

# Ophelian Negotiations: Remediating the Girl on YouTube

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## Abstract

It is no longer possible to think of Ophelia simply as the restricted tragic girl of *Hamlet*. Rather, she is a recurrent text, image, and even a brand that can be endlessly repurposed and appropriated. Building on recent work on Ophelia as a discourse that names and constitutes the contemporary girl, this essay examines a variety of Ophelia productions on the video-sharing platform YouTube. It identifies particular genres of response and situates them in terms of current debates within girls' studies, as well as media studies. The objective here is to think more precisely about the modes and politics of girls' media uses. What is at stake in the turn — or return — to Ophelia within online culture? To what extent is Ophelia a progressive text? More broadly, does the democratic media-making associated with Web 2.0 signal new, meaningful forms of feminism, or might we be dealing with the latest phase of "girl power"? This essay interprets Ophelia videos in terms of a triptych, "YouTube-Shakespeare-Ophelia." Each of these terms should be understood as a frame, both enabling and delimiting, through which girls produce and/or perform postfeminist identities online. Ophelia becomes a meta-language for a set of negotiations about girl culture and the (im)possibility of authentic expression in the contemporary mediascape.

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*Anyone with a webcam now has a stronger voice and presence. — Wesch 2009*

*She's not real. — Viewer post on LonelyGirl15 House Arrest*

*The canonical position of Shakespeare as an index of Western culture can suggest [...] the retrospective construction of modern girls via available representations of girls in the past." — Driscoll 2002*

In the YouTube video *Ophelia's Vlogs* (by dancingqueenajm; uploaded 8 January 2012, 192 views), a Barbie-type Ophelia (with a hint of Marilyn Monroe and cues to films like *Clueless* and *Mean Girls*) delivers her diary digest to a webcam. Over a series of five vlogs, this camgirl Ophelia updates the viewer on her relationship with Hamlet. Surtitles separate the video diaries, which are further individuated through physical adjustments — Ophelia's blond hairstyle changes in each installment — and through song choice, each one appropriate to Ophelia's unfolding revelations. In

the first piece to camera, as Ophelia speaks of her romance with Hamlet, Rick Astley's 1980s pop-factory hit "Never Going Give You Up" is playing in the background. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Later, as Hamlet seems less than reliable, the background track — this time Avril Lavinge's "Happy Ending" — takes on an ironic twist. The pop references seem deliberately outdated, as if suggesting that this clueless Ophelia is not tuned into contemporary girl culture. Several aspects of this video will resonate with anyone familiar with the tropes of YouTube culture and, more specifically, the emerging canon of Shakespeare videos in that setting.<sup>1</sup> As with so many YouTube Shakespeare videos, *Ophelia's Vlogs* is parodic in tone. It filters Shakespeare through popular culture. The video also explicitly references and, indeed, parodies the vlog or video diary, a genre of self-expression that, although predating YouTube itself, has become a staple of YouTube culture and the invitation of its trademarked strapline to "Broadcast Yourself."<sup>2</sup>

Assuming the voice of an imagined or absent person, the performer makes recourse to the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia (Desmet 2008, 237). The act of impersonating or remembering Ophelia places *Ophelia's Vlogs* within the context of that character's rich citational history and appropriability (Peterson and Williams 2012; Showalter 1985). Shakespearean drama becomes a culturally valorized space — as Catherine Driscoll suggests in her important study of girl culture (2002) — where the idea of the girl takes shape and where girls might productively recognize their own self-identification as girls. In adapting the vlog and uploading on to YouTube, the videographer engages in the process known as remediation, understood in Bolter and Grusin's influential study as the defining characteristic of contemporary media. A new medium authenticates itself in relation to "earlier technologies of representation," or re-purposes those technologies and their cultural functions (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 46). Thus, the vlog involves the remediation of the soliloquy, at once appropriating its form and dispersing it via the video distribution platform. Through remediation, the young performer in *Ophelia's Vlogs* simultaneously finds an online alias or identity, in a sense "becoming" Ophelia, and also replaces the older technology of representation that is Shakespeare's character. Remediation thus involves a return to history — to Ophelia as a text of girlhood — and also a turn away from her in the pursuit of new expressions of the girl. The description accompanying the video provides further insight into the context for this Ophelia performance: "we explored Ophelia's character in relation to teenage girls, using the book *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher. It's also a satire about white teenage girls" (*Ophelia's Vlogs*). In a narrow sense, then, school or educational contexts account for this turn towards Ophelia, especially as YouTube is being used in the classroom as a network to encourage students to engage in the text through media production and to subsequently share their work with peers (Thompson 2010). Yet,

as suggested by the references to Pipher's psychological study of female adolescence and to the vlog's status as a satire, the video takes us beyond the specificities of school culture. Through its knowing combination of the vlog with Ophelia as an icon of girl culture, the video foregrounds some of the ways in which girls use YouTube and also Shakespeare to explore certain archetypes of femininity and girlhood as received and consumed through mass media.

