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Refashioning Cordelia, Ophelia, and Juliet:
The Strength of Julia Margaret Cameron's Suffering Women
Melissa Parlin

“**B**ut I will say, of Shakespeare’s works generally, that we have no full impress of him there; even as full as we have of many men. His works are so many windows, through which we see a glimpse of the world that was in him.” These words from Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* claim that Shakespeare’s works could only be segments of the whole that was Shakespeare (147). Carlyle argues further, “Alas Shakespeare had to write for the Globe Playhouse: his great soul had to crush itself, as it could, into that and no other mould. It was with him, then, as it is with us all. No man works save under conditions” (147). Carlyle believed Shakespeare’s work was limited by cultural expectations and artistic restrictions, and he viewed Shakespeare’s accomplishments as like those of a sculptor who “cannot set his own free Thought before us; but his Thought as he could translate it into the stone that was given, with the tools that were given” (250). Despite these supposed limitations, Shakespeare produced a body of work that would be lauded and appropriated by innumerable artists to come.

As for working under "conditions," the same could be said of British photographer and poet, Julia Margaret Cameron. A great admirer of Shakespeare, Cameron dedicated the period from 1867-1874 to producing photographic images from Shakespeare’s plays. While the demands and limitations of working for a playhouse, such as those Carlyle addressed regarding Shakespeare, did not limit Cameron, she too felt pressures from her own society, especially as a female artist. The "world that was in" her, it seems, was often in contrast to the reality of the nineteenth-century world of most women. In response to expectations for women to be passive and submissive no matter what their circumstances, Cameron recreated suffering women as examples of feminine endurance. While Cameron upheld some aspects of the traditional Victorian woman, such as the ideal of motherhood, in most ways her photographic characters transcended Victorian gender views by defying convention and asserting their independence.

I would like to argue that through her Shakespearean images of women, Cameron refashioned female characters, who are typically depicted as passive and weak, into women whose identities are bolstered by their suffering. For instance, Cameron reinvents Cordelia by focusing on her proclamation of selfless love for her father and not depicting her as a pitiful, wounded victim. Unlike works from other nineteenth-century artists, Cameron's Ophelia and Juliet are not depicted in death; instead, they are portrayed in contemplation and action. Cameron reinvents Juliet and Ophelia by emphasizing feminine strength through suffering and underscoring moments of Ophelia's and Juliet's autonomy. In interpreting Ophelia and Juliet as empowered, Cameron contradicts traditional interpretations of these women's roles by stressing their strength in the midst of hardship.

One of Cameron's earliest images of Shakespeare's plays is an 1865 photograph simply titled "Cordelia and King Lear" (see fig. 1). Lear and Cordelia are pictured together shortly after he learns of her death. Lear's head is bowed, and his face hovers over Cordelia's outstretched form; Lear's expression conveys somber resignation and regret. This death moment is one of solemnity and pathos. Lear's eyes are opened, although the angle of his head makes it difficult for the viewer to see specifically where his eyes rest. Cordelia's visage is one of soft repose, and her white garb, layered and shroud-like, underscores the purity of her selfless devotion to Lear as well as her mystical presence, which is arguably a palpable absence, that she maintains over the course of the play. Ultimately, by rendering Cordelia in front of her mournful father, Cameron illuminates the final moment of Lear's reckoning.

Lear dominates the photograph and evokes in viewers an acknowledgement of how his actions have caused Cordelia's early demise. Thematically, the subject of the beautiful dead woman has received extensive analysis by art historians. For instance, Bram Dijkstra, in *Idols of Perversity*, discusses how "representations of beautiful women



Fig. 1. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Cordelia and King Lear*, 1865. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 460.



Fig. 2. Julia Margaret Cameron, *King Lear Allotting His Kingdom to His Three Daughters*, 1872. [Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs](#) By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 460.

safely dead remained the late nineteenth-century painter's favorite way of depicting the transcendent spiritual value of passive feminine sacrifice" (50). While Cameron seems to participate in restrictive gender ideology with this image of Cordelia, I would argue that by depicting Cordelia with Lear, Cameron emphasizes Lear's hand (literally and figuratively) in his daughter's demise. Indeed, this death moment is more about Lear than Cordelia. This rendering of Cordelia resembles other Victorian images of dead, or seemingly dead, women, but I would like to assert that Lear's presence as the mournful father, as well as the modest portrayal of Cordelia, prevent her from

being fetishized. Cameron photographically fashions Cordelia as the selfless daughter who stood her ground despite her disinheritance.

