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Better off dead?: the creative practice of reviving Ophelia

Abstract:

Various attempts have been made to reclaim Shakespeare's heroines from tragic fates and patriarchal oppression. *Hamlet's* Ophelia has been a particular source of inspiration for writers and filmmakers but, as with many heroines of the tragedies, the greatest challenge for revising Ophelia is rewriting her death, which is the pivotal point of her narrative significance in the original play. Framed within a broader consideration of the feminist project to revive and reclaim Ophelia in the 1990s and beyond, this article considers how treatment of Ophelia's death in twenty-first century has been the significant narrative turning point for adaptations and appropriations. This focus on her death has either facilitated or compromised her subjectivity and agency. The article concludes with suggestions for the other thematic and technical possibilities afforded to both creative writers and literary scholars engaged in the process of canonical revision.

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Introduction: the feminist project of reclaiming lost heroines

There have been various attempts to re-imagine Shakespearean tales from alternative perspectives for the express purpose of engaging audiences with the story, if not the form of Shakespeare's plays. One of the major issues encountered by many of these re-tellings is how to represent Shakespeare's female characters in a modern, rather than early modern, context. In general, Shakespeare's female characters are spirited and intelligent, similar to the female characters audiences find appealing in modern comedies and dramas, but nevertheless may still be constrained by the expectations of early modern femininity and the limited fates for women in literature – usually death for those who transgress social, sexual and political boundaries, and marriage for those who eventually submit to the patriarchal forces at play in their lives. While dramatically appealing, these fates can be considered problematic for modern audiences, particularly for younger audiences, so it becomes necessary to reclaim these heroines in the retelling of these stories.

Many modern adaptations and appropriations attempt to find ways to subvert patriarchal structures and story lines, and to emphasise female agency. In the BBC's 2005 mini-series, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, for example, *Much Ado About Nothing*'s Hero refuses Claude's (Claudio in the original) attempt to rekindle their romantic relationship and instead offers him friendship, while in the well-known appropriation of *Taming of the Shrew*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, Katherine's submission to Petruchio at the play's end is transformed into a voluntary moment of emotional vulnerability from Kat and an act of contrition from Patrick that seeks to portray them as a couple that has found equilibrium and equality after their troubled courtship. These examples are, of course, comedies. It is more difficult to revise the fates of Shakespeare's tragic heroines: *ShakespeaRe-Told*'s *Lady Macbeth* still falls into psychosis and dies, and *O's* Desi cannot escape a tragic death at the hands of her partner in the 2001 cinematic retelling of *Othello*. To reclaim these women from the clutches of tragedy, the dramatic denouement must be entirely re-written and subverted. Reclaiming *Hamlet*'s Ophelia for consumption by twenty-first century audiences, specifically young adult readers, presents a particular challenge. Here, after all, is a girl driven to madness by her lover, leading to her eventual death by misadventure nearby a brook. Such a fate rankles with even the most reluctant teenage feminist, taught by popular culture that the best breakup revenge is success.

Despite these challenges, 'reviving Ophelia', to draw upon the title of Mary Pipher's 1994 self-help book of the same name, has proven to be a particularly rich creative practice, particularly for authors of young adult novels, but the question remains as to why Ophelia appears to be particularly inspiring. After all, a quantitative analysis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* renders Ophelia a minor character: although she is significant as one of only two female characters in the play, she is present in only four scenes, delivering a total of 58 out of the 4042 lines of Shakespeare's longest known play. Despite her minor role, Ophelia resonates, particularly with younger audiences. As mentioned, she is one of only two female characters in a play that jostles with *Romeo & Juliet* to be the most studied in schools and as a young unmarried woman she is more romantically appealing than Gertrude, a middle-aged, widowed mother.