In one sense, there is nothing especially new at work here: Ophelia's varied cultural afterlives have been well documented. Ophelia supplies a metaphor for cultural representations of girls and has variously represented an ideal of femininity and beauty, the teenage girl-in-crisis, regulated female sexuality, and the spectacularization of female death (Hulbert 2006). In another sense, however, the aggregation of Ophelias on Web 2.0 and social media is a novel development, not least in terms of the new scales of distribution and connectivity that platforms realize for vernacular or amateur media productions (Lovink 2011, 50-62). Ophelia is now a discourse that names and constitutes the contemporary girl. Recent work within Shakespeare studies has been attending to these emerging Ophelias (Iyengar and Desmet 2012). The photo and media sharing sites Flickr and Tumblr contain pages devoted to her image.<sup>3</sup> On YouTube alone, there are some 23,500 videos tagged with the name Ophelia.<sup>4</sup> Within these various settings, Ophelia is not an exclusively feminine text. Young men respond to her image through online video production. Men also constitute a potential audience for Ophelia videos, a fact that might involve a return to the gendered nature of spectatorship associated with earlier images of Ophelia, in which the dying or dead female body is both eroticized for and made legible through a male gaze (Romanska 2005). She is also a space where young boys encounter constructions of girlhood and assumptions about gender roles. For instance, in the video *Help Ophelia Get Cured!!* (uploaded 30 September 2013, 59 views), two school boys playfully act out the "mad" Ophelia and, through embedded hyperlinks in the video, invite us to view their cures for her.

Yet, simply recognizing that Ophelia is a recurrent text within contemporary online culture is not sufficient. It is necessary to address what the turn to Ophelia might reveal about our contemporary media arrangements. We also need to ask to what extent, if any, Ophelia constitutes a progressive text? Does the democratic media-making of the Internet herald new and meaningful forms of feminism, or rather are we dealing with the latest phase of commodified and self-regarding girl power, which may ultimately leave patriarchy intact? These questions go to a broader issue about contemporary girls' media culture, in particular the politics of vernacular productions, productions made possible in the first instance by the "participatory culture" of Web 2.0 (Jenkins 1992). A production such as *Ophelia's Vlogs* suggest the possibilities of Web 2.0 technologies for

new forms of networked vernacular media production, in which inheres the potential for a sense of community, of belonging to a culture or a style, as well as what Theresa Senft has stressed in her important work on camgirls as the possibility of writing back to commercially produced media, contesting those images as perpetuated via the contemporary media industry (Senft 2008, 43).

At the same time, however, as Senft and other critics have suggested, behind the critically reactive properties of online identity performance may lurk the frustration that authenticity is no longer available within postmodern media culture or that modes of self-presentation have acquired the surface meanings associated with brand culture. As Sarah Banet-Weiser observes, "the fact that some girls produce media — and thus ostensibly produce themselves through their self-presentation — within the context of a commercially driven technological space is not only evidence of a kind of empowering self-work but also a way to self-brand in an increasingly ubiquitous brand culture" (Banet-Wesier 2011, 284). The case of *LonelyGirl15* is illustrative here: the emotive vlogs of "Bree," who presented herself as a genuine camgirl, turned out to be a carefully scripted production of authenticity by two independent filmmakers (Burgess and Green 2009, 27-30; Senft 2008, 29-30). As a viewer post (cited in the epigraph above) reminds us, "She's not real." On YouTube, the webcam enables both a new form of empowered self-expression and also simulations and manipulations of a broadcast self. In Ophelia videos, the search for authenticity is often played out via the videographer's claim that her recreation offers a faithful account of Ophelia's death.

Building on existing critical analyses of Web 2.0 Ophelia, this essay explores how girls on YouTube deploy Ophelia as a meta-language for girl culture, gender identity, and the (im)possibility of authentic expression in the contemporary mediascape. The selection of YouTube is partly to do with the platform's association with forms of self-expression and performance that blur the lines between the live and the mediatized, the private and the public, thus offering us insight into the contradictory nature of being online. YouTube is also focused upon because, as the dominant video-sharing site within the contemporary mediascape (currently attracting over 1 billion views per month), it has attained a certain cultural and, indeed, brand ubiquity, which in turn have made it the default place to which individuals go to either be online or watch others doing so (YouTube Statistics 2013). When it comes to exploring self-initiated production and expression, YouTube presents the researcher with a copia of content. For Shakespeare studies, the platform becomes an attractive and exciting space for user-generated responses to the Bard, as well as a convenient archive of Shakespeare performance across film, TV, and theater. In arriving at a sense of what we notice and/or what videos are selected for analysis, we need to recognize how YouTube facilitates serendipitous search — the surfing from one video to another — and also a controlled viewing experience, since the YouTube algorithm tracks our selections and then returns related

videos, presented on the right hand side of the interface as "Recommended for you." Accordingly, the examples of YouTube Ophelias selected and discussed in this essay are not purely subjective choices on my part, but reflect a hidden, algorithmic determination of relevance. At the same time, however, I have endeavored to consider examples that illustrate particular genres of response to Ophelia (such as the vlog, the dramatization, the fan music video) in order to think more precisely about the modes — and, indeed, politics — of girls' media uses.

### Framing the Girl

The kinds of self-expression that I trace in this essay instance the complex negotiation of individual agency within the "culture industry" (Adorno 2001), which suggests a certain acquiescence to contemporary brand culture and also a critical, if ultimately contained, interrogation of its recurring images and tropes of femininity. In other words, the concatenation of YouTube-Shakespeare-Ophelia that this essay explores might be understood as a triptych through which girls produce and/or perform postfeminist identities online. The image of the triptych suggests an available frame for identity, but also one that is potentially enclosing and delimiting. Each component of the YouTube-Shakespeare-Ophelia triptych is already situated within and inscribed by mass media and consumer culture. As such, none of them can be said to provide a space or language outside of the culture industry and its homogenizing, alienating effects.

