

Still Crazy, After All These Years: Ophelia vs. Clementine

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Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet, by David Dalton, Jeremy Beck, and
Christopher Patrick Mullen. *Quinnopolis, NY*. Shakespeare
Association of America Annual Convention, Philadelphia. April
15, 2006. *Performed by* Jeremy Beck and Christopher Yeatts.

Abstract

Ingeniously collapsing Ophelia's narrative into that of the subject of the ballad "My Darling Clementine," *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* depicts a Danish court in which the female characters are mutually destructive tools. Polonius emerges as a misogynistic director of his ingénue daughter, while Gertrude is literally a prop in this production; her main function is to point out, punctuate, and report on the collateral damage suffered by Ophelia as Hamlet falls headlong into vengeful madness.

Going well beyond the Shakespearean original, *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* offers a whirlwind tour through at least a century and a half of literary criticism (running the gamut from the work of Freud's follower Ernest Jones to Stephen Greenblatt's early twenty-first century salvo, *Hamlet in Purgatory*, 2002) and reprises key moments from famous stage-into-film versions of the original play — or plays. In addition to insightful interpretation of the various relationship dynamics in the play and their subconscious roots, *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* also confronts head-on the presence of multiple texts of *Hamlet*. Rather than producing a four-hour Shakespeare-athon, as does Kenneth Branagh's attempt to reconcile the good quarto with the Folio text (1996), the movement in *Quinnopolis* is toward distillation, creating a 75-minute meditation on the play's various permutations, as well as on prior interpretations of the central characters: Hamlet, Ophelia,

Gertrude, Claudius, Polonius, and the ghost. Here, the male characters are artists (Hamlet is a tripod-mounted camera, clad in the artist's uniform of black; Claudius's costume offers an opportunity for a puppet play-within-the-play; and Polonius is turned into a misogynistic director of his ingénue daughter) while the female characters are tools. Gertrude is literally a prop in this production; her main function is to point out, punctuate, and report on the collateral damage suffered by Ophelia as Hamlet falls headlong into vengeful madness. Seldom has the Tragedy of Ophelia been clearer, or more poignant.

"A Maiden All Divine"

Jeremy Beck's performance of Ophelia in *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* put the emphasis on blushing modesty. His fellow actor, Christopher Yeatts, forced him to put on the pink, puff-sleeved dress trimmed in lace that signified Ophelia over his jeans and Doc Marten boots, with Beck hilariously completing the reluctant, cross-dressed transformation on the line "For the apparel oft proclaims the man" (Shakespeare 1997, 1.3.72). Once dressed (literally), Beck transformed into a bashful naïf. He adopted a Shirley-Temple-in-trouble stance: one foot turned toe inwards, leg twisting back and forth with head held down, eyes peering up. He put on a simpering smile and shifted to a falsetto for the retained lines of his confrontation with Polonius over Hamlet's tenders of affection, which focused on Ophelia's complete inability to operate in the world of men: "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (1.3.105). Beck met Polonius's order that Ophelia refuse "to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet" with petulant compliance, flouncing out of the scene (1.3.135).

In this tight, streamlined performance — *Hamlet Redux* — Polonius's ineptitude was signified by the huge, clown-like plaid pants that Yeatts kept trying to put on, only to have them drop to the stage floor, and by the fact that his next interaction with Ophelia after ordering her not to write to or speak with Hamlet had him directing her flirtatious interaction with the now maddened Dane from upstage. Beck, as Ophelia, interacted downstage with a tripod-mounted camera wearing a black suit jacket and Groucho Marx nose, glasses and mustache over the camera's lens to signal the post-ghost transformation of Hamlet to an "antic disposition." Yeatts shimmied and groped his chest as if fondling breasts, urging Beck's increasingly uncomfortable Ophelia to use her "feminine wiles" on the (necessarily) stoic Hamlet. Then, the prompt cards cueing their action from stage left ran out of ideas, leaving Beck and Yeatts to resolve *Hamlet* on their own.