As a result of these factors, Ophelia is a clearly enough drawn character to resonate, and yet vague enough to provide clear opportunities for writers to fill in the gaps of her story. A particular opportunity presents itself in the fact that Ophelia's death occurs off-stage, recounted poetically by Gertrude. I suggest here that Ophelia's usefulness to readers, writers, and cinema audiences is this very vagueness and malleability of both character and narrative presence, which makes her vulnerable to our own creative interpretation. Framed within a broader consideration of the feminist project to revive and reclaim Ophelia in the 1990s, this article considers how treatment of Ophelia's death in twenty-first century adaptations and appropriations has either facilitated or compromised her subjectivity and agency.

Dragged from the depths: Ophelia's '90s revival

The visual reproduction of Ophelia through art and cinema has ensured that this otherwise minor Shakespearean character has had a lasting presence in Western culture. Pre-Raphaelite John Everett Millais' 1852 painting *Ophelia* is perhaps one of the most ubiquitous images of Ophelia, which was in turn referenced in other representations of the character, such as her death in both Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh's cinematic productions of *Hamlet*. All of these graced our cultural consciousness in the 1990s, from cinemas to the Millais print on the wall of the average undergraduate (possibly alongside Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* and/or John William Waterhouse's *The Lady of Shalott*). Ophelia was thus never entirely gone or forgotten, but she was most frequently captured and thus remembered in that moment of death.

Into this cultural milieu, psychologist Mary Pipher released a best-selling manual for understanding teenage girls in the 1990s that references Ophelia's iconic death in its title. Pipher argues that coming of age in the 1990s presents adolescent girls with different challenges to those faced by their parents, wherein physical and emotional changes are complicated by cultural forces and the pressure, both internal and external, to become independent from their parents. These pressures can result in a split between girls' true selves and the roles they are forced to take on in order to conform to social and peer expectations.

Pipher uses Ophelia as a cipher for female adolescence because she felt her story 'shows the destructive forces that affect young women' (2010: 20), both specific to and transcendent from specific historical context. Interestingly, Pipher's revival of Ophelia coincided with the rise of Girl Power discourse. Viewed superficially, these two discourses provide ostensibly conflicting perspectives of femininity; while both are centred on youthfulness, Girl Power emphasises assertive, dynamic femininity, and *Reviving Ophelia* emphasises the vulnerability, voicelessness, and fragility of girlhood. Yet Marnina Gonick urges an intersecting rather than competing interpretation of these discourses, arguing that when they are read together, rather than in opposition, the 'Girl Power and Reviving Ophelia discourses emphasise young female subjectivities as projects that can be shaped by the individual rather than within a social collectivity' (2006: 18). Elizabeth Marshall suggests that the arrival in the 1990s of these discourses is no coincidence, identifying this era as 'a unique cultural moment in which an ongoing

struggle around gender, sexuality and power are [sic] made visible through diverse discursive and material representations of adolescent girlhood' (2007: 711).

Although it was a bestseller, feminist responses to Pipher's work have been highly critical. Jennifer Hulbert highlights Pipher's selectiveness in her appropriation of Ophelia in preference to the other ubiquitous Shakespearean teenager, Juliet who, 'for Pipher's purpose … is not pathetic enough' (2006: 202) She has too much agency, is too sane, and is too vocal to be a useful symbol of oppressed contemporary teenage femininity. By fixing on an agenda of silence and vulnerability, Pipher's project is evidently flawed from the outset; as Erica Hateley observes, 'Pipher had to fix, objectify, and contain her. In short, Pipher had to take a patriarchal approach to Ophelia in order to formulate a feminist revival program' (2013: 436).

It is important to emphasise that *Reviving Ophelia* does not present a literary interpretation of the character. As a practicing therapist, Pipher takes up an appropriation of Ophelia more in line with psychological and psychiatric traditions, wherein she was used to represent hysteria (Gonick 2006: 11; Hulber 2006: 214). Marshall suggests that this results in a recycling and refashioning of old discourses of femininity 'to produce rather than simply reflect contemporary understandings of female adolescence' (2007: 714). The difference is that nineteenth century psychology of femininity focused on individual pathology, whereas twentieth century 'Ophelia narratives' were more concerned with the external forces at play.