YouTube itself entails a branding of individual identity and expression. The strap line and trademark icon are overt reminders of YouTube's deep connections to corporate media (Jarrett 2008). Any user of the platform will be familiar with the frequency of advertisement pop-ups and banners. These dimensions of the browsing and viewing experience remind us that YouTube is "both industry and user-driven" (Snickars and Vonderau 2009, 11). The intersection of commercially produced content and amateur production — what some commentators have referred to as the "two YouTubes" (Burgess and Green 2009, 41) — has long been a feature of the site, and any user of YouTube would be familiar with the extent to which these seemingly distinct modes of cultural production overlap and intersect, as users borrow from and repurpose commercially produced content. In this sense, YouTube answers to theories of media convergence and spreadability, which envisage the media consumer as an active participant in the flow of mass media (Jenkins et al. 2013; Jenkins et al. 2006). By way of contrast with "older notions of passive media spectatorship" (Jenkins 2006, 3), media consumers are understood to have greater opportunities to intervene in media production that was typically — though not universally — the preserve of commercial and professional producers. Within this new media schema of participatory culture, YouTube "allows everyone to perform their own 'bardic function,'" as John Hartley puts

it (Hartley 2009, 133). In a Shakespearean context, this is a resonant phrase. However, Hartley is using the bard of Celtic tradition as a metaphor to express what he sees as the transition from a centralized form of communal storytelling to one that is more democratic and polyphonic.

The idea of online participation as a form of story-telling, with users making their own content rather than passively receiving it from traditional broadcast media, corresponds well with YouTube's image as a popular platform for "ordinary people" (Strangelove 2010), as evidenced by its now iconic videos of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> Yet, with participation comes a degree of acquiescence to the commercial and the corporate (Gehl 2009; Wasko and Erickson 2011). An extreme instance of this is illustrated by the practice of some YouTubers, who reproduce their own names with the font and icon of the YouTube logo, thus presenting their channel as a branded extension of themselves and of YouTube.<sup>6</sup> A less overt instance — largely because the YouTube interface has acquired a visual familiarity — is the way in which the YouTube search page involves a symbolic framing of individuals into video boxes that appear alongside advertisements. The self becomes a mediated thing, and even a commodity to be shared. A network or community can emerge here, but these become entangled in mass media, or vie for attention within the abundant flow of information. As danah boyd notes, "in an environment where following one's friends involves the same technologies as observing the follies of celebrity, individuals find themselves embedded in the attention economy, as consumers and producers" (boyd 2011, 53). In this scenario, as Alexandra Juhasz argues, YouTube is both a platform for non-professional media making and, through its provision of a plethora of visuals for its vast audience, also an ideal space for advertisers (Juhasz 2011). YouTube thus becomes another example of the ways in which our (online) lives bear traces of mass media and the marks of the corporate, the sense that our social identities and even modes of expression are conditioned by media images. However, as boyd's work suggests more broadly, the self that emerges here reveals the shaping force of an increasingly "networked public," where new scales of connection (although offering no guarantee of an audience) become possible and where existing notions of what constitutes public and private are complicated (boyd 2011, 49-55). There may be a sense that broadcasting on YouTube reflects a rush to participate in the flow of information and content for the sake of connectivity itself, but such an environment need not be regarded as entirely negative, since forms of self-branding also allow for degrees of identity play. As boyd puts it, "why shouldn't we all have the ability to [. . .] craft our identity in a public culture?" (boyd 2012, 75).

Shakespeare, the second component of the triptych, also operates like a brand in contemporary popular culture, a citational commodity that denotes forms of symbolic capital (we might think

here of the Bard as a dimension of the British tourist industry), as well as more overt commercial appropriations (we might think here of Benedict Cumberbatch providing the voiceover of "All the World's a Stage" for the Google+ advert).<sup>7</sup> On YouTube, Shakespeare's citational properties are immediately apparent, with the platform providing an accidental archive of Shakespeareana. Even a cursory search under Shakespeare will reveal the ways in which individuals are responding to and engaging with the texts, enacting their "bardic function." Yet, while the intersection of the Tube and the Bard has produced new versions of amateur and popular Shakespeare (perhaps bringing us close to forms of Shakespeare by and for the people), as accessed via YouTube such vernacular or grassroots iterations cannot be separated out from industry or commercially produced content. What's more, as accessed via YouTube, user-generated Shakespeare is already part of mass media.

Ophelia, the third component of a triptych, which I am suggesting provides one of the available frames through which girls engage in media production, is similarly implicated in the culture industry. She has attained a citational ubiquity across media and while she may, as noted above, signify in substantial ways, she is also reducible to a style or image. For some YouTubers, her name provides a convenient way to label their channels, as in *Opheliasays*<sup>8</sup> and *OpheliasaysWhaaaa*.<sup>9</sup> Other YouTubers provide a step-by-step guide to looking like Ophelia, as in *Halloween Makeup Tutorial: Ophelia — drowned body/nymph/waterspirit* (uploaded 1 November 2009, 4,363 views). This "how to" video is, quite literally, about style over substance. Yet, it may not be as far removed from a production such as *Ophelia's Vlogs*, since both trade in images of and a discourse about girl power, even when they make recourse to irony. Synonymous with the emergence of the Spice Girls in the 1990s, the girl power phenomenon has come to denote post- or commodity feminism, in which the politics gives way to a look or style. As critics have observed, postfeminism is contradictory because while, on the one hand, it advances autonomy for girls and adult women and suggests self-control over their bodies, on the other, it leads to a fixation with surface appearance, which risks inviting objectification through a male gaze (Bae 2011). The association of the phrase with a largely manufactured pop band highlights how the girl power discourse is both a product of consumer culture and, by directing girls towards an autonomy based on image and appearance, and thus towards consumerism, also sustains that culture. A more recent analogy is the HBO series *GIRLS*, which though producing new archetypes of the girl/young woman in its depiction of a group of twenty-something friends struggling to find direction in their personal and professional lives, nonetheless relies on a postfeminist, consumerist concept of girl power and leaves its female characters curiously dependent on the men in their lives. At the same time, however, these examples of commercial girl culture should not automatically be read as politically redundant; Catherine

