



Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Laurea magistrale (*ordinamento ex
D.M. 270/2004*)
in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e
Postcoloniali

Tesi di Laurea

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**Resurrecting Ophelia:
rewriting *Hamlet* for Young Adult Literature**

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Anno Accademico
2013 / 2014

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Introduction

This dissertation is concerned with understanding how the rewritings and adaptations of the Shakespearian masterpiece *Hamlet* have changed the figure of Ophelia, both in terms of the history of the character, and its psychology, and how these new texts have made this literary figure suitable for novels written for young readers, especially teenagers or children.

Young Adult literature, in addition to becoming a real genre, distinct from the wider Children's literature (which originally was meant for readers of various ages, up to adolescents), has also sought new thematic horizons, more suitable for young readers. Specifically, Young Adult novels deal with teenagers' life and experiences and explore those themes which are typical of this age: growing up, creating the self, love and relationships, living in a family and being accepted by the society.

Also adaptations, or in some cases appropriations, of literary classics can be considered important products of the specific *modus-operandi* of this genre, with the aim of providing new interesting material.

In this field of studies *Hamlet* has a very important role since several texts in "second-degree", as Genette defines rewritings, in relation to the Shakespearian play may be found in this literary genre. Specifically, this dissertation wants to emphasize how a secondary character as Ophelia has received more attention both from mainstream and from fringe writers, who have personalized and contextualized its story and given it a new life.

After an analysis of the Shakespearean character in the works of Mary Cowden Clarke and the Lambs, this study concentrates on novels written in the 21st century, with the aim of understanding the evolution of Ophelia's figure through various books: some

writers have preferred to maintain Ophelia in the historical context where she had been originally collocated, others have thought it was more appropriate to bring this character closer to the experience of the reader, giving a more contemporary version of her figure, while others have given Ophelia another chance, even if *post-mortem*.

It is possible then to recognize a new Ophelia, with greater charisma and personality, disconnected from the male figures of power who surround her, even if some of the Shakespearian features are still preserved: the original “green girl” in *Hamlet* slowly becomes a woman who knows what she wants, a spirit that seeks freedom and a much more complex and elaborated character.

Working on *Hamlet* means working with reinterpretations of established texts in new contexts or with relocations of an “original” or source text’s cultural and temporal/spatial setting, as we are going to see through the analysis of some of the most interesting rewritings of *Hamlet* nowadays for Young Adult Literature.

The “practice” of adapting is nothing new in Literature and Postmoderns have inherited this habit but, specifically, it has become much more widespread because there are many more new materials and new means to work on, and the result of this process has been far more than merely “adaptation”: we have gone further than this simple definition.

In this work we try to underline that no text can be considered, and then rewritten, without admiration and deep respect for its hypotext and we ask ourselves: is Shakespeare up-to-date now? Are his works once more worth to be read and studied? Is there something more which his production can tell or teach us? And this is the very start of our analysis, in Chapter 1, titled *Shakespeare adaptation and appropriation for Young People*. Here, we analyse the meaning of the two terms “adaptation” and “appropriation”, and all the nuances of meaning between them. The

chapter examines also how rewriting Shakespeare has changed the artistic and literary panorama of the recent years and how much this has affected popular contemporary culture.

We cannot help mentioning that, thanks to the birth and development of Young Adult Literature and the creation of adaptations and appropriations, Ophelia has been used by a great number of artists to channel a wide array of historically cultural fantasies about themes and motives linked to her figure¹. Moreover, what we underline here is the importance of this character as both a textual and a theatrical phenomenon, and note that any modern Ophelia stands in for a woman (or a kind of woman, or a group of women) that culture in general can imagine and represent².

In Chapter 2, called *Ophelia: telling her story*, we concentrate on the Shakespearian Ophelia: her features, her “voice”, her appearance, her presence in the original play. Moreover, in our study we compare her figure with two important works in English Literature: the Lambs’ short story *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (1807), intended for children, and Mary Cowden Clarke’s *Ophelia: The Rose of Elsinore*, part of the author’s collection of tales *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines* (1852), a short tale in which the authors rewrites and enriches Hamlet’s plot from the point of view of Ophelia. This chapter deals with an Ophelia who is still “in the canon”, still immutable in her Shakespearian shape. Nevertheless, Cowden Clarke’s merit is her attempt of giving Ophelia a relevance, a proper position in the *Hamlet* story, a feeble voice who, luckily, has been probably heard by Young Adult authors we take in exam during our work.

¹ There are really thousands artists who have used Ophelia’s story in their works, in art of any kind, from theatre, to poetry, from paintings to cinema. Some pictorial examples can be seen in the Appendix.

² Jeremy Lopez’s chapter “*Reviewing Ophelia*” in Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 29.

In Chapter 3, *Rewriting Ophelia: contemporary rewritings of Hamlet*, we observe different Ophelias in various novels: Jeremy Trafford's *Ophelia* (2001), Lisa Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* (2003), Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* (2006), Michelle Ray's *Falling for Hamlet* (2011) and Rebecca Reisert's *Ophelia's Revenge* (2003). All these novels have an interesting feature in common: Ophelia has now become a powerful character, the real focus of the story, and she can decide or arrange her life as she wants. So we have an Ophelia who does not go crazy, hand out flowers, or die by water but incredibly "resurrects", figuratively or effectively, and this flies in the face of a tradition that has locked the theatrical character in that rigid and static iconography for too long. In performance traditions and in visual media (cinema, TV-productions), as many studies can demonstrate, through the centuries Ophelia has always done the same things, because, as a repeating cliché, she has carried flowers and has died watery deaths³. But now all the story, or part of that, is shifted into something new, transformed and subverted: in the books we consider, this process is clearly evident, so that an attempt of adding that "something more" which was missing to our well-known Shakespearian traditional Hamlet can be identified.

In Chapter 4, *Echoes of Hamlet*, unexpectedly for the reader, Ophelia also comes to a sort of resurrection, moving really far from her original Shakespearian shape. We examine here other novels which deal with the *Hamlet* story, but which, at the same time, show a new version of Ophelia: the "green girl" has now become brave, firm, fierce and independent from the male characters around her. All the novels we refer to have the figure of Hamlet as protagonist of the plot but Ophelia has now the role of the co-protagonist, presenting herself as the perfect "counterpart" for the boy. Each of the books shows a particular peculiarity of the Ophelian character: Bergantino's

³ Coppélia Kahn's chapter "Afterword" in Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 231.

Ophelia's Revenge (2003) describes Ophelia as an avenging ghost which, in reality, is only looking for peace for her soul; in Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977), Leslie is naïve and extremely vital; in Haig's *The Dead Fathers Club* (2006) and Holderness's *The Prince of Denmark* (2002), the Ophelia character is a controversial character which has her own voice and tries, in every possible way she can, to cry her feelings out to the world around her.

Surely, it has been a great challenge to analyse "each Ophelia" coming out from the works considered, but the more interesting part is to determine how much her character has gained from the process of adaptation and appropriation.

The range of books used in this work to explore *Hamlet* can be really considered as a testimony to the many levels this play is built on: relationships, death, revenge. Each level presents a thoughtful point of view to explain human nature and offers a convincing vision of life itself. These layers serve an argument for the richness of this Shakespearian play: the events in the castle of Elsinore may seem to have happened long ago, but if we explore human feelings and emotions such as friendship, love, and revenge, the play seems distinctly more timely⁴.

Quoting Kristeva, all types of texts always "invoke and rework other texts, in a rich, ever-evolving, never-ending cultural mosaic⁵": each of the novels analysed here is a piece of the process of the "narrative bricolage", intended as the intersection and multilayering of different works and textual traditions, to create a renewed literature.

⁴ Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, pp. 75-76

⁵ Julia Kristeva quoted by Julie Sanders in her book *Adaptation And Appropriation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 17.

1.

Shakespeare adaptation and appropriation for Young People

1.1 Adaptation: a definition

Julie Sanders and Linda Hutcheon, literary critics and theorists, define adaptation as a contextually oriented process of re-creative interpretation, which encompasses formal transformation from one genre to another, and intercultural reinterpretation by networked writers and readers. These relationships contrast with more traditional practices of citation, allusion or echoing, about which Randall Martin and Katherine Scheil say that the adaptive text is implicitly judged to be of lesser cultural value compared to the original source¹, because of its derivation from a “recycling” practice² of pre-existent materials.

Adaptation studies have developed a wide vocabulary of interesting terms to define the idea underneath them: version, variation, interpretation, continuation, transformation, imitation, pastiche, parody, forgery, travesty, transposition, revaluation, revision, rewriting, echo, etc. This list suggests that all these concepts have different, even opposing, aims and intentions, according to the literary result the writer wants to obtain: the studies in this field agree on considering adaptations as a celebration of the on-going interaction with other works and artistic productions. For this reason, Sanders states that specifically sequels, prequels, compression and

¹ In Randall Martin and Katherine Scheil eds., *Shakespeare/ Adaptation / Modern Drama: Essays in Honour of Jill L. Levenson*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2011, pp. 4 – 5.

² In Loretta Innocenti, *La scena trasformata*, Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2010, p. 7.

amplification play an interesting role in the adaptive mode, as it can be seen in the novels we are analysing in next chapters of this dissertation.

Adaptation itself can be considered “a transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mode, an act of re-vision in itself”³. It can be used to trim and prune texts, but also as an amplificatory procedure with the aim of adding, expanding, accreting and interpolating various sources, combining them together. Moreover, it is frequently used in giving commentary on a source text or can constitute a mere attempt to make works “relevant” or more comprehensible to new audiences and readerships, through an updating process.

Gerard Genette talks about texts in the “second degree”, specifically with a reference to the new literary products: this is why adaptation studies are strictly linked to comparative studies. In his work, he studies the fundamental types of textual imitation (pastiche, caricature, forgery) and transformation (parody, travesty, transposition), their distinctive features and their thrust. His explanation constitutes a clear example of what he calls “open structuralism”: Genette focuses his analysis on relations between texts, the ways they reread and rewrite one another. Effectively parody, travesty and transposition all result from textual transformation; by contrast, pastiche, caricature and forgery come from imitation.

In 1982, in his book *Palimpsests*, he properly declares that “any text is a hypertext”⁴, because it is grafted onto an earlier text it imitates or transforms. So, from this point of view, there is a need to establish various terms to discuss and describe the relationship between the source text and its appropriation and/or adaptation, underlining that there is a difference between them.

³ In Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and appropriation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 18.

⁴ In Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature on the Second Degree*, Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. IX.

Starting from the definition of *transtextuality*, considered as the textual transcendence of the text⁵, Genette identifies five types of transtextual relationships. The first category is *intertextuality*, explored by Julia Kristeva in 1969, and defined by Genette as “a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts”. In the most explicit and literal form, it is the traditional practice of quoting, while, in another less explicit and canonical form, it is the practice of plagiarism⁶. The second type has been called *paratextuality*: a title, a subtitle, a preface, forewords, notices, marginal notes, illustrations, and many other kinds of those secondary signals a text can contain. The third kind of textual transcendence, *metatextuality*, is the relationship most often labelled as “*commentary*”: it unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it or naming it. Another one is defined *architextuality*, which involves a completely silent relationship, which can be titular or most often subtltular and articulated as a paratextual element. The last type of transtextuality relationship has been baptized *hypertextuality*: it represents any relationship uniting a text B (which Genette calls *hypertext*) to an earlier text A (called *hypotext*), where B derives from another pre-existent text⁷.

From this analysis, Deborah Cartmell categorises adaptation into three typologies⁸:

- 1) transposition
- 2) commentary
- 3) analogy

For example, all screen versions of novels can be considered as transpositions: they take a text from one genre and deliver it to the new aesthetic conventions of a

⁵ Genette defines this aspect as “all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts”.

⁶ Ibid. p. 2.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 4 – 5.

⁸ In Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Adaptations, From text to screen, screen to text*, New York, Routledge, 1999, p. 24.

completely different one. On the other hand, many adaptations of novels, but also of other generic forms, contain further layers of transformation, relocating source texts in cultural, geographical and temporal terms. Genette would describe this phenomenon as a shift of proximation and this can be clearly seen in screen adaptations of classic novels: behind updating process, we have the specific intention of bringing the text closer to the audience's frame of reference and making it more congruous in cultural and social terms. On the contrary, not all the transpositional adaptations that are characterized by temporal shifts, move nearer to the present, even if it is the most common approach.

When we talk about the second category, commentary, we notice that the process of adaptation starts to move away from a simple proximation towards something culturally richer. Commentaries can be considered as adaptations that comment on the politics of the source text, or those of the new product, or both, in terms of alteration or addition. What we notice when we analyse these adaptations, is their impact on the audience, for example for what concerns film adaptations, which depends on the spectator's awareness of some explicit relationship with the original work. From the point of view of the adaptors, instead, the desire to make this relationship clear and vivid is linked to the way in which the responses to these new products depend upon complex ideas of similarity and difference. Obviously, these ideas of likeness and dissimilarity can only be discovered by a reader or a spectator, who responds to the intertextual elements incorporated into the adaptation.

The third type of adaptation described by Cartmell, analogy, or analogue in Sanders's analysis, may enrich and deepen the understanding of the new cultural product, with the purpose of being aware of its shaping intertext, even though it can be difficult to enjoy the work independently from the acknowledgement of the various texts used

during the adapting process. The complex question that emerges in reading or experiencing adaptions like these, as to whether or not knowledge of the source texts is required or it is simply something in addition, can normally stand out and represents one of the main purposes in analysing this kind of works⁹.

Starting from this point of view, the kinetic account of adaptation is clear: these new texts rework other texts, which often reworked texts in their turn, for example as in film musicals. The adaptive process is constant and ongoing. In this sense, it proves to be a far from neutral, indeed highly active, mode of being, far removed from the unimaginative act of imitation, copying, or repetition that is sometimes presented by literature and film critics as something obsessed with claims to “originality”.

Moreover, thinking adaptation in terms of complex processes of filtration and in terms of intertextual nets or signifying/semantic fields is better and more interesting than seeing it as simplistic one-way lines of influence from source to adaptation.

In an article appeared in 1982 in the journal *Screen*, John Ellis¹⁰ stresses what emerges when we experience adaptations:

Adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, and repeating the production of a memory.

By prolonging the pleasure of the initial act of reading or the first meeting with a text, Ellis suggests that the process of adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, which can be derived from actual reading or from a generally circulated cultural memory. Adaptation, in effect, is a process of reducing a pre-existent piece of writing to a series of functions (for example locations, actions or characters, as we can see in

⁹ Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁰ In John Ellis, “The Literary Adaptation: an introduction” in *Screen*, Volume 23, Issue 1 May 1982, Gilmorehill Centre University of Glasgow, Glasgow, 1982, p. 4.

our analysis), and it trades upon the memory of the source text, consuming this remembrance to efface it with new elements.

1.2 Appropriation: a definition

Starting from the consideration that literature is a big system of textual re-creation and a sort of constant process of intertextual cooperation, Innocenti notices that the definition of adaptation and appropriation implies a classification based on quantitative criteria, which do not permit to see real differences¹¹. For Sanders, while adaptation preserves a connection with its source text, appropriation transforms the original text into something completely new. This is to say that appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the original source into a totally new cultural product and field¹². This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of at least one text against another: this is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations¹³. Specifically, the appropriated texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process.

The word “appropriation” implies an exchange, either the theft or the borrowing of something valuable, such as property of ideas, or a gift, the allocation of resources for a worthy cause¹⁴ (teaching or studying in depth, for example).

Julie Sanders categorizes appropriation of texts into two main groups:

1. embedded texts

¹¹ In Loretta Innocenti, *La scena trasformata, Adattamenti neoclassici di Shakespeare* Pisa, Pacini Editore, 2010, p. 15.

¹² In Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006 p. 26.

¹³ Specifically the reference goes to the discourse around the memory we have of a text, as said by Ellis reported in the previous paragraph.

¹⁴ In Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer, eds., *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, London, Routledge, 1999, p.4.

2. sustained appropriations

To clarify the meaning of the first category, Sanders gives two significant examples in the theatrical field: the musical *West Side Story* and the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, an elaboration of the best-known Shakespearian *Hamlet*. They both maintain a link with the source texts and what is really interesting is how much pleasure can be found in tracing the relationships and overlaps between the new products and the source text. Embedded texts can be obviously considered as adaptations, but in another modality: the reworking of the source text has to be identified as intrinsic to the appropriated text. Rather than the movements of proximation or cross-generic¹⁵ interpretation detectable as crucial to adaptation, here we can notice a wholesale rethinking of the source.

Interplay between appropriations and their sources is encouraged (as we are going to see in next chapters), and it is a fundamental and even vital aspect of the reading or spectating experience, even if it is not always so clear if a text is a pure appropriation, with new meanings, or an adaptation¹⁶. In effect, appropriation does not always make its founding relationships and interrelationships as clear as the two examples used by Sanders in her explanation. The approach towards the sources can be completely shadowy in some situations, and this brings into play, sometimes in controversial ways, questions of intellectual property, proper acknowledgement, and the charge of plagiarism¹⁷.

For what concerns the “sustained appropriations” mentioned above, we are on a far more complex level of rewriting. Julie Sanders tries to clarify the concept in her book

¹⁵ Referring to the genres.

¹⁶ In Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 29.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 32.

Adaptation and Appropriation, using a large number of literary examples. From her analysis, we can deduce that sustained appropriations are texts which show very close similarities with their source text: these works are derivations of other pre-existent materials, and they can be seen both as homages or plagiarism¹⁸. Also in Shakespeare it is possible to notice such process: an examination of sources or creative borrowings, citing allusions to or redeployments of Ovid, Plutarch, Thomas Lodge, the Latin comedies and so on. But, in the case of a modern novel, this approach becomes a reductive discussion of plagiarism and “inauthenticity”¹⁹. Sometimes, this kind of texts are devalued, because they are not “original”, even though many critics, adhering to Genette’s theories of palimpsestuous writing, state that the response for the reader to these works consists in tracing the relationships existing between the texts used to gain a sustained adaptation.

In effect, without wishing to reduce the act of reading to a game of “spot the appropriation or the adaptation”, it is important to acknowledge that to tie an adaptive and appropriative text to one sole source text may in fact close down the opportunity to read it in relationship with others.

Moreover, in studying the various interpretations and reinterpretations of canonical or established texts, we are on a journey that takes us through various historical and geographical points. And there is also a danger in deploying the motif of this journey: as a term that seems to stress a beginning and an end-point, the idea of a journey can reduce the adaptive process to a linear teleology, as defined by Julie Sanders in her book²⁰.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 33 – 34.

¹⁹ Ivi.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 38.

What cannot be denied is the invaluable set of terms for rethinking the process of adaptation, moving away from a static or purely linear stand-point. Unfoldings, recyclings, mutations, repetitions, evolutions, and variations: the possibilities are endless²¹. This is the positive vantage point of literary adaptation and appropriation, which considers them both as creating new cultural and aesthetic possibilities that stand alongside the texts that have inspired them.

1.3 Shakespop adaptations and the game of success

In recent years, the study of Shakespeare and popular culture has been transformed from an occasional, ephemeral and anecdotal field of research, which was generally considered peripheral to the core concerns of scholarship and pedagogy, to one which is making an increasingly significant contribution in understanding how and why Shakespeare's works came into being and continue to exercise the imagination of readers, theatregoers and scholars worldwide. The increased priority afforded to theatrical performance, the growth of interest in Shakespeare on cinema and television, the theoretical debate and methodological innovations of the 1980s and 1990s which have encouraged new kinds of interdisciplinarity in the field of Shakespearian studies and a turning attention to the forces that have shaped his production and reproduction in material culture, are some factors that have prompted this shift, along with the Postmodern approach and also the changing patterns of educational participation and provision of this last centuries²².

²¹ Ibid. p. 40.

²² In Robert Shaughnessy, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.1.

Gary Taylor, through the following passage, clarifying the concept the increasing interest for the Shakespearian production²³:

If Shakespeare has a singularity, it is because he has become a black hole. [...] We find in Shakespeare only what we bring to him what others have left behind; he gives us back our own values. [...] Before he became a black hole, Shakespeare was a star – but never the only one in our galaxy. He was unusually but not uniquely talented. [...] He was no less and no more singular than anyone else.

Catherine Belsey, referring to Shakespeare's extraordinary continuing "pre-eminence"²⁴, states that he has been so endlessly adapted²⁵. With the specific aim of giving Shakespeare to the world, cinema, but also theatre, literature, radio and other media have reworked his masterpieces. Sometimes modern directors or writers relocate his plays in contemporary settings, discovering new meanings and new readings, so every generation obviously perceives its own concerns in Shakespeare. Another important issue is that his work has been also regularly retold in other genres²⁶: it was retold for children by Charles and Mary Lamb²⁷ in the nineteenth century; Victorian paintings and a wide number of classic novels have borrowed plots and characters from his plays, and composers of the nineteenth century made music inspired by them. In this sense, we can use the term "appropriation", testifying in the reworking process the vitality of Shakespearian production, opened to repeated manipulations. For the Victorian period, in effect, Shakespeare was a genius: his plays were believed to depict in a precise way human nature in all its aspects and attitudes, in universal situations. And moreover, he wrote timeless moral truths in immortal

²³ In Gary Taylor, *Reinventing Shakespeare: a cultural history, from the Restoration to the present*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 410 – 411.

²⁴ In Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. IX.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

²⁶ Ivi.

