“This richly varied collection builds on Elaine Showalter’s famous 1985 essay, ‘Representing Ophelia,’ to examine multiple representations of Ophelia in various times and places. The images, both described and captured in illustrations, are fascinating in themselves, and the collection as a whole constitutes a revealing contribution to cultural history, demonstrating that Ophelia is indeed a mirror in which successive cultures have seen their own anxieties and values.”

—Phyllis Rackin, professor of English Emerita, University of Pennsylvania

“This is a simply fabulous collection of essays on ‘the blighted girlhood’ of Ophelia, whose fate has fascinated readers for centuries. Far from being a static figure, however, this volume shows that Ophelia has changed with the times, and her fate reveals as much about the cultural dynamics of representing femininity as it does about Shakespeare’s character in her original rendition.”

—Dymphna C. Callaghan, William Safire Professor of Modern Letters, Syracuse University

Although she appears in only a handful of scenes in Hamlet, Ophelia is one of Shakespeare’s most enigmatic and unforgettable characters. This collection of new essays is the first to explore the rich afterlife of one of Shakespeare’s most recognizable figures. With contributions from an international group of established and emerging scholars, The Afterlife of Ophelia moves beyond the confines of existing scholarship and forges connections among fields that are typically pursued as separate lines of inquiry within Shakespeare studies: film and new media studies, theatre and performance studies, historicist and contextual perspectives, and studies of popular culture.

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Cover art: Untitled (Ophelia) (2001) by Gregory Crewdson, courtesy of Gagosian Gallery

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CHAPTER 5

The Paradox of Female Agency: Ophelia and East Asian Sensibilities

Alexa Huang

I think nothing.
—Ophelia (Hamlet 3.2.117)

I am weak and therefore I am strong.
—Bing Xin

There has always been a perceived affinity between Ophelia and East Asian women. In May 1930, Evelyn Waugh entertained the prospect of the Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong in the role of Ophelia: "I should like to see Miss Wong playing Shakespeare. Why not a Chinese Ophelia? It seems to me that Miss Wong has exactly those attributes which one most requires of Shakespearean heroines." Ophelia is a paradox in East Asian literature, drama, and film. Even when she appears to depend on others for her thoughts like her Western counterpart, the figure of Ophelia in Asian rewritings signals a strong presence by her absence and even absentmindedness. The above quotation by Chinese author Bing Xin comments on how surviving in wartime China encouraged her readers to face the dilemma of the modern woman. While she did not write about Shakespeare, her works for adults and children aptly capture the Ophelia paradox: a young woman who is vulnerable yet powerful, undermined and empowered by her femininity. While Asian Ophelias may suffer from what S. I. Hayakawa calls "the Ophelia syndrome" (the inability to formulate and express one's
own thoughts), they adopt various rhetorical strategies—balancing between eloquence and silence—to let themselves be seen and heard. A large part of Ophelia’s global afterlife has remained inaccessible because of language and cultural barriers. This chapter investigates interpretations of Ophelia in East Asia. While Western Ophelias seem more muted, Asian incarnations of Ophelia occupy a broad spectrum of interpretive range and possess more moral agency. There are three main approaches to interpreting East Asian Ophelias. The first is informed by the fascination with and reaction against the Victorian pictorialization of Ophelia, especially John Everett Millais’s famous Ophelia (1851–52), that emphasized, as Kimberly Rhodes describes, her “pathos, innocence, and beauty rather than the unseemly detail of her death.” Despite having lived through negative experiences, Ophelia retains a childlike innocence in these rewritings. For example, New Hamlet by Lao She (the penname of Shu Qingchun, who lived from 1891–1966) parodies China’s “Hamlet complex” (the inability to act at a time of national crisis) and the fascination with an Ophelia submerged in water. Both Ophelia’s character and Millais’s painting are featured in two of Japanese writer Natsume Sōseki’s early twentieth-century novels. A second approach emphasizes the local context. Adapters used local values to engage with, and even critique, the Victorian narrative tradition of moralization. Late nineteenth-century translator Lin Shu (1852–1924), for example, tones down the sentimentalization of Ophelia in his classical Chinese rewriting of Charles and Mary Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare, showcasing the conflict between Victorian and Confucian moral codes. The third approach focuses upon an objectified and sexualized Ophelia. As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, this is not exclusively an Asian phenomenon. However, the eroticism associated with the Ophelia figure in a number of Asian stage-and-screen versions of Hamlet, such as Sherwood Hu’s film Prince of the Himalayas (2006), aligns Ophelia with East Asian ideals of femininity, yet also brings out the sexuality that is latent or suppressed in Victorian interpretations.

