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SECONDARY CHARACTERS

Carolyn G. Heilbrun (essay date 1957)

SOURCE: "The Character of Hamlet's Mother," in *Hamlet's Mother and Other Women,* Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 9-17.

[*In the following essay, originally published in 1957, Heilbrun argues that the traditional critical opinion of Gertrude as shallow and feminine ("in the pejorative sense") is wrong. Heilbrun instead asserts that Gertrude is "strong-minded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion [Gertrude's lust] sensible."*]

The character of Hamlet's mother has not received the specific critical attention it deserves. Moreover, the traditional account of her personality as rendered by the critics will not stand up under close scrutiny of Shakespeare's play.

None of the critics of course has failed to see Gertrude as vital to the action of the play; not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty and, to the Elizabethans, incestuous marriage, the whole question of her "falling off," occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost. Indeed, Freud and Jones see her, the object of Hamlet's Oedipus complex, as central to the motivation of the play.[1] But the critics, with no exception that I have been able to find, have accepted Hamlet's word "frailty" as applying to her whole personality, and have seen in her not one weakness, or passion in the Elizabethan sense, but a character of which weakness and lack of depth and vigorous intelligence are the entire explanation. Of her can it truly be said that carrying the "stamp of one defect," she did "in the general censure take corruption from that particular fault" (I.iv.35-36).

The critics are agreed that Gertrude was not a party to the late King's murder and indeed knew nothing of it, a point which on the clear evidence of the play, is indisputable. They have also discussed whether or not Gertrude, guilty of more than an "o'er-hasty marriage," had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband's death. I will return to this point later on. Beyond discussing these two points, those critics who have dealt specifically with the Queen have traditionally seen her as well-meaning but shallow and feminine, in the pejorative sense of the word: incapable of any sustained rational process, superficial and flighty. It is this tradition which a closer reading of the play will show to be erroneous.

Professor Bradley describes the traditional Gertrude thus:

> The Queen was not a bad-hearted woman, not at all the woman to think little of murder. But she had a soft animal nature and was very dull and very shallow. She loved to be happy, like a sheep in the sun, and to do her justice, it pleased her to see others happy, like more sheep in the sun. . . . It was pleasant to sit upon her throne and see smiling faces around her, and foolish and unkind in Hamlet to persist in grieving for his father instead of marrying Ophelia and making everything comfortable. . . . The belief at the bottom of her heart was that the

> world is a place constructed simply that people may be happy in it in a good-humored sensual fashion.[2]

Later on, Bradley says of her that when affliction comes to her "the good in her nature struggles to the surface through the heavy mass of sloth."

Granville-Barker is not quite so extreme. Shakespeare, he says,

> gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change but at last fade and wither; a pretty creature, as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old. . . . She is drawn for us with unemphatic strokes, and she has but a passive part in the play's action. She moves throughout in Claudius'shadow; he holds her as he won her, by the witchcraft of his wit.[3]

Elsewhere Granville-Barker says "Gertrude who will certainly never see forty-five again, might better be'old.'[That is, portrayed by an older, mature actress.] But that would make her relations with Claudius—and *their* likelihood is vital to the play—quite incredible" (p. 226). Granville-Barker is saying here that a woman about forty-five years of age cannot feel any sexual passion nor arouse it. This is one of the mistakes which lie at the heart of the misunderstanding about Gertrude.

Professor Dover Wilson sees Gertrude as more forceful than either of these two critics will admit, but even he finds the Ghost's unwillingness to shock her with knowledge of his murder to be one of the basic motivations of the play, and he says of her "Gertrude is always hoping for the best."[4]

Now whether Claudius won Gertrude before or after her husband's death, it was certainly not, as Granville-Barker implies, with "the witchcraft of his wit" alone. Granville-Barker would have us believe that Claudius won her simply by the force of his persuasive tongue. "It is plain," he writes, that the Queen "does little except echo his [Claudius'] wishes; sometimes—as in the welcome to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—she repeats his very words" (p. 227), though Wilson must admit later that Gertrude does not tell Claudius everything. Without dwelling here on the psychology of the Ghost, or the greater burden borne by the Elizabethan words "witchcraft" and "wit," we can plainly see, for the Ghost tells us, how Claudius won the Queen: the Ghost considers his brother to be garbage, and "lust," the Ghost says, "will sate itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage" (I.v.54-55). "Lust"—in a woman of forty-five or more—is the key word here. Bradley, Granville-Barker, and to a lesser extent Professor Dover Wilson, misunderstand Gertrude largely because they are unable to see lust, the desire for sexual relations, as the passion, in the Elizabethan sense of the word, the flaw, the weakness which drives Gertrude to an incestuous marriage, appalls her son, and keeps him from the throne. Unable to explain her marriage to Claudius as the act of any but a weak-minded vacillating woman, they fail to see Gertrude for the strongminded, intelligent, succinct, and, apart from this passion, sensible woman that she is.

To understand Gertrude properly, it is only necessary to examine the lines Shakespeare has chosen for her to say. She is, except for her description of Ophelia's death, concise and pithy in speech, with a talent for seeing the essence of every situation presented before her eyes. If she is not profound, she is certainly never silly. We first hear her asking Hamlet to stop wearing black, to stop walking about with his eyes downcast, and to realize that death is an inevitable part of life. She is, in short, asking him not to give way to the passion of grief, a passion of whose force and dangers the Elizabethans are aware, as Miss Campbell has shown.[5] Claudius echoes her with a well-reasoned argument against grief which was, in its philosophy if not in its language, a piece of commonplace Elizabethan lore. After Claudius'speech, Gertrude asks Hamlet to remain in Denmark, where he is rightly loved. Her speeches have been short, however warm and loving, and conciseness of statement is not the mark of a dull and shallow woman.

We next hear her, as Queen and gracious hostess, welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court, hoping, with the King, that they may cheer Hamlet and discover what is depressing him. Claudius then tells Gertrude, when they are alone, that Polonius believes he knows what is upsetting Hamlet. The Queen answers:

> I doubt it is no other than the main,
> His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage.

(II.ii.56-57)

This statement is concise, remarkably to the point, and not a little courageous. It is not the statement of a dull, slothful woman who can only echo her husband's words. Next, Polonius enters with his most unbrief apotheosis to brevity. The Queen interrupts him with five words: "More matter with less art" (II.ii.95). It would be difficult to find a phrase more applicable to Polonius. When this gentleman, in no way deterred from his loquacity, after purveying the startling news that he has a daughter, begins to read a letter, the Queen asks pointedly "Came this from Hamlet to her?" (II.ii.114).

We see Gertrude next in Act III, asking Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with her usual directness, if Hamlet received them well, and if they were able to tempt him to any pastime. But before leaving the room, she stops for a word of kindness to Ophelia. It is a humane gesture, for she is unwilling to leave Ophelia, the unhappy tool of the King and Polonius, without some kindly and intelligent appreciation of her help:

> And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
> That your good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
> Will bring him to his wonted way again,
> To both your honors.

(III.i.38-42)

It is difficult to see in this speech, as Bradley apparently does, the gushing shallow wish of a sentimental woman that class distinctions shall not stand in the way of true love.

At the play, the Queen asks Hamlet to sit near her. She is clearly trying to make him feel he has a place in the court of Denmark. She does not speak again until Hamlet asks her how she likes the play. "The lady doth protest too much, methinks" (III.ii.240) is her immortal comment on the player queen. The scene gives her four more words: when Claudius leaps to his feet, she asks "How fares my Lord?" (III.ii.278).

I will for the moment pass over the scene in the Queen's closet, to follow her quickly through the remainder of the play. After the closet scene, the Queen comes to speak to Claudius. She tells him, as Hamlet has asked her to, that he, Hamlet, is mad, and has killed Polonius. She adds, however, that he now weeps for what he has done. She does not wish Claudius to know what she now knows, how wild and fearsome Hamlet has become. Later, she does not wish to see Ophelia, but hearing how distracted she is, consents. When Laertes bursts in ready to attack Claudius, she immediately steps between Claudius and Laertes to protect the King, and tells Laertes it is not Claudius who has killed his father. Laertes will of course soon learn this, but it is Gertrude who manages to tell him before he can do any meaningless damage. She leaves Laertes and the King together, and then returns to tell Laertes that his sister is drowned. She gives her news directly, realizing that suspense will increase the pain of it, but this is the one time in the play when her usual pointed conciseness would be the mark neither of intelligence nor kindness, and so, gently, and at some length, she tells Laertes of his sister's death, giving him time to recover from the shock of grief, and to absorb the meaning of her words. At Ophelia's funeral the Queen scatters flowers over the grave:

> Sweets to the sweet; farewell!
> I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
>
> I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,
> And not t'have strew'd thy grave.

(V.i.266-269)

She is the only one present decently mourning the death of someone young, and not heated in the fire of some personal passion.

At the match between Hamlet and Laertes, the Queen believes that Hamlet is out of training, but glad to see him at some sport, she gives him her handkerchief to wipe his brow, and drinks to his success. The drink is poisoned and she dies. But before she dies she does not waste time on vituperation; she warns Hamlet that the drink is poisoned to prevent his drinking it. They are her last words. Those critics who have thought her stupid admire her death; they call it uncharacteristic.

In Act III, when Hamlet goes to his mother in her closet his nerves are pitched at the very height of tension; he is on the edge of hysteria. The possibility of murdering his mother has in fact entered his mind, and he has just met and refused an opportunity to kill Claudius. His mother, meanwhile, waiting for him, has told Polonius not to fear for her, but she knows when she sees Hamlet that he may be violently mad. Hamlet quips with her, insults her, tells her he wishes she were not his mother, and when she, still retaining dignity, attempts to end the interview, Hamlet seizes her and she cries for help. The important thing to note is that the Queen's cry "Thou wilt not murder me" (III.iv.21) is not foolish. She has seen from Hamlet's demeanor that he is capable of murder, as indeed in the next instant he proves himself to be.

We next learn from the Queen's startled "As kill a king" (III.iv.30) that she has no knowledge of the murder, though of course this is only confirmation here of what we already know. Then the Queen asks Hamlet why he is so hysterical:

> What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue
> In noise so rude against me?

(III.iv.39-40)

Hamlet tells her: it is her lust, the need of sexual passion, which has driven her from the arms and memory of her husband to the incomparably cruder charms of his brother. He cries out that she has not even the excuse of youth for her lust:

> O Shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
> If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
> To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
> And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
> When the compulsive ardor gives the charge,
> Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
> And reason panders will.

(III.iv.82-87)

This is not only a lust, but a lust which throws out of joint all the structure of human morality and relationships. And the Queen admits it. If there is one quality that has characterized, and will characterize,

every speech of Gertrude's in the play, it is the ability to see reality clearly, and to express it. This talent is not lost when turned upon herself:

> O Hamlet, speak no more!
> Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul,
> And there I see such black and grained spots
> As will not leave their tinct.

(III.iv.88-91)

She knows that lust has driven her, that this is her sin, and she admits it. Not that she wishes to linger in the contemplation of her sin. No more, she cries, no more. And then the Ghost appears to Hamlet. The Queen thinks him mad again—as well she might—but she promises Hamlet that she will not betray him—and she does not.

Where, in all that we have seen of Gertrude, is there the picture of "a soft animal nature, very dull and very shallow"? She may indeed be "animal" in the sense of "lustful." But it does not follow that because she wishes to continue a life of sexual experience, her brain is soft or her wit unperceptive.