²⁷ In this study we cannot avoid to mention The Lambs's "Tales from Shakespeare", written in 1807.

lyrics. But history went on, giving birth to what is called “Shakespeare industry”, with the purpose of selling the Shakespearian “products”, promoting his work in every possible way, constructing the author as an icon. Belsey talks about the need for Britain to have a national poet²⁸ and he was exactly what British were looking for. Douglas Lanier in his book *Shakespeare and modern popular culture* considers Shakespeare fan fictions as a form of popular appropriation that reveals much about the relationship between Shakespeare and popular culture. Among the different forms of Shakespeare fan fictions, there is one that simply revises the Shakespearian originals, exploring relationships between characters that the Bard does not take into consideration, alternate perspectives on events, alternate or interpolated plot lines, characters with altered traits or motives, or “crossover” hybrids between plays. He talks about the various approaches to Shakespearian works, and traces six different possibilities²⁹:

- **extrapolated narrative**, in which plot material is generated from events mentioned but not developed in the “master” narrative; often this takes the form of filling in gaps of motive or event within the original narrative, or of imagining the next frame out of a plot line or motive;
- **interpolated narrative**, in which new plot material is dovetailed with the plot of the source;
- **remotivated narrative**, in which the new narrative retains the basic plot line or situation of the source but changes the motivations of the characters;
- **revisionary narrative**, in which the new narrative begins with the characters and situation of the source but changes the plot;
- **reoriented narrative**, in which the narrative is told from a different point of view;
- **hybrid narrative**, in which narrative elements or characters from two or more Shakespearian plays are combined.

²⁸ In Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 3.

²⁹ In Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 83.

Another type of Shakespeare fan fiction can imagine Shakespearian characters and plots in terms of conventions of popular genres: anime and manga series, action movies or video productions. Lanier doubtlessly defines Shakespearian fan fictions as a minor cultural phenomenon, nevertheless they bring into focus how deeply popular culture shapes contemporary understandings of Shakespeare³⁰. Like all other kinds of reworking texts, also Shakespearian fan fiction recognises certain formal and ideological limits of its Shakespearian source and seeks to push against those limits, in a spirit of critique and recuperation. In some sense, these works return Shakespeare's plays to their place in a long tradition of imitation and adaptation, from which Lanier says that the status of these theatrical productions as literary masterpieces has tended to isolate them. This approach to the adaptation process exemplifies the postmodern concept of "pastiche"³¹, an imitation of styles, mannerisms and images distinguished from "parody". Jameson gives this explanation of this term:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practise of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody...

While this concept is true for postmodern Shakespearian pastiche, which often lacks of parody's satirical motive, this idea is certainly capable of extending or enriching the meaning of Shakespeare's text, making it more appealing in accordance with the period in which it is written. Moreover, while the original Shakespearian texts are transposed into contemporary terms, the language always remains Shakespearian

³⁰ Ibid. pp. 84 – 85.

³¹ Ibid. p. 87. Here Lanier specifically makes a reference to Frederic Jameson, who discusses his point of view in an article appeared in a journal called "The Cultural Turn", in 1998.

and it shows a dialogue between the Bard and contemporaneity. The technique of adaptation is often self-conscious about placing the relation between the author and popular culture in the foreground. And despite all the updating, the preservation of the Bard's language often announces a desire to remain faithful to the Shakespearian source. In effect, it is important to recognize that most Shakespop adaptations, as Lanier defines those adaptations of the Shakespearian work into popular culture³², reject Shakespeare's language, and prefer to fasten on some facet of Shakespearian action, plot, character or iconography and to draw it into the realm of popular. Cultures maintain themselves by constantly rehearsing and affirming shared ideas and symbols, and pop culture is an important social institution through which contemporary society produces a shared network of knowledge and reference. Shakespop adaptations are a potential source of innovation and creativity because they transform and reproduce the Shakespeare they transmit in light of contemporary assumptions, circumstances and ideologies. More often, Shakespop adaptation has a complex cultural politics, an often inconsistent mix of conservatism and progressiveness. In any case, segregating Shakespops from "authentic" Shakespeare may obscure the extent to which both sustain the original texts' vitality in the culture.

In effect, if we grant that "unfaithful" pop adaptations are part of the larger cultural system that produces conceptions of Shakespeare, several issues arise³³. For example, how we can know whether what we have in front of us is a Shakespearian adaptation or not, and what specifically makes a Shakespearian adaptation, as opposed to some resemblance that may indicate nothing more than a common plot or character type. Even if Shakespearian names or phrases appear, it is not always clear

³² Ibid. p. 88.

³³ Ibid. p. 89.

that they indicate an engagement with their Shakespearian sources. Of course, even a general association of Shakespearian characters with a mythic past or alternative world may be significant, for that association, common to fantasy, science fiction, Gothic romance and children or young adults' literature, reinforces the larger cultural assumption that Shakespeare's characters and stories are timeless. Audiences appreciate many Shakespop works without recognizing that they are Shakespearian at all, but only alluding to his works.

Another important issue is claiming Shakespeare as a source for popular culture, because it establishes a relation between specific pop/popular conventions and Shakespearian works. But it is not only a matter of forcing Shakespeare to fit an established popular form, as of using pop canon to amplify and alter certain semantic potentials in the Bard's texts while playing down or discarding others. In effect, Shakespop adaptations have also become a way of defending the value and dignity of popular culture in general, of suggesting its cultural relevance and its worthiness of close study. Identifying Shakespearian elements in pop culture states the essential continuity between high and popular culture. Following his approach, Lanier defines a "classic" simply as a work that stays popular for a long time³⁴, because of:

the forces and energies and impacts that account for the status and indeed the survival of an immortal masterpiece are [...] the same forces and energies and impacts that assure commercial success at the box office in any age.

Shakepop adaptations perpetuate cultural tradition by reframing the Bard's already long-popular characters, plot, and themes in new shapes and without all that "old fashioned" language. By stressing the similarities between these two elements³⁵, we return his work to its original popular register, free from fleeting ideologies or high

³⁴ Ibid. p. 95.

³⁵ Shakespeare and his production compared to pop culture.

cultural fashions. Moreover, a deep continuity of theme, character type, plot line and appeal can be clearly noticed. Even though it is possible to find Shakespearian echoes in consumerism and trash culture, what makes Shakespeare's work still constantly up-to-date and appealing is a certain universality of human nature, an unchanging core of concerns, desires and feelings that governs how people of all eras and cultures respond to art.

1.4 Children's Literature: a brief introduction

Peter Hunt, in introducing the second edition of the collection of essays *Understanding Children's Literature*, starts his analysis reflecting upon the meaning of Children's Literature³⁶. He says that "Children's literature" sounds like an exciting field of study: having been beneath the notice of intellectual and cultural authorities, children's books are apparently free of what readers and critics ought to think and say about them. To many readers, Hunt asserts these books are a matter of private delight; they are real literature, as they "engage, change, and provoke intense response in readers"³⁷. But if this private delight seems something too subjective for a study, then we can reflect on the influence that children's books have on society, culture and history. Nowadays they are also important educationally and commercially, with consequences across the cultures, from language to politics. Childhood is, after all, a state we grow away from, and Hunt considers children's books as the "province" of culturally marginal groups, for example females. But this marginalisation had had advantages: children's literature is culturally low-profile,

³⁶ In English this is a wide term which includes illustrated books, books for children and books written for older kids. Only in recent years, literary theory has introduced the word Young Adult (YA) to identify texts written for young people or teenagers.

³⁷ In Peter Hunt, *Introduction, The expanding world of Children's Literature Studies*, in Peter Hunt ed., *Understanding Children's Literature*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2005, p.1.

free from any group or discipline and doesn't "belong" to a department of literature, library school or parental organisation. It is attractive and interesting to students of literature, education, history, psychology, art, popular culture or media and it can be approached from any specialist viewpoint. Its nature, both as a group of texts and as a subject for study, permits to break down barriers between disciplines, and between different types of readers.

In the light of this analysis, Hunt states that children's books are complex and their study is really wide. Their complexity is not merely in problematizing on the texts, but the most apparently "straightforward act of communication"³⁸ underneath this specific genre of literature is quite intricate, dealing with fundamental communicative questions between adults and children, or, in other words, between individuals.

But if children's literature is more complex than it seems, Hunt thinks that it happens because of the position this genre finds itself in, between adult writers, readers, critics and, more important, child readers.

Children's books are different from adults' books: they are written for a different audience, with different skills, different needs and different ways of reading. Equally, children experience texts in ways which are often unknowable, but which many may strongly suspect to be very rich and complex, if we judge children's books by the same value systems we use for adult books. In effect, studying children's literature without taking into consideration concepts such as childhood or family is quite impossible. Texts, authors, characters and genres mainly represent the core of these stories. Peter Hunt asserts that they have influenced every adult and that these books are the ideal link between children's culture and the adult's cultural world.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 2.

On the other hand, we cannot avoid considering that most of children's books are written by adults, with their ideas on what childhood is and which effect writers want to produce with their work³⁹. Moreover, editors publish these books according to what the "market" wants. The result consists of books for children that cannot be considered reliable historic documents, because in reality they mirror the way society would be, would be seen, or the author expects or likes it to be. All these questions are what makes important and exciting studying children's books: texts for children can be studied from the point of view of literature, linguistic studies, pedagogy, psychology, media studies, history, culture and folklore, theatre, dance, and so on. Moreover, Hunt, in the *Prologo* section of *Storia della letteratura inglese per l'infanzia e la gioventù*, adds that readers feel both emotionally and intellectually touched by children's books, because they become their readers' property.

In the past children's books were meant for immature and naïve minds, critics thought these works had nothing in common with adult ideas and thoughts and they were often linked to fantasy and fairy tales. Someone could suggest that they are not worth of being read or examined, but the truth is that, due to the commercial importance children's literature has gained, children's books have become crucial in modern western culture: now they are studied in universities as a model for academic disciplines, because they are multicultural, international and interdisciplinary⁴⁰.

Hunt discusses in another of his books⁴¹ three hundred years of history of Children's books. Children's literature seems to be a literature divided between entertainment and edification, and criticism today is divided along this lines. The idea that children's

³⁹ Peter Hunt in the introduction to Laura Tosi and Alessandra Petrina, *Dall'ABC a Harry Potter, Storia della letteratura inglese per l'infanzia e la gioventù*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2011, p. 14.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 17.

⁴¹ In Peter Hunt, *An Introduction to Children's Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 163.

books should be, or can be, free of ideological “taint” and an idealistic concept of childhood may be naïve. But Peter Hunt states that literary studies, for many years, have been seen as “superior” to educational studies, and “realist” texts have been seen as superior to “fantasy”. At the end of his study, the author concludes his analysis saying that the ideas surrounding children’s literature are as rich and complex as the books themselves⁴², which contain all the elements that can be found in adults’ books but with something more interesting: strong nostalgic/nature images, a sense of place or territory, testing and initiation, outsider/insider relationships, mutual respect among adults and children, closure, warmth/security, food, etc., and, more important, the relationship between reality and fantasy. In many ways, fantasy, in effect, and the usage of it, is the heart of the adult-child relationship in literature. Fantasy, in effect, embodies radical revelations of the human mind and, thus, is suitable for children: for Hunt, reality and realism, presenting the probable or actual actions of recognizable beings in recognizable circumstances, are treated with prudence and parsimony. But, on the other hand, modern fantasy in its totality is the richest and most varied of all the genres. Surely, the types of fantasy offer children different modes of experience⁴³: for example, “domestic” fantasy is rooted in a world perceptible to children, “high” fantasy, on the other hand, set in a secondary world, offers a wider scope of imagination combined with a simpler set of moral solutions. Between domestic and high fantasy, we can find two other types: the first can be found in books where the secondary world is framed by the real one, where the characters move from one to another, the second can be seen in texts in which the secondary world impinges upon the real one. But this is a issue we are going to discuss in further chapters.

⁴² Ibid. p. 184.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 185.

Peter Hunt says that, doubtless, arguments about what books should contain, whether they are for education or for “literary” responses, or both, are fundamentally ideological⁴⁴. Moreover, some critics share the assumption that children’s books lead on to adult books, that good books and/or good habits of reading (specifically, literary texts) will lead to a literary, literate life, and Hunt shares this view. He also adds that the less a book appeals to adult literary or artistic values, the more it is a children’s book. The idea is that books that are positively bad from the adult point of view may be good children’s books: we can merely get rid of the idea that books are simply a step to higher things. On the contrary, the adult may enjoy a children’s book in which the focus is on child behaviour, or may enjoy the mood of those books “charmed” by whimsical and curious devices.

In short, Peter Hunt gives his reader, and those readers (of all ages) of children’s books, great advice⁴⁵: children’s literature gives its best if it is approached with an open mind.

Adult readers of children’s literature can not only pass on whatever they find good to children, but they can also expand their literary horizons and revitalize their reading experience.

1.5 Adapting Shakespeare for kids: YA Literature

YA literature’s value lies in its ability to immediately connect young readers to the story, because its power deals with the problems and matters that occur in their lives.⁴⁶ The vital questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I fit in?” affect most

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 187.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 188.

⁴⁶ In Sarah K. Herz and Donald R. Gallo, *From Hinton to Hamlet: building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. XVI.

adolescents nowadays because growing up is never an easy journey. Consequently, YA literature was born in the attempt of offering teen audience a comfortable reading experience that can provide it with the chance of beginning to understand human nature and the relationships between human beings. By using a teenage narrator, most YA novels create an immediate contact with the world the author is creating, so the reader can be engaged in a story he/she is connected or familiar with. Moreover, readers can also feel confident in sharing their interpretations with peers and maybe get involved in some interesting literary discussion.

This genre has gone through a transformation⁴⁷, according to Sarah Herz, and what used to be conceived only as a supporting or easier reading experience, has become a rich literary source which can be suited to the abilities of all types of YA readers.

Before the advent of YA literature, in the late 1960s, all the books with this particular target were considered as teen literature. These novels avoided controversial topics or taboos, such as sexuality or death, and they focused on one specific socio-economic class. So, they were considered superficial by many literary critics for their lack of credibility in portraying the true nature of adolescent's lives⁴⁸. The turning point, then, came in 1967 with *Hinton*, who described the young people he saw around him as alienated youths, giving YA literature great popularity among teenage readers, offering them an honest view of the main characters' hopes, fears, dilemmas, and helping young audiences to identify themselves in what they were experiencing. In facing these books, the literary talents of the authors who dedicate themselves to this specific genre is evident and clear and these writers often incorporated into their works the same elements used in adult novels.

⁴⁷ Ivi.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 9.

Donald Gallo gives a summary of the main characteristics of “good fiction for young adults”⁴⁹:

- The main characters are teenagers.
- The length of the average book is around 200 pages, though it may be as brief as 100 pages [...] as long as 900 pages.
- The narrator is most often the main character.
- The story is usually told in the voice of a teenager, not the voice of an adult looking back as a young person [...].
- The language is typical of contemporary teenagers, and the vocabulary [...] is manageable by readers of average ability.
- The setting is most often contemporary, but also can be historical, futuristic [...], or imaginative [...].⁵⁰
- The books contain characters and issues to which teenagers can relate.
- The plot and literary style are uncomplicated but never simplistic, though the plots of a few books are quite complex [...].
- The outcome of the story is usually dependent upon the decisions and actions of the main character.
- The tone and outcome of the novels are usually upbeat, but not in all instances.⁵¹
- [...], all the traditional literary elements typical of classical literature are present in most contemporary novels for young adults⁵² [...] though they are used less frequently and at less sophisticated levels to match the experiential levels of readers.
- The very best of YA books can be as appealing to adult readers as they are to teens.

However, critics do not agree on the definition of Young Adult Literature: some have defined it as any kind of literature read voluntarily by teenagers; others delineate it as books with teenage characters, or books written for teenage readers. It covers a broad spectrum of books, including books written for adults that are read by both adults and teenagers.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid. pp 10 – 11.

⁵⁰ Depending from the genre the book can be classified in.

⁵¹ Quoting Donald Gallo, he says: “Since 2000, there has been an increase in the number of darker, grittier novels for and about teens”, as we eventually are going to see in the examples taken in exam.

⁵² Such as well-rounded characters, flashbacks, foreshadowing, allusions, irony and metaphorical language.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 11.

Nowadays, there is clearly a distinct corpus of literature written specifically for young adult readers and being read by them, and the contents of these books have improved throughout the decades.

From this, hence, here comes the idea of appropriation, which can be defined as the process of creating a bridge between source texts and their audience, building an interplay between new texts and their “originals” as a crucial aspect of the reading or spectating experience. And this clearly produces new meanings, applications and resonance, as appropriation, differently from adaptation, affects a more specific “journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain”⁵⁴. This journey may or may not determine a shift or juxtaposition of at least two different texts. Some works considered in further chapters are specific examples of what emerges with this new way of interpolating and rewriting literature, giving birth, in some case, to new characters and scenarios.

⁵⁴ In Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and appropriation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006, p. 26.

2.

Ophelia: telling her story

2.1 The Shakespearian Ophelia: a portrait

Helena Faucit Martin in 1880 described with these words her opinion on Shakespearian women¹, making a clear reference to the character of Ophelia, and how audience can consider her role:

My views of Shakespeare's women have been wont to take their shape in the living portraiture of the stage, and not in words. I have, in imagination, lived their lives from the very beginning to the end; and Ophelia [...] is so unlike what I hear and read about her, and have seen represented on the stage, that I can scarcely hope to make any one think of as I do. It hurts me to hear her spoken of [...] as a weak creature, wanting in truthfulness, in purpose, in force of character, and only interesting when she loses the little wits she had.

This is a really interesting point of view, which makes the reader or the spectator aware of the relevance the author wanted to give to one of the figures he created. Ophelia appears faint and delicate and, at the same time so, full of suggestiveness. For this reason the interest over this character has grown up so much and judgements over its attitude and way of behaving is so varied depending on the aspects taken into account. Faucit Martin pictured Ophelia as the motherless child of an old father, Polonius. Baby Ophelia maybe was left to the kindly but unsympathetic tending of country-folk; for this reason she appears so sweet, fond, sensitive, tender-hearted, even though the offspring of a delicate dead mother. The author states that one can see this lonely child as lonely from choice, with no playmates, wandering by streams,

¹ In Helena Faucit Martin, *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters, Ophelia, Juliet, Portia, Imogen, Desdemona, Rosalind, Beatrice*, Edinburgh, Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010, p. 3.

plucking flowers, making wreaths and garlands, learning the names of all the wild flowers, listening to the country songs at night, whose words and melodies come back still vividly to her memory². Creating, a fictional past of the character she had to perform, Faucit Martin considered this implied information³ really important, to help herself in her acting activity:

I think it is important to keep in view this part of her supposed life, because it puts to flight all the coarse suggestions which unimaginative critics have sometimes made, to explain that Ophelia came to utter snatches of such ballads as never ought to issue from a young and cultured woman [...].

When we see Ophelia first, she is still very young, according to what Laertes, her brother, says.

Roberta Barker says that a “feminist” interpretation of Ophelia is difficult to achieve, because of the vast accretion of masculinist constructions around the role⁴. Every succeeding age of criticism has tailored her image to fit the vision of femininity correspondent to each particular time; she has been manipulated in cultural history just as the men in the play manipulate her. But, on the other hand, it is quite difficult to find and grant Ophelia the complexity and autonomy she deserves, mostly because her figure is linked forever, for centuries, to Hamlet: relationships with men give feminine identity a definition, for herself a woman is a constantly changing entity⁵, as Hamlet declares in the play.

Shakespeare’s plays are full of resourceful and self-confident women, who are able to create their own space and achieve independence. In his works there are several

² Ibid. p. 9.

³ Ivi.

⁴ In Roberta Barker, *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance, 1984 – 2000, The Destined Livery*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 31.

⁵ Ibid. p. 32.

different personalities, who assert themselves in very different ways: Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Desdemona, Portia, Rosalind, Viola, just to mention some of them⁶. Looking at Ophelia, we always have the impression of a huge tragic burden and guilt attached to her character that end in death.

“The fair Ophelia” is passive almost to the point of non-existence as an independent consciousness and is, to some extent, a more extreme version of Gertrude, Hamlet’s mother. She speaks to the King and Queen only when she is mad, nearly at the end of the play. Earlier in the tragedy, she exchanges only few words exclusively with her brother, her father and Hamlet. The Bard probably exploited this passivity to provoke responses from other characters and from the audience.

In effect, we only acknowledge more about the feminine figure from other characters’ words. In Laertes’s construction, for example, a woman can avoid being frail by fearing “the shot and danger of desire” and, implicitly, by submitting herself to the management of her male relations, a father, a husband or other figure in her life⁷. In Hamlet’s soliloquy, it emerges that woman evolves into a creature with two options: obedience or loss of honour.

Women of Shakespeare’s dramas were bound to rules and conventions of the patriarchal Elizabethan era. Therefore, single women were considered to be property of their fathers and were handed over to their future husbands through marriage. In Elizabethan times, women were considered as the weaker sex and dangerous, because their sexuality was supposedly mysterious and therefore feared by men. Women of that time were supposed to incarnate virtues like obedience, silence,

⁶ In Sara Ekici, *Feminist Criticism: Female Characters in Shakespeare’s Plays Othello and Hamlet*, Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2009, p. 4.