In conversation with, and moving beyond, the Victorian legacy, Ophelia has been reimagined in Asian culture as a filial daughter, river goddess, an ideal lover, and mediator between human and spiritual worlds. As they race to “bitch [her] words up” (4.5.10) and tell Ophelia’s stories, Asian artists present an Ophelia figure who is no longer just a “document of madness” (4.5.178). In fact, Ophelia is so central to the anxiety of modernity that she remains a focal point on the Japanese stage even when Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” soliloquy and other soliloquies were cut completely in early adaptations and performances in Tokyo and elsewhere. The first production of Hamlet in Japan, a kabuki adaptation around 1890, and the first performance of Hamlet in Tokyo in 1903, both indulged in the spectacle of the mad Ophelia. Significantly, the 1903 Tokyo production became a landmark event in Japan’s theater and cultural history because Orieko (Ophelia) was played by an actress (Madame Sadayacco) rather than the customary onnagata, or female impersonator. This Western performance technique was used to offer an Asian take on Ophelia, as the production was set in contemporary Japan.

East Asia’s history of globalization, along with a century of deeply conflicted love-hate relationships with Western modernity, shapes Asian attitudes to Ophelia. The history of imperial expansion and English-centered cultural globalization have prompted both ideological resistance to and fascination with the West in Asian cultures, as well as ever more daring and cosmopolitan revisions to the narrative. Some of these works retain traces of Millais’s imagery, while others privilege local reading positions; for some Ophelia is a site of resistance to authority, while for others she is a dedicated lover with a pure heart.

The “Fair Ophelia” of Victorian Legacy and in Modern Parody

The Victorian legacy has served as an iconic reference point for later artists and shaped Ophelia’s afterlife. Rhianne Brace describes The Ophelia Project (2010), which she directed in London, as “a celebration of woman” that drew upon “romantic images of women such as Millais’s Ophelia and other Pre-Raphaelite paintings [and their glorification of Nature] to create movement.” Natsume Sōseki created a painter obsessed by Millais’s Ophelia in his Kasamakura (1906), and one obsessed by the likeness of Ophelia herself in a portrait in Kojin, A Wanderer (1912–13). Lao She’s novella New Hamlet (1936) and Sherwood Hu’s film Prince of the Himalayas (2006) were also inspired by this iconic painting, which was exhibited in Tokyo and Kobe in 1997–98, and these are well known to East Asian audiences. Ophelia, crowned by a floral wreath and floating in a lake, dominates one of the posters for Prince of the Himalayas, while Lao She’s novella creates an ironic distance from such unnatural naturalism and gendered poses that modern adapters have inherited from the Pre-Raphaelite ideal.

Best known to American readers as the author of the bestseller Rickshaw Bay (also known as Camel Xiangzi, published in 1936), Lao She is one of modern Chinese literature’s most well-traveled writers. He most likely saw the Millais Ophelia at the Tate Gallery while serving as a lecturer in Chinese at the University of London in the 1930s. Writing in an age with pervasive pessimism, uncertainty, and hesitation when China was at a crossroads between Westernization and the preservation of its own traditions, Lao She uses a self-appointed “new Hamlet” figure to satirize the unbridled
fascination with all things Western on the one hand and cultural essentialism on the other. Preoccupied with a Hamlet-like "philosophical posture," and shunning immediate and effective actions, the Chinese society of Lao She's times and in his fiction becomes "paralyzed by the posture." Theodore Huters characterizes this paralysis as follows:

Many . . . of the ideas that were brought forward in response to the national crisis were accompanied by a pervasive sense of impasse, [reflecting] the fear that adapting too easily to alien ways would result in irreparable damage to the very set of [Chinese] institutions that reform was designed to save.11

Appearing at the end of Lao She's story, Millais's Ophelia symbolizes the individual's struggle against suffocating social expectations. The Chinese writer ridicules the intellectual's posturing, which, ironically, is not too far from Victorian mannerism. Identifying a nation with Hamlet is not new: Ludwig Börne's 1828 essay connected Germany's inability to act politically with Hamlet's hesitation. But what is new about Lao She's New Hamlet is its protagonist's failure to break away from anything tagged as "old."

The story revolves around a college student named Tian Liede, an idle dreamer. He gets his nickname from a slumber party:

Once, after having had too much to drink, Tian said—with mixed self-mockery and self-esteem—to his friend: "I am Shakespeare's Hamlet. We share the same given name, more or less." [Here he refers to the phonetic proximity of his name, Lide, to the second half of the Chinese transliteration of Hamlet, "Hamuleite."]

"Do you often see ghosts, too?" his friend asked laughingly.

"Surely more than once! But . . . " Tian replied. "But they don't all come out to patrol at night in white robes and red eyes."

"A new Hamlet!" his friend said casually.

Thus it became his nickname, one that makes him nod in satisfaction.

