

Ophelia's Ghost

Marion Wynne-Davies
University of Surrey
m.wynne-davies@surrey.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This essay takes as its starting point the 2008 Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *Hamlet* directed by Greg Doran in order to explore the ways in which Ophelia's death and burial might be used to disturb dominant cultural codes. As such, it focuses upon the regulatory discourses framing three female subjects: the legal and religious rules governing suicide, in particular the inquest's record of the death by drowning of Katherine Hamlet in 1579; the account of Ophelia's death and her "maimed rites" in the Gravedigger's scene; and the performance of Mariah Gale in the "mad scene." In each case the female body is perceived to breach expected boundaries: the way in which the real girl's death presents a series of questions about temporal and spiritual laws; the engagement of the play with those legal and religious discourses by locating the female character as a disturbing absence; and the use of the actress's body in order to reiterate in performance the sense of threat encountered in the text. In so doing it employs the theories of the abject and the uncanny as discussed by Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva in order to locate where the text's distorted repetitions uncover the tenuousness of the cultural codes used to regulate the Early Modern understanding of female suicide.

1. Introduction: the scrapbook

The director of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2008 production of *Hamlet*, Greg Doran, undertook some interesting research during rehearsals that he later published in

the programme as “Rehearsal Scrapbook”. The notes take the form of a diary and explain how in week five the cast prepared Act IV, part of which Doran described as “the mad scene.” The account, however, begins somewhat oddly for a production diary in that it eschews depictions of acting or directing, commencing instead with some history: “in 1579 a girl called Katharine Hamlet was drowned in the Avon at Tiddington, just upstream from Stratford. Shakespeare was fifteen.” It is that last telling comment on age that indicates Doran’s belief that Shakespeare would have known about and remembered the incident and so prompted the director to make further exploration. The Scrapbook proceeds, therefore, to describe how Doran and Mariah Gale, who played Ophelia in this production, walked along the banks of the Avon where the drowning was supposed to have happened, identifying the purple flowers and nettles that Gertrude describes the character as gathering. Then, as Doran imagined Katherine Hamlet, “it occurs to us that, if Mariah were to try gathering [the flowers] ...then her skin would quickly become muddy, scratched and red raw with stings. Perhaps this is how to play the mad scene.” The successive images —of Katherine drowning, of Ophelia’s crazed wandering along the river bank and of Gale’s inflamed skin— conflate, for Doran, into an understanding of how to direct “the mad scene”:

We have agreed that each time we rehearse...the other actors will not know what route to Ophelia’s madness we are taking....what is sense to her must seem lunacy to them.

To understand the full impact of Doran’s direction, it is necessary to consider Gale’s performance, and I intend to return to that imaginative portrayal of Ophelia at the conclusion of this essay. First, however, I should like to consider the ideas identified in the Scrapbook because this combination of the historical contextualization of a girl’s possible suicide, the dramatic representation of a woman’s lunacy and the graphic imagining of maimed female skin, together serve to uncover the ways in which Ophelia’s body may be used to disturb dominant cultural codes. In each case the female subject must be perceived to breach regulatory boundaries: the way in which the real girl’s death presents a series of questions about temporal and spiritual laws; the engagement of the play with those legal and religious discourses by locating the female character as a disturbing absence; and the use of the actress’ body in order to reiterate in performance the sense of threat encountered in the text.

In order to locate questions about how the female body may be used to breach these regulatory boundaries it is useful to consider the work of Judith Butler who, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argued that “the line between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (1999: 170), which she politicized further, explaining that the “body” should not be considered as “a ready surface awaiting signification, but as a set of boundaries, individual and social, politically signified and maintained” (1999:44). In particular, Butler offers a methodological approach that enables the location of the boundaries and the points at which they are undermined, challenged and shown to be socially constructed rather than timeless universals:

Not only is it necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands. (2004: 216)

The implications of this terminology —“border...boundary...breaking point”— signify their effectiveness for an understanding of the abject, since, for Butler, abjection must be politicized. She argued that certain people appear to exist outside the borders of what constitutes “the real,” that is the normative ontology; a clear example being homosexuals who are excluded by the dominant heterosexual discourse. Butler, however, means neither that the abjects have no physical presence nor that they exist beyond the boundaries in a material form. Rather, she asserts that a subject is abject if s/he cannot be constructed as knowable or legitimate within the dominant frame and this, in turn, means that we need to identify the cultural codes that determine their abjection. She goes on to argue that, in the case of sexuality, social order is maintained by reiteration or repetition of:

Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires [which] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality. (1999: 173)

The performative body for Butler does not suggest acting on stage where the actor poses as ‘other’, but a constant repetition of gender identity that reiterates and legitimates the cultural norm. She uses ‘drag’ as a way of explaining how the absence or hesitation of repetition discloses the lack of essentiality, pointing out:

the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction. (1999: 179)

Butler’s effective politicization of the abject enables an analysis of how Ophelia’s body may be contained within the dominant patriarchal discourse and yet “unintelligible” to it. It is important to understand that Ophelia should not be identified as existing in material form beyond the boundaries, rather that her body, in particular her dead body, signifies the internalization of the abject that undermines regulatory discourse. And this, of course, is exactly what Doran identifies through his focus upon the repetition of female suicide —Katherine’s, Ophelia’s and Gale’s. In order to expose the boundaries of social control, therefore, we need to search for the points at which the repetition of the social norm breaks down, where reiteration is parodied, deformed or absent.

