

Shakespeare Seminar

William Shakespeare



Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft

Issue 13 (2015)

Shakespeare's *Unsung*
Heroes and Heroines

<http://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/publikationen/seminar/ausgabe-13-2015.html>

Shakespeare Seminar 13 (2015)

EDITORS

The *Shakespeare Seminar* is published under the auspices of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft, Weimar, and edited by:

Christina Wald, Universität Konstanz, Fachbereich Literaturwissenschaft, Fach 161, D-78457
Konstanz (christina.wald@uni-konstanz.de)

Felix Sprang, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, D-10099
Berlin (felix.sprang@hu-berlin.de)

PUBLICATION FREQUENCY

Shakespeare Seminar is a free annual online journal. It documents papers presented at the Academic Seminar panel of the spring conferences of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. It is intended as a publication platform especially for graduate and postgraduate students. The current call for papers is published on our website.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER

ISSN1612-8362

CONTENTS

Introduction <i>Christina Wald and Felix Sprang</i>	1
<i>Fortinbras's Revenge: Genre and Sovereignty in Hamlet</i> Martin Moraw	3
<i>Before the Madness: Hamlet's Ophelia as an Unsung Revenge Tragedy Heroine</i> David J. Amelang	15
<i>(Un)Heroic Madness: The Jailer's Daughter as Playwright and Audience Figure in The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> Karoline Baumann	27
<i>The Pain of Others: Silencing Lavinia in Titus Andronicus</i> Marlena Tronicke	39
<i>'There's not a boy left alive': The Heroic Eloquence of Shakespeare's Silenced Children. An Analysis of Henry V and Macbeth</i> Gemma Miller	51
<i>Feeble Heroism: 1&2 Henry IV and Intellectual Liberty</i> Sam Gilchrist Hall.....	63
Call for Statements – <i>Shakespeare Seminar at the Shakespeare-Tage 2016</i>	74

BEFORE THE MADNESS: *HAMLET*'S OPHELIA AS AN UNSUNG REVENGE TRAGEDY HEROINE

DAVID J. AMELANG

Introduction

The consensus among scholars and editors is that the source text Shakespeare probably used for *Hamlet* was a late 1580s dramatisation of the Danish myth of prince Amleth of Denmark, one of many revenge plays that were so popular among Elizabethan theatregoers.¹ This earlier version of the play, the *Ur-Hamlet* as it has been called, seems to have been very similar to Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, as Kenneth Muir observes, and could have possibly been written by Kyd himself as well: "both plays begin with a ghost demanding vengeance; both are concerned with the madness, real or assumed, of the avenger; both contain the death of an innocent woman; both heroes blame themselves for their procrastination; both contain a play within the play" (158). Shakespeare modifies the source play, as he so often does, to add his own particular nuances to the plot and its characters. The temperament of *Hamlet*'s young heroine Ophelia, for instance, seems to be an invention of Shakespeare's, for "the girl who foreshadows her in Belleforest [one of the three historical chronicles of Prince Amleth from which *Ur-Hamlet*'s plot must have been taken] is hardly individualized at all", according to William Lawrence (409). In other words, Shakespeare was working with a blank slate when it came to characterising the young heroine of his play; he had the possibility of either looking at his theatrical precedents in other revenge plays such as those written by Kyd, or to go elsewhere to find and develop a new and different sort of character.

Throughout his career, especially in the stage leading up to the writing of *Hamlet* in 1599-1600, Shakespeare for the most part endows his female protagonist roles with a remarkable amount of esprit and dynamism. Lawrence notes that "the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies, so different and so distinctive in character, are alike in one respect: they are courageous and resourceful." *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, however, is in Lawrence's mind the most notable exception. "Whatever we think of that unhappy lady, and we should certainly not judge her too harshly, we cannot call her courageous or resourceful" (409). The instinctive questions are: why did Shakespeare put such an apparently colourless heroine at the heart of his most ambitious play? From where did the motivation for this new character originate? And how did his immediate audiences react to this unexpected change? These queries, however, have not necessarily met with answers, since the early history of analysis of the character of Ophelia has not been very thoroughgoing. The first critic of the heroine of *Hamlet* is thought to have been William Richardson in *On Shakespeare's Imitation of Female*

¹ More in Thompson & Taylor 44-47; Jenkins 82-111; Erne 146-156.

