

# Reviving Ophelia: Reaching Adolescent Girls through Shakespeare's Doomed Heroine

Jennifer Flaherty, Georgia College and State University

---

## Abstract

With the publication of Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* in 1996, Shakespeare's Ophelia became a symbol for adolescent girls who are drowning in the pressures of their day-to-day life. Pipher's appropriation of Ophelia resonated with readers, and the idea of saving Ophelia has become a metaphor for the act of helping young women to withstand the social pressures of the twenty-first century. Speaking directly to young readers, authors Lisa Klein and Lisa Fiedler take the current connotations of the character back to *Hamlet* by creating young adult novelizations of Shakespeare's play from Ophelia's point of view. In *Dating Hamlet* (2002) and *Ophelia* (2006), Fiedler and Klein re-create Ophelia by presenting her as a capable, headstrong teenage girl who can survive the painful circumstances that drive her Shakespearean predecessor to madness and early death. By revising Ophelia and creating newer, more assertive versions in their novels, Fiedler and Klein subvert the critical tradition of *Hamlet* and invert the popular perception of Ophelia in an effort to create relatable role-models for their young readers. Fiedler and Klein use the comfortable distance of the Shakespearean source text and the historical romance genre to address contemporary social concerns (including education, sexism, consensual sex, and date rape). Both authors rely on a cultural familiarity with Shakespeare to provide alternate readings of *Hamlet* that focus on giving Ophelia more autonomy as a way of encouraging their teenage readers to embrace their own agency.

---

With the publication of Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* in 1996, Shakespeare's Ophelia became a symbol for adolescent girls who are drowning in the pressures of their day-to-day life. Pipher's appropriation of Ophelia resonated with readers, inspiring teenagers and their mothers to write back with texts entitled *Ophelia Speaks*, *Ophelia's Mom*, and *Surviving Ophelia*. Ophelia even lends her name to a national program to prevent relational aggression, called "The Ophelia Project." The idea of saving Ophelia has become a metaphor for the act of helping young women to withstand the social pressures of the twenty-first century. Speaking directly to young readers, authors Lisa Klein and Lisa Fiedler take the current connotations of the character back to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by creating Young Adult (YA) novelizations of Shakespeare's play from Ophelia's point of view.

In *Dating Hamlet* (2002) and *Ophelia* (2006), Fiedler and Klein re-create Ophelia by presenting her as a capable, headstrong teenage girl who can survive the painful circumstances that drive her Shakespearean predecessor to madness and early death. By revising Ophelia and creating newer, more assertive versions in their novels, Fiedler and Klein subvert the critical tradition of *Hamlet* and invert the popular perception of Ophelia in an effort to create "relatable" (recognizable and accessible) role-models for their young readers.

### Centering Ophelia

Ophelia's association with contemporary teenage girls raises the stakes of adapting her character in YA romantic historical fiction, a genre aimed primarily at young female readers. As Jennifer Hulbert argues, seeing Ophelia as a "mainstream assignment as synecdoche for all teenage girls" can be problematic, both in interpreting Shakespeare and in understanding contemporary adolescence (Hulbert 2006, 201). By making Ophelia into a YA heroine, Fiedler and Klein implicitly affirm the dubious association, but they do so in a way that transforms Ophelia from a pathetic symbol of lost innocence to a competent young woman. In her contribution to *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, Coppélia Kahn models a close reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* that moves away from the "truncated story of blighted girlhood" that dominates Ophelia's afterlife and find "another story, a different Ophelia — a subject more than an object" (2012, 232). Fiedler and Klein address Ophelia as subject by adding to her complex afterlife. By using Ophelia as a first-person narrator, Fiedler and Klein limit the audience's perspective on the events of the story and establish Ophelia as the lens through which the readers interpret the actions of other characters.

Centering the character as narrator gives her a stronger voice, in defiance of "Ophelia's origins as a character whose story or history is always-already pointedly articulated or reconstructed for her, ventriloquized even, by other characters in *Hamlet*" (Peterson and Williams 2012, 3). Through this shift in perspective, Fiedler and Klein defy the warning given by Elaine Showalter in her examination of critical responses to Ophelia: "To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic center, is to re-appropriate her for our own ends. To dissolve her into a female symbol of absence is to endorse our own marginality" (Showalter 1985b, 79). By choosing to transform the events of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* rather than just change the perspective, Fiedler and Klein establish their adaptations as creatively critical. They reframe the discourse surrounding Ophelia's character by changing her actions from the source text. In their creatively critical responses to *Hamlet*, Fiedler and Klein unabashedly "liberate" Ophelia from the text for their own ends, taking her out of Shakespeare's margins and making her the anti-tragic center of new texts. These novelizations

grant Ophelia a form of agency that is impossible for her to achieve in the Shakespearean source text, an agency that challenges the expectations of both her readers and her fellow characters.

By presenting their Ophelias as twenty-first century heroines in a Shakespearean setting, Fiedler and Klein encourage a similar agency in the twenty-first century "Ophelias" who are their readers. When asked why they adapted Ophelia's story by remaking her into the heroine of a young adult novel, both Fiedler and Klein offered similar explanations. Fiedler, who began her novel in a college writing class, explains that "she felt female characters like Ophelia always got a raw deal, so she borrowed them from classic literature and gave them the guts to change their own destinies" (2002, 1). Klein, who has taught *Hamlet* "more times than I can count," states that her students "shared my disappointment that Shakespeare's Ophelia is such a passive character" (2006, 334). Her novel grew out of the question, "If Ophelia could tell her own story, how would it differ from Shakespeare's version?" (2006, 334). Like the teenagers who contributed to the collection of poems and memoirs entitled *Ophelia Speaks*, Fiedler and Klein wanted to emphasize Ophelia's voice and actions, to change her story from one of doomed passivity to one of active achievement. They move beyond the beginnings of feminist criticism, when the editors of *The Woman's Part* first noted Ophelia as a "character who [has] an existence and importance beyond Hamlet's perceptions of [her]" (Greene, Lenz, and Neely 1983, 4). By recreating Ophelia as both removed from Shakespeare's text and newly central to the plot of *Hamlet*, Fiedler and Klein use their own creative work to address critical concerns about Ophelia's role as subject and object, heroine and victim.