⁷ In Roberta Barker, *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance, 1984 – 2000, The Destined Livery*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 33.

sexual chastity, piety, humility, constancy and patience. And all of these qualities have their meaning in relationship to men: men were the “breadwinners” and women had to be obedient housewives and mothers.⁸

When Hamlet delivers the judgment of frailty about all women, he is unconsciously commenting upon both his mother and his girlfriend. Women, in effect, embody or personify frailty, intended as lack of constancy. Their behaviour is linked just before the performance of *The Mousetrap*, when he comments on the short-lived nature of “woman’s love”, saying that it is mutable and changeable⁹:

HAMLET Is this a prologue or the posy of a ring?
OPHELIA ‘Tis brief, my lord.
HAMLET As woman’s love.

(Act III, Scene II, vv. 145 - 147)

In her uncomplicated obedience to her father or brother, Ophelia is radically different from other young women in similar situations in other Shakespearian plays. For example Juliet, Hermia, Desdemona, Cordelia, Perdita and Miranda, all explicitly put their love for their prospective husbands before their obedience to fathers, defying far more intimidating figures than Polonius. In Ophelia’s case, there is not even a hint of a struggle and Shakespeare does little to develop her. She is presented, in effect, as someone with no point of view, no ideas about anything in particular; as she says in ACT I: “I do not know my lord what I should think”.

She promises twice to write to Laertes and perhaps her letters could bring him home, but she is inconclusive. She makes no attempt to communicate with Hamlet, even if

⁸ Ibid. p. 3.

⁹ All the quotations can be found in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2006, from p. 308.

there are two occasions when she could confide to him. We can presume that Shakespeare deliberately wants to keep her silent.

Unexpectedly, after the “nunnery” episode, Ophelia speaks to the audience for the only time in the play: she presents herself entirely as the victim of Hamlet’s rough treatment. From the text, we can assume the image Ophelia has of Hamlet and, at the same time, what her feelings are toward him:

OPHELIA

O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword,
Th’expectation and rose of the fair state,
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,
Th’observed of all observers, quite, quite down.
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,
Now see what noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of time and harsh –
That unmatched form and stature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me
T’have seen what I have seen, see what I see.

(Act I, Scene I, vv. 149 – 160; pp. 292 - 293)

There is no introspection, no sign that she feels she has behaved in any way shamefully. Nor does she express any understanding of Hamlet’s pain. Her lament for the man he once was, is surprisingly generalised and conventional, as if grief and sorrow, and all other human feelings, could not be expressed as they are, but only considered within a specific frame of social conventions.

At this point in the play, when Claudius thinks that Hamlet is not mad, Ophelia describes him as “blasted with ecstasy”: she chooses to regard everything Hamlet has said to her as madness rather than consider whether her own behaviour has in any way provoked it.

By the end of Act IV and through Act V, Ophelia achieves ultimate passivity and paradoxically a new kind of power, first in her distraction, then in the brook and finally in her coffin. Her social incapacity to communicate and express herself, which has been a crucial theme since the third scene in Act I, modulates into "madness".

Firstly, other characters notice this change in her:

GENTLEMAN

She is importunate – indeed, distract.

Her mood will needs be pitied.

[...]

She speaks much of her father, says she hears

There's tricks i'th' world, and hems and beats her heart,

Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt

That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,

Yet the unshaped use of it doth move

The hearers to collection. They yawn at it

[...]

Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,

Indeed would make one think there might be thought,

Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

(Act IV, Scene V, vv. 2 - 13; pp. 372 - 373)

But then she is already deeply ill with madness and, in a quite uncommon behaviour for the time and social conventions the play is set in, she firstly speaks and addresses directly Queen Gertrude:

OPHELIA

Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?

QUEEN

How now, Ophelia?

OPHELIA (*Sings.*)

How should I your true love know

From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff

And his sandal shoon.

QUEEN

Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?

OPHELIA

Say you? Nay, pray you, mark.

Sings.

He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone.
At his head a grass-green turf,
At his heels a stone.

(Act IV, Scene V, vv. 21 - 32; pp. 375 - 376)

Then to the King, who is worried in seeing her in that mood and tries to find a cause to Ophelia's disease, she says:

KING
How do you, pretty lady?
OPHELIA Well, good dild you. They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are but know not what we may be. God be at your table.
KING
Conceit upon her father –
OPHELIA pray, let's have no words of this, but when they ask you what it means, say you this:
Sings.
Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day
All in the morning betime,
And I a maid at your window
To be your valentine.
Then up he rose and donned his clothes
And dupe the chamber door –
Let in the maid that out a maid
Never departed more.
KING
Pretty Ophelia –
OPHELIA Indeed, without an oath I'll make an end on't.
[...]
OPHELIA I hope all will be well. We must be patient. But I cannot choose but weep to think they would lay him i'th' cold ground. My brother shall know of it. And so I thank you for your good counsel. [...]
Goodnight, ladies, goodnight. Sweet ladies, goodnight, goodnight.
KING
Follow her close. Give her good watch, I pray you.

(Act IV, Scene V, vv. 41 – 74; from p. 376 to p. 379)

This insanity is presented through plaintive songs and pretty nonsense, and, together with the representation of her death, offers decoration in place of any attempt of

psychological elaboration. Her madness is less “real” than Hamlet’s confused state of mind, because it appears unproblematic and unthreatening. She is presented only, and along the whole play, as an innocent victim of other people’s wickedness. Her suicide is in effect described as involuntary in Gertrude’s words¹⁰ in Act IV, Scene VII, vv. 161 - 183; while the gravedigger is sceptical and, while working, he keeps thinking of what happened to this young girl¹¹, as reported in Act V, Scene I, vv. 1 - 56. It appears, both for the audience and also for other characters, to be harder to find the guilt that caused her death: Ophelia may or may not be found guilty in betraying and rewarding Hamlet’s love, and this could seem the cause of her madness and decease.

In Shakespearian tragedies young women suffer from isolation, abuse and death, as we can see in *Hamlet*. Specifically, some female characters seem to have the same tragic fate, an unnatural early end. Ophelia seems to be the ideal representation of Elizabethan daughterhood: she has, like Queen Gertrude, only little autonomy, she is sweet, innocent and obeys both her father Polonius and her brother Laertes. Unlike Hamlet, she does not struggle with moral choices or alternatives and her character seems subordinate in the play. She is a very silent presence in the first court scene, but she gets attention from the world and a public role only the moment she goes mad. But, some critics state that her figure has important symbolic meanings: her behaviour, her appearance, her gestures, her costumes and her props are always embedded in emblematic significance¹². In particular, her symbolic meanings are specifically feminine, considered in accordance to Elizabethan conventions, and therefore Ophelia is the perfect daughter and sister that would not oppose her family.

¹⁰ Ibid. from p. 406 to p. 409.

¹¹ Ibid. from p. 409 to p. 414.

¹² In Sara Ekici, *Feminist Criticism: Female Characters in Shakespeare’s Plays Othello and Hamlet*, Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2009, p. 6.

Polonius refers to her daughter as a “green girl”, not believing in her independent judgment. Although Ophelia has feelings for Hamlet, she takes her father’s words as the truth and is only able to comply, saying “I shall obey, my lord.” Moreover, after the “nunnery” scene with Hamlet and his harsh words against Ophelia and all women, she appears too pure and good for the world she has to live in and, when she goes mad, she creates a sort of disturbance for all the characters she faces and for the whole court. Ophelia, as innocent and pure as she is, is crushed by Lord Hamlet’s words and prays to “heavenly powers” to “restore him”¹³, as we can read in Act III, Scene I, verse 140. She mourns over her lover’s fall from excellence into madness, trying to find an explanation to what is happening around her. Her weak prayers provoke further insult from Hamlet’s side: he rejects her. Poor Ophelia is now dazed and helpless, she collapses and describes herself as “most deject and wretched”¹⁴ in Act III, Scene I, verse 154. After Hamlet exits, Claudius and Polonius enter and neither of them expresses a single word of concern to this desolated, young girl. As the play goes on, Ophelia has to face continuous humiliations from the male characters in the play. During the performance of “The Murder of Gonzago”, Hamlet chooses purposely to sit right next to her and addresses her as if she was a prostitute: his words are sarcastically cruel, full of crude sexual jokes¹⁵ (Act III, Scene II, vv. 108 - 110). The reaction of Ophelia here reinforces the idea we have of her from the very beginning of the play: she bows to Hamlet’s cruel jokes and sexual comments, she does not stand a chance of controlling him and, mainly, she does not make any attempts of preserving her dignity.

¹³ In William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2006, p. 291.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 292.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 304 – 305.

In the next scene, then, she has already gone insane: she is convinced she has been struck by the same illness that afflicted Hamlet. She is dishevelled and, speaking of double-edged sentences, her discourse bursts into snatches of songs:

OPHELIA
[...]
[*Sings.*]
White his shroud as the mountain snow –
[...]
OPHELIA (*Sings.*)
Larded all with sweet flowers
Which bewept to the ground did not go
With true-love showers.

(Act IV, Scene V, vv. 26 – 40; pp. 375 - 376)

She goes on singing her songs until the end of her life, especially about funeral rites and loss, and this behaviour leads other characters to think that she is expressing her deep grief for her father's death. Sara Ekici in her essay on the female characters in *Othello* and *Hamlet* writes that, paradoxically, it seems as if Ophelia were bringing into the "mad" world of Elsinore castle a certain sense of "normality", because in the end her madness has a real cause and because she tells ordinary stories in the songs she sings in front of the royal court: for example, in the song of St. Valentine's, she links madness with femininity. Ekici states that mental illness is a product of her female body and female nature, and this can be clearly seen in illustrations and pictures of Ophelia, where she is sharply defined within the conventions of female insanity by being dressed in white, wearing wild flowers, herbs and her hair down and scruffy while singing wistful and bawdy ballads.

The violation of decorum that is created by Ophelia, when she enters with dishevelled hair is at the same level as the one Hamlet displayed entering on the stage with disordered clothing. These conventions show certain aspects of femininity and

sexuality: the flowers Ophelia wears, for example, represent the contradictory double images of female sexuality, both innocent and slutty¹⁶. But, on one hand, she is the “green girl” of pastoral, the virginal “Rose of May”¹⁷ and, on the other hand, the sexually explicit mad woman that deflowers herself by giving away her wild flowers. Ending her life by drowning can also be associated with the female fluidity: the so-called “Ophelia complex”¹⁸ suggests a symbolic connection between woman, water and death. Ophelia’s death is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. The deep and organic symbol of the liquid woman who so easily breaks in tears is water, moreover the female body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid and milk.

Throughout the whole play, the character of Ophelia is permanently associated with flowers, fragile and transient. In her state of insanity, she is addressed to as the “sweet” and “pretty” girl that uses the language of flowers: in Elizabethan age, they were symbol of sexual innuendos. She voices frustration and hurt, as if she had been encouraged enough to express openly her feelings, especially her sorrow, and this is the reason why she has gone mad and has destroyed herself. The last moment of Ophelia, where she drowns, fits perfectly with her repressed and submitted character: every aspect of her is pretty and, in the same time, pathetic: with marvellous garlands, she steps into a stream and “mermaid-like they bore her up”.

¹⁶ In Sara Ekici, *Feminist Criticism: Female Characters in Shakespeare’s Plays Othello and Hamlet*, Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2009, p. 10.

¹⁷ This is a clear reference to the Virgin Mary.

¹⁸ In Elaine Showalter’s essay titled *Representing Ophelia: women, madness, and the responsibilities of feminist criticism* in Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman eds., *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 81.

2.2 Attempts of rewriting *Hamlet* in prose for children: the Lambs' "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark"

Among the various attempts of rewriting *Hamlet*, which have been brought into literature during the centuries, we cannot avoid to mention a really important Shakespearian adaptation, which can be collocated into the specific genre of narrative prose for children: *Tales from Shakespeare* was written in 1807 by Charles and Mary Lamb and it is a collection of twenty of William Shakespeare's best-known plays, adapted into stories. The aim of this work was to bring Shakespeare's stories to life, capturing the richness of his characters and imagery, guiding young readers through quite complex plots in a simple and easy manner.

At the beginning the Lambs wrote these tales to introduce children to the study of Shakespearean literature, with the aim of preparing them for when they grew up and it was time to learn about the complexities of life through the original plays. The authors wished children to be enriched by virtues of kindness, humanity, generosity, courtesy, and all those qualities that can be found within Shakespeare's plays, combined with fairy-tale magic, romance, tragedy or humorous elements¹⁹.

In *Tales from Shakespeare* it is possible to find heroes and villains, heroines and deceivers, kings, queens, fairies and magic: all the same ingredients that can be found in literature for children. The adapter's job can be considered a "surgical art"²⁰, since transposing drama into a narrative form means taking critical decisions about compression or expansion, and in Lamb the process of adapting from a dramatic mode has given interesting results.

¹⁹ These argumentations can be found in the Preface section in Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London, Puffin Books, 2010.

²⁰ Abbott's words quoted in Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, p. 19.

One of the innovations of the *Tales from Shakespeare* is the voice of the narrator²¹: as happens in fairy tales, it describes the characters and the meaning of action, avoiding in this way ambiguities and difficulties of understanding for the reader. A narrator can rearrange events, to simplify things for the young audience. Just from the beginning of the tale “Hamlet, Prince of Denmark”, we understand that everything is focused on Hamlet, who is considered as the unique protagonist. Ophelia, on the other hand, scarcely appears and seems marginal but the narrator traces an interesting profile: from his words and comments, we can have a clear idea of her attitude and relevance in Elsinore court. The narrator, introducing Ophelia to us, writes²²:

Before Hamlet fell into the melancholy way which has been related, he had dearly loved a fair maid called Ophelia, the daughter of Polonius, the king's chief counsellor in affairs of state.

Ophelia is a girl who lives in Elsinore castle and her father has an important place at the court. We don't know her age but we deduce that she is young and beautiful, “fair”. She is Hamlet's love and, not explicitly, she returns, in some sense, the same feelings. The narrator describes her as “good” and “gentle”, also in her way of excusing and in finding a cause to his rude and rough behaviours.

Submitted to powerful figures of control in their lives, Elizabethan women were not supposed to have free opinion in behaving toward men, and Ophelia is no exception:

[...] Ophelia dutifully showed to her father, and the old man thought himself bound to communicate it to the king and queen [...].

(p. 328)

²¹ In Laura Tosi, “I could a tale unfold...”: Adaptations of Shakespeare's Supernatural for Children, from *The Lambs to Marcia Williams*, in New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship, 15: 2, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 130.

²² All the quotations can be found in Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London, Puffin Books, 2010, from p. 327.

Another important quality of Ophelia is her sense of duty: the adverb used by the narrator indicates how much the girl is loyal and respectful of the contemporary conventions and of the good name of her family. The narrator, then, reports what the queen wished for Ophelia and her son, and through these words, we understand she is the mirror of the feminine canons of Elizabethan women:

[...] the good beauties of Ophelia might be the happy cause of his wildness, for so she hoped that her virtues might happily restore him to his accustomed way again, to both their honours.

(p. 328)

Even from the queen's opinion, Ophelia is described as beautiful and virtuous, from an Elizabethan point of view: women were expected to have all qualities, of gentle behaviours, and conscious of the role they are born for. Elizabethan women had to be a sort of saviour for her man, an anchor, and Ophelia could be the cure for Hamlet's illness.

The narrator does not focus on "The Murder of Gonzago"²³, and, differently from the original Shakespearian play, this part is described vaguely and marginally, so the over-the-top dialogue between Hamlet and lady Ophelia does not appear. We have the impression that she is really a secondary character, and, in effect, Ophelia appears again only at the end of the play, at the moment of her death. The narrator describes her funeral, reporting how other characters perceived her, and the cause of her death:

This was the funeral of the young and beautiful Ophelia, his once dear mistress. The wits of this young lady had begun to turn ever since her poor father's death²⁴. That he should die a violent death, and by the hands of the prince whom she loved, so affected this tender young maid, that in a little time she grew perfectly distracted, and would go about giving flowers

²³ Ibid. p. 331.

²⁴ This is a reference to the scene of the tragic murder of Polonius, released by Hamlet, as quoted in the text.

away to the ladies of the court, and saying that they were for her father's burial, singing songs about love and about death, and sometimes such as had no meaning at all, as if she had no memory of what happened to her.

(pp. 337 - 338)

She is described as young and beautiful once again, and the narrator reveals the real reason why she went mad: the violent death of Polonius, caused by Hamlet, shocked Ophelia in such a terrible way that she has reached the point of no return. The songs she sang in the Shakespearian play here in the tale are only referred to and, through a well-detailed description of the events, we learn the terrible circumstances by which poor Ophelia found death:

There was a willow which grew slanting over a brook, and reflected its leaves on the stream. To this brook she came one day when she was unwatched, with garlands she had been making, mixed up of daisies and nettles, flowers and weeds together, and clambering up to hang her garland upon the boughs of the willow, a bough brake, and precipitated this fair young maid, where her clothes bore her up for a while, during which she chanted scraps of old tunes, like one insensible to her own distress, or as if she were a creature natural to that element²⁵: but long it was not before her garments, heavy with the wet, pulled her in from her melodious singing to a muddy and miserable death.

(p. 338)

Differently from the original text, the queen is the last character who uses direct speech, giving the reader her impression of Ophelia, lamenting her death and misfortunate destiny:

Sweets to the sweet! I thought to have decked thy bride-bed, sweet maid, not to have strewed thy grave. Thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.

(p. 338)

²⁵ In the original play, the word used by the author is "mermaid", with a clear echo to mythology and magical elements.

This is the last memory of sweet and young Ophelia, an innocent victim of other characters' actions and behaviours.

But there is another interesting element in these tales: their moral and pedagogical purpose. Even if it is implicit, this aspect can be easily found also here in this specific tale: the passage reported invites the reader to forgive and be indulgent towards our parents:

And though the faults of parents are to be tenderly treated by their children, yet in the case of great crimes the son may have leave to speak even to his own mother with some harshness, so as that harshness is meant for her good, and to turn her from her wicked ways, and not done for the purpose of upbraiding.

(p. 334)

In the light of giving educational advice, the *Tales from Shakespeare* were written for children who, according to Charles Lamb, had access mainly to religious and moral tracts, which were common during the period when these tales were written²⁶. The Lambs loved Shakespeare and wanted to share their passion.

Moreover, adapters of Shakespeare are always very sensitive to the problem of language²⁷, which can make the comprehension of Shakespearian works more difficult. The author Leon Garfield in one of his essays believes in using the direct speech wherever possible and combining it with a narration that should encourage the reading process²⁸. The Lambs wrote these words in the *Preface* to the *Tales from Shakespeare*²⁹:

²⁶ In Naomi Miller, *Reimagining Shakespeare for Children and Young Adults*, New York, Routledge, 2003, p. 31.

²⁷ In Laura Tosi, "I could a tale unfold...": *Adaptations of Shakespeare's Supernatural for Children, from The Lambs to Marcia Williams*, in *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 15: 2, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 130.

²⁸ Ivi. Garfield's words are quoted by Tosi in her article, with a reference to his attempt of rewriting Shakespeare without being archaic.

²⁹ In Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London, Puffin Books, 2010, p. xi.

[...] diligent care has been taken to select such words³⁰ as might least interrupt the effect of the beautiful English tongue in which he wrote: therefore, words introduced into our language since his time have been as far as possible avoided.

The authors have tried to recreate the same effect in Shakespearian language. In the tales taken from Shakespearian tragedies, Shakespeare's own words, with little alteration, recur very frequently in the narrative as well as in the dialogue. In the attempt of giving as much of the Bard's own language as possible, and letting young readers understand the tales even if not so familiar with dramatic form of writing and, at the same time, Shakespearian works, the Lambs language is rich in repetitions and simple expressions. In effect, it is possible to notice a widespread usage of the same adjectives (good, fair, young), very common verbs (know, think, say) and really plain sentence structures, to avoid misunderstandings or difficulties. Since children are more familiar with the style and conventions of narrative than drama, prose retellings should be more easily understood and more appealing to young readers. The Lambs described their work as a kind of lure that would foster a child's interest for drama and tempt children to go back to the originals.

Reprinted more than thirty times during the nineteenth century, the *Tales from Shakespeare* has become a milestone in literature for children and it is frequently used to introduce Shakespeare not only in English-speaking countries, but also in translation³¹. These tales, like many nineteenth century versions, were intended mainly for young girls, since boys usually were, as the Lambs themselves explained in their introduction³²:

³⁰ This is a reference to the original language used by The Bard in his works.

³¹ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare: reinventing the Bard in young adult literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, p. 3.

³² In Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London, Puffin Books, 2010, p. XIII.

[...] permitted the use of their father's libraries at a much earlier age than girls are [...] and, therefore, instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand [...].

In her book *Shakespeare in Children's Literature, Gender and Cultural Capital*, Erica Hateley states that, in the period the Lambs wrote their tales, Shakespeare was the figure of ideal authorship, and the child became the figure of ideal readership as a result of a connection between innocence and the natural. The role of the child, considered as the possible embodiment of Romanticism, was an issue as heavily debated as authorship. In the eighteenth century debate on juvenile development, which consolidated constructions of childhood as a category of individual and social evolution, the concepts of *tabula rasa* by John Locke and the natural education theorized by Jean Jacques Rousseau were in opposition. Although the two philosophers really differed in their points of view, their mutual interest in the child as reader offered an interesting argument of reflexion for the Romantics.

