinore not only through her iconographical associations with classical myth and pastoral comedy but also through her mad performance of popular ballads in Act IV. In these scenes, Ophelia appropriates the voices of female characters from yet a different narrative world, and the joviality and

suggestiveness of the lyrics underscore the extent to which moral evaluations of characters' conduct are contingent upon the values and assumptions embedded in their environment (Trudell 52).

Introducing popular performance into the play through Ophelia's madness delegitimizes popular balladry and may extend that delegitimization to women, but “never refuses the theatrical possibilities” popular ballads afford (Bialo 190). Ophelia's “appropriation” of ballads during her scenes of theatrical madness places the “voices” of women from popular ballad tradition into the mouth of a character whose perfect embodiment of expectations for noble female conduct and temperament have been foregrounded (Bialo 301). The ballads Ophelia sings depict the circumstances of lower-class female life and reveal the fluidity of the customs, assumptions, and possibilities of sex for the lower classes. These contrasting dramatic representations of good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable female conduct in the two dramatic forms corresponded to a historical difference in the expectations for women of different social positions regarding sexual conduct. While considered an important female virtue for women of all classes, chastity was more important for noblewomen whose location in a system of primogeniture made the enforcement of their virginity a source of more urgent cultural anxiety (Bialo 300). When Hamlet accosts her in 3.1, Ophelia cannot understand his foreboding statements about her purity because her modesty does not allow her to grasp the notion that beauty makes her an object of male sexual desire (Engle 448). But after she is driven mad, she sings in one “snatch” of a “tune”:

Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
You promised me to wed.'

He answers,

'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,

An thou hadst not come to my bed '(4.5.67-71).

Now, she appropriates the voice of a female sexual initiator whose lover's cold retraction of love “imaginatively rehearses the consequences against which her father warned her” (Bialo 304). These different modes of discourse she represents through various popular ballads foreground the ways in which different dramatic traditions frame gender relations, sexual desire and its consequences, and the contrasts it sets up among them underscore the ability of dramatic discourse destabilize and critique the gender hierarchy presented in elite art and espoused in elite culture. Her appropriation of multiple different female subject voices locates her as a voice “among other female voices”, registering collective female reactions to “living in a patriarchy” and foregrounding the ways in which the patriarchal world of the play is responsible for Ophelia's descent into madness (Bialo 305). Moreover, as Caralyn Bialo suggests, this leaves open the possibility of interpreting Ophelia's ballad singing as an indication that “Ophelia's tragedy is produced not only by Elsinore's corruption, but also by a broader patriarchy that demands her unmitigated submission” (Bialo 306). Revealing how assumptions about female conduct differ in different artistic worlds and contextualized modes must necessarily undermine their presentation as fair expectations.

Ophelia's Alternative Tragic Model

In addition to importing the voices and symbolic associations of other artistic modes and representational worlds into the world of the play, Ophelia temporarily de-centers Hamlet as the central dramatic figure within the drama's tragic arc, and she presents an alternative model for

modern tragedy (Pollard 1078). Both Ophelia and Hamlet are tragic figures uniquely suited to affect the sympathies of contemporary audiences. Because the play was staged during a time of increasing social mobility, *Hamlet's* meditation on the unstable relationships between inner self, outward expression, and identity would have resonated with contemporary anxieties. How, then, might a playwright construct a tragedy that moves spectators with Hamlet's sensibilities, who respond to displays of performed lament by dwelling not on their moral implications—for Hecuba does not prompt Hamlet to the morality of revenge—but on the fact that they are witnessing an actor playing a role? Ophelia and Hamlet animate two modes of staging tragedy for audiences with these sensibilities. As a tragic hero, Hamlet evokes pathos through tortuous uncertainty rather than grieving spectacle, and it is effective for contemporary spectators because he suspects himself—his motivations, the reality of his own emotions—before they can suspect him. Conversely, Ophelia is effective because she presents grief absolutely devoid of control or agency—she does not command attention as Hecuba does but assures spectators that she will hurry up her lament: “Indeed, la, without an oath, I'll make an end on't” (4.5.62). Her expressions are urgent, involuntary, and inelegant, and they have no effect. In this way we can pity her without wondering if she has “forced” her soul so to her “own conceit” to be a tragic figure (2.2.580).