Driscoll's work has demonstrated the need to critically interrogate the assumption that girls' culture is necessarily conformist (Driscoll 2002, 267-301). One of the achievements of the Spice Girl phenomenon, for instance, was to enable girls to regard "feminism [as] necessary and fun" (Susan J. Douglas, quoted in Driscoll 2002, 281).

Although less commercially produced than a pop group, Ophelia is nonetheless part of a girl power discourse, one that is also entangled in mass media and that produces certain forms of identity for girls to relate to. Marnina Gonick elaborates on this point when she relates the "Reviving Ophelia" discourse (associated with Mary Pipher's book of the same name) to girl power and its production of the "neoliberal girl subject" (Gonick 2006). In Pipher's work, Ophelia provided a useful starting point for diagnosing "the destructive forces that affect young women," including anxieties induced by peer-pressure and the damaging effects of media representations of the female body on self-esteem (Pipher, quoted in Hulbert 2006, 205). Ophelia becomes a synecdoche for girlhood in crisis, with the media taken "to task for its "girl hostile culture" (Pipher, quoted in Gonick 2006, 12). A video presentation by Pipher is available on YouTube (uploaded 4 October 2006, 124,700 views),<sup>10</sup> and through YouTube's system of video tags, it connects with videos such as *Girls, Sexuality, and the Media* (uploaded 16 July 2007, 24,238 views), which critiques dominant representations of women in the media.<sup>11</sup> (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) In looking at the YouTube interface, therefore, it is possible to apprehend the uses to which Ophelia has been put, as well as the set of issues regarding female adolescence and the machineries of representation that continue to flow out from her name. However, while providing "more spaces for young women to critically examine changing discourses of femininity," the "Reviving Ophelia" discourse "may, ironically, also be contributing to the proliferation of the girl-damaging media images through its own mass marketing" (Gonick 2006, 15). YouTube Ophelia videos could be said to have similar effects. For Gonick, the "Reviving Ophelia" phenomenon is a form of girl power that unhelpfully advances "processes of individualization that [. . .] direct attention from structural explanations for inequality toward explanations of personal circumstances and personality traits" (Gonick 2006, 2). In other words, Ophelia becomes a "technology for the production of certain kinds of persons" (18). In this model, girlhood and the move into the agency of adulthood are normalized as white and predicated on the presence, or attainment, of a certain, we might say bourgeois, lifestyle in which the girl/woman can afford the "right look."

It is precisely a sense of an acquired feminine and girl aesthetic that *Ophelia's Vlogs* parodies in its exaggerated performance of the teen girl. Gender is presented here as a series of signs and gestures. The performance conveys Ophelia's alternating state as a matter of style: the manicured,



hyper-femininity of the first vlog gives way to a disheveled girl in the later entries, with hair undone and makeup smudged. These visual cues to Ophelia's deteriorating state, as brought on by Hamlet's behavior, contrast with Ophelia's spoken words, where she continues to think favorably of Hamlet and his attentions. The video thus prompts us to reflect on feminine appearance as demanded by masculine culture. As noted earlier, this video references the vlog and webcam, both of which have offered important technologies of representation for women. The critical possibility of these modes has been traced in Senft's work on camgirls, for whom the humble webcam is a "means to speak back to the new media industry," as well as providing forms of community or networks (Senft 2008, 43). The exposure of *LonelyGirl15* as a deliberately inauthentic performance of a camgirl is potentially damaging to the critical efficacy of the vlog. Irony, parody, and the incongruous emerge as the dominant tone and aesthetic of YouTube vernacular productions, which tend towards the quick and immediately recognizable gag rather than the meaningful.<sup>12</sup> This quick humor should be understood as a function of YouTube's attention economy, where the proliferation of competing videos requires that videos be short, noticeable, and accessible. One implication of such fast-paced and potentially superficial viewing is a short-circuiting of irony and parody; if suddenly everywhere, do they lose their critical edge? *Ophelia's Vlogs* may instance YouTube's tendency toward ironic free fall. While the video does important work in disclosing, through performance, a set of gendered stereotypes and archetypes inherited from popular media — as in the clueless girl, the Barbie girl, and the blond — at the same time it trades in those surface appearances and plays the vlog for laughs.