Characters (1788). Richardson, generally thought of as someone sympathetic to Shakespeare's attempts at creating inspiring young heroines, had very little to say about Ophelia and none of it was particularly positive (White 95). Critics in the following century thought along those lines as well. Up until the early 20th century, in fact, the vast majority of critics would rather give her the 'silent treatment' than dissect the text in search for her literary/dramatic essence:

The romantic critics apparently felt that the less said about Ophelia the better. "What shall be said of her? For eloquence is mute before her" asks Mrs. Jameson. Hazlitt considers that she "is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon", and calls her a "flower too soon faded". Strachey writes, "There is more to be felt than to be said in the study of Ophelia's character just because she is a creation of such perfectly feminine proportions and beauty". And Bradley believes that in her fate we have "an element, not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty, which makes the analysis of her character seem almost a desecration". (Camden 247)

Such considered opinions notwithstanding, there is much to be said about Ophelia, if not necessarily in her defence. Indeed, much has been said since Camden published those words in 1964; as R.S. White explains, "Ophelia has unexpectedly generated a rich, more varied, and even perverse afterlife than any literary figure" (93). However, most of recent scholarship discussing Ophelia focuses almost exclusively on her extraordinary madness scene in the fourth act.² Very little has been written about the character that existed (on stage and page, I mean) before that passage. In this brief article I walk down the less trodden path of 'Ophelian' analysis and focus on the character before tragedy struck, the unsung heroine before the swansong. A close reading of Ophelia's interventions, especially when put side-by-side with those of her most prominent generic predecessor, *The Spanish Tragedy's* Bel-Imperia, will shed light on this new type of character that would for the first time take the Elizabethan stage. This article explores how the character of Ophelia stylistically and conceptually challenges the traditional figure of the young female heroine in Elizabethan revenge plays.

Ophelia, an exemplary Gentle Lady

From a broader social point of view, the prevailing perception of women in Elizabethan England was, without any doubt, unflattering. At the beginning of her classic essay "Women on Top", Natalie Davis reminds us that the "female sex was thought to be the disorderly one par excellence in early modern Europe. 'Une beste imparfaicte,' went one adage, 'sans foy, sans loy, sans craincte, sans constance' (an imperfect animal, without faith, law, fear, constancy)" (147). Shakespeare, who is considered one of the more generous playwrights when it comes to creating admirable female characters, time and time again evokes, and ironically exposes, the notion that women are weak and base by nature. "I thank God I am not a woman", Rosalind tells Orlando under the male guise of Ganymede, "to be touched with so many giddy offences as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal" (*As You Like It* 3.2.335-

² Some noteworthy titles focusing exclusively on Ophelia's madness are Bialo; Charney; Guilfoyle; Leverenz; Mazzaro; Neely (1991) 323-338; Neely (2004) ch2; Ronk; Salkeld; Showalter; Trudell. For a good summary on recent Ophelia criticism and afterlife, see Thomson; White.

338).³ Women were considered “dangerous, unstable, and sexually voracious” (Tague 19). It was believed that these imperfections, which can be traced all the way back to the Garden of Eden,⁴ could only be kept in check with constant vigilance and a proper upbringing based on the principle of subduing her personality and by doing so stifling any possibility of the woman’s real nature ever taking over. This idea of education grew in the 17th and 18th centuries with the popularisation of conduct books for ladies, which promoted a lifestyle such as the one described by Ruth Kelso in her pathbreaking study *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*:

The girl in her father’s house would grow to marriageable age, habituated to modest and discreet behavior, in which pert looks, roving eyes, loud laughing and babbling, were abhorrent. Still happy and composed she would have learned to show a modest and shy face, to keep her eyes down, her whole body composed, to speak only when questioned and the to reply humbly and briefly. (54)