Some critics, having accepted Gertrude as a weak and vacillating woman, see no reason to suppose that she did not fall victim to Claudius'charms before the death of her husband and commit adultery with him. These critics, Professor Bradley among them (p. 166), claim that the elder Hamlet clearly tells his son that Gertrude has committed adultery with Claudius in the speech beginning "Ay that incestuous, that adulterate beast" (I.v.4Iff). Professor Dover Wilson presents the argument:

> Is the Ghost speaking here of the o'er-hasty marriage of Claudius and Gertrude? Assuredly not. His "certain term" is drawing rapidly to an end, and he is already beginning to "scent the morning air." Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hasting to "incestuous sheets." Why then should the Ghost waste precious moments in telling Hamlet what he was fully cognisant of before? . . . Moreover, though the word "incestuous" was applicable to the marriage, the rest of the passage is entirely inapplicable to it. Expressions like "witchcraft", "traitorous gifts", "seduce", "shameful lust", and "seeming virtuous" may be noted in passing. But the rest of the quotation leaves no doubt upon the matter.
>
> (p. 293)

Professor Dover Wilson and other critics have accepted the Ghost's word "adulterate" in its modern meaning. The Elizabethan word "adultery," however, was not restricted to its modern meaning, but was used to define any sexual relationship which could be called unchaste, including of course an incestuous one.[6] Certainly the elder Hamlet considered the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude to be unchaste and unseemly, and while his use of the word "adulterate" indicates his very strong feelings about the marriage, it would not to an Elizabethan audience necessarily mean that he believed Gertrude to have been false to him before his death. It is important to notice, too, that the Ghost does not apply the term "adulterate" to Gertrude, and he may well have considered the term a just description of Claudius'entire sexual life.

But even if the Ghost used the word "adulterate" in full awareness of its modern restricted meaning, it is not necessary to assume on the basis of this single speech (and it is the only shadow of evidence we have for such a conclusion) that Gertrude was unfaithful to him while he lived. It is quite probable that the elder Hamlet still considered himself married to Gertrude, and he is moreover revolted that her lust for him ("why she would hang on him as if increase of appetite had grown by what it fed on") should have so easily transferred itself to

another. This is why he uses the expressions "seduce," "shameful lust," and others. Professor Dover Wilson has himself said "Hamlet knew of the marriage, and his whole soul was filled with nausea at the thought of the speedy hasting to incestuous sheets"; the soul of the elder Hamlet was undoubtedly filled with nausea too, and this could well explain his using such strong language, as well as his taking the time to mention the matter at all. It is not necessary to consider Gertrude an adulteress to account for the speech of the Ghost.

Gertrude's lust was, of course, more important to the plot than we may at first perceive. Charlton Lewis, among others, has shown how Shakespeare kept many of the facts of the plots from which he borrowed without maintaining the structures which explained them. In the original Belieferest story, Gertrude (substituting Shakespeare's more familiar names) was daughter of the king; to become king, it was necessary to marry her. The elder Hamlet, in marrying Gertrude, ousted Claudius from the throne.[7] Shakespeare retained the shell of this in his play. When she no longer has a husband, the form of election would be followed to declare the next king, in this case undoubtedly her son Hamlet. By marrying Gertrude, Claudius "popp'd in between th'election and my hopes" (V.ii.65), that is, kept young Hamlet from the throne. Gertrude's flaw of lust made Claudius'ambition possible, for without taking advantage of the Queen's desire still to be married, he could not have been king.

But Gertrude, if she is lustful, is also intelligent, penetrating, and gifted with a remarkable talent for concise and pithy speech. In all the play, the person whose language hers most closely resembles is Horation. "Sweets to the sweet," she has said at Ophelia's grave. "Good night sweet prince," Horatio says at the end. They are neither of them dull, or shallow, or slothful, though one of them is passion's slave.

Notes

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* with a psychoanalytical study by Ernest Jones, M.D. (London: Vision Press, 1947), pp. 7-42.

[2] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 167.

[3] Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 1:227.

[4] J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 125.

[5] Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1952), pp. 112-113.

[6] See Bertram Joseph, *Conscience and the King* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1953), pp. 16-19.

[7] Charlton M. Lewis, *The Genesis of Hamlet* (New York: Henry Holt, 1907), p. 36.

Andrew Gurr (essay date 1978)

SOURCE: "The Claudian Globe," in *Hamlet and the Distracted Globe,* Sussex University Press, 1978, pp. 26-41.

[*In the following essay, Gurr examines Claudius's role in the play, stating that Claudius initiates every action in the play, except for the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia. In terms of* Hamlet's *political plot, Gurr argues that it is Claudius's story, "the narrative of his struggle to maintain order and security in the state. . . . "*]

Based on an ostensible realism as the play is, the first subject to study, the framework of the action, is the Claudian world, the official, public world where appearances belie reality, and from which consequently

Hamlet feels alienated. We begin with the court at Elsinore.

Shakespeare was always careful with his anachronisms. In the political background to his Elsinore story he carefully specifies the historical details and makes it clear that he is doing so. Any anachronisms in his presentation are at risk more from our misreading than his casualness. On the question of succession to the Danish throne for instance, where too many editors have assumed that hereditary succession by primogeniture, the automatic inheritance through the eldest son, was the norm, Shakespeare is careful to describe it as elective. A much older form in Europe than primogeniture, formalised by Charlemagne, election of kings by a council of elders was the standard procedure across medieval Europe, and certainly the normal practice in the ninth or tenth-century Denmark of the historical Amleth. Automatic succession by the eldest son did not replace election in England until 1272, in France in 1270, and later still in the less powerfully nationalistic territories such as Denmark.

One of the advantages of election was that it gave scope for the crowning of any eligible member of the royal dynasty if for any reason the heir apparent was unfit. A brother could rule if the eldest son was still a child, or a younger son if the eldest was an idiot. Normally, the eldest son could expect to be elected, but not automatically. He was truly the "apparent" heir to the throne. The system had its problems, since an elected brother might well promote the claims of his own child ahead of the dead king's infant son, and the in-fighting where an infant or imbecile heir did exist was usually fatal to someone. Five and more centuries of such struggles led in the end to a general preference for the automatic succession of the eldest son, whoever and whatever he might be, and consequently the elevation of primogeniture to the status of a law of nature, a law assumed to be ordained by God for the regulation of all mankind.

Looking back from an age which had found its kings through primogeniture with some degree of success for three hundred years, sixteenth-century writers were conscious of the hazards of the older system. Shakespeare dealt with the hazards of primogeniture in nine history plays. Election offered opportunities for even more mayhem of the kind exemplified in the Amleth story. It had the advantage for this play of clearing out of the way any direct concern for title, the problem handled so extensively in the history plays. Hamlet's problem is personal, not dynastic. His mayhem does not come from a struggle for power. Shakespeare used anachronisms in Denmark, but not over the Danish constitution.

The details of Denmark's elective system are touched in obliquely but fully. We are first given a hint in the parallel case of Norway, which also settled on its kings by election. At I.i.80-104 Horatio tells the story of the wager between the now-dead King Hamlet of Denmark and his opposite, old Fortinbras of Norway, and how young Fortinbras wants to regain the lands lost when his father was killed by old Hamlet. Not for another hundred lines, till I.ii.28-30, do we learn (and then in passing) that the new king of Norway is not young Fortinbras but the dead king's brother, "uncle of young Fortinbras". The parallel between Denmark and Norway is thus made clear. We know the Danish situation by now since Claudius began his speech from the throne with a reference to "Hamlet our dear *brother's* death".

Several niceties of the election system are touched on in the same scene. Claudius emphasises at the beginning of his opening speech that both his accession to the throne and his marriage were approved by the council. "Nor have we herein barred / Your better wisdoms, which have freely gone / With this affair along." Again, when he addresses the dead king's son as "our cousin Hamlet and *my* son", he is taking care to claim a closer kinship than young Fortinbras has to his uncle the king of Norway. By marrying the queen Claudius has avoided the problem of choice between the dead king's heir and any children of his own. He confirms this implication of his marriage a few lines later when he explicitly announces that young Hamlet is his choice as the next king.

> You are the most immediate to our throne . . .
> Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

This is the "pledge" to which he announces he will drink that night. He has made as decisive an announcement as Hamlet's own at the end of the play when he declares that Fortinbras "has my dying voice" in the election of a new king (V.ii.338). That the king's pledge has been registered is confirmed when Rosencrantz reminds Hamlet that "you have the voice of the king himself for your succession in Denmark" (III.ii.318-9). With the king's own vote in his pocket Hamlet's election is as nearly guaranteed as any question of power can be. The same pledge leads Laertes and Polonius in the next scene to warn Ophelia that Hamlet is a prince out of her star.

Claudius's pledge has far-reaching consequences. Laertes says Ophelia has to reject Hamlet's love because it can only be lust. Marriage is out of the question because Hamlet's consort will be chosen by the advice and consent of his council—"circumscribed / Unto the voice and yielding of that body / Whereof he is the head." In his choice of human flesh, says the gentle brother, Hamlet being royal may not "Carve for himself." How exalted and guarded Hamlet must be as heir apparent is constantly implied, when the queen calls him "our hope" (II.ii.24) or when Claudius sensibly comments "Madness in great ones must not unwatched go" (III.i.187). And yet the question of the succession is open enough for Claudius to offer it to Laertes and for the mob to riot on his behalf.

> The rabble call him lord;
> And, as the world were now but to begin,
> Antiquity forgot, custom not known,
>
> The rati fiers and props of every word,
> They cry,'Choose we; Laertes shall be king!'

(IV.v.98-102)

Custom demands that the council elect him, not the mob. But no custom, even the custom of carousing to his pledge, will hold Claudius to his vote for Hamlet if expediency makes it convenient to offer it to Laertes instead.

Election runs continually in Hamlet's mind. He calls Horatio his soul's "elected" friend (III.ii.60), and his thwarted ambition is one of the three charges he puts up against Claudius, the only one he feels free to declare publicly. In the closet scene to Gertrude he calls Claudius a cutpurse who has stolen the crown. To Ophelia he describes himself—a public and not undissembling statement—as "very proud, revengeful, ambitious" (III.i.125). Rosencrantz in his clumsy attempt to pick up Hamlet's thinking had already used the last word (II.ii.249). Hamlet even does him the convenience of returning it to him (III.ii.317) in reply to a direct question over the cause of his "distemper". Saying he lacks advancement is what he knows his audience expects him to say. But election is in his mind, and there is an element of truth in the admission. In V.ii.65, when he rehearses the list of Claudius's crimes to Horatio, he makes the point explicitly and unambiguously. Claudius has not only "killed my king and whored my mother" and plotted against Hamlet's own life, but has "Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes".

Hamlet's hopes were not only hopes of power for himself. Even before he learns of the murder Claudius committed to gain the throne he is bitter about the new king. In the first soliloquy after he has seen Claudius at his smooth work Hamlet's comparison of dead king to living king carries with it the assumption that Claudius degrades the throne, that there is an honour in the post, an ideal of conduct to which Hamlet himself aspires and which is out of Claudius's reach.

> My father's brother, but no more like my father
> Than I to Hercules!

(I.ii. 152-3)

Hamlet is disgusted with the Claudian world well before he knows it to be a criminal one. Between the Hamlet world and the Claudian world there is an unbridgeable gulf; they are alternative societies.