Created nearly a decade later, Cameron's 1872 photograph (see fig. 2) emphasizes the moment Cordelia chooses to risk her father's displeasure for the sake of her principles. This image appears to be a far more complex "snapshot" moment of Cordelia's decision to "Love and be silent." Cameron chooses her title more carefully than her earlier Lear photograph, calling this one: "King Lear allotting his Kingdom / to his three daughters / 'What Shall Cordelia do / Love and be silent.'" As described in *Seizing the Light: A History of Photography*, "As allegorical subjects gained popularity in the mid-1850's, many photographers titled their portraits [...] so that viewers could bring their formal knowledge to bear" (81). By using a more descriptive title, Cameron emphasizes Cordelia's lines, which clearly directs viewers' attention to Cordelia's response to her father. It was often the case that photographers "who did not wish for this type of interchange or who wanted to be more ambiguous and less directional referred to their work as 'untitled.' Such an open-ended viewing situation made it the viewer's responsibility to supply the meaning" (81). In this case, it seems, Cameron fully intended for viewers to recall Cordelia's autonomy and her decision to "Love and be silent," and thus Cameron titled her photograph appropriately.

Although Cordelia's lines are underscored in the title, viewers can't help but notice that the composition of the photograph draws immediate attention to Lear, not Cordelia. Lear's powerful presence and stark white hair and beard make up the center of the image and take up the most space. Additionally, in keeping with portrait conventions, Cameron utilizes props to add gender distinctions. In this Lear image, Cameron depicts Lear holding a staff, a visual, phallic symbol of male power. By positioning Lear with his stern gaze in the center of the photograph, Cameron overtly conveys his displeasure with Cordelia. Moreover, Lear's centrality serves to highlight Cordelia's choice to "Love and be silent." By the angle of his gaze, viewers are directed toward Cordelia, although Lear does not appear to be looking *at* her but *past* her, off in the distance. His vacant, stern look is one of disappointment, and that disappointment is what leads to Cordelia's disinheritance.

Aware of the importance of her sitters' body language, as apparent with Lear's dominating presence, Cameron's positioning of Cordelia, Goneril, and Regan is also very deliberate. Schooled in various aspects of art, Cameron studied how portraitists positioned their subjects. As Zirka Z. Filipczak explains in her chapter "Poses and Passions: Mona Lisa's 'Closely Folded' Hands," "if portraits described a sitter's temperament, they did so through props and settings, color, and especially positioning of the body" (70). Cameron utilizes these same techniques. In Cameron's photograph of Lear dispersing his kingdom, the position of the three sisters demonstrates their degree of loyalty to Lear. These positions emphasize the daughters' honesty or deviousness respectively. Cordelia is truthful and faces Lear while Goneril and Regan, deceitfully flattering, remain hidden behind their father. Cameron's placing of their hands is also significant. While Lear, as alluded to earlier, holds his staff with confidence, Cordelia's hands are held clasped together submissively in a fashion that makes them appear bound. This physical positioning of Cordelia's hands duplicates the metaphorical reality that her hands are indeed tied. Cordelia's hands also maintain a position of modesty and duty, with one hand crossed over the other and close to her body. Leonardo da Vinci "noted without elaboration in his journal what 'intention of the soul' the pose of folded hands represented: 'Women must be represented in modest attitudes (*atti vergogniosi*), their legs close together, their arms closely folded'" (Filipczak 73). Da Vinci's ideas echoed



Fig. 3. John William Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1894. Essential Pre-Raphaelites By Lucinda Hawksley. Bath: Parragon, 2000, 238.

the prevailing traditions of early Italian portraits, which Cameron was familiar with. Furthermore, the folded position of women's hands also referred to childbirth and demonstrated "a psychological indicator of modesty with a physical reference to fertility" (77). Additionally, "The arc formed by joining the hands directs attention to the uterus area yet also seems to protect and fence it in" (77). In Cordelia's case, Cameron seems to be suggesting that the moment in the play wherein Lear allots his kingdom to his daughters is what determines Cordelia's marriageability. She would be more valuable as a wife with a portion of her father's land than without. Although the King of France still marries her, the moment of the allotment determines Cordelia's potential to be both wife

and mother, and it is appropriate, therefore, that Cameron emphasizes how Cordelia chooses to risk the fruits of marriage for the sake of professing her love for her father honestly. Cameron's Cordelia withstands her challenging circumstances and proudly displays her independence despite the consequences of her father's disapproval.