By calling attention to the roles that young women play in literature and in life, Fiedler and Klein introduce their teenage audiences to alternate ways of reading canonical texts such as *Hamlet*. Both Ophelias acknowledge the patriarchal constraints on their freedom before defying them. Fiedler's Ophelia caustically comments that female freedoms are restricted because "the male of the species could not abide such a threat to his authority" (2002, 163), and her struggle to liberate herself from the control of Claudius and Polonius invites a closer examination of the limitations placed on Shakespeare's Ophelia. Klein's Ophelia, upon learning of Hamlet's death in a letter from Horatio, decides to literally "take up [her] pen and write" her own "part in this tragedy," stating that "like the sun, I will dispel the darkness about me and cast a light upon the truth" (2006, 3). In presenting Ophelia as a character who can challenge these restrictions and rewrite the tragic final act of *Hamlet*, both authors invite comparisons between their own texts and their Shakespearean source. Through the comments of their heroines, Fiedler and Klein analyze and edit their Shakespearean source much like the literary critics who also defied Showalter's warning against making Ophelia into the text's "tragic center."

In her article "Ophelia: Centre Stage," Lucy Potter argues that bringing Ophelia to the forefront is "necessary if we are to take an idea of tragedy that includes a positive appreciation of woman into the next century" (Potter 1999, 25). Potter serves as an advocate for Ophelia and frames the text in a way that both highlights the limitations on her character and advances the possibility that Ophelia may transcend those limitations. Coppélia Kahn examines the same limitations by emphasizing Ophelia's relationship with her father: "Daughters, however secondary as characters, are key figures in the articulation of patriarchal power. We can see the importance of Ophelia as such a figure if, for the sake of analysis, we focus on her story for a moment, and relegate Hamlet's to the background" (2012, 233). For Kahn, it is Ophelia's marginalized position in the play that justifies a focused study. Like Fiedler and Klein, Kahn explores what *Hamlet* would look like from Ophelia's point of view, painting a picture of a character dominated by "her father's ruthless ambition" (2012, 234). The Ophelias of Fiedler and Klein refuse to be defined only through their relationships with the male characters (daughter, sister, or lover). By transforming the story to give Ophelia a more active and centered role, Fiedler and Klein encourage their female readers to identify with Ophelia and to consider Shakespeare's *Hamlet* from her critical perspective. As they transform the story to give Ophelia a more active and centered role, Fiedler and Klein encourage their female readers to identify with Ophelia. Moreover, such readers' perception of the patriarchy established in *Hamlet* is potentially influenced by the way the Ophelias of Fiedler and Klein refuse to be defined only through their relationships with the male characters (daughter, sister, or lover).

Incorporating twenty-first century ideals into the historical setting, both Fiedler and Klein make a point of establishing their Ophelias as distinctly proto-feminist. Particularly in their interactions with their respective Hamlets, these Ophelias function as stand-ins for feminist critics, challenging *Hamlet*'s more misogynistic comments. Klein's Ophelia debates her Hamlet, imagining herself to be "like the noble ladies in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*" (2006, 54). Like Castiglione's Emilia, Klein's Ophelia is able to challenge the perceptions and positions of women in the Renaissance and to demonstrate that women have a place in debates on courtly behavior. She reproves Hamlet for his derogatory criticism of women by stating, "Lord Hamlet, it seems you see all women as deceivers, be they beautiful or ugly. Perhaps the fault lies in the man who trusts only his sight and is a slave to his base desire" (2006, 56). Fiedler's Ophelia similarly objects to her Hamlet's opinions on the subject, cutting him off with "I prefer we talk not on your notions of frailty and women, sir. In fact, I warn thee — go not there" (2002, 63). By giving their Ophelias the chance to speak up and talk back to their Hamlets on the subject of women, Fiedler and Klein rewrite Ophelia's passive acceptance of Hamlet's slanders and reexamine the ways that women are portrayed in *Hamlet*. These brave new Ophelias challenge external and internal pressures on women. Unlike Shakespeare's Ophelia,

whom Jennifer Hulbert describes as "subservient and marginalized" (2006, 202) and Irene Dash explains is "caught in the clashes between the men who govern her life" (1997, 111), the Ophelias of Fiedler and Klein resist the control of others. They emerge as strong young women who bring feminist criticism and values to a pre-feminist text.

### Madness and Flowers

The technique of first-person narration allows us to read Fiedler and Klein's interpretation of Shakespeare text as Ophelia's explanation for her own words and actions. Although such interpretation is common in novelizations of Shakespeare, the practice takes on a critical significance when applied to the character of Ophelia, who is given no soliloquies through which to share her perspective with the audience. Instead, we are given others' interpretations of her speech, as her words are consistently proscribed, mocked, and interpreted by the male characters in the play. Particularly after her madness, Ophelia's lines are scrutinized by critics and characters alike, as acknowledged by Horatio:

Her speech is nothing,  
 Yet the unshapèd use of it doth move  
 The hearers to collection. They aim at it  
 And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts  
 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. (4.5.7-13)<sup>1</sup>

Just as Ophelia herself tells Hamlet in an earlier act that she thinks "nothing," this gentleman argues that she speaks "nothing." The responsibility for conveying meaning is not on Ophelia herself, but on her "hearers," who listen to her rhymes and questions and apply their own meanings rather than trying to discern hers. Like the hearers in the play, readers and writers have similarly botched up Ophelia's words fit to their own thoughts, looking for meaning in fragments of songs and names of flowers. In "Ophelia's Sisters," R. S. White applies the concept of "botching" to Ophelia's madness, the use of her name in psychology, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a whole (2007, 93). For Gina Bloom, Anston Bosman, and William West, the inscrutable nature of Ophelia's madness is itself an act of defiance: "unlike the compliant maiden of the first part of the play, mad Ophelia defies Hamlet's prescription to 'Suit the action to the word, the word to the action' (3.2.17-18)." Her words and actions are so out of joint that audience members must relate them in their own ways, "fit to their own thoughts" (2013, 170-71). Directors, actors, and writers have fit their own meaning to