In other words, being a good gentlewoman in early modern Europe meant being modest, chaste and all in all unremarkable, in the literal sense.⁵ This, however, contrasts quite sharply with the character presentation of heroines of the Elizabethan stage, who were more often than not made of more assertive qualities than those Elizabethan educators desired of their real-life gentle ladies. The heroines in Shakespearean romantic comedies (and sometimes in other genres as well) are “active, enabling, even redemptive, often in breeches or other disguise. They are witty and self-confident, usually well-born, always beautiful [...] [...] Many of them are aristocratic young women, often unencumbered by parents” (Mann 208). Juliet, Portia, Rosalind, Beatrice, Viola... a long list of charismatic female roles, in some cases unleashed by the license given to them by a male disguise, was proof to Elizabethan theatregoers that it was possible to act contrary to the principles of ‘the body enclosed’ without necessarily becoming a shrew or a scold.⁶ One of the most prominent non-Shakespearean characters of this sort is *The Spanish Tragedy*’s heroine and Elizabethan fan-favourite Bel-Imperia, “a formidable woman”, as editor J.R. Mulryne describes her, “decisively able to control and direct her emotions” (*The Spanish Tragedy* 24).⁷ Bel-Imperia fits almost perfectly Mann’s description of the young

³ By pointing this out I am in no way claiming that these were the thoughts of Shakespeare himself. However, as David Mann explains, even if “Shakespeare did not enter into all the aspects of the theatrical response to this manifestation of male anxiety [...] he is by no means untouched by it and it helps to frame much of his work” (130).

⁴ “The quest for perfection”, Elisja Schulte van Kessel reminds us, “was the primary task of every believer. In reality, it was a duty imposed on women more than on men, and girls’ education placed greater emphasis on virtue than did a boy’s. Moreover, women were scrutinized far more closely than men, because Eve, the prime instigator of evil, lurked in every member of her sex” (146).

⁵ Despite the overwhelming acceptance of this reading of history, Phyllis Rackin cautions about the possible exaggeration of this narrative. As she rightfully points out, “reminders that women were expected to be chaste, silent, and obedient probably occur more frequently in recent scholarship than they did in the literature of Shakespeare’s time” (11).

⁶ In Valerie Traub’s words, the phrase ‘body enclosed’ “refers simultaneously to a woman’s closed genitals, closed mouth, and her enclosure within the home”. More in Traub 129-134; Stallybras.

⁷ Fredson Bowers (82) discusses the popularity of Bel-Imperia among Elizabethan theatregoers, who view her as a symbol of romantic passion and strength.

Shakespearean heroine. And yet, she finds her direct generic successor in Ophelia, who could not have a more different stage personality.

One of the main differences one can observe between Ophelia before her madness and the other young heroines is that not only she still has a parent, but an extremely controlling one at that. Polonius, a prominent figure of the court of Elsinore, embodies one of the most oppressive and claustrophobic environments in the Shakespearean corpus, especially in relation to women. “Ophelia and Gertrude exist within a corrupt state,” writes Marguerite Tassi, “where gender constraints give them little defence and few choices in response to harm, threatened violence and injustice” (76). It would be expected that Polonius, ever the tutor, would make sure his daughter received the most proper education available to gentlewomen of the time. Unfortunately, what passed as ‘elite’ education for ladies in the Renaissance was hardly inspiring, especially in comparison with what their male counterparts were taught:

The sons of the nobility and later of the bourgeoisie were made to study classical culture: the culture of the preparatory school and the university, a culture that could be understood only by those who knew Latin and that opened their way to important careers in the ecclesiastical or civil bureaucracy. Daughters of all strata of society were relegated to learning skills useful around the home: things that a girl could learn from her mother and that were useful in Christian households (Sonnet 101).

If Bel-Imperia and the heroines of Shakespearean comedy are surprisingly unlike the ideal gentlewoman, Ophelia as we get to know her before Act 4 is equally surprising by how much she sounds like the perfect lady as dreamed of by the patriarchal education doctrine of the period: silent, chaste, and obedient to a fault. By setting Bel-Imperia side by side with Ophelia and compare them according to their degree of observance of what scholarly research defines as the proper behaviour of the lady in Renaissance Europe, we may come closer to understanding the singularity of each character in relation to the contemporary audience’s understanding of women.

