

# "I think nothing, my lord": Emptiness, Absence, and Abused Innocence in "Ophelia, the Rose of Elsinore"

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## Abstract

Mary Cowden Clarke's cautionary, didactic pre-history of *Hamlet's* Ophelia uses the character's submissive affect and limited agency to inflict an escalating series of emotional and psychological shocks on her heroine, which she suggests will eventually burst forth as madness. In doing so, Clarke becomes another (perhaps the worst) of Ophelia's abusers, constructing a narrative of foundational, sexualized psychic pain that surpasses the traumas visited on her by Shakespeare, ultimately silencing her "heroine" and reifying her secondary status in the prince of Denmark's tragedy. In the nineteenth century tradition of "bowdlerizing" literature for impressionable young readers, Clarke employs folk and fairy-tale conventions to create a social and cultural landscape in which masculine desire is an omnipresent threat, female desire too dangerous to contemplate, and a young maid's wits as mortal as her virtue. In her zeal to protect the purity of Victorian girlhood, Clarke adopts an abusive relationship to Ophelia that effectively conflates the roles of author and evil stepmother. By evacuating her subject of any internal resources save "innocence" and "obedience," Clarke creates a character who is merely acted upon, denying Ophelia even the agency granted her theatrical prototype, who performs the most powerful, proactive deed of her circumscribed life by ending it.

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## This Nothing's More than Matter: Ophelia as Blank Slate

Mary Cowden Clarke begins her richly imaginative pre-history of *Hamlet's* Ophelia with a portrait of mute, shapeless inertia and vacuity: "The babe lay on the nurse's knee. Could any impression have been received through those wide-stretched eyes that stared as wonderingly as if they were in fact beholding amazed the new existence upon which they had so lately opened, the child would have seen that it lay in a spacious apartment, furnished with all the tokens of wealth and magnificence, which those ruder ages could command" (Clarke 1852, 161). This image of the infant, apparently awake and alert, yet according to this narrative, strangely vacant and incapable of comprehension, lays the foundation for the portrait of submissive, tractable innocence that Clarke

constructs for her Shakespearean "heroine." The child's "wide-stretched eyes" and their "violet" color are mentioned three times in the story's opening paragraph, along with speculations about what they *might* have "noted," "seen," or "perceived," had they possessed the ability to do so (161).

This introduction to Clarke's "Ophelia, the Rose of Elsinore" — one in a series of morally instructive "prequels" for fifteen of Shakespeare's female characters published as *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* between 1850 and 1852 — presents Ophelia as a passive receptor for incoming stimuli, ready to be molded and manipulated by those around her. This rather flaccid representation prefigures the noncommittal responses of Shakespeare's character when questioned about her perceptions and opinions: "I know not what I should think, my lord" (to which Polonius replies, "Marry, I'll teach you; think yourself a baby"), and "I think nothing, my lord," which Hamlet deliberately misinterprets as an obscene reference to the "no thing" that "lie[s] between maids' legs" (*Hamlet*, 1.4.104-105; 3.2.106-107).<sup>1</sup> But Clarke goes beyond the play's sketchy portrayal of a girl caught between the agendas of powerful men to create a young woman whose very "innocence" dooms her to passivity, silence, and victimization. Using Ophelia's submissive affect and lack of agency as her starting point, Clarke systematically inflicts an escalating series of emotional and psychological shocks on her heroine, traumas that she suggests will eventually burst forth as madness in *Hamlet*. In doing so, Clarke becomes another — perhaps the worst — of Ophelia's abusers, creating a narrative of foundational psychic pain that surpasses even the tortures envisioned for the character by Shakespeare himself.

After enumerating the objects and family members that exceed the newborn Ophelia's capacity for recognition or understanding, Clarke allows that the infant "probably gained a clearer perception . . . for the good peasant-woman, who had been engaged as wet-nurse to the little Ophelia, — daughter of the lord Polonius, and of the lady Aoudra" (Clarke 1852, 162). This nurse, Botilda, is a rustic countrywoman with a heart of gold and a store of "old world ditties and scraps of antique songs" at her disposal, with which she lulls her infant charge to sleep. When the subject matter of these lullabies is questioned by a more sophisticated female servant, the nurse protests that there can be no harm to Ophelia in the practice, since the songs' meanings are "none to her, so that the tune helps to keep her quiet and to close her eyes" (162). Moreover, Botilda asserts that a coarse interpretation reflects more poorly on the hearer than the singer, since if the "innocent child . . . should chance to catch up the words by-and-by, from hearing me repeat 'em, [she] would only do so like a prattling starling, for the sake of the sound, and without thought of any bad meaning" (163). This early observation on the shifty nature of interpretation indicates Clarke's anxiety about youthful suggestibility, while evoking Horatio's comment that the mad Ophelia's

"speech is nothing / Yet the unshaped use of it doth move the hearers to collection" (*Hamlet*, 4.4.7-9). Ophelia may have "no thought of any bad meaning," but others may hear "something" in her "nothing"; as her brother Laertes puts it, "This nothing's more than matter" (4.5.172).