Ophelia's bawdy song fragments. Some versions use the sexualized language as a way for Ophelia herself to demonstrate sexuality, from the "emancipated, Western-style sex life" demonstrated by Branagh's film through flashbacks during Ophelia's mad scene to the "sensationalist" text of *The Secret Love Life of Ophelia* (Peterson and Williams 2012, 1). Mary Cowden Clarke's Victorian reimagining of Ophelia's childhood gives the power of interpretation to Ophelia's nurse, who explains that if Ophelia should ever happen to sing the filthy songs she heard as lullabies, she "would only do so like a prattling starling, for the sake of sound, and without a thought of any bad meaning" (quoted in Thompson and Roberts 1997, 97). The figure of the nurse provides an excuse to distance Ophelia from the sexual implications of the songs, allowing Cowden Clarke to create a "Rose of Elsinore" that will keep her innocence even in madness, adhering to Seth Lerer's description of the "natural and crafted beauty that defines her for the Victorian imagination . . . exquisite in youth [and] floral in insanity" (2012, 18). Fiedler and Klein allow their Ophelias to assume control of their own meanings, explaining the significance of the mad scenes to their readers directly.

To reinvent Shakespeare's "Rose of May," both Fiedler and Klein give particular emphasis to rewriting the ways that flowers have served to define Ophelia. The critical response to Ophelia's flowers serves as a locus for exploring either the chastity or the sexuality of the character. As Arthur McGee argues in his interpretation of Protestant and Catholic symbolism in her flowers, "the ambiguity of Ophelia's role and of the language she uses" positions her as "both a nun and a whore" (1987, 149). Elaine Showalter likewise explains the dichotomy in interpretations of the scene: "The discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination; she is the 'green girl' of pastoral, the virginal 'Rose of May' and the sexually explicit madwoman who, in giving away her wild flowers and herbs, is symbolically deflowering herself" (1985b, 81). In presenting their Ophelias as neither virgins nor whores during the flower scene, Fiedler and Klein take steps toward dismantling that dichotomy for their young readers. Their Ophelias are not representations of male reverence or male desire; they are familiar teenage heroines. Although earlier episodes in both *Dating Hamlet* and *Ophelia* describe Ophelia's experiences with sex, Fiedler and Klein do not overtly sexualize this scene, or spend time extensively describing Ophelia's appearance. For these authors, her visual impact is less important than the reasons for her actions. Fiedler and Klein do not focus on Ophelia's body here — they focus on her intentions.

Both authors give their Ophelias strength and clarity of mind, emphasizing the method in their madness. Since both characters are feigning madness rather than truly experiencing it, the

"distracted" lines of the flower scene are an opportunity to undercut traditional character-based criticism of the character, such as Marvin Rosenberg's musings in *The Masks of Hamlet*:

Sadly enough, most of the floral life she dispenses seems to speak of infidelity, vanity, appearance and transience of time. That Ophelia has deliberately picked them, or imagined doing so, suggests that Shakespeare is reflecting a kind of disillusioned, life-ending mood that may parallel Hamlet's . . . We may hardly suppose that this mad girl understands, except as a medium, all the implications of the plants she gives and to whom. (1992, 805)

Emphasizing, as Rosenberg does, the tragic overtones in the flower selection and Ophelia's mournful lines, Fiedler's Ophelia concludes her flower scene with a portion of the same song that Shakespeare's Ophelia uses:

And will he not come again?  
And will he not come again? No, no, he is dead,  
Go to thy deathbed.  
He will never come again. (Fiedler 2002, 141)

The songs that Ophelia sings in the first part of Fiedler's flower scene are part of her feigned madness, but when she sings this song her "cover cracks, a cleft in the charade that invites true grief to creep beneath it" (Fiedler 2002, 141). Fiedler's Ophelia is overwhelmed by sorrow for Hamlet, who has been sent to England and is presumed dead, but her sorrow is not the distracted mourning presented in Shakespeare's text. Using her prose to offer Ophelia's own commentary on the words she speaks, Fiedler makes it clear that, despite her grief, Ophelia's mind is sound. The novel has already established that fennel is linked with "flattery and deceit" earlier in the text, so the selection of flowers comes across as deliberate and rational rather than as the ramblings of a troubled mind when Ophelia offers fennel to Claudius. Much of the scene also functions as an elaborate performance designed to set up the spectacle of her faked death; like Hamlet, Ophelia takes advantage of the court's diminished perception of her faculties.

Klein takes the significance of the flowers even further by clearly explaining their meanings to her audience. Along with the rosemary for remembrance and pansies for thoughts that Laertes receives, Ophelia bestows fennel, columbines, and hidden messages upon the queen; "I did not expect her to know that the flowers were symbols of faithlessness, and that with my gift I rebuked her for being disloyal" (2006, 201). Ophelia also tosses a circlet of daisies at Claudius, thinking "with their bright innocence I mocked his evil and called him usurper. I knew that a daisy, a remedy for every ache, pain, and wound of the body, was powerless to cure the disease of his

rank soul" (2006, 202). Most significant, however, is the rue that Ophelia crushes and presses into Claudius' hand. By calling it "herb of grace," Ophelia implies "that he should repent of his evil deeds" (2006, 202). The narrative goes on to explain:

He could not know that the juice of rue healed the ache of the ear or that it was an antidote to the bite of poisonous snakes. Thus shielded by madness and metaphor, I boldly told him I knew of his crime: pouring poison into King Hamlet's ears. With my gift I accused him of being the serpent in the garden of Denmark. (2006, 202)

The explanations that Klein offers for the meanings of each flower give her readers information about the scene, much as an annotated copy of *Hamlet* does, which is useful for young readers who want to gain a better understanding of Shakespeare. More importantly, however, Klein defies the idea that Ophelia's flowers are chosen in madness, with no thought to the significance they might have for those who receive them. Each flower makes a rational and calculated statement. Although she does not expect the court to understand her hidden messages, Ophelia is using the significance of the flowers to speak out against what is rotten in the state of Denmark. In Klein's text, the flowers are quiet rebellion, a challenge "shielded by madness and metaphor" (2006, 202). Unable to attack with a sword, Ophelia uses words and flowers to deliver her message of disappointment to Gertrude and disgust to Claudius. Klein challenges the critical constructs of young women and madness inherent in Ophelia's role as "the paradigmatic figure of victimized femininity and madness, or what Showalter calls 'the female malady,' the original madwoman in the attic" (Peterson and Williams 2012, 8, citing Showalter 1985a).