The first axiom every gentlewoman of the time must observe is that of obedience. Obedience underwrites every other value; obedience to the father first, to the husband later; never is there a moment in their life in which she is not to have a man telling her what to do and how to do it (Kelso 44). Natalie Davis summarises the period’s explanation of the need to subjugate women: “the lower ruled over the higher within the woman [...] and if she were given her way, she likewise would want to rule over those above her” (148). The way in which Ophelia interacts with the rest of the characters in *Hamlet* seems to be the perfect practical representation of this principle: she is just an instrument in the hands of Hamlet and Polonius and Claudius, a pawn in their game, and her only reaction to their never-ending commands is “I shall obey, my lord” (*Hamlet*, 1.3.135).⁸ Bel-Imperia, however, “rebels against her superiors’ assumption that people can be manipulated like things”, Katharine Maus says of her, “her spirited refusal to comply with the dictates of a patriarchal system makes her an attractive character” (xvi). Critics like Bowers even go on to say that her spiting Balthazar, son of the Viceroy of Portugal and one of her suitors, in favour of her

⁸ More on Ophelia’s suffering and manipulation at the hand of other characters in Camden 249; Baldo 23.

heart's choice and lower-born Horatio is in itself an act of certain defiance and independence of mind (67). What is clear is that Bel-Imperia's attitude stands in sharp opposition to Ophelia, who rejects her beloved Hamlet because of her father's direct order. As far as early modern society's expectations are concerned, Bel-Imperia would have appeared to an Elizabethan eye as the more outstanding of the two characters, and Ophelia a much more realistic portrayal of the true gentlewoman – if indeed the educators Kelso cites succeeded in their efforts to repress young women. In terms of literature and theatre, on the other hand, Bel-Imperia is far from being alone; she fits in the group of popular heroines of the likes of Juliet, Hermia, Jessica, and to some extent Portia as well. To see a young woman defy the social rules or conventions in favour of true love is a common literary sight, much more so than a young woman who follows the impositions of her father to infinity and beyond the way Ophelia does.

Another interesting point of difference between Ophelia and Bel-Imperia is the fluidity and the confidence with which they speak. Early modern educators thought the base nature of women could be rectified through speech, or rather lack of it: women should avoid talking unless prompted to by their male superiors (and if so, they should be as brief as possible), “for there is nothing”, a clergyman wrote for his daughters, “that doth so commend, avaunce, set forthe, adourne, decke, trim, and garnish a maid, as silence” (Kelso, 50). Ophelia seems to exemplify this doctrine from her very first appearance in the play in 1.3: out of the 135 lines of the scene, and with her being the only character on stage throughout the entirety of it, she is allotted twenty lines (under 7%), and four of these are half-lines. For the most part she speaks only when asked to, and does so in a brief and humble manner; most of her interventions are either corroborations of understanding what is being said to her, i.e. a marker of obedience, or answers to questions posed to her. According to Shakespeare's own Rosalind, the modest and brief speech which is demanded of gentle ladies goes against their own nature: “Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak”, she exclaims to Celia (*As You Like It* 3.2.243-244). Yet Ophelia's longest speech in that scene is a seven-line address to her brother, which stands out because of its length and tone:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
Do not as some ungracious pastors do
Show me the steep and thorny way to heave
Whiles, a puffed and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads
And reckes not his own rede. (*Hamlet* 1.3.44-49)

This is an exceptional speech for a character much better known for a less inspiring sentence: “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (*Hamlet* 1.3.103).⁹ On the other hand, in her first appearance on stage in 1.4 Bel-Imperia asserts her agency, in contrast with Ophelia's deference, by starting and conducting the dialogue with

⁹ Her tone when talking to her brother Laertes is in general much more casual than when speaking to their father, as it was to be expected; this might be the reason why so modest a speaker finds some elbow room to exercise her own voice at this point of the scene.

