

Gertrude's Tale

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Ophelia's death takes place decorously offstage. The audience learns about it only through Gertrude's narrative about an innocent young woman who gathers flowers and sings, oblivious to her impending death. This account of Ophelia's apparently benign death raises questions. Why does Gertrude tell this story? Why was she there, and why did no one help Ophelia? Scott Trudell articulates concerns shared by many audience members: "Ophelia's drowning fascinates and disturbs us, especially given the onlookers' perplexing failure to intervene. We wonder how much of Gertrude's portrayal of Ophelia as a harmless aesthetic object 'incapable of her own distress' is calculated to subdue Laertes and the rebellious mob at his heels."¹ The questionable circumstances of this story about an event that the audience does not witness draw attention to the possibly fictionalized nature of this account, and thus to the teller and her motivation. This motivation for her fiction-making goes deeper than political expedience. Gertrude is the appropriate teller for a poetic protest against the vilification of women that she and Ophelia suffer in the fallen Eden of Denmark's corrupted court.

Gertrude recounts Ophelia's death in what is one of her longest speeches:²

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his (hoar) leaves in the glassy stream;

There with fantastic garlands did she come
 Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
 That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
 But our cold maids do "dead men's fingers" call them:

There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke;
 When down her weedy trophies and herself
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide;

And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
 Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds;
 As one incapable of her own distress,
 Or like a creature native and indued
 Unto that element: but long it could not be

Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death.³

Gertrude's narrative has a poetic quality. According to Bridget Lyons, "Ophelia's death is 'beautified' by the Queen . . . described visually in terms of the flowers with which she has been associated, and in language that emphasizes the natural beauty rather than the horror of the scene."⁴ Maurice Hunt sees "the rich pathos, poignant rhythms, and evocative details of her account of Ophelia's death" as evidence of Gertrude's full and complex interior life. He also points out how her narrative is not only beautiful but also stark; her account begins in "melodious" and ends with "muddy."⁵ A. D. Nuttall opens *Shakespeare the Thinker* with an exploration of Gertrude's story, which he calls a "sudden lyric ascent," and an "aria."⁶ Nuttall adds, however, that this speech is not simply about the "exalting agency of high poetry," but also "intelligently, about the tension between lyric exaltation and cold, muddy water."⁷ Gertrude's intensely poetic language suggests that she is not simply lying or embellishing a sordid truth but creating a poetic invention. The tension readers see between lyric and graphic is an important part of a poetics that measures that distance between what should be and what is.

The distance between what is and what ought to be is central to the idealizing poetics Phillip Sidney praises in his "Defense of Poetry." The poet does not simply report what she sees, not "what is or is not, but what should or should not be."⁸ Poetry creates a

golden alternative to the fallen world: "Nature never set forth the earth in so rich so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers. . . Her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden."⁹ Gertrude's poetic account of Ophelia's death evokes this fruitful and flowery golden age. However, her poetics have an edge that protests the tragically fallen world in which she finds herself.

The world of *Hamlet* is a fallen world, where human beings are exiled from a garden of innocence. Echoing the story of the Biblical Fall and the first murder, the ghost tells Hamlet that he has been poisoned by his brother in a garden: the "serpent" that poisoned him now possesses his crown and has seduced his Queen (1.5.38-48).¹⁰ Hamlet sees himself as cast out from Eden. The golden world has declined to "an unweeded garden / that grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (1.2.139-141). Weeds symbolize sinful forgetfulness. The ghost urges Hamlet to vengeance lest he become complacent like the "fat weed / that roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf" (1.5.39-40). When Hamlet upbraids his mother for forgetting his father, he urges her to stop sleeping with Claudius, lest she "spread compost on the weeds / To make them ranker" (3.4.172-73). Hamlet here associates weeds with Gertrude's sexuality as well; fecundity in the fallen world does not breed flowers.

In harsh speeches to Gertrude and Ophelia, Hamlet lays much of the blame for the fallen world on women. As Hannibal Hamlin explains, Hamlet expresses the common belief that woman was responsible for the Fall: "Woman (Eve) was, after all, the reason the world is an 'unweeded garden'. . . This garden is described as 'rank and gross' not simply because it is untended but because in Nature itself 'something is rotten.'"¹¹ Woman is not only responsible for, but also identified with, this fallen state of nature. For Hamlet, "Gertrude is both Eve and the fallen garden itself."¹² As woman embodies the fallen state of nature, the flowering garden becomes choked with weeds.