"Fell into the Raging Brine"

Confronting the thorny problem of Hamlet's madness (as well as the thorny issues of *Hamlet*, in multiple texts), Beck and Yeatts went back to the origin of the problem, using the yellow,

satin-lined fleece blanket that signified Claudius as the set for a sock-puppet theater remount of Hamlet's encounter with the ghost of his dead father. The prop signifying Claudius thus became the backdrop (or cover-up for Beck and Yeatts as they manipulated the puppets) for the announcement of Claudius's role in the death of the old king. Both actors then delivered the "To be or not to be" soliloquy simultaneously: Beck performing the "good quarto" from downstage, while Yeatts echoed him with bad quarto from upstage, the bad quarto haunting the good one, and eventually taking it over. The action in most tragedies seems relentless, inexorable. In *Hamlet vs. Quinnopolis*, the pacing of the performance reached a crescendo from this quiet enactment of "To be or not to be," reshuffled scenes blending into one another frenziedly, almost as if actors and audience had slipped into a nightmare from which they could not awake.

After "To be or not to be," Yeatts took over the role of Hamlet, storming in to Gertrude for the closet scene in a towering rage. Gertrude was played by a rag mop; the effect of watching Yeatts interact with it early in the play as Claudius, tenderly caressing tendrils of "hair" out of her "face," in contrast to his violent tossing of the head of the mop back and forth in Hamlet's harsh confrontation with his adulterous mother was stunning. And then, at the height of Hamlet's fury, a stage direction present only in *Quinnopolis*: Enter Ophelia.

The Ophelia who entered this scene, a scene in which she does not belong, was not yet mad. Indeed, she was still entirely too innocent, in her pink puff-sleeved dress, for the violent misogyny of Hamlet. This scene brilliantly captured the twisted origins of Hamlet's ferocity against all women, channeled through his loathing for Gertrude and her apparently still vibrant sexuality, the central theme of his tirade in the closet scene both in *Hamlet*, and in *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet*.

As soon as Beck approached Yeatts's Hamlet as Ophelia, the mop ceased to be Gertrude and became instead a weapon with which to accompany the contradictory logic of the nunnery scene. For, every time that Hamlet seemingly dismisses Ophelia with the crude injunction "get thee to a nunnery," he continues to detain her either with questions — "where's your father?" or curses: "I'll give thee this plague for thy dowry" (3.1.122, 131, 136-37). Yeatts alternately used the handle of the mop to parry Beck's attempts to get away from him, or to plunge wildly at him, in a seeming attempt to force Ophelia out, which would then immediately be countered by using the handle to block her exit.

Or *did* the mop cease to be Gertrude as soon as Ophelia entered the scene? Given Gertrude's complicity in the plot to use Ophelia as bait to ascertain the source of Hamlet's madness in the nunnery scene in the original play(s), having the prop that represented Gertrude take so central and so violent a role in this scene underscored the utter lack of female community in Shakespeare's Elsinore. One could clearly see in this scene of *Quinnopolis* the extent to which both Gertrude

and Ophelia are tools of the men surrounding them. Finally, the extent to which Hamlet's rage at Ophelia is really rage at his mother also became brutally apparent, as the mop flailed about Ophelia's head and torso in a manner directly reminiscent of Yeatts's manhandling of it during his furious assault on his mother.

"Ruby Lips Above the Water"

At several junctures, *Quinnopolis vs. Hamlet* recalls, replays, or recasts film versions of *Hamlet*. In the closet scene that gives way to the nunnery scene, the violent sexuality of the disturbingly incestuous closet scene in Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990) was revisited via a harrowing sexual assault on Beck's Ophelia. Once again, the Gertrude mop-prop played an eerie role, as Yeatts's Hamlet slid it under Ophelia's pink skirt, lifting it, a mocking expression on his face, before forcing her to the ground and straddling her, thrusting his pelvis repeatedly toward hers in a manner highly suggestive of a rape. Curiously, in the post-show discussion with the actors and director Dave Dalton, an audience member who discussed this scene referred to it as an *attempted* rape. In a world in which mops and dresses worn over jeans represent women and camera tripods dressed in suit jackets approximate men, what would a "real" rape look like?