### Best Safety Lies in Fear: Shakespeare for Nice Girls

The episode with Botilda and her songs foregrounds one of Clarke's major concerns, which she shares with other contemporary adapters of Shakespeare for juvenile readers: the impressionable character of children (especially girls) and the importance of providing an appropriate education, while shielding them from information and experiences that might mold them in undesirable ways. That she situates the first such threatening influence in the apparently wholesome wet-nurse from whom Ophelia once "drew forth delicious streams of nourishment" underscores the need for constant vigilance, particularly on the part of mothers (Clarke 1852, 162). Clarke's introduction of the garrulous, ignorant nurse gestures toward the traditional belief that the caregivers of young children could pass on more than "nourishment" to their charges; one is reminded of Juliet's nurse, who remarks, "Were I not thy only nurse / I would say thou hadst sucked wisdom from thy teat" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.73-74). Caroline Bicks has noted how, historically, "wet-nurses and female domestic workers, often in charge of rearing children during their formative years . . . were believed to influence infants both by their physical and verbal intimacy with the child" and were also held responsible for the actual, physical *shaping* of children: "The 1540 *Byrth of Mankynde* instructs the nurse to 'bynde every parte right and in his due place and order / and that with all tendernesse and gentell entreatynge / and not crookedly'" (Bicks 2003, 11). Given the malleable nature of the infant, the impressions left by its earliest companions might prove disturbingly permanent and present a danger to the child's welfare by way of the very nurturing these caregivers were enlisted to provide.

Although the innate purity and virtue of Clarke's Ophelia "never will be moved, / Though lewdness court it in a shape of heaven," the potentially unwholesome influences that appear throughout her narrative serve as warnings to Clarke's target demographic of young girls and their mothers, who were encouraged to read and discuss the stories together (*Hamlet*, 1.5.53-54). By introducing the figure of Botilda, Clarke inserts a folk/fairy-tale element into Ophelia's fictional "girlhood" that would have been familiar to youthful audiences and that she further exploits by temporarily displacing the infant Ophelia from the Danish court to her nurse's rural cottage, where she encounters other tropes of traditional storytelling: a frightening, quasi-monstrous savage, a beautiful peasant girl, and a handsome, mysterious nobleman on a "milk-white horse" (Clarke 1862, 178). The sense of impending danger that informs Ophelia's early life is a key component of the

dark emotional landscape Clarke invents for her character, in which monsters seem to lurk around every corner. By presenting the child Ophelia in continual peril from her surroundings, Clarke lays the groundwork for the emotional fragility of Shakespeare's character, while reminding her readers that being a young woman is a dangerous business in any time.

Although Clarke explores relatively new territory by inventing elaborate back-stories for Shakespeare's characters, the repackaging of his plays for young and/or female audiences began earlier in the nineteenth century with the publications of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* and Henrietta and Thomas Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare*, both of which appeared in 1807. Shakespeare's ubiquity as a signifier of taste, culture, and education demanded that any person with pretensions to refinement be familiar with his works, yet certain elements in many of his plays rendered them problematic. Texts such as those by the Lambs and the Bowdlers aimed to negotiate between Shakespeare's acknowledged value to young people as a source of moral instruction and cultural capital and parental concerns about the hazardous effects of unmediated interpretation on the unsophisticated reader. In the same way that a responsible mother would select the most suitable wet-nurse, careful parents of the late Romantic period could provide their children with the benefit of Shakespeare's "wisdom" while sheltering them from topics and situations they were not yet equipped to interpret for themselves:

Ideally, the child could be given the Shakespeare text "as is" and draw from it the great truths so often attributed to Shakespeare. However, the Romantic understanding of Shakespeare implicitly acknowledges that the text is open to any number of interpretations. Enter the adapters, with an implicit faith in both the cultural capital of Shakespeare, and the value of transmitting that capital to a newly-invented market of child readers as future citizens. (Hateley 2009, 26)

Both the Bowdlers and the Lambs sought to present a version of Shakespeare that retained his most useful and instructive lessons while excising anything deemed "vulgar" or "indelicate." But where the Bowdlers simply expurgated (or "bowdlerized") the text to eliminate objectionable material, the Lambs undertook to completely rewrite twenty-one of Shakespeare's plays in language appropriate for and accessible to young readers. They did so, however, with the caveat that their versions were primarily targeted at girls rather than at "young gentlemen, who can read them so much better in the originals . . . [thus] their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest to understand" (Lamb and Lamb 1953, 17). This is significant in a volume co-authored by a brother and sister, and it is worth noting that when *Tales from Shakespeare* was first published, it was attributed to Charles alone. It has been speculated that Mary's name was

initially left off due to the scandal surrounding her 1796 murder of their mother during a fit of insanity, but this seems unlikely, since she led a public life in the literary circles of the day (she also served as Latin tutor to the young Mary Cowden Clarke). Instead, in its privileging of the juvenile male reader's faculties over those of his sisters, *Tales from Shakespeare* may not only reflect the Lambs' professional relationship, but also serve to reify the female reader's inferior position in the contemporary literary society for which the *Tales* ostensibly sought to prepare her. Erica Hateley argues that this patriarchal attitude informs the Lambs' rewriting of Shakespeare for impressionable young audiences and "inscribes a passive female reading position in relation to Shakespeare" that, in its "production of feminized anxiety about children's status, marks the reproduction of cultural values (in particular the equation of women with children) rather than a critique of them" (2009, 29). Furthermore, if we assume from the remarks in the *Tales*' preface that "Mary Lamb feels symbolic equality with her child audience, this functions as an indictment of the position of women in the literary culture of early nineteenth-century England, rather than as kudos for her authorial approach, because it links feminine and juvenile subjectivity, and renders both subordinate to masculine authority" (Hateley 2009, 29).

