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The Dramaturgy of Ophelia's Bouquet

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ABSTRACT

What does Ophelia carry with her on stage in Act 4, scene 5 of *Hamlet*? She names a variety of botanicals, but productions have often replaced these with sticks, bones, pills, toys, or nothing at all. These replacements seek to provide modern audiences with more accessible or relatable symbols but can rarely capture the complexity and ambiguity of the originals. On page and stage, Ophelia's bouquet has become a key to interpreting her in her madness – the meaning ascribed to her plants going hand in hand with the presumed qualities she displays in the scene, from childish innocence to overt sexuality to defiant anger. This essay details a series of staging experiments conducted in a graduate Shakespeare class to investigate the dramaturgical possibilities of Ophelia's bouquet, asking how these items shape our perception and understanding of Ophelia, her mental state, and place within the play.

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> 'Even the sturdiest intellects seem to come over a bit sentimental when it comes to Ophelia: this is because of the flowers'.
>
> Michael Pennington, Hamlet*: A User's Guide*

Introduction

What does Ophelia carry with her on stage in Act 4, scene 5 of *Hamlet*? She names rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbine, rue, and a daisy; she wishes for violets but has none. Each item is specific, yet their implications in an early modern context were varied and even contradictory. Rosemary, for instance, was carried at funerals and worn at weddings. It was thought to strengthen the memory and be 'good … for al infirmities of the head and braine'; it was also an emmenagogue that could 'bringeth down women's fleurs'.[1] To an

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[1]Rebecca Laroche, 'Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets', in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, eds. Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 216–17; Lucile F. Newman, 'Ophelia's Herbal', *Economic Botany* 33, no. 2 (April–June 1979): 229. The uses to which early modern people put these plants were rooted in observation, tradition, and hearsay. However, such self-medication was often at best ineffective and at worst

early modern audience, this single prop could open up an array of potential readings, from mourning to celebration, soothing and improving the mind to regulating menstruation and fertility. Her traditional gifting of rosemary to Laertes, for example, has been interpreted as both appropriate and logical, given the mourning both are in over their father, and as an indication of the extremity of her mental break, presuming that she imagines her brother to be Hamlet, her 'love' and bridegroom.[2] For a modern audience, who may be unaware of the rosemary's varied meanings, understanding will come in the way the performer handles the prop, to whom they gift it, and the reaction of those onstage.[3] These decisions in turn will inform an audience's perception of Ophelia and her mental state.

In performance, productions have used a wide range of materials for Ophelia's bouquet, from the plants she names to straws, grasses, sticks, bones, pills, toys, photographs, letters, mementos of her father and/or Hamlet, to nothing at all. Substitutions for the original plants seek to create more accessible and production-specific meanings for audiences as we move further from a widespread understanding of the bouquet's pharmacological and symbolic meanings in early modern England. The selection of props for the bouquet and their use in performance are what Scott Irelan, Anne Fletcher, and Julie Felise Dubiner call 'acts of dramaturgy', work that helps to move a text from stage to page and bridge gaps between the play, performers, and audience members.[4] These acts are performed by all members of a production staff, not simply the dramaturg, and are, as Michael Mark Chemers argues, most successful when guided by phronesis, practical wisdom that straddles individual point of view and collective endeavour, theatrical history, critical interpretation, and present-day practice and sensibility.[5]

Acts of dramaturgy around Ophelia's bouquet are weighty, for what she carries is often seen as key to understanding the character herself. Rebecca Laroche, for example, reads in choices that render the plants imaginary or replace them with unconnected objects 'a century of critical editing' that has emphasised Ophelia's madness to the extent that she is 'nothing more than mad' at this point in the play.[6] Removing her props removes Ophelia from the reality shared by the rest of the court and the audience. Restoring those same props, particularly (for Laroche) the plants themselves, provides a

highly toxic, even deadly. Nothing in the information presented here should be used to treat or diagnose any medical condition.

[2]William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, vols. 3 and 4*, ed. Horace Howard Furness (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1877), 3: 340; and *Hamlet*: *The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 4.5.173.

[3]Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Arden), 4.5.172.

[4]Scott R. Irelan, Anne Fletcher, and Julie Felise Dubiner, *The Process of Dramaturgy: A Handbook* (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, 2010), ix–xii.

[5]Michael Mark Chemers, *Ghost Light: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2010), 5–6.

[6]Laroche, 'Ophelia's Plants', 211, 213.

means of resisting 'the androcentric story that requires the demise of both plants and women in the play'.[7] In stage history, theatre criticism, and artistic representation, Ophelia is inextricably linked to her props.