Pipher's literary understanding of Ophelia is limited, but her work should nevertheless be understood as an important contribution to Ophelia's contemporary meaning. In his discussion of Shakespearean fan fiction, Douglas Lanier (2002) outlines the various forms that appropriation of original texts can take: extrapolated, interpolated, remotivated, revisionary, reoriented, and hybrid narrative, none of which are mutually exclusive. Despite its non-fictional form, Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* is arguably revisionary, as its narrative 'begins with the characters and situation of the source but [seeks to change] the plot' (Lanier 2002: 83); Pipher desires a plot where Ophelia can live, despite the characters and events that surround her.

The effect of Pipher's bestseller extends beyond popular psychology and social discourse. By creating a pop psychological phenomenon that rested upon an accessible cultural and literary allusion, Pipher's interpretation of Ophelia in turn limited teenage girls' independent engagement with the character. Hulbert (2006: 205) attests to this with her own recollection of growing up in the 1990s:

> After having read *Reviving Ophelia* (well, the juicy parts at least), my high school introduction to *Hamlet* was with a peak concentration of the parts with Ophelia and the romantically tragic character I thought her to be. In fact, at the time I didn't even read Act V; Ophelia was dead and I'd already seen the movie. Because I was told I was just like her, I identified with her more.

Ophelia's meaning and Hulbert's understanding of this were already set and her capacity for independent interpretation limited.

Choosing to sink: millennial Ophelia, existentialism, and suicide as agency

What Hulbert's (2006) testimony also illustrates is the way that Pipher's Ophelia was not operating in a cultural vacuum. Not only was *Hamlet* being taught in schools, but also the 1990s featured two film adaptations of the play. A third film adaptation was also released at the beginning of the subsequent decade, but Michael Almereyda's modernised version, which was both set and released in 2000, offers a different interpretation of both the play and the character. The shift to the new millennium context also signals a shift in interpretations of Ophelia, and a movement toward a modernised characterisation. Amanda Kane Rooks argues that Almereyda's Ophelia, played by 1990s Shakespearean 'it girl', Julia Stiles, 'works to expose previously limiting and predictable portrayals of this character that have placed her in a romanticised medieval setting and have denied her potency as a repressed figure' (2014: 477). This Ophelia is androgynous, autonomous, and angry rather than 'mad'. Stiles' Ophelia is particularly important to consider in the context of Pipher's cultural domination of the figure, as this Ophelia *was* a teenage girl in the 1990s. She has agency, and she *chooses* to drown (Rooks 2014: 482).

This interpretation of Ophelia's death as suicide is facilitated by Almereyda's firm location of the narrative in millennial New York. In the original play, Laertes' vehement denial that his sister's death is a suicide must be understood within its historical context of early modern Christianity as a dominant social and cultural force; suicide is a sin, and will prevent the deceased from entering heaven. Almereyda's New York is atheistic, a place where psychotherapists have taken the place of clerics. Its millennial context emphasises the early modern existentialism evident in the original play but extends this beyond Hamlet to Ophelia (Rooks 2014: 483; Burnett 2006: 38), creating a space that allows Ophelia's death to be framed clearly as a suicide, and Laertes' refutation of this evidence of psychological denial to stem from mourning, rather than spiritual denial.

Despite, or perhaps because of her suicide, Almereyda's Ophelia is arguably the most feminist interpretation to date due to the various techniques employed to emphasise Ophelia's subjectivity. Other feminist interpretations of the character are more preoccupied with preventing her death than with understanding it. A simplistic interpretation of this desire to save Ophelia from drowning could be that the narratives of appropriation that seek to rescue Ophelia from her fate are usually written for young adult audiences, so may shy away from the possibility of suicide as too dark and too problematic for young minds. Such a view is easily countered by the dystopian turn in young adult fiction (Hintz, Basu and Broad 2013: 2) wherein the death of teenagers, both voluntary and involuntary, is almost as commonplace as it is in Shakespearean plays.