2. *Per infortunium*: Katherine Hamlet and the case against suicide

“By accident”: the minutes for 11 February 1580 from the records of the Corporation of Stratford-Upon-Avon report that “Katherine Hamlett” drowned “*per infortunium*” or by accident. The original account of the inquest held at Tiddington is in Latin but was translated by the indefatigable and now sadly neglected historicist, Edgar Fripp:

Katherine Hamlett...going with a certain vessel, in English a Pail, to draw water at the river called Avon in Tiddington aforesaid, it so happened that the aforesaid Katherine, standing on the bank of the same river, suddenly and by accident slipped and fell into the river aforesaid, and...was drowned, and not otherwise nor in other fashion came by her death. (1926: 51)

Since Fripp’s diligent researches, the account of Katherine Hamlet’s drowning has been referred to by Shakespeare’s biographers and critics of *Hamlet* in order to posit both a conversance with the law and to suggest a real-life version of Ophelia’s death as a source for the play. The question of whether or not Shakespeare assisted in the Stratford attorney’s office or if he replicated the gruesome details of a contemporaneous death is not of any particular relevance here. What is significant is that Shakespeare engaged with both Common Law and individual circumstance in order to represent, in Ophelia, a character who was able to undermine the cultural codes that sought to circumscribe a woman’s death. Rather than search for biographical details, the Corporation’s record needs to be investigated to determine whether the uncertainties of the play’s representation of female suicide may be associated with a wider destabilization of gender identity. The key phrase in the Corporation’s minutes is an insistent reiteration, “*not otherwise nor in other fashion*” (italics mine). The double negative is used, not to suggest a positive, but to underline absolutely that Katherine’s death was “*per infortunium*,” in other words that it was not a “*felo de se*” or suicide. But why was it so important to adjudicate that Katherine Hamlet died by accident? And why were the coroner and thirteen townsmen —John Pearse, Thomas Townsend, Giles Walker, Edmund Baker, Thomas Baker, Richard Godwine, William Fawkenor, John Lord, Thomas Gibbes, Thomas Hicke, Thomas Warde, Robert Simcocks and Robert Griffine— so keen to argue that she had been seen with a ‘Pail’ and, therefore, must have gone to the River Avon to draw water? The answer lies in the combination of harsh temporal law and stringent religious practice with regard to suicides. Moreover, it not only explains why thirteen of Katherine Hamlet’s neighbours were so keen to say they had seen her with a bucket, but also the manner in which Gertrude describes Ophelia’s death.

Beginning with the play, we first learn that Ophelia is dead when Gertrude announces to Laertes, “Your sister’s drowned,” explaining how the woman has lingered by “the glassy stream” and how, when she tried to hang her “crowned weeds” upon an overhanging bough, it snapped and she “fell in the weeping brook,” her clothes initially bearing her up but, gradually becoming heavy and water-sodden, pulling her down to a “muddy death” (4.7.162-181). In Gertrude’s announcement there is no suggestion that

the death is attributable to suicide. As Ann Thompson points out in the Arden edition notes, "From the Queen's account in all three texts one might deduce that it was accidental as much as willful" (Thompson and Taylor 2006: 408, n. 181). Moreover, given Ophelia's mental instability it may be argued convincingly that she was not able to make a rational decision. These are important distinctions because in Early Modern English Common Law, evidence that proved accidental death or mental instability was deemed to affect the harsh penalties that would normally be exacted. Indeed, suicide was considered to be a *felonia de seipso* (usually abbreviated to *felo de se*), meaning a felony committed against the self. Therefore, someone who committed self-murder was considered to be a felon and his or her property was forfeit to the crown. As Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy note in their comprehensive study of Early Modern suicide, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*:

Suicides were tried posthumously by a coroner's jury, and if they were convicted as self-murderers, they and their heirs were savagely punished. Their moveable goods, including tools, household items, money, debts owed to them, and even leases on the land that they had worked were forfeited to the crown or to the holder of a royal patent who possessed the right to such windfalls in a particular place. (1990: 15)