A junior in college, he is very proud, very serious. He plans everything thoroughly, and he ponders all the time.12

Tian's self-important tone contrasts with his inaction. Having spent all his energies fleeing from his father's withering family business out of disdain for the necessary labor in exchange for sustenance, Tian has not returned home for two years and has become a stranger to his family. Interestingly, Tian refers to himself as a flower, an incorruptible white lotus in a clear pond, echoing Ophelia's status as a symbol of purity in Millais's painting. Aspiring to become a "literary giant and give the world a new voice and hope," toward the end of New Hamlet Tian emerges as a quasi art critic, taking on the subject of Millais's Ophelia.13 Yet, the painting Tian analyzes is not even the original:

Tian thought back on a reprint [emphasis mine] of a famous painting he had seen in a magazine: a beautiful girl floating in a sparkling, clear stream, the lower half of her body in the water, her sleeves spread out across the surface of the stream, her long hair following the ripples like golden algae. Her snow-white forehead was tilted upward as if she was hoping for something. Her bosom was scattered with petals.14

Lao She parodies both melodramatic representations of Ophelia in popular culture and earlier Chinese morastic treatments of Ophelia's death that made her a quintessential Confucian woman of virtue, such as in Lin Shu's rewriting to be discussed in the next section. In New Hamlet, Millais's Ophelia is another icon of Western culture that Tian embraces but never truly understands:

Tian did not know why he was thinking of this particular painting and he did not want to bother with the story in it. He just felt her long hair and her jade forehead were so lovely and pitiable. Those flower petals, though, were a bit redundant, like painting feet on a snake. This thought gave Tian pleasure.15

In this moment of ecstasy and comical self-assurance, Tian "felt by the end of the day he was still in possession of critical ability" and the intellectual upper hand; "Transfixed by this painting he had conjured in his mind," he smiles and feels a sense of gratification.16 If the flower petals in Millais's painting are redundant, as Tian suggests, he too is out of place and adrift.

Ophelia as Filial Daughter

Lao Shis's predecessor Lin Shu approached Ophelia from a rather different angle. Interesting readings of Ophelia's character and motives emerge when Victorian moral codes meet Confucian ethics. In Lin Shu's time, at the beginning of the twentieth century, radical cultural reformers launched wholesale attacks on traditional Chinese culture and believed in the superiority of Western cultural values and the democratic institution. Lin attempted to counter their arguments by demonstrating that Shakespeare—who was the
indisputable authority of cultural values during the time—upheld the same morality and was as superstitious as those in traditional China.

While it is indisputable that Ophelia dies by drowning, it is never clear whether it is an accident or suicide, and, if the latter is the case, what prompts her to end her own life. Charles and Mary Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), which contains one of the most widely circulated Victorian reworkings of *Hamlet*, presents a filial Hamlet not incompatible with Confucian ideals:

The young prince . . . loved and venerated the memory of his dead father almost to idolatry, and being of a nice sense of honour, and a most exquisite practiser of propriety himself, did sorely take to heart this unworthy conduct of his mother Gertrude.17

Designed “for young ladies” because, as the Lambs reasoned, “boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers’ libraries . . . before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book,” the publication of this collection was a landmark event, and it was translated and reprinted multiple times in Korea, Japan, and China; thus, many Asian readers first encountered Shakespeare through the Lambs.18 The *Tales* also inspired the first Japanese- and Chinese-language performances of Shakespeare and influenced the staging of the plays in the decades that followed. The Lambs’ text was translated orally into Chinese by Wei Yi for Lin Shu who then rewrote the stories in classical Chinese prose. Lin did not read English, but with Wei’s help he published his rendition of the Lambs’ text as *An English Poet Reciting from After* (1904) and many other Chinese rewritings of English and European literary works.19 In Lin and Wei’s version, Ophelia becomes Hamlet’s wife: formalizing their relationship, presumably to render it more legible to the reader. Just as Mary Cowden Clarke’s “The Rose of Elsinore” filled in Ophelia’s backstory in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1852), Lin and Wei fill in the gaps in the Lambs’ text.20 Ophelia conforms to the role of an aristocratic lady in traditional China and acts according to Confucian moralities. While the Lambs suggest that Ophelia dies of an accident, Lin offers a more elaborate explanation of her madness and death that is more consistent with Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*:

When Hamlet returned from the trip to England, he ran into the funeral procession of his wife Ophelia [Wofei] who had taken her own life because of her grief over her father’s death. Upon hearing the news that her father was killed by her husband, who had lost his wits, Ophelia fainted and then lost her mind, singing all day without combing her hair.

One day she came upon a willow brook. She plucked many flowers and clambered to hang these flowers on a bough, saying she was decorating the willow tree. The bough unexpectedly broke and she died [in the water].21

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the true cause of Ophelia’s madness remains ambiguous, though she clearly struggles between conflicting loyalty to her husband and father. Here, her situation is translated into a moral dilemma typically found in the Confucian classics: How should a woman react when her husband kills her father?