Ophelia attempts a counter-narrative to this jaundiced view of fallen nature and fallen women. Rebecca LaRouche argues that Ophelia's distribution of flowers in Act Four is informed by Ophelia's knowledge of the healing properties of plants. Her flowers offer an alternative language and vision to the "ego-, andro-, and

anthropocentric view of the world that is Hamlet's." In contrast to the tragic, poisonous world of the court, she argues, "Ophelia belongs to another, perhaps more simple, herb-filled world, in which plants can restore one's stability of mind and can ease pain and are not used for, but are rather used against, poisoning."¹³ Ophelia's flower language attempts to transform the fallen world into a fruitful Eden, but she is unable to heal herself or, apparently, to get anyone to hear her.

The story that Ophelia tries to tell gets a fuller hearing in a later play. In *The Winter's Tale*, propagating the story of woman as temptress and originator of the Fall spreads winter while women's tales about themselves bring back spring. Polixenes's joke that women are the source of the Fall turns deadly serious when Leontes accuses Hermione of adultery.¹⁴ His unfounded accusation brings deathly winter, loss, and death to his family. When the lost Perdita is finally found, the play fills with imagery of spring.

The Winter's Tale presents this redemptive story in a genre that is often considered especially sympathetic to women. Claire Dawkins expounds on how Romance validates a woman's tale and thus brings healing rather than tragedy:

The genre of romance—so often denigrated as being feminine in its form or aimed at a female or effeminate audience who merely read for pleasure—is what brings about virtue in Leontes when tragedy could not. Whereas tragedy has taught him to be a suspicious reader of the women around him, romance re-teaches him to look at women with faith. It teaches Leontes to approach his wife as someone to listen to, rather than as someone with whom he is locked in a zero-sum game of power with the end result of either kill or be killed.¹⁵

In this romance, Paulina reverses the effects of the Fall. Her words create the possibility of redemption for Leontes, and she revises his corrupted view of women.

The Winter's Tale validates women's virtues, voices and poetics. Hermione's virtue and her word are proven true. Paulina's insistence on Hermione's virtue are vindicated. Paulina not only defends Hermione with words that keep her injured virtue alive, but she also poetically reaches beyond the wintry, fallen nature of the play to create a story of what should be. The play reaches its happy ending as she artfully stages Hermione's transformation from

lifeless statue to living woman. As Jonathan Bate explains, Paulina's art does what nature cannot as she apparently restores Hermione to life.¹⁶ "Nowhere," Bate affirms, "is there more powerful testimony to the creative, even redemptive, power of drama."¹⁷ Nevertheless, as Bate points out, Shakespeare highlights how human this art-making is. Antigonus and Mamillius are not resurrected, and Hermione's wrinkles witness lost time that will not be recovered.¹⁸ *The Winter's Tale* ends with renewal only insofar as it is available in the mortal world; time and time's irrevocable passage is not abolished. The play offers both rejoicing and lamentation for what is lost. It celebrates the power of artifice but also acknowledges its limitations.

The Winter's Tale connects the restorative return of the seasons with women's creative powers, both as poets and mothers. Mary Ellen Lamb suggests that *The Winter's Tale* demonstrates "the supposed feminine orientation of prose romance" not only through "the considerable narrative authority wielded by Paulina," but also through the subject matter of the play, "supporting the maternal condition as a legitimate topic and in valuing the recovery of a daughter."¹⁹ This story of the lost daughter whose return transforms winter to spring alludes to what might be considered another women's tale—how Ceres secures the return of her daughter Proserpina from the underworld. Critics of *The Winter's Tale* have commented on links between the play and this story. Like Proserpina, Perdita is associated with flowers.²⁰ Like Proserpina, she goes to a sort of underworld and returns with the spring.²¹

The story in Ovid is about mothers and daughters, about women's hopes and fears, and about the worth of their words—themes that are important for both *The Winter's Tale* and *Hamlet*. In Ovid, the separation of a mother and daughter is set in motion because Venus is playing for power, but this trauma draws the sympathy and intervention of other women. When Proserpina is snatched by Dis, female characters rise up in protest. Cyane upbraids Dis for his failure to woo courteously and even tries to block his path.²² Like Proserpina, Cyane is a victim of sexual violence. Dis not only snatches Proserpina, but violates Cyane's pool, blasting a path to the underworld (5. 524-528). When Ceres, goddess of fertility, vengefully curses the earth, Arethusa

appeals to Ceres's motherhood and implores her compassion for the violated earth:

O thou that art the mother dear
 Both of the maiden sought through all the world both far
 and near
 And eke of all the earthly fruits, forbear thine endless toil
 And be not wroth without a cause with this thy faithful soil.
 The land deserves no punishment. Unwillingly, God wot,
 She opened to the ravisher that violently her smote.
 (5. 607-612)

Proserpina's defenders call for sympathy shared among women, protest violence against women, and appeal to maternal values.