The Claudian world is a practical one, and within its own terms markedly more successful than the Hamlet world in maintaining law and order, peace and prosperity in the land. Claudius fights with superb skill and resolution for the security of his "state", a word which encompasses his prosperity, his throne, and his kingdom. Like his travesty Polonius Claudius uses the cunning of age against the rashness of youth. All the threats, a balanced group of challenges, come from the younger generation. Young Fortinbras threatens invasion from abroad; young Laertes threatens rebellion from within; and beyond both of these public dangers is young Hamlet, a secret cause of insecurity both to the king's title and his life. A king who poisons people through their ears manages to defeat two of the threats, the external and the internal, with mere words; he even turns them to his own advantage. Throughout the play Claudius acts with speed and sureness to avert every risk, in a masterly display of political skill. His only failures are in his first plot against Hamlet's life once the threat comes into the open, and in the excess of cunning which this failure draws him on to, what you might call his overkill, in the final scene. At the very end, too, his loyal courtiers do not come when he calls on them for help against Hamlet. He is more alone then than Hamlet himself.

The details of Claudius's manoeuvres are sketched in lightly but fully, and the skeleton of the plot can be seen in them. Claudius initiates every action in the play except the murder of Polonius and Ophelia's suicide. We can trace the whole sequence of events through Claudius.

The first detail is the guarded battlements and preparations for war. Sentries, two of whom we meet at the opening of the play, are on constant watch; armourers and ship-builders are working overtime (their "sore task/ Does not divide the Sunday from the week"). The defences are alert because young Fortinbras is planning to invade Denmark, unknown to his old uncle the king of Norway, to regain lands his father lost to Hamlet's father. A thoroughly serious threat against which Claudius is making serious defensive preparations.

In the scene of the king in council which immediately follows, however, we find him doing more than passively wait for the invasion. The first item on the agenda after the formal words about his predecessor and his marriage is an announcement that the threat of invasion is to be met by sending ambassadors to warn the Norwegian king of his nephew's plan, in the hope that old Norway will honour the agreement over Denmark's annexation of the land and so prevent Fortinbras from trying to regain it. Claudius is in total command of the situation. He trusts himself to assess the danger accurately and to judge the best action to take. He keeps a firm grip on events—the ambassadors are to deliver his written message to the Norwegian king and no more. Eventually of course (in II.ii) we shall hear that his judgement was right and that the stratagem has succeeded. The invasion is stopped without bloodshed and at minimal cost to Denmark.

The next two items on the council's agenda at this first meeting (I.ii) are seemingly trivial domestic matters. They do however have a bearing on state security too, and Claudius well knows it. The first item is Laertes'request for permission to return to the high life of Paris after his dutiful attendance at the funeral and wedding festivities, which Claudius readily grants him. The Claudian world approves of courtly training in Paris as it does of deep drinking at Elsinore. The second item is Claudius's refusal of permission for Hamlet to return to his studies at Wittenberg. Diplomatically he gives the reason that Hamlet is important to the state as the nominated successor to Claudius. This piece of candy he injects with the tart suggestion that as heir apparent Hamlet really ought to learn to behave better and dress more normally. When Hamlet's response is insultingly to ignore Claudius and reply only to his mother Claudius chooses to gloss it over ("'tis a loving and a fair reply"). He has got his way in the important matter, that of keeping Hamlet where he can be watched. And he has put Hamlet in the wrong simply by displaying his own tact and discretion in contrast with Hamlet's surly offensiveness. Hamlet's attitude is anything but the "gentle and unforced accord" which

Claudius chooses to call it, as everyone at court can witness, to Hamlet's shame. Only Hamlet sees the iron hand behind the smooth reproof. Denmark's a prison, he tells Rosencrantz later.

Claudius's final words to his council are image-builders too. He is hearty, carousing, carefree. "No jocund health that Denmark drinks today, / But the great cannon to the clouds shall tell, / And the king's rouse the heaven shall bruit again." Not for him the lean and hungry look. He is richly dressed (a peacock Hamlet calls him), and a hearty drinker who can dissemble enough to poison other people with it when need be.

Not that Hamlet, out of step as ever, is above accusing Claudius of thrift ("The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" I.ii. 179-80). That is a mark of Claudius's inversion of values, like the drinking, which Hamlet also condemns at I.ii. 174 and I.iv.8-22. Claudius's choice of drink as a concealment for his mental sharpness, his disguise for the solitude that the possession of power entails, leads Hamlet into his "mole of nature" speech, about men who suffer condemnation in general for one vice in particular. Since that is not at all Claudius's situation, Hamlet's criticism says more about his antipathy to Claudius, his rejection of the king's way of making himself seem human, than it does of Claudius's standing in the community at large. In outward appearances Claudius wins hands down. His behaviour is impeccable, his policy sound and economical, his handling of an ungracious and hostile stepson discreet and effective.

Claudius next appears in Act 2, after Hamlet has learned the ghost's story and has resorted to his "antic" (clowning) disposition as his own form of image building. Claudius, ever cautious and alert to possible dangers, won't take what he calls this "transformation" at face value and has fetched two of Hamlet's "school fellows", fellow-students from Wittenberg, to spy on him and find what lies behind his strange behaviour. He is sceptical of Polonius's conjecture that Hamlet is merely love-sick, but agrees to test it as an additional line of investigation. The ambassadors have returned from Norway with Fortinbras's invasion successfully scotched, so Claudius is free to turn his full attention to what is clearly developing as the next threat to state security.

Hamlet of course has no trouble baffling both his fellow students and Polonius, so that early in Act 3, when Claudius gets their reports on what they have found he can see that they will never get anywhere. Consequently after he has himself spied on Hamlet's antic behaviour to Ophelia his conclusions are properly cautious, and his decision prompt.

> Love! His affections do not that way tend;
> Nor what he spake, though it lacked form a little,
> Was not like madness. There's something in his soul
> o'er which his melancholy sits on brood;
> And I do doubt the hatch and the disclose
> Will be some danger; which for to prevent,
> I have in quick determination
> Thus set it down: he shall with speed to England,
> For the demand of our neglected tribute.

(III.i.161-69)

Such a mission is proper for a prince. Moreover a sea voyage, he tells Polonius, might help to clear that distracted head. But the Mousetrap, Hamlet's essay at spying, is waiting for Claudius, and when it snaps shut Claudius sees that the egg Hamlet is sitting broodily on (164-5) does indeed contain something dangerous. Before it can hatch therefore Hamlet must be sent away. Claudius is ahead of Hamlet here too. Even before Hamlet has finished his turn at spying Claudius has shifted from suspicion to action, in a prompt and sensible reversal of his earlier decision to keep Hamlet at court where he could be watched. In Ill.iii Claudius, quickly back in control after the "distemper" which Hamlet's Mousetrap play put him in, orders Rosencrantz and

Guildenstern to escort him overseas on the grounds that his lunacy and his closeness to the royal family puts the throne in danger.

> The terms of our estate may not endure
> Hazard so near us as doth hourly grow
> Out of his lunacies.

(III.iii.5-7)

A thoroughly reasonable precaution. Unfortunately Claudius's helpers are less prompt than he is. Polonius is still intent on spying, and worse still Gertrude has roused herself to take an initiative. Stirred to action for the first time on seeing the way her son used the Mousetrap to provoke her new husband, she decides to speak to him, to tell him off as if he were an illbehaved child. When he replies with very unchildlike violence, and holds her in her seat to listen to his sharp words, she remembers the violence of lunatics and shrieks for help, with results fatal to her would-be helper behind the curtain, who is also too frightened to do anything but stay where he is and cry for help. On hearing of this catastrophe Claudius, fresh from his attempt to repent his brother's murder, decides that his stepson must be destroyed to prevent more trouble.

Polonius's death is a potential disaster which Claudius can easily turn to his own advantage. He can hold Hamlet prisoner (in the Kozintsev film Hamlet was put in a strait-jacket) till he is safely on board ship for England, and even has a potential excuse for making sure that Hamlet never returns alive. To Gertrude he can explain shipping him off as getting him out of the way till the uproar over the "vile deed" has blown over. He has to do something because he will in any case be blamed for failing to keep mad Hamlet where he could do no harm, and by sending him away he might be able to escape the slanders which would be bound to grow if he did nothing to check his errant son and heir.

In IV.vii, moreover, Claudius admits a further difficulty, that besides the problem of upsetting his doting mother Hamlet's popularity with the people makes it difficult to "put the strong law on him". So to Hamlet and the immediate court he announces that the reason for sending Hamlet overseas is for Hamlet's own safety. His soliloquy announcing the secret reason, that Hamlet is to be killed while away, follows immediately. We can take it, presumably, that Claudius has inserted this further twist of policy into the original plan as a result of Hamlet's murder of Polonius, though it might equally well be a result of the Mousetrap's revelation that Hamlet knows about his father's murder. I think we should take it that after the Mousetrap at first Claudius is genuinely penitent, and that only the omninously short work Hamlet makes of Polonius, a surrogate for the king, pushes him into the decision to kill him. Expediency forces him into more and more devious turns as the pressure of Hamlet's threat to his security mounts.

Turning Polonius's murder to his advantage in this way is adroit enough, but there are other troublesome consequences of the deed, in Polonius's orphaned children, which call for even more speedy footwork. The furtive burial of the corpse was necessary to keep the queen believing in her husband's desire to protect Hamlet, but it causes problems with both children. Ophelia's madness is obviously Hamlet's fault, another item in his crime sheet, but the burial does make it seem that Claudius is protecting Hamlet. It is therefore some sort of pretext for Laertes to raise his rebellion on. "We have done but greenly, / In hugger-mugger to inter him" (IV.v.79-80), admits Claudius. He already knows of Laertes'return and the rumour-mongering which is stirring up a general suspicion against him as king: "necessity, of matter beggared, / Will nothing stick our person to arraign / In ear and ear" (IV.v.88-90). There is evidently popular support for Hamlet's invidious comparison of Hyperion-Hamlet to his satyr-brother. Claudius does not command the universal respect his brother had.

But Claudius is a man for all occasions. Just as he stopped the invasion by Fortinbras with a word in old Norway's ear, so now he stops Laertes'insurrection with words, and turns one enemy against another by

diverting Laertes'passion against Hamlet. Claudius is at his best in the scenes with Laertes because we know for the first time exactly what he has to cope with and see him doing it. He is cool, steady, ripe with the native hue of resolution, a perfect actor of a part he knows to perfection. Supremely disingenuous, reminding Gertrude in passing that her son is "most violent author / Of his own just remove", he uses her when Laertes bursts in as a foil to his own brave stand. He draws Laertes from violence into an exchange of words, and once on his own ground sets to work to adjust him from a blind to a precisely aimed hatred.

> That I am guiltless of your father's death . . .
> It shall as level to your judgement'pear
> As day does to the eye.

(IV.v.146-9)

He knows perfectly what the outward appearance of events will show.

> Make choice of whom your wisest friends you will,
> And they shall hear and judge'twixt you and me,

a judgement he gives a price to by putting his crown and life on it. His plan is clear: "Where th'offence is let the great axe fall". Laertes will learn that Claudius is already in the process of executing justice on Hamlet.

That of course can't happen in Gertrude's hearing, and only in IV.vii, once the judgement has been passed in Claudius's favour and Gertrude is absent, can Claudius describe the details of the execution. He explains that he hasn't punished Hamlet openly because the queen is so devoted to him and because of his general popularity, "the great love the general gender bear him". But Laertes may be satisfied.

> You must not think
> That we are made of stuff so flat and dull
>
> That we can let our beard be shook with danger
> And think it pastime.