Moreover, for Hateley, Locke, with his idea of combining education and entertainment for children, can be identified as a key precursor of dominant understandings of children's literature today. In his *Emile*, Rousseau identified instinctual feeling and sensory experience as the foundations of valuable childhood, suggesting indeed that the child ought to learn only from experience. Within a framework of "instinctive" and "natural education", and Rousseau considered childhood as a time where any outside/adult influence is potentially damaging to the child, and such influence necessarily includes fictional narratives. Among the followers of Rousseau's point of view, who were also proponents of a literature for children, Hateley mentions Charles

Lamb, and adds that Romantics, in the promulgation of a model of childhood between Locke and Rousseau, located the “reading counterpart”³³.

Thus, if the implication of Shakespeare in the construction of Romantic authorship, and the relationship between author and child reader, formed the Romantic aesthetic, which serves as a model for writings for children, for Hateley it is surprising that only the Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* and the Bowdlers’ *The Family Shakespeare*, both published in 1807, have emerged in the early nineteenth century. Moreover, she states that they are crucial to understand contemporary Shakespeare for children, and they reveal the gendered goals of adaptation discussed in the previous chapter and that have been inherited as part of this new genre. Both these texts speak simultaneously to the power and limitations of Romantic ideologies, and they reify the Romantic faith in the author and the reader we discussed above. Moreover, Hateley writes that they also represent the extent to which these are constructed discourses³⁴. Even as they inculcate Shakespeare as cultural authority, they both reveal that this aspect needs to be inculcated. Ideally, the author suggests that the child could be given the Shakespearian text “as it is”, and draw from it the great importance attributed to The Bard during the centuries.

However, the Romantic idea of Shakespeare implicitly acknowledges that the text is open to any number of interpretations: in the Lambs’ preface, faith in Shakespeare’s value, as both cultural and moral authority, is linked with the possibility of inculcating these values in children through reading and assimilation³⁵. The Lambs, in the end of the *Preface to Tales from Shakespeare*, conclude the introduction to their work with

³³ In Erica Hateley, *Shakespeare in Children’s Literature: gender and cultural capital*, New York, Routledge, 2009, pp. 24 – 25.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 26.

³⁵ Ivi.

the following words, recognizing the huge value of Shakespearian plays and specifying the purpose of these tales³⁶, which have been writes especially for children of the nineteenth century:

What these Tales shall have been to the young readers, that and much more it is the writers' wish that the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to them in older years – enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity: for of examples, teaching these virtues, his pages are full.

2.3 “Ophelia: The Rose of Elsinore”

The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines was written in 1852 and, in a brief presentation of the book, the author described the motivation behind her work. Through the words reported in the passage it is possible to understand the purpose of Mary Cowden Clarke when she decided to write her collection of tales:

[...] to imagine the possible circumstances and influences of scene, event, and associate, surrounding the infant life of his heroines, which might have conduced to originate and foster those germs of character recognized in their maturity as by him developed; to conjecture what might have been the first imperfect dawning of that which he has shown us in the meridian blaze of perfection.

In the eighteenth century children's literature rose in the expanding book market, but the nineteenth century added the increased importance of Shakespeare as required reading for children³⁷. Gary Taylor wrote that, in the attempt of letting middle-class children acquire knowledge about Shakespeare, the Bard was transformed into a children's author. At the same time, young ladies were to be preserved from the

³⁶ In Charles and Mary Lamb, *Tales from Shakespeare*, London, Puffin Books, 2010, p. XIV.

³⁷ In Laura Tosi, “I could a tale unfold...”: Adaptations of Shakespeare's Supernatural for Children, from The Lambs to Marcia Williams, *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 15: 2, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 135.

harshness of some language and scenes used by Shakespeare. Mothers and daughters are the protagonists of the fifteen novellas dedicated to the description of the childhood and teenage years of Shakespeare's heroines, a sort of prequels which are meant to explain how female characters have grown and developed into the effective characters as the original Shakespearian text³⁸. The tales are rich in detail, with both new and familiar characters and episodes: these tales can be considered an important part of the tradition of character criticism of Shakespeare's heroines, a kind of study that had become prominent in the nineteenth century.

Cowden Clarke wrote her novellas after having been a Shakespeare's editor and philologist and believed that the task of *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* was to speculate on what may have happened to the heroines before they appear in the play. Laura Tosi writes that the heroines come to terms with serious childhood traumas caused by bereavement, parental neglect, dysfunctional families and, even in the case of Ophelia, the threat of a child molester. She describes these tales as "double-edged cautionary tales", because on one hand they praise and reinforce traditional notions of femininity, while, on the other, they point out the dangers these girls must identify and from which they must escape³⁹.

Ophelia's story, *Ophelia: the Rose of Elsinore*, starts with abandonment: her mother leaves the little daughter in the care of her old nurse's family, in order to promote Polonius's political ambitions in Paris. The figure of Jutha is very interesting: she is the adolescent daughter of a peasant couple, takes care of young Ophelia and protects her from the insistent attentions of an idiot brother, Ulf. He is a "hairy loutish boy", who likes to torture flies, eat songbirds and rip the petals off roses. He is always very

³⁸ Ibid. p. 136.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 137.

eager to give little Ophelia “bear-hugs”. Ophelia is repeatedly cornered by him as she grows up: once she escapes the hug by hitting him with a branch of wild rose, another time, he sneaks into her bedroom “to obtain the hug he had promised himself”, but just as he bends over her trembling body, Ophelia is saved by the reappearance of her real mother. Jutha, on the other hand, falls in love with Lord Eric, but in the end he abandons her and the girl is found dead by Ophelia. Some time later, back at the court, Ophelia relives the same experience when she finds the lifeless body of her friend Thyra, who hanged herself after being seduced and dismissed by the evil seducer Lord Eric. On both occasions, Ophelia hardly recovers from these traumatic events, which foreshadow her own story of yielding to passion and rejection by a socially superior lover. She breaks down with brain fever – a staple mental illness of Victorian fiction – and has prophetic hallucinations of a brook beneath willow trees where something bad will happen. The warnings of Polonius and Laertes have little to add to this history of female sexual traumas⁴⁰. Just from the very beginning of the tale, it is clear from which point of view the story is told: those “violet eyes” are the reader’s guide through the events that affected Ophelia’s life before the original Shakespearian play⁴¹.

Mary Cowden Clarke’s novellas and subsequent novels based on Shakespearian character novels offer their readers an insight into Shakespeare’s characters, usually through first person or limited third-person narration. Following Cowden Clarke’s lead, recent writers have often used Shakespearian novels or rewritings to explain the

⁴⁰ In Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 87 – 88.

⁴¹ All the quotations can be found in Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines, In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009, from pp. 183 – 184.

interior psychological motives of particular characters⁴². Here is an example of Cowden Clarke's characterization⁴³ of Ophelia:

Among these rough cottage people, more and more did the child feel herself alone and apart. Her shyness and sparing speech grew upon her. She was not unhappy; but she became grave, strangely quiet and reserved for a little creature of her years, and so confirmed in her habit of silence, that she might almost have passed for dumb. She might be said to feel her uncongenial position without understanding it; she did not comprehend what made her serious, but she was rarely disposed to cheerfulness; she did not know why she was disinclined to talk, but she seldom met with any inducement to open her lips, and insensibly she kept them closed. With her sweet, earnest eyes, her placid though unsmiling countenance, and her still demeanour, she had a look of reflection, - of pensiveness, that better becomes womanhood grown, than childhood.

The interesting point of the narrative structure is the use of prophetic dreams and actions, which haunt Ophelia's mind and anticipate the development and the ending of the story. While the reader is warned of the dangers Victorian girls might have to face in their teenage life, Ophelia gives the impression of not having learnt the lesson from her "doubles", who clearly have not paid attention to the value of prudence in their relationships with men⁴⁴. The first dream reported is the one referred to Jutha's death:

That night, Ophelia lay awake [...] Botilda, after sharing her bed for many nights, thinking that the child had by this time recovered the late shock, had left her, to return to her room, after seeing her softly drop off into her first sleep. But from this, the little girl had suddenly started, broad awake, trembling and agitated, with a frightful dream she had been dreaming; of digging down into Jutha's grave, with a mad

⁴² In Robert Shaughnessy, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.116.

⁴³ In Mary Cowden Clarke, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines, In a Series of Fifteen Tales, Volume 2*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 205.

⁴⁴ In Laura Tosi, "I could a tale unfold...": Adaptations of Shakespeare's Supernatural for Children, from *The Lambs to Marcia Williams*, in *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 15: 2, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 138.

desire to look upon her face once more, - of finding it, only to see it change into that of Ulf; who, raising himself from the coffin, groped among the mould, and drew forth a little baby's white arm, which he fell to scratching and marring with briars. The horror of the sight, awoke her; she struggled into a sitting posture, stared through the dim space, and found herself alone in that dreary room.

(p. 217)

Ophelia's heightened sensibility and childhood experiences make her the ideal receptacle of words like those of Laertes: "be wary then, best safety in fear".

Fear indeed is her hallmark, the way she "answers" to the threatening, frightening and violent world of Elsinore, a world that communicates with her through hallucinations and nightmares, where the Old King doesn't tell anything about his death but reveals what will happen to Ophelia. Shocked by the suicide of her friend Thyra, Ophelia falls into convulsions, at times "wandering in delirium", at times "sunk into a heavy stupor". She imagines the King of Denmark dead, then her friend alive and, at the end of her hallucinations, another ethereal being swims into her ken⁴⁵. This is the third dream of a long series of tormented sleeps and, in this one, it is quite clear the resemblance with the original Shakespearian text, an echo from the well-known masterpiece:

Then I saw one approach, whose face I could not see, and whose figure I knew not. She was clothed in white, all hung about with weeds and wild flowers; and from among them stuck ends of straw, that the shadowy hands seemed to pluck and spurn at ... [T]hen the white figure moved on, impelled towards the water, I saw her glide on, floating upon its surface; I saw her dimly, among the silver-leaved branches of the drooping willow, as they waved around and above her, up-buoyed by her spreading white garments.

(pp. 249 – 250)

⁴⁵ In Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 19.

It may seem an odd anticipation of her own death that will happen in Shakespeare's play. But, in the context of this specific history, it can be read like a script for Pre-Raphaelite pictorialism⁴⁶. The details given by Cowden Clarke, in effect, remind the reader of Millais's or Dante Gabriele Rossetti's portrait of the image of Ophelia.

Mary Cowden Clarke, in effect, uses the floral elements, also in the name of this tale, which is titled "*Ophelia; The Rose of Elsinore*". The flowers are constantly incorporated in the text; at key moments, they link the character to rosebuds, emblems of virginity. Her Ophelia effectively beats off an assailant Ulf with a branch of thorny rosebuds, as though virginity itself had some defensive power:

He leaned down over her. The hot breath reached her face; like the rank fumes of a charcoal-furnace, it seemed to stifle her with its tainted oppression. She struggled and woke, to find that loathly visage hanging just above hers. Instinctively, to ward off its fearful approach, she clutched at the nearest thing at hand. It was the branch of wild-rose, which, beside its scarlet berries, was thickly studded with thorns; and this she thrust with all her force against the impending face.

(p. 216)

Clarke's Ophelia is beautiful, inquisitive, easily enraptured and almost equally easily frightened. But nothing in this tale is quite as brilliant, or as weird, as the episode toward its close, when Ophelia sickens with a fever and has visions of the dead:

The shock she had received, produced a severe illness. [...] "Is the king dead?" "I trust not, dear one." [...] "Methought I saw him, dead;" said Ophelia, [...] "[...] He pointed to them, as each appeared." "Of whom do you speak, dear child?" "Of those figures – those women. [...] It was Jutha, mother." [...] "It became the distinct semblance of the king [...] set in death." [...] "But there were two others, I saw. One was my poor Thyrea. [...] But she faded out of my ken, also, as the mailed figure again stretched forth his pointing hand. The wind sighed amid the reeds. The heads of nettles and long-purples were stirred by the night breeze, as it swept on mournfully. The air seemed laden with heavy sabbings. Then I saw one

⁴⁶ Ivi.

approach, whose face I could not see, and whose figure I knew not.

(pp. 248 - 249)

In Cowden Clarke's tales, heroines are idealized, even if they are compatible with realistic and insightful portrayals, set in specific places and periods of time, to contextualize in the better way their stories. Moving Ophelia's character, and all the other heroines of *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, from the margins to the center, inevitably changes the perception of their figure in the original play⁴⁷. Cowden Clarke's work is primarily addressed to a sisterhood of girl readers and grants marginalized or even victimized female characters the possibility of an extra-textual life that explains their choices and makes them fuller and more valuable figures.

Clarke works from the premise that children most enjoy stories about people their own age. Instead of rewriting Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies with their adult protagonists, she imagines what the childhood of Shakespearian characters, especially heroines, might have been like. All her tales include vivid, and often melodramatic, foreshadowings of the Shakespearean plays⁴⁸. In her editing, Cowden Clarke did not deepen the original Shakespearian text, because she believes The Bard to be the girl's moral preceptor⁴⁹, concept which appears in Miller's book. In an article appeared in 1887, Cowden Clarke clarifies her point of view:

To the young girl, emerging from childhood and taking her first step into the more active and self-dependent career of woman-life, Shakespeare's vital precepts and models render him essentially a helping friend.

⁴⁷ In Laura Tosi, "I could a tale unfold...": Adaptations of Shakespeare's Supernatural for Children, from *The Lambs to Marcia Williams*, in New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship, 15: 2, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 139.

⁴⁸ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare: reinventing the Bard in young adult literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, p. 4.

⁴⁹ In Naomi J. Miller, *Reimagining Shakespeare for Children and Young Adults*, New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 109-110.

Girls of that period were encouraged to read Shakespearian texts as a way of improving the mind, and, at the same time, they were also provided with essays and books about Shakespeare's heroines as a way of helping their own characters to grow.

3.

Rewriting Ophelia: contemporary rewritings of *Hamlet*

3.1 *Ophelia*: her early life

The character of Ophelia has been reconsidered and examined widely in these last few years and Young Adult Literature has been hit by a new trend: adaptations and/or appropriations of the well-known Shakespearian play *Hamlet* with the clear intent of revising Ophelia's character or/and her story. In the rewritings of this masterpiece, the reader can notice how Ophelia has been refashioned: sometimes starting from her childhood, sometimes just from some months or years before the events Shakespeare represented in his work.

Generally, in this process Ophelia has become the real protagonist and, in some cases, the predominant narrative voice who tells the story. In this paragraph we are taking into consideration three books that can be classified as prequels of *Hamlet*'s story: *Ophelia*¹ by Jeremy Trafford, *Dating Hamlet*² by Lisa Fiedler and *Ophelia*³ by Lisa Klein.

For what concerns the choice of the narrator of the events, it is interesting how the three writers we have mentioned above have decided to rewrite the story of Ophelia and what has happened to her.

In Trafford's *Ophelia*, the author has tried to guess what could have happened before the events of the play, telling the story from an external point of view, which describes the events and comments on the events in the plot. Sometime this narrator

¹ Jeremy Trafford, *Ophelia*, Thirsk, House of Stratus, 2001.

² Lisa Fiedler, *Dating Hamlet*, London, CollinsFlamingo, 2003.

³ Lisa Klein, *Ophelia*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006.

tries to report the feelings and thoughts of the characters, building up the story with lots of descriptions, leading the reader through the meanders of Elsinore castle and its complex life and balance between power and lust, love and obsession, treachery and betrayal, murder and justice. The key role of this character becomes thus to depict and describe what is going on in each character's mind. Consequently, the whole book is built up with the flowing of the characters' thoughts, intentions, desires and plans. Thanks to this particular appropriation, the reader can obtain a new point of view, Ophelia's one, of what could have happened before the original Shakespearian play and what motivations were hidden behind the choices and actions of the main figures of *Hamlet*.

Trafford explained that he explicitly wanted to give another chance to the character of Ophelia: looking through this character and in understanding what moved Shakespearian characters in their actions or behaviours, in an interview⁴ and also in the *Author's Note*⁵ to his novel, the author states:

People generally blindly accept what is written down. They don't question Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia, which is actually very sketchy. She goes mad in the play. But why? What has led her to this point? Shakespeare gives us no real insight into her character and one of the purposes of my book is to fill in the blanks.

[...] Believing Hamlet's love affair with Ophelia to be in ruins by the time the play commences, I tried to conceive of what once it might have been – to Ophelia especially. I found myself imagining her feelings for her father, which must have been intense for her to be driven to madness by his death, and [...], by her father's anguished protective love for her.

⁴ In an interview reported in www.gaylondonwriters.com website, at the following link: http://www.geocities.ws/gaylondonwriters/jeremy_interview.html.

⁵ In the Preface part of Jeremy Trafford, *Ophelia*, Thirsk, House of Stratus, 2001.

In Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet*, Ophelia has become the real protagonist of *Hamlet*'s story and, while she tells her story, she gives lots of descriptions and considerations, giving commentaries on the other characters in the novel.

Ophelia's story parallels many of the plot situations in the Shakespearian play⁶: Prince Hamlet learns about his father's death from the ghost of his father on the ramparts and Horatio, his best friend, witnesses the ghost and agrees to help Hamlet in seeking revenge for his father. What is new in the story is that Ophelia and Hamlet share madness, and she is not distant or strange as in the original play. In the Shakespearian tragedy, Hamlet insults her and frightens her so that she is confused and, due to desperation and sorrow, she goes mad, drowning then in the river.

In *Dating Hamlet*, the two protagonists, Hamlet and Ophelia, are very much in love, but they can show their affection for each other only in private. In the Shakespearian text, the relationship is not explored.

Ophelia is the character who describes events and her love story with Hamlet. She tells the story in first person narration, giving details of her life, her feelings and the relationship with the young prince⁷:

My thoughts settle on Hamlet. Prince of Denmark. [...] Since his return, we have whispered gentle promises and sworn upon our very souls that we, indeed, are meant to spend eternity in each other's arms. [...] He speaks of making me his wife, and I am told that the Queen finds favour in this.

The same happens in Klein's *Ophelia*, so the reader can see that the story is from young Ophelia's point of view and the author joins Ophelia in trying to free her life from the male power in her life.

⁶ In Sarah K. Herz and Donald R. Gallo, *From Hinton to Hamlet: building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 50.

⁷ In Lisa Fiedler, *Dating Hamlet*, London, CollinsFlamingo, 2003, from p. 5 to p. 7.

Klein creates an Ophelia who can read and write, a girl who loves and, most of all, marries a man she knows is above her station. She is smart enough to realize when her life is in danger and when she must leave to save herself.

Lisa Klein's great interest and admiration for Shakespeare and his works were the motives that moved Lisa Klein to write her first novel in 2006⁸. When she was asked how she came to decide to rewrite *Hamlet*, she answered:

I wrote my doctoral dissertation and my first book on Elizabethan poetry [...] and taught Renaissance literature to college students for several years. So while I wasn't trained as a Shakespearean scholar, Shakespeare goes with the territory.

Her field of study, in effect, was not only Shakespearian literature, but also the Elizabethan period, the lives and works of Renaissance women and the way sixteenth-century people experienced the world.

Moreover, when she was asked why she chose Ophelia as subject of her retelling, she replied⁹:

Whenever I taught Hamlet I found that students shared my disappointment that Shakespeare's Ophelia is such a passive character. [...] I think he missed an opportunity to deepen Hamlet's conflict by enhancing his relationship with Ophelia. [...] Well, if Ophelia was so dim, what on earth made Hamlet fall in love with her? How would the play have been different if she had not drowned? If Ophelia could tell her own story, how would it differ from Shakespeare's version? These were the kinds of questions that started me thinking. They just wouldn't let go, so I began writing.

These aspects have been noticed also by other writers, but Klein wanted to "renew" Ophelia, giving her a "second chance".

⁸ In *A Conversation with Lisa Klein*, in her personal webpage <http://www.authorlisaklein.com>.

⁹ Ivi.

At the beginning, the character of Ophelia lives free from society constrictions and conventions, but then we follow her during the changes in her life and social position. When she enters the court, the queen notices Ophelia's qualities and invites her to join her ladies-in-waiting. Here Ophelia receives some female guidance and learns to be a proper lady. The first meeting, in effect, changes definitely her life forever¹⁰:

Someone must have spoken to my father about my unruly ways. Soon after my incident at the brook¹¹, he gave me a new satin dress and horn combs for my hair. With fingers unused to such tasks, he untangled my hair and brushed it until my head ached. Then he instructed me to follow him while he attended the king and to curtsy and nod in the presence of Queen Gertrude, but never to speak.

[...] Indeed Gertrude was so grand and beautiful that I was afraid to look at her, even when she touched my curls and asked my name.

"She is Ophelia, my daughter and my treasure, the exact copy and very picture of her departed and lamented mother," said my father grandly, before I could open my mouth.

Gertrude lifted my chin and I looked up into eyes that were deep and grey and full of mystery.

[...] With Queen Gertrude's words of approval my fortunes changed, and I became a member of her household. A servant was sent that very day to fetch my small trunk. My father smiled to himself and hummed, pleased for his own sake.

Through Klein's descriptions of Ophelia's daily routine in Elsinore castle, the reader learns that the girl has to conform to the conventions of that time, even if she loves having access to books. When the queen finds out how well educated she is, she becomes one of the queen's favourites, and spends hours reading aloud to her and sharing discussions¹²:

The answer soon came to me. When the queen learned that I had been schooled in Latin and French, she bade me read aloud as she and her ladies worked on their embroidery. One

¹⁰ In Lisa Klein, *Ophelia*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006, pp. 24 – 25.