Learning to swim: reviving Ophelia in young adult literature

One of Pipher's proposed solutions for reviving the teenaged Ophelias of the 1990s (and arguably beyond) was to encourage them to read more female-centred literature by and about women. Mary Ann Tighe observes that young adult fiction now offers female readers 'an abundance of literature written by talented women who address the

very issues that Pipher…identif[ies] in [her text] – literature that describes the lives of young girls struggling with society's expectations while striving to be true to themselves. And, most importantly, this literature portrays them as survivors' (2005: 57). Tighe's selection focuses on novels that explore issues of eating disorders, rape, sexuality, peer relationships, and loss – Pipher's figurative Ophelias – but in recent years several novels have sought to revive the literal, literary Ophelia and to refashion her as a survivor. These novels take the form of extrapolated, revisionary, and reoriented narratives, as defined by Lanier (2002). Michelle Ray's *Falling for Hamlet* in particular provides an interesting example of how the malleability of the tragic heroine Ophelia has been creatively useful for rewriting her into a twenty-first century context. Not only does Ray subvert Ophelia's traditional death, her exploration of Ophelia's perspective highlights the play's original theme of surveillance in a manner that connects with current social media and celebrity culture.

For twenty-first century, young adult, and female audiences, authors use characterisation and, significantly, subversion of her madness and death as the means by which Ophelia is re-imagined as a more 'positive' role model for young girls. In terms of form, these twenty-first century young adult Ophelia novels are written in first-person. This works to privilege Ophelia's voice and subjectivity, which some argue are silenced or controlled in the original text and its subsequent performances and adaptations. Both her death and madness are faked in these narratives in order to facilitate her escape from Elsinore, allowing Ophelia to start a new life. This occurs not only in Ray's *Falling for Hamlet*, but also Lisa Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* and Lisa Klein's *Ophelia: A Novel*. In all three of these novelisations, Ophelia takes on Horatio's traditional role as the survivor who provides testimony to the truth of the events at Elsinore, in which she is also an active participant. This, Abigail Rokison suggests, is 'a strategy undoubtedly motivated by Ophelia's lack of agency in Shakespeare's play, and her traditional portrayal as a victim of a patriarchal society, controlled by her ambitious father' (2010: 791). These revisions indicate an interpretation of the original Ophelia as trapped by her circumstances and the pressures placed upon her by her lover, brother, father and king. Yet, as highlighted by Rokison, rewriting the story from Ophelia's perspective allows writers and readers to challenge traditional interpretations of the character, and to consider the impact of historical context on action, character, and behaviour.

It is important to acknowledge that not all revisions of the story attempt to rescue Ophelia. Hateley's analysis of John Marsden's *Hamlet: A Novel*, David Bergantino's *Hamlet II: Ophelia's Revenge*, and Alan M. Gratz's *Something Rotten* characterises these appropriations as 'a cautionary tale for young men' (2013: 439). Ophelia remains 'present but subordinate' in these novels, which centre more on using genre to explore the thematic possibilities of the original play. Marsden's novel, for example, is contemporary fiction that, interestingly, provides an Oedipal reading of Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude, while Bergantino draws upon the horror genre and Gratz engages with noir. By contrast, novels by female writers engaged in the agenda of reclaiming Ophelia situate themselves within the romance genre, fleshing out the romantic and sexual relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia. In the overtly feminist novels, giving Ophelia (heteronormative) sexual agency can be seen as a direct response

to traditional readings of her madness as the hysteria of suppressed sexuality, while allowing her to survive resists any traditional characterisation of victimhood. Although all these novelisations approach their task with different creative and political agendas, they all seek to make the characters and story of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* accessible to twenty-first century young adult audiences.