The Mousetrap play, danger in pastime, evidently still rankles. And then just as Claudius is on the point of telling Laertes his plot to kill Hamlet comes the news of the prince's return. On hearing that calamity Claudius changes direction without a tremor. He wisely omits to tell Laertes that he's already tried to kill Hamlet once and has failed, and within a few seconds is offering Laertes the chance to do it himself with a new scheme which he ironically claims is "ripe in my device". Once again it has to be devious, to appease both Hamlet's partisans and his enemies.

> . . . for his death no wind of blame shall breathe;
> But even his mother shall uncharge the practice,
> And call it accident.

So, resourceful as ever, Claudius manoeuvres Laertes into position with that implausible account of Hamlet's jealousy over Laertes'reputation as a swordsman. Italianate poisons are added to the French notion of a duel (Claudius evidently has less faith in Laertes'swordsmanship than he lets Laertes know), and the plan for Laertes'revenge is ready.

The two contrasting scenes about death, Ophelia's suicide and the gravedigging scene, hold us off until the plan is ready to be set in motion. When Hamlet and Laertes fortuitously meet at the graveside and fight, Claudius tells both Laertes and Gertrude to have "patience", for opposite reasons. Still playing the game both

ways, Claudius says confidently to Gertrude when they learn of Ophelia's suicide that he'd only just managed to cool Laertes down, and that the news would set him on his path of revenge again.

That note, the ambiguous voice of the seemingly wellmeaning diplomat, sounds again at the outset of the duel when Claudius, having laid his fatherly bet on Hamlet, makes the contestants shake hands and declare a truce to animosity. Even in the scuffle when the poisoned foil cuts both of them he pretends peacemaking—"Part them. They are incensed." To the very end he keeps up his act. When Gertrude collapses poisoned by the drug meant for Hamlet he desperately declares "She swoons to see them bleed." But finally, when Laertes gasps out the truth and Hamlet swoops to his revenge, he is alone. His plea for help—"O, yet defend me, friends; I am but hurt"—goes unheeded. Words at last will not serve. They have substituted for general popularity only for so long as Claudius has remained conspicuously in control. Now, as his most complicated plot begins to go astray and strew more bodies on the stage, an action at last begins which only Claudius himself, face to face with Hamlet at last, can play. The final action belongs to the two most solitary figures alone.

This is the story of what happens in the play at its political, Claudian level. Claudius is an *efficient* king, supremely competent at handling challenges to his state, external and internal alike. He is just in the routine performance of his rule, commanding the loyalty of the old king's chief counsellor and the allegiance of the court. There is no illegality in his being elected ahead of young Hamlet to the crown of Denmark; he cannot be challenged as an usurper. Marrying the former king's widow was useful to secure his position, but it is also obviously a love match of sorts on both sides, whether or not we take the ghost's allegation of adultery to mean a liaison preceding the murder. The only intractable problem in the way of a peaceful and prosperous rule is young Hamlet. And how childishly *he* behaves. Sulky, and solitary, he refuses to cast off his mourning clothes when the new king decrees that the proper period is over. He seems to enjoy the public contrast of his own gloomy black with the celebratory colours and deep-drinking of the court. He won't even concede the semblance of good manners towards the king, in spite of a promise that the king will give his support to Hamlet's succession. Openly hostile and ambitious in the eyes of the court, he becomes when afflicted by seeming insanity openly threatening. He insults the tender Ophelia as readily as he insults the king his stepfather. He assaults his mother and murders the chief counsellor of the state. He treats the corpse of his victim shamefully and shows little sign of penitence for his deed. He fights with the murdered man's son in the grave of the daughter, a tender girl driven to suicide by Hamlet's acts against her and her father. He insults even the seemingly well meaning Osric. He is utterly at odds with the court and his position in it. He is the only discordant note in the well orchestrated Claudian world.[1]

That, very roughly, is the sequence of political actions in the story of *Hamlet.* It is Claudius's story, the narrative of his struggle to maintain order and security in the state for which, as king, he has total responsibility. Kings kept order and administered justice, and in return their subjects owed obedience. Hamlet's disobedience ended in the total destruction of the royal family and dynasty, and the family of Denmark's chief counsellor. On almost every count it is a story of political disaster caused by Hamlet alone.

Political collapse is what happens in the play on the Claudian level. Above it though is Hamlet's level, the region where all the major structural parallels and contrasts combine to focus attention not on Claudius as the centre of political events but on Hamlet. In the pattern of political challenges to state security Hamlet is in the centre, Laertes and Fortinbras on either flank, Claudius the target for all three, for reasons which emphasise the solitary eminence of Hamlet's perspective against the merely expedient calculations of all the others.

The parallels of Fortinbras and Laertes to Hamlet are precise, each one taking up a different aspect of Hamlet's situation. Young Fortinbras is in the same position in Norway as Hamlet is in Denmark, the king his father and namesake dead, his father's brother on the throne. Laertes is in the same position as Hamlet, too, in having a father killed, his murderer unpunished and a target for the son's revenge. The two unthinking men of action, "outstretched heroes", flank the doubt-ridden student prince who shares their problems but not their psychology.

A more complex set of parallels and contrasts putting Hamlet above Claudius can be found in the two triangular patterns already mentioned. The first, old King Hamlet, his murderer Claudius and his queen, is explicitly made by young Hamlet to match its successor, King Claudius, murdering Hamlet and the queen, by means of two groupings of literary figures, King Priam—revenging Pyrrhus—Hecuba, and Player King—Lucianus—Player Queen. This matching of roles is a complex exercise. It links Hamlet and Claudius as regicides, and so makes a love triangle (husband, wife, lover) into a political issue. It puts Hamlet into Claudius's shoes as criminal murderer, regicide, and in some sense a rival for Gertrude's affections. Where the obvious value of the Laertes—Fortinbras—Hamlet parallels lies in the emphasis they give to Hamlet's inert suffering of his shame and his ultimate triumph, the two triangular patterns put his task of revengeful murder into deeper focus. Brother Claudius has murdered King Hamlet and married the queen out of political ambition and earthly love. Nephew Hamlet must murder King Claudius and yet not destroy the queen with grief. His dilemma is the moral one in the act of revenge, the difficulty of punishing an evil act without committing an exactly parallel act.

Hamlet's first literary analogy to this problem is the old account of Priam's murder by fell revenging Pyrrhus, who hesitates before his sword falls as he hears the walls of Troy collapse around him but still sets Hecuba to her grief and the narrator to his tears. In this first analogy to his situation Hamlet is more concerned to incite himself with revenging Pyrrhus's example than to dwell on the grief of Hecuba. She of course laments the death of old Priam as Gertrude so conspicuously did not for old Hamlet: a noble Trojan precedent for ignoble Denmark. But will Gertrude weep this time, when revenging Hamlet drops his sword on the old head of Claudius?

In his soliloquy following the speech about Troy Hamlet checks himself for such a self-indulgent use of literary precedents, and sets about preparing a better analogy for his situation. The analogy he sets up, his Mousetrap, the murder of Gonzago, follows the ghost's account of King Hamlet's murder by Claudius in all its details, including the thirty years'marriage, except one. Hamlet gleefully points out to the increasingly worried Claudius as the Mousetrap unfolds, that the Player King's murderer is "one Lucianus, *nephew* to the King". Just as brother Claudius had been positioned in the triangle as rival and murderer of King Hamlet, so now nephew Hamlet will position himself in the new triangle as murderer of King Claudius. Even to the extent of winning the queen's love from the king.

Hamlet's problem over this last point is neatly illuminated in a third analogy when, on the point of visiting Gertrude after the Mousetrap, Hamlet tells himself he will not have the heart of a Nero. This, the reason Shakespeare changed the name Fengon from his sources into Claudius, is an allusion to Tacitus's view that the Emperor Claudius in marrying Nero's mother Agrippina was committing incest. He was her uncle. And of course Nero murdered not Claudius but Agrippina.

The two sets of triangular relationships and their historical analogies are patterns making it clear that Hamlet son must emulate his uncle's sin in avenging his father's death. It has the neatness of an eye-for-an-eye justice. It is the pattern Hamlet father expects his son to follow as unquestioningly as Fortinbras and Laertes follow their revenges. And as before what stands in the way of direct accomplishment, of a precise parallelism, is Hamlet's mind, his better consciousness of the implications of the larger pattern of things.

A trio of young men all aim their revenges against Claudius and the security of his state. Young Fortinbras is after Claudius to avenge his father's loss and the territory which went with it. Young Laertes is ready to overturn the throne for its murky involvement in the cover-up of his father's murder. Claudius turns both aside from their vengeance, Fortinbras into a futile "fantasy and trick of fame" as Hamlet calls it, the classic method of taking out one's frustration on a secondary target, and Laertes is diverted into serving the king. Laertes for his pains is sickened by what he has to do so much that he loses his desire for revenge altogether and asks his victim to "exchange forgiveness with me". Fortinbras for his acquiescence gains a kingdom.

Between these two casual slaughterers stands Hamlet, more powerfully impelled to murder (by three offences to Laertes'one), pushed by the ghost where Fortinbras and Laertes struggle only for their notional honour. All the structural analogues, the triangles and the parallelisms, draw our attention firmly to Hamlet's mental problem and indicate some of the complexities of his situation. Unlike his peers he pauses. Like rugged Pyrrhus he hears Troy falling. He hesitates over obstacles where Laertes and Fortinbras see only a clear road. He diverts his passion onto secondary targets as he sorts out the tangle of morality and psychology in which he is caught. The whole interim of Hamlet's delay between the order to take revenge and its execution is the central matter of the play.

Notes

[1] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London 1930), pp. 32-41 and 318-20.

Martha C. Ronk (essay date 1994)

SOURCE: "Representations of Ophelia," in *Criticism,* Vol. XXXVI, No. 1, Winter, 1994, pp. 21-43.

[*In the following essay, Ronk examines the way in which Ophelia is represented first as a projection of other characters, and then the way she is represented by Gertrude, when the queen describes Ophelia's drowning.*]

Ophelia has perhaps been drawn or painted more frequently than any of Shakespeare's heroines; yet her history of representation not only postdates the play's production, but also is embedded in the play itself. Ophelia seems to move towards the abstract or emblematic throughout as she is represented as dutiful daughter, beloved beauty, mad woman, drowned innocent. Early in the play she is represented as the projection of others—her father and brother and Hamlet who set aside her statements about herself and revise her into obedience. Polonius further instructs her in representing herself as what she is not, telling her to stifle her desires for and her faith in Hamlet and to present herself to him as indifferent and pious maid as he simultaneously represents her as the devil: "with devotion's visage/ And pious action we do sugar o'er/ The devil himself (III.i.47-49). Hamlet draws attention to Ophelia as a false picture by referring to the use of cosmetics as painting: "I have heard of your paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (III.i.144 ff.) Hamlet most frequently juxtaposes miniatures of his father and Claudius, but he also gazes on Ophelia as if he meant to draw a picture of her. Ophelia gives a picture of his picturing her:

> He took me by the wrist and held me hard.
> Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
> And with his other hand thus o'er his brow
> He falls to such perusal of my face
> As a would draw it.