¹¹ The episode in which Edmund, an evil boy, tries to harm Ophelia while she is swimming in the brook and Hamlet, luckily, saves her life.

¹² Ibid. p. 40.

of Gertrude's favourite books was *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, which, she told us, was written by Margaret, the queen of Navarre in France. Reading aloud and translating as I read, I was glad to exercise my mind and tongue again. Though I still performed my lowly duties, I dared to hope that my status at court was improving.

One of the main themes in this novel is the power of words. In effect, Ophelia uses words to win favour from people: she can read and write as well as the men around her. Her ability gives her the power to participate in Prince Hamlet's wit and to become a favourite of the Queen by reading to her. Otherwise, her main power and skill comes not only from this talent, but also from her capacity to learn fast and use natural medicaments and drugs.

In Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet*, Ophelia, similarly to Klein's character, is smart and active, and so she can understand how dangerous the situation around her is and Claudius's plan of getting power. She is an expert in herbal potions and properties, and, with her knowledge, she can help Hamlet in his purpose of revenge, giving him a poisonous philtre to kill Hamlet's uncle. She fakes madness and fakes drowning in a river, with an impressive talent in acting: starting from the deep grief caused by the death of Polonius, who is not her real father in this novel, she begins simulating to suffer from a feeble-mind. Her plan works perfectly and through her narration we learn she is really in love with Hamlet and concentrated on helping him.

But Ophelia is also a sensitive girl, who loves her family, and the author gives her this complexity and duality, which can be seen in various descriptions like the one we report here¹³:

He is very like our mother, Laertes is. Kind and beautiful and wise. Laertes loves me – I know this to be true. He is as no brother ever was – devoted, concerned, sometimes a nuisance,

¹³ In Lisa Fiedler, *Dating Hamlet*, London, CollinsFlamingo, 2003, pp. 26 – 27.

but always a dear friend. He worries after me, which I have never quite understood but always liked.

Laertes used to fret over such things as me falling from horses, or developing rashes from too close contact with my flowers (which he teasingly calls weeds). His worry has taken a new turn of late – and Hamlet, having made his affection for me known, is at the root of it. Laertes' worry increases with the blossoming of my womanly figure! It is funny and he is dear.

This new Ophelia is also a character that interacts with other figures during the story, even if it is reinvented and manipulated. The relationships with the Queen's character, which is included in all the three novels we are analysing, is more interesting in Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet*, in which we have a changing and a deeper study of the relationships between Ophelia and this figure.

The Queen is presented through different memories, in which her attitude is compared to what it was before King Hamlet's death¹⁴ and how it changed now after the tragic event:

The Queen! Oh, how I once loved her. When married to King Hamlet, she was a proud and gentle presence. In truth, I thought Gertrude much like my own mother – a beauty with playful spirit and fertile mind. But now I see she has misplaced her loveliness. She has the same bright-cobalt blue eyes as my Hamlet, and her smiling lips are petal-toned, also like his. But to me, today, she is cold and colourless – even as she doth blush warmly beneath her husband's touch.

Differently from the original play, one night Ophelia and her servant Ann, a character quite similar to those female helping figures that appear in Cowden Clarke's reinterpretation of the Shakespearian play¹⁵, observe the scene of the ghost of Hamlet's father on the ramparts talking to his son, and Ophelia tells the young Prince everything. When his father's ghost appears to Hamlet that night, he tells his son that

¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 27 – 28.

¹⁵ See the analysis in chapter 2, specifically for what concerns Cowden Clarke's collections of tales.

Claudius had poisoned him. He is shocked and, thus, he plots revenge: he and Ophelia simulate madness in order to trick his uncle and Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. The interesting point is that it is Ophelia who gives Hamlet the idea of seeking revenge and how to succeed in his plan. The words reported give the reader a very different image of Ophelia, totally in contrast with the Shakespearian character¹⁶:

[...] “Damn his soul to hell! Damn Claudius, who killed Hamlet! Damn him!” I reach for something else – a book – and fling it against the wall. “Damn his eyes, and his vile heart, and his nose, and each one of his gnarled teeth, and damn every last follicle of hair on his body!” [...]

“Claudius took your father’s life with poison.”

“So you wish to punish him in kind?”

“Don’t you?”

He stares at me, then mutters ‘neath his breath, [...] “Forgive me, love, I am confused. You denounce revenge e’en as you hand me fresh poison. How am I to reconcile this?”

“Please do not look so amazed, my lord. I despise the custom of vengeance, aye, but am willing to support you if you seek it. [...] I will not stand by and see thee suffer!”

Here, we have a firm and straight young woman, very different and distant from what the Shakespearian play has given us through the centuries. Ophelia is a woman who can convince men of doing and planning actions that can affect their life forever.

Another interesting point in Fiedler’s book, regarding the presence of ghosts, is that Ophelia’s mother appears as a ghost, too.

Her mother, as shown in the quote below, was always good to her and Ophelia has really good memories of her. But there is always something that does not completely make sense in her life, maybe a more important open question than helping Hamlet in his revenge, which needs to be solved. Her father forbids her to see, talk and smile to Hamlet and this sounds too tough and illogic for young Ophelia, so she disobeys him.

¹⁶ In Lisa Fiedler, *Dating Hamlet*, London, CollinsFlamingo, 2003, from p. 45 to p. 47.

Polonius is not her real father and the part of the novel in which Ophelia's mother's ghost appears¹⁷ is really interesting and intriguing:

Through the smoke,
Throught the sparkling stream,
To my mother.
My mother. Who speaks.
[...]
"Child. Daughter. Woman. You are all of these, and lovely at each." [...]
"Hear me, dear one. Listen wll. Though I fear what follows may cut as certainly as it cures, I must impart to you a truth – I pray you will find comfort in't, even as I know it will stun thee."
[...]
"He is not your."
[...]
"You are not his."
[...]
The ghost replies in silence so profound I know there is only truth between us. O, in the name of all that is holy, I can scarce contain my relief?
Polonius.
Is.
Not.
My.
Father.
"Sweet, gracious ghost, tell me, please, shall I believe this?"
Her speech is moonbeams and lark song and stars. "If it heals thee, Ophelia, then, aye, believe it. If it brings thee greater pain, then believe it not – you need not take our secret beyond this mist. You may leave it here to vanish with this sleepy smoke.

An interesting theme, which represents a novelty both in plot and in the construction of a new Ophelia, regards sexuality: in all three novels, the authors introduce this aspect, probably in order to give their character more credibility and realism.

In *Dating Hamlet*, an episode in which sexuality can be clearly and explicitly noticed is when the guard Barnardo tries to rape Ophelia. She is frightened but her strength,

¹⁷ Ibid. from p. 12 to p. 14.

and mostly cleverness, is stronger than anything else, even than male physical power and lust¹⁸:

Barnardo pulls me round to face him; his hand slithers upwards to cup my breast. I near convulse at his touch, giving forth a shudder of true disgust. Again, he laughs, mistaking my repugnance for passion. [...]

Through a haze of rage, I glimpse the row of pots along my window ledge.

Inspiration!

At once, I effect an expression of utter coyness and will the fury from my voice to speak. "A drink, sir?"

"What?" Waylaid, Barnardo flinches, drawing back to study my eyes.

I lower my lashes. "You are true, good Barnardo. I confess, I have oft looked hungrily upon thee, thinking thoughts most intimate. You have discovered me, and now we are free to bring those thoughts to action."

[...] "A drink," I whisper. "A toast to us, together at last." I go up on tiptoe to place a small kiss upon his throat, ignoring the odious taste of his skin. His grip upon me falters; he clings lightly now, as I lead him to the ledge.

[...] "Wine and then some," [...]

"This night calls for something mystical, a secret nectar. Now pour the wine, sir, whilst I prepare the potion."

[...] "Drink, sir, and lustily." I stroke his cheek. "Though I am certain you need no assistance in romantic matters, I believe we both have much to gain from the gifts of this potion."

[...] Using the heat of all my hatred, I fold a fist and land it hard upon his jaw. He staggers backwards, the polluted wine sloshing from his cup. "That one is for me," I tell him. "And this—" with every ounce of strength I possess I direct my knee into the spot he described as south of his stomach "-is for Anne!"

In various passages of the book, the reader has the impression that the theme of sexuality in this novel is mainly linked to lust, uncontrollable desires and bad intentions, and considered as a dirty and sinful thing. On the contrary, in Trafford's *Ophelia*, the sexual dimension is also combined with love and analysed in both positive and negative aspects.

¹⁸ Ibid. from p. 95 to p. 98.

Just from the very beginning of this novel, we are introduced to a new aspect of the relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia, completely new compared to the original Shakespearian play. This aspect concerns a secret love and a sexual relationship between them. Their “first time” is narrated with plenty of details¹⁹:

[...] Her father was prone to speak of the treasure of her chastity, but if her being chaste damaged the Prince's love for her, then she saw it as a form of penury instead. [...] Yet his mounting excitement awakened no response at first. [...] He unloosed his clothes; she'd often imagined this happening, supposing it an act of solemn wonder, not this awkward fumbling that reduced her feeling further. Then he unloosed hers, with hands that shook as he did so. She didn't find it in any way exciting: it appeared an act of stealth, clumsy and rapacious, and she hated the involuntary shame that overtook her. Resolving to reject her shame, she determined now to give her body to him, hoping that in so doing, they would forge some potent bond that could survive his desolating absence. She longed that the experience would elevate their love, not demean it to the level of these graceless physicalities.

In Klein's novel, Horatio, Hamlet's trusted friend, is essential in helping them to hide their relation and Ophelia herself, gaining much more importance here in the novel than in the Shakespearian play, suggests that they should dress as poor peasants and meet away from the castle²⁰:

[...] It was my idea that we disguise ourselves as a rustic and a shepherdess, for the lovers in Gertrude's romances often did so. So I wore a linen smock and petticoat and, over them, a sleeveless bodice that laced below my breasts it was plain and comfortable, unlike my stiff and fashionable courtly dress, and it gave me an ease of movement that I relished. Hamlet found some loose breeches and a homespun tunic and covered his curls with a leather cap. I liked him all the better for his plain attire and the easy manner he put on with it. When we wore our simple disguises, few people gave us a second look. Holding hands, we strolled openly through the streets of the town. Then like country folk without any cares, we lay in the

¹⁹ In Jeremy Trafford, *Ophelia*, Thirsk, House of Stratus, 2001, p. 7-8.

²⁰ In Lisa Klein, *Ophelia*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006, pp. 67 - 68.

meadow, surrounded by tall grass and wove garlands of white daisies and purple columbines to crown each other.

They meet in the orchards, gardens and an abandoned cottage; they get married according to Christian traditional rites and they consummate the marriage. They live like husband and wife, putting aside their duties in Elsinore, and they try to have a normal relationship, as a couple and as a family, faking to live in a usual and canonical situation even if all their actions would have brought inevitable consequences.

During an interview, Trafford explained that his novel is a story of relationships, "most especially between Hamlet and Ophelia"²¹. But there are not only love relationships: the reader can follow the relationship between Hamlet and his father, between Ophelia and her father, between wife and husband and the author explicitly talks about²² the very special relationship between "Man and whatever people may think of as their idea of God". Perhaps the central focus of the novel is Ophelia's love for two people: a new character, Svendborg, who does not appear in the original Shakespearian play, and Prince Hamlet.

We cannot guess or learn what age Ophelia is in Trafford's novel, but probably she is already adolescent, maybe at the beginning of her "fertile" age as a woman. When Hamlet is away fighting the war against the Poles (a detail which has a sort of echo with Hamlet's staying in Wittenberg in the original Shakespearian play), Ophelia shows clearly her feminine nature, expressed through various aspects such as desires, feelings, and wishes²³:

²¹ In an interview reported in [www.gaylondonwriters.com](http://www.geocities.ws/gaylondonwriters/jeremy_interview.html) website, at the following link: http://www.geocities.ws/gaylondonwriters/jeremy_interview.html.

²² Ivi.

²³ In Jeremy Trafford, *Ophelia*, Thirsk, House of Stratus, 2001, p. 130.

Her love for Hamlet was her whole life, she thought, but as the day wore on and there was no news from the front, her daydream started playing tricks on her.

Ophelia's strange and odd feelings during Hamlet's absence lead her to perform an action that is going to change the girl forever. In Svendborg, she finds a sort of "replacement" for Hamlet and she yields to him. Her feelings are confused and illogical, driving Ophelia to a strange state of mind²⁴:

Ophelia touched his hand beneath the sheet, and he clasped her hand in return. She put her lips to his mouth and felt his breath slowly strengthen, becoming regular and even, and the idea that he would now recover filled her with an excitement that caused her guilt, though the guilt was qualified by the bizarre idea that it was through him that she was loving Hamlet. Hamlet was in battle, fighting for his life, and this young man had been fighting for survival and now at last was surely winning through. She had this terrifying fantasy of Hamlet lying broken in the battleground, the blood rippling through the bullet holes upon his naked torso. But with her hands she staunched his blood, she plugged the holes that leaked his life away, she held his twisting head and kissed his weeping panic-stricken eyes...

Svendborg seems to distract Ophelia from her love for Hamlet and, as is shown in the hunting passage in the book²⁵, this will have tragic consequences in the end. She makes the same mistake twice, and this can appear as an unbelievable thing for a person who declares herself in love, loyal and true to her unique lover. In effect, she seems to be acting toward Svendborg as if she were in a dream, and the episodes are told by narrator as distant memories²⁶:

[...] He knew he owed his life to this mysterious woman who seemed to have been with him now for days. And he

²⁴ Ibid. p. 133.

²⁵ In the passage Ophelia, Hamlet and old King Hamlet are hunting in the woods, and, when a deer is captured and killed, the girl is shocked and sad for the poor creature. Here Ophelia is represented as a delicate and gentle girl, full of pity for all the Creation and worried for each being she finds on her path.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 155.

remembered how in an interlude of his sickness she'd come and lain beside him in his bed.

She'd done this twice. He recalled her body in his arms – the hair across her face, her slender breasts, the delicate reserve of one arm gently held across her breasts. How strange the contrast of her boldness and her shyness: the unbelievable brazenness of her entering his bed and the innocence of her posture – with the awkward touchings of her hands as if at first she'd only wished to soothe the sores erupting on his skin.

On the other hand, Lisa Klein reinvents the story of young Ophelia from her birth in the year 1585 in the village of Elsinore. Her mother dies giving birth, and her father is distant and aloof, absent from their home for days. She and her brother Laertes grow up together sharing their youth: they swim in the river, explore in the forest and run in the streets with other children. Laertes becomes her playmate and protector²⁷:

Laertes was my constant companion and my only protector. After our lessons, we joined the children playing barley-break in the dusty streets and on the village green. [...] Once Laertes saved me from a dog that seized my leg in its teeth and raked my back with its claws. He beat the dog senseless and wiped the blood from me with his shirt while I clung to him in terror.

In Fiedler's novel, we have more details of this new Ophelia's story and the reader discovers that Ophelia and Laertes's father is the gravedigger, the one whose "singing" she can hear all day. When she knows the truth about her humble background, she can face her destiny and make her own choices without any kind of fears: losing prestige in the court, a position or connections.

The meeting between Ophelia and her real father is really interesting: for the reader this is a novelty, in contrast with the original Shakespearian play. Here, Ophelia learns

²⁷ In Lisa Klein, *Ophelia*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 9.

the truth about her origin and now she can count on a special friend, the gravedigger²⁸, in releasing Hamlet's revenge:

The gravedigger's eyes go distant and his voice is mild, musical. "We met just days after her father promised her to Polonius. I was, at that time, a travelling player, a minstrel, come to Elsinore with my troupe to entertain the good King Hamlet's court". He draws a quivering breath. "She was mayhap the age you are today. I loved heron an instant, and she swore the same feeling for me. But she could not disgrace her family by forsaking her betrothed. She despised him, but could not bring dishonour to her family by running off with a mere player."

"And so?"

"And so...when my fellows departed, I stayed behind, took up a pickaxe and commenced digging graves, only to be near her."

"An you were?"

"Of that," he says, with a playful pinch to my cheek, "you and your brother are the proof."

Quite differently from the Shakespearian play, here Ophelia is really close to her father and very heedful of what his thoughts are. Here Polonius is a caring father and does not appear as a simple man-of-the-Court, only interested in business and power.

In Fiedler's novel, Laertes, Ophelia's brother, is not Hamlet's enemy or an opponent to Hamlet and Ophelia's love: he participates in the revenge plot with the two protagonists of the book.

In the end, the new "endings" to Ophelia's story must be mentioned and they are a very interesting point in this analysis.

In Trafford's ending of the novel, the reader can see without any doubt that the narrator sympathises fully with Ophelia's nature and her sufferings, whereas Shakespeare, as reported by John Bayley in his review of this book²⁹, takes a liking to

²⁸ In Lisa Fiedler, *Dating Hamlet*, London, CollinsFlamingo, 2003, p. 90.

²⁹ In "Review of Ophelia" webpage in www.gaylondonwriters.com website, at the following link: http://www.geocities.ws/gaylondonwriters/ophelia_review.html.

Hamlet's troubles and "has no time to do more than a hint at such things during the swift onrush of the play's action". Unluckily, the novel has its own drama, too, as in the original Shakespearian play: we see Ophelia losing Hamlet's child by miscarriage, and running to meet him in hope of another baby. This is maybe the most tragic part of the novel, even sadder than King Hamlet's death. Trafford has a relevant talent in depicting human inner torments and the well-described psychology of his characters is a confirmation of such ability.

Peter Slater in his review³⁰ defines this novel as if it were the other missing half of the Shakespearian play: he says that this prequel makes real one of Shakespeare's most poorly drawn characters. In effect, in Shakespeare's play Ophelia is in love with Hamlet, but there are no love scenes between the two: we just have to take their relationship on trust; this book fills the gaps that the Bard "was too busy to write³¹". In contrast, Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* does not end in tragedy: evil is defeated, Ophelia and Hamlet can now be together and move to Verona to start a new life.

Hertz and Gallo conclude their analysis stating that, for setting, plot sequences and characters development, the novel is a good bridge to Shakespeare's tragedy³²: it includes also all the deceit Claudius and Polonius use to foil Hamlet, and there are allusions to Hamlet's soliloquies.

In Klein's novel, a book that can be considered a complete rewriting of the Shakespearian work, Ophelia decides that her existence is worth saving and she has to run away for her very life. In the place where she has found a shelter, she gives

³⁰ Ivi.

³¹ Ivi.

³² In Sarah K. Herz and Donald R. Gallo, *From Hinton to Hamlet: building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 51.

birth to Hamlet's heir, naming him Hamlet: the novel ends with Horatio finding Ophelia and the three watching the sun appearing brightly through the clouds³³:

I do not dream! I see the face of Lord Hamlet on this youth, overspread with Ophelia's beauty and her truth," he says in a tone of wonder. He steps closer and takes my hand in his. Still holding it, he kneels, putting himself eye to eye with young Hamlet, and bows as if offering allegiance to him.

My trusting boy smiles and reaches out to touch Horatio's red curls.

Defying the storm that threatened, the clouds that curtained the sun now pass, and we three survivors of a long-ago tragedy stand together in silence, beholding one another in the sun's light.

In the meantime, Claudius's intent is to remove any threat to his power, even killing someone, and the possibility of Ophelia's pregnancy is a problem, both for his thirst for power and a possible legacy of Prince Hamlet. So Ophelia, to save her life, fakes her madness and subsequently her death, thanks to Horatio's help. Also Queen Gertrude helps her in the best way she can, meeting the girl during an unexpected visit. In this way, Ophelia can escape and she finds a refuge in a convent in France. There, she serves as a healer for the sisters, helping out in the better way she can, using her knowledge in herbs and infusions. The final scene with Ophelia, her little child Hamlet and Horatio, who has succeeded in finding her, represents a sort of new dawn, a rebirth for this character put aside for so long by Shakespeare and critics but which has always maintained her mystery and charm.

3.2 And if Ophelia were a contemporary teenager?

Michelle Ray took inspiration for her novel *Falling for Hamlet* (2011) from her love for the original play and from a production of the Shakespearian masterpiece

³³ In Lisa Klein, *Ophelia*, London, Bloomsbury, 2006, p. 328.

performed by Washington's Shakespeare Theatre Company³⁴. The company performed a modern dressed version of *Hamlet* and, while watching the performance, the author noticed the unconventional approach to the play and started wondering, at the end of the show, if all that could make sense:

I loved that they were wearing jeans and sweatshirts and such, but they were doing all the lines of the original Shakespeare. As the play progressed, it became really clear that the themes of friendship, love, betrayal, jealousy and revenge made sense in any era. [...] What I didn't like about the production was Ophelia's madness and possible suicide. I couldn't figure out why a modern girl would go nuts and kill herself over a boy. [...] On my way to the subway after the show, I kept thinking about her and asking 'Why would she kill herself?' By the time I got to Silver Spring, the question had morphed into, 'What if she didn't?' Thus the story was born.

Falling for Hamlet is the Shakespearian story told from Ophelia's point of view, set in modern time. Ray is convinced that Ophelia directly speaking to the readers rather than to other characters shows how her character grows from experiences. About her choice, the author declared in an interview³⁵:

Ophelia needed a new ending, and I thought the best way to tell her story was in her own voice. Her attitude and way of speaking were quite strong in my mind from the beginning.