Horatio. Even in the wake of death of Andrea, her late lover or love interest, she is not only eloquent but forcefully so:

Signior Horatio, this is the place and hour
Wherein I must entreat thee to relate
The circumstance of Don Andrea's death,
Who, living, was my garland's sweetest flower,
And in his death hath buried my delights. (*The Spanish Tragedy* 1.4.1-5)

Throughout her stage presence in this scene, a total of 99 lines, she speaks almost half of them. 19 of her 44 lines form a soliloquy in which she reveals her intentions of revenging Andrea's death whilst at the same time confessing she has feelings for Horatio and she intends to act on them. Every line she is given, Bel-Imperia reminds us that she will not sit idly by under any circumstance, that she is an active character to her very last fictitious limb. She is so active that without Bel-Imperia there would be no play: she initiates the love-affair with Horatio that will unleash the chain of events that will follow; her presence is necessary to link the two murder plots together; it is her letter to Hieronimo that lets him know his son's death is in need of revenge, and that if he does not execute the revenge she will; her suicide at the end of the play within a play is the final straw for an already overwhelmed audience. Ophelia's lack of activity, on the other hand, has resulted in published summaries of *Hamlet's* plot in which there is no mention of her existence (Clare). Even John Kerrigan, who has written a book on the history of revenge tragedies, does not find many opportunities to talk about Ophelia's relevance regarding the development of the plot other than saying that her rejecting the prince may be yet another reason for Hamlet's distress (184). The apparent irrelevance of Ophelia in the revenge story of *Hamlet*, however, clashes directly with the fact that her madness scene in the fourth act is the catalyst for Laertes' revenge, and the consequential death of the main protagonist. "Remove women," Marguerite Tassi points out, "and the play loses some of its depth and ethical potency" (76).¹⁰

Focusing now not on what is being said but on how it is being said, the differences between Bel-Imperia and Ophelia are no less extreme. Bel-Imperia not only enjoys taking centre stage in conversation, but also has a certain dexterity when it comes to words, whereas Ophelia's speech lacks in poetic flair. For instance, the signature rhetorical device of Bel-Imperia's idiosyncratic dialect is her ability to engage in banter repartee and stichomythia, "a form of dramatic dialogue in which two disputing characters answer each other rapidly in alternating single lines, with one character's replies balancing (and often partially repeating) the other's utterances" (Baldick 243). In 1.4.77-89 she engages in a rapid exchange of witticisms with Lorenzo and Balthazar, picking up some of their words and phrases and recycling them to her advantage. She does this again with Horatio in 2.2.24-29 and in 2.4.24-29 in the climactic love scene of the play. Not only is her tongue sharp, but it is also rich with implicit references to passion ("If I be Venus, thou must needs be Mars / And where Mars reigneth, there must need be wars" *Spanish Tragedy* 2.4.34-35) as well as explicit content ("Then ward thyself: I dart this kiss at thee" *Spanish Tragedy* 2.4.40).

¹⁰ More on Ophelia's role as inciter of action in Tassi 78-97.

This is a direct act of defiance against the doctrine of chaste behaviour expected from a gentle lady, who should from a very young age be “guarded against learning unclean, wanton words, together with uncomely gestures and movements of the body, even in innocence, because she will use the same when older, unaware and often against her will” (Kelso 42). Even her erudite reference to classical mythology was to be condemned since, as Kelso’s sources remind us, reading was one of the great threats to chastity and moral rectitude: “It was a pity, some thought, that girls should learn to read at all, and they would have them taught late” (41).

On the opposite side of things, when Hamlet assails Ophelia with sexually charged puns and double-entendres right before the mousetrap in 3.2, she refuses to take part in the bawdy undercurrent of his language:

HAMLET. Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
 OPHELIA. No, my lord.
 HAMLET. Do you think I meant country matters?
 OPHELIA. I think nothing, my lord.
 HAMLET. That’s a fair thought to lie between maid’s legs.
 OPHELIA. What is, my lord?
 HAMLET. Nothing.
 OPHELIA. You are merry, my lord.
 HAMLET. Who, I?
 OPHELIA. Yes, my lord. (*Hamlet* 3.2.108-117)

Not only does Ophelia dismiss Hamlet’s sub-textual dialogue, but she avoids (however elegantly and successfully we may argue) offering him any opportunity to twist a sexual misinterpretation of her words. She is consciously working against the stichomythia and mockery Bel-Imperia enjoys so much, just as the proper gentle lady should. Needless to say this has nothing to do with Shakespeare’s ability to weave a sharp-tongued female character; Beatrice’s constant repartee with Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* is testament to some of the most enjoyable wordplay of the period’s stage literature, and the play which everybody assumes Shakespeare to have written right before *Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, has in Rosalind one of the most praised female roles of the Shakespeare corpus.¹¹ Ophelia talks only when she is asked to, as briefly as possible, and with an absolute modesty of meaning and style. She is Shakespeare’s best exercise at natural speech.