(Il.i.87-91)'

Once she is mad, Claudius speaks of "poor Ophelia/ Divided from herself and her fair judgment,/ Without the which we *are pictures* or mere beasts" (IV.v.83-5, my emphasis). Once Ophelia has lost those who created her (Polonius is dead and Laertes is absent), she is undone.[2] Her representation as the conventional mad woman derives directly from patriarchal law, and her mad songs foreground the twisted manner in which she speaks her concerns with sexuality and death. In spite of its conventionality, however, her representation as madwoman does accomplish something other than pathos. For one, at the moment in which she is presented as most divided, she is also most aware of the exploitation of maids, and of the ways in which romantic myths of St. Valentine's day become crude losses. Moreover, without any physical contact, she has moved beyond

maidenhood—not *not* virginal, but something else. She demonstrates her knowledge of the equivocal nature of things by puns—Hamlet's device as well—("by Cock"), and by singing her grotesqueries prettily. As Laertes says: "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself,/ She turns to favor and to prettiness" (IV.v. 186-87).

The most arresting and arrested picture of Ophelia occurs after she has disappeared from the play in Gertrude's description of her drowning in IV.vii. 166-83, and it is this representation which I take as the focus of my paper. This is a peculiar speech for at least two reasons. One, for what it is not. It is not a lamentation or disjointed outpouring of emotion as might be expected; rather it is a set piece, an arras, a speaking picture. It seems contrived and overblown. Gertrude's stylized speech is notably attentive, not to the human tragedy at its center, but to the decorative aspects of Ophelia's drowning—the embroidered flowers, the slanting willow, the billowing skirts. At the very least one might find it curious that the queen should give so aesthetically pleasing and detailed a description of the event:

> 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.

(IV.vii.174-183)

Secondly, the speech is peculiar, if not outrightly bizarre, because Gertrude appears to have been present as eyewitness. For if she had been present to watch Ophelia's sinking to "muddy death," the speech puts Gertrude again in the situation of being complicitous with someone's dying. Moreover, since it is so highly astute a representation of Ophelia—of her madness, sexual obsessions, confused motivations—one wonders how Gertrude knows so much and just how much Gertrude's Ophelia is a mirror of herself and a premonition of her *own* death. Since it is so visual a representation, one wonders what is it a visual representation of; what is it (to refer to the language of *Othello*) ocular proof of? How does the picture function in terms of representing "Ophelia" and what does the representation itself say about representing the unseeable? The question of who saw what and what such seeing means is, of course, central to the entire play.

In this paper I focus on Shakespeare's use of *ekphrasis* to signal a representation of the inexpressible, the speaking picture, the refiguration of what cannot be figured. That is, I focus on *ekphrasis* as a particular means of suggesting aspects of character not otherwise accessible. In Jakobson's terms the relationship between word and image is both metonymic and metaphoric—metonymic in that the two complete each other sequentially and as parts of a whole, metaphoric in that each translates into the other's medium. Each moves towards the other impossibly. By moving from one sign system to another the poet creates a gap to signal a gap and it is in this arena that I locate my discussion of Ophelia—not to argue that Shakespeare has miraculously been able to represent the unrepresentable, but that the technical shift from verbal to visual by means of a specific rhetorical device, *ekphrasis,* signals both the enormous gap between words and images (and between images and the world) and the suggestion that the missing sign system might indeed offer up some version of "presence." Moreover, since the picture of Ophelia is given by means of language, the speech conveys ocular absence in an especially potent manner—no paint, no body.

Such shifts into the ekphrastic occur in Shakespeare's plays in numerous places: Viola's Patience speech, Cleopatra on the barge, Desdemona's willow song, to name a few. In the case of Viola, the Patience speech functions in a variety of complex ways, but especially to assert—while simultaneously denying—her other

gender by evoking the picture of her sister.[3] The case of Ophelia is complicated since she does not present her own picture, but rather has it presented "for her" by Gertrude. Yet like the famous "speaking pictures" discussed at length by Renaissance rhetoricians, Ophelia's picture does assert something about an issue central to the play—acting and its relationship to volition. By setting the speech on Ophelia's drowning in the context of the visual—both in terms of rhetoric (*ekphrasis* and *enargeia*) and culture (popular sixteenth century emblem books, theatrical staging)—I will try to suggest what her representation represents. I choose this manner of examining Ophelia in order to use the methodology of the period, but I also think that the shifts into *ekphrasis* in Shakespeare's plays stand at significant junctures and demonstrate the successes and failures of representation. Further, I will follow the lead of Angus Fletcher's work on allegory in drawing together two critical methods which have traditionally been at odds with one another: the discussion of Elizabethan imagery and psychoanalytic interpretations of the plays.[4]

I don't wish to argue that there is a transhistorical self or transcendent essence of Ophelia, but that Shakespeare frequently devises an approach to such by means of technical devices. That is, he uses visual allegory, for example, to extend and expand representation of character. Rather than making a character less elastic, I would argue, such artificial devices work to deny one aspect of character in service of something else. Rather than flattening character, such devices fill in what we know more traditionally by means of plot and dialogue. If the subject is missing—and clearly a picture of someone absent and in the process of dying in her absence is about as far from subject as one can get—what appears in its place and to what ends?

The representation of Ophelia has been almost entirely iconic; her wild hair depicts madness or the victim of rape; her blank white dress stands in contrast to Hamlet's inky and scholarly black; the emblematic flowers which she gives away and which surround her at death signal her participation in deflowering; her snatches of song suggest fragmentation of character. For Hamlet she is emblem of mother, bride, and finally grave. In her fine article, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," Elaine Showalter shows how historical depictions of Ophelia alter with changes in attitudes towards women and madness. I wish to argue, however, that her picture-like existence in the play raises epistemological questions as well. As Bridget Lyons suggests in her essay on the iconography of Ophelia as flower-giver, although Ophelia exhibits certain traditional props and gestures of the goddess Flora, she nonetheless remains difficult to read.[5] Within the play itself her icongraphy is contradictory as she appears both as the goddess of nature and a debased version of the same. Significantly, Ophelia herself draws attention to the difficulties of signs and their meanings when she comments that the flowers she hands about can carry a variety of meanings:

> There's rue for you; and here's some for me. We
> may call it herb of grace a Sundays. O, you must
> wear your rue with a difference.

(IV.V.178 ff.)

That is, in her language and in her person Ophelia most vividly raises questions of the ways by which we know things and of the confusion that may result from using different approaches or different sorts of language. Most pointedly, Ophelia provokes questions of character, questions also posed by the ghost which comes "in the same figure like the King that's dead."[6] Both "figures" raise the questions: what is a theatrical representation of character; what is the relationship between a figurative and a dramatic character; what is the relationship of what one sees to what is; can a "piece" of a character ("a piece of him")—whether that piece is a bit of dialogue, a bit of ghostly shadow, a bit of mad talk—represent a full blown "character," and what does that mean? Interestingly, both Ophelia and the ghost are uncannily half-dead, seen and not seen (mad, ghostly) and are potent in their absence. The ghost who is there and not there sets Hamlet on his quest for revenge and Ophelia, more powerful in death than in life, propels Hamlet to declare his love, his "identity" ("This is I, Hamlet the Dane") and his willingness, finally, to fight. Both raise the question of what meaning is to be assigned to a figure (or figures of speech or emblematic figures) and what relationship exists between a

so-called figure and any other sort of reality. The ghost appears "as Hamlet Sr." and from the outset of the play questions what it means to appear "as" something else, especially in a play in which one figure is constantly being substituted for another, one representation of father for another, one woman for another.[7] Here Ophelia appears as an emblem of Ophelia, but not in order to be dismissed, but rather to mean differently from the ways she has meant before. Angus Fletcher points to these fundamental questions concerning what is usually called the lack of reality of allegorical characters in his book on *Allegory:* "allegorical agents are *real enough,* however ideal their referents may be, however'unlike ourselves'they may appear. They have what might be called an'adequate representational power.'Too many philosophic questions are raised: What constitutes reality? Is it accuracy of representation? Then what constitutes accuracy? Or representation?" (32).

In her final moments of the play Ophelia is caught in an allegorical picture, one that most readers and viewers cannot forget. If Hamlet threatens to become all language and eventually all story, Ophelia as his counterpart becomes all picture, displayed in her final moments by means of description, not so much even of her person but of the objects around her, as if they could speak her story:

> There is a willow grows aslant the brook,
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crowflowers, 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 crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
> When down her weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook.

(IV.vii.166-75)

The willow—here given (like Ophelia) not directly but by means of a representative reflection—is itself an emblem described by Thomas Fuller in his *The History of the Worthies of England:* "A sad Tree, whereof such who have lost their love make their *mourning garlands*" (144). The rest of the items in the description are emblematic as well. The nettles are associated with pain, poison or betrayal; the daisies with forsaken love. The crow-flowers perhaps symbolize dejection; the phallic purples signal the causal association between sexuality and death; the flowers are transformed to trophies.[8]

The scene is rendered even more allegorical by personification: the branch on which Ophelia climbs is "envious" and the brook into which she falls is "weeping." "Weeping" comes at the end of a chain of sounds that seems to build inevitably to this conclusion—"weeds," "weedy," "weeping." The court may be corrupt and the queen may be dry-eyed, but the pathetic fallacy is in place. Gertrude says that Ophelia is in harmony with nature (*indued unto that element*) and the sounds draw all the items of the scene, both human and inhuman, closer together so that *weeping* becomes a generalized event with many participants: Ophelia, brook, Gertrude, audience. Although the human figures are not described as actually weeping, the unrealized state of mourning for each is pictured in the weeping brook. As in other allegorical moments, emotion, often unconscious emotion, is spread out over the landscape. We know the centrality of mourning then through this scene. Since, as Lacan argues, there has been too little mourning heretofore, finally there is enough (39).

I would argue that in allegorical writing such as this, the unconscious is, to borrow Louis Aragon's phrase, "out there." Ophelia may be missing in the sense that we know little of her except as others describe her, but like the hoar leaves, she is reflected/captured piecemeal in the embroidery of the scene. The willow tells us of Ophelia's unrequited love and the fantastic garlands (circular garlands on a phallic bough) tell of her obsession

with sexuality and death. Allegory heightens the pervasiveness of sorrow and makes the connection between world and character inescapable. In discussing Virgil's use of a night scene to describe Dido's sorrow, the Renaissance critic Peacham reiterates this argument, including the effect of pictorial description on the reader. As Rosemond Tuve observes: "[It] offers a way of magnifying the *depth and importance* of Dido's sorrow. Our participation in that passion, made thus more active, operates to give us'a more familiar insight into'all sorrow, for, as Sidney says, it is'so in [its] own naturall seate layd to the viewe, that wee seeme not to heare of [it], but cleerely to see through [it]'" (165-66).[9] The mechanical operation set up by pictorial allegory leads to an assumption of depth and importance. That is, the technique of "seeing through" leads to an assumption of "seeing through and into and beyond." If there has been an enormous identification with Ophelia over the years since the first production of *Hamlet,* it may have to do not only with how much of her story is missing from the play (and therefore how many gaps there are for the imagination to fill), but also with a visual operation established by scenes such as this.