Michelle Ray would like to write more modernized stories than those she used to read at school during her lessons, but at the same time she wanted something based on Shakespeare's works and other classics:

I love modern twists on known stories, and love the challenge of transferring them to a different setting.

³⁴ In a review in <http://silverchips.mrhs.edu/story/11029> webpage.

³⁵ Ivi.

Ophelia, both here in Michelle Ray's novel as in the Shakespearian play, is the daughter of Polonius, who is the principal adviser to the King of Denmark, King Hamlet. Ophelia is in love with her prince, Hamlet, son of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude. She and the Prince have known each other since they were young and have been together, mostly, since she was fifteen. The relationship between the two young lovers is not always idyllic and, at the beginning of the novel, the reader can learn that they have just got back together, after Hamlet sampled the charms of the ladies at Wittenberg University, where he studies. At the moment, they seem to have mended fences and Ophelia is preparing for her senior year in Elsinore, far from her prince, who is coming back to university in Wittenberg, while their life is always in the media spotlight³⁶:

The next morning, he was set to leave. I was getting ready for our official public good-bye when Hamlet surprised me by coming to my apartment. My father was still home when Hamlet walked in. They shook hands, and my father wished him well. I was just about to be relieved that they hadn't irritated each other when my dad looked at his watch and said, "You two are expected downstairs in five minutes. People count the faults of those who keep them waiting."

Hamlet rolled his eyes as my father took his coffee into his study and shut the door.

The plot is mainly set in modern day Denmark, at Elsinore castle: Claudius, the king's envious brother, may have poisoned King Hamlet, and, probably to cover the tracks of the fact, Claudius and the king's widow, Gertrude, get married, a short time after the king's death. But Prince Hamlet is deeply convinced that Claudius has really killed his father and Ophelia, trying to help her young boyfriend, is consequently swept up in plots and counterplots in the royal court: this leads up to her betrayal of Hamlet, the death of her father and her own madness and imprisonment.

³⁶ In Michelle Ray, *Falling for Hamlet*, New York, Poppy, 2011. p. 36.

In effect, the whole story, and subsequent events, is told after the murder, by Ophelia, so there are obviously some major plot differences compared with the original Shakespearian play. The first difference is that each chapter is told in three different styles: the beginning is structured as an interview during an Oprah-like talk show, the middle part is the recollection of what really happened, and the ending is the police interview transcript. Thus, in some sense, the novel, and all the other books we have taken in exam, can also be read without having read the original play, as if it was a new literary product, distinctively recognizable apart from its original source or text in "first degree", using Genette's words.

In effect, the author uses a frame technique, with interviews opening and closing the chapters, to underline the method of spying and interrogation, and during these parts Ophelia always seems to appear as confused and powerless as in Shakespeare's version of the story. This Ophelia has a new point of view about life, and her conclusion that Cinderella life was never for her, is a modern analysis of her role and character.

But the biggest difference from the Shakespearian play is that in this new story Ophelia does not die: Michelle Ray, in effect, stated that she wanted to show teen girls a strong female protagonist. Ray's Ophelia is quite different from Shakespeare's character: she is an impressionable teenage girl and she is explicitly in love with Hamlet but, on the other hand, she always tries to do what she thinks is right, even if this means upsetting the Queen, King Claudius, her father and family. For this reason, we can argue with some reviews³⁷ of the book, which affirm that the novel is not plot-

³⁷ In a review in <http://bookemadventures.blogspot.it/2012/07/review-falling-for-hamlet.html> webpage.

driven, but character-driven: the star is Ophelia and she surely shines bright on her relationship with Hamlet, Polonius, the royal household and her friends.

Moreover, here in the novel, Ophelia is not only the “green” and beautiful girl at court, because she is so modern and up-to-date: similarly to Jeremy Trafford’s novel³⁸, this is the original girl story, about boys and love, romance and the way it sets the stage for sex. Ophelia’s sex life, described as exciting, fulfilling and part of an intensely intimate relationship, will be riveting, as it is the description of the night she loses her virginity³⁹:

I insisted, sitting down and facing him, my hands shaking. “I don’t want this day to be the day my mother was buried. I want to remember it as the day we first slept together, the day I lost my virginity.”

[...] “I want to do it, and I want to do it with you. I want to know what all the fuss is about, and I want my first time to be with someone I trust.”

[...] I was feeling a little frantic; I had to make him understand how important this was to me. I inched forward and clutched his leg. “I won’t want to undo anything. This is what I want.”

He was almost as nervous as I was, I think. He was shaking and stopped a few times to make sure I still wanted to go through with it. When he finally pushed himself inside me, I started to cry. I had to urge him to go on, and he looked so worried. It was overwhelming to be completely connected to someone and to have it come with such pain. All I could think about was my mother buried mere miles from where her baby was leaving behind the last of her childhood.

This description resembles Trafford’s scene of Ophelia losing her virginity, but here it is not described in full details. Here the atmosphere is more romantic, in some sense, it is an experience in which each female adolescent reader can identify herself.

Falling for Hamlet’s Ophelia reincarnates a strong-willed yet easily swayed girl and girlfriend, a senior in high school and the typical adolescent who loves to spend time

³⁸ Discussed in the previous paragraph.

³⁹ In Michelle Ray, *Falling for Hamlet*, New York, Poppy, 2011, pp. 187 – 188.

with her friends. She has a mobile phone, sends lots of text messages, has a social life and goes to lots of crazy parties. But readers cannot help noticing parallels between Ophelia and Hamlet's relationship and that of Kate Middleton and Prince William, while they were dating: the paparazzi, the tabloids and the media are all part of the game of celebrity. The author herself discusses the process behind the construction of the parallelism mentioned above⁴⁰:

In transferring *Hamlet* to now, I considered setting it in a place like Hollywood or the business world of New York. But I felt strongly that keeping Hamlet a prince was important because hanging over all the family drama is a fight for the crown. And in looking at gossip magazines, most specifically at Princess Diana's tabloid-bait sons, it occurred to me that the royals still make great press. In deciding to do this, I wondered what it would be like to be the nonroyal girlfriend of one of them, and to feel the pressure not only of everyone judging you so publicly, but of the prospect of becoming a queen.

In rewriting *Hamlet* in this modern version Michelle Ray faced some challenge, in the attempt to obtain a really interesting novel based on the worldwide well-known play⁴¹:

One challenge was that Ophelia is in just few scenes of *Hamlet*, so I had to think of ways for her to see, or at least hear about, the action. Technology helped. I also had Hamlet bring her with him to scenes she did not originally witness. *Hamlet* begins after the death of his father and remarriage of his mother, but I wanted readers to see what thinks were like before their world fell apart. I also added a life for Ophelia outside of the castle – an interest in art, attraction to other boys, and friends not afraid to comment on her behaviour or choices.

⁴⁰ In Author's note section in Michelle Ray, *Falling for Hamlet*. New York, Poppy, 2011, p. 2.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 3.

3.3 The dark side of Ophelia

Rebecca Reisert's novel depicts a quite problematic kind of Ophelia, with a strange and mysterious past and an even more complicated psychology. The novel *Ophelia's Revenge*⁴² has a complex plot that starts from Ophelia's birth, childhood and goes on with her adolescence. From the beginning of the story, her character is very peculiar and different from the others seen in the previous books we have analysed: her personality is strong, rough and untamed, and this is what helps her in escaping the hard events in Elsinore castle to save her life. Reisert tells the story from Ophelia's point of view, adding many extra details that cannot be found in the original *Hamlet*: the author has rewritten the Claudius figure as a sweet middle-aged lover, queen Gertrude has become a victim of King Hamlet's obsession for power, and Hamlet has become a lunatic and a depressed maniac. Reisert refreshes the original story while remaining quite faithful to many of Shakespeare's motives: love, honour, loyalty, but also revenge, which remains a universal theme. The novel diverges enough from the original masterpiece and the ending is particularly unexpected: in this way, the reader can argue that Reisert has remoulded the Bard's most famous work for a contemporary audience.

The reader meets Ophelia just from her own words, where with a unique simple sentence she summons up her life. Immediately it is possible to have an idea of the kind of character we are facing until the very moment she is talking to us readers and telling her true story⁴³:

By my sixteenth birthday, I'd murdered two kings, my father, my brother, a queen, a prince and my husband.

⁴² Rebecca Reisert, *Ophelia's Revenge*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2003.

⁴³ Ibid. p. 3.

Ophelia in this way starts speaking of herself and how things have happened until the events of the well-known Shakespearian play. Here, she is the protagonist, the narrative voice and the point of view from which the story is seen.

Instead of despairing or suffering like Shakespeare's Ophelia, Reisert's Ophelia shows positive qualities that can be found in conventional heroine figures in contemporary Young Adult fiction: she is capable, mature and assertive, even in the worst situation or events.

The portrait Reisert gives of her Ophelia is of an incredible girl and her story is like an adventure, experienced fully. Her narrative voice is as strong and powerful as her personality: her passion for life is huge and her creative talent in creating stories and dramas as if she was an expert director is really impressive. She is depicted as a headstrong, intelligent and smart girl⁴⁴:

One volume contained all manner of beasts. [...] How I yearned to be that flying cat-girl. I began to make up stories for Piet and the other children of the village about the adventures of the Flying Catgirl and how she travelled to distant lands. In truth I didn't know where my tales comes from. I'd open my mouth and whole sentences would tumble out like peas from a sifter.

Ophelia is not only rich in fantasy and creativity, qualities that will be useful when bad times will come in her life, but she is also bright and quick-witted.

The presence of ghosts in this novel is really interesting: ghosts are nearly everywhere around Ophelia and they seem to participate to her life as if they were her guiding spirits. At the beginning, when they first appear, especially when Yorick's ghost appears⁴⁵, we cannot understand if they are living people or not: they are on the scene, they seem to participate to the events told in the story and they sometimes

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 7.

⁴⁵ See in Chapter 6 in Rebecca Reisert, *Ophelia's Revenge*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2003.

have a key-role in Ophelia's decisions, as happens when the girl watches Hamlet leaving for Wittenberg⁴⁶ or when King Hamlet reveals to her his plan for a new marriage⁴⁷.

But not only does Ophelia see ghosts, but she also talks to them, as happens when we have the certainty that Yorick is an apparition and he starts telling his story⁴⁸, paralleling King Hamlet's ghost telling his story:

[...] Finally he whispered, "Hamlet killed me."

"I knew it!" I said, my blood boiling with fury. "King Hamlet murders and murders, and he'll murder again, and nothing is done to stop him."

Yorick gave me a queer look. "You don't understand."

[...] "Yorick, the difficulty is not that I don't understand, but that I understand much too well." [...] "You and all the others tell me that the king cannot be stopped, but, listen to me well, for I now tell you not only *can* the king be stopped from his frenzy of murders, but that he *will* be stopped."

And also here the character and attitude of Ophelia emerges in a very interesting way: she plans to stop King Hamlet's killings, she fights for what she thinks is right. Unfortunately, she encounters misfortune during the events told in the book, but, in no case, does she blame others for what happens: she acknowledges that falling for Hamlet was a mistake caused by a "childish heart that had craved a hero"⁴⁹. Ophelia describes Hamlet as a madman who too often indulges in speculations without any clue, coming to the conclusion that others could take care of the Prince⁵⁰:

Stop it! I lacked Hamlet's appetite for idle speculations. These thoughts were too deep for me to sound, and I suspected in any case they had no bottom. Instead I must trust that in our exile I'd survive his dark times and revel in the bright ones. I wouldn't wallow in thoughts about how bleak it would be to spin out a lifetime on an island with a madman, or that my

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 180 – 181.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 217.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 227.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 439.

⁵⁰ Ivi.

future with Hamlet was a high price to pay for the indiscretions of a childish heart that had craved a hero.

One of the main novelties of this novel is the presence of villagers and poor and humble people: they represent a sort of “frame-characters” for the protagonists of the story. Each of them has a proper life, his/her own past and they cross Ophelia’s life in many occasions. The more interesting is surely Ragnor, a pirate or rather a Viking from a distant land, full of mystery and charm.

He helps Ophelia in many ways and he seems to appear when things are quite bad for the girl. One example is when Hamlet is dying and she runs to Herbwife’s hut in search for help and looking for the guy: while they are speaking she suddenly realizes that she has always wanted a persona like Ragnor at her side, but she is not yet ready to let go of her feelings for Prince Hamlet⁵¹:

Then a harsher truth slashed its way into my understanding.

I loved him.

I loved his wild tangle of hair, his flashing black eyes, his shame-the-devil courage, his passion for life just as he found it without needing to make it prettier or more philosophical. He’d known me when I was uneducated, wild, strong-willed, silly, and he loved me for all those things I’d tried to scrape out of myself. With Ragnor I wouldn’t be large in worldly status, but I’d be large in character. Loving Ragnor was like finding my way to the kingdom of myself.

But–

I was already married. I’d married Lord Hamlet.

The ending of the book is a complete surprise for the reader: Hamlet dies, and after this event, Ophelia has no more connections with Elsinore castle. Thus, she can be what she has always wanted to be: free, happy, in a peaceful place without murder,

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 370.

evil plans or thirst for power. She decides to leave Denmark with the pirate Ragnor and start a new life with him, even if she is pregnant with Hamlet's child⁵²:

I stole a look at Ragnor. I wondered just what role he would play in my new life.

We set sail. More quickly than I thought possible, Denmark began to vanish in the distance. [...]

I knew that I carried within me the ghosts of Laertes, my father, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, the queen, Claudius, and both Hamlets. They would haunt me for a long time. Perhaps for my whole life long. [...]

But inside me I carried something else . . . my child. The child for whom I'd thrown away a kingdom and a crown.

I'd saved my son for now, and sometimes now had to be enough.

Ophelia here takes stock of her experiences until that moment, trusting in the future, as she has always done in her life. She has always dreamt to be "the Flying Catgirl"⁵³ and now she has a chance to make her dream come true⁵⁴, the more important thing she has ever longed for:

[...] He was right⁵⁵, of course, but I stayed where I was, facing the future. What did it matter if I got cold or wet, now that I finally had my chance to fly?

⁵² Ibid. p. 519 - 520.

⁵³ Reference to the fancy figure created by Angela Carter's in her novel *Nights at the Circus*: in her turn, she has clearly taken from Greek mythology, where we can acknowledge about the incredible figure of a woman with wings of a bird.

⁵⁴ Ivi.

⁵⁵ The reference here is to Ragnor, who is talking to Ophelia, but she is lost in her thoughts.

4.

Echoes of Hamlet

As we have already seen in our analysis, *Hamlet* seems like an especially suitable text for revision by authors of young adult literature. The themes embedded in this play are useful as a “virtual catechism” for the field of adolescence¹. In the Shakespearian play, Hamlet dislikes his stepfather and he fights and disapproves of his mother. Moreover, Ophelia’s father prevents her romance with prince Hamlet. Besides, two young men, Hamlet and Laertes, compete for prestige in the kingdom of Elsinore and two childhood friends of Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, betray his trust and he ends in trouble with pirates. Another relevant point regards death: Hamlet contemplates suicide, and Ophelia acts it out. Lastly, Hamlet, a boy in his adolescence, sees his father’s ghost, but cannot tell if it is real or a hallucination.

Parental conflicts, romantic conflicts, peer conflicts, mystery, death, adventure²: Isaac in her book notes that Shakespeare really packed his play full of crowd-pleasing favourites.

Herz and Gallo trace a summary of themes that can be appealing to YA literature readers, suitable for growing-up kids³:

1. Initiation of the innocent into an evil world
2. Dealing with loss of a parent
3. Abandoning one’s sense of morality to seek revenge

¹ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare: reinventing the Bard in young adult literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, p. 66.

² Ivi.

³ In Herz, Sarah K. and Gallo, Donald R., *From Hinton to Hamlet: building Bridges between Young Adult Literature and the Classics*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 50.

4. Risking one's place in the community to take a stand
5. Surviving without parental support.

Consequently, many young adult novels without direct Shakespearian links can be compared with *Hamlet*, as we discuss when we analyze Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* in this chapter. Young adult readers may find several novels particularly enlightening when read against the thematic backdrop of the Shakespearian play, even if they have really little in common with it⁴. Vague allusions to the character of Hamlet and his difficulties appear with frequency: in effect, some of Hamlet's lines, like the well-known "To be or not to be", are so famous that authors can toss them casually (or premeditatedly) into their prose, with complete confidence that they will be recognized and appreciated by readers. Sometimes these allusions offer, in some sense, a commentary upon Shakespeare⁵. In the following paragraphs some of the most significant contemporary rewritings will be considered. References to *Hamlet* will be labelled as "echoes" of the Shakespearian play, in which the figure of Ophelia has been slightly marginalized as a secondary character.

4.1 *Hamlet* for boys: the new *Ophelia* as a "secondary character"

Behind Haig's *The Dead Fathers Club*⁶ and Holderness's *The Prince of Denmark*⁷ there is a desire to re-collocate the Shakespearian play *Hamlet*: the first novel collocates the plot in a modern society with current characters moving in a contemporary scenario, the second one contextualizes Hamlet in an hypothetical historical period when the

⁴ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare: reinventing the Bard in young adult literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, pp. 66 - 67.

⁵ Ivi. p. 67.

⁶ Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006.

⁷ Graham Holderness, *The Prince of Denmark*, Hertfordshire, University of Hertfordshire, 2002.

story could have happened. The novels, differently from the books we have previously analysed but similarly to the others shown here in the chapter, can be mainly considered as written for boys, “using” a young male protagonist to relive *Hamlet’s* story.

The Prince of Denmark is situated in eleventh century Denmark: the novel is interlarded with medieval texts, for instance, the chronicles of Ansgar, and with anachronistic references to the Reformation period in Europe. On the contrary, *The Dead Fathers Club* draws on the original plot of *Hamlet* and is, despite its seemingly parodic tone, a sorrowful account of life ruined by the constant zeal for revenge.

In Holderness’s novel, with a peculiar attention to the historical setting and connotation of the story, for Ophelia the relationship with the male figures in her world is a matter of love and mutual consent to authority, rather than acquiescence. She tells Hamlet that she holds him in high esteem and she defends her “virtue as a maid”⁸. Ofelia, in fact, bluntly refuses to yield her chastity to the prince as a royal authority or its apparent heir⁹. Eventually, it is Ofelia who, out of her own volition, offers her chastity to the prince, affirming¹⁰:

[...]would fain die, rather than live a maid.

In *The Dead Fathers Club*, Ophelia’s character is incarnated by Leah Fairview, a twelve-year-old girl who discloses her sexual awareness to Philip, the real protagonist of Haig’s novel. The boy is entrapped in a precarious world, further

⁸ Ibid. p. 93.

⁹ See in Mohammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Ophelia Transformed: Revisioning Shakespeare’s Hamlet* in GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, Volume 13(2), May 2013, in <http://ejournal.ukm.my/gema/article/viewFile/3183/2023> webpage, p. 184.

¹⁰ In Graham Holderness, *The Prince of Denmark*, Hertfordshire, University of Hertfordshire, 2002, p. 101.

darkened by the presence of his father's ghost who constantly urges Philip to revenge his murder.

To find a relief to an apparently schizophrenic illness, the boy is encouraged to spend time and become friend with Leah: though senior to Philip by only one year and despite certain flaws in her character, Leah is, in personality, far beyond the young boy in intellectual maturity, social experience and determination. She regards Philip as naïve in the art of love and teaches him how to kiss a girl: the experience of being kissed on the lips, which, at first, appears to Philip "weird", broadens his experience of life and enkindles him to explore if kissing other girls he knows would create the same emotional engagement¹¹.

Thus, Ophelia, in these novels, has become a resolute thinking character that, even if it is not a protagonist of the plot, criticizes traditions regarding sexuality, expresses her attitude toward relations with the opposite sex, and initiates, out of her own will, intimate or sexual affairs¹². In this way, the young girl is endowed with a degree of agency and voice in the expressions of her emotions and will. She is far from being meek, submissive or fragile as in *Hamlet*.

For example, *The Dead Fathers Club*'s Leah daringly smokes cigarettes and sarcastically challenges the divine authority¹³:

Who says [we can't smoke]? God?

The transformation of Ophelia into a dauntless determined girl is an aspect that posits the new Ophelia against her traditional figure: though ostensibly lewd in

¹¹ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, from p. 78 to p. 80.

¹² In Mohammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Ophelia Transformed: Revisioning Shakespeare's Hamlet* in GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, Volume 13(2), May 2013, in <http://ejournal.ukm.my/gema/article/viewFile/3183/2023> webpage, p. 183.

¹³ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. 94.

certain respects, she acts as a result of her own will and agency than of being enforced by the rulings of a patriarchal or transcendent authority¹⁴.

In her review, Daniela Guardamagna focuses her analysis on the text and underlines important quotations from the Shakespearean hypotext. Effectively, she asserts that the reader can notice that the plot and the range of characters follow the Shakespearean precedent with surprising symmetry, though not all the characters have a counterpart¹⁵. For what concerns Ophelia's character, there is a girlfriend, Leah, who, though much less passive and obedient than Hamlet's fiancée in the original play, tries to commit suicide by throwing herself into a river; Leah has a brother, and a father who, like the Shakespearian predecessor Polonius, dies in place of the intended victim.

Matt Haig's novel is a real appropriation of the Shakespearian hypotext. It is a complex transposition, most notably in genre, setting and perspective. The characters are similar and the plot of the hypertext mirrors that of the hypotext relatively closely. However, they deviate decisively when the reader reaches the section corresponding to the "Representation of Ophelia's death" in the original¹⁶.