In the same way that Cameron rewrites Cordelia's seeming subservience into an act of autonomy, another female Shakespearean character that Cameron rethinks is Ophelia. At the time Cameron is working on her images, Ophelia is "the later nineteenth-century's all-time favorite example of the love-crazed self-sacrificial woman who most perfectly demonstrated her devotion to man by descending into madness, who surrounded herself with flowers to show her equivalence to them, and who in the end committed herself to a watery grave, thereby fulfilling the nineteenth-century male's fondest fantasies of feminine dependency" (Dijkstra 42). Indeed, the "weak-witted expiring woman" was the model for a host of Pre-Raphaelite and later works (Dijkstra 45). As Alan R. Young articulates in his chapter "The Ophelia Phenomenon," there are two groups of nineteenth-century Ophelias. The first group (see fig. 3) "almost invariably depicts Ophelia as a solitary figure within a natural setting, often among dense trees or tall reeds and often beside the water that will be her undoing" (325).

Ophelias of the second group, according to Young, are depicted in the water, generally on their backs (see fig. 4). With both groups, Ophelia typically “wear[s] a white dress [...] her arms, legs, and even breasts [...] exposed, while her hair is loose and disordered” (325). Cameron, however, revises these depictions and rewrites Victorian gender ideology by giving Ophelia power within a living, enduring state.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Cameron does not give her viewers the satisfaction of gaping at Ophelia on the edge of the water or at Ophelia dead. Cameron does not depict Ophelia bare-breasted or with exposed flesh. Young asserts how typically, “the principle reason for the attractiveness of Ophelia to artists, feminist scholars have surmised, was that she provided artists and the viewers of their works (particularly males) with the opportunity to contemplate and contain (notably when madness leads to death) the threatening fantasy of uncontrolled female sexuality” (282). Cameron, however, deliberately chooses not to exploit the character of Ophelia in this virgin/whore dichotomy or to give in to the demand for spectacle. Instead, Cameron’s Ophelia, alive and more lucid than most other versions of Ophelia, is rendered in a strong, upright position, both facing the viewer and in profile (see figs. 5-8). Cameron thus avoids depicting Ophelia as a deranged, suicidal “fantasy of feminine dependency” (Dijkstra 42). In doing so, she not only shields Ophelia from the voyeuristic male gaze associated with the viewing of most images of Ophelia, she also brings Ophelia face to face with her viewer. By meeting Ophelia's gaze, viewers are forced to acknowledge and confront this suffering woman's strength and fortitude.



Fig. 4. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52. The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites By Elizabeth Prettejohn. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000, 154.

Cameron's first 1867 study of Ophelia is intense and striking (see fig. 5). In contrast to other more elaborate images, Cameron employs dark clothes and minimal flowers, with only a few roses at the base of Ophelia's neck. This photograph lacks most overtly Ophelia-like qualities of nineteenth-century portrayals. There is no water's edge shown here, and, though she is clearly troubled, Ophelia does not appear weak or deranged. The Ophelia depicted here is contemplative with the open mouth suggesting she may be burdened or preoccupied. The hair is free flowing, emphasizing her unrestrained nature. While delicate and aloof, her gaze is fixed on an unseen focal point, again suggesting a heavy-hearted inwardness. There is a touch of intrigue in Cameron's version, and unlike so many other nineteenth-century versions that depict her dead or dying, this Ophelia is alive and resilient.

Cameron's second version of Ophelia, another study done in 1867, conveys a contemplative Ophelia (see fig. 6). Her expression and gaze in this photograph depict a woman caught in a moment of serious consideration.

While there are flowers in her hat and at the base of her neck, little else makes this image recognizable as Ophelia. In fact, the hat, which seems to be a kind of



Fig. 5. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Ophelia*, 1867. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 240.

sailor straw hat, makes her more of a nineteenth-century figure than one from Hamlet's early medieval time.

According to *Fashion and Its Social Agendas*,

"The use of men's hats by women [...] began in the middle of the [nineteenth] century. Sailors' straw hats were first adopted as a fashionable style for children before becoming fashionable for women in



Fig. 6. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Ophelia Study No. 2*, 1867. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 460.

the 1860's" (103). Adhering to fashion standards indicates a presence of mind, and Cameron might have used a hat in this image to create a modern nineteenth-century Ophelia-- one sane enough to be mindful of her appearance. Nevertheless, because Cameron inevitably realized that the hat would thrust viewers ahead of rather than back to Hamlet's time, she omitted it in her other renditions. The long-flowing hair, as in all of her Ophelia images, is a staple for most of Cameron's women. This choice of hair arrangement is almost certainly more an influence of Pre-Raphaelitism than a symbol of Ophelia's psychic disarray. While this Ophelia image seems the least effective of Cameron's renditions, Ophelia is nonetheless animate and persevering. Cameron still represents an anguishing woman struggling to transcend her circumstances. While the dark drapery might seem to suggest impending death, the moment captured is of an Ophelia very much alive.

