Iconic characters: Ophelia

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Introduction: Ophelia and popular culture

Douglas Lanier's macro-article on Shakespeare and popular culture reminds us of the etymologies of both the words “popular” and “culture.” “Culture” takes its origins from the practice of farming, its metaphor of cultivation or growth suggesting that a community simultaneously worships or appeases angry gods, and nourishes itself, through literary and artistic expression. Ophelia in so-called popular culture conforms to Lanier's taxonomies (folk, mass, “pop,” public, and global). Moreover, these categories respond, often in visual or iconic form, to particular textual aspects of Ophelia’s character: a “rose of May” or emblem of innocent, beautiful, doomed sexuality; a “document in madness” whose lyric sufferings anticipate nineteenth-century female hysteria; a decorative object, “beautified” by the words of Hamlet in his intercepted letters, of Gertrude in her account of Ophelia’s drowning, and by the drawings, etchings, paintings, and photographs of scores of visual artists thereafter; and a victim of misused male power, that is, an “obedien[t]...daughter,” “deject and wretched” lover, “kind sister,” and voiceless political subject. Popular appropriations of Ophelia may additionally fantasize an imagined resistance on Ophelia’s part both to her scripted silencing through suicide and to the dominant traditions of the eighteenth, nineteenth- and
early twentieth century that represented the character as pre-sexual or child-like rather
than as the sexually-aware singer who enters in Act IV.

The folk Ophelia comes into existence before the development of professional
theatre and literary critics or of twentieth-century mass media, and generally emphasizes
the character’s mildness, youthfulness, sexual purity, and her associations with the
natural world, particularly with water and flowers. The mass Ophelia comes into her own
with the development of cheap print in the late nineteenth century and reaches her
apotheosis in the Golden Age of Hollywood. Hollywood studios market and often
simplify the mass Ophelia for media consumers and, especially, for high-school and
college students. The “pop” Ophelia partakes of the arch intellectualism of post-modern
art, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. Professional artists, novelists
and critics produce the “pop” Ophelia in opposition to both the mass Ophelia and the folk
Ophelia, directing their arguments about Ophelia herself and about the function of artistic
production towards both these audiences.

The public Ophelia exists solely as a means to make an argument about society, in
particular about girlhood. She appears at the end of the twentieth century, after the
so-called second-wave of feminism, and becomes initially the organizing principle of
campaigns to protect and preserve a girlish strength and beauty in the face of conflicting
and constricting cultural messages about what women’s bodies ought to look like, and
subsequently, a member of the imagined “third-wave” of sexually-assertive and
outspoken young women. The twenty-first century, global Ophelia overlaps some forms
of the mass Ophelia and reincarnates the folk Ophelia, bringing her full circle. The
Folk Ophelia

The stage directions of Q1, the so-called bad quarto of *Hamlet* (1603), “Enter Ofelia playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing” and her speech in that same quarto upon her second mad entrance, “Wel God a mercy, I a bin gathering of floures” give us the characteristics of Ophelia that dominate her representation in the eighteenth century. Stage productions figured her distraction through disheveled clothing or hair; her innocence through armfuls of flowers, in her arms, in her hair, and on her gown; and her pathos through the attention given to her mad scenes, often at the expense of the few other lines she has in the play. Directors often cut Ophelia’s soliloquy, “Oh, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!” in order to downplay an Ophelia who serves as tragic chorus in favor of an Ophelia who is the subject of commentary or analysis, a passive art-object ready for ekphrastic analysis rather than an active and insightful commentator on
Hamlet’s own antic disposition. In addition, the witty aptness of Ophelia’s responses to Hamlet’s sexual equivoces during the play-within-the-play and “the bawdiness of her madness” (Aasand 224) in her songs disappeared, so that the character displayed a genteel, refined, and total ignorance of sexual matters rather than the earthy, sincere and partial knowledge of Shakespeare’s text.