Ophelia's tragic death complements Hamlet's not only because it parallels his dramatic arc, but also because her death by drowning registers a desire to bridge the gap between a father's image and his unreachable self. The “hoar” leaves of the willow tree from which Ophelia falls recall Polonius, whose “white” beard and “flaxen...poll” Ophelia remembers in her songs (4.5.219). After Act V's many expositions of the difference between the human body and

personhood, between their interior soul and the image or “picture” of person and their being—this figures as an image of Polonius, static and separated from his himself; that the tree's image is also reflected “in the glassy stream” constitutes an even further removal of image from Polonius and suggests the possibilities of degrees of distance between sense perception or material and substantial value (4.7.191). Thus, when Ophelia breaks through the surface of the water as she falls, she bridges a gap between thing and image of the thing which throughout the play was heretofore uncrossable.

VI. Ophelia and Meta-drama

Page-Centered and Stage-Centered Power

The physicality of Ophelia's madness foregrounds the bodily mediation that goes into theater meaning-making, showing that “art involves a continual process of mediation in which technologies, ideas, bodies, and other structures and forms all, in no preset order, make their mark” (Trudell 51). In particular, Ophelia's mad singing draws attention to the body of the actor because singing is highly technical; it foregrounds the distinctiveness of a player's voice and exposes the fact that the character is being channeled through a real person's body (Trudell 57).

Shakespeare thus exposes his interest in the power of actors over scripts and performance as an outworking of his own relationship to actors as a playwright. Ophelia enacts the transition from a performer who follows a script to an anarchic one. Initially, Polonius positions her and chooses her props: “walk you here [...] Read on this book (3.1.47-50). When he dies, she gathers her own props and tells her spectators what they mean.

The negotiation between “body-centered” and “script-based” playing which Ophelia foregrounds is also bound up in the play's larger exploration of the distinctions and shared

traditions between elite and low forms of performance (Bialo 295). During Shakespeare's time, in response to the social mobility that destabilized socioeconomic and cultural orders of distinction, members of the noble and elite classes began to “insist” on the moral and aesthetic authority of printed texts in order to mark the separation of elite tastes from popular culture (Goldman 422). Not only did this emphasis on the primacy of printed text involve a separation from ballad culture, which, being oral, lacked barriers to access for the lower classes, but it also glorified the ability of these printed texts to present a coherent picture of the world, which must affirm (insofar as they affirmed) “some code of social or artistic decorum” (Goldman 422). Ophelia's performance emphasizes the presentational aspect of dramatic performance at the expense of the representational aspect both in the sense that she undermines the codes and moral sensibilities of the rest of the play and in the sense that her bodily, performative gestures call attention to the body of the performer, which, because it resembles the player's nonfictional self, calls attention to the mediation between message, script, and performance output (Goldman 422).

Hamlet associates bodily performances with audiences of lower class and grosser tastes when he gives directions to the players in Act III:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently [...] O, it offends me to the soul, to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who, for the most part, are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise (3.2.14).

Shakespeare fashions Ophelia's madness after exactly this kind of popular performance. Horatio