For both Klein and Fiedler, this scene is just one of many times that Ophelia demonstrates her understanding of flowers and plant lore — an essential part of her character and the key to understanding how Ophelia can escape her pre-scripted death. Both authors present her as an expert in local plant life. Part botanist and part apothecary, both Ophelias understand the properties of plants and herbs, and they grow and gather them to make medicines, perfumes, and potions. Each Ophelia eventually uses her thorough knowledge of the local plant life to save her own life when she concocts an herbal potion that makes her appear dead for several hours. These scenes are reminiscent of the potion scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, but these Ophelias do not require the assistance of a Friar Lawrence. This potion enables them to take part in the death-scene described by Gertrude and the funeral scene portrayed by Shakespeare while still achieving happier endings to their stories as a result of their own knowledge and determination. By building on Ophelia's plant references to make her an accomplished botanist, Fiedler and Klein allow her to defy her



Shakespearean fate. Both authors confirm her status as a modern role model for teenage girls by focusing on Ophelia's own assertive ingenuity and careful studies.

In Fiedler's novel, Ophelia's ability to create this potion saves not only her life, but also the lives of Laertes, Hamlet, and Gertrude in the final scene of the story. Because Laertes supplies Claudius with Ophelia's potion rather than with a true "deadly poison," Ophelia's antidote miraculously revives the corpses that litter the floor at the end of Shakespeare's play, turning tragic revenge to comic farce. Klein's novel takes a more somber approach. Klein's Ophelia cannot avert the tragedies that haunt Denmark as Fiedler's Ophelia does; she can only save her own life (and that of her unborn child). The tragic events of the final act of *Hamlet* play out unaltered in *Ophelia*. Klein's Ophelia is nonetheless able to use her knowledge of plants to her own advantage later in the story. As she is raising Hamlet's son in a convent in France, Ophelia continues to develop her skill with herbs, and she becomes the convent's in-house doctor, treating everything from boils to schizophrenia with her home-made medicines. Both authors present their heroines as strong enough to withstand the pressures that overcome Shakespeare's character, literally "reviving" their Ophelias and giving them hopeful futures rather than tragedy.

### Ophelia's Freedom

Both Fiedler and Klein use the comic device of female cross-dressing to allow their Ophelias to move about freely after their false deaths. The Ophelias instantly find their change of attire physically liberating. Klein's Ophelia, delighted by her new clothing, is described "striding about the cottage marveling at how easily I could move without a petticoat, a kirtle, and a gown clinging to my legs," and exclaiming, "How delightful it is to be a man and free!" (2006, 229). Similarly, Fiedler's Ophelia confesses, "In truth, I can recall no other feeling so liberating as this! I may run, jump, kick high as an unbroken stallion! I would ne'er have believed such power could come of wearing breeches! 'Tis yet another injustice against our sex" (2002, 163). In addition to freedom of physical movement, their boyish appearances allow them more freedom of social movement. Their experiences reflect Clara Claiborne Park's observations on cross-dressing in Shakespearean comedy: "Male garments immensely broaden the sphere in which female energy can manifest itself. Dressed as a man, a nubile woman can go places and do things she couldn't do otherwise" (1983, 108). Klein's Ophelia observes on her journey from Denmark to France, "my plain, mannish appearance also let me pass unnoticed. It gave me the liberty of looking at everything about me, a freedom not allowed to courtly women" (2006, 235). By realizing the "injustice" of the physical and social limitations placed on women, both Ophelias again show themselves to be

feminists *avant la lettre*, aware of their own oppression. They use cross-dressing to free themselves from the restrictions of both patriarchy and tragedy.

Adapting a play that is characterized by inaction, Fiedler and Klein both present Ophelia as a young woman unafraid to take action to fix all that has gone astray. Fiedler, in particular, works the language of decision into the text; her Ophelia is the anti-Hamlet, able to take decisive action where her male counterpart cannot. In the happily-ever-after ending, Fiedler's Hamlet freezes when asked about their next step. His answer is "Ah, you know me, my love. I cannot decide," to which Ophelia replies "But I can" (2002, 191). Fiedler even includes a couplet at the end of her first chapter: "For I, Ophelia, am not one to suffer the plague of indecision. I will act! And tell my love of this night's ghostly vision" (2002, 18). While Klein avoids explicitly defining Hamlet as a character plagued by inaction, her readers can see Ophelia's frustration with his fixation on revenge and the mad behavior that he assures her is feigned. Deciding that she cannot rely on Hamlet, Klein's Ophelia formulates her own plan to leave Denmark safely, and as a result, she is the only character who manages to avoid the death scripted for her in Shakespeare's version. Where the language surrounding criticism of Shakespeare's Ophelia centers on words such as "passive," "docile," and "obedient," Fiedler and Klein present her as a decisive character, able to make up her own mind and take risks to survive the tragic events that bring down Shakespeare's characters.