<FOR ONLINE EDITION: The Pre-Raphaelites’ Ophelia>

Early visual representations of Ophelia varied widely in their treatment of the figure, but tended to represent her as “an aestheticized and eroticized madwoman” (Rhodes 26). During the second half of the nineteenth century, visual representations of Ophelia increasingly imagined the scene of her drowning in the brook, a scene given to viewers only indirectly in Shakespeare’s play, through Gertrude’s elegy. This shift corresponds to what Elaine Showalter calls “the re-sexualization of Ophelia” (89), the presentation of Ophelia as the victim of a sex-specific hysteria or madness who is nonetheless sexually attractive and available to the male viewer or audience member. Perhaps the most famous of these drowning Ophelias is John Everett Millais’s 1852 portrait of the sickly, wistful Elizabeth Siddal as Ophelia, an image as notorious for the conditions of its production (Millais required his model to lie in a bath warmed only by oil lamps) as for its verdant detail. The Pre-Raphaelite artists particularly prized Siddal as a model (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a founding member of the Brotherhood, later married her) because they believed that her face and figure exhibited the refinement, delicacy, and
emotion necessary to represent Shakespearean characters in the visual arts; part of their attention to verisimilitude and technique required the matching of model to character. Other Pre-Raphaelite Ophelias similarly direct a voyeuristic gaze upon an exquisitely beautiful and fragile female figure in a deeply-realized landscape. Arthur Hughes’ 1852 *Ophelia* notoriously presents a pallid, elfin, child-like figure wearing a flimsy white shift and a spiky crown of thorny stems, scattering flower-petals into the river from her seated position on the leaning trunk of the willow tree. The image is semi-circular, its Christian symbolism heightened by its icon-like framing in a great expanse of rectangular gilt on which is painted in Gothic type in red and blue lettering Gertrude’s account of Ophelia’s death. Hughes revisited the subject of Ophelia in 1871, painting an Ophelia at once more active and more adult in her sexuality (Rhodes 109). This Ophelia stands upright on the river-bank holding the willow-bough with one hand and her gown, which she has used to contain her flowers, with the other; the gentle billowing of her clothing almost hints at pregnancy, although her unfocused blue gaze still displays the feminine “vacancy” admired by Victorian art critics in both paintings.

**Mass Ophelias**

Where Restoration and eighteenth-century directors of Shakespeare attempted to refine and restrain Ophelia, popular entertainments in the nineteenth century returned both the character’s nascent sexuality and her folk associations with the rural, the earthy, and the fertile through Ophelia’s best-known scenes and attributes, namely the nunnery
scene and her scenes of madness. In John Poole’s *Hamlet Travestie* (1810), Hamlet’s strictures in the nunnery scene target not merely women’s made-up faces but specific, and iconic, female prostheses that might be worn by his Ophelia – breasts, hair, legs, and buttocks. Ophelia’s gown is dirtied with mud, she distributes “cabbage,” and she regrets that she is unable to bring “a rope of onions,” because her father “ate them all before he died” (53). In nineteenth-century America, immigrant cultures also made Ophelia their own, in both comic and sentimental form. Sarah Bernhardt’s prince established the broad humor latent in Hamlet’s antic disposition, although her earlier portrayal of Ophelia emphasized the young woman’s sincere passion for Hamlet. On the melancholic side, B. Vilenski’s “Yiddish Hamlet,” starring Bertha Kalish as the prince, “out-Shakespeared Shakespeare” by bringing on stage the waterlogged corpse of Ophelia at Laertes’ refusal to weep because his sister has already had “too much of water” (Berkowitz 100-108).

<FOR ONLINE EDITION: Ophelia on film>

The twentieth century saw the continued growth of a professional class of critics and actors distinct from mass culture, even as this high or elite culture appropriated popular genres. Thus Laurence Olivier’s *Hamlet* (1948) owed its murky black-and-white spiral staircases and cloudy battlements both to critic Ernest Jones’s influential Freudian interpretation of the play and to the cinematic conventions of film noir. Jean Cartmell observes that Olivier’s Ophelia, Jean Simmons, was only sixteen when cast, her vulnerability emphasized by Olivier’s cutting her soliloquy (as Ophelia’s eighteenth-century editors had), the violence of the Nunnery scene (in which Olivier’s
Hamlet flung her down on the stairs so that she was literally a fallen woman) and the lighting and set design that illuminated her white face against the dark castle and her maidenly retreat into a walled garden. Hamlet’s intense and Oedipal relationship to Gertrude in Olivier’s germinal film would sideline any suggestion of an adult affair between Hamlet and Ophelia until 1996, when Kenneth Branagh interpolated into his film sequences featuring Hamlet and Ophelia making love.