tells the King and Queen that she “hems, and beats her heart... winks, and nods, and gestures”. That she attracts “hearers” associates her performance with the those the audience members would have seen often on the streets from minstrels and ballad singers (4.5.10). The Globe theater would have been surrounded by these participants in the “informal theatrical economy”, and Ophelia would have echoed onstage what audiences heard immediately outside of the theater (Bialo 298). This disconnect foregrounds the economic and cultural interdependence of low and elite dramatic performance even as it underscores the differences between them; while Hamlet articulates and Shakespeare seems to endorse through the subtlety and intelligent complexity of this work the artistic superiority of elite theater, he destabilizes the notion that this distinction, and the class distinction it reinforces, constitutes a system of stable and discrete differentiations. Moreover, the fact that Polonius has bad artistic taste while the wandering acting troupe has superior tastes suggests that artistic engagement and the mental agility with which it is associated is are not synonymous with class distinctions. Furthermore, he problematizes the notion that social order corresponds to an order of value based on moral capacity. Hamlet suggests that fishmongers are more honest than Polonius and the royal court of which he is such an emblematic example (2.2.167). Ophelia's performance engages and destabilizes all of these interrelated hierarchies – between men and women, nobility and common people, and elite and popular dramatic tradition.

Ophelia's introduction of the ballad form into a 'high' play invites viewers to critique the elite theatrical mode of *Hamlet* and to compare the values of high and low-brow art more generally. Thus, the disjunction of the dramatic modes registers Ophelia's madness as a “metatheatrical moment” that calls attention to the theatricality of the play-world of *Hamlet's*

Denmark (Bialo 297). In keeping with popular ballad tradition, Ophelia's mad performance is markedly, self-consciously performative: Horatio reports that Ophelia's ballad recitals drew spectators “with erratic gestures—she winks, nods, and “beats her heart” (4.5-12). Later, she seeks out Gertrude as a spectator, and her entreaty for Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes to continue listening suggests that she feels she is making a performance (4.5.40). The extent to which Ophelia's songs would have been familiar to members of Shakespeare's contemporary audiences and the extent to which Ophelia's entreaties for her audience to listen to her words would have resembled the familiar calls from minstrels and ballad sellers on the Southwark streets just outside of the globe—thus, Ophelia “situates” the audience “simultaneously within and outside Hamlet’s fictional frame” (Bialo 298).

If the purpose of art is, as Hamlet claims, to hold a mirror up to reality so that the source of the art is hidden while the character of the audience is revealed, Ophelia's performance collapses this paradigm—effectively breaking the mirror—by performing performance. Because one of the effects of this meta-performance is to place into dialogue the different worldviews espoused by different forms of dramatic art, the effect of this “shattering” of the traditional relationship between audience and work that Hamlet articulates is to call into question the effectiveness of this mirror, and undermine the claim to authority of high drama over the sophisticated depiction of reality.

Hamlet states that dramatic performances must be subtle and realistic in order to fulfill their higher purpose:

suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of

playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own image, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (3.2.20-24).

Before Ophelia's madness, *Hamlet's* Denmark makes an extremely powerful and cohesive dramatic. Shakespeare foregrounds its existence as a fictional cluster of moods and meanings. Marcellus' articulation of the general sense of unease and oppressive uncertainty and the threat of violence encapsulates the essence of this world: “There is something rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.95). Ophelia's unrealistic playing undermines the realism of the rest of *Hamlet's* realistic, constructed world. Her madness breaks the unity of the play and thus undermines the “representational world” by calling attention to its theatricality (Bialo 298). Moreover, Ophelia's death out of doors and her distribution of flowers opens the imaginative frontier of the play to the natural world and counters the otherwise claustrophobic atmosphere of a play that otherwise took place almost entirely indoors. And more simply, it presents a rapid and unexpected discontinuity in the characterization of a significant character. This disjunction destabilizes the “otherwise seamlessly representational world”, and, with it, its defined values, assumptions, rules, and associations (Goldman 421). It exposes the tragedy world's value system as a contextual set of symbolic and moral assumptions and interrogates their values.

Interrogating the Primacy of Script

Hamlet's endeavor to embody a plan for revenge—which requires the instruments of bodies and weapons—parallels the project of translating a scripted play into a dramatic performance, and Shakespeare foregrounds these similarities: by having Hamlet stages his own performances in the form of his feigned madness and *The Mousetrap* as part of his plan. That

Hamlet's attempt for absolute control of his plan results in destruction and closure connects to the play's thematic exploration of words, the fate of words and communications, and *Hamlet* repeatedly implies that words stay alive only when they remain open to interpretation.