The connection between feminine and juvenile subjectivity that Hateley identifies in the Lambs' project is equally informative to a discussion of "Ophelia, the Rose of Elsinore" and its author, who has been hailed as a proto-feminist for her work as a scholar and editor of Shakespeare, as well as for her essays and fiction. Born in 1809, Clarke was the daughter of the musician Vincent Novello and so was raised in an atmosphere that valorized learning and the arts; family friends included Coleridge, Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and Keats. Mary and her siblings were educated at home, where she studied Latin with Mary Lamb (as noted above), who was a frequent visitor. In later years, Clarke remembered Lamb fondly, and Hateley posits that these early interactions had an important, lasting influence on the developing writer: "Cowden Clarke . . . grows up with a vision of women as instructors, including the Lamb tales and their female author, and in remembering Mary Lamb's voice [in her capacity as teacher] links the oral and the literary" (Hateley 2009, 37). This connection between the oral and the literary would prove particularly important for the *Girlhood* project, but Clarke also published in a number of other genres. She spent sixteen years compiling the first complete concordance to Shakespeare's plays, and among her scholarly publications were *Shakespeare's Proverbs; or, The Wise Saws of our Wisest Poet Collected into a Modern Instance* (1847-48); *Shakespeare's Works* (1859-60); *The Plays of Shakespeare* (1864); and *The Shakespeare Key: Unlocking the Treasures of His Style* (1879), on which she collaborated with her husband, Charles Cowden Clarke. For these achievements, Gail Marshall has declared

Mary Cowden Clarke to be "the pre-eminent female Shakespeare scholar of the century." In her analysis of *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, Marshall writes:

[Clarke's] narrativised versions of the pre-life of fifteen of Shakespeare's women are particularly interesting in the ways in which they anticipate the details of the lives to be revealed in Shakespeare's plays, to such an extent that they remove any possibility of agency from the women themselves . . . The young heroines of Cowden Clarke's text become blameless because they are so clearly the sums of their upbringings, and particularly of the shortcomings of their parents, one of whom is usually dotingly, neglectfully benevolent, while the other is equally dangerously coercive and strong-willed. (Marshall 2009, 19, 61)

This is a thought-provoking and potentially troubling observation, since these stories were marketed to young women as a carefully mediated exposure to Shakespeare, from which young ladies were expected to glean important moral lessons that, when the time came, would (presumably) inform their reading of the original texts. But if, as Marshall argues, Clarke removes all agency and responsibility from her "heroines," placing it instead in the hands of indulgent or dictatorial parents, of what value are the lessons taught by her stories? Like the Lambs and Bowdlers before her, Clarke believed that Shakespeare's plays could serve a useful educational function if they were introduced carefully to girls, optimally by their mothers, who could pick and choose the most edifying material while editing out elements for which young women's tender sensibilities might not be ready. As Nina Auerbach describes this etiological enterprise, "Clarke 'explains' each heroine by providing her with a minutely realized and vivid childhood, forming her character and elaborating her motivations so carefully that her behavior in her play becomes a mere coda to the drama of her girlhood" (1994, 31). That being the case, Clarke's adolescent female audience may well have been ignorant of how the plays would end, which allowed her a great deal of scope when foregrounding — and thus preemptively interpreting — these Shakespearean "codas" for Victorian mothers and daughters. By appropriating Shakespeare's characters and inventing paratextual explanations for their subsequent fates in the plays, Clarke effectively strips her "heroines" of agency not only in the narrative that *she* constructs for them, but in Shakespeare's as well. Although a bold, even hubristic, undertaking for an author of any sex, Clarke's approach to her heroines problematizes claims of a feminist agenda for the *Girlhood*. While the stories' composition may constitute a feminist act for Clarke as a writer, her narratives offer nothing to suggest that such personal autonomy is an available — or indeed, safe — option for her characters or her readers. Clarke is interested in educating young women, but not necessarily

in empowering them with anything beyond an awareness of the constant peril attendant on being female.

Hateley writes that "[i]n privileging feminine influence over masculine, Cowden Clarke embodies a resistance to the textual emphasis on patrilineal inheritance of Shakespeare such as that emphasized by the Lambs and the Bowdlers" (Hateley 2009, 37). For Clarke, this privileging of the feminine takes an explicitly matrilineal form, in which she casts herself as a sort of co-parent to Shakespeare's archetypal authorial father figure. Rather than playing the censor or translator, Clarke instead adopts the role of wise (if somewhat overcautious) maternal guide that she also assigns to the mothers she invents for her characters, many of whom are orphaned, motherless, or inadequately parented in the source texts. Throughout the *Girlhood*, Clarke seems to suggest that the world (certainly the world of Shakespeare's plays) would be a better place if mothers were in charge, provided they took their responsibilities as role models and educators seriously. Although Clarke grew up surrounded by men of letters, Marshall notes that, in addition to her warm recollections of Mary Lamb's tutelage, she cited her mother as her primary, shaping influence, "writing in . . . the Preface to her *Complete Concordance to Shakspeare* [sic] that it was 'she who forms the glory and happiness of her children, she who first inspired me with a love of all that is good and beautiful, and who therefore may well be said to have originated my devotion to Shakspeare [sic]'" (Marshall 2009, 20). Although she and her (substantially older) husband had no children of their own, Clarke's reverence for the power of maternal influence on developing minds is apparent in her creative writing. Early in "The Rose of Elsinore," Clarke goes on a lengthy, rhapsodic tangent that elevates "Holy mother-love" above the realm of ordinary human relations, fetishizing the mother-child bond as the "nearest semblance vouchsafed to mortals of Divine protection! Benignest human symbol of God's mercy to man! There is a blessed influence, a sacred joy, a plenitude of satisfaction, in the very presence of a mother, that plainer speaks the mysterious beatitude of Heaven itself to earthly intelligence, than aught else in existence" (Clarke 1852, 195). In Clarke's text, the "very presence" of Lady Aoudra — a character entirely absent from Shakespeare's play — is fundamentally necessary to Ophelia's emotional, psychological, and physical welfare. By removing her mother at a strategic, formative point in Ophelia's upbringing, Clarke demonstrates the dire effects that can result from even a temporary lack of this "blessed influence" in a child's life (195).