The absence of a sexual relationship with Hamlet himself did not, however, prevent some filmed Ophelias from becoming the focus of eroticism. Tony Richardson’s 1969 filmed version of his own stage production starring Nicol Williamson as Hamlet featured a breathless, tightly-laced Marianne Faithfull as an Ophelia already sexualized by a quasi-incestuous relationship with her brother, and adding a new meaning to Laertes’s characterization of Hamlet’s love as a “toy in blood.” The lingering, incestuous kiss prefigures Claudius’s salacious enjoyment of his line, “our sometime sister, now our queen,” as he triumphantly kisses Judy Parfit’s voluptuous Gertrude. Franco Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* cast Helena Bonham-Carter as a rebellious Ophelia driven to madness by the powerful male figures around her, especially her father, as she attempts to assert a nascent womanhood. Confronted with betrayal, she retreats into an interior world of pre-adolescence except for shocking interludes of sexual awareness (such as when she grabs the codpiece of a horrified sentry on the battlements). Kate Winslet’s Ophelia, directed by Kenneth Branagh, is the most violent in her madness and the most mature in her connection with Hamlet. In this film, their affair is fully consummated, sincere,
consensual, and long-standing. This Ophelia’s madness, too, is active and violent enough that Ophelia must be restrained in a strait-jacket and padded cell.

In Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), Ophelia (Julia Stiles) is an artist, indeed, a photographer, in her own right, a fitting counterpoint to the budding film-maker Hamlet (Ethan Hawke) and to the film’s obsession with representation and media old and new. Stiles’s Ophelia combines a helpless, weeping passivity when her overbearing father forces her to wear a concealed microphone in her encounter with Hamlet with a spirited anger when Hamlet tries to “lie in [her] lap” during the Mousetrap. Ophelia’s imagined world in this film creates an inner life for the character outside her limited spoken lines, a life represented in art, by the Polaroids she burns in response to Hamlet’s recorded answering-machine message exhorting her, “Get thee to a nunnery!”; in fantasy, by the repeated shot of her plunging, fully clothed, into the fountain in the central lobby of Denmark Enterprises; and in her Gothic style, as she changes the color of her nail-polish to black as if in sympathy with Hamlet’s own rebellious mourning.

**Pop Ophelias**

We can distinguish the mass Ophelia from the “pop” Ophelia through the wit or irreverence or self-consciousness demonstrated by the latter’s creators. While the mass Ophelias are intended to be to some extent serious or faithful adaptations of Shakespeare (even when, as in the Almereyda *Hamlet*, such appropriations are modernized and drastically condensed), the “pop” Ophelias have little or no interest in fidelity to an
ancient original. Instead, “pop” Ophelias offer self-conscious appropriations by self-defined artists. Such incarnations are usually twentieth-century phenomena, associated with (post)modernism and the “pop art” of Andy Warhol, although they are not limited to the visual arts. They can include everything from what we still call “pop” music to novels, television shows, surrealist film, and fine arts.

<FOR ONLINE EDITION: Pop art Ophelia: the Brotherhood of Ruralists>

During the 1970s and 1980s a group of English artists retreated from the increasingly conceptual and abstract London art world to the countryside, styling themselves (in emulation of both the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and of Samuel Palmer’s Brotherhood of Ancients) The Brotherhood of Ruralists. Later known for their cover designs for Methuen for the Arden Shakespeare, second series, the Ruralists agreed that their first joint major exhibition should consist of a series of paintings, drawings, and sculptures on the theme of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. The exhibition opened at the Bristol Museum of Art in October 1980 and traveled the same year to Trinity College, Cambridge. The Ruralists’ work encompassed a variety of styles and approaches – from the arch wit of Peter Blake, the so-called “Godfather of English Pop Art” and the sardonic feminism of his then-wife, the fabric artist and sculptor Jann Haworth, to the affectionate portraits of Annie Ovenden, the clear lines and color blocks of Graham Ovenden, the subtle watercolors of Ann Arnold, and the heightened botanical detail of Graham Inshaw – but their Ophelias and, later, their Arden Shakespeare covers, shared
what Blake himself called in an interview a “magic realism,” a deep engagement with the textual world of Shakespeare within a mythologized English landscape (Dean 9).