Understandably, the relatives of the deceased were often keen to prove that the cause of death was accidental, thereby allowing them to retain the estate. On the other hand, if the evidence indicated a deliberate self-murder, the relatives had the option of claiming that the deceased was mentally unstable, or *non compos mentis* (not in their right mind), a plea that should have annulled the crown's right to confiscate property. In practice, however, this defence proved ineffective, since around 98 per cent of all suicide cases between 1500 and 1650 were judged to be *felo de se*, and MacDonald and Murphy go on to argue that while:

lunatics should not have been regarded as suicides at all. Some medical men and many laymen nevertheless believed that the utterly insane were particularly liable to kill themselves. (1990: 232)

A plea of *non compos mentis* was, therefore, likely to lead to the judgment of *felo de se* and the consequent loss of a family's property and livelihood. When Gertrude's evidence suggests that Ophelia's death was an accident she is, therefore, acting in accordance with common practice and, like Katherine Hamlet's neighbours, she seeks to reassure Laertes, the immediate family of the deceased, that there will be no economic loss. But of course she does more than that, because suicide was not only considered to be a temporal crime, it was also a spiritual one.

Discussions of Early Modern treatments of suicide cases often conflate the Common Law with religious practice, yet it is important to demarcate the two because while the former had considerable repercussions for the worldly goods of the deceased, the latter had an equally harsh impact on their body. Self-murder contravened the sixth commandment "thou shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13) and was also understood more

widely to subvert God's prerogative to determine when a person should die. Therefore, after having been found guilty in the law of *felo de se*, the Church took over, denying funeral rites and burial in consecrated ground. At this point, an officer of the church was appointed to take the corpse at night to a crossroads, throw it naked into a pit and hammer a stake through the body. It is important to note immediately that this nightmare-like interment was not uniformly practiced, as R. A. Houston rightly argues in *Punishing the Dead?: Suicide, Lordship, and Community in Britain, 1500-1830* (2010), where he accuses MacDonald and Murphy of "an enduring selectivity in how suicide's bodies were treated" (2010: 191). Still, for a Christian society, even the formal denial of appropriate ritual and burial were serious enough, since without these rites the soul was condemned to eternal damnation. When Gertrude describes how Ophelia has been seen climbing a branch with the intention of hanging flowers on it and that the wood snapped causing her to fall into the river, she carefully presents an image of accidental death that will ensure that the young woman will not be judged to have committed *felo de se* and therefore be subject to the harsh penalties of both church and state.

Because Ophelia's madness and suicide have become perversely iconic —a point I shall return to later— for present-day readers and audiences, the opening of Act V is not generally acknowledged as surprising. Yet, only ten lines after Gertrude has explained Ophelia's death as an accident, the Gravedigger asks, "Is she to be buried in Christian burial?", suggesting that the young woman committed suicide and, therefore, should not be interred in consecrated ground. In order to understand this seemingly rapid shift, it is necessary to explore performance time in relation to the play's narrative chronology. For the audience, the Queen has only just told us that the young woman drowned and so, when the Gravedigger begins with "she," we immediately know that he's referring to Ophelia. But in 'play' time at least a day has elapsed: Hamlet has only just arrived in Denmark not having had opportunity for the meeting he has requested with Claudius, an interval that will be reinforced at the end of Act V scene i when the King reminds Laertes of their "last night's speech" (5.1.284). So, what has happened in the meantime? Assuming that about twenty-four hours have elapsed, the text provides sufficient information to elucidate the events that have occurred following Ophelia's death. First, from the Queen's description it is possible to deduce that the body sank to the "muddy" bottom of the stream, from where it must have been rescued, perhaps by the attendants urged to "give her good watch" (4.5.74), after which the incident would have been brought to Gertrude's attention. At this point, the Queen clearly believed that the drowning was accidental. However, since the death was unexpected, an inquest would have been held, presided over by a coroner or "crownor" as the Second Man observes (5.1.4). There has certainly been sufficient narrative time for an emergency hearing to take place since the Second Man notes that the coroner has "sat" in a formal session, an event that is later referred to as an inquest or "quest" (5.1.22). It was at this hearing that the coroner would have formally adjudicated that Ophelia's death was accidental, thereby ensuring that she should have a "Christian burial" (5.1.5), in other words that her death was not a *felo de se*, just as Gertrude believes. The play, therefore, refers to

common legal processes that would have been recognized and expected by an Early Modern audience. Yet, there appear to be doubts about the inquest's result because the Gravedigger clearly voices popular opinion when he suggests that Ophelia killed herself and, in so doing, alludes to another case in which the coroner was called upon to judge a possible *felo de se*.