Philip's life is duly perturbed by his assigned task by his father's ghost, and though he does not decide to play any "antics", the people surrounding him are worried about his mental well-being, and suggest he needs the help of a psychologist.

The main differences between this plot and Shakespeare's lie in the fact that, though Philip does not for a moment suspect his father's ghost of being a "goblin damned", the author seems to want the reader to suppose this, and to read malevolence and

¹⁴ In Mohammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Ophelia Transformed: Revisioning Shakespeare's Hamlet* in GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, Volume 13(2), May 2013, in <http://ejournal.ukm.my/gema/article/viewFile/3183/2023> webpage, p. 184.

¹⁵ In Daniela Guardamagna, *Matt Haig, The Dead Fathers Club* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006; London: Vintage, 2007), 314 pp., in *Anglistica* 12. 1 (2008), p. 117.

¹⁶ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, from p. 281 to p. 295.

bad faith into his behaviour. Surely, Uncle Alan's character is unpleasant, but there is a final twist, subverting completely the Shakespearian version of the story: the young boy repents of the part he has taken in the accident that is endangering Uncle Alan's life, realizes that his uncle saved him, and so tries to help him, even if he is in no condition to do so. In the end, effectively, the reader is even led to assume that the ghost, having learnt to act in the physical world, manages to manipulate the hospital instruments which can keep Alan alive, thus being able to kill him personally.

Generally, Haig faithfully follows the main events of the play, but there is a significant modification: Philip finds Leah hovering on a bridge¹⁷, then she plunges into the river, so he plunges in after her, manages to save her with Uncle Alan's help, and he is in his turn saved by Alan. The appearance of a head surfacing the water and then its disappearing underwater draws Alan back into the river, but Haig seems to suggest to his reader that the Ghost figure, differently from the Shakespearean one, has unfortunately become active and deceives his brother into risking his life again, causing him to end up in hospital, where he probably dies. So, our young Hamlet in the novel decides not to kill his uncle after all, but he cannot stop the stream of events.

Guardamagna thinks that the point of Haig's rewriting is this transformation of the ghost's action¹⁸: from an ineffectual creature in the first chapters we slowly see the shaping of a strong and powerful ghost in the second part of the novel. Selfish, opinionated, sometimes obviously lying, the Ghost uses his son's life for his own ends. Guardamagna, then, concludes her analysis stating that Haig does not directly imply that we take facts too much at face value because when, reading *Hamlet*, the reader

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 274.

¹⁸ In Daniela Guardamagna, *Matt Haig, The Dead Fathers Club* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006; London: Vintage, 2007), 314 pp., in *Anglistica* 12. 1 (2008), p. 120.

interprets King Claudius straightforwardly as a villain and the Ghost as a positive figure. What Haig does show is the destruction of the lives of the living through the manoeuvres of a dead man who refuses to die his own death: so we are presented with a conspiracy of the dead against the living, in order to trap the living in the past, to make a future impossible without the dead¹⁹.

Though Haig knows well Shakespeare, Guardamagna states that the overall texture of Philip's language is obviously anything but Shakespearean²⁰: we are presented with the stream of consciousness of an eleven-year-old boy. His sentences are often virtually without punctuation, no apostrophes in verbs and no subjunctive. Moreover, though generally simple in texture, the text presents also some graphics devices.

But Shakespeare is there: the text is a curious pastiche where verbal Shakespearean references occasionally surface in the basic flow of normal English, ranging from the apparently haphazard, like the mention of Hamlet cigars or a thriller called "Murder Most Foul", or again a fish called Gertrude to actual though dislocated quotations.

The floral symbolism, prominent in the Shakespearian hypotext, is largely absent in the novel; on the contrary, the imagery of water, fish and death is more evident. The willow is exchanged for a weir, which nicely incorporates many of the actual and symbolic properties of the willow and is a proximation that results more easily recognisable for the modern reader. In the water Leah initially seems very passive, as in the Shakespearian version of the character of Ophelia, but Philip's intervention makes her spring into action²¹. If the water and the current symbolises the destructive forces affecting Leah, this comments on Ophelia's basic submissive and unassertive role in the hypotext.

¹⁹ Ibid. p. 121.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 118.

²¹ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. 286.

The fish imagery is also highly present in the novel: an often-evoked image, the aquatic creature symbolises and at times foreshadows death²². This is due to the habitats of the characters and the fish: both die if they enter the other's. Thus, when Philip feels a fish brush, he can see his disadvantage the fish is a symbol and a harbinger of death²³. Alan acts as a figure of transition; moving Philip and Leah into their element but dying in the process symbolically represented as a fish on land²⁴.

In addition, the character of Ophelia displays a vibrant sensuality, yet she is simultaneously vociferous in the expression of her convictions regarding intimacy or sexuality²⁵. Further, Ophelia is vivacious and self-willed, and when dead, as happens in Holderness's *The Prince of Denmark*, her corpse is no longer the image that is favoured by the cult of male figures around her. In some sense, the revisionings of *Hamlet* constitute a response not only to the Shakespearean play itself, but also to certain portions of literary or artistic creation that have "eroticized" Ophelia's dead body²⁶, promoting her beauty in death.

Ophelia's version in Matt Haig's book clearly tries to commit suicide, but survives. While Ophelia's death is described as a solitary event on her part in the hypotext, it is far from the event reported in the hypertext. Haig offers an answer to the fact that there were people present during Ophelia's tragic end and that she was not saved: Philip, and Uncle Alan ultimately, saves Leah who has hurled herself off a weir. This is not as much an interpolation as a consistent deviation from the hypotext, a sort of an

²² This image is established in Matt Haig's novel just at the beginning in p. 14.

²³ Ibid. pp. 291 – 292.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 310.

²⁵ In Mohammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Ophelia Transformed: Revisioning Shakespeare's Hamlet* in GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, Volume 13(2), May 2013, in <http://ejournal.ukm.my/gema/article/viewFile/3183/2023> webpage, p. 185.

²⁶ Ivi.

alternative ending. Facing with a suicidal Leah, Philip recognises that he is to blame, something that is far distant from Hamlet's mind in the funeral scene²⁷.

Furthermore, when having jumped in after Leah, he partly experiences the drowning of the "hypotextual" Ophelia, but where the original Ophelia seems strangely passive, Philip, the Hamlet figure of Haig's novel, on the contrary kicks off his shoes and presents a diametrically opposite alternative²⁸. This fits in well with Haig's alternative plot. Throughout the hypertext it is unclear whether Alan really is a bad person, as most of his actions are ambiguous.

Furthermore, other scenes from the hypotext are represented in the suicide-section regarding Leah: the girl has the words "dead" and "gone" written in blood on her arms before jumping, echoing scene 4.5 in the original Shakespearean text²⁹.

In some sense, Haig seems to react to Ophelia's excessively tragic ending in the original Shakespearian work, merging and editing the extended last act into one section including Leah's attempted suicide and its aftermath.

Another interesting aspect in Holderness's novel is represented by a sort of portrait, though in brief compared to other novels we have analysed throughout this dissertation, the time when Ofelia possesses a masculine personality³⁰:

[...]a tomboy [...] who fought with her brother.

Though the author mentions education as a necessary stage in the life of a girl as Ofelia, yet in his rewriting of the Shakespearian play he appears to regard Ofelia

²⁷ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. 286.

²⁸ Ibid. p 289.

²⁹ In William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. London, Arden Shakespeare, 2006, in 4.5, in line 29 and Leah's song in Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. 273.

³⁰ In Graham Holderness, *The Prince of Denmark*, Hertfordshire, University of Hertfordshire, 2002, p. 83.

majorly as an object of pleasure, for education is merely a further adornment, making a girl more "seducible" and "marriageable"³¹.

Holderness's Ophelia is also educated, though she mesmerizes Hamlet more by her voluptuousness than by her mental power. In this regard, Polonius, while lavishing much praise on Ofelia's being educated, acknowledges the curtailment of his patriarchal authority³²:

[...] young women in these days are, as your lordship well knows, schooled and learned as though they were young men. My daughter lacks nothing in obedience. Yet in faith to win her consent in this, my lord could do no better than to address his wishes to the lady Ofelia in her own person.

Hence, education contributes to a girl's liberation from male subjugation to the extent that Polonius lays the burden of wooing on Hamlet's shoulder³³. Ophelia's victimization and vulnerability is challenged also in *The Dead Fathers Club*, creating the strong and powerful character of Leah, who unfortunately, toward the end of the novel, loses her peculiar strength and attempts suicide. Leah relishes juvenile delinquency and motivates her boyfriend Philip to practice shoplifting. To prove her adventurous spirit, she first enters a shop and steals some ointment, and then, while leaving the place, she drops the loot in the garbage can³⁴. Her agility as shown in a number of shoplifting feats and their subsequent escape from a security guard chasing them, causes Philip to establish a close emotional bond with Leah³⁵:

I looked at Leah's eyes and her hair all pretty for me and I loved her.

³¹ Ibid. p. 85.

³² Ibid. p. 89.

³³ In Mohammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Ophelia Transformed: Revisioning Shakespeare's Hamlet* in GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, Volume 13(2), May 2013, in <http://ejournal.ukm.my/gema/article/viewFile/3183/2023> webpage, p. 186.

³⁴ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, p 132.

³⁵ Ibid. p. 134.

Philip's affection for Leah is indeed liberating in the sense that Philip, in his love for Leah, finds himself unencumbered by the ghost of his revengeful father who has pestered him with doubts and fears³⁶:

I loved her because it was the first time I hadn't [sic] thought of Dad since he was a ghost like she had gone in my head and shoplifted the sad things without me looking.

On the other hand, not only Leah is a daredevil, but she is also a strong supportive friend for young Philip: she resolutely defends Philip against the harassment of two bullying schoolmates of him. To safeguard the young boy against the intimidating guys, she reassures him³⁷:

He is scared of me and he won't [sic] mess with you again.

The new Ophelia now is not only recognized by her physical mobility but distinguished by her audacity as a result of her education for a life of challenge: far from being a submissive figure, she defies her Hamlet, and when he feels insecure, she is the source of solace³⁸.

To claim that Haig has feminist intentions is a matter of surmise, yet he has created a new Ophelia who is undaunted in many respects, and Philip, who is constantly bullied, achieves relief through the friendship with Leah. In short time, Philip's hesitations concerning Leah's influence vanish and the reader now faces a completely new version of Ophelia: this figure is enabled to defend both herself and Hamlet against enemies; it is Hamlet who now has to rely on Ophelia for his safety. The

³⁶ Ivi.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

³⁸ In Mohammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim, *Ophelia Transformed: Revisioning Shakespeare's Hamlet* in GEMA Online Journal of Language Studies, Volume 13(2), May 2013, in <http://ejournal.ukm.my/gema/article/viewFile/3183/2023> webpage, p. 187.

feeling of being isolated and unattended overwhelms Philip only when he, convinced by the ghost, rejects Leah.

But Haig's Ophelia, among her features, has also a prominent scepticism: she blankly expresses her hatred of God, yet her reasoning is imbued with sentimentality. Despite being the daughter of a man who is considered by people as a "bible-basher", she detests God as she thinks the divinity was indifferent to her mother's ordeal. Leah is convinced that God rejoices in man's sufferings, for sufferance, in her opinion, entrenches man's belief in God³⁹:

I hate God...God just looks down at people asking him for help and he doesn't [sic] do anything because he knows if they are hurt they'll [sic] want to believe in him more.

Moreover, Leah is appalled by the contradictions in God's commands, because she cannot explain things in her life⁴⁰, like her mother's death, which she considers as divine larceny:

[...] he says you can't [sic] do things like you can't steal. But he steals. He steals people...he let Mum die...and he didn't [sic] do anything.

In Leah's view, to dream of a life of happiness in the hereafter is merely self-delusion: it is a false conception held by her father who wants to think her wife is in Heaven. This Ophelia impugns both patriarchal and ecclesiastical authority: her scepticism and nonconformity is manifest during all Haig's novel, but totally absent in *The Prince of Denmark* which results completely reliable to the time it is set, following the cultural context of that particular historical period.

³⁹ In Matt Haig, *The Dead Fathers Club*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. 93.

⁴⁰ Ivi.

4.2 Ophelia's Revenge: an afterlife for Ophelia

David Bergantino's novel, entitled *Hamlet II*⁴¹, focuses on the figure of a young man, Cameron, which resembles the Shakespearean character of Hamlet. Just from the very first pages of the book, the reader can presume that this novel has been conceived for a male audience, from a male point of view on the events and a mainly male world opposed to a feminine counterpart. For this reason, Ophelia has been apparently put aside and marginalized as a secondary character.

In *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*⁴², the authors debate the relationship between the Shakespearian masterpieces and youth culture stating that all the "Bard's Blood Series", which *Hamlet II* is a part of, deals with this connection. All these books are haunted, both in terms of their narratives of teen horror and for what concerns the presence of ghosts and mysterious elements, and, in addition, in the sense of reading them while being "haunted" by the memory of the original Shakespearian work and other "mediations" of it.

Hamlet II begins with a very strange statement, saying "Something was rotten in the State of Ohio", and immediately the reader is introduced to a contemporary version of Hamlet's story: Cameron, the protagonist, is a popular student in his University and he is also the quarterback of the football team, he lost his father and he is facing important challenges in his life.

The character of Ophelia appears in the novel only as a ghost, without a concrete form or shape. Moreover, she has particular magical powers and in some sense cannot be considered as a positive figure, seeking revenge and frightening people around her:

⁴¹ David Bergantino, *Hamlet II: Ophelia's Revenge*, New York, Pocket Star Books, 2003.

⁴² In Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. and Robert L. York, *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 222.

she is an active avenger⁴³, who can possess teenage girls and commit in this way acts of violence using them and their body. This Ophelia has not only been revived, but she has also found that particular will and strength to revenge herself that Hamlet never had in the Shakespearian original play or in adaptations we have mentioned in our analysis.

In making a revenging, murdering kind of Ophelia, the authors of *Shakespeare and Youth Culture* writes that Bergantino has clearly strayed from Renaissance tradition and has entered the teen horror film genre. This Ophelia is a sort of riot girl and no oppressed teen who needs to be revived⁴⁴. Effectively, in this novel, she is the active revenger of the story, while the Hamlet figure remains paralyzed. The reader is privy to this ghostly Ophelia's thoughts, and her language is now thoroughly modernized⁴⁵:

No, things would be different, and Hamlet would bear witness to her transformation. When they were together again, there would be no more of this 'Get thee to a nunnery' crap. He was going to find out who wore the leggings in the family.

What is interesting and unique here is that the fact that this novel places the narrative of Hamlet in the real Denmark and treats the original play as if it had concrete roots in history, not as a tragedy as the hypotext it comes from.

The other unique aspect is Ophelia's postmodern, feminist attitude toward her former betrothed, which is certainly not found in the original text.

Ophelia possesses Sofia many times during the novel, but the girl succeeds in defeating the ghost by telling her to "move on" and overcome what she has experienced⁴⁶:

⁴³ Ibid. p. 223.

⁴⁴ Ivi.

⁴⁵ In David Bergantino, *Hamlet II: Ophelia's Revenge*, New York, Pocket Star Books, 2003, pp. 109 – 110.

⁴⁶ Ibid. pp. 236 – 237.

In short, Ophelia my love, get over him. You've had more time than most to get over this guy. And while you're at it, get over yourself! [...] I'm sorry about the way things went with Hamlet. If I'd been around as your friend, you could have cried on my shoulder, and then we would have gone to a club, had a few beers, danced, found a few hot guys and gotten ya laid. Believe me, a much better situation than ending up at the bottom of a swamp.

In some way, we can assert that the whole Shakespearian play and, in this case, Ophelia's character are evaluated by a young woman who rejects them both and what they stand for. Ophelia's problems and her logic behind them are not the problems of today's young people, at all: their problems are completely different from Ophelia's ones, and, conversely, they have solutions to her problems that would never have been available to her. Contemporarily, in the conclusive chapter of *Shakespeare and Youth Culture* conclusive it is said that, if the original play deals with characters that constantly lack action, while this novel, on the contrary, presents young people who are mainly characterized by an active attitude⁴⁷.

On the other hand, the novel is also haunted by the problem of relevance: by telling Ophelia to "get over herself", Sofia also gives voice to the typical young person's response to Shakespeare, encouraging her to transcend time, context and situation and make yourself relevant to now and/or do not waste time (and your life) in doing something imposed on you by others or something that will not make you happy⁴⁸.

Bergantino has given us a postfeminist Hamlet for a generation raised on horror films, series and sequels, and girl power⁴⁹: Ophelia is now the real revenger, differently from the Hamlet figure who demonstrates no action. The whole story in

⁴⁷ In Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. and Robert L. York, *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, pp.225 – 226.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 226.

⁴⁹ Ivi.

this novel serves as a backdrop for a slasher flick: effectively, the sequel is the same story, just rebuilt for a new generation.

Ophelia is the “new feminist” of “postfeminism” young women who discard what is established and rigid feminism. She is the most empowered character in Bergantino’s text as she takes on Hamlet’s narrative and subject position as the avenger.

To a large extent, although the “Ophelias” previously discussed are much stronger than the Shakespearian Ophelia, they are still recognisable as possessing the valued female traits of innocence, caring and virtue. So, in line with the genre, young female readers access female empowerment through Ophelia as increased agency and development and, in this specific novel, female empowerment is taken to an extreme: instead of an innocent girl who gets unwittingly caught up in Hamlet’s thirst of revenge, Ophelia is now an active and violent *post-mortem* avenger.

Effectively, here in this novel Ophelia’s character comes back from the dead, full of resentment and grudges, to take revenge, this time on Hamlet. In this sense, we can label this novel as a sequel, because Bergantino, using the ghost element as in the original play, has opened up the possibility of an afterlife. In this way, not only can Ophelia gain agency, she can also actively seek her vengeance.

This is a sustained adaptation that is completely focused on Ophelia: in this hypertext, she is the villain, a swamp-like creature who preys on twentieth-century high school girls to avenge on Hamlet for his violence against her, her father and her brother. She is looking for justice, in the attempt of finding peace for her spirit and atone for the fault suffered by the male figures in her past life.

On the arrival of Hamlet's "reincarnation", the young football star Cameron Dean, Ophelia's soul is roused by the proximity of her ancient lover's soul. Upon awakening, her first thoughts are for revenge⁵⁰:

Ophelia [...] swept the muck-laden hair from her lifeless eyes. Since herself was invisible, she could see that which was ordinarily invisible. The world glowed in strange and shimmering colors humans could not perceive. [...] And shining like a beacon, a surreal lighthouse in the distance, was Hamlet.

Her Hamlet.

It was for him that she had once lived. And it was him that she had died.

And now that she had risen, it was his turn to die for her.

Here Ophelia blames her death on Hamlet, conforming to the conventional reading of *Hamlet's* Ophelia and the cultural notion of an Ophelia who relinquishes her sense of self for Hamlet. Effectively, Ophelia's anger conforms to negative representations of radical man-hating feminists: her vengeful spirit gives her the right ability to possess other teenage girls in love, and through their bodies, enact revenge on "love" by killing men involved with them.

At first, it seems like this vengeful Ophelia exemplifies the contemporary notions of female empowerment. Through possessing girls' bodies and mind, Ophelia can have access to their thought, too, in the contemporary common language⁵¹:

The words soothed Ophelia. She began to float faster. Then she stopped. "Melancholy kinda sucks?" What kind of language was this? It was so . . . inelegant. Very unbefitting a woman once destined to be princess. It was so . . . common. Distasteful it seemed at first; however, the thought and feeling had eradicated her sadness. A boldness coursed through her. She had shaken free of her possession-induced melancholy.

⁵⁰ In David Bergantino, *Hamlet II: Ophelia's Revenge*, New York, Pocket Star Books, 2003, p. 72.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 100.

Her reaction is totally filled with disgust. However, this modern language channels “boldness” that gives Ophelia’s spirit that “feminist empowerment” she needs to complete her mission⁵²:

Ophelia smiled to herself at the new shape of her thoughts. There was the power—the power of defiance, the power of freedom, the power of independence. This was the power she drew from her victims. In death, this made her feel more alive than she had while living. She thought back to her father [...] What would he say if he saw his daughter Ophelia now? Would he treat her like the simple child she was, to be fair, actually been?

After Ophelia has killed many young men and women, Sophia is physically possessed by Ophelia’s spirit: now they have become a whole. Ophelia can hear Sophia’s thoughts and both women confront each other in Sophia’s head, as a split personality. It is literally a clash of attitudes in which the modern feminist woman faces the conservative male-centered attitudes that Ophelia holds⁵³:

“Listen,” Sofia said quickly, “what are you here for anyway, huh? What’s this ‘vengeance’ you’re talking about? Hey, I know times were different, but bad advice, especially from relatives, is bad advice, and there’s no need to go crazy over it. And this Hamlet guy. If yours was such an inevitable, eternal love, why did he treat you like that? Sounds like a jerk to me. And you? How pathetic! I have no respect for people who can’t move on.

Sofia’s frank assessment of Ophelia’s self-indulgence and Hamlet’s narcissism reflects the changing contemporary attitudes toward relationships and the way young people read the Hamlet-Ophelia story. The process of Ophelia’s possession of women’s physical bodies allows the transference of both modern language and thoughts, which channels more pragmatic attitudes toward relationships. What initially starts as

⁵² Ibid. p. 109.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 236.