Blake’s *Ophelia* was exhibited in two states. The first recalls Ophelia’s own words about her encounter with Hamlet in her closet, his “doublet all unbraced,” his face pallid and “piteous,” perusing her face “As he would draw it” (2.1.77-100), but in this painting it is Ophelia herself, semi-nude, hair disheveled, who gazes fixedly upon the viewer. The later state partly clothes Ophelia in a torn blouse; her nose is bloodied, and she holds a bedraggled bunch of flowers. Her uneven gaze is still directed unflinchingly towards the viewer. Inshaw’s eerie *The River Bank (Ophelia)* depicts two female figures in a highly manicured and pollarded English garden. One is fleeing, with her hands holding on to her broad-brimmed hat; the other lies drowned in the river. The style is a postmodern hyper-realism, with vivid colors and granular detail on, say, the petals of an iris, but the womens’ bodies, the clothing of the drowned girl, and the shapes of greenery are elongated and twisted in a way that makes it hard for us to know whether we are seeing Gertrude (or a ladies’ maid) discovering Ophelia’s corpse, or Ophelia herself in both past and present, both contemplating suicide and achieving it. Graham Ovenden’s *Ophelia* (1979-81), like Inshaw’s, was rendered in oil, but unlike Inshaw’s, it offers the deceptive simplicity of commercial art (such as an album cover, or a poster). A very young, blonde, teen or ’tween girl defiantly looks down her nose at the viewer, holding on to her hair in two bunches and standing against a background of marshy green water and a twilit blue sky with a crescent moon. Stylized tiny, crisp flowers in bright colors are woven into her hair and the buttonholes of her shocking-pink dress. Graham Arnold’s
Ophelia lies supine on a bed in the ruins of a castle, the outdoor blues and greens and yellows of the sky and earth around her picking up the variegated colors of a patchwork tablecloth beside her. She wears a frilled pinafore dress, like a child, but her mood suggests abandonment, and the assorted objects beside her (a seashell, a folded chess board, a rock, and other traditional subjects for still-lives) hint at a larger, still unexplained mystery.

The three women Ruralists emphasized the character’s youth and innocence above all (a tactic that allies them with the proto-feminist tradition of Mary Cowden Clarke’s “Ophelia: The Rose of May” in her *Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* [1851]). Instead of the sulky, nascent sexuality of Graham Ovenden’s teen Ophelia, Annie Ovenden’s child-Ophelia, in a crocheted black shawl beneath an ivied tree and bearing a bunch of poppies, forget-me-nots, and other flowers, displays a girlish eagerness for approval, standing as if posed for a family photograph. Ann Arnold’s Ophelia sits pensively on what we assume is the river bank (the water is not seen) against a background of archetypally English downs, hugging her legs and hunching her back as if to hide her developing body from the viewer’s gaze. Jann Haworth exhibited two terracotta and fabric sculptures: *Baby Ophelia*, an infant’s head; and *Ophelia*, a be-ribboned terracotta mask of an adult face with a haunting expression of extreme emotional release, somewhere between ecstasy and anguish.

<FOR ONLINE EDITION: Ophelia in popular young adult fiction >
Mary Cowden Clarke wrote for Ophelia a pre-history that was both material and psychosexual, offering readers the historical detail of an imagined medieval Denmark and the rich characterization of an imagined series of mental traumas. Without ever explicitly telling her readers, she hints that Ophelia from a very young age had been surrounded by maternal loss, not only the absence of her own birth mother but also the specter of her foster-sister’s unwanted pregnancy when the latter is abandoned by a prince who had wooed her in secret. Cowden Clarke ended her story where Shakespeare’s began, but twentieth- and twenty-first-century young adult fiction not only invents a support-system for the character but also lifts her out of her tragic Shakespearean present.

The three best-known young adult novels about Shakespeare’s character imagine that Ophelia is privy not only to Hamlet’s plan to put on an antic disposition but also that the heroine stages her own death in order to escape the confines of Danish court life. Lisa Klein’s *Ophelia* (2006) begins with a fairly realistic representation of what life in country and court might have been like for an intelligent, under-educated girl in sixteenth-century Denmark, but concludes fantastically, as Ophelia successfully elopes and marries a newly-cheered Hamlet, and sets up as an apothecary and wise-woman. The action of Rebecca Reisert’s *Ophelia’s Revenge* (2003) takes place both before and after the events of Shakespeare’s play: Ophelia, misled by the seemingly benign ghost of Yorick, indirectly commits all the murders mentioned in the play, through her access to the poisons belonging to the herb-woman of the village where she was wet-nursed after the suicide of her mother. Ophelia fails to recognize both Yorick’s duplicity and Hamlet’s genuine melancholic mania. This recalcitrant heroine, pregnant with the child of the
now-dead Prince Hamlet, escapes Elsinore not because of but despite her own machinations. Lisa Fiedler’s *Dating Hamlet* (2002) stays within the action of the play, apart from Ophelia’s feigned death, but purports to be narrated entirely by the heroine. Christine Balint’s 2004 novel *Ophelia’s Fan* recounts the childhood and coming-of-age of actress Harriet Smithson, muse to composer Hector Berlioz, whom critics so identified with the character that she became known as “the Fair Ophelia.”