In 1554 Sir James Hales drowned himself and therefore his estate should have gone to the Crown but, in a subsequent lawsuit brought by his wife in an attempt to retain his property, an ingenious argument was developed. Since the offence of suicide involves self-murder it can only be an accomplished crime once death has occurred, therefore, up until the moment of death, the living man cannot have committed a crime and so cannot be a felon and should not have his estates made forfeit to the crown. Understandably, the judge, Lord Dyer, rejected the appeal. It is now accepted that Shakespeare alludes to this celebrated case when the Gravedigger refers to "an act hath three branches," and that he parodies the over-complicated legal arguments of "quest law" when explaining:

Here lies the water —good. Here stands the man —good. If the man go to this water and drown himself in it, willy-nilly, he goes. Mark you that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. (5.1.15-19)

This argument depends on a visual image that in performances is commonly acted out making graphic sense that, if you go to the water and drown you are guilty of suicide, but if the water comes to you then the death is accidental. The Gravedigger makes his contempt for coroners' equivocation clear and he certainly convinces his companion that the inquest on Ophelia has brought in the wrong verdict. In other words, since it was the young woman who walked to the river, rather than the river flooding its banks, then she is guilty of *felo de se*. This critique of lawyers is echoed by Hamlet later in the scene when he describes their "quiddities...quillies...and tricks," a portrayal that would certainly tally with the overly subtle arguments, verbal quibbles and ploys that were employed in the case of James Hales (Thompson and Taylor 2006: 416-7, n. 94). But Hamlet also calls attention to the Gravedigger's own "equivocation" (5.1.130) and so, when considering the arguments for and against suicide, it is worth rereading the Clown's words for "quillies" or, as Butler would put it, "a de-formity, or a parodic repetition." The first instance occurs in what is generally read as a confused line: when the Gravedigger points out "she wilfully seeks her own salvation?", it is assumed that what he really means is "her own damnation" (Thompson and Taylor 2006: 410, n. 2). This is a perfectly appropriate reading in terms of Early Modern English religious discourse, the tenets of which claimed that suicide inevitably led to damnation, and also one that accords with the character's own conviction that Ophelia is guilty of a *felo de se*. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the Gravedigger is a clown in the manner of Dogberry, who makes a similar verbal slip in *Much Ado About Nothing*. On the contrary, the Gravedigger's linguistic dexterity is evidenced throughout the scene and Hamlet points out that "we must speak [to him] by the card or equivocation will undo us" (5.1.130), which means that, if the Gravedigger says Ophelia willfully "seeks

her own salvation,” we need to interpret the line as it stands. The answer, I believe, may be found in a further “quillet” —the Gravedigger’s use of the present tense.

This seemingly minor distinction is important because it calls attention to the changes in mourning rituals wrought by the English Reformation. Catholic liturgical practices had allowed for an affinity between the living and the dead, in particular intercessory prayers that were believed to affect the souls of the departed, enabling them to escape the pains of hell and the transitional purification offered by purgatory, finally allowing them to access heavenly bliss. At the Reformation such prayers and masses were outlawed since, if the deceased had lived a good life and was truly penitent, their soul would immediately be assumed into a state of grace. What then could be the purpose of prayers and grief when the response to death should be a joyful realization that the loved one had been granted eternal salvation? Therefore, when the Gravedigger commences Act V with “Is” and reinforces his use of the present tense with “seeks,” the verbs in the sentence begin to destabilize the object, suggesting that, rather than a verbal error, the term “salvation” must be considered alongside the word “damnation.” In other words, if the Gravedigger were referring to an accidental death within the Protestant understanding of the spiritual outcome, he would have used the past tense because her soul would have already been in heaven. Quite simply, he would have said she “sought” salvation. But, by employing the present tense, Ophelia is constructed as still existing in some way, an indeterminate ‘other’ that might well correspond to the Catholic state of purgatory in that she is still actively “seeking salvation.” However, as the crime of self-murder was considered heinous by both Catholic and Protestant churches alike, in either case, if Ophelia is a suicide as the Gravedigger suggests, her soul would have been cursed to “damnation.” *Hamlet* is read increasingly as evidence of Shakespeare’s engagement with Catholicism, but I am not suggesting that the Gravedigger’s seemingly erroneous use of the present tense be used to bulwark a case for Shakespeare’s faith, one way or the other. Instead, I want to invert the traditional focus on the Ghost of Hamlet’s father and look instead at the Ghost of Ophelia.