Confucianism conceptualizes filial piety as “a mandatory unconditional positive duty,” as exemplified by Confucius’s and Mencius’s answers to hypothetical moral questions in the *Analects* and *Mencius*.22 This principle, which flies in the face of universal moral judgment, is deployed to tackle the potentially unsolvable moral dilemmas of conflicting duties. One such dilemma is theorized in *Mencius* to explain his moral philosophy: if a king’s father is found to be a murderer, should the king prosecute and execute his own father in pursuit of justice? As the ruler, the king should uphold the laws, but as a filial son, he could not allow his father to be punished. Therefore, the king in question, Mencius suggests, should cede his crown and go into exile with his criminal father, thereby fulfilling his filial duty as a son and giving up his conflicting identity as a ruler. In Lin’s text, Ophelia dutifully mourns the murder of her father. The next step she takes is a form of self-exile. Given that the prince whom she continues to love is missing, there is no conceivable solution to her moral dilemma, and she goes mad. Her predicament also reflects the Confucian concept of consanguineous affection, or love with distinction.23 This view acknowledges that love is partial and stipulates that one should prioritize those with blood ties to oneself. According to Confucian hierarchy, one’s father is prioritized over any other interpersonal relationship, private or public.

Interestingly, Ophelia’s death scene is less elaborate here than her interactions with Hamlet. Lin presents it in passing, as a direct observation by the narrator, rather than as a report by Gertrude. Lin’s narrative focuses on Confucian propriety, presenting the incident as an unfortunate result of Ophelia’s mourning.24 Gertrude’s report in *Hamlet* emphasizes Ophelia’s innocence, but the news of her death in Lin’s version elaborates on the cause of her madness and her mourning of Polonius. As much agency as Lin has given Ophelia earlier on in the text, as evidenced by her proactive role in orchestrating her marriage with the prince, Lin’s ultimate goal is to present a maid who, in a patriarchal social structure, remains a filial daughter and prioritizes her relationship with her father. Her death in a stream also echoes
the Chinese tradition of the river goddess, which will be discussed in the next section. Gone are the visual details of how Ophelia floats temporarily with her “crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples” (4.7.169) scattered across the stream before being dragged down to a “muddy death” (183).

Lin’s account of Ophelia’s relationship with Hamlet even includes a private exchange of vows:

The prince has long been fond of a virgin named Ophelia . . . and frequently exchanges letters with her. He gave her a ring, and they vowed to spend the rest of their life together. Afterwards, the prince had to feign madness. Whenever he saw Ophelia he angrily and mercilessly chastised her. Ophelia pitied his illness, but believed that he would love her again if his illness was cured.29

Ophelia’s naïveté ultimately leads to her marriage with the prince, a happy outcome from her perspective:

Even in his feigned madness, the prince could not bring himself to treat Ophelia so harshly. Therefore, he found an opportunity to write her a letter. Though his words were garbled, true affection hid within them. Upon reading the letter, Ophelia knew immediately that the prince still loved her.26

Ophelia decides to present the letter to Polonius, who then mentions it to Claudius and Gertrude, who immediately find a solution to the prince’s madness. They believe that “the prince has reached marriageable age and without a wife he has gone mad.”27 A wedding is promptly arranged. In thus bringing Shakespeare, a tranhistorical icon of progressive Western values, closer to Confucian narratives, Lin, himself a Confucian scholar, sculpts Hamlet and Ophelia into an ideal son and daughter, as well as loyal subjects. The fundamental change to the plot—Hamlet and Ophelia’s arranged marriage—fits the Confucian worldview of moral propriety and the positive image Lin attempts to create for the couple.

Ophelia as Goddess and Lover on Screen

Shot in Tibet with an all-Tibetan cast, Sherwood Hu’s Prince of the Himalayas offers a fuller, visual response to Millais’s representation of the drowning Ophelia.28 Tibetan actress Sonamdolgar as Odsaluyang presents a feisty and assertive Ophelia who links the secular with the sacred, and death with life. Ophelia is associated with water throughout the film, calling to mind the drenched and drowned Ophelias in Kenneth Branagh’s and Michael Almereyda’s film versions. Early on, we are shown a rather explicit, intimate scene between Prince Lhamoklodan (Hamlet) and Odsaluyang in her hut by a stream, after which Ophelia becomes pregnant (the two are not married). In labor, Odsaluyang approaches the Namtso Lake, a sacred site to Tibetan pilgrims, in search of the prince, whom she loves, but also hates, for killing her father. It seems that she walks into the lake to ease her pain, but the scene presents a haunting image of Ophelia’s death that amounts to a visual citation of Millais’s painting. Picking wild flowers and wearing a white garment with a floral wreath on her head, she lies down and floats on water, giving birth to her and Hamlet’s child before “sinking down to the river bed in deep sleep” where she “meets her father and mother.”29 The camera pans over the water to give us a glimpse of the baby floating away from the mother. Presumably, she dies after giving birth in the lake, but her death is not depicted on screen.