<FOR ONLINE EDITION: Ophelia in poetry and literary fiction>

Natasha Trethewey’s beautiful novel-in-verse, *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (2002), creates a past for one of the women immortalized in E.J. Bellocq’s famous Gilded Age photographs of light-skinned, mixed-race (“octoroon”) sex workers in the brothels of New Orleans’ Storyville. While Bellocq’s striking images often obliterate or even literally mask the faces of his subjects, turning the women into the characterless bodily receptacles of a customer’s (or a viewer’s) lust, Trethewey’s poems name one of these women and imagine her origins, hopes, desires, and dreams. Forced by poverty, despite her intelligence and literacy, to work for “the Countess” in her octoroon brothel, Trethewey’s Ophelia meets Bellocq, who asks to photograph her. Although Ophelia agrees to become Bellocq’s subject, she learns to operate the camera herself and becomes an artist in her own right, producing delicate still-lives rather than the voyeuristic portraits of her erstwhile mentor. Ultimately, Trethewey’s Ophelia “look[s] into / a capped lens, [sees] only [her] own clear eye” and steps right out of the photograph, “into her life” (46, 48).
The title-story of Deborah Levy’s collection *Ophelia and the Great Idea* (1989) takes for its unreliable narrator a male chemist, twice-married, with a step- and a biological daughter, each named “Ophelia.” The narrator conducts mysterious experiments with “uranium” (57), and idiosyncratically names his daughters O1 and O2. The girls divide between themselves many of the characteristics of Shakespeare’s Ophelia, or of Hamlet. O1, the elder, is haunted by the ghost of her mother, who died covered in “pussing eruptions” on her skin (42). O2 offers her step-father “Fennel for welcome home” and “Camomile for long life” (45). O2 drowns under a willow tree decorated with “twists of barbed wire” (57). In an addition to Shakespeare’s story (and perhaps a nod to Mary Cowden Clarke), O1, abandoned by her husband, gives birth to a child whom she drowns in a sack. O2’s “great idea” had been to enshrine labor in the natural world, to sanctify a factory setting by placing in it traditional crafts such as dyeing and weaving (59). What O1 calls “the damaged ear of the twenty-first century,” namely pollution, mass industry, and sexism, make the great idea “drown itself” (52, 59). The narrator’s last words express, finally, an awareness of the wrong he has perpetrated against the natural world and against his daughters: “If anything could grow in the poor soil around the lake I have polluted, and I had a last wish, I would choose rosemary. Rosemary for remembrance.” (60).

**Public Ophelias**
The public Ophelia appropriates Shakespeare as a vector for a public discourse about girlhood. Psychologist Mary Pipher’s advice book, *Reviving Ophelia*, makes Shakespeare’s tragic heroine the emblem for a generation of teenage girls who suffer a dramatic loss of confidence, gregariousness, and academic and athletic achievement once they reach adolescence. In contrast to the proleptic traumas experienced by Mary Cowden Clarke’s young Ophelia, Pipher’s Ophelia “As a girl...is happy and free, but with adolescence she loses herself” in seeking approval from the dominant male figures in her life, namely Hamlet and Polonius, until, “dressed in elegant clothes that weigh her down, she drowns in a stream filled with flowers” (20). Pipher deliberately mentions Ophelia’s “elegant” clothing in order to anticipate her argument that twentieth-century cultural ideals of beauty are literally killing girls by directing them towards self-destructive behaviors such as self-mutilation, self-starvation, and -- another inadvertent early modern echo -- purging. Pipher recommends for present-day Ophelias and their parents an almost homeopathic cure: parents’ regulations to cure peers’ rules, namely the personal attention of loving, firm elders as an alternative to the arbitrary demands of careless, unpredictable schoolfriends and mass media.