From another perspective, however, the video's production of inauthenticity suggests a form of deliberate self-distancing from the predations of media and of being public online. The vlog, with its direct address to camera, often from the bedroom or some other space associated with privacy, plays off a blurring of the private and the public, of self-revelation and scripted self-presentation. For the viewer, it is as if the person has opened a window on to her life and allowed us to eavesdrop on her performance. This is the "publicness" of social media (boyd 2012, 75), or the always-on window that seems to erode the private altogether. Yet, as boyd and others have noted, this aspect of social media has brought about a more complex negotiation of privacy and publicity. We recognize, too, that the vlog is a mediated event, and one that, when uploaded to YouTube, also becomes a digital object that can be shared easily across other platforms. It thus instances the intersection of the live and the mediatized, which Philip Auslander regards as a defining feature of contemporary cultural production (Auslander 1999). Impersonating Ophelia as a teen girl allows for a frame or filter through which the self can be safely mediated; the use of an online alias provides an additional

frame. Nonetheless, even as she engages in prosopopoeia, the young performer reveals something of herself; as a viewer, we are aware of the body beneath this performance, and thus of a "real" teen girl and her private space, since a bedroom is visible in the rear of the camera. Furthermore, in an outtake that appears at the end of the credits, we see the performer out of character. In such moments of elision between performer and role, between a simulated and real being, we can sense how Ophelia functions as a template through which teenage girls are negotiating their own identity in and through the "publicness" of social media, as well as expressions of girlhood as they are mediated to them through popular media.

Other genres within YouTube culture offer further levels of self-distancing and mediation. For instance, the extremely popular practice of fan-made music videos provides for indirect media participation. Here, the identity of producers need not be revealed publicly; their gender, or age, or any other of the traditional markers of identity may be available only to their immediate peers, or to their network of YouTube subscribers (Lange 2009). A popular form of fan media production, these videos take a track and set it to moving images, usually borrowed from TV and/or film. They are indicative of remix culture more generally (Lessig 2008). In borrowing from professional or commercially produced content and then modifying it, these videos instance the convergence of the new media user as both consumer and producer, as the recipient of mass media products and the manipulator of them. Shakespeare has received the remix treatment, with Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* proving especially popular.<sup>13</sup> Ophelia also functions as a recurrent text in fan music videos. Within the remixes of Ophelia, Natalie Merchant's elegiac track "Ophelia" proves a popular choice. Through YouTube's system of tags, it has become part of the network of Ophelias, connecting girls through their online production. In *Ophelia Multifandom Tribute* (uploaded 4 August 2009, 3,684 views), Merchant's song is set to a series of images from popular TV shows such as *Merlin*, *Robin Hood*, and *Doctor Who*, as well as to the BBC *Hamlet* featuring David Tennant as the Prince and Mariah Gale as Ophelia. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) The fan video makes good use of Merchant's song. Taking its cue from that track, in which Merchant discovers Shakespeare's "poor Ophelia" (*Hamlet* 4.1.183) as a recurring figure in history, from demi-goddess to suffragette to symbol of the nation, the video's selected images of latter day Hamlet and Ophelia archetypes suggests that Ophelia's love can never simply be, but is rather continually thwarted by circumstance or fate. Merchant's track also features in the remix *Marilyn Monroe — Ophelia* (uploaded 10 March 2009, 1,145 views), where it is set to looping images of the iconic actress. With Monroe presented as a latter-day Ophelia, the video elegizes both figures. However, the video's lament carries a broader resonance. The description below the video includes

Monroe's remark "I don't mind being in a man's world as long as I can be a woman in it," which as applied to Ophelia, takes on an ironic note. Ophelia and Monroe are emblematic of women denied agency, whose stories must be told and told again in order to foreground the long history of gender inequality. At the same time, this troubling repetition suggests that both figures are trapped in a narrative loop that will not let them be.

### Remediating Ophelia, Contesting the (Patriarchal) Bard

These videos illustrate some of the uses to which Ophelia is being put on YouTube. They warrant attention because they represent vernacular Shakespeare production within that setting.<sup>14</sup> However, claims for the significance of Ophelia need to be contextualized in terms of the broader frames of reference available on YouTube and within popular culture: as might be expected with contemporary iterations of Shakespeare more generally, Ophelia is simply one among a number of images and texts to be adapted within YouTube's culture of creative appropriation and mashup. We have moved from Shakespeare as a centripetal cultural icon towards a centrifugal, diffuse sense of the characters as available reference points or ciphers. The move from the anchoring authority of the Bard towards a single character and her afterlife is itself interesting, suggesting as it does a revisionary impulse; certainly, as Ophelian rather than Shakespearean negotiations, Ophelia videos can be understood as registering frustration with the play's gender politics. We once again encounter possibilities for new forms of expression and agency. Yet, as much as girls might contest images of femininity through Ophelia, they draw from an existing database of images and references, or an Ophelia discourse, which is suggestive of the repetition and derivation associated with contemporary cultural production. As such, Ophelia is both an enabling and delimiting text for fans and videographers.

This contradictory dimension of Ophelia can be pursued with reference to the concept of remediation, which as noted at the outset, captures the extent to which an emerging medium or technology of representation defines and authenticates itself in relation to older, or existing forms, in the process arrogating their cultural functions. In the case of the online vlog, we can recognize how it not only adapts the properties of the soliloquy, but also proliferates and democratizes their use. YouTube itself mirrors this process because, as a video-sharing technology, the platform hosts existing media forms such as film and TV, while at the same time "hybridizing" (Grusin 2007) such forms and their practices into something that looks new and unprecedented. In both instances, with the vlog as a remediation of an earlier form, YouTube as a remediation of disparate forms, there is a sense of history, of difference from the past, as one form is displaced by another. At the same time, there is a sense of continuity with the past, since the older form can be said to survive,

albeit in a different guise, in the "new" form. Remediation thus alerts us to how a medium has a history. However, we are not dealing with a linear movement towards ever more sophisticated modes of representation, but rather a series of repetitions. The repetition that inheres within acts of remediation, as older forms and their cultural functions circulate as if on a continuous loop, has important implications for the politics of new media production. In relation to responses to Ophelia, it means that what seems new is in fact a repetition of a familiar theme; the gendered representations of Hamlet are thus put back into circulation through each iteration.