This scene takes Ophelia’s association with the cyclic quality of nature in Millais to a different level, hinting at the necessary, if cruel, procession of fading and emerging generations. Both Millais’s and Hu’s works are part of the historical fascination with Ophelia’s death and reports of drowned girls.30 Painted along the banks of the idyllic Hogs mill River in Surrey, Millais’s Ophelia espouses a dramatic quality because it focuses thematically on the cycle of growth and decay and the transitional moment between life and death.31 Buoyed temporarily by the stream, the dying Ophelia is half sunk but her head is still above the water. More importantly, as Stuart Sillars points out, the painting functions as “both an anticipation and a deferral of mourning” by crystallizing this particular moment before death.32 Likewise, in Hu’s film, this scene is depicted in a painterly way to focus visual attention on Ophelia’s suffering. As Odsaluyang walks into the lake singing a song, the water runs red with her blood. The baby is carried by water to safety and rescued by the Wolf Woman, a prophet. As one of the most interesting departures from Hamlet, this scene hints at the possibility of a saintly Ophelia who, in her death, brings forth a new life and hope for the next generation. Prince of the Himalayas offers a courageous, independent Ophelia.

If Gertrude’s account of Ophelia recasts her as a fairy tale creature (“mermaid-like” (4.7.176)), Odsaluyang in Prince of the Himalayas is a kind of goddess of nature, an immortal bride who returns to Nature. The strong association between water and suffering women in Chinese art and film history contributed to Hu’s decision to shoot Ophelia’s death scene by the mirror-like Namtso Lake near Lhasa. Water might play the role of a mirror of beauty or a gateway to darker realities lying beneath its surface. Female water deities celebrated in Chinese poetry and paintings “ruled the waves” and water can be “a mirror of beauty or for the darker possibilities hidden below its surface.”33
Significantly, Ophelia does not go mad. While her songs allude to rivers and boating, and her intimate scene with Hamlet involves rain, Ophelia does not drown in the end.

This bold cinematic reimagining of *Hamlet* shifts the focus from the question of interiority—traditionally embodied by Hamlet—to an ambitious, articulate Gertrude (Empress Wan) and an assertive Ophelia (Qing Nü): both characters do not hesitate to express their love for the prince. Empress Wan has kept her romantic relationship with him under wraps. Qing Nü’s naiveté and purity make her a desirable yet unattainable figure of hope, in contrast to the calculating empress, and also make an ideal contrast to China’s postsocialist society that is driven by a new market economy that turns everything, including romance and love, into a commodity. Instead, she is innocent, passionate, and bold.

Despite China’s economic growth, censorship continues to pose a challenge to artists. In the film, Qing Nü shuns traditional methods of communication altogether. In response to Empress Wan’s probing question as to whether Qing Nü has received any letters from the prince, she offers a bold answer: “we never exchange letters.” She also speaks of her dreams openly: “The prince always comes in my dreams. He came last night as well.” She admits this with a sense of pride.

*The Banquet* turns Ophelia into a symbol of innocence in a court of violence and intrigue. Significantly, for a martial arts film, Qing Nü is the only character not versed in swordsmanship, and her only weapons are her perseverance in the face of insurmountable obstacles and her headstrong adherence to her love for the prince. Her name, Qing Nü, derives from the goddess of snow in Chinese mythology, and her robes are always white, regardless of the occasion. This highlights the idea of chastity, as snow is used as a trope for chaste women in traditional poetry. Qing Nü is uninterested in politics and refuses to succumb to her father’s advice to “learn from the empress” and use marriage as a political stepping-stone. Empress Wan, by contrast, marries her brother-in-law in exchange for power and security after her husband is killed by a scorpion’s sting. Yet, Qing Nü’s innocence and dedication do not translate into childhood. In response to her brother’s reminder that she is “not in [the prince’s] heart. Do not fool yourself,” Qing Nü indicates that she is fully aware of the situation, but she has “promised to always wait for him.” She chooses to stay by his side and sing to him so that he will not be lonely. The consequences are painful. Jealous of Qing Nü’s intimacy with the prince and her ability to offer unconditional love, Empress Wan orders her to be whipped. Ever defiant and refusing to be manipulated by anyone, Qing Nü almost gets her face branded by the Empress.
Qing Nü also publicly expresses her love for the prince. When Wu Luan is being sent by Emperor Li as a hostage to the Khitans, a nomadic people in northwestern China, Qing Nü petitions in front of the court to be allowed to go along, echoing Desdemona's insistence on accompanying Othello to Cyprus. Her passions are uncensored and her reasons simple: so that the prince will not be lonely. Unlike Shakespeare's Ophelia, Qing Nü does not have to go mad or speak allusively to express herself, though she sings on multiple occasions just like Ophelia does in *Hamlet*. Toward the end of the film at the banquet celebrating the coronation of the empress, she sings a song of solitude that the prince had taught her, and leads a group dance:

What blessed night is this?  
Drifting down the river Qian.  
What auspicious day is this?  
On the boat with my Prince.  
Too bashful to stare,  
A secret I cannot share.  
My heart is filled with longing.  
Longing to know you, dear Prince.  
Trees live on mountains,  
And branches live on trees.  
My heart lives for your heart,  
But you do not see me.