Responses to Pipher’s book included both collections of essays by adolescent girls who felt that they could project the voice of the submerged heroine herself (Sara Shandler’s *Ophelia Speaks*, 1999) and of the birth mother who is absent in Shakespeare (Cheryl Dallasega’s *Surviving Ophelia* and Nina Shandler’s *Ophelia’s Mom*, both from 2001). Practical interventions include The Ophelia Project in Erie, Pennsylvania, founded in 1997 to support adolescent girls and their families and which now extends its mandate
to counter the effects of “relational aggression” among boys, girls, and even adult co-workers. Most recently (April 2011), the Ophelia Project returned to Shakespeare, albeit to a different play, to dramatize the consequences of social aggression in general and cyber-bullying in particular by staging a version of *Much Ado About Nothing* as a multimedia drama on the social networking site Facebook; the Project also runs a YouTube channel for educational videos made by the organization’s researchers and for amateur video responses, many of which re-tell or reimagine the story of Ophelia herself.

**Global Ophelias, folk and mass**

Global Ophelia appears worldwide in mass media such as film but also in art forms still considered elite or “high,” such as stage-plays or sculpture. She has perhaps the longest history in France, where a misplaced comma in an edition of one of Shakespeare’s sources, Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* (1570), led to two centuries of confusion over Ophelia’s awareness of Hamlet’s plans, her sexual activity, and her sanity (Vest 17). The French tradition comprises two Ophelias, one a sexually active, loyal mistress to Hamlet, and the other a saintly virgin. French Enlightenment Ophelias were tragic heroines, magnificent, strong, and heroic, so presented in order to counter what neo-classical critics perceived as Shakespeare’s ugly mingling of genres. Popular adaptations on stage removed the grave-diggers’ scene, and some allowed Ophelia to survive and reign with Hamlet.
Such neo-classical conformity persisted longer in France than in England, so that decorous productions obscured Ophelia’s madness in the early nineteenth century. Gradually, however, Ophelia’s madness became “beautified,” as it were, part of the character’s fascination, in part because of France’s adoring love-affair with the “at once intense and winsome” actress Harriet Smithson (Vest 126). The French Ophelia continued to draw on what philosopher Gaston Bachelard helpfully dubbed the “Ophelia complex,” the association of beautiful and needy women with death and water, usually through their drowning (so fixed is the association between Shakespeare’s character and the water that from 1964-1976 the Danish scholarly journal Marine Biology Research was called, perhaps with tongue in cheek: Ophelia). The complex appears in fiction, through the motif of vulnerable women near water in George Sand’s novel Indiana [1832]; in painting, such as Eugène Delacroix’s paintings of an Ophelia set against sky and sea; and in sculpture, such as Auguste Préault’s 1876 bronze Ophelia with its wave-like forms wreathed around the figure’s hair. French Decadent poetry, such as Charles Baudelaire’s Fleurs du Mal (1861), associated both Hamlet and Ophelia with an evil world and a time “out of joint,” and Arthur Rimbaud in 1870 characterized her breakdown as a sweet or gentle madness, or “douce folie” (“Ophélie,” line 7).

General readers in the Far East often became aware of Shakespeare’s works through prose retellings or adaptations. Charles and Mary Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare, for example, provided the most important medium for the transmission of Shakespeare to China until the 1920s. Lin Shu’s Tales (1904) adapted the Lambs’ stories to Confucian settings and morality; Lin emphasized the commonalities between
Shakespeare’s work and the Chinese tradition of stories about ghosts and spirits. Alexa Alice Joubin writes that in *A Ghost’s Summons* (Lin’s *Hamlet*), Ophelia explicitly becomes insane because of the conflict between her duties to her father and her husband (Hamlet), and drowns when the branch of the willow tree that she was decorating breaks above the brook, and in Lao She’s parody *New Hamlet* (1936), Hamlet is a failed revolutionary who is obsessed with a Western painting of Ophelia (almost certainly Millais’) that he has seen (Peterson and Williams). Even before the rise of film and other new media through the latter half of the twentieth century, *Hamlet* was the single most popular Shakespeare play in China. Post-print media, in particular Laurence Olivier’s influential film *Hamlet*, encouraged further productions and adaptations of Shakespeare, such as Xiong Yuanwei’s stage-play *Hamlet, Hamlet* (2000) in which Hamlet and Ophelia perform the play on stage while simultaneously watching Olivier’s film.