At this point it is useful to revisit the drowning of Katherine Hamlet and, rather than walking along the Avon in the footsteps of Doren and Gale, look more closely at the inquest’s double assertion that the death was accidental, “and not otherwise nor in other fashion.” One of the possible reasons for this emphatic repetition was that the legal processes had not functioned in the usual and appropriate fashion because Katherine Hamlet died sixty-two days before the inquest was held; the records clearly note that she drowned “on the said seventeenth day of December in the year aforesaid”. So, something must have gone wrong. Given the brevity of the corporation records and the lack of a burial account, there can be no definite answer, but the inquest does provide two clues: the first is that they “view...the body” and the second is the mention of the “Pail.” (Fripp: 51). In the case of an unexplained death, the law required, then as now, for the body to be examined, and so when the coroner and the townsmen “view” Katherine Hamlet’s corpse they are abiding by the regulations. However, for the corpse to be inspected over two months after the death, either they had to exhume the body or it had only just been recovered. The former practice was not uncommon, but

exhumation would only have taken place if extra evidence had come to light to suggest that an original finding of accidental death was not sound. Since the corporation records for December 1579 make no mention of an earlier inquest, it is reasonable to assume that the body was only recovered in February 1580 and the most obvious explanation would be that the Avon froze over in December, with a thaw and consequent flooding in February. Indeed, 1579/80 is in the middle of the period known as the 'Little Ice Age' and the previous February melting snow had caused the Thames —another river flowing from the Midlands— to flood to such an extent that fish were deposited in Westminster Hall. After sixty-two days the sodden corpse would not have been pleasant to view, and as such the emphatic judgment might be considered understandable. Except for the bucket. Unlike the Gravedigger, the coroner at Katherine Hamlet's inquest at first appears certain that the death was accidental, but proof was essential and that's why two months after the drowning witnesses would have been questioned to ensure that the young woman was seen "going with a certain vessel, in English a pail, to draw water at the river called Avon in Tiddington," watched her "standing on the bank of the same river" and noted when she "suddenly and by accident slipped and fell into the river" (Fripp: 51). But if there had been no witnesses, then some sort of material proof of her activity that day would have been necessary and that is where the bucket comes to serve as circumstantial evidence. However, the detail devoted to the pail is interesting; at first, the words "in English" suggest that there has been a clarification of the original word in the Latin record, where it is noted, "iens cum quodam multrale Anglice a Paile" (Fripp: 50). Yet, the English noun offers no clarification at all since it simply reiterates the Latin, since "multrale" means milk pail, and not, as Fripp translates it, a "certain vessel." Of course, Fripp was trying to make sense of the repetition and so, rather than repeat the same word twice, which would have read "going with a milk pail, in English a pail," he mistranslated the sentence. But, for the coroner, that repetition was all important since it not only rendered a key word from the original Latin into a readily understandable English term, but it also underscored the importance of the pail, thereby proving that Katherine had a very good reason for standing on the "bank" of the Avon —she was there to get a bucket of water— and so establishing that she was neither mad and nor suicidal. These worried repetitions ("not...nor") and contorted explanations ("multrale...Pail") suggest that, with a gap of sixty-two days between death and inquest, Katherine Hamlet's putrefying corpse had become a site of unease. As such, Butler's injunction to search for parodic and distorted reiteration is apposite since, by locating the excessive concern of the inquest to assert accidental death in macabre circumstances, it uncovers the tenuousness of the regulations that were intended to circumscribe suicide. Indeed, the very "quilllets" that supposedly affirmed the soundness of the verdict serve instead to uncover the coroner's uncertainty.

This essay does not suggest that the case of Kathryn Hamlet's drowning should be considered as a direct source for Shakespeare's play; she is not the 'real Ophelia' any more than the numerous other candidates suggested for this role — Jane Shaxspeere and Margaret Clopton amongst them— and it is as well to remember that drowning was the

second most common cause of suicide in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. Rather, the anxieties of the inquest on Katherine's death and the excessive vocabulary in the records indicate a legal discourse that is beset with irregularity and destabilization. Indeed, the very determination to assert accidental death inevitably calls to mind the alternative judgment of *felo de se*, and this is precisely the point of tension that the Gravedigger replicates. The play's use of the present tense, therefore, with its suggestion of an uncanny presence, implies that Ophelia must be represented both as existing and non-existing. She is said to have had an accidental death and therefore should be in heaven, but at the same time to have committed *felo de se*, meaning that her soul must seek restlessly for salvation. Indeed, in a play that foregrounds the uncanny as does *Hamlet* with its evocation of the Ghost, it is not surprising that Ophelia's dead body should be identified as a site of destabilization. What's more, if compared to the other bodies buried—and unearthed—by the Gravedigger, this potential for an evocation of the uncanny becomes more apparent.