As demonstrated by Almereyda's millennial New York, shifting the story from its original early modern setting to a time contemporaneous to young readers facilitates particular characterisations, interpretations, and thematic explorations. *Falling for Hamlet* is set in a twenty-first century rendition of the Danish court, where the royal family live in a penthouse of a sleek modern skyscraper that looms behind the historic castle; the staff, including Ophelia and her family, live on the lower levels of the building, and the whole compound is highly secured by a network of body guards and security cameras. Despite the cultural setting and murderous plot, it shares less in common with contemporary Danish political dramas like *Borgen* than it does with American teen soap operas, such as *Gossip Girl*. It is, as Hateley observes, 'a realm of social fantasy' (2013: 444) that 'depends on and debunks cultural fantasies of contemporary 'princess culture'' (2013: 444). The novel commences with Ophelia beginning to tell her story to a talk show diva, Zara, after having survived the tragedy at Elsinore. Ophelia, fearing that she would be targeted after the deaths of her own and Hamlet's father, had, with the help of Horatio and Hamlet's bodyguard, Marcellus, faked her own death. She emerges in the aftermath of the royal deaths, which she witnesses via a video phone feed from Horatio, to mourn her brother and to control the public narrative.

Unlike Almereyda's film, however, Ophelia's agency in the new millennium is expressed through her survival rather than her death. The subversion of Ophelia's death also occurs in Fiedler and Klein's historical novels, but Ray further exacerbates the falseness of this report by emphasising Ophelia's skill as a swimmer, and her madness before her death is explained by a vodka binge while mourning her father.

While novelisations and appropriations, like Ray's *Falling for Hamlet* and other Ophelia novels, prove to be useful in getting readers and audiences to access and appreciate the basic narrative of Shakespeare's plays, the extent to which they can be said to be generating new readers or audiences for the original texts, or encouraging an appreciation and understanding of the play form is still rather questionable. More importantly for this discussion, we must also question the extent to which such novelisations and appropriations allow readers to come to their own interpretation of characters like Ophelia, although we might argue that it is the same risk as watching a performance of her: we are witnessing *an* interpretation of her, not *the* interpretation.

Such novelisations and interpretations thus raise the question of how we approach and privilege form, narrative and character in seeking to understand a primary text and the secondary productions that draw upon its material. We might also want to ask ourselves why it is so important to rescue Ophelia in terms of both character and ultimate fate, when the latter, at the very least, has been sealed for centuries. Readers approaching *Hamlet* via novelisations and other interpretations might be disappointed by the Ophelia that they find in the original text. As high school teacher Toni says in her four-star

review of Ray's *Falling for Hamlet* on GoodReads, 'what I love about [this book] is that it is told by Ophelia. Ophelia in the Shakespeare version is weak and today's woman is more independent and [I] love that Ray's version has changed this!!! Ophelia…you go girl!!!'

Live and let die: creative and critical possibilities beyond Ophelia

Ophelia and other women of the predominantly male, white literary canon undoubtedly provide an opportunity to 'write back' to that canon, but what needs to be foregrounded in this process are the choices we make as writers and scholars, and the impact this has on form and interpretation. A critical engagement with the revisionist process as an act of creativity and/or as an act of literary analysis is necessary. Certainly, re-writing canonic texts has political possibilities, as illustrated by the tradition of feminist revision that has proliferated since the 1960s and 1970s, but such revision also requires an understanding of the mechanisms of the original text, and an understanding of what tactics would yield particular effects, politically and textually, in the act of rewriting. As such, revisionist writing offers an opportunity for both creative writers and literary scholars to understand the impact of characterisation, narrative, and context through the very practice of unpacking and repacking a text according to a variety of textual rules and socio-historical values.

Sarah Barber and Hayley Esther express a concern that the feminist standpoint taken in revising canonical works and characters, such as Ophelia, runs the risk of alienating male readers (2011). This could, however, also be a reflective and pedagogical opportunity to explore the gendered subject positions and assumptions of both writers and their characters. For example, creative writing students could first be asked to write a short story from the perspective of any minor character, together with a reflection upon the reasons underpinning their character selection and narrative choices. Next, they could be asked specifically to take on a minor character of the opposite gender to that which they selected initially, with another reflective activity alongside this. Given the lack of female characters in *Hamlet*, even the limited choice between Ophelia and Gertrude could yield interesting discussions about the appeal, role, and relative sympathy of younger or older female characters to both male and female readers and writers.