Ophelia's revenge, becomes now resolved through an interaction with the practicality of Sofia's postfeminist ideas. Moreover, if the representation of Ophelia in YA fiction involves construction of a model teenager, her adjustment in her attitudes toward romantic love mirrors the way adolescent girls are encouraged to cast off ingenuousness, take on more pragmatic attitudes and make informed decisions when it comes to love. Teenage readers should emulate Ophelia's ability to "get over herself" and objectively assess their romantic choices. At the same time, girls are encouraged to learn from their mistakes, such as losing their sense of self, having unrealistic expectations or indulging in despair and self-pity in front of a romantic failure.

In the end of the novel, also Ophelia has learnt lots from her evil and vengeful behaviour and has become a reconciliatory spirit. Ophelia's interaction with contemporary teenagers does not entail rejecting romantic love, but allows her to become well-adjusted, gaining a new belief in love. At the end of Bergantino's novel, Ophelia has transformed into a benevolent spirit who has accepted the inevitable complexities of romantic love: her spirit returns to an idealistic notion of love. It still exists and the relationship with Hamlet can heal only if Ophelia can just "get over herself".

We must admit that Bergantino has given his readers a postfeminist *Hamlet* for a generation raised between horror films and "girl power", with "girl" power connoting a popular version of feminism. If adaptation is meant to "fit" a new context, just the title of Bergantino's novel, *Hamlet II: Ophelia's Revenge*, foregrounds the way horror productions are sequelized, where a sequel is meant to represent an opportunity to reuse a successful formula and gain a guaranteed feedback. While Bergantino takes

advantage of the popularity of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to generate his own "feedback", the text allows Ophelia to her literally "feedback"⁵⁴:

And so would her vengeance, against Hamlet, against love, be fulfilled.

4.3 Terabithia as Elsinore: a naïve Ophelia

Katherine Paterson's Newbery Medal winning novel *Bridge to Terabithia*⁵⁵ (1977) is a moving book with some interesting connections to Hamlet. Mainly they regard plot structure and the construction of the two main protagonists of the novel, Jess and Leslie, two up growing children, attending Lark Creek school and living in a suburb area in U.S.A.

Megan Lynn Isaac, in her book *Heirs to Shakespeare, Reinventing the Bard in Young Adult Literature*, observes that most of the novel seems like a cleverly subversive text in which the author is clearly concerned with redefining the ways readers think about gender roles and socially constructed gender stereotypes⁵⁶: the two protagonists struggle to develop and sustain an unexpected friendship. Jess is the novel's male protagonist and, like Hamlet in the original play, feels lost and betrayed by his family as he moves toward adolescence. In this sense we can consider this character as a youthful version of Hamlet, free from the pressure of dynasty, of a kingdom, of a marriage and a mission of revenge to play out.

On the contrary, Jess's father is not dead, as old King Hamlet, but he seems distant and unapproachable; on the other hand, Jess's mother is quite similar to Gertrude: she shows her genuine love for her son but, unfortunately, she is too consumed by other

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 100.

⁵⁵ Katherine Paterson, *Bridge to Terabithia*. New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 1995.

⁵⁶ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare, Reinventing the Bard in Young Adult Literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, p. 67.

aspects in her life, in this case for what concerns caring for other four children and running a humble household.

Another similarity between Jess and Hamlet regards arts: Jess loves drawing, while the original Hamlet writes poetic love letters and performs a dramatic speech with some travelling actors visiting the castle of Elsinore. But both these male characters, in order to win the appreciation of their family and the social context their live in, dedicate themselves to proving physically their strength and courage: Jess participates in a school running race in order to become the fastest runner in the fifth grade, while Hamlet gets involved in a contest against Laertes. Hamlet loses and so does Jess, with his dreams abruptly destroyed by Leslie, the new girl in the school, who violates the playground rules and races with the boys, winning against them.

Leslie has various traits in common with the Shakespearian Ophelia: her mother is virtually absent, as in the original play where this character is never mentioned; her father, on the other hand, is too busy with his political writings to pay attention to his daughter, and here we have a clear reminiscence of Polonius's profession as King's counsellor at the Elsinore court.

The two children, Jess and Leslie, become friends, sharing adventures in the wood nearby the town where they live and creating their own kingdom. Like Ophelia and Hamlet, their families and friends suspect them of being involved in a love affair but their relationship is on a more innocent level than in the original play.

Moreover, this Ophelia is more active, dynamic (both in her attitude and in her spirit), and smart: she reads books, she read Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and teaches Jess what she knows about it and about literature in general. In this novel, differently from Bergantino's Ophelia and Haig's Leah, the character resembling the Shakespearian

Ophelia is considered in her more innocent aspects: here she is a teenager in a new school, who tries to find some friends and to be accepted by her schoolmates.

As we have mentioned in our analysis, the hypertexts coming from other works borrow and adapt characters and plot lines from original texts⁵⁷. Paterson's novel, effectively, contains allusions, references to characters and events that can be found in the Shakespearian play, creating an interesting intertext, which can be interpreted in many ways. Moreover, the novel gives the reader the chance to understand those themes typical of YA literature: parental relationships, romantic experiences, and, sometimes, violent confrontations.

Both Jess and Hamlet leave their "Ophelia", abandoning her to a tragic destiny: Jess, when he comes back from a trip to Washington D. C., learns that Leslie's body has been discovered "down in the creek", and that his friend has died in a tragic accident. Similarly, Hamlet learns of Ophelia's death: her body has been found floating in the brook. Hamlet's grief nearly overwhelms him and, furious against fate and events, he jumps into the grave with the corpse. Unlike the Shakespearian protagonist, Jess suffers for an unspeakable grief, which can heal only thanks to a father-and-son relationship which had been lost for so long until that very moment.

It is interesting to notice how Isaac concludes her brief comparison between *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Hamlet*: the ending of Paterson's novel, anyway, is a clear example of the tendency of writers revisioning Shakespearean plots to accept and/or acknowledge conservative values and social patterns (such as the importance of family relationships, or being accepted in society)⁵⁸. Paterson, effectively, pushes her readers to reconsider their expectations about gender and in this way she seems to

⁵⁷ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare, Reinventing the Bard in Young Adult Literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, p. XII.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 68.

condemn the social pressures on children while they are growing up, in particular for what concerns Leslie's naïve spirit or Jess's artistic talent.

On the other hand, Paterson, like Shakespeare, decides to "sacrifice" the character of Leslie, "in the service of patriarchal paradigms⁵⁹", as observed by Isaac, and in favour of a conservative choice. At the end of the novel we can see that the "male world" is still alive, even if it has been transformed by the encounter with the "Ophelian" character of the novel. Her premature death is what the male characters of Paterson's novel need to change their lives and make a fresh start.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 69.

Conclusion

Ophelia has always appeared as a submissive and marginal character throughout the whole Shakespearian play. The Bard created a perfect example of Elizabethan daughterhood and Ophelia does not act by her own wishes, but rather according to her father's will. She must ignore her own love feelings for Hamlet and has to reject him, in order not to damage her father's reputation. She appears as the perfect, well-behaved and obedient daughter, living by the Elizabethan conventions. Regardless of her innocence, she is constantly haunted by mental doubts about her rejected love and her despair culminates in insanity and death¹. Nevertheless, feminist criticism has shown that women play important roles in specific Shakespearean plays and contribute to the progress of the play. Shakespeare used the female characters as tools to break or obey Elizabethan conventions, to convey a certain message by differentiating gender in the most extreme form².

Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most frequently performed, adapted and appropriated plays. Numerous authors have taken the themes and characters of it to create novels, other plays, films and even television series with the aim of reinterrogating its themes and characters. Less well known but equally abundant are adaptations, particularly in novel form, for teenagers.

Megan Lynn Isaac has commented that *Hamlet* seems like a ripe text for revision by young adult authors for the themes embedded and this single play serves as a virtual

¹ In Sara Ekici, *Feminist Criticism: Female Characters in Shakespeare's Plays Othello and Hamlet*, Norderstedt, GRIN Verlag, 2009, p. 21.

² Ivi.

guide to study the field of adolescence³. Hamlet is a student, grappling with his mother's remarriage, his relationship with his young girlfriend, his sense of identity and feelings of responsibility, themes which feature regularly in adolescent literature, as we have already underlined. Commonly, YA novels' primary subtext is about construction of identity and Hamlet is surely the character in Shakespeare who struggles most with a construction of a sense of self⁴.

The books analysed in this dissertation are adaptations of the Shakespearian play and, at the same time, novels which include the study of the play at different levels: just to list some of them it is possible to mention friendship and death as in Paterson's novel, revenge and freedom as in Reisert's book, but there would be so many more examples. Each book represents a thoughtful method for exploring the original play and offers a convincing new vision of the hypotext. Together, they serve as an argument for the richness of the Shakespearian masterpiece they all come from⁵. The events in the castle at Elsinore may seem far from the experience of many young adult readers, especially for what concerns Holderness's version of the story. But, when we consider Hamlet's story not as a political or philosophical conflict, and instead as an analysis of those themes that are well-known to the young readers (love, family, relationships with others), the Shakespearian play seems distinctly more timely and up-to-date.

A common method by which authors adapting Shakespeare seek to make the characters, situations and settings more familiar is by updating the events of the plays to the present day, a feature which can be underlined in Haig's *The Dead Fathers Club*,

³ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare, Reinventing the Bard in Young Adult Literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, p. 66.

⁴ In Abigail Rokison, *Shakespeare for Young People, Productions, Versions and Adaptations*. London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 148.

⁵ In Megan Lynn Isaac, *Heirs to Shakespeare, Reinventing the Bard in Young Adult Literature*, Portsmouth, Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000, pp. 75 – 76.

Ray's *Falling for Hamlet*, Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* and also in Bergantino's *Hamlet II*, where the story is set nowadays but the reader is taken to the ancient story of Hamlet and Ophelia, told through the ghost's voice. On the contrary, an interesting example is offered by Holderness's book, where the original story of *Hamlet* is set in the twelfth century, and Shakespeare's play seems firmly located in "a sophisticated and Christian Renaissance court⁶" and intimately related to the political and social circumstances of Renaissance Europe.

While Klein, Fiedler, Reisert, Trafford and also Holderness retain the play's pseudo-Renaissance Danish setting, Haig, Paterson, Bergantino and Ray update their novels to identifiable twenty-first-century England or USA. Certainly, the locations of these novels are more familiar to contemporary teenagers than that of a sixteenth-century Danish court, if only through the medium of TV series and cinema productions. In Haig's novel, but also in Ray's, Bergantino's and Paterson's, it is not only the setting but also the characters which have been adapted to make them contemporary. They create modern figures whose lives partly mirror those of the original characters in the Shakespearean play; on the contrary, it is possible to notice how the other authors have retold the story of Shakespeare's characters as in the original hypotext. These features make the Shakespearian play nearer to young adult readers' world and experiences.

Moreover, the use of a contemporary setting for a story which shares with *Hamlet* so many elements as we have mentioned until now (plot, characterization), helps to emphasize the evident contemporaneity of many of the play's themes⁷. Just to quote an example of this feature, Haig's novel as an uncorrected piece of Philip's writing,

⁶ Thompson and Taylor's study, quoted in Abigail Rokison, *Shakespeare for Young People, Productions, Versions and Adaptations*. London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 150.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 152 – 153.

devoid of punctuation or apostrophes, and often deliberately awkward in expression in a way that is sometimes comic. This style of writing allows the reader to enter the protagonist's uncensored thoughts and emotions, and it also serves to endorse the value of a child's honest expression of his feelings without any filter.

In addition, Haig analyses the issue of bullying, as in Paterson's novel: this is another common theme in children's literature. The protagonists of these two novels are not literary heroes, they are pensive, isolated little boys, bullied by their peers in school. Among all the interesting themes and features of the Shakespearian play, our work has focused on the fascinating figure of Ophelia, and how this character has been changed during the process of rewriting the hypotext of *Hamlet*.

The fact that Ophelia has been used by all manners of artists (in arts, literature, cinema and so on) to channel a wide array of historically contingent cultural fantasies about madness and femininity has been extensively demonstrated during our analysis. As a consequence, various writers have referred to her as an interesting index of social reality⁸, both if she is in her original setting, and if she is put in a more modern atmosphere. Moreover, as both a textual and a theatrical/literary phenomenon, any modern Ophelia stands in for a woman – or a kind of woman, or a group of women – that the culture at large cannot, or will not, or is not worried about, imagine and represent, as a kind of “person” which is marginalized by a predominant male world and considered inferior and submissive.

Specifically, Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet*, Klein's *Ophelia*, Reisert's *Ophelia's Revenge*, and also Trafford's *Ophelia*, all make Ophelia the real protagonist of their novels, giving her far more agency and opportunity for self-expression than her Shakespearian counterpart. Putting Ophelia at the centre of the story may help to draw girls into

⁸ Jeremy Lopez's essay *Reviewing Ophelia* reported in In Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 29.

what is essentially a “male-dominated play”, and to encourage them to consider Ophelia’s behaviour and attitude in relation to their own life, background and experiences.

In our analysis we have taken in exam also some novels which are aimed particularly at boys, have male protagonists and male narrators, even if their Ophelia figures are, perhaps inevitably, made more assertive and vocal than the character depicted in the Shakespearian play: Haig’s *The Dead Fathers Club*, in which the protagonist is young Philip, Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia*, in which Jess is the outsider teenager version of the Shakespearian Hamlet and, Bergantino’s *Hamlet II*, in which the Hamlet figure is impersonated by Dan Cameron, the more popular footballer player in the school.

One of the main ways in which all the novels analysed in this work, allow their female characters a “voice” is in writing in the first person, a strategy employed by most of the novelists considered in this analysis. It is also the technique employed by Haig, who writes from the point of view of their male protagonist. The capacity to tell a story in the first person is one of the key differences between prose and drama, an important consideration when we think about the transposition of *Hamlet* from the medium of drama to the prosaic one. The Shakespearian play offers a multiplicity of unmediated characters-voices, while, on the contrary, these adaptations in novel-form transmit the story through the eyes of a single character⁹.

While Haig’s Ophelian figure, Leah, plays a smaller role in the novel than her counterpart, she is represented as a feistier figure than the Bard’s Ophelia. Moreover, she has now a proper own real story, independent of that of the protagonist: she has her feelings, thoughts and experiences.

⁹ In Abigail Rokison, *Shakespeare for Young People, Productions, Versions and Adaptations*. London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 149.

Fiedler, Klein and Reisert, but also Ray and Trafford, reverse this tendency, electing to make Ophelia the real protagonist and, in some cases, the narrator of her own story, and through her eyes the reader sees the events unfold and now is informed of her motivations, thoughts and feelings. Towards the end of Klein's book, for example, Ophelia, when is considering her actions, seems to challenge explicitly her Shakespearian counterpart's lack of an independent story.

Although Klein's, Reisert's and Fiedler's keep the original geographical and historical setting of the story, their protagonists have the sensibilities of modern young women, and can be compared to Ray's version of Ophelia: they are proactive, strong, bright and also sexually aware and engineer much of the action of the story. In these three novels, the original ending is completely subverted: in *Ophelia* we have an overt defiance, while in *Dating Hamlet* and *Ophelia's Revenge* the reader can see Ophelia, as narrator, making plain her feelings and intentions as if she were speaking a soliloquy on a stage. And, above all, she survives.

The sexual aspect is also important in these novels, especially in Klein's and Reisert's, where Ophelia and Hamlet engage in sexual intercourse, while Fiedler's Ophelia is portrayed as physically intimate with Hamlet, resisting sleeping with him until after their marriage, but enjoying with him an intimate exploration of each other's bodies. In Trafford, Ophelia and Hamlet are already bond by a spousal relationship, even if the theme of sexuality, but also fidelity/infidelity is widely exposed. In Ray, on the contrary, the theme of infidelity is only linked to Hamlet and male characters: this may sounds as a sort of critique to the male world and his behaviour towards women, even if the author never mentions explicitly her thought about this issue. Anyway, the acknowledgement of Ophelia's sexual desires in these novels helps to free the character from a focus of frustrated sexuality as the principal possible cause of her

madness¹⁰. In some cases, her madness drives her to fake death, especially in Fiedler's and Klein's books where the "green girl" uses a sleeping draught as an allusion to Shakespeare's Juliet. Moreover, in other cases she escapes Elsinore telling the truth about the events occurred there, stealing the role that the Bard assigned in his play to Horatio.

The treatment of the character of Ophelia in all the novels taken in exam as a more assertive, smart and "unbowed" figure is a strategy used to provide the character with a voice that is completely muted in the Shakespearian play¹¹: the new version of Ophelia has finally her own voice and her own personality. These authors have given her a "second chance" and they have allowed her to survive.

As we have seen, rewritings can lead a text to develop unimaginative new perspectives of revising and *Hamlet* is the perfect candidate to future other new works to come.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 161.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 163.

Appendix

The figure of Ophelia has always been fascinating and has captured the attention of everyone who has read about her, therefore this appendix supports the study of this Shakespearean character.

The paintings shown below, clearly inspired by *Hamlet*, present us the image of a girl constantly suffering, probably as a consequence of a sharp pain for which she has lost her mind and the sense of self completely. Her hair, loose down her back, displays a deep inner illness that, over the centuries, authors and critics have labeled as the Shakespearean portrait of female madness, a suffering that cannot find any solution. Her pale skin and her white robe enrich further our imagination, making us think of her appearance and her virginal purity, and, in the end, to her young and innocent soul. Very often, the "disease of Ophelia" has taken the connotation of "Melancholia", according to the definition of the first psychiatric studies of this malaise, characterized more by emotional symptoms than others which can be more objective. Then, in the paintings we show here, it is possible to notice both the floral element and the one of water, two powerful symbols that have always accompanied the figure of Ophelia: while cut and thrown away flowers symbolize the young girl's life which has gone "wasted" and that has ended in a premature death, on the other hand, water is associated with the female being that can give life but, unfortunately, in Ophelia's story it is only a cause of death. A marginal figure in the tragedy of *Hamlet*, she remains forever immortalized in these works, creating an unexpectedly rich and multifaceted undelatable imaginary.

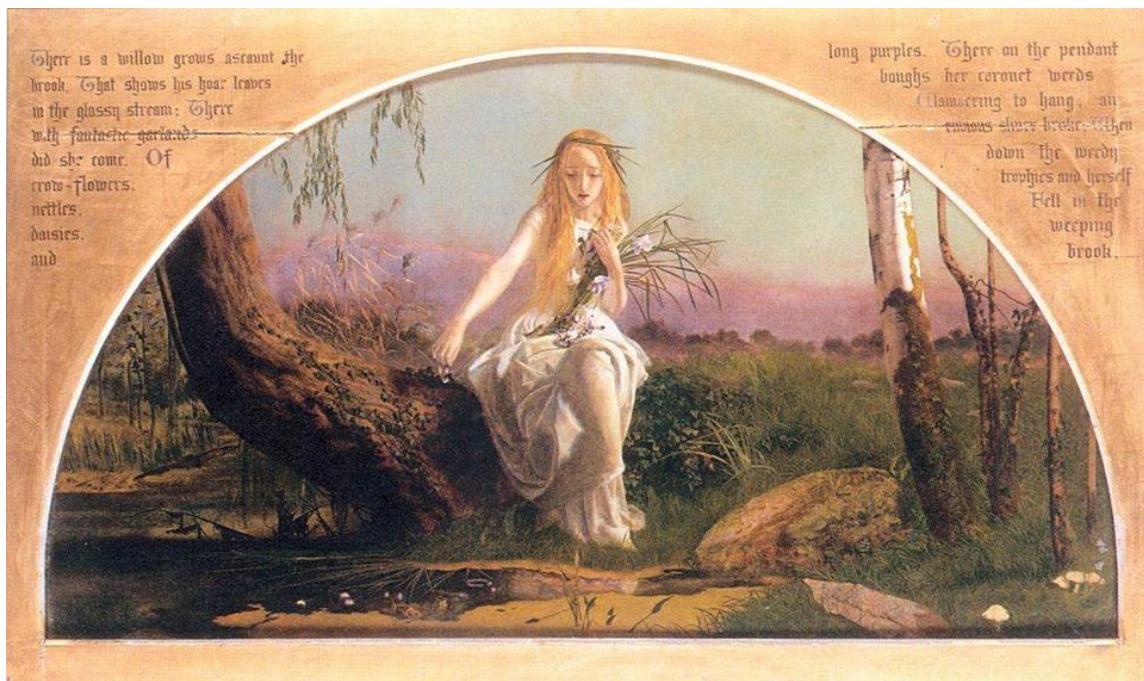


Figure 1. Hughes, Arthur; *Ophelia*; ca. 1851 – 53; oil on panel.



Figure 2. Millais, John Everett; *Ophelia*; ca. 1851 – 52; oil on canvas.



Figure 3. Delacroix, Eugène; *The Death of Ophelia*; 1853; oil on canvas.



Figure 4. Cabanel, Alexandre; *Ophelia*; 1883; oil on canvas.



Figure 5. Waterhouse, John William; *Ophelia*; 1889; oil on canvas.



Figure 6. Lefebvre, Jules Joseph; *Ophelia*; 1890; oil on canvas.



Figure 7 - 8. Waterhouse, John William; *Ophelia*; 1894; 1910; oil on canvas.

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