Thus, Clarke's insistence on the indispensable role of the mother in the formation of her offspring's mind and character is central to her explanation of why "a young maid's wits / Should be as mortal as an old man's life" in *Hamlet* (4.5.158-59). After depriving Ophelia of maternal counsel at a vulnerable point in her emotional development, Clarke forces her to endure

ordeals never imagined for her Shakespearean prototype, including a lengthy separation from her parents, the seduction, disgrace, and death of two friends at the hands of the same "libertine," an attempted rape, a near-fatal attack of "brain fever," and the sudden demise of the loving mother Shakespeare neglected to provide for her. Like Shakespeare's character before her madness, "The Rose of Elsinore"'s Ophelia exhibits little motivating force of her own, but is continually defined and moved around according to the needs and purposes of others. With the exception of Clarke herself, these manipulators are usually men, and in her essay on the role of feminist criticism in the fluctuating nature of Ophelia's representation, Elaine Showalter writes:

Some [feminist critics] have maintained that we should represent Ophelia as a lawyer represents a client, that we should become her Horatia, in this harsh world reporting her story . . . But what can we mean by Ophelia's story? The story of her life, the story of her betrayal at the hands of her father, brother, lover, court, society? . . . Shakespeare gives us very little information from which to imagine a past for Ophelia. She appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes; the pre-play course of her love story with Hamlet is known only by a few ambiguous flashbacks. (1985, 78)

### Most Excellent Fancy: Inventing Ophelia's Past

Armed with only these "ambiguous flashbacks" and faced with the challenge of constructing an identity for Ophelia before she appears as Laertes' sister and Polonius' daughter, Clarke must invent a Denmark that predates the action of *Hamlet*. In doing so, she creates a social and cultural landscape that evokes the genres of folk tradition and fairy-tales as much as that of early modern drama. Designed to capture the attention of the young reader, this is a world where the daughter of a high-ranking courtier finds herself in a woodcutter's cottage, where handsome princes mysteriously appear on horseback to seduce innocent peasant girls, and where delicate, aristocratic, young ladies die of broken hearts. To the series of male-engendered betrayals that inform the theatrical Ophelia's life, Clarke introduces the theme of feminine weakness: the men may be self-serving and rapacious, but the women in her narrative betray themselves by neglecting to exercise the necessary caution to preserve their virtue. In Clarke's didactic, cautionary representation of female frailty, Ophelia's reason is undermined as much by the failings of the women in her life as by those of the men.

Ophelia takes up comparatively little room in the predominantly male world of Shakespeare's text, so in order to set the stage for her tale of imperiled female innocence, Clarke fabricates a highly feminized environment for the girl to grow up in: Ophelia has not only a devoted mother and a nurse, but female attendants and two (ill-starred) girlfriends. The men of the play are mostly conspicuous by their absence: Laertes is barely mentioned after leaving for school in Paris, the

guardsmen Bernardo and Marcellus get a single line, Osric is a foil for Clarke's invented seducer, Lord Eric of Kronstein, the King, Claudius, and Prince Hamlet hardly appear (the latter never speaks), and Horatio is nowhere in sight. Polonius is an autocratic, somewhat risible windbag whose mere "wave of the hand" is understood by his wife and daughter to be "of final significancy," but his role in Clarke's text is primarily to complicate things for his wife and daughter (Clarke 1852, 201). Ophelia's first traumatic experience occurs as a result of her father's professional ambitions: when Polonius embarks on a diplomatic mission to France, he demands that his wife accompany him and leave their children behind. This is the first of several relocations for Ophelia, who is placed in the home of her wet-nurse, Botilda, for the duration of her parents' absence. This early separation is central to the narrative's agenda: Lady Aoudra is unconcerned with the possible effects of Botilda's family on her daughter, trusting "to the child's extreme youth — scarce beyond babyhood — for security that she should not acquire coarse habits, or imbibe unseemly notions" (165). She expects "to return before the time when it was necessary to begin the inculcation of principle, the inspiring of ideas, the formation of heart and mind," but this temporary abdication of her maternal duties — although reluctantly acceded to out of wifely obedience — sets in motion the chain of events Clarke posits as the source of Ophelia's eventual madness and suicide (165).