Conclusion

With the character of Ophelia, Shakespeare seems to have shifted his gaze away from literary/theatrical sources and precedents and directed it toward the model gentlewoman of his day and age. Ophelia is the theatrical representation of ‘the ideal lady’ as encouraged by early modern educators and later put on display in the popular conduct books of the 17th and 18th centuries.¹² However, and at the risk of sounding

¹¹ For all conjectural chronological references in Shakespeare’s career I refer to Wells & Taylor.

¹² These social constraints were aimed specifically at gentlewomen, not Englishwomen of all tiers of society. More in Tague 22-24.

contradictory, this ideal lady is still a character educated to survive and exist in the real world and not in the realm of fiction, or in other words, not in the Castle of Elsinore. She is put in a position that requires much more than what she can offer. Shakespeare consciously, and probably with a lot of self-restraint, takes away from his young heroine the best weapons he could have given her to survive the psychological torture to which he was about to subject her: a strong and independent mind, quick wit and feet, and a sharp tongue to match.

Ophelia is an uncomfortable character for critics, and has often been a subject to avoid because the text does not give us enough to paint a clear picture of what she is: a slice of Emmental cheese, full of gaps, a meal made out of air. Even though in the last fifty years or so criticism of Ophelia has increased exponentially when compared to the previous four centuries, much of what is being said about her either focuses on her madness scene in Act 4, which is certainly her most interesting and redeeming appearance in the play, or is committed to rereading the character in order to cast her in a more positive light. This runs the risk of misreading her, for the truth is that Ophelia, even before going mad, is a formidable *dramatis persona*, perhaps not from a personality standpoint but definitely from a literary and theatrical one. If we understand courage and purpose as synonyms of strength, then she is anaemic; and yet, Shakespeare casts her in one of the most cumbersome roles in dramatic tradition, that of the young female heroine in a revenge tragedy, and then deprives her of any means of weathering the storm that is to come. Her act 4 swansong adds a further, undoubtedly commendable, dimension to the character, “a moment of spotlight to give voice to injustice” in the words of Tassi (73). Tassi goes on to suggest that Ophelia can only promote said justice “once freed from the socially determined behaviours and restrained speech of a young, rational female” (76). However, the first step needed for the swansong to take place is for the playwright to recreate the aesthetics of ‘restrained speech’ through speech, a remarkable effort in its own right.

So *why?* *Why* did Shakespeare put such a defenceless creature in the middle of the psychological sea of troubles that is the castle of Elsinore? *Why* did he develop a character that poses so many questions, and yet gives us so little real material with which to elaborate our interpretations? Perhaps, if the theories of anxiety have any truth to them, Shakespeare was fighting the stereotype and looking to represent this timeless story – timeless genre, indeed – in a way that had not been done before. In his rejection, or reassessment, of genre and plot he replaces a quintessential literary heroine like Bel-Imperia with the factory results of the repressive Elizabethan gentlewomen’s education. That would make sense, in my opinion. I am also inclined to believe that there is a chance Shakespeare wanted to remove some degrees of alienation for his audience, who were used to seeing young men playing the female roles on the professional stage, by creating a character with whom early modern English audiences might identify. But the truth is I do not know, and I wonder if there is anyone who can answer this question with the surviving *Hamlet* texts as the only clues in hand. However this might be precisely the point of Ophelia, and to a certain extent the whole play of *Hamlet* as well: a human tragedy such as this does not have to be fully apprehended in each step it takes for it to be appealing, for it to engage the audience (or reader) as a play. “Beyond the evidence of the text we have no right to

go”, William Lawrence reminds us at the end of his essay (416). That said, the same text is better read when one has a sense of where Shakespeare was coming from when he began to write his play, and that necessarily involves what his contemporaries expected or wanted women to be. The problem is that sometimes this image distorted their – and our – view of the text, and instead of looking at the actual words written we look at the spaces between the lines and fill them with what we think is right. And when we do this, we run the risk of making Ophelia a victim a second time.