Beck retaliated against Yeatts's assault as many real rape victims do, by disassociating from his identity as Ophelia. He leaped up angrily and forced Yeatts back into the Claudius role, appropriating Hamlet's role for himself. The two actors then rewound the action of Shakespeare's play yet again, to Hamlet's journey through the castle to Gertrude's chamber for the closet scene, and the moment when Hamlet comes upon Claudius praying (or so he thinks) and contemplates taking his revenge then and there. Here, the staging recalled Branagh's film of *Hamlet* (1996), with the lines suggesting action ("And now I'll do it" [3.3.74]) accompanied by fantasy visions of actually stabbing Claudius. Since Beck played Hamlet to Yeatts's Claudius, the spluttering delivery of the lines and the unbounded glee with which he repeatedly stabbed the kneeling Claudius gave him a sort of vengeance for the sexual assault he had just suffered at Yeatts's hands as Ophelia.

"There Grow Rosies and Some Posies, / Fertilized by Clementine"

Ophelia, however, gets no revenge for either Hamlet's abusive treatment of her or his accidental murder of Polonius. Deprived of any means of rectifying the wrongs that she has suffered, Ophelia sinks into madness. Here, the narrative of Ophelia's mental anguish was conveyed entirely in song, as Beck wore the pink dress one last time for a winsome performance of "My Darling Clementine." The narrative of the song perfectly suits Ophelia's own: Clementine lives alone with her father, who mines for gold as Polonius mines the court for information he can pass to the King; she drowns,

and she is mourned in the song by one who loved her, as Hamlet professes to have done in the play when he stumbles unwittingly upon Ophelia's austere funeral service. The creepy incestuousness that stage and film productions of *Hamlet* have frequently located in the closet scene is present here, too, since Clementine's father seems, perhaps, a bit too happy to come home from a hard day down the mine shaft to "caress" her. After singing about the rosies and posies that adorn Clementine's grave rather than distributing Ophelia's rosemary and pansies, Beck removed the pink dress for the last time:

In my dreams she still doth haunt me,
Robed in garments soaked with brine,
Then she rises from the waters,
And I kiss my Clementine. (Bradford 1883; additional lyrics traditional)

In silence, Beck removed from the refrigerator-sized wooden box that had served as prop shop and green room for the entire show a metal pail and a gallon jug of water, which he upended to plug noisily into the metal pail, gradually raising the jug higher as its water content lessened, to create splashing sounds in the bucket below, now almost full. His basic character having never been satisfied with being made to cross-dress, to be a girl, he left no doubt about whether Ophelia killed herself, or just slipped into the river "incapable of her own distress" (4.7.179). Beck seized the dress and plunged it viciously down into the bucket, holding it under water for a long count only to lift it up and plunge it under again. In this willful act of destroying the costume that represented Ophelia, Beck offered a violent vision of Ophelia's self-annihilation.

Eventually, Yeatts approached Beck with the Gertrude mop — its handle extended outward — and fished the dress out of the bucket, sliding the mop handle through the sleeves so that, when he lifted the mop up, the dress rose out of the bucket, streaming water as if worn by an invisible ghost. The wooden box was then turned on its side to become a coffin, the Ophelia dress whipped unceremoniously into it off of the end of the mop handle. No report of Ophelia's death was offered; that is Gertrude's office in the play, and she performed it here as well, the mop handle draped in the sopping dress standing in for the woman and her sad mission of telling Claudius and Laertes that Ophelia is "Drowned, drowned" (4.7.185). Again, the impotence of the women of Elsinore came to the fore: Ophelia's only recourse to vengeance is to kill herself; the only real help that Gertrude can give her is to retrieve Ophelia's remnants from the water and bury them.

Online Resources

Internet Movie Database information for Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116477/>.

Internet Movie Database information for Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet*. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0099726/>.

Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, 1870-1885. Library of Congress. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/smhtml/smhome.html>.

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