Ovid's story inquires into the value and efficacy of these women's words. When Dis attacks Cyane, she loses her human form and her ability to speak, "melting into tears, consumed away with smart. / The selfsame waters of the which she was but late ago / The mighty goddess now she pines and wastes herself into" (5. 533-35). Cyane loses her ability to speak. When Ceres comes searching for her daughter, she "would assuredly, / Have told her all things had she not transformèd been before. / Her mouth and tongue for utterance now would serve her turn no more" (5.580-582). Cyane can no longer speak, but Ceres's words have some power. When she "curse[s] all lands," the earth languishes (5. 591-598). Arethusa eloquently appeals to Ceres's motherhood, and promises to tell her another narrative in better times (5. 620- 625). Finally, Ceres is at least partially successful when she eloquently argues that Jove do his duty by her and her daughter (5. 637-682).

In *The Winter's Tale*, the story of Ceres and Proserpina foreshadows a happy ending in which the dead are restored to life and women's tales are vindicated. *Hamlet* presents the tragic version of the story. As Linda Bamber argues, "Ophelia is a kind of inverse Perdita . . . [who] represents possibilities that have been lost in the *Hamlet* world, whereas Perdita stands for triumphant fertility, rebirth, renewal."²³ Citing Bridget Lyons, Bamber notes how both characters hand out flowers, even some of the same flowers.²⁴ Lyons argues that Perdita represents a straightforward celebration of the fertility and freedom of pastoral whereas Ophelia's character is more vulnerable to being misread. She concludes that Ophelia's story is at odds with the treacherous setting of the rest of the play: "Ophelia is made to suggest mythical and symbolic meanings

more appropriate to pastoral comedy than to the realistic world of political intrigue and sexual danger in which she actually finds herself.²⁵ Ophelia's voice seems to be drowned out as *Hamlet* spirals towards the many deaths of its tragic conclusion. However, Gertrude's narrative of her death shows that Ophelia has had at least one attentive listener. Gertrude's framing of Ophelia's death links herself and Ophelia to the story of Proserpina and Demeter. Her poetic narrative mourns lost possibilities and protests the silencing of women's voices.

In Gertrude's narrative, Ophelia is dragged into the depth of the water like Proserpina was dragged into the depths of the underworld, innocently gathering flowers. Throughout *Hamlet*, Ophelia is associated with one Proserpina's flowers. Ovid's Proserpina is gathering lilies and violets before Dis snatches her (5. 492). In *Hamlet*, Ophelia declares herself a lost Proserpina who has already encountered the kingdom of death. She tells Laertes: "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died" (4.5.207-209). At her grave, Laertes affirms her innocence and connects her to the powers of regeneration and renewal that are so important in Proserpina's story: "And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring" (5.1.249-50). Unlike Proserpina, though, Ophelia never will come back.

In contrast to Proserpina and Hermione, the woman Gertrude would resurrect is actually, irrevocably dead. Human art cannot bring her back to life. However, Gertrude can still create a powerful protest for what has been lost. She crafts a tragic version of Proserpina's story that replaces Proserpina's innocent violets with weeds and more sinister plants. Ophelia hangs "weedy trophies" on the willow tree (4.7.199). Margreta de Grazia points out persistent images of sterility in Gertrude's story: Ophelia is decking a willow, a "fruitless emblem of sterility," with weeds.²⁶ Gertrude renames the "long purples" that Ophelia gathers (4.7.193). Instead of the "grosser name" that shepherds give them, she says "our cold maids do 'dead men's fingers call them" (4.7.194-195). Gertrude's renaming of these flowers been read as a sign of her "refinement."²⁷ However, her renaming might also reflect that state of what she calls her own "sick soul" (4.5.22). Perhaps Gertrude is infected by the debased view of sexuality taken in the fallen world of Denmark, and she too sees only weeds where there could be flowers.

However, Gertrude may also be protesting this view. Her “dead man’s fingers” and “cold maids” sounds like a satirically hyperbolic response to the court’s obsession with the perils of sexuality. She points out that Ophelia is now finally beyond reproach only when she is cold in death. Gertrude mourns a lost vision of happy fertility at Ophelia’s grave. Scattering flowers on the Ophelia’s dead body, Gertrude mourns, “I hoped thou should’st been my Hamlet’s wife / I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid / And not have strewed thy grave” (5.1.255-257). The innocent fecundity associated with an inadmissible “grosser name” has become the macabre image of “dead man’s fingers” just as the grave has replaced the bridal bed.