Both Fiedler and Klein demonstrate Ophelia's affinity for action (countered by Hamlet's inaction) by replacing the madness and suicide of Shakespeare's Ophelia with a successful plan to feign her own tragic death. Erica Hateley acknowledges that Fiedler "refreshing[ly]" subverts the narrative of the "objectified hysteric" when the latter makes her Ophelia comment that feigned, rather than real, madness leads to freedom. But Hateley contends that Fiedler's distinction is problematic because it "implies that Shakespeare's Ophelia chose to become mad in a bid for freedom, and . . . that mental health is a product of choice rather than of circumstance" (2013, 443). While this implication is especially unfortunate in the context of a YA novel, the idea that Ophelia's madness could be an attempt to break free of the constraints of the Danish court predates Fiedler's text. Accounts of *Hamlet* in performance indicate that Ophelia's madness, even death, have been equated not only with freedom, but with action. Describing performances in which various Ophelias revel in their madness with freedom of movement and expression, where they once were restricted by court culture, heavy clothing, and oppressive rules, Marvin Rosenberg muses that "perhaps the child's psyche is finally getting even (Shakespeare could hardly have more explicitly dealt with the unequal role of woman in a male dominated society)" (1992, 251). As Lucy Potter argues:

In her madness and suicide, Ophelia has realized the subject-positions refused by Hamlet, who spends his time convincing the audience and other characters in the play that he is

but "mad in craft," and not performing the action demanded of him. This . . . is the play's final irony because, in the absence of Hamlet's action, Ophelia steps in to fulfill his role. (1999, 40)

The idea that Ophelia could achieve freedom through madness or take action through suicide has been praised in the context of performance reviews or feminist criticism as a way of claiming Ophelia as an agent of her own fate. These small rebellions only reinforce the limitations placed on Shakespeare's Ophelia — limitations that both Fiedler and Klein make an effort to erode or transcend. In negating both Ophelia's madness and death, they rewrite the very actions that critics have previously used to make the case for an active Ophelia. They replace the passive rebellion of Ophelia's self-destruction with the more active rebellion of self-preservation.

### Reflecting Ophelia

By subverting the prevalent image of Ophelia as a helpless character who cannot survive her tragic circumstances, both Fiedler and Klein present an Ophelia who is designed to empower today's adolescent girls. As Hateley argues, the genres of Shakespeare adaptation and YA romance novel merge to establish Ophelia "as a positive role model for young women in the twenty-first-century" (2013, 441). In their discussion of using literature to empower young adults, Belinda and Douglas Louie explain that "it is when the characters are responsible for solving their problems that adolescent readers are most likely to be empowered to develop confidence in overcoming similar problems of their own" (1992, 53). These new Ophelias not only solve the problems of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but also take on twenty-first century challenges in a seventeenth-century setting. The issues to which each fictionalized Ophelia must respond would seem familiar to any of the adolescent authors of *Ophelia Speaks*: consensual sex, teen pregnancy, sexual assault, and, especially, the need for a female community. Through the lens of historical fiction, adolescent girls are able to read about a heroine who takes action to solve problems that have clear parallels for their own lives. Blending faux-Elizabethan dialogue with Hollywood teen-movie slang to create her Ophelia's literary voice, Fiedler creates a blended time period that allows her readers to see the current issues of adolescence from a comforting distance, giving them new perspective on their own lives. While Klein integrates her character more thoroughly into a Renaissance setting, her narrative reveals a similar modern sensibility simmering beneath Ophelia's references to Castiglione and pastoral romance. The settings are Shakespearean, but the issues encountered by these Ophelias are entirely relevant to the contemporary adolescent girls who serve as audiences for the novels of Fiedler and Klein and subjects of books such as *Reviving Ophelia*.

The way that Klein and Feidler address contemporary social issues in the context of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is inextricably connected to the "Ophelia-ization of the contemporary teenage girl" that Hulbert historicizes as beginning with the success of Mary Pipher's book (Hulbert 2006, 199). *Reviving Ophelia* uses the Shakespearean Ophelia's tragic fate to call attention to the plights of modern adolescent girls. Describing Ophelia as a character who "loses herself" because she is "torn apart by her efforts to please," Pipher finds parallels with the teenage girls that she sees in her psychiatric practice (1994, 20). Citing conversations with teenagers who are struggling with issues such as anorexia, substance abuse, and rape, Pipher argues that girls "crash and burn in a social and developmental Bermuda Triangle" and urges her readers to help the Ophelias in their own lives to weather the storm of adolescence (1994, 19). In *Ophelia Speaks*, teenagers themselves responded to the desolate image that Pipher paints of adolescence by addressing key topics from Pipher's book in their own stories and poems, edited by Sara Shandler. Mothers shared their own experiences with their teenage daughters and the pressures they face in *Surviving Ophelia*, edited by Cheryl Dellasega, and *Ophelia's Mom*, edited by Nina Shandler, Sara Shandler's mother.

One of the most common topics in these cultural studies of the pressures on teenage girls is a discussion of consensual (and non-consensual) sex, which Fiedler and Klein develop further in their novels. Using some of the original dialogue from Shakespeare's conversations between Laertes, Polonius, and Ophelia on the subject of chastity, both authors reframe the role of sex in *Hamlet*. Fiedler and Klein do not present sex as the "canker" that "galls the infants of the spring" (1.3.39). In both novels Ophelia chooses to enter into a sexual relationship with Hamlet of her own free will. As in the films noted by Peterson and Williams, Ophelia uses sex to express "her liberation from early modern patriarchal constraints on virginity" (2012, 1). The novelized Ophelias, however, lose their virginities without the self-destructive guilt that characterizes interpretations such as Kate Winslet's Ophelia in Branagh's 1996 *Hamlet*. While the Laertes and Polonius in both Klein and Feidler's texts still caution their respective Ophelias to "be wary" (1.3.43) and "tender yourself more dearly" (1.3.107), the assertive new Ophelias have their own ideas on the subject. Klein presents this conversation as an opportunity for her Ophelia to examine the double standards of male and female sexuality, asking herself "why should men be allowed freedoms that were deemed sinful for women to take?" (2006, 106). With this double standard still in place today, modern adolescent girls could ask themselves the same question.