She seems to be content to simply love the prince without seeking anything in return. Qing Nü's entrance takes Emperor Li and Empress Wan by surprise: her performance at the court commemorates her lover, presumed dead en route to the Khitans (although, unknown to Qing Nü and everyone in the court, the prince has returned and is disguising himself as one of the masked dancers).

Qing Nü's accidental death at the hands of the Empress has more in common with Shakespeare's Claudius or Gertrude than Ophelia: she drinks from a poisoned cup the Empress intends for the Emperor. Ever a sainly presence, Qing Nü addresses her last words to the prince: "Do you still feel lonely?" Mourning Qing Nü's demise, the prince, a kung fu master, finally moves forward with his revenge plan. Ophelia's fatal drop from the willow tree into the stream in *Hamlet* is thus replaced by Qing Nü's selfless sacrifice and symbolic purging of the court's collective sins in *The Banquet*. The Ophelia figure, therefore, represents ideal femininity in the face of a dysfunctional political structure.\(^ {38} \)

**Ophelia as Mediator on Stage**

In Korea, the dilemma Ophelia faces between her father and brother on the one hand, and the prince on the other, has been considered by directors and critics as a parallel to the situations of "Korean women constricted by Confucian conventions."\(^ {39} \) While Confucian constrictions can undermine a woman's agency, in the East Asian dramatic tradition, oppressed women gain an upper hand when they return as ghosts or act as mediators in religious contexts. As a result, multiple stage "shamanistic" adaptations in Korea have recast her as a mediator or a medium possessed by a ghost. While Millais' painting highlights the transitional moment between life and death, Korean adaptations present Ophelia as a shaman who serves as a medium to connect the worlds of the living and dead. As Hyon-u Lee suggests, the Korean fascination with Ophelia coincides with the rise of Korean feminism in the 1990s.\(^ {40} \) And shamanism, which resides outside the Confucian social structure, gives women greater agency.\(^ {41} \)

Kim Jung-ok's *Hamlet* (1993) is staged under an enormous hemp cloth that is suspended from the ceiling to resemble a house of mourning. It is customary for a mourning son to wear coarse hemp clothing, because hemp cloth is associated with funerals. Appropriately enough, the play begins with Ophelia's funeral. Possessed by the Old King's spirit, Ophelia conveys the story of his murder.\(^ {42} \) Kim Kwang-cho's *Ophelia: Sister, Come to My Bed* (1995) also opens with Ophelia's funeral. Caught between the incestuous love of Laertes and romantic love of Hamlet, Ophelia is eventually abandoned by both men: there is no future with Laertes, and Hamlet must carry out his revenge mission. Following Kim Jung-ok's adaptation, Ophelia is possessed by Old Hamlet's spirit: she urges Hamlet to avenge his father's death. When she is possessed by the ghost of Old Hamlet (a large puppet operated by three monks), Ophelia moves in unison with the ghost and changes her voice to that of an old man ("Hamlet, my son!").\(^ {43} \) Like Qing Nü, Korean Ophelias are both the mediators and agents of change, consoling the dead and guiding the living. The use of shamanism as a thematic structure reminds us, also, that *Hamlet* was perhaps a way to exorcise the painful loss of a son by its author.

Transnational productions designed for international festivals espouse a different attitude toward Ophelia and her world. These works are often more self-reflexive and conscious of the transformation of Shakespeare's Ophelia into an icon in an age of globalization. Staged at the *Hamlet* Sommer festival in Kronberg Castle, Denmark, Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen's *Search: Hamlet* (2002) featured Dicte, a Danish rock singer who wrote the score, sang, and performed in the dance theater event. Ong uses the conceptual question, "Who is Hamlet in our time?" to pull together a diverse group.
and material. Although the main character, Hamlet, was missing, Ophelia was represented as an astute observer of events.

The performance took place in different rooms of the castle and gradually descended into a courtyard connected by runways: a detail appropriated from the hanamichi bridge (flower way) of Kabuki theater. Following the style of a Noh play, Search: Hamlet contained five “books,” each of which offered a different version of the events in Hamlet from a different perspective: the Book of the Child, the Book of the Warrior (Laertes), the Book of the Young Girl (Ophelia), the Book of the Mad Woman (Gertrude), and the Book of the Demon (Claudius). Dicte’s song for Ophelia interrogates the various stereotypes associated with her Shakespearean character. She does so, notably, in the third person:

Oph. She is said to be sad
She’s just sad
Is that bad
So in love
She is said to be sad
She’s just fragile
Obedient
So in love
So in love
She is said to be sad
Weak and violent
She’ll go mad
Hold her tongue
Hold her tongue
She is said to be sad
Look how pale blue
Turns to black
Sick at heart
Sick at heart
She is said to be sad
Now she’s weightless
Is that bad
Where’s her heart
Where’s her heart

No longer a “green girl” (1.3.101), Ophelia speaks freely of herself in third person as an observer. Gilda Rosky Krantz III (Ann Crossley), an outsider, immediately retorts, “That’s not true,” and urges her to “stop dreaming and get changed.” But daydreaming is the last thing this powerful performance seeks to induce. Its multi-national cast highlights the connections between its diverse sites of origin—Asia, Europe, America. Wandering through this landscape is Ophelia the singer, who appears in three of the five books. Her songs offer astute observations of her alter ego in Shakespeare’s play and provide advice on love to others.