Every corpse in Act V, with the exception of Ophelia's, is resolutely decayed and displayed to the audience in a comic maelstrom of visceral bravura. As the skulls are tossed out of the grave by a nonchalant Gravedigger, Hamlet and Horatio posit on the possible identities of the exposed bones—a politician, a courtier and a lawyer—before learning that the final skull to be brandished is of a man actually known to them, Yorick. And so the living clown, for that is how the Gravedigger is introduced—"enter two clowns"—confronts the dead clown, the actor's face set alongside the dead man's head. This doubling underscores the parallel couplings of decayed flesh with vibrant identity: a "jawbone" is linked to the politician; the courtier is seemingly "chapless"; the lawyer is "knocked about the scone with a dirty shovel"; the sight of Yorick's skull makes Hamlet's "gorge rise"; and even Alexander is said to have smelt bad as he decayed to dust (5.1.73ff). On each occasion, Hamlet manipulates the imagination in order to bring life to the dead bodies, forcing the audience to see the grisly link between the corpse as it is and what it once was. But while these parallels are drawn, the bodies are resolutely decayed—skulls, worms, chapless, bones, rotting bodies, "picky corpses", stench, dust, loam and clay. The Gravedigger sings of how men are "slipped...into the land" because man is made of "clay", and Hamlet echoes this with, "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust, the dust is earth," both drawing equally upon the Protestant burial service, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust" (5.1.73ff.). All the corpses in the graveyard are resolutely represented as clay and dust, thereby conforming to the Protestant belief that the soul must depart the body and be in heaven. While the decay might be unpleasant to see and smell, the possibility of the uncanny is resolutely rejected by the Gravedigger and his humour reminds the two noblemen of the realities of mortality, since while they posit identities for the skulls, to the Gravedigger the bones are no more than dust. The only suggestion that this boundary between life and death could break down occurs when Hamlet's imagination conflates the memory of kissing Yorick's lips with replicating that act with the skull, causing his "gorge to rise," thereby breaching the wholeness of the body through vomit and regurgitation.

Such a reaction is discussed by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* where she describes the effect of seeing a dead body in powerfully evocative terminology:

Corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live...In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders...The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (1982: 3)

Kristeva describes the corpse as "death infecting life," reminding us of the erasure of the body's borders and the consequent threat of instability. Thus, when Hamlet feels vomit rise in his throat, he not only has a natural reaction to the stench of decaying flesh, but manifests a bodily acknowledgement of how the corpse breaches boundaries as it forces recognition of the permeable border between life and death. Hamlet's reaction, which evokes the destabilizing power of the skulls, seems, therefore, a direct contradiction to the response of the Gravedigger, who considers the bones to be simply "clay." This posits the common dialectic of spiritual and temporal discourses through which both men may be seen to occupy an intelligible site within Early Modern cultural codes, their class simply reinforcing their philosophical standpoints. However, that doesn't quite work, partly because Hamlet himself draws attention to the Gravedigger's "equivocation" and partly because the Gravedigger, while prepared to accept that the souls of those properly interred bodies are now in heaven, demonstrates considerable doubt about the destination of Ophelia's spirit. The politician, courtier, lawyer and Yorick have been buried according to the regulations that govern death, but Ophelia, like Katherine Hamlet, does not quite conform to either religious or legal codes. Instead, she remains a disturbing presence and, like that other ghost in the play, refuses to be contained by the processes that are intended to confine her identity, as safely dead and securely buried. Moreover, Butler's argument that the abject may be located at moments of distorted reiteration finds fruition in the anxious repetitions of both the historical inquest and the "quilllets" of the Gravedigger as he questions Ophelia's right to a Christian burial.

3. Ophelia's maimed rights

In the midst of all this decay, stench and ghoulish humour, the Gravedigger points out that the grave he is currently digging is for, "One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul she's dead, (5.1.127-128). The audience is perfectly aware that the grave is for Ophelia, but as the funeral procession arrives Hamlet remains ignorant of the identity of the deceased, although he immediately recognizes that there is something wrong with the ceremony:

Who is this they follow?
 And with such maimed rites? This doth betoken
 The corpse they follow did with desperate hand
 For do it own life. 'Twas of some estate.
 (5.1.207-210)

One line later Laertes repeats the accusation, “What ceremony else?” a charge he makes twice more, “What ceremony else?...Must there no more be done?” (5.1.214/224). The deficiency in the funeral rites for Ophelia is questioned four times in twenty-five lines thereby evidencing Laertes’ concern and focusing the audience’s attention upon what is missing. Hamlet’s reference to “estate” has suggested to some editors that the funeral demonstrates a lack of mourners for a woman of Ophelia’s rank, and this is certainly true; the British Library holds a large quantity of funeral rolls depicting long funeral cortèges that make it quite clear that status in death, as in life, was all-important to the Early Modern court. However, the Priest is brutally clear when he informs Laertes exactly why there is no “more.” In accordance with the law, after the inquest has taken place Ophelia’s corpse has been transferred to the church officials to arrange burial. But here the problems begin because the Priest points out, with some anger, that the formal regulations have not been adhered to. Ophelia’s death has been judged “doubtful,” that is she was suspected of committing *felo de se* because the evidence given was not sufficient to confirm an accidental death. Indeed, by rereading Gertrude’s description of events, it becomes possible to understand why Ophelia might have been considered mad; after all, decorating a tree with a coronet of flowers is hardly as reasonable as going to the river with a bucket to fetch water. However, although a plea of *non compos mentis* was supposed to avoid a judgment of *felo de se*, in effect the claim of insanity simply resulted in a verdict of suicide. As the Priest points out, since she was recorded as having committed self-murder, the “order” from the coroner to the church official was that:

She should in ground unsanctified been lodged
 Till the last trumpet: for charitable prayers,
 Flints and pebbles should be thrown on her.
 (5.1.218-220)

And he is quite right; that is exactly what should have happened to Ophelia’s corpse if the laws of state and church had been adhered to. But, as the Priest points out sharply, a “great command [has] o’ersway[ed]” the coroner’s order, making him complain that she has been allowed “virgin crants...maiden strewments...bell and burial” although at least he notes there will be no “requiem” sung since that would “profane the service of the dead” (5.1.221-223/225). Increasingly, the omissions in Ophelia’s funeral are read as alluding to Catholic rather than Protestant ritual, in particular the reference to “requiem” suggests the Latin mass that was sung before the burial. The brief allusion to the Catholic rite is apposite since it calls attention to the intercessory mass deemed necessary for a soul in purgatory and thereby underscores the Gravedigger’s concern

that Ophelia's spirit has not been assumed into heaven as it would have been under Protestant doctrine. As such, Ophelia is represented as occupying a liminal site since she cannot be given either the Catholic or Protestant rites that would allow her soul to be granted salvation—either immediately or after the purification of purgatory—thereby allowing her corpse, like Alexander's, to turn into dust. Moreover, the evocation of Ophelia's continued uncanny presence, which is initiated by the Gravedigger and the Priest, is echoed by the mourners.

The Priest's denial that Ophelia's spirit has departed her corpse like those of "peace-parted souls" is reacted to violently by her brother, who calls him "churlish" and claims that Ophelia will be "a ministering angel", that is granted "salvation," while the Priest will "liest howling," in other words, condemned to "damnation" (Thompson and Taylor 2006: 227, n. 231). Subsequently, Laertes leaps into the grave asking to be buried with Ophelia, "pile your dust upon the quick and dead" (5.1.240), a threat of action that is echoed by Hamlet:

Dost come here to whine
to outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.
(5.1.266-268)

I am not so much interested in whether or not Hamlet joins Laertes physically in the grave, although many productions represent the scene this way, but rather upon the way the mourners seek an uncanny union with the corpse of the woman they claim to have loved. However, perhaps the most telling line, and one often cut from productions, is Claudius' concluding representation of Ophelia's interment, "This grave shall have a living monument" (5.1.286). One of the reasons for eliminating this description is that editors have found it indeterminate: does it predict Hamlet's death at the hands of Laertes, or does it presume a watch, an "hour of quiet" that will offer up prayers for the soul of the deceased? If placed within the context of Early Modern rituals of interment, however, the image of the "monument" set over the "grave" is appropriate; a young woman of Ophelia's class would certainly have merited a tomb and one which should have lauded her piety, chastity and the ascent of her soul to heaven. Indeed, an appropriate sculpture would have been similar to the image Laertes suggests, figuring Ophelia as a "ministering angel." The problem is, of course, the word "living," because this verb, set alongside the Gravedigger's use of the present tense, the Priest's assertion that as a suicide Ophelia's soul is not "peace-parted" and the uncanny uniting of the "quick and the dead" by both Hamlet and Laertes, cannot but evoke Ophelia's continued existence in spirit form or, as it were, a ghost.

The burial of those who were judged to have committed suicide was harsh and ignominious and, even if not all dioceses advocated impaling the body with a stake, the casting of "flints and pebbles" on the corpse was, as the priest points out, an acceptable alternative. The reason for using either stake or stones was to prevent the spirit of the deceased wandering on the earth "seek[ing]...salvation." The temporal and spiritual regulations governing *felo de se* were thus intended to ensure that the boundaries

dividing the living from the dead stayed firmly in place. But to return to Kristeva, the very sight of a corpse calls attention to the fragility of such borders, since the dead body “is something rejected [but] from which one does not part.” In other words the corpse inevitably reminds us of that which it has ceased to be —the living body— and of that which the living flesh must become —the bones and skulls of the dead. The corpse therefore signifies an abject that cannot be contained by social regulations, instead demanding recognition of the instability of cultural codes. Consequently, placed in the context of the attempted political regulation —by church and state— of suicide, the corpse uncovers the fragility of the rules constructed to police both the laws of property and the doctrines of a Catholic or Protestant church. Just as the inquest on Katherine Hamlet reveals, through parodic repetition, the anxieties of the coroner and Stratford townsmen, so too the insistence, by the Gravedigger, Priest, Laertes, Hamlet and the King, upon Ophelia’s uncanny presence uncovers the fragility of a multiplicity of patriarchal discourses —state, church, kinship, love and rule. It is significant that the only character to insistently interpret Ophelia’s death as accidental is another woman, Gertrude.