Ophelia sleeps through the journey to Botilda's cottage and does not awaken until after her mother's tearful departure, but her blank inertia is in evidence from the moment she awakens: "[s]he was none of those fretful children, who, the very first thing they uniformly do upon waking up from sleep is to roar; on the contrary, she lay silent and still . . . then raising herself softly against the side of the cot, rubbed her eyes, and looked over" (Clarke 1852, 167). She eventually calls out for "Mamma," but mutely submits to the care of Botilda (who refers to her as "*my* baby") and the latter's adolescent daughter, Jutha, to whom the child becomes something of a pet (168). As in the story's opening lines, Clarke emphasizes Ophelia's passive, silent affect and contrasts it with the earthy manners of the peasant family: the "little court lady" is "not unhappy; but . . . grave, strangely quiet and reserved for a little creature of her years" (170, 181). Clarke's Ophelia is content to join Jutha on woodland rambles and picnics, but when indoors she is disturbed by Botilda's "hairy loutish" son Ulf, an "idiot boy" who tortures insects, devours song birds whole, mutilates flowers, and is always trying to give Ophelia a "hug" (169). This character — another fairy-tale borrowing, like an ogre or troll — provides a locus for the little girl's fears, but also for her curiosity, which leads her to watch him continually. Ophelia is frightened and confused by Ulf, but she feels a fascinated repulsion: "she shrinks from his approaches; yet she still cannot resist watching him. Dread and disgust she feels; but withal a strange irresistible excitement, which impels her to look upon that she fears and loathes" (175).

## A Document in Madness, Thoughts and Remembrance Fitted: Psychoanalyzing a Victorian Ophelia

For the modern reader, the previous sentence immediately invites a psychoanalytic reading; indeed, Showalter notes that "[w]hile the . . . essays of Mary Cowden Clarke are now mocked as the epitome of naïve criticism, these Victorian studies of the girlhood of Shakespeare's heroines are of course alive and well as psychoanalytic criticism" (1985, 89). Written in the early 1850s, Clarke's representation of female sexual (or at least sexuality-based) trauma is certainly striking and easily viewed by a twenty-first century audience through a Freudian lens. Ophelia's response to Ulf's "ferocious delight" in destruction is among the most obvious and compelling examples:

The vindictive satisfaction with which he exercised this power upon things of beauty and fragility, and the air of triumph with which he gloated over his work of ravage as he leered at her after each feat of the kind, made the little girl always feel somehow as if she were herself the bird, or the fly, or the rose, or whatsoever other object might chance to be the object of Ulf's destructive propensity. (Clarke 1852, 175)

The "ravage" of things (and people) "of beauty and fragility" becomes an all-too-familiar motif in the girl's life, as Ophelia is exposed to situations that are progressively more troubling (although still incomprehensible to her "innocent" mind). As the uneducated Botilda neglects her duty to Jutha as mother, to Ophelia as nurse/mother surrogate, and to Ulf as moral guide and disciplinarian, the world around Ophelia grows more unstable and confusing, until even Jutha effectively abandons her. This second trauma begins when the girls stumble upon Lord Eric of Kronstein (Clarke's emblematic figure of the seductive, irresponsible libertine) on one of their regular walks in the forest. In this scene, which is worth quoting at length, Clarke skillfully combines tropes of juvenile literature with a glimpse into the imaginative lives of the two young girls whom she places in danger:

One fine noonday, when the heat of the sun had compelled Jutha and the little girl to seek the shade of the forest depths, Ophelia interrupted the story then telling, by exclaiming suddenly: — "Look Jutha! See there!" Jutha looked . . . and saw, to her surprise, a milk-white horse, saddled and bridled . . . "The beautiful creature!" exclaimed Jutha. "What costly housings it has! It looks like a fairy horse, — the steed of some of those gallant princes in the stories! . . . The girl and the child crept a little nearer to the figure they saw lying there. It was that of a man, in a rich hunting-dress. His plumed hat had been placed so as to shade his eyes during sleep; but it had fallen partly aside, and showed a face finely shaped, with

features marked and handsome. "A fit owner for such a gallant beast!" murmured Jutha . . . "Sure, a prince — no less; such a prince as they tell of in the wondrous tales I have heard. How passing beautiful he is! What can he be? Where can he have come from? From fairy-land — or from the court, surely." (Clarke 1852, 77-78)

The fairy-land and the court (where Ophelia comes from) are figured here as interchangeable, and the outcome for the young women in "The Rose of Elsinore" is as predetermined as that of any fairy-tale heroine, but living happily ever after is not a part of it. Lord Eric initially seems courteous and gallant, referring to both girls as "wood-nymphs" and to Jutha as "a fair damsel to bring an errant-knight his palfrey" (179, 180). But he soon indicates his desire to be alone with the "opening rose" Jutha, and suggests that she send the sexually immature, "close-furled bud" Ophelia to play alone in the forest (184). The child consents and comes to no harm, but although the "little Ophelia was less charmed with this addition to their society . . . she could not altogether find in her heart to regret what made Jutha so evidently, so radiantly happy" and is thus made unknowingly complicit in her friend's downfall (183). She will be similarly implicated in the ruin of her friend Thyra, who uses Ophelia (who is by this time an adolescent, and initially unrecognized by the seducer) to make up an innocent third party at her own meetings with Lord Eric. Although Ophelia is always in close proximity to what her mother terms "sin," she is invariably oblivious to its significance, but is nonetheless wounded by it on some deep, internal level. Even Gertrude conducts her dalliance with Claudius right under Ophelia's nose, but the girl seems oblivious to any wrongdoing as she sits sewing in the queen's chamber while Claudius, "in a deep embayed window, at some distance from her, stood . . . regarding [Gertrude] earnestly from beneath his bent brows and drooping lids" (213).