Ophelia in Popular Culture

Though the significance of her incoherent presence is challenging to grasp, Ophelia has a central place as a symbol of abuse victim in popular, teen, and performance cultures. She has achieved cult status in some parts of East Asia thanks in part to Hamlet’s global reputation, but her story is often taken out of the Shakespearean context. Two different sets of high-thread-count cotton bedding are sold in China and Taiwan under the name “Ophelia,” and the packaging—catering to the high-end market—associates the name with quality, joy, and modern life. Ophelia is also the name of a self-made heroine possessing compassionate instincts found in a Chinese online video game that has little to do with any Shakespearean source.

A recent adaptation entitled Hamlet-machine-hamlet b (2010) was staged in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Taipei. This production takes a grim view of Ophelia as a globally circulating icon. Quoting from Jean Baudrillard, it is based in part on Heiner Müller’s Hamletmachine (the German playwright even made a guest appearance typing out the script on a typewriter). The play explores modern consumer culture and the future of the “culture industry” through installation art and fragmented monologues. The performance space in a black box theater was designed to resemble a digital screen. Frames large enough for the performers to walk through were hanging to the left and right, and images and texts were projected to the white ceiling. Hamlet’s revenge mission is irrelevant because this Hamlet is a street artist whose “performance” as an avenger is bought for private consumption by a rich patron. A fan of Hamlet, Ophelia goes to great lengths to pursue her idol, only to discover that the man in front of her is one of the many mindless, digitally reproduced avatars—fleeting simulations of the real.

One of the most striking scenes involved Ophelia floating in onstage streams, clutching a crimson luxury handbag. The scene, accompanied by a tagline taken from Baudrillard, dominated the poster: “We live by object time; by this I mean we live by the pace of objects, live to the rhythm to their ceaseless succession.” It is notable that Ophelia blinks her eyes as she
enjoys what appeared to be a spa experience rather than a “return” to mother nature as a consequence of suicide or fatal accident. A parodic visual citation of Millais’s sentimental Ophelia, the figure of Ophelia in this production becomes a vehicle for commentary on the endless precession of simulacra. She first appears as a black female mannequin, clad in a white fluffy skirt and hanging from the ceiling. The audience watches on through a frame that symbolizes a screen. The message from a world of simulacra is driven home when all the actors cross-dress to become Ophelia as the mannequin is lowered onto the stage.

Ninagawa’s Hamlet (1995), privileges local, rather than international, contexts. Ophelia follows the Japanese custom of arranging ornate hina dolls on tiers—a pastime for ladies at the court. The dolls will eventually be set afloat to carry misfortunes away so that the children of the house can grow up healthy. Since the dolls represent hope, Ophelia’s giving away dolls rather than flowers in her mad scene carries with it a grave tone. The metaphorical connection between drowning—dolls adrift—and despair is also evident. Ophelia has also been more freely appropriated and loaded with local significance. South Korean Internet novels chronicle the romantic adventures of couples who, oddly enough, are evoked as Hamlets and Ophelias, convenient shorthand for unfulfilling love, such as Romeo and Juliet’s. The same pattern is evident in Shi Jisheng’s “A Sonnet for Ophelia” (1983)—an ode to romantic love, detached from the context of Hamlet—and Wu Zhenhuan’s “Ophelia” (2008), among other creative works in Chinese. Wu’s poem alludes to Hamlet by connecting a “feeble girl” to the departure and arrival of a mysterious man—her only “curse and blessing.”

East Asian rewritings transform Ophelia from “a document in madness” to symbols of purity and female agency, privileged sites of resistance of authority, and an icon of true love. These adaptations of Hamlet are pre-occupied with their placement and displacement in relation to sources of authority. While her songs still occupy the center of attention, Ophelia does not tend to stand in for lost girlhood or female madness in Asia. Instead, the strands of girl power and fragile girlhood coexist as Asian Ophelias lay claim to their moral agency by thinking and acting on their own behalf. However, they are simultaneously limited by the new cultural environments they seek to sustain. In some instances, the double bind of Confucian ethical codes and East Asian modernity contributes to contrasting interpretations of Ophelia that make her, at once, a powerful mediator and a symbol of the abject. In other instances, these powerful rewritings serve as inspiration for local artists and audiences, for spawning new images of modern women. In still other instances, the figure of Ophelia is pitched as a cross between a conscientious and filial Cordelia, an innocent Desdemona, a loyal subject, and a fearless and dedicated lover.