An additional exercise could offer writers the opportunity to gender-switch the main characters, which is already a practice in modern theatrical productions, which in turn gestures toward the tradition of cross-dressing in Shakespeare's plays, as well as in contemporaneous productions. Beyond novelty, gender-switching has the potential to subvert standard interpretations of character, theme, and narrative. By making Ophelia male, her madness would then be removed from its traditional reading as female hysteria, as already illustrated by Almereyda's interpretation of Ophelia in the twenty-first century, which sought to treat Ophelia's depression with the kind of gravity not found in accounts of female hysteria that diminish and pathologise women's mental health and embodied responses to their social milieu. Interestingly, rewriting the character of Hamlet as female may allow a new reading of Hamlet's existential crisis as hysteria, in turn facilitating a discussion about representations of gender and mental

health at various points in history. Would male Ophelia's subsequent madness and death rankle our nerves in quite the same way as when female Ophelia dies? Would we also seek to rescue him?

Rewriting *Hamlet* also offers an opportunity to queer the text, particularly from the perspective of Horatio. His friendship with Hamlet is frequently foregrounded in the revisionist narratives by male authors – indeed, in Alan M. Gratz's noir revisioning of Hamlet for young adult audiences, *Something Rotten*, Horatio is its gumshoe narrator – but in these novels, the relationship is still framed in heteronormative terms. As Jeffrey Masten observes, the *queerness* of Horatio's farewell to Hamlet, 'Good night, sweet prince', is often overlooked due to the 'butch heroics of the preceding scenes' (2004: 368), including the 'tabulation of competitive Ophelia-loving' (2004: 368). Interestingly, Horatio has only double the number of lines as Ophelia in *Hamlet* (109 of 4042). In this quantitative manner, we could argue that Horatio is a minor character, but like Ophelia he is marked in our memory because of the protagonist's ambiguous attachment to him. Unlike Ophelia, however, he is memorable because he survives the bloodshed at Elsinore. Consequently, beyond a queer reading, the character of Horatio may lead to a fascinating narrative of trauma and survival.

After all, the feminist politics that instigated the revisionist process need not always be the focus and goal of rewriting canonical texts. Other themes, such as class and race, could also be explored. Again, Almereyda's *Hamlet* already gestured toward this, positioning capitalist corporations as the new royalty of the postmodern age, but imagine, for example, a white Othello seeking acceptance in a black community. The imperfect analogy of this revision facilitates a discussion around race and privilege, as well as issues of race and (self) representation in literature.

While transfixing on Ophelia and her death has been a productive field for feminist writers, it should be the starting rather than the end point for a revisionist engagement with *Hamlet*. The original play has continued to resonate with audiences over time. This is perhaps in part due to our insistence that it ought to, but as various interpretations and appropriations illustrate, it also resonates because its ideas, characters, and plot points may be still opened up for discussion and debate over four hundred years later. Revisions and appropriations of the text provide opportunities to better understand the text and, arguably, ourselves.

Conclusion: *je suis* Ophelia

It is perhaps important to remember that there is, after all, no single Ophelia, whether we examine the original text, performances or novelisations; even Ray's novel offers no single Ophelia. We need to always look at her as various interpretations of the character, produced by writers, actresses, directors and production teams, as well as readers and audiences. Consequently, Ophelia novels need to be examined in conjunction with one another and with various filmic and theatrical interpretations. Novelisations like *Falling for Hamlet* might thus become a useful part of the process of understanding critical interpretation, appropriation and intertextuality, rather than as presenting definitive representations of the characters, or an attempt to understand the original text itself.

Ophelia-as-writing-prompt can be useful for reflecting upon changing ideas of what constitutes a desirable and admirable female character at different points in time. Most importantly, expanding the prompt beyond Ophelia may open up new creative and critical territory for understanding character, narrative, and shifting critical contexts.

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