As it is so often the case, this paper was written at an intersection in an on-going research. The work forthcoming involves analysing how the doctrine of early modern behavioural guides translated into the real world of the Elizabethan gentle lady. It would be rather simplistic to take the descriptions compiled by Ruth Kelso and other historians, which are after all literary texts, as a literal source for social reality. Despite Rackin’s cautionary warning, it is difficult to argue with the fact that the early modern period’s “vogue for conduct literature was simultaneously schooling young women on how to be ‘chaste, silent, and obedient’, alongside a sprinkling of learning in music and other arts” (Parker 195-196). However, as Ingrid Tague points out, conduct books and similar documents of the period were not “the *only* discourse of femininity. The same society that produced conduct literature also produced pornography that revelled in female sexuality” (21). The use made of Kelso’s study in this article, will benefit immensely from extensive research on early modern elite women, including analysing the language of what could be understood as transcriptions of their public voice. Additionally, the often overlooked characteristics of pre-Act 4 Ophelia must finally be integrated within the global reading of the *dramatis persona*. Or, in other words, the madness of Ophelia should be effectively discussed with her prior disposition in consideration and vice versa. Through the comparative and correlative study of the two behavioural modes, new assessments of the role of repressive education and a consequent state of distress or insanity can be made. Although it is beyond doubt that Ophelia’s outburst in the fourth act derives in no small part from the way the title character systematically belittles her in his quest for revenge, perhaps a dip into the archives may indicate that her father’s questionable didactic ways deserves some of the blame as well. Finally, I plan to compare the portrayals of gentlewomen in English theatre with those in countries in which women were allowed to perform professionally on the stage alongside men, such as Spain and Italy. Moreover, education manuals in these other countries should prove insightful in reconstructing the thought process not only behind the emergence of a character like Ophelia, but also behind the solid preference in all European stage literatures for characters such as Bel-Imperia, Portia, Rosalind, Olivia, Juliet, ... in other words, women who would transgress the limits established by a philosophy of education that encouraged the social constriction of gentlewomen’s voices.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

- Kyd, Thomas. *The Spanish Tragedy*. 1970. Ed. J.R. Mulryne. London: A&C Black, 1989.
- Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. The Arden Shakespeare. Ed. Juliet Dusinberre. London: Thomson, 2006.
- . *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. Eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Methuen, 2006.

Secondary Literature

- Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Baldo, Jonathan. "Ophelia's Rhetoric, or Partial to Synecdoche." *Criticism* 37.1 (1995): 1-35.
- Bialo, Caralyn. "Popular Performance, the Broadside Ballad, and Ophelia's Madness." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 53.2 (2013): 293-309.
- Bowers, Fredson Thayer. *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940.
- Camden, Carroll. "On Ophelia's Madness." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15.2 (1964): 247-55.
- Charney, Maurice, and Hanna Charney. "The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists." *Signs* 3.2 (1977): 451-60.
- Clare, Janet. *Revenge Tragedies of the Renaissance*. Horndon: Northcote House, 2006.
- Davis, Natalie Zemon. "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe." *Symbolic Inversion in Art & Society*. Ed. Barbara A. Babcock. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978. 147-90.
- Erne, Lukas. *Beyond the Spanish Tragedy: A Study of the Works of Thomas Kyd*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- Guilfoyle, Cherrell. "'Ower Swete Sokor': The Role of Ophelia in *Hamlet*." *Comparative Drama* 14.1 (1980): 3-17.
- Jenkins, Harold. "Introduction." *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Thomson, 1982. 1-159.
- Kelso, Ruth. *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*. Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1956.
- Kerrigan, John. *Revenge Tragedy: Aeschylus to Armageddon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Lawrence, William W. "Ophelia's Heritage." *Modern Language Review* 42 (1947): 409-16.
- Leverenz, David. "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View." *Signs* 4.2 (1978): 291-308.
- Mann, David. *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Maus, Katharine Eisaman, ed. *Four Revenge Tragedies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Mazzaro, Jerome. "Madness and Memory: Shakespeare's Hamlet and King Lear." *Comparative Drama* 19.2 (1985): 97-116.
- Muir, Kenneth. *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Neely, Carol Thomas. "'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.3 (1991): 315-38.
- Neely, Carol Thomas. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