While not every sexual experience in *Dating Hamlet* is as "fortunate" as the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia, Fiedler uses the readers' imaginations to suggest that sex can be romantic and healthy and that it does not have to be a source of shame. For Fiedler's readers, many of whom might experience or even participate in "slut-shaming" among their peers, this can be

an empowering message. Ophelia's perspective on sex serves as a counter-point to some of the messages young women might encounter through the media. Arguing for the necessity of advising teenage girls through projects such as the Arts Effect All-Girl Theater Company, Monique Svazlian explains that "Girls and women often feel sexuality is their most prized possession, thanks to the messages they get through pop culture. But when they do own their sexuality, they are shamed for it, putting them in a double bind" (2014). Fiedler's approach is less direct than that of the Arts Effect's *SLUT: The Play*, but Ophelia's explanation of her own sexuality provides fictional model that allows readers to consider how they view their own bodies and choices.

Klein's Ophelia allows its audience of young women to examine this issue in their own times as well as Ophelia's historical (and fictional) setting. In *Dating Hamlet*, Fiedler uses the conversation to emphasize Ophelia's right to determine her own relationship with Hamlet. She privately rages against the limitations placed on her, arguing that "whatever I do *not* do with Hamlet, I do *not* do because I am ordered against doing but because *I* do not choose to do it" (2002, 34, emphasis in original). For Fiedler's Ophelia, the cautions of a father who does not love her and a brother who "goes off to France to enjoy himself treasure-hunting among the women there" mean very little (2002, 33). If she chooses not to sleep with Hamlet, it will be her choice, not theirs.

Fiedler's Ophelia firmly asserts that she can make her own decision about entering into a sexual relationship with Hamlet. Even when Anne, her close friend and servant, worries that Hamlet might not agree with her choice to abstain from sex, Ophelia unequivocally states that "my choice will leave him none" (2002, 34). Later, however, when she and Hamlet are alone together, Ophelia narrates that "there is a tender invitation in his kisses and I discover that choice is a changeable thing" (2002, 50). While this Ophelia's choice is not quite the "North Star decision" that fits with "one's long-term goals" that Mary Pipher hopes young girls will choose (1994, 208), Fiedler's language emphasizes Ophelia's role in the decision. When she does make love to Hamlet, it is a "choice" and a response to an "invitation," not a concession to Hamlet's desires that overrides her own wishes. Fiedler presents an Ophelia who is comfortable with her own body and choices in a way that the modern teenage girls described in books like *Reviving Ophelia* find challenging. In *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher describes girls who have dissociated themselves from the act of sex; "they didn't know they had the right to make conscious decisions about sex. They didn't know how to say no" (1994, 209). Likewise, the sections in *Ophelia Speaks* that deal with sex are tinged with shame and disappointment. One girl asks, "can I actually make a good decision for myself?" and another decides that "nothing was worth this fear" as she waits for the results of an HIV test (quoted in Shandler 1999, 188, 189). Through Ophelia, Fiedler gives teenagers a figure who can own her decision to say either no or yes, whose first experience is a conscious choice.

When Pipher explains that a girl's first sexual experience is crucial to her development, she posits that "if [the girl is] fortunate, her first experience is with someone she loves and who loves her, and sex occurs in the context of an emotionally committed relationship. If she's fortunate, the lovemaking is gentle, passionate, and deepens the caring between the two participants" (1994, 209). Fiedler goes out of her way to paint her Ophelia's first sexual experiences with her Hamlet as "fortunate," in Pipher's sense. Ophelia initiates the encounter herself, after Hamlet has made it clear that he does not want to pressure her, and shows no signs of regretting the choice she has made. In portraying the sexual relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet as consensual, passionate, and loving, Fiedler offers a model of a positive experience to her young readers. By creating examples of positive sexual experiences for young women, as Fiedler does, authors of young adult literature can fill the void described by Richard M. Lerner and Laurence Steinberg in the *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. Lerner and Steinberg argue that because young women "have been indoctrinated to believe that it is their job to suppress sexual desire, to serve as sexual gatekeepers" they come to believe "only adult women are granted sexual agency" (2004, 221). Within this societal framework, Lerner and Steinberg find it "difficult to discern what a positive, empowering, and healthy model of female sexual development should look like" (2004, 220). Pipher believes that finding such models is an important part of developing a healthy attitude towards sex and argues that "until [these girls] could picture a good experience, I doubted they could have one" (1994, 209). While not every sexual experience in *Dating Hamlet* is as "fortunate" as the encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia, Fiedler uses the readers' imaginations to suggest that sex can be romantic and healthy, and that it does not have to be a source of shame.

In *Ophelia*, Klein offers a more complicated view of the sexual relationship between her Ophelia and Hamlet. Like Fiedler, she describes their first sexual encounter in terms that Pipher would deem "fortunate"; she and Hamlet are in a committed relationship, with plans to marry. Klein clearly identifies their intercourse as a mutually consensual expression of love by having them "confirm [their] vows with the deed of love itself" only a few days before their secret wedding (2006, 102). But Klein's Ophelia is still conflicted about her own decision the next morning, acknowledging that "I had given him my most valuable gift, one that could never be taken back" (2006, 103). She struggles to come to terms with her newfound experiences and imagines voices resembling those of her teachers and father censuring her, calling her "common," "ruined" and "undone" (2006, 103). Where Fiedler's Ophelia is eager to share her experience with Anne, Klein's Ophelia is cautious, worried that someone at court will find out about their tryst. This concern comes just before Klein's Ophelia hears the counsel that both Polonius and Laertes offer in act 1 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and her fear of discovery gives way to a new understanding

of the pervasive double standards of male and female sexual roles and responsibilities. Ophelia's second thoughts would ring true for the teenage contributors to *Ophelia Speaks*, who describe their own doubts and fears after their first sexual experiences. While Klein's Ophelia finally listens to the "wiser, more generous" voice in her head that reassures her that she is "made new by love, a maid no more, but born a woman" (2006, 103), *Ophelia* implies that even consensual sex between partners in a committed relationship can bring regrets and consequences.