Yet, just as remediation suggests the degrees of creative exhaustion that may ghost contemporary media production and interventions, the act of reverting to and then repurposing earlier forms suggests its restorative properties. Bolter and Grusin note that the word "remediation" derives from the Latin *remederi*, "to heal, to restore to health," and while they resist interpreting remediation as progressive, they do acknowledge that it can entail reform "in a social or political sense" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 59-60). For Sujata Iyengar and Christy Desmet, video responses to Ophelia remedy "the perceived ills or omissions of earlier forms of art" (Iyengar and Desmet 2012, 62), so that while Ophelia is revived through each remediation, it is a different Ophelia from the one scripted by the play. As they observe, "Ophelia requires a more complete biography than Shakespeare could ever have imagined for her" (73). One way in which girls on YouTube seek to remedy and redress received constructions of Ophelia is through the re-creation of the circumstances of her drowning. Bella1951's *Ophelia Drowns* (uploaded 2 September 2007, 148,256 views) is an especially interesting example of such dramatizations. The videographer prefaces her impersonation of Ophelia with a direct address to the camera, in which she explains the context for the re-creation. The video uses the naturalistic setting of a weeping brook, as well as a voiceover of Gertrude's description of Ophelia's last living moments. The effect is to present the video as a close study of *Hamlet's* representation of Ophelia's death, which is interpreted here as an accident rather than a suicide. As Ophelia attempts to hang a garland on a tree, she falls into the water. The camera lingers on her as she struggles against the current and tries to hold on to the rocks. As we see Ophelia fully submerged in the water, her arms stretched back and her lifeless body carried by the current, Bella1951's performance redresses both Gertrude's description of a serene, aestheticized dead Ophelia and also subsequent representations of her eroticized floating body. This is Ophelia before she assumes the angelic pose of Millais's painting. In taking the time to re-create Ophelia's death scene and in interpreting the circumstance of her death as a drowning, the video seeks to tell a story that is slightly different from the one of beautiful Ophelia in *Hamlet*. In the process, the video asserts the authenticity of its version of Ophelia, as if to say it is truer to the character. The vlog-style address at the start of the video, which connects the performer's identity

with her subsequent embodiment of Ophelia, furthers the impression of a personalized, authentic investment in what Ophelia and her image means. Ophelia is thus made into a space by and for girls, which enables them to enact a form of self-expression that seems real, or unmediated. Of course, the irony is that such expressions are secured through a pre-fabricated template called "Ophelia."

Another way in which girls respond to Ophelia is to redress lacunae in the play and make creative additions to its construction of the character. *Ophelia's Suicide Soliloquy* (uploaded 2 July 2008, 10,358 views), by fidelis1400, can be viewed as Ophelia's final broadcast, of and by herself. The video replaces the soliloquy with the vlog and, in engaging in the act of remediation, draws attention to the gendered work of that device. Here, Ophelia gets to soliloquize and is imbued with private thoughts and an intellectual life that, in stark counterpoint to Hamlet, she is denied in the play. "This [is] brilliant!" posts one viewer, "if only it were in the real play." The sense that we are accessing Ophelia's private thoughts is further conveyed through the use of lighting and location. Shot in black and white, Ophelia cuts a shadowy figure, with only the outline of her face and a white night dress visible. As Ophelia delivers an apostrophe to the "weeping brook" (*Hamlet*, 4.7.173) of Gertrude's description, the lapping of water can be heard and it becomes apparent that this Ophelia is speaking from a bath. Ophelia's thoughts are delivered in a poetic style, most likely intended to sound authentic to Shakespearean verse. If this style appears strained, perhaps it is appropriate; we should expect Ophelia's final soliloquy to sound tongue-tied. Resolving "no longer to persist in poor company of myself," Ophelia offers her situation as a warning to women in history: "Alas, do not allow shallow affection of men to enwrap you" (*Ophelia's Suicide Soliloquy*).

### Ophelia and the Politics of Girls' Media Culture

If these two videos can be taken as exemplary of the revisionary possibilities of remediation, their acts of interpretative redress go only so far. While they are Ophelian in their amplification of Ophelia's story and in the artists' use of her to broadcast themselves and register a frustration with *Hamlet's* gender politics, both videos operate within the ambit of the Shakespearean text. In redressing Ophelia's story, they also return us to it. Coppélia Kahn pinpoints this repetition compulsion within new media Ophelias when she writes, "As a feminist, I would prefer that Ophelia, in whatever media she lives on, be self-consciously performed, so that girls do not drown with her but rather, wonder why, in the playworld of *Hamlet*, her girlhood ends that way" (Kahn 2012, 241). A similar frustration, this time in relation to the politics of girls' media culture more generally, is raised by Mary Celeste Kearney, when she notes the difficulty of locating "alternative girl-centred media texts and performers" (Kearney 2011, 12) within a contemporary mediascape that seems increasingly mainstream. The frustrations of academic criticism with girls' media use

are warranted; after all, they speak to a desire for greater levels of critical media engagement among young media users. However, we also need to reorient the question towards the needs of girl culture itself. Ophelia may prove an attractive text to teenage girls precisely because the delimited agency she is apportioned in *Hamlet* resonates for them. The sense that Ophelia's voice and presence is simultaneously enabled and framed by *Hamlet* may approximate girls' paradoxical relation to online culture, where they can speak, but do so in ways that seem derivative of pre-existing voices and modes of expression that are available through mass media.