Significantly, as Cameron works with her vision of Ophelia over time, Ophelia becomes more vital and more engaged, rather than perishing and detached--as she is most commonly portrayed by others. Cameron's 1874 versions of Ophelia maintain the sitting pose but depict a strikingly more present Ophelia who looks directly at the viewer (see figs. 7-8). In doing so, Cameron enlivens Ophelia and asserts her humanity and personhood, thus disallowing the viewer any opportunities for sexual fantasy or objectification of her body. While both 1874 images maintain the symbolic significance of the flowers, these faces of Ophelia make her fully present and so intensely human that viewers feel uncomfortable making direct eye contact for too long. These renditions are removed from emphasizing any state of fragile, suicidal passivity. One bold countenance is defiant and assertive (see fig. 7), and the other seems to recognize the kind of hardiness that comes from having endured great suffering and reached an ultimate calm despite the experience (see fig. 8). In both images, the hand in the hair emphasizes that Ophelia is dissatisfied, and the gesture underscores the frustration and disappointment found in the faces. In one image, (see fig. 8), Ophelia holds reeds, while in the other, (see fig. 7), the reeds are cropped out. The Ophelia without the reeds, per Cameron's portrayal, is more emotionally disturbed than the Ophelia with them. I would argue that the reeds' presence, therefore, acts as a visual reminder that Ophelia, like Christ who is also pictured with reeds in Christian iconography, meets with great suffering but, in Cameron's version,

continues to endure. Indeed, without the clue of the reeds, viewers might not know they were looking at Ophelia. By the time viewers find from Cameron's title who the subject actually is, Ophelia has already been rewritten in their gaze since Cameron's Ophelia defies the "lack of control over her own fate" that so many other versions emphasize (Dijkstra 43). Yes, Cameron's Ophelia is in conflict, but she is not the same mad or dead Ophelia found in so many other Victorian versions of her.

In "Representing Ophelia," Elaine Showalter asserts that each succeeding age has tailored Ophelia's image to fit its vision of femininity (52). Cameron, I would argue, reforms Ophelia in opposition to the Victorian versions of a dead, or near-dead, Ophelia, and creates a live, unrelenting Ophelia. Cameron's Ophelia defies Victorian gender roles for women, and since Cameron cannot change Ophelia's madness or death, Cameron instead reshapes the way viewers think about how Ophelia faces her tragic circumstances and resolutely moves toward her fate. Ophelia is a woman challenged by extraordinary circumstances and her suffering is uncontrollable. However, a live Ophelia emphasizes Cameron's determination to dispute the expectation that Victorian women are not equipped to bear much hardship. Ophelia, like so many of Cameron's women, asserts strength and autonomy in response to circumstances of suffering.

Another female figure that Julia Margaret Cameron recreates is Shakespeare's Juliet. Of all the key moments from the play Cameron could select, Cameron makes a disorienting choice



Fig. 7. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Ophelia*, 1874. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 238.



Fig. 8. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Ophelia*, 1874. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 239.

in depicting Juliet with Friar Lawrence (see figs. 9-10). Despite this being one of *Romeo and Juliet's* less visually dramatic scenes, readers and viewers alike still know it as a pivotal moment, a crucial moment of decision-making for Juliet. While some interpretations of the play emphasize Romeo and Juliet as "star-crossed lovers" who are victims of fate, other readings view the characters as possessing free will and making choices that lead to their tragic end. For instance, Douglas L. Peterson in his chapter "Romeo and Juliet and the Art of Moral Navigation" focuses on the lovers' decision-making aptitude:

They are "star-crossed" lovers in a quite literal sense. Providence, having decreed that they will settle the feud, has selected the stars as the agency through which its determination will be affected. Once they meet, they will be powerfully attracted to each other. But it does not follow that since their love at first sight is providentially ordained, they are deprived of freedom of choice, or that their deaths are inevitable as the only means of restoring civic order. How they manage their affections, once they have met—hence how they fulfill their destiny—will be up to them. (308)

In both of these Juliet photographs, Cameron shows Juliet exercising this freedom of choice in her procurement of the fatal potion. Unlike more frequently depicted moments, such as the balcony scene or Juliet's suicide, both of which emphasize how Juliet is swept up in the intense passions of the moment, this instance with Friar Lawrence marks Juliet's thoughtful deliberation and resolve. Regardless of the trepidation and concern viewers know she must be feeling, Cameron's Juliet remains in defiance of her parents and asserts her autonomy.