The Ophelias of Fiedler and Klein are both able to offer counsel and support to friends who have been sexually assaulted. Fiedler's Ophelia listens as her friend Anne confides that Barnardo pinned her against the wall and kissed her after she smiled at him and that he has done "worse" to other serving maids. When Ophelia protests that a smile from Anne "does not give him such right as to molest you," her words recall discourse surrounding contemporary rape victims (2002, 47). Patricia Yancey Martin explains that "public opinion routinely exonerates rapists and blames rape victims . . . beliefs like these depict raped women (and girls) as having invited their assault by how they dressed, behaved, talked, and so forth" (2005, 18). In *Ophelia Speaks*, Sara Shandler includes a contribution from an anonymous fourteen-year-old who describes her feelings after her rape: "deciding whether or not to tell anyone, because you feel as though it's all your fault. Asking yourself, did I give him all the wrong impressions?" (1999, 57). Through Anne, Fiedler gives voice to victims who internalize this blame, who believe that they must somehow be responsible for what has happened to them. Ophelia's response is anachronistic, like much of *Dating Hamlet*, and it articulates a clear message about sexual assault: the victim is not to blame. Presenting Ophelia in the role of counselor rather than victim, Fiedler is able to model a dialogue between young women about sexual assault and encourage a deeper understanding in her young readers.

Just as Fiedler's Ophelia is able to offer support to Anne, Klein's Ophelia takes on a similar role when she arrives in the French convent. Struck by the puzzling behavior of a novice named Marguerite, Ophelia urges her to tell her story and learns that Marguerite was betrothed to Fortinbras of Norway before coming to France. Marguerite explains:

I favored him . . . and by praising my beauty he persuaded me to grant him certain favors. Having conquered me in part, he pressed for full possession. When I denied him, he grew angry, saying that all of my body would soon be his . . . One day he assaulted me as if I were a land to be invaded and seized. I fought to repel him and was nearly overcome, when by fortune a servant overheard my cries and discovered us. I denounced this suitor to the king, but the prince denied his crime and instead impugned my virtue. He called me whore and spurned me. (2006, 316)

Once again, a minor Shakespearean character is recast as a would-be rapist and used as an example of the dangers faced by young women. While Marguerite's story is seeded with language that marks it as historical fiction — betrothal, suitor, favors — the subject matter is entirely relevant to the audience of teenagers that Klein is writing for. Her experiences mirror those of victims of acquaintance rape; she has a close relationship with her attacker, who pressures and threatens her before attempting to force himself on her. Like Fiedler, Klein calls attention to the way that victims are blamed, particularly when the attacker is an acquaintance or someone in a position of power. Through Fortinbras, whose accusations led to Marguerite's exile to the convent, Klein is able to call attention to the gender and power dynamics that still color discourse about rape today.

### Conclusion

Klein's treatment of Fortinbras' assault on Marguerite balances the mediation "between past and present" cited by Hateley as a characteristic of YA historical romance (2013, 442). Because her readers are at risk for acquaintance or date rape, Klein explores the uncomfortable subject from the comforting distance provided by a setting that is removed in time and culture from her readers' day-to-day lives. Her use of Shakespearean characters and historical setting allows her readers to distance themselves from painful plot elements such as attempted rape while still learning from the dialogue between the two women. Klein's method of introducing her audience to the topic of acquaintance rape is a way of educating young women in a way that experts have found useful. In *Is It Rape?* Joan McGregor cites a 1995 study that revealed that "61% [of acquaintance rape victims] did not define their own experiences as rape . . . until sometime later when they participated in a class, read something about acquaintance rape in the newspaper, or saw a TV program that educated them on the subject" (Weihe and Richards 29, quoted in McGregor 2005, 75). By establishing Ophelia as both a survivor of assault herself and a supportive friend to another young woman who has faced assault, Fiedler and Klein are able to educate their readers about the danger posed by sexual assault and emphasize the importance of creating a supportive environment for the victims.

Both texts make it clear that it is hard for their young heroines to find this sort of supportive environment in their fictionalized Early Modern Europe, and they introduce language that calls attention to patriarchal oppression. Fiedler's character Anne states that women "must tolerate this sort of thing. We exist, to men's minds, only to be of use to them . . . and in any number of ways, some bearable, some vile. But men believe it is to them to decide. And we have little means of defying that" (2002, 53). Anne's philosophy is reminiscent of the words of Shakespeare's Emilia on the subject of men: "they are all but stomachs, and we all but food; they eat us hungerly, and when they are full, they belch us" (*Othello*, 3.4.100-102), and serves as a foil for Ophelia's determination



to defy patriarchal expectations and limitations. Ophelia systematically dismantles Anne's beliefs about the positions of women over the course of the novel, both through her kind words and her decisive actions. By taking control of her own life (and the lives of Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius), Fiedler's Ophelia refutes the idea that women must be subject to the control of men. She offers encouragement not only to Anne, but also to young readers who feel that they have lost control of their own lives.

Similarly, Klein's Ophelia laments both the harsh treatment that women suffer at the hands of men and the tenuous position of young women in a fickle court. When she sees a new lady-in-waiting replace her as Gertrude's favorite, just as Ophelia had once replaced the previous favorite, Cristiana, Ophelia explains sadly, "To kings and queens we are like lutes . . . they play us for our flattering songs, and when we are out of tune or they are fretted, they cast us aside" (2006, 171). Klein presents court culture as a petty circle of intrigues, jealousies, and betrayals; the challenges Ophelia and the other ladies-in-waiting face are reminiscent of the social pressures today's young women endure in high school or junior high. While Fiedler's Ophelia is able to change the limitations of the Danish court by reversing the tragic events of the final act of *Hamlet* and winning the praise and admiration of all of Denmark, Klein's Ophelia merely escapes the oppressive environment to find a more supportive setting. At the French convent, Klein's Ophelia finds a group of strong, compassionate women who are able to protect and care for her during her pregnancy. She, in turn, helps them by using her knowledge of herbal medicine to treat their maladies. While Klein's Ophelia does, in fact, go "to a nunnery," her role is not that of a virginal novice who would not "be a breeder of sinners." She chooses to serve not as a nun, but as an in-house doctor who provides treatment for physical and mental illness as she raises her child. While Klein takes the action away from the court, her message is the same; young women can overcome the restrictive barriers of society by using their determination and compassion to make the world a better place. By advocating for a support system among women, Fiedler and Klein challenge their readers to look beyond the text and apply these ideas to their own lives, as have Mary Pipher's readers.