The scene in Gertrude's closet registers the play's general skepticism about the “dominant early modern theories of representation, in which authorial inventions may be altered by their expression in the world but nevertheless defer to a prior realm of meaning” (Trudell 74).

[Ecstasy?]

My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time
 And makes as healthful music. It is not madness
 That I have uttered. Bring me to the test
 And I the matter will reword, which madness
 Would gambol from. (ll. 138–42)

Scott Trudell points out that, given Gertrude's inability to see the ghost, Hamlet's claim to be articulating a definitive “matter” is unfounded, and underscores the impossibility of verifying that Hamlet's mission materializes a meaning which is in accordance with a truth that is higher. Hamlet's defensive reference to the myth that humans are healthy when their bodies are in “heavenly harmony” with the music of the spheres, which they “can mimic but never... hear” underscores the contingency of his claim to be engaging with meaning which is singular, definitive, and superior, and therefore absolutely legitimate (Trudell 74). This impossibility of fixing absolute signification for communications registers the problem of maintaining authority over the signification of a piece of communication, especially a piece of art. Gertrude's statement that “words are made of breath, and breath, life” emphasizes the way that communications, once

delivered, take on a life of their own. Her remark registers the particularly dynamic nature of speech, which, not being written down, can be misheard or misremembered, can be repeated in strange new contexts, or can simply vanish. However, Gertrude's comment implies that words that are not made of breath are not alive, they cease to be powerful and become “artifacts...delusional “nothings” that vainly seek to determine their significance in advance” (Trudell 74).

Polonius' obsessive control of his daughter is an attempt to actually restrict her words by forbidding communication with Hamlet and to fashion her as an iconographical image (Lyons 61). This approach to maintaining her purity is analogous to an attempt to figure Ophelia into a kind of stable object. Rendered figuratively infertile because she is denied the ability to connect with others, she cannot conceive or create new things, her speech is “nothing”—only recycled content that she is unable to harness into something that ends the corruption at court. But just as violets can grow from Ophelia's dead body, so too can living, creative new masterpieces be constructed from decomposing low-order material that Ophelia mimes during her madness (4.5.9).

Just as Ophelia's body returns to the earth where it will grow things, the fate of all art, and indeed all expression, is to be revised, altered, combined into other things, and ultimately to diffuse into the collective well of artistic tradition from whence it came and from which playwrights like Shakespeare himself gather inspiration. Ophelia's appropriation of ballads is especially fitting because ballads and broadsides make up a particularly diffuse economy of words and share a tradition with the elite dramatic forms of which *Hamlet* is an example. Shakespeare acknowledges the reliance of elite theater on this kind of performance. Shakespeare

himself plainly rehashes and recombines other works. Moreover, the ballads Ophelia sings fit easily as a physical metaphor for the “impermanence of all signification” because early modern ballads, when they were printed, were circulated on ephemera pamphlets and broadsides (Trudell 48). Ballads ended up as either discarded print matter or fragmentary, mostly forgotten auditory memories. They diffuse into collective narrative memory in a process metaphorically represented by Ophelia's drowning: she is still singing ballads in “melodious lay” when the water pulls her down into “muddy death”, where her song rejoins the baser matter of popular tradition in the same moment that Ophelia's body returns to nature to become organic material (4.7.207-208). Thus, Ophelia's repetition of popular ballads participates in the play's reflection on the difference in the possibilities, values, and ultimate legacy of drama from oral and scripted tradition.