There is no one explanation to account for the conservatism that appears to mark girls' online media productions. We might see it as function of YouTube culture, where the referencing and emulation of established styles of video achieves an important sense of community and networking, yet may do so through the production of similitude (Iyengar and Desmet 2012, 69-70). Postfeminism, with its focus on style and self-attainment, might also account more generally for the conservatism of the selected productions, since it produces an accessible, but safe form of feminist politics (Bae 2011, 38). Audience reactions can also shape what a YouTuber envisages as permissible or is prepared to risk in going online, even through the filter of an alias or a persona like Ophelia. As Banet-Weiser notes in her work on girls' home-dance videos on YouTube, self-expression takes the form of self-branding, or the promotion of identity as a legible style. Viewer feedback in the form of posts affirms that style as mainstream; as Banet-Weiser elaborates, "Feedback on girls' YouTube videos functions more often than not as a neoliberal disciplinary strategy, where videos are judged and gain value according to how well the girls producing them fit normative standards of femininity" (Banet-Weiser 2011, 289).

Recent work on girls' culture such as that undertaken by Banet-Weiser leads one to contemplate what role feminist scholarship itself might play in girls' vernacular media production. In part, the difficulty here is the disconnect between academic scholarship and the producers of these vernacular productions; to what extent, if any, does the former attract the attention of the latter? This question goes to ethical considerations about the objectivity of the researcher/critical analyst. It is common for scholars to argue for the development of critical media literacy among young media users (Jenkins et al. 2006). Yet, efforts to influence the politics of girls' media culture may introduce another layer of complication, with scholarly analysis leading to the indirect institutionalizing of amateur content. Nonetheless, academic criticism has an important role to play in attending to vernacular creative productions within new media culture and in posing questions about its structures and politics. In terms of responses to Ophelia, the shaping influence of Shakespeare criticism and feminist theory may already be in evidence since, through teaching, these shape the wider reception of the plays. Feminist critics have attempted to envisage what Carol Rutter

describes as a less "masculinist *Hamlet*" (Rutter 2001, 27), undertaking revisionist approaches to the play or contemplating adaptations that seek to destabilize the representation of Ophelia. Such critical interventions contrast with earlier feminist criticism of Shakespeare that feared it could do little more than map its own exclusion from the dramas as fashioned by the "Patriarchal Bard" (McLuskie 1994).<sup>15</sup> As noted above, *Ophelia's Drowning* and *Ophelia's Suicide Soliloquy* direct a revisionary impulse towards *Hamlet*, but in both videos that impulse is short-circuited.

If we are to extend the parameters of Ophelia beyond those figurations inherited from the play and Ophelia discourse, a more iconoclastic approach to Shakespeare is necessary. Edits538's *Hamlet — The Death of Ophelia — Director's Cut* (uploaded 15 December 2006, 1,701 views) offers one example of what an iconoclastic, irreverent response to Ophelia might look like. The opening title sequences, which parody the MGM icon and score it to the title music for 20th Century Fox, set the tone for this comic portrayal of the iconic death scene, here depicted using a wooden doll on a perilous journey across a bathtub. The addition of canned laughter, as well as the track "The End" by The Doors, lends bathos to the scene. That the video leaves us wondering whether this doll-Ophelia jumps or falls is, I think, part of its point, which is to send up naturalistic dramatizations and the kind of false identification with Ophelia that they can elicit. Other videos similarly turn to parody and the absurd: in *Barbie Hamlet: Part Three* (uploaded 20 May 2009, 20 views), which acts out the play using dolls, the Ophelia figure comes to her watery end in a food blender. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) Originating as high-school assignments, these videos reflect the perspective of those encountering Shakespeare for the first time. However, they may also register a sense of estrangement towards the play; humor thus becomes a mode of response, one that may allow young learners to negotiate representations of gender and sexuality in the play vis-à-vis their own identities.

In moving into the absurd, these videos offer a potentially new Ophelia for girls to pursue and re-script for themselves, one that does not revolve around issues about body image and regulation, or that keeps Ophelia within such a gendered semiotic space. The productive possibilities of subverting the iconicity of the death-like Ophelia are further suggested in Rebecca Mellor's *Ophelia — RM10* (uploaded 26 July 2010, 581 views).<sup>16</sup> In this film-short by a professional artist, Millais's classic image is remediated. (*A film clip is available in the HTML version of this document.*) A single camera shot is used throughout to frame Ophelia, who wears a floral dress and is laid out in a bathtub, with some plants in the foreground. What is immediately noticeable about this Ophelia, however, is "her" heavy beard — when we look again, it is apparent that the model is male. As deployed here, drag has some of the disruptive, mocking, and subversive qualities that Judith Butler

regards as crucial to the disclosure of gender as a series of performances (Butler 1990, 183-95). Ophelia in drag disrupts the heterosexual coherence of Ophelia's performance to subvert its implicit scopophilia. The film defamiliarizes the received image of Ophelia and through that move, alerts us to gender polarities. Ophelia becomes the site of a critical examination of the "mediatized (female) body, onto which beauty ideals have been violently inscribed throughout history" (Wegenstein 2006, 63).