Looking back on her experiences in Denmark, Klein's Ophelia muses: "I had wanted to be the author of my tale, not merely a player in Hamlet's drama or a pawn in Claudius' deadly game" (2006, 241). Both Fiedler and Klein have allowed their Ophelias to rewrite *Hamlet* as their own story, to step out of passivity and into feminist revisions of Shakespeare. If, as Showalter argues, the critical history of Shakespeare's Ophelia is one of "marginality" or even "absence," her current status as a representation of the troubled teenager calls attention to the ways that many contemporary young women have been marginalized or absent in our own society. While equating the suffering of a Shakespearean character to the problems faced by contemporary teenagers is, in

itself, a problematic endeavor, Fiedler and Klein seek to use the connection in a productive way, speaking to young women by giving Ophelia herself a chance to speak.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, they give their young female readers an example of a character who is able to break free of the constraints of her text to challenge the historical and current limitations on adolescent girls, encouraging them, like Ophelia, to find a voice.

### Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to the *Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Shakespeare 1997).
2. Hulbert and Hateley explain some of the problems with the parallel in more detail in their articles.

### Online Resources

*The Ophelia Project*. The Ophelia Project, Erie, PA. <http://www.opheliaproject.org>.

## References

- Bevington, David, ed. 2004. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Fifth edition. New York: Pearson.
- Bloom, Gina, Anston Bosman, and William N. West. 2013. "Ophelia's Intertheatricality, or, How Performance is History." *Theatre Journal* 65.2: 165-82. Online. DOI: 10.1353/tj.2013.0041.
- Dash, Irene G. 1997. *Women's Worlds in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Dellasega, Cheryl, ed. 2001. *Surviving Ophelia: Mothers Share Their Wisdom in Navigating the Tumultuous Teenage Years*. New York: Ballantine.
- Fiedler, Lisa. 2002. *Dating Hamlet*. London: Harper Collins.
- Greene, Gayle, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, and Carol Thomas Neely, eds. 1983. *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Hateley, Erica. 2013. "Sink or Swim? Revising Ophelia in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 38.4: 435-48. Online. DOI: 10.1353/chq.2013.0061.
- Hulbert, Jennifer. 2006. "'Adolescence, Thy Name is Ophelia!': The Ophelia-ization of the Contemporary Teenage Girl." In *Shakespeare and Youth Culture*. Edited by Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Whetmore, Jr., and Robert L. York. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 199-220.
- Kahn, Coppélia. 2012. "Afterword: Ophelia Then, Now, Hereafter." In *The Afterlife of Ophelia*. Edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 231-44.
- Klein, Lisa. 2006. *Ophelia*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Lerer, Seth. 2012. "'I've got a feeling for Ophelia!': Childhood and Performance." In *The Afterlife of Ophelia*. Edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 11-28.
- Lerner, Richard M., and Laurence Steinberg, eds. 2004. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. Second edition. Indianapolis: John Wiley & Sons. DOI: 10.1002/9780470479193.adlpsy001001.
- Louie, Belinda Y., and Douglas H. 1992. "Empowerment through Young-Adult Literature." *English Journal* 81.4: 53-56.
- McGee, Arthur. 1987. *The Elizabethan Hamlet*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

- McGregor, Joan. 2005. *Is it Rape? On Acquaintance Rape and Taking Women's Consent Seriously*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Parke, Clara Claiborne. 1983. "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular." In *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Edited by Gayle Greene, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, and Carol Thomas Neely. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 262-78.
- Peterson, Kaara L. and Deanne Williams. 2012. "Introduction: The Afterlives of Ophelia." In *The Afterlife of Ophelia*. Edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peterson, Karen S. 1989. "The Pitfalls of Adolescence; Teen-agers Ponder their 'Dark Side.'" *USA Today*. 7 June. 1D.
- Pipher, Mary. 1994. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Putnam.
- Potter, Lucy. 1999. "Ophelia Centre Stage." In *Extensions: Essays in English Studies from Shakespeare to the Spice Girls*. Edited by Sue Hosking and Dianne Schwerdt. Kent Town: Wakefield Press. 25-41.
- Rosenberg, Marvin. 1992. *The Masks of Hamlet*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *The Norton Shakespeare*. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York: Norton.
- Shandler, Nina. 2001. *Ophelia's Mom: Loving and Letting Go of Your Adolescent Daughter*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Shandler, Sara. 1999. *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Showalter, Elaine. 1985a. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. Reprint, 1987; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin.
- Showalter, Elaine. 1985b. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism." In *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. Edited by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman. New York: Methuen. 77-94.
- Svazlian, Monique. 2014. "Slut Shaming is Still a Thing: How Women Are Shifting the Conversation through the Arts." *HuffPost Arts & Culture*. *Huffington Post*. 10 December [accessed 12 December 2014].
- Thompson, Ann, and Sasha Roberts, eds. 1997. *Women Reading Shakespeare 1660-1900: An Anthology of Criticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Weihe, Vernon, and Ann Richards. 1995. *Intimate Betrayal: Understanding and Responding to the Trauma of Acquaintance Rape*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Welshimer Wagner, Linda. 1963. "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14.1: 94-97.
- White, R. S. 2007. "Ophelia's Sisters." In *The Impact of Feminism in English Renaissance Studies*. Edited by Dympna Callahan. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. 93-113.
- Yancey Martin, Patricia. 2005. *Rape Work: Victims, Gender, and Emotions in Organization and Community Context*. New York: Routledge.