Though this particular scene is rich in allegorical detail, it is not an isolated example of Shakespeare's use of emblems in the play. The play's display of emblems is full, if not indeed extreme: Yorick's skull, the graveyard, the figure of the ghost, the mousetrap—all visual images in the service of abstraction. Moreover, the play belongs to an historical period in which the emblematic was a received mode of perceiving the world. Rosemary Freeman draws attention to an habitual cast of mind for Renaissance poets, a readiness to see a relation between simple, concrete, visible things and moral ideas (155); Steven Mullaney describes London, particularly the liminal space of the Liberties as highly emblematic: "Reading the city . . . was something every citizen was expected to do" (14). Masques were emblematic; Spenser's "Shepheardes Calender" was emblematic; designs for tapestry or for the queen's gowns were taken from emblem books; certain Shakespearean characters are seen as emblems—Falstaff as Vice or Actaeon. Critics have often thought that emblem books provide the closest model to these ekphrastic moments in Shakespeare's plays. First published in England in 1586, such books also present pictures in combination with text—set apart, interpreted, allegorized—each part necessary, each part not enough. Renaissance writers repeatedly express enthusiasm for emblem books and for vivid pictures. Sidney, for example, argues that a philosopher is not so accomplished as a poet since he can only create "a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth." Sidney also draws attention to the power of *ut pictura poesis* and *enargeia* (similar to *ekphrasis*) not so much to narrate as to exhibit. Like the figures in emblem books, many of which are classical women, Ophelia seems in her death to be held up as a statue or visual exhibit designed to be contemplated and interpreted.[10]

Although discussion of the pervasiveness of the pictorial in Renaissance literature is beyond the scope of my paper, I want to allude at least to the importance of the visual in the theater. The theater, of course, is always a focal point of the interplay between the visual and the verbal and *Hamlet* almost relentlessly replaces one with the other, most obviously in the mousetrap scenes, but also throughout. The play persistently replaces itself in the way it refigures its own progress, drawing self-conscious attention to the incompleteness of each figuring. Thus my understanding of the two representations of the murder is that one (the dumbshow) simply does not work: Claudius doesn't respond, not for some commonsensical reason as that he is engaged in conversation, but because the effect of representation (as Hamlet notes in his conversations with the players) is mysterious and uncertain in its effects. Likewise, the picture of Ophelia drowning localizes the point of connection between the verbal and the visual and draws attention to the inconclusiveness of both. Too much and too little are given. What does it mean? What are the allegorical implications? And what is there in this "passive" portrait and useless drowning which seems rather to suggest potency?

The nature of the speech is, as I have said, a set speech, a formal and artificial picture in part because of its numerous emblematic qualities. Moreover, to move from the speech itself to the speaker, it appears set because it is narrated in so flat and decorative a manner that one might assume a painting (traditionally commissioned to keep one's image alive after death) rather than a tragic event were being described. Gertrude describes the event as if it were a scene to be contemplated in careful detail rather than a scene to be reacted

to; she doesn't lose control or break from her cool chronology of events. One might say that the speech no more belongs to Gertrude than to anyone; it is outside of character as if it stood at a remove and had its own integrity and purpose. It must occur when it does because it introduces the graveyard scene, but it could, one might argue, be projected from any voice or any character. Does it matter, then, that it is Gertrude who utters these words?

I think that it matters for several reasons. First, Gertrude is the other woman in the play subject to the decisions, the sexuality, the plotting of men; here she substitutes for Ophelia. By speaking of Ophelia, Gertrude speaks—as she rarely does in the play and here only by reflection—of herself. Like Ophelia who dutifully obeys father and brother, Gertrude is submissive to Claudius, behaving as a sort of projection. In their first encounter with Hamlet, Claudius asks "how the clouds still hang on you," and Gertrude echoes "good Hamlet, cast thy nighted colour off." Both women are reflected in the eyes of the men around them: Hamlet would draw Ophelia and would, as he says in the closet scene, set up a glass for Gertrude to see her "inmost part." Both women are attacked by Hamlet for their whorishness and both are torn by conflicting loyalties, slipping from one allegiance to another, and losing the ability to represent themselves. Ophelia's gathering of "long purples," for example, seems an enactment not so much of her own fantasies, but of Hamlet's. The dank image of "dead men's fingers" to describe these same flowers may reveal her ambivalence towards sexuality, but it seems equally evocative of Hamlet's injunction to Gertrude concerning Claudius'fingers. Equivocally, he tells her not to do what he bids her do, and specifically pictures the king "paddling in your neck with his damn'd fingers" (III.iv.187). In Shakespeare, visual descriptions seem not so much particular as pervasive, not so much belonging to a single character's unconscious as to an unconscious underlying the play as a whole. Yet for all of Hamlet's crazed objectifying of both Ophelia and Gertrude, it is Gertrude who gives the last description of Ophelia as an art object. This seems appropriate, not only because of their comparable positions, but also because Gertrude's dispassionate description forces an audience to attend to what is happening to them both. Just as she disappears from the play, Ophelia becomes emblem or icon in a process eerily similar to that of others of Shakespeare's women characters.[11] As Ophelia becomes icon, Gertrude as witness forces the self-conscious witnessing of her/their fetishization.

Gertrude's description is thus striking because of her decided aesthetic objectification of Ophelia. For Gertrude, Ophelia is a site of fascination and obsessive staring; there is no intimacy between them, as there is, for example, between Rosalind and Celia; and nothing, moreover, that draws Gertrude towards maternal intimacy or concern. Although later she does say that she had hoped to deck her marriage bed with flowers, a comment that indicates some connection to the girl who might have married her son, here she simply describes Ophelia as if she were invitingly framed to be stared at. It seems to me, then, that one of the reasons this moment is so unsettling is that *vis à vis* Ophelia, Gertrude stands in what is so frequently in these plays a male position, or at least one that renders her a distant and voyeuristic observer.

Yet, unbeknownst to her, Gertrude's delivery of this speech also binds her inextricably with Ophelia—calling attention to how they have each been made. Moreover, it binds her to Ophelia by so fully capturing the way in which both Ophelia and Gertrude decide by not deciding, intend by not intending. Gertrude seems not to know of Hamlet Sr.'s murder, yet she does suffer guilt for some reason as she indicates by an aside just before Ophelia enters singing her mad songs:

> To my sick soul, as sin's true nature is,
> Each toy seems prologue to some great amiss.
> So full of artless jealousy is guilt,
> It spills itself in fearing to be spilt.

(IV.v.17-20)

Her comment about the player queen—"The lady doth protest too much"—seems also to give some indication if not of guilt, then of her subtle knowledge of how to represent oneself in a complex, shady world.

What then does this knowledge indicate that she knows about the man she marries and about his murdering of Hamlet Sr.? Ophelia also seems "to act" in some shadowy realm of knowing and not knowing. She seems to crawl out the limb merely to hang her garland of flowers for some nonchalant, aesthetic reason, yet she is already mad, already obsessed with the death of her father. Is she out of control or not, and what does control mean at this juncture in the play? Is she, like Hamlet, acting a part or acting, and what is the difference between them, a question the play and the players reiterate time and again. This is the sort of serious quibble which the clowns turn comic in the graveyard: if Ophelia went to the water she drowned herself purposely; but if the water came to her, then she drowned herself in her own defense.[12]

I am leading here to the question of whether or not Gertrude is complicitous in the murder of Hamlet Sr., not that I think that the play offers a direct answer, but rather that the play so insistently raises the question of what it means not to know what is going on. Ophelia, as many have argued, does not deserve the maimed rites which she receives because she did not intend to commit suicide; rather she crawled out on a weak limb to hang her trophy of flowers and the branch broke.[13] Yet, although she is cleared of suicide, she still receives maimed rites. Although the moment at which Gertrude chooses to marry Claudius is missing from the play, the scene in which Ophelia agrees to stand as bait for Hamlet is not. I have often puzzled over this scene wondering if it were a moment of change in which she gives up even the few worried questions she poses for her father early in the play, questions which signal her fullness as character, to become a pure iconic image of devotion. In this moment does the representation of Ophelia shift so that she is no longer allied with life but with a kind of stasis, life-indeath? In describing Ophelia's inadvertent death does Gertrude in some way describe the inadvertency at the center of her own actions; in her description of another does she acknowledge her complicitous choices even as Ophelia seems to choose suicide? By this speech does Gertrude portend her own death in which "the drink" also pulls her down. Does she, like Hamlet, sense what is to come or does she speak more wisely than she knows when she says to Laertes just before her description of Ophelia's drowning, "One woe doth tread upon another's heel,/ So fast they follow" (IV.vii. 162-63)?

In the play as a whole happenstance looms large and when accident occurs it seems to signal the operation at least of fate if not, as Hamlet suggests, of providence. Gertrude accidentally drinks from the wrong cup; Ophelia dies by the accidental breaking of a branch; and Hamlet's ship encounters the pirates by chance. Behind these events there seems to be some hidden meaning which the picture of the breaking branch contains. In visual terms such a picture appears analogous to Hamlet's: "There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now,'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come." That is, the picture of the breaking branch contains the past, present and future, as Gertrude pictures Ophelia making a garland, crawling out on the branch, and falling to her death; and it focuses on volition and on fate—on being ready or even eager to die and on leaving it, simultaneously, to fate. It seems as if Ophelia must hang up the garland—must, even to the point of drowning. Her compulsion to hang out this garland, this circular O of flowers on the limb seems to engage with Hamlet's copulatory imagery throughout the play and also to be an enactment of a ritual of mourning. As she says in her mad song about her father: "Larded with sweet flowers / Which bewept to the grave did not go" (IV.v.38-9). Thus Ophelia out on a limb is emblematic of an intertwining of choice and fate that tragically can only be represented in numerous ways, never untangled. It is an emblem of the equivocation—acting and not acting—which stands at the center of the play, and of the equivocal nature of representation.

In more psychological terms, it is emblematic of Ophelia's absolute control of her actions and simultaneously of her total submission to an obsessive idea which possesses her. Ophelia is driven compulsively to hang out the garland or to hand out flowers in a proper and ordered fashion. Ophelia's allegorical behavior becomes analogous, as Fletcher argues, to compulsive behavior: "The commonest experience of the compulsive neurotic is that he is suddenly disturbed by impulses that have no apparent rational meaning, and thence are

seen as arbitrary and external'commands'" (287). And yet, Ophelia's action is powerful for all its seeming strangeness (or, as Fletcher puts it, "foreignness"), in part I think because that which is missing from view is enacted in the visual emblem as she, like Hamlet in his final scene, enacts both sexes in one: she is both bough and garland as he is both sword and wound. Also, it is a moment in which art dominates and asserts its power: the random flowers of the mad scene have been braided into a garland which outlines the O of Ophelia's name. Copulation has become entirely symbolic.

The description of Ophelia's drowning adds momentously to her representation just as she is permanently removed from the play. Just as the play seems to stall just before the rush of events leading to Hamlet's death, so here it stops as Gertrude leisurely relates the drowning. Indeed, the ekphrastic moment is a moment of stop time, as Murray Krieger has so well described, a moment when stillness reigns; this is particularly obvious here since it comes at the end of the scene in which Laertes and Claudius are plotting Hamlet's death and in which Laertes expresses all eagerness for action. *Ekphrasis* and *enargeia* run counter to narrative time and seem to move into space as an escape from time and its effects as in the famous example of the Grecian Urn. *Ekphrasis* allows for a kind of spacing out, a shift into another mode. In *Hamlet* Ophelia is clearly affronted by the rapid passage of time—by the early loss of young love, by the unexpected murder of her father, by the loss of her own sanity, and finally by death. Moreover, Ophelia is effaced not only by the rapid pace of time, but also by the language of nothingness, the nothing, as Hamlet remarks, between maids'legs (III.ii.115-19). In this instance the nothingness becomes so overwhelmingly sexual as to blot out any other aspects of character. The play's counter-movement to this rapid effacement of Ophelia is the presentation of her as abstract allegorical figure, most particularly in the moment of her drowning in which she paradoxically becomes one with the earth (dragged "to muddy death"). She is now the obvious representation of "Ophelia," or to put it another way, that she was a representation all along is made clear. The picture disrupts any notion of "self by turning "self into pure figuration. Uncannily, Ophelia seems to participate in this movement, answering Hamlet's version of her nothingness with her own, and replacing her earlier frenzied madness with another sort: still, calm, deliberate. Her movement out on the limb is as Murray Krieger describes it in his essay on *ekphrasis,* "a forever-now" motion (118). It has often seemed to me appropriate in a comic way that the foolish Polonius is killed behind an arras. As a character he is marked by mechanical behavior, two-dimensional as a tapestry. Ophelia also is defined in the play by mechanical operations foisted on her largely by her father, and her death scene is also tapestry-like. Yet, I would argue that the effect on the reader of this move from drama to the still ekphrastic moment is to elicit contemplation—in particular concerning the successes and failures of representation, the losses and triumphs of becoming picture or story. Both Renaissance and contemporary literary critics are sensitive to the peculiar effect of allegorical representation. Peacham says that the figure of allegory "engraves" the image of things "under deep shadowes to the contemplation of the mind." Angus Fletcher suggests that emblems and allegory present codes to be deciphered which elicit, therefore, an interpretive response from the audience: "the silences in allegory mean as much as the filled-in spaces, because by bridging the silent gaps between oddly unrelated images we reach the sunken understructure of thought" (107).[14] Thus one's experience of this madness, if it is that, is quite different from one's experience of Ophelia's earlier mad scene. Quieted by emblem, one's experience is of something beyond.