To investigate the challenges and opportunities surrounding Ophelia's bouquet, our graduate Shakespeare on Stage class conducted two days of staging experiments. This exercise was not originally planned as part of class work, which impacted how I designed our time together to minimise out-of-class demands on the students, but it was an excellent opportunity to bring research, practice, and pedagogy together. The first day, we worked with the live plants Ophelia names or close equivalents; on the second, we pulled a range of props to work with inspired by class conversation and the production history of the play. On both days, students worked in three groups, each tasked with adopting a different interpretation of Ophelia's character at this moment in the story drawn from critical and stage traditions. After reviewing resources related to these interpretations and selecting a version of the scene to work from on the first day (First Quarto or Folio), they pitched ideas for which plant would go to which recipient and with what intended meaning. On the second day, they revisited these interpretations, attempting to find analogues to make their initial interpretation of the scene more readily accessible to a modern audience.

Both days resulted in three different but equally compelling versions of the scene that foregrounded the importance of these props and offered a useful range of production choices. Collectively, they highlighted the value of collaborative dramaturgy around this moment, and specifically the benefits of incorporating performers into discussions around props that have and will continue to shape the character in audiences' minds. As we seek to be more accountable and inclusive in our dealings with Shakespeare, particularly around issues of gender, race, sexuality, and ability, such an approach facilitates agency and conversation in ways that resist, rather than replicate, the power dynamics of the play and traditional production hierarchies.

Preparation and Design

As Sarah Dustagheer, Oliver Jones, and Eleanor Rycroft point out, projects that fall into a practice-as-research frame, which this certainly can, often start with research and move to performance as culmination or start with performance and move to research as culmination. The latter more accurately describes our project in its strictest sense, but I hope the continued reverberations of our staging work as reflected in student writings, and the broader implications we found for practice and research, show the kind of 'interchange and reciprocity' that they hoped for in 2017.[8] To prepare, I conducted research into

[7] Ibid., 213.

[8] Sarah Dustagheer, Oliver Jones, and Eleanor Rycroft, '(Re)constructed Spaces for Early Modern Research in Practice', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 180. I am indebted to the editors and anonymous peer

production history and editorial and critical traditions to determine how best to use our sessions. I began by analysing the moment itself:

> OPHELIA There's rosemary; that's for remembrance.
> Pray, love, remember. And there is pansies; that's for thoughts.
>
> LAERTES A document in madness, thoughts and
> remembrance fitted.
>
> OPHELIA There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's
> rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it
> herb-grace o'Sundays. Oh, you must wear your rue
> with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you
> some violets, but they withered all when my father
> died. They say he made a good end.[9]

Among the early *Hamlet* texts, the most significant variants are the missing columbines in the First Quarto (Q1), Q1's slightly different order of distribution, and who is standing on stage to receive these gifts: it is the King, Queen, and Laertes only in Q1, these same plus Horatio in the Folio, and all these plus an unnamed Gentleman in the Second Quarto (Q2). Next, I looked at production history, which revealed a kind of traditional gifting pattern: rosemary and pansies to Laertes, fennel and columbine to the King, rue to the Queen. This tradition is tied into the editorial practice around the bouquet and the meanings of the plants glossed in popular editions of the play. I then turned to scholarship on the bouquet itself and its links to Ophelia's madness. These investigations suggested concrete interpretations of the character, props, and scene around which we could build our experiments.

In 1985, Elaine Showalter articulated four traditions around Ophelia and her distraction in art, performance, and criticism, which she argued follow evolving ideas of women and madness: the childish innocent of Victorian fantasy, the hypersexual madwoman unleashing her repressed desires popular from the 1950s onward, attempts at recreating clinical diagnoses on stage (most often schizophrenia) in the 1960s, and finally 'madness as protest and rebellion' in the 1970s.[10] We used the first, second, and fourth interpretations in class. We labelled the first the 'childish' Ophelia, the second the 'sexually aware'

reviewers for pointing me toward two projects that were particularly helpful to consider alongside ours: José A. Pérez Diez, 'Editing on Stage: Theatrical Research for a Critical Edition of John Fletcher and Philip Massinger's *Love's Cure*', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (2016): 69–88, and Lucy Munro and Emma Whipday, 'Making Early Modern "Verbatim Theatre", or, "Keep the Widow Waking"', in *Loss and the Literary Culture of Shakespeare's Time*, eds. Roslyn Knutson, David McInnis, and Matthew Steggle (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 233–50.

[9]Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Arden), 4.5.172–82. This is the Folio version, nearly identical to Q2; in Q1, she gifts rue and the daisy first, then rosemary and pansies, ending with fennel and the reference to violets.

[10]Elaine Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Patricia Parker (New York: Metheun/Routledge, 1985), 91.

Ophelia, and the third the 'knowing' or perceptive Ophelia who sees and responds to the rottenness at the heart of Denmark's court. For the sake of our in-class experiments, we treated these approaches as distinct and siloed, though of course there is no need for them to be so in performance.