4. The route to Ophelia’s madness: staging

This essay began with Greg Doran’s “Scrapbook” and the research he undertook in order to direct the RSC’s 2008 production of *Hamlet*, which drew upon the historical account of Katherine Hamlet’s drowning in order to inform his direction of the “mad scene.” The section of the text alluded to (Act IV scene v) offers ample proof of Ophelia’s mental instability, but on stage Gale’s performance emphasised the character’s disconcerting qualities, so that psychological flux morphed into physical volatility. This innovative direction makes sense when read alongside the “Scrapbook” because the acute material image of Gale’s “skin...[as] muddy, scratched and red raw with stings” is transferred onto the representation of a bodily lunacy in which Gale’s presence disturbs the expected relations upon stage. In other words, just as her skin proves permeable, so the dominant social and gender hierarchies of the play are displaced. During the scene Patrick Stewart (Claudius) and Penny Downie (Gertrude) were not informed of, as Doran puts it, “the route” of Ophelia’s madness. And what a wonderfully Shakespearean word he has chosen, since the “root” or cause of her madness is what the King and Queen with their sane understanding of the world try to find out. In their ordered existence everything has a cause and effect, a rational progression of events that may be proved either true or false. But Ophelia’s “route” is quite different; she is not interested in the psychological foundations of her actions, simply in the actions themselves —where she walks, what her body does, the materiality of her path. So, not only are Claudius and Gertrude unaware of the “root” of her madness, they are similarly made, by Doran, unaware of the “route” of her madness. Through this effective device of concealing the stage directions he gave to Gale, Doran ensured that Stewart and Downie would have no idea how Ophelia’s part was blocked

and, therefore, how she was meant to engage with them through bodily actions. Indeed, Doran's production was most remarkable in its depiction of Gale's threatening physicality in the mad scene. The uncertainty and even nervousness of veteran actors like Stewart and Downie seemed palpable to an audience sitting in close stage proximity to a strong young woman who darted, rushed, crept, challenged and thrust her body across the stage. It is important to recognise that this uncertainty might be evidence of superlative acting skill by those on stage. However, given Doran's stated insistence that the two actors should not know Ophelia's "route", the focus upon destabilization remains key to understanding how the suicidal female body is able to breach convention.

Earlier on in this essay I referred to how Ophelia has become a perverse icon for female suicide, an idealised saint as it were for young women's self-murder. One of the origins of this romanticised narrative is the well-known painting, *Ophelia* (1851-2) by John Everett Millais. The work draws upon Gertrud's description of Ophelia as she is carried along by the water, depicting a young woman who drifts, seemingly oblivious of her fate, along a pastoral stream, flowers floating inert on the surface of the still water. Although not highly regarded when it was first shown at the Royal Academy, it has since become so popular that subsequent representations of Ophelia can even be dated as pre- or post-Millais; in other words, is she an active subject standing up decking the tree with garlands, or is she passive, lying supine and inert in the river? In directing Gale to represent Ophelia as taking an unknown "route," Doran undercuts the conventional representation of Ophelia as a passive victim, while Gale through her muscular enactment of a dangerous instability challenges any notion of the inert female suicide. What is telling is that both director and performer drew their inspiration from the historical account of Katherine Hamlet's drowning, an event that had provoked the acute unease of the Stratford coroner and the thirteen townsmen who gathered at the inquest to swear that her death was accidental, even if the evidence was the circumstantial recollection of an abandoned bucket. Sometimes, however, the return to a historical source can revitalize a present-day production, so that the nineteenth-century conventions surrounding the portrayal of Ophelia's death may be stripped away, revealing an unsettling performance that questions, rather than reinforces, cultural codes. So, if Doran's direction and —equally— Gale's acting proffers a distorted reiteration of what has been assumed to construct female subjectivity, then the romanticisation of women's self-murder is thrown into question. If this essay began, therefore, with real, imagined and enacted suicides, it concludes with the image of a corpse. The cadaver might provoke black jokes like those cracked by the Gravedigger, an inordinate fuss like that displayed by the Priest, a leap into the grave like Laertes or the Hamlet-like desire to vomit, but it is the corpse's powerful reminder of the fragile boundary between life and death that summons the uncanny, thereby unlocking our imagination and freeing Ophelia's ghost.

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