Each of these affairs brings catastrophic consequences, the last being the murders of King Hamlet and Polonius, the madness and suicide of Ophelia, and the corpse-littered image of the Danish court that ends Shakespeare's play. But although Clarke offers disturbing glimpses into the inner world she constructs for her heroine, she seems more interested in using the traumas that shape Ophelia's personality to explain and excuse her later behavior than in analyzing how those traumas have informed that behavior. Whereas a straightforward Freudian reading would see repressed sexuality as a structuring function of the text, leading to unconsciously driven actions (such as Ophelia's surveillance of Ulf and her persistent inability to recognize sin, vice, or danger), Clarke's agenda, while not wholly unrelated, seems somewhat different. In "The Rose of Elsinore," it is *unrepressed* sexuality that results in such driven actions, most explicitly figured in the character of Lord Eric, who seems incapable of not seducing every young woman he meets. Moreover, the implication is that all men — from the bestial Ulf to the bullying Polonius, the adulterous Claudius,

and even Prince Hamlet — are in thrall to such drives unless they actively resist them. In Clarke's narrative, women who are properly instructed should be immune to these urges, but they remain in constant peril from the seductive power that enables men to act on their most profane desires. In this way, Clarke's project challenges a classic psychoanalytic reading because although she wants her female readers to recognize the dangers of male sexuality, they are not encouraged to acknowledge or interrogate their own. Male desire is an omnipresent threat to be guarded against, but female desire presents a danger too enormous to contemplate unless its consequences are made terrifyingly clear.

Clarke's persistent emphasis on the inherently threatening nature of male *and* female sexuality problematizes Showalter's claim that "The Rose of Elsinore" is a "Victorian feminist [revision] of the Ophelia story" invested in addressing "the wrongs of women, and especially . . . the sexual double standard" (1985, 87). In my reading, Clarke's Victorian solution to this double standard is the denunciation of male desire and the complete denial of any analogous desire in educated (and therefore "virtuous") women. In her lecture to Ophelia on the ever-present danger of "libertines," Lady Aoudra laments society's unforgiving attitude towards female transgression: "The world is charitable in the allowances it makes for the worker of all this evil, though severely tyrannous to the injured party . . . I, for my part, must ever hold deliberate seduction as one of the most heinous crimes, and continue to manifest my abhorrence of the seducer in proportion with my estimate of his guilt" (Clarke 1852, 221). But despite her apparent interest in equal justice for equal wrongdoing, Clarke's overwhelming message remains that men are a danger from which young women must safeguard themselves. None of the women in Clarke's text is necessarily *immoral*, merely insufficiently vigilant in defending their own virtue and, by association, the innocence of those for whom they are responsible, but their creator still makes them suffer for their weakness. In "The Rose of Elsinore"'s moral universe, sexuality is not only equated with ruin, despoilment, and loss, but ultimately synonymous with death.

This theme is repeated throughout the narrative, and with escalating intensity: the well-meaning but ignorant Botilda turns the young Ophelia over to the naïve Jutha, who yields to the errant knight Lord Eric not through licentiousness but because of her obliviousness to the world's snares (about which Botilda has failed to instruct her). Lady Thyra, the friend Polonius selects to provide Ophelia with "a little forming in manner, to render her presentable" for attendance at court, is more sophisticated than Jutha but motherless, and enjoys a dangerous degree of autonomy as the *de facto* mistress of her father's household (Clarke 1852, 201). Without maternal guidance, Thyra also falls under Lord Eric's spell, and after he flees to avoid his gambling debts, she hangs herself in despair. Even Queen Gertrude's falling off comes not so much from wickedness as from weakness

when she allows her flattered vanity to soften her resistance to Claudius' incestuous, adulterous advances: instead of "repelling the boldness of his warmth . . . she could not help yielding to the secret guilty pleasure of knowing it to exist" (228). All of these women reap the consequences of their own carelessness, and while George C. Gross has commented on what he sees as Clarke's relatively sympathetic attitude to feminine frailty, he also notes that the fates of Ophelia and her friends are not a plea for consensual sexual equality, but a sign that for Clarke, "[e]limination of the double standard means . . . that neither sex has any right to sow wild oats, and if the oats are sown, both sexes should reap the consequences" (Gross 1972, 55).

Clarke hammers this message home for her impressionable young readers by having the sweet, affectionate Jutha, pregnant and abandoned by her lover, endure a painful confrontation with her parents, whose lack of sympathy for her friend's mysterious "illness" distresses Ophelia. The girl later delivers a stillborn baby and dies; we are spared the details and are shown only the aftermath, when Ophelia creeps downstairs at midnight to find Jutha's shrouded corpse. The sight of this "white, still, rigid thing," holding the baby with its "little, little face . . . so transparent, so waxen, — so pretty, though so strangely image-like" sends Ophelia into hysterics, and the ensuing shock renders her more solitary and quiet than before: "[n]aturally gentle, she became timid" and "a prey to fancies and terrors that would not let her close her eyes" (Clarke 1852, 191, 193). Soon after, Lady Aoudra returns to bring her back to court, arriving late one night and swooping into Ophelia's bedroom just as Ulf, hidden in "a lurking place by the bedside," is about to spring at the child, who has been lying awake contemplating "the wandering shapes of evil permitted to visit the earth in night and darkness, as wild tales hinted" (194). Ulf slinks away unseen, but Ophelia develops a fever from the shock of her mother's sudden appearance and becomes "averse from speaking, or even thinking, of the period she had spent at the cottage" (196). At this point, the peasant family disappears from the narrative, but the point has been made: "although the young reader may still have questions, she knows at least that seduction leads to death" (Gross 1972, 54).