This movement into eternal icon thus renders Ophelia paradoxically outside of or beyond the very mutability which death usually entails. Such a technical maneuver places her in a new arena as amplified *figure:* an artificial representation larger than life. Michel Beau-jour argues persuasively that *ekphrasis* is disruptive of the forward movement of narrative time and that it operates towards the ideal:

> Such rhetorical ornaments as *enargia, ekphrasis,* the whole complex array of *evidentia,* lie athwart the thread of narrative time, and jeopardize its integrity. Like the *imagines agentes* of *Memoria,* descriptive figures derive their *energy* from idealization, excess, hyperbole, cosmic order. Reaching for optimum effectiveness, descriptive ornaments rise toward an Empyrean inhabited by quasi-Platonic ideas and, as such, they become strangers to mutability, and to the

red dust of cause and effect. (42)

As Gertrude slowly details the drowning, Ophelia moves out of narrative and into some "cosmic order," as fantastical as the fantastic garlands she weaves. She becomes part of a pastoral world removed from the corruption of the court; even the liberal shepherds' "grosser name" for the long purples seems merely frank compared to the sexual license and incest at court. She belongs to the artificial realm of pastoral poems:

> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name.

(IV.vii.167-69)

Another way in which the picture of Ophelia specifically argues for Ophelia as an inhabitant now of another realm is in the peculiar imagery used to describe her clothes: "her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up." The image "mermaid-like" for Ophelia's skirts is so far-fetched as to force one to ask why such an image occurs. Like mermaids her clothes bear her up, bear her away. Indeed she seems metamorphosed into a water creature of sorts: "like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element," she seems therefore oblivious of drowning. She is, like the mermaids, a momentary inhabitant of two realms, air and water. Some part of her, alien and otherworldly, has split off in the form of skirts, to buoy her up. Paradoxically, at the moment of her death in the play, she is on her way to becoming legendary, the stuff that does not change.

By association, I would argue, Ophelia herself comes to be represented by mermaids.[15] Like the mermaid, Ophelia is split in nature by those who describe her in the play; in Gertrude's speech that split is displayed in the vivid picture of creatures half-women and half-fish buoying Ophelia in the water. As emblems mermaids were readily available to the culture and had been part of the pageants given to entertain Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth in 1591 and at Elvetham in 1595, creating a sort of Ovidian myth for the Elizabethan age.[16] In *Midsummer Night's Dream* Oberon tells about such a mythical realm in which mermaids calm the seas and sing heavenly music:

> I sat upon a promontory,
> And heard a mermaid, on a dolphin's back,
> Uttering such dulcet and harmonious breath,
> That the rude sea grew civil at her song,
> And certain stars shot madly from their spheres,
> To hear the sea maid's music.

(II.i. 150-56)

In *Hamlet* Shakespeare's imagery of mermaids mythologizes Ophelia, pulling her into an iconic realm of the idealized and transcendent.

The figure of Ophelia behaves allegorically then in pointing insistently beyond itself as a key to something hidden, mysterious, unexpressable, a realm—to use Walter Benjamin's terms—"of hidden knowledge." In allegory, he argues, "all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed sanctify them" (175). The shift into *ekphrasis* may not be able fully to render that realm, but it is a potent technical device which can suggest the larger and inexpressible shift. That is, *ekphrasis* becomes a poetic device to render a presence which cannot be rendered or to represent that which cannot be represented. If the word is the sign for symbolic and arbitrary mediation,

the image becomes a sign for the unmediated. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests in *Iconology:*

> We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature. The image is the sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as (or, for the believer, actually achieving) natural immediacy and presence. The word is its "other," the artificial, arbitrary production of human will that disrupts natural presence by introducing unnatural elements into the world—time, consciousness, history, and the alienating intervention of symbolic mediation.
>
> (43)[17].

What interests me at this point is what to make of the emblem which is "Ophelia." Although it seems true that Shakespeare's women cannot survive their transformations into art objects, it seems also true that some potency remains in this portrait of Ophelia in part because of some specific aspects of this particular scene such as the witty enactment of copulation which it is tempting to see as some form of transcendent sexuality, insistently beyond the forms offered by the culture of the play. Even the reference to the mermaids seems to draw attention to two sexes in one; if the scene is a scene of symbolic copulation, it is one in which *gentle, diffuse,* and *spread out* (like the skirts) seem the operative terms. I also would postulate at least tentatively that when we approach the women of Shakespeare's plays as art objects or as objects of the gaze, we come at them in part, and particularly in the second example, from a modern perspective. Although I do not deny the frequent obliteration of women in the plays, it would be more useful to imagine what sort of potency resides with an icon from the perspective of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation which repressed icons, particularly icons of the central female figure of the Catholic Church. From this vantage, the emblem of Ophelia appears more subversive and potent; as the figure who represents the return of the repressed, she is eerily insistent and tropic.

Moreover, Ophelia seems to participate in her own emblematization. She moves beyond the play at this point to stand in a realm apart like the mimes or the silent ghost. In this tragedy, Hamlet's and Ophelia's refusal to participate in the world as it presents itself results in death. Yet Ophelia's death also has a sort of insistent calm about it, constructed by the technical devices of narration and *ekphrasis.* I do not mean to overly romanticize silence, but I do mean to draw attention to the potency of refusal.

Further, the emblem, again like the ghost, has a potency associated with the arousing of fear. As many critics have pointed out, this play is very much one of questions concerning where one comes from and where one goes and the fear attendant on such questions. Significantly, then, Ophelia may be said to arouse fear first as an image of the other, that is, woman (for Hamlet, an image of the debased sexuality of his mother), and here imaged as half-woman, half-fish; and secondly as emblem of where one comes from and where one is going (to muddy death). More importantly, perhaps, the ekphrastic portrait of Ophelia arouses fear as the form of emblem itself. This is a version of Freud's "uncanny" in which one feels an eerie fear when one "doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not in fact be animate."[18] W. T. J. Mitchell explains the fear of ekphrastic moments in a manner in keeping with Freud as stemming from a sense of the visual image as a sort of idol or fetish: "the fear stems from the recognition that these signs, and the'others'who believe in them, may be in the process of *taking* power, appropriating voice" (151). Such fear could arise from a dead person speaking as the ghost speaks to Hamlet or as Ophelia "speaks" from beyond the grave.

She makes herself known ekphrastically by putting forth emblematic flowers—at least so Laertes imagines:

> Lay her I'th'earth,
> And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
> May violets spring.

(V.i.233-34)

The grotesque nature of this image becomes even more evident when it is set next to Shakespeare's source in Persius: "e tumulo fortunataque favilla/ nascentur violae?"[19] The violets in Shakespeare's play grow not out of the ground, but out of Ophelia's very flesh, and are emblems here of the realm beyond the human: fair and unpolluted.

As a sort of decomposing emblem which passes in and out of the iconic, Ophelia forces a recognition of all that such alternation back and forth signifies, including the realms beyond the senses, realms located in absence and death; and, more importantly, of the uncanny and affecting nature of that which will not hold still even in its stillest (most iconic) form. As Ophelia shifts in and out of the iconic, her shifts represent the mysterious absences and gaps which are contained in the "not this" of "that" or the "not that" of "this." She remains unseen. Indeed how could Gertrude have seen her, many critics of the play have asked, the sort of naive question like "how many children had Lady Macbeth?" that leads us to central perceptions concerning male potency (a central issue in *Macbeth*) or concerning unrepresentativity, to my mind, *the* central issue in *Hamlet.* That is, the Gertrude who has been represented in the play could not have witnessed and then narrated Ophelia's drowning; that she appears "other" at this point further underscores the instability of representation. That Gertrude describes Ophelia as "incapable of her own distress" signals not only Ophelia's removal from self (by madness perhaps), but also her incapability, as in sonnet 113: "Incapable of more, replete with you./ My most true mind thus maketh mine m'eyen untrue." As Stephen Booth has it in his notes to the sonnets, "the capsulation of everything in the poem has logically distinguished in the course of reporting a fanciful collapse in distinctions of function." Vision undoes vision.[20] In discussing Shakespeare, many critics have described his use of doubles and substitutes and replays; here is another sort of doubling: the use of *ekphrasis* to represent and underscore the O which is missing. One is blocked from seeing, thwarted in one's efforts to pierce the narrative to see the picture which itself blocks "Ophelia." Neil Hertz associates "blockage" with the sublime, describing the activity of a mind attempting to match the extent of an object: "but when its capacity matches the extent of the object, the sense of containing the object, but also (with a hint of the theological paradox) of being filled by it, possessed by it, blocks the mind's further movment and'composes it into a solemn sedateness,' 'strikes it with deep silent wonder.'"[21] Ophelia's ekphrastic presence in the play, particularly given the historical moment, suggests the impossibility of more than seeing what the viewer "could not have seen" (as Hamlet can never see his own conception and his own death) to an audience intent on viewing what is not there—the sheer impossible effort of which may also help to create a sense of the transcendent or of the frustration which lapses into it.

Notes

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet.* ed. Harold Jenkins, Arden ed. (New York: Routledge, 1982).

[2] Irigaray: "How could she be anything but suggestible and hysterical when her sexual instincts have been castrated, her sexual feelings, representatives, and representations forbidden" (*Speculum of the Other Woman,* trans. Gillian Gill, [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985], 59-60).

[3] Martha Ronk, "Viola's [lack of] Patience," *Centennial Review* 37 (1993): 384-99.

[4] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), chapter 6.

[5] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism," in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory,* ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, (New York: Methuen, 1985), 77-94. Bridget Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia," *ELH* 44 (1977): 60-74. Maurice Charney and Hanna Charney, "The language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists," *Signs* 3 (1977): 451-60. Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet,"* in *Literature and Psychoanalysis,*

ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1977).

[6] The definitions for *figure* in the OED are too numerous to include in full here. I give some of the ones relevant to my argument: "5a. An embodied (human) form; a person considered with regard to visible form or appearance. 9a. The image, likeness, or representation of something material or immaterial. 1531 Elyot *Gov.* I. xxvi, There is nat a more playne figure of idlenesse, than playinge at dise. 10. *esp.* An artificial representation of the human form. b. In painting, drawing, etc. H.a. Represented character; part enacted; hence, position, capacity. 1610 Shakes. *Temp.* III.ii i 83 Brauely the figure of this Harpie, hast thou Perform'd. 12. An emblem, type."