Though it is necessary to highlight female agency in its local contexts, these examples do not seek to privilege any version of local feminism or to posit a nationalist category of “Asian” women. On the contrary, they slow us down, defamiliarize what has been assumed to be familiar, and help focus our attention as we “return” from translation and adaptation. They lead us back to Shakespeare’s plays with new paths for interpretation. The artistic achievements of these interpretations of Ophelia lie in the rich and complex pictures of love, social responsibility, and transcendence that they can offer. Freely appropriating Ophelia as a privileged site of female agency, writers and directors have also parodied constructions of female madness and unrequited love through Ophelia. Indeed, in accord with what Elaine Showalter argues—there may be no “true” Ophelia for whom “feminist criticism must unambiguously speak”—a variety of images of East Asian women emerge through these rewritings.

Notes

I wish to thank Coppelia Kahn, fellow panelists, and the audience at the Modern Language Association convention in Los Angeles (2010) for their invaluable feedback, and Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams for inviting me to be part of the panel and for sharing their insights on all things Ophelia.

2. Waugh went on to say that “I cannot see her as Lady Macbeth, but she seems to me perfectly suited for the role of Juliet or to any of the heroines of the comedies.” Evelyn Waugh, “My Favourite Film Star,” The Daily Mail May 24, 1930. I thank Jonathan Hay for bringing the text to my attention.

3. Throughout the chapter, I follow the East Asian conventions of putting family names before given names. Bing Xin is the nom de plume of Xie Wanying (1900–99), which means Icy Heart and alludes to purity and untainted character. One of the most prolific and influential Western-educated Chinese writers, she is best known for children’s and adolescent writing.

4. See S. I. Hayakawa, “What Does It Mean to Be Creative?” Through the Communication Barrier, ed. Arthur Chandler (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 104–05; see also “News and Notes,” British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition) 284.6327 (1982): 1483. This is not to be confused with popular usage of the term that has little to do with Hamlet or Ophelia, such as the pop/rock band Ophelia Syndrome that was formed in 1998.

5. More primary research materials including digital videos with annotations and English subtitles are now available. Some of the stage and film adaptations discussed in this chapter will be available on Global Shakespeare, an open-access video archive with federated search functions edited by Alexander C. Y. Huang and Peter Donaldson. See (http://globalshakespeare.org).


8. The Ophelia Collective, a collective of female dancers and choreographers, staged The Ophelia Project, a hybrid stage work of physical theatre and contemporary dance, to celebrate womanhood. The Ophelia Project, dir. Rhiannon Brace, perf. The Ophelia Collective, Robin Howard Dance Theatre at the Place, London, 2011; quotation accessed December 1, 2010 (http://www.theromanticrevolutions.co.uk/).


11. Theodore Huters, Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005) 2.


13. Lao She, “Xin Huanmuliede [New Hamlet]” 448–49. Translations are mine.


18. Charles and Mary Lamb, Tales from Shakespeare 6.

19. Lin Shu and Wu Yi, Yingwu shiren yinbian yanyn (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1904).

20. It may not be a coincidence that Lin is using a strategy similar to Mary Cowden Clarke’s. Lin Shu and Chen Jialin translated “The Thane’s Daughter” from The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines and published it as A Short Biography of Geluzhi, a Marvelous Lady (Qinji Geluzhi xiaozhuan) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1916).


34. Silbergeld, China into Film 175.

35. This film was screened at the 2008 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America in Dallas, TX. The Banquet, dir. Feng Xiaogang, perf. Zhang Ziyi, Ge You, Daniel Wu, Zhou Xun, music by Tan Dun, Media Asia Films, 2006, DVD.
42. See Huang and Donaldson *Global Shakespeares* and Lee, "Shamanism in Korean Hamlets."
45. As evidenced by American writer Lisa Klein's Opelia and "The Book of the Young Girl"—a part of Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen's stage production *Search: Hamlet* in Kronborg Castle, Denmark. Some adaptations present her as a pathological woman, while others construct a more assertive Opelia, such as *Twelve Opelias* by Caridad Svich and *Opelia Thinks Harder* by Jean Brets. Richard Schechner recently directed an unsettling "performance-in-progress" exploring Opelia's descent into madness and suicide, *Imagining O*, at the University of Kent in July 2011.
46. Opelia and other characters, along with their dialogues, are also being distilled to construct notions of innocence and love in such musicals as *With Love, William Shakespeare*, staged by Theatre Noir and Hong Kong Repertory Theatre in 2011.
47. The play was written by Chan Ping-chiu and coproduced by Hong Kong On & On Theatre Workshop and Taipei's Mohbiu Strips Theatre.
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