By highlighting the exchange between Friar Lawrence and Juliet, Cameron deliberately emphasizes not Juliet's romantic love for Romeo, but Juliet's resolve to defy familial and



Fig. 9. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Friar Lawrence and Juliet*, 1865. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 448.

gender expectations. Like Ophelia, the dead Juliet has always been a popular figure. But instead of emphasizing the helplessness that Juliet must feel in her circumstances, Cameron recreates this moment by giving agency to her heroine even though her fate is already prescribed. In refashioning Juliet this way, Cameron revitalizes Juliet as a woman capable of momentous decisions, like that of acquiring the potion.

As with Cordelia and Ophelia, if we examine these two 1865 portraits of Friar Lawrence and Juliet, we must note Cameron's positioning of her sitters. In the first of the two images, (see fig. 9), Juliet and Friar Lawrence face each other and join hands with the all-important vial either missing or concealed. The visually absent vial reinforces Juliet's clandestine task and underscores Juliet's choice to take risks for the sake of securing her own happiness. In this portrait, Friar Lawrence seems very grave, while Juliet looks solemn but hopeful. Their mutual gaze reflects the serious intensity of this moment of covert exchange. Juliet is positioned at more or less equal height, perhaps to highlight their shared responsibility in this act of defiance. Juliet's outfit is mostly white and accentuates Juliet's purity and status as a new bride in stark contrast to Friar Lawrence's dark habit, which signifies his religious orders as well as the *cloaked* task at hand. Juliet's white gown also makes her presence more prominent in the photograph, perhaps to demonstrate that the final decision to accept and use the potion rests with



Fig. 10. Julia Margaret Cameron, *Friar Lawrence and Juliet*, 1865. Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs By Julian Cox and Colin Ford. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003, 448.

Juliet. Juliet's head is upturned delicately, while the Friar's head seems magically suspended, perhaps to underscore his alchemical practices. Cameron's image emphasizes the secrecy of the moment and reminds viewers that Juliet is a woman determined to take control of her circumstances.

In the second of the two images (see fig. 10), viewers see Friar Lawrence putting the vial in Juliet's hand. Although the image with the vial concealed better shows the secrecy of Juliet's task (see fig. 9), allowing viewers to see the vial makes this crucial decision of Juliet's more recognizable. The centrality of the vial in the image highlights the significance of

the potion in providing Juliet with forbidden happiness. In this version, Juliet's dark clothes seem to allude to her death and emphasize that her secret nocturnal visit must be hidden from her parents. Juliet's expression and seemingly supplicant position convey her desperation. Friar Lawrence must recognize the gravity of her predicament and in this image, his tender expression is calming and more compassionate than in the first image. Cameron's Juliet is compelling in a new way. Though she remains Romeo's star-crossed lover, through Cameron's refashioning, Juliet is shown as a woman who is self-governing and willing to defy the wishes of her family to decide her own fate.

Roberta Barker, author of "The Feminist Ophelia and the (Re)production of Gender," puts the rewriting of women like Ophelia and Juliet into perspective when she notes of twenty-first century Shakespearean depictions: "they protest against the victimization of women, but may reproduce the 'natural' opposition between male and female that feeds gender asymmetry instead of exposing the constructed nature of gender identities. Even those committed to eradicating gender oppression replicate the discourses that give rise to it" (46). Such is the case with Cameron's Cordelia, Ophelia, and Juliet. Cameron repeats the stories of feminine suffering from Shakespeare's texts, but Cameron chooses to harness and refocus that suffering. She chooses to render these women not as victims but as women who strive to reshape rather than submit to their circumstances. Cameron subverts the discourses that promote gender oppression when she rewrites or avoids the image of the beautiful dead woman. Cameron's depictions refashion these women into figures of endurance rather than objects of the male gaze. In Cameron's photographs, Cordelia's true declaration of love becomes a sight for reclaiming her respect as one of Shakespeare's most self-sacrificing women. Similarly, Cameron's figuration of Ophelia is in direct contrast with nineteenth-century depictions that focus on her madness and suicide. Cameron's Ophelia is strong, thoughtful and vibrant, facing her circumstances, and sometimes viewers, boldly. Finally, Cameron's Juliet is remade to be a stoic, resourceful woman, determined to forge her own course in life. All three Shakespearean heroines, via Cameron's renditions of them, become symbols of feminine perseverance despite their respective suffering.

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