[7] I am grateful to my colleague Michael Near of Occidental College for these perceptions.

[8] Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England* (London: F.G.W.L. and W.G., 1662). See also the Longer Notes in Jenkins, 544-47. Alciatus pictures a willow in plate 201 in a way that associates the willow not with unrequited love, but with sexuality, if not assault: "A willow tree near a stream. . . . At the left a nude supine woman with a burning torch at her side. Behind the woman a kneeling bearded man reaching between the legs of a second nude woman who leans back on her knees" (*Emblemata* [Padua, 1621]).

[9] *Elizabethean and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), 112.

[10] Rosemary Freeman, ed., *A Collection of Emblems, Ancient and Moderne by George Wither,* (reprint, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 1975); Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

In contemporary literary criticism the word *ekphrasis* (defined in the OED as "a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing," 1715) has been used to refer to these verbal images and to connect them to one of the earliest and the most famous examples of such rhetorical practice, the shield of Achilles. W. T. J. Mitchell, *Iconography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) and an unpublished essay "On Poems On Pictures: Ekphrasis and the Other." Murray Krieger, "The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoon* Revisited," in *The Play and the Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967). John Hollander, "The Gazer's Spirit," in *The Romantics and Us,* ed. Gene W. Roff, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990). Michel Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 27-59.

Concerning terminology, Jean Hagstrum provides important information about current use of the term: "I use the noun *ecphrasis* and the adjective *ecphrastic* in a more limited sense to refer to that special quality of giving voice and language to the otherwise mute art object. My usage is etymologically sound since the Greek noun and adjective come from *ekphrazein* which means "to speak out," "to tell in full" (*The Sister Arts* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], 18 note 34). Yet in Renaissance books of rhetoric the word which most frequently occurs for vivid pictures in language is *enargeia* (also translated as *illustratio* and *evidentia* and closely related to *ut pictura poesis*) to show enthusiasm for vivid pictures in language. In praising Homer's use of pictures, Erasmus refers to *evidentia:* "We use this whenever, for the sake of amplifying, adorning, or pleasing, we do not state a thing simply, but set it forth to be viewed as though portrayed in color on a tablet, so that it may seem that we have painted, not narrated, and that the reader has seen, not read" (*On Copia of Words and Ideas,* trans. Donald B. King and H. David Rix [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982], 47). Cf. Sister Miriam Joseph, *Rhetoric in Shakespeare's Time* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962).

"The'*Enargia,* or cleereness of representation, requird in absolute Poems is not the perspicuous delivery of a lowe invention; but high, and harty invention exprest in most significant, and unaffected phrase; it serves not a skillful Painters turne, to draw the figure of a face onely to make knowne who it represents; but hee must

lymn, give luster, shaddow, and heightening; which though ignorants will esteeme spic'd, and too curious, yet such as have the judiciall perspective, will see it hath, motion, spirit, and life,'George Chapman, prefatory letter, *Ovid's Banquet of Sense,* 1595)," quoted in Rosemond Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947); cf. Sidney, "The Defense of Poesy (1595)," *The Renaissance in England,* ed. Hyder Rollins and Herschel Baker (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1954), 610.

I examined numerous primary sources, some in reprint, many at the Huntington Library. Henry Green, *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers* (London: Trubner & Co., 1870); *Whitney's "Choice of Emblemes,*" ed. Henry Green (London: Lovell Reeve & Co., 1866); *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne by George Wither,* intro. Rosemary Freeman (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1975); *Peacham's Compleat Gentleman,* intro. G. S. Gordon (London: Clarendon Press, 1906); Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna 1612,* English Emblem books No. 5, ed. John Horden (Scolar Press, 1973); Caesar Ripa, *Iconologia: or, Moral Emblems,* (London: Benj. Motte, 1709); Alciatus, *Emblemata* (Padua, 1621); Francis Quarles, *Emblems, divine and moral* (London: Alkexr Hogg, 1778); Cesare Ripa, *Baroque and Rococo pictorial imagery. The 1758-60 Hertel edition of "Iconologia"* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971); *Speaking Pictures: a gallery of pictorial poetry from the sixteenth century to the present* (New York: Harmony Books, 1975); Richard Sherry, *A Treatise of schemes and tropes (1550): and his translation of the education of children by Desiderius Erasmus* (Gainsville: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1964).

Several more recent publications suggest the pervasiveness of the pictorial in Renaissance literature and culture. Rosemary Freeman, *English Emblem Books* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966); John Steadman, "Falstaff as Acteon: A Dramatic Emblem," *SQ* 14 (1963): 230-44; David Bergeron, *Pageantry in the Shakespeare Theater* (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1985); Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut pictura poesis* (New York: Norton, 1967); Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts;* Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: the parallel between literature and the visual arts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970) and *Studies in Seventeenth-Century Imagery* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1939); Madeleine Doran, *Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1954); Richard Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); Peter M. Daly, *Literature in the Light of the Emblem* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979); Marjorie Donker and George M. Muldrow, *Dictionary of Literary-Rhetorical Conventions of the English Renaissance* (West-port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 239; David Rosand, "Ekphrasis and the Generation of Images," *Arion* 1 (Winter, 1990): 61-105. William S. Heckscher, "Shakespeare in His Relationship to the Visual Arts: A study in Paradox," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama,* ed. S. Schoenbaum, The Report of the MLA Seminar, XIII-XIV (1970-71): 5-71; John Doebler, *Shakespeare's Speaking Pictures* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974).

[11] The discussion of women as art objects is widespread. See, for example: Jacqueline Rose, "Sexuality in the reading of Shakespeare: *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure,"* in *Alternative Shakespeares,* ed. John Drakakis, (New York: Routledge, 1985); Stanley Cavell, *"Othello* and the Stake of the Other," in *Disowning Knowledge* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1977); *Seduction and Theory, readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric,* ed. Dianne Hunter, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16 (1975): 6-18; E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film* (New York: Methuen, 1983).

[12] T. W. Baldwin, *Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke,* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), 121:

> The'point'was whether Ophelia's cause was'Voluntaria, quae Consilio.'The test is'Nam iacere telurn, voluntatis est.'Did Ophelia wittingly commit the act of drowning? If she went to the water she did. But'ferire quem nolueris, fortunae.'If the water came to her, she did not; then she drowned herself in her own defence,'se offendendo'in fact, as the first Clown rather aptly twists the proper phrase—in spite of the fact that Shakspere knew no Latin! The First Clown is

> thoroughly correct in his fundamental procedure, however ludicrously he may have expressed it. Shakespeare should have procured this knowledge . . . from *Topica* in Stratford Grammar School.

[13] Roland Frye, *The Renaissance Hamlet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 299: "Over the centuries prior to 1600, both church practice and doctrine consistently held that a person so patently mad as Ophelia should receive the full rites of Christian burial. Her death, however apparently suicide, was not'by her fault'in the sense of rational and responsible choice, but was brought on by her madness, either directly or by the loss of a sense of consequences. Contemporary attitudes in 1600, buttressed by over a thousand years of church history, attest to the Tightness of Laertes'claims for his sister." Cf. Michael MacDonald, "Ophelia's Maimed Rites," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 309-17.

[14] "Peacham says justly that this figure [*allegoria*] serves to *engrave* the lively images of things,'and to present them under deep shadowes to the contemplation of the mind, wherein wit and iudgement take pleasure, and the remembrance receiveth a longlasting impression'(p. 27 [1593])" (Tuve, 108).

[15] *Harvard Concordance:* ERR 3.02.45; MND 2.01.150; 3H6 3.02.186; ANT 2.02.209; LUC 1411; ERR 3.02.164; VEN 429; VEN 777; ANT 2. .02.207. In Shakespeare's plays the image of mermaids is usually a reference to sirens—to those who are seductive, and one might think this reference an appropriate association with Hamlet's representation of Ophelia. Roland Frye refers to an emblem from 1567, intriguing for its similarity to aspects of the plot of *Hamlet;* it points to Mary's public involvement with the assassination of her husband: "A mermaid (traditional symbol for prostitution and adultery) was shown crowned, and labeled with'M R'for Maria Regina. Below, a hare represented Bothwell's heraldic crest; it was labeled with the initials I.H. for his name, James Hepburn, and surrounded by a corona of daggers to signify assassination. As the days passed, it became increasingly clear that the suspected adultery would soon be transformed into marriage" (104). The final emblem printed in Green's *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers* is one I have not been able to locate myself: a mermaid is pictured circled by a snake biting its tail: "Colophon. 'Ex literarum studiis immortalitatem acquiri,'Alciat, ed. 1534, 45." Given my argument concerning Ophelia, what interests me especially is the association of the mermaid with immortality and eternity. Cf. also Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1975).

[16] See the introduction to the Arden edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (ed. Harold F. Brooks [London: Methuen, 1979]): "the very fact that what Oberon describes is comparable up to a point with each of the two entertainments confirms the conclusion that it has for antecedent not one occasion, but the kind of courtly diversion they both exemplify. It was a kind in which the pageantry frequently drew (as with Arion) from Ovid's mythology, or still better, created new myth in the Ovidian style" (lxviii). Cf. Ashley Montagu's quotation from Peacham's *Minerva Britanna 1612:* "The friendly Dolphin, while within the maine, / At libertie delightes, to sport and play,/ Himselfe is fresh, and doth no whit retaine/ The brinish saltnes of the boundless Sea/ Wherein he lives" (*The Dolphin in History* [Los Angeles: UCLA Clark Memorial Library, 1963], title page). *Antony and Cleopatra:* "his delights/ Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above/ The element they lived in: in his livery / Walk'd crowns and crownets" (V.ii.88-91).

[17] In his essay on Quarles's emblem books, Ernest B. Gilman emphasizes the mystery behind both the picture and the language: "On the other side of the *ut pictura poesis* equation, language might be conceived as intrinsically pictorial, distinguished at its best by the *enargeia* and colors of the liveliest painter. In the Augustinian tradition the *verbum* of scripture, although accommodated to the halting human intellect, shadows the nontemporal, luminous *res* of divine truth. The goal of interpretation—formed in part by the neo-Platonists'sense of our intuitive, unmediated perception of the intelligible as a mode of visionary experience—was to see through language to the realities themselves, from the temporal realities to the eternal realities, from talk to silence, and from discourse to vision. Indeed the technical language of Biblical exegesis (*typos, schema, figura, paradigma*) is insistently visual ("Word and Image in Quarles'*Emblemes,*" in *The*

Language of Images. ed. W. J. T. Mitchell [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 62-63). Perhaps indeed one of the reasons Renaissance writers were so endlessly interested in rhetorical figures is that the desire to hint at this Platonic realm was both culturally strong and also in question. Perhaps emblem books had such enormous popularity as replacements for Catholic icons—pictures of virtues, replacing statues of the Virgin, or as in *Hamlet,* the picture of Ophelia replacing all that is missing not only for the hero but also, as he himself suggests, in the culture itself.

[18] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *On Creativity and the Unconscious,* ed. Benjamin Nelson, (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 132. Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Lupton, "Shapes of Grief: Freud, *Hamlet,* and Mourning," *Genders* 4 (1989): 50-67.

[19] Baldwin, 543.

[20] Stephen Booth, ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 375.

[21] Neil Hertz, "The notion of Blockage in literature of the sublime," in *The End of the Line* (N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1985), 48.

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