Ophelia recovers and remains externally unblemished by witnessing this grim result of less-than-perfect virtue: if anything, the spectacle of Jutha's corpse and stillborn infant ensures her continued obedience and passivity. As Auerbach points out, "Clarke's account of the successive traumas that form Ophelia locks the heroine into so harrowing a series of events that there is no room in her character for disruptive ambiguities," and Clarke quickly provides her heroine, and her audience, with a second example of the wages of sin in Lady Thyra, the motherless noblewoman whom Ophelia befriends at Polonius' insistence (1994, 31). Thyra is kind-hearted, but secretly betrothed to the same young man who despoiled the unfortunate Jutha — a match to which she knows her father would never consent. Despite Lady Aoudra's reservations about Ophelia's

intimacy with a girl so "unrestricted in her proceedings, choosing her own associates, complete mistress of her conduct and herself," Thyra does not corrupt her "dear, scrupulous novice," but must suffer nonetheless for her involvement with the reckless, amoral Eric (Clarke 1852, 201, 204). It is unclear whether this second seduction proceeds as far as Jutha's, but the outcome for Ophelia is more serious than the hysteria of her earlier bereavement. The discovery of her friend's corpse, "hanging where her own desperate hand had stifled out life," brings on an illness during which she has delirious hallucinations of her dead friends, along with prophetic visions of King Hamlet's murder and her own suicide by drowning:

The night was obscure; there was a veil of haze upon tree, and shrub, and brook; but I saw her plainly, and knew her at once, before she shook back her long hair, and wrung her hands, and moaned; it was Jutha, mother! . . . there were two others, I saw. One was my poor Thyra. I knew her by a terrible token . . . her livid throat . . . and there was a space between her feet and the ground, as she glided past me . . .

The wind sighed amid the reeds. The heads of nettles and long-purples were stirred by the night breeze, as it swept on mournfully. The air seemed laden with heavy sobbings. Then I saw one approach, whose face I could not see, and whose figure I knew not. She was clothed in white, all hung about with weeds and wild flowers; and from among them stuck ends of straw, that the shadowy hands seemed to pluck and spurn at; and then the white figure moved on, impelled towards the water. I saw her glide on, floating upon its surface; I saw her dimly, among the silver-leaved branches of the drooping willow, as they waved around and above her, upbuoyed by her spreading white garments. (222-24)

The last part of the above passage contains obvious echoes of Shakespeare's text, in which Gertrude reports Ophelia's drowning in strikingly similar language. The most fascinating thing about Clarke's decision to give Ophelia this vision and to have *her* articulate it is the implicit link it creates between Clarke's innocent, traumatized heroine and the morally compromised queen of "The Rose of Elsinore" and *Hamlet*. Whereas Shakespeare's audience has only Gertrude's (not necessarily trustworthy) word about Ophelia's final moments, Clarke deliberately confers authority on this version of events by including it in her didactic "preview" of Shakespeare's play. This may be no more than another example of Clarke's appropriative zeal, but it can be easily read as a warning to young readers that all women — whether innocent or fallen — are alike in their susceptibility to the threat of sexuality, and to its attendant consequences. Sarah Annes Brown has noted how, in the same vision, Clarke may obliquely tar the (largely absent, and wholly silent) Prince Hamlet

with the same brush as Lord Eric, and the other corruptors of feminine virtue against whom Lady Aoudra warns her daughter: "The last woman is clearly her later self, and by associating her with Jutha and Thyra, Cowden Clarke seems to imply that Ophelia was a victim of men, that she was in fact later seduced by Hamlet, even though, when he appears on the margins of Cowden Clarke's text, it is as an apparently attractive and kind young man" (Brown 2005, 105). Brown also raises the intriguing possibility that Clarke, as a Shakespearean scholar, may have drawn on some of *Hamlet's* source materials when crafting her narrative and points out that in Saxo Grammaticus' *Amleth* (ca. 1200 CE,) the Prince "feigns idiocy, rather than madness, and his own foster-sister is offered to him (Ophelia-like) as a sexual temptation" (Brown 2005, 105). The notion that Clarke may have inserted the brutish Ulf as a gesture towards the roots of *Hamlet* as well as those of Ophelia's madness is an arresting one, but seems counterintuitive given Clarke's manifest investment in privileging the stories of Shakespeare's female characters over those of their more well-represented male counterparts. However, this thinly-veiled suggestion that *all* men are potential villains — from the highest to the low(li)est — accords nicely with the anxiety about masculine desire and feminine vulnerability that grounds the text, and especially with Aoudra's deathbed warning about her daughter's nascent affection for Hamlet: "But let [a woman] be sure — entirely sure — of his love for her, ere she permit her fancy to engage itself too fondly with his image," and with Clarke's follow-up: "Thus it came that — from her mother's warning . . . Ophelia had the perils which awaited her in her future life at court, peculiarly impressed upon her mind" (Clarke 1852, 226, 227).

### Virtue Itself 'Scapes Not Calumnious Strokes: Ophelia as Cautionary Victim and Sacrifice

The modern reader is well aware what the outcome of these "perils" will be, but it is important to remember that the story's original readers may not have been. Looking ahead to when her impressionable audience does engage with Shakespeare's text, Clarke has used her narrative to systematically build an explanatory context for Ophelia's mental collapse in the aftermath of her rejection by Hamlet and his subsequent murder of Polonius. She is particularly anxious to clear her heroine from any proper understanding of the things she says (and sings): "Mrs. Clarke seems to have understood very clearly the sexual innuendoes of the mad scene, and to have taken the hint from them to create her own vivid and detailed incidents to teach her young readers and their mothers about the pitfalls in the path to virtue" (Gross 1972, 54). To that end, she not only traumatizes Ophelia via the deaths of her friends and her mother, but also leaves a trail of clues stretching back to infancy as an index to the girl's ravings. Thus, we know that the blameless child learned her bawdy songs at her nurse's knee and that her reference to the owl comes from Jutha's

attempt to distract the child from questions about Lord Eric by relating the apocryphal tale of the hungry Christ's transformation of an uncharitable baker's daughter, who refused to give him bread, into an owl. Ophelia's familiarity with the properties and "grosser" names of wild flowers stems from the walks on which they meet Jutha's seducer, who refers to his victim as "a rose" and to her young charge as "an unopened bud" who "promises to be just such another flower of beauty . . . when she shall have reached [the] age of bloom" (Clarke 1852, 184, 180).