*Hamlet* has likewise been one of the most popular of Shakespeare’s plays in Japan, also because of its emphasis on ghosts, ancestors, and revenge. Given the long traditions of single-sex casts in Japanese theatre (all-women for Classical Kabuki dance-drama and the popular Takarazuka performance tradition; all-male for Modern Kabuki and Noh theatre) and an emergent trend of mixed-sex casts with transgender casting, well-known Japanese Ophelias may be male or female. *The Death of Ophelia* (1926) was one of the first pieces performed in the Takarazuka Grand Theatre by the famous and riotously popular all-women repertory company the Takarazuka Revue, and the company has recently performed a rock musical *Hamlet!!*, using Shoichuro Kawai’s
translation of the play but adding songs and dialog, including a posthumous number by Ophelia.

The twenty-five-year run of *Hamlet Studies*, the only scholarly journal devoted entirely to *Hamlet*, testifies to the popularity of this play in India. At first enshrined in canonical school education in order to shore up the ideals of the British Empire, Shakespeare studies, including translating Shakespeare’s works into indigenous languages became for the generation before Independence “a compensatory act for the loss of political power” (Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 16). After Independence, Shakespeare performances became a marginal part of both school curricula and cultural production, a decline dramatized in the evocative and beautiful Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah*, with a screenplay by Ruth Prawer Jhabala. *Shakespeare Wallah* follows the increasingly difficult fortunes of a traveling company of English actors in India shortly after Independence. The troupe performs *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Hamlet* within the story, but the film itself also gives us two tragic Ophelias, one English (played by Felicity Kendal), one Indian (played by Madhur Jaffrey), both in love with a princely playboy.

This decline of curricular or imperially mandated Shakespeare in India corresponded, however, to a greater freedom among directors to adapt or modify Shakespeare to Indian traditions or, in complete contrast, to present the plays in Western dress or with historical detail (motivated by an “empowering mimicry” rather than the “ingratiating obsequiousness” of the early twentieth century, argue Trivedi and Bartholomeusz [18, 16]). Lakshmi Chandrasekhar describes the unusual Kannada
folk-theater (*yakshagana*) production of *Hamlet* directed by Ekbal Ahmed in which the director played the title role and one other actor (Bhageerathi Bai) played all other parts, including Ophelia (Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 194-202). Rajiva Verma catalogues adaptations of *Hamlet* in Hindi cinema (such as Sohrab Modi’s 1935 *Khoon Ka Khoon* or Kishore Sahu’s Olivier-influenced *Hamlet* in 1954) but more interestingly documents echoes of Hamlet in the 1980 Bollywood blockbuster *Hum Paanch*, including a young woman who mourns her lost love through adaptations of Ophelia’s songs. With the arrival of video that could be viewed in private homes or in villages halls in rural India, streamed worldwide by satellite to “non-resident Indians” and downloaded on computer by the growing middle class in and outside India, Shakespeare and Shakespearean characters (like Jane Austen’s characters) are reborn endlessly. At the time of writing (2011) there are two separate *Hamlet* films in process, V.K. Prakash’s Malayalam *Karmayogi* and another with the working title *Hamlet* to be directed by Vishal Bhardwaj.

<For Online Edition: Ophelia in the Craft Marketplace>

The folk Ophelia has a new life in the twenty-first century as the most frequent Shakespeare name used to “brand” or inspire hand-crafted products and art in socially networked sites for creative artists and artisans. The online environment that has enabled such creators to produce, display and sell their work has been called “Web 2.0,” and the social networking sites that they frequent include: Flickr or Tumblr, where photographers may upload and display their images, with or without accompanying blog entries; DeviantArt, where digital and traditional artists buy, sell and encourage each others’ visual art, poetry, prose, and computer programs; Etsy, where crafters can sell their
home-made goods and cultural artifacts to a worldwide market without the expense and overheads of a brick-and-mortar store; and YouTube or Vimeo, where film-makers can archive, revise, and “answer” both amateur and commercial videos. The creators who appropriate the iconic character Ophelia generally do so from a limited knowledge of or expertise in Shakespeare or English literature. Some exploit the conventional associations of the character with gentility, delicacy, and vulnerability familiar from mass culture, but others follow the “pop” tradition by figuring a resistant or even Gothic Ophelia in opposition to conventional, ladylike behavior and affect. The iconic scene of Ophelia’s drowning dominates both YouTube videos and Flickr photo-sharing sites and may be staged seriously as a teenage love-tragedy or comically as a subversive parody (Iyengar and Desmet, in Peterson and Williams; Young).

Sources cited


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**Additional sources**


**Online Resources**

“The Brotherhood of Ruralists Information Website.” Aztec Consulting Ltd. Web. 