YouTube Ophelia videos register an investment in that figure, often intensely, so rather than the same images or stories being told through her again and again, it is important that we contemplate how she might signify differently. Mellor's video suggests a productive future direction for Ophelia within girls' culture, one that moves away from a postfeminist attention to surfaces and style towards a critical consciousness about gender and its cultural legibility. In Mellor's video, remediation takes the form of repetition but importantly, it is "repetition with ironic critical distance," to borrow Linda Hutcheon's formulation about the effects of parody (Hutcheon 2000, xii). It offers a model of Ophelia as a queer text, one that prompts a consideration of the cultural value of being in one body or another.

YouTube Ophelias are to be welcomed as vernacular interventions in the media; indeed, they begin to disrupt the boundaries between the vernacular and the commercial media and between consumer and producer. This is just one of the negotiations that, as I have been suggesting, YouTubers perform in their interactions with YouTube as a commercial video-sharing technology. The platform affords the opportunity for girls to redress the images they receive from mass media, but participation in this setting entails its own set of negotiations between offline and online selves, and the production of identity as a bite-size commodity to be consumed by the eye-balls scanning YouTube and the Internet. These may be the trade-offs required of us all for access to free social media platforms. Responses to Ophelia work through these compromises in their concern with reproducing Ophelia's death authentically, in using her name to title their channel, or as a persona for going online and addressing the YouTube audience. In these various iterations, she is the restricted tragic girl of Shakespearean drama, an image that floats independently from that text, and the equivalent to a brand name, one among many available icons to be absorbed and appropriated in brand culture. That it has become possible to refer to YouTube Ophelias tells us so much about the nature of contemporary girls' culture. Ophelia has become a discourse and brand, an available, if not always progressive, space where girls explore what it is "to be" online.

### Notes

1. See Desmet (2008); Shohet (2010); Thompson (2010); Hodgdon (2010); O'Neill (2011).



2. On the vlog as a specific example of "vernacular creativity" and YouTube, see Burgess and Green 2009, 25-26. On examples of the vlog that pre-date YouTube, such as the video diaries of Sadie Benning, see Donaldson 2006.
3. Examples of these are curated and discussed in Young, "Ophelia and Web 2.0."
4. [http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=Ophelia&page=6](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=Ophelia&page=6) [accessed 12 February 2014].
5. For example, *Charlie Bit my Finger — Again!* (uploaded 22 May 2007, 527, 214, 587 views) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_OBlgSz8sSM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OBlgSz8sSM) [accessed 12 February 2014]. On this iconic video, see Strangelove 2010 and Kavoori 2011, 51-54.
6. See the example of actor Henry Dinkins, <http://www.youtube.com/user/kenjr79/videos> [accessed 12 February 2014].
7. See Burt 2002 and Lanier 2010. On Shakespeare and the culture industry, see Bristol 1996, 88-117 and Rumbold 2011. The advert is available on YouTube: see Google+: Tom (uploaded 30 March 2012, 686,221 views); <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQDYt61yHdg> [accessed 12 February 2014].
8. <http://www.youtube.com/user/Opheliasays> [accessed 12 February 2014].
9. <http://www.youtube.com/user/OpheliaSaysWhaaaa> [accessed 12 February 2014].
10. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrRtJY28ps8> [accessed 12 February 2014].
11. This clip is included here with the kind permission of Media Education Foundation. The full version is available at <http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=303>.
12. Juhasz, <http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/#>.
13. Of these remixes, the video with the highest view count is *Romeo and Juliet (Sacrifice)*, uploaded 23 September 2007, 8,453,667 views; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU1zJofOY60> [accessed 12 February 2014].
14. On the rich history of amateur Shakespeareans, see Dobson 2011.
15. For an overview of feminist readings of Shakespeare, see Rackin 2005. On Shakespeare's plays as critiques of early modern discourses of misogyny and patriarchy, see Dusinger 2003.
16. The video was entered into YouTube Play, a competition for creative video run by YouTube and the Guggenheim Museum. See <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/press-room/releases/3515-ytprelease> [accessed 12 February 2014].

### Online Resources

*Barbie Hamlet: Part Three*. YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=av1DiVin960> [accessed 12 February 2014; link no longer active].

*Girls, Sexuality, and the Media.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXLu1p15Rvw> [accessed 12 February 2014].

*Halloween Makeup Tutorial: Ophelia.* YouTube. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjY\\_o2shG0I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sjY_o2shG0I) [accessed 12 February 2014].

*Help Ophelia Get Cured!!* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Up4nf6DXK24> [link no longer active].

*Hamlet — The Death of Ophelia — Director's Cut.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4PRLuiiKnM&list=PLF5257F62099CE211&index=3> [accessed 12 February 2014].

*LonelyGirl15 House Arrest.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtH7DTu-DgI> [accessed 12 February 2014].

*Marilyn Monroe — Ophelia.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2qsPSKoL4eo> [accessed 4 December 2014].

*Multifandom Tribute.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c39jrqd3Ss> [accessed 12 February 2014].

*Ophelia Drowns.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mmq3ylfVJ3Q> [accessed 12 February 2014].

*Ophelia's Suicide Soliloquy.* YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty1aJ-wKLFU> [accessed 12 February 2014; link no longer active].

*Ophelia's Vlogs.* YouTube. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT5H\\_-vIcJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iT5H_-vIcJw) [accessed 12 February 2014].

*Ophelia — RM10.* YouTube. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGOYQvQr\\_Mg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qGOYQvQr_Mg) [accessed 12 February 2014].

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