The fact that dramatic signification is impermanent and dynamic creates a fixation in the play on the legacy of dramatic art and playwrights. Hamlet articulates the fact that performance, especially of the unscripted, clowning type Yorick represents, vanishes in time when he addresses Yorick's skull: “Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs?” (5.1.196). Moreover, the fact that Hamlet changes the players' script by adding *The Mousetrap* registers the tendency for scripts and stories to change over time. Hamlet's addition also reflects the fact that in Shakespeare's day scripted plays were often altered during the staging, to the extent that some printed editions of early modern texts state that they do not contain the additional scenes. Similarly, Ophelia's spectators cannot decide how interpret Ophelia's mad utterances, suggesting the possibility that interpretations of her madness will continue to change as spectators “botch the words up to their own thoughts” (4.5.12). Moreover, Shakespeare registers some of the contingencies caused by this possibility of alteration after-the-fact in the scene of Ophelia's

burial, in which the priest, Hamlet, and Laertes argue over funeral rites and how to remember Ophelia (Trudell 57). A playwright cannot be certain whether he how he or his work will be remembered because of the impermanent and dynamic nature of all expression, an anxiety palpably buried in Hamlet's jibe about Denmark's disrespectful lack of mourning for his father: “Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year: but, by'r lady, he must build churches then; or else shall he suffer not thinking on” (3.2.142).

VII. Conclusion

Hamlet has outlived Shakespeare's life many times over, and its endurance is due in large part to the play's complexity and ambiguity; it has fulfilled Shakespeare's theory—which he stages through Ophelia's madness—that performances with unfixed meanings have superior imaginative and emotional power. Ophelia is one of the play's most suggestive open endings. Who is Ophelia? What deep desires, fears, patterns of thought, and inherent, pre-social traits and tendencies make up her personality? Was her death a suicide? Like the “O” that begins her name, the other characters figure her as an empty, bounded object, visible only in terms of her interpersonal relationships and her engagements with external power structures and social discourses. Even her name suggests her figuration in the play as an embodied metaphor for the human uterus, a placeholder rather than a concealed personality. She is a mystery that other characters repeatedly associate with “nothing” (4.5.9). Just as the watchman Bernardo, when asked if he has seen the ghost on the night that begins the story, replies that he has seen “nothing”, and Gertrude, when asked the same question in Act IV, tells Hamlet that she sees “Nothing at all; yet all that is I see,” and that she hears “nothing but ourselves”, Ophelia's interiority is an absence so complete as to be present (3.4.153). When Hamlet asks if she has

taken his request to lay his head in her lap as a veiled sexual request, her response, “I think nothing, my lord,” has a peculiar force (3.2.124). Of her mad utterances, Horatio says, “her speech is nothing” (4.5.9). The fact that the word 's double meaning as an Elizabethan slang term for female genitalia registers Ophelia's opacity as an aspect of the distance built into relationships between men and women both in the world of the play and in the Elizabethan patriarchal system in which Shakespeare's audiences lived, but more importantly, it connects Ophelia to the play's interrogation of the assumptions of epistemological logic, and, consequently, morality.

That Shakespeare locates Ophelia so firmly in this debate emphasizes the problematical nature of the emphasis Polonius, Laertes, and Hamlet place on the value of her virginity. Virginity is the ultimate present-absence, a perfect example of a truth on which the functions of society - both in the world of the play and the world of the audience – depends, yet which is also unverifiable. Its hiddenness causes severe anxieties while also hindering attempts to articulate or justify its nature and worth. In foregrounding Ophelia's virginity, Shakespeare underscores the play's broader examination of how cultures create “shared systems of meaning” and how art can enforce or undermine those valuations (Lyons 62).

Shakespeare bases *Hamlet* upon a new model of subjectivity which has become central to modern western conceptions of the individual. However, it is uncertain whether *Hamlet* presents this mode in order to endorse it. What is certain is that Ophelia illustrates the consequences of this mode of subjectivity, and though her attempts to restore connection and natural harmony fail within the play, Laertes' mournful expression at her grave scene emblemizes the only kind of hope imaginable after the utter “havoc” of *Hamlet's* ending: “Lay her i' the earth; / And from her

fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring!" (5.1.248).

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