- Parker, Patricia. "Construing Gender: Mastering Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*." *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*. Ed. Dymphna C. Callaghan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 193-209.
- Rackin, Phyllis. *Shakespeare & Women*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Ronk, Martha C. "Representations of 'Ophelia'." *Criticism* 36.1 (1994): 21-34.
- Salkeld, Duncan. *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism." *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. Eds. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman. New York: Methuen, 1985. 77-94.
- Sonnet, Martine. "A Daughter to Educate." *A History of Women in the West, Vol. III. Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes. 1991*. Eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. 101-31.
- Stallybrass, Peter. "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed." *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*. Eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quillingan and Nancy Vickers. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 123-42.
- Tague, Ingrid H. *Women of Quality: Accepting and Contesting Ideals of Femininity in England, 1690-1760*. Rochester NY: Boydell Press, 2002.
- Tassi, Marguerite A. *Women and Revenge in Shakespeare: Gender, Genre, and Ethics*. Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2011.
- Thompson, Ann. "Hamlet: Looking Before and After: Why So Many Prequels and Sequels?" *Reinventing the Renaissance*. Eds. Sarah Annes Brown, Robert I. Lublin and Lynsey McCulloch. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Thompson, Ann, and Neil Taylor. "Introduction." *Hamlet*. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Methuen, 2006. 1-137.
- Traub, Valerie. "Gender and Sexuality in Shakespeare." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*. Eds. Margreta de Grazia and Stanley Wells. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 129-46.
- Trudell, Scott A. "The Mediation of Poesie: Ophelia's Orphic Song." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63 (2012): 46-76.
- van Kessel, Elisja Schulte. "Virgins and Mothers between Heaven and Earth." *A History of Women in the West, Vol. III. Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes. 1991*. Eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. 132-66.
- Wells, Stanley, et al. *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- White, R.S. "Ophelia's Sisters." *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*. Ed. Dymphna C. Callaghan. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. 93-113.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz untersucht, wie der Ophelia-Charakter die traditionelle elisabethanische Rachetragödie-Heldin hinterfragt. Im Laufe von Shakespeares Karriere, insbesondere bevor er *Hamlet* schrieb, nahmen dramatische Heldinnen wichtige Rollen in der Handlungsentwicklung ein, obwohl sie sich im Grunde nicht in den Quellen für die jeweiligen Geschichten, die Shakespeare nutzte, befanden. Trotzdem ist Ophelia von ihren direkten chronologischen Vorgängerinnen im Genre zu unterscheiden.

Was inspirierte Shakespeares neue Heldin? Dieser Aufsatz argumentiert, dass die Situation von Frauen jenseits der Bühne der frühen Neuzeit die Quelle von Shakespeares Ophelia waren, jedenfalls, was das Verhalten Ophelias vor ihrem Wahnsinn in den Akten 1 bis 3 betrifft.

Abstract

With the character Ophelia Shakespeare draws attention to what we can identify as conventions of the heroine in Elizabethan revenge tragedy, exemplified, for example by Bel-Imperia, the heroine of *The Spanish Tragedy*. The focus of this paper is on acts 1 to 3 prior to Ophelia's madness, which has usually been the focus of interpretation. While Shakespeare's plays, in particular the ones written before *Hamlet*, are all marked by multifaceted female characters who, in their complexity, have no counterpart in the sources that Shakespeare used when writing these plays, it is in Ophelia that we see a departure from generic conventions most clearly. This paper addresses the question what may have prompted Shakespeare to develop this new type of heroine. Contrasting Ophelia and Bel-Imperia, it is arguably the changing norms and hence the shifting role of the gentlewomen in Shakespeare's London, evidenced in conduct books, that served as an inspiration for the character Ophelia prior to her turning mad.