Throughout "The Rose of Elsinore," Clarke identifies Ophelia with the (proverbially shrinking and faithful) violet rather than "the blowing rose" of sexual maturity (Clarke 1852, 184). She makes a point of reminding us that the girl's "wide-stretched" eyes are of that color, which evokes not only Ophelia's own lament, "I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died," but also Laertes' admonition to view Hamlet's affection as "a violet in the youth of primy nature / Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting" and his later prayer that "from [Ophelia's] fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring!" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.180; 1.3.7-8; 5.1.223-24). The play's floral imagery also informs the identification Clarke's Ophelia feels with the flowers that Ulf takes "delight in ripping up and destroying" (Clarke 1852, 175). This "sweet rose of May" desperately fears becoming "just such another" as Jutha and Thyra, and her hallucination of a figure "clothed in white, all hung about with weeds and wild flowers . . . up-buoyed by her spreading white garments" may be equal parts prophecy and suggestion (224). As Auerbach writes, "Ophelia's destiny and her madness are determined before the play begins. In case we doubt the power of one trauma to form her conclusively, the same trauma recurs with only slight variations . . . Under these circumstances, anyone would become Ophelia" (1994, 32). Perhaps Ophelia's delirium produces a genuinely fatal vision, or — in another example of Clarke's troubled, pre-Freud Freudianism — it may combine with her accumulated losses to plant the idea of suicide in her weakened mind. Either way, Clarke's character cannot be held responsible for her words or her actions; her breakdown is the result of the traumas she has suffered.

The fact that Ophelia's multiple, formative traumas are invented and visited upon her by Clarke complicates the text in interesting ways. Auerbach observes that the Victorian era was "an age that could not stop telling stories while insisting on controlling the stories it told," operating in accordance with "a narrative ideology avid to define, to place, to understand, to explain," and this certainly applies to Clarke's project in "The Rose of Elsinore" (Auerbach 1994, 32). In laying her speculative groundwork for the "document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted" that is Shakespeare's Ophelia, Clarke attempts to negotiate a slippery slope between the cultural imperative to expose young women to "timeless" literature, her desire to explain and excuse behaviors in its heroine that are wholly inexcusable according to the moral standards of

her time, and what she clearly perceives as the need to deliver a stern, terrifying warning to her malleable readership (*Hamlet*, 4.5.175-76). Given such a complex and problematic agenda, it is unsurprising that the text and its author occasionally appear to be at cross-purposes. To return briefly to psychoanalysis, it sometimes seems that Clarke's Ophelia is consigned by Clarke herself to the fate of the Freudian subject: unconscious of her own drives and deliberately forgetting her traumas, Ophelia finds herself in the same situation time after time, in much the same way that Clarke seems driven to dwell compulsively on the dangers of sexuality without really addressing or examining them.

The embodiment of vacancy with which Clarke begins her narrative — the infant Ophelia, a cipher devoid of sense or motion — is gradually filled up with the effects of the traumas that surround her; by the end of her tale, "the affectionate nature of this gentle being" has been subjected to a frightening array of slings and arrows by Clarke (Clarke 1852, 230). The penultimate line of Clarke's text is Ophelia's first line from the play, in answer to Laertes' admonition that she should "let [him] hear from [her]: "Do you doubt that?" (*Hamlet*, 1.3.4-5). This is followed by, "What to this was sequent, / Thou know'st already" (5.2.55-56). On the one hand, Clarke's choice to end Ophelia's story with Hamlet's words — delivered when he describes forging a death warrant for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, which he then switches for his own — seems odd. The line not only presumes that the reader *does* know what is "sequent" (which may or may not be the case), but by giving Hamlet the last word, Clarke evacuates her "heroine" of any small degree of agency she might have granted her. On the other hand, this is entirely in keeping with Clarke's abusive relationship with the heroine/daughter of her piece, in which she seems to conflate her role as author with that of evil stepmother. By taking away even Ophelia's voice, she delivers the *coup de grace* that re-instantiates and solidifies the character's secondary status in the prince of Denmark's tragedy. Shakespeare's Ophelia cracks under the pressure of her sorrows and violates the boundaries of behavior for maidens of the medieval period in which the play is set, the early modern one in which it was written, and the Victorian era for which her story was appropriated. Wandering through the Danish court "distracted, playing on a lute, and her hair down," singing suggestive songs and prattling like the starling to which Clarke's Botilda compares her infant charge, this Ophelia breaks the molds that have shaped her, overflows the small space she has been allotted by those who control her, and performs the most powerful, proactive deed of her life by ending it (*Hamlet*, 4.4.21-22). But that can only happen in Shakespeare's play; for Mary Cowden Clarke's Ophelia, the rest must be silence.

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to the *Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (Shakespeare 1997).

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Image of Ophelia from *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1881), p. 695 from the Internet Archive.

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