There is a maternal quality to this sad graveside speech. Hunt argues that Gertrude “implicitly suggests that she had wished one day to be a grandmother.”²⁸ Ophelia has lost her chance to become a mother, and Gertrude never will welcome a daughter and her children into her family. In her narrative of Ophelia’s death, Gertrude mourns as a thwarted mother to motherless Ophelia. Like Ceres, she protests a daughter’s untimely journey to the underworld. The weedy, death-like flowers in her story of Ophelia’s death not only allude to nature cursed by the Fall, but also to how Ceres cursed nature as punishment for the loss of a daughter.

Gertrude’s account of Ophelia’s death ends with her drowning, conflating Proserpina with other female characters in Ovid’s story. Drowning, Ophelia makes her journey to the underworld as Proserpina did, through a body of water. Ophelia falls into a “weeping brook” (4.7.200). This personification suggests that nature grieves the untimely death of this woman who should have been a part of flourishing nature. This figure of speech also associates the brook with Ovid’s Cyane, who becomes a fountain “melting into tears” when she fails to rescue Proserpina (5, 533-534). Like Cyane, the brook mourns a fellow being. Ophelia is also like Cyane herself. She too is gradually absorbed into a body of water. She loses her voice, as she is dragged “from her melodious lay / To muddy death” (4.7.206-208). Gertrude’s depiction of Ophelia singing does not simply prettify this death. She protests a lost voice and the flowery world Ophelia tried to sing back into being. Her story is Gertrude’s first significant speech since the end of Act Three.²⁹ Her narrative is thus also an attempt to claim her own voice.

Ophelia's silencing spurs Gertrude into poetry. Her lyrical narrative is not a factual eyewitness account, nor a palliative softening of a tragic death, nor an expedient political invention. It is poetry aimed at recalling its listeners to what should be. Gertrude's tale attempts to redeem vilified Eve. She reaches towards what should be, a green and fertile garden where innocent Ophelia can realize her promise, an Eden not yet invaded by sin. In the tragic world of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is beyond the restorative powers of human art. Gertrude's lyric shades into dark tones, portraying a distorted image of the golden world that highlights her losses. Her mingling of soaring lyric and dark detail makes a powerful protest against the corruption of the golden world and the vilification of woman.

Notes

1. Scott A. Trudell, "The Mediation of Poesie: Ophelia's Orphic Song," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63. 1 (2012): 58. While Trudell brings up Gertrude's speech only briefly, his exploration of Ophelia's songs grants considerable power to women's poetics in this play.

2. Maurice Hunt, "Gertrude's Interiority," *Cahiers Elisabethains: A Biannual Journal of English Renaissance Studies* 78 (2010): 15.

3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Barabara Mowat and Paul Werstine. The Folger Shakespeare Library (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 4.7.190-208. Subsequent in-text citations refer to act, scene, and line(s) in this edition.

4. Bridget Gellert Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia," *ELH* 44 (1977): 71.

5. Hunt, "Gertrude's Interiority," 26.

6. A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 7.

7. *Ibid*, 8, 9.

8. Philip Sidney, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (1966; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53.

9. *Ibid*, 24.

10. The resemblance of the ghost's story to the story of the Fall and first murder in Genesis is discussed by Hannibal Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 154 and by Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36.

11. Hamlin, *The Bible in Shakespeare*, 159.

12. *Ibid*, 161.

13. Rebecca Larouche, "Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets," in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, ed. Lynne Dickson Bruckner and Daniel Brayton (New York: Routledge, 2011), 220. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e700xna&AN=398161&site=eds-live.

14. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Barabara Mowat and Paul Werstine. The Folger Shakespeare Library (New York: Washington Square Press, 2009), 1.2.78-108.

15. Claire Dawkins, "Gendered Narratives of Marital Dissolution in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 46.1-4 (2017): 108. EBSCOhost search.ebscohost.com/login.aspdirect=true&db=mzh&AN=2017395545&site=ehost-live.

16. Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 237.

17. Ibid, 238-239.

18. Ibid, 239.

19. Mary Ellen Lamb, "Virtual Audiences and Virtual Authors: *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, and *Old Wives' Tales*," in *Staging Early Modern Romance: Prose Fiction, Dramatic Romance, and Shakespeare*, ed. Mary Ellen Lamb and Valerie Wayne (New York: Routledge, 2009), 130.

20. Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 230-33.

21. A. D. Nuttall "The *Winter's Tale*: Ovid Transformed," in *Shakespeare's Ovid*, ed. A. B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 135-36. and Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 233.

22. *Ovid's Metamorphoses Translated by William Golding*, ed. Madeleine Forey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), book 5, lines 515-23. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to book and line number in this edition.

23. Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 73.

24. Ibid, 73. See Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia," 65.

25. Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia," 72.

26. de Grazia, *Hamlet*, 119.

27. Hunt, "Gertrude's Interiority," 26.

28. Ibid, 26.

29. Ibid, 15.