To help connect these threads with the bouquet itself, I offered scholarship drawing on Renaissance herbals and other primary sources that aligned with these three interpretations, highlighting how the bouquet has consistently been used to advocate for interpretations of Ophelia's character and the performance of her madness. My sources for each approach were as follows: J.W. Lever's 1952 'Three Notes on Shakespeare's Plants' for the 'childish' interpretation; Lucile F. Newman's 1979 'Ophelia's Herbal' for the 'sexually aware' interpretation; and Laroche's 'Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets' (2011) for the 'knowing' Ophelia. Though all claim the same grounds for authenticity and root themselves in associations available to Shakespeare and his audiences, these pieces also demonstrate Showalter's point that understandings of Ophelia seem to always 'reflect the ideological character of their times, erupting as debates between dominant and feminist views in periods of gender crisis and redefinition'.[11]

Lever's commentary, for example, while fairly arguing that scholarly speculation is most useful when confined to what can be represented onstage, harkened back to a long tradition of reading Ophelia as sweet, naive, and victimised, retreating in her madness to a world of 'pretty gestures and childlike responses'.[12] He offered censorious evaluations of associations that the plants, and by extension the character, have accumulated in previous decades:

> There is no need to read into [Ophelia's] words or actions confusions of identity between brother and lover, fey intuitions of the secret sins of Claudius and Gertrude, or psychological subtleties well beyond her range. She merely enjoins Laertes, in the language of flowers, to remember their dead father [rosemary] and to think of him [pansies]; pays dainty compliments to the King and Queen, honouring the one with flowers of gratification [fennel] and royalty [columbine], the other with the herb of grace [rue]; keeps her 'rue' to herself; adds another flower [daisy] to make up to the Queen for a slight misunderstanding over the rue; and rests her thoughts on her father [violets], the most manly man she has known. It is all in keeping with Ophelia's character, her good intentions, her abysmal ignorance of life. The picture of Ophelia and her flowers, after the removal of some scholarly cobwebs, is restored to its clear outlines and simple pathos.[13]

Lever asserted that subtext and subtlety are 'beyond [Ophelia's] range', and therefore must also be beyond the scope of Shakespeare's intent with her bouquet. The character and her props must align in their innocence or the 'simple pathos' of the scene is lost. Alternative interpretations ('scholarly

[11]Ibid.
[12]J. W. Lever, 'Three Notes on Shakespeare's Plants', *The Review of English Studies* 3, no. 10 (April 1952): 123.
[13]Lever, 'Three Notes', 129.

cobwebs') may be dismissed. Amid the conservative backlash post-WWII regarding gender roles and the emergence of the hypersexual Ophelia on stage, this plea for a return to 'innocence' may have held particular resonance.

Writing a little more than a quarter century later in the wake of the sexual revolution, the legalisation of abortion in the United States, and in the midst of second-wave feminism, Lucile F. Newman highlighted the prevalence of fertility regulators in Ophelia's bouquet. Like Lever, Newman rooted her interpretation in early modern sources, where rosemary is considered an emmenagogue; fennel, rue, and violets abortives, and the juice of pansies a treatment for syphilis. Newman was not particularly concerned with how the plants were distributed, nor did she argue these readings should necessarily mean a more sexualised interpretation of the character. But she did suggest the value of understanding that 'Ophelia's speech was capable of conjuring up images of pollution in the mind of the hearer and suggesting a dramatic change in her character from a former state of purity'.[14] Understanding the reproductive uses of her bouquet supports readings of Ophelia as a possessor of sexual knowledge. In performance, this interpretation has ranged from suggesting the consummation of her relationship with Hamlet (sometimes including a resultant pregnancy), to incestuous feelings for her brother, to Ophelia as a victim of sexual abuse.

For a time, this interest in Ophelia's sexuality was quite dominant onstage; in fact, by 1996 Michael Pennington warned that the hypersexual Ophelia was becoming a wearisome choice:

> we assume that an earlier age favoured the lyrically wet and floral, now we often see a raucous sexuality … Either way (or preferably neither), just as the Closet Scene entices Gertrude, the Mad Scene is the only reason any actress wants to play Ophelia.[15]

In the direction of 'preferably neither' are those who offer ways into Ophelia and her madness that rely neither on a sexualised interpretation of the character, nor on fetishising her as an innocent victim. In 2011, Laroche offered one such reading as she returned to sources familiar from earlier interpretations, namely John Gerarde's *Herball* (1597). Laroche positioned Ophelia as educated, knowing, and actively attempting to cure her mental anguish. She pointed out that, as a young aristocratic woman who will one day head a household, Ophelia would have been expected to be competent at gathering, processing, and creating plant-based medicine. Ophelia's bouquet had real-world applications: rosemary soothed and improved the memory, pansies eased the heart, fennel

[14]Newman, 'Ophelia's Herbal', 228. Margreta de Grazia does take this approach, though with less reliance on the plants' individual meanings; she argues that Ophelia's madness arises from a loss of chastity [Hamlet *without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116–19]. More recently, Lois Potter argues that an early modern audience read Ophelia as 'an example of sexual frustration rather than a grieved daughter' ['Ophelia and Some Theatrical Successors', in *Afterlife of Ophelia*, ed. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 156–57].

[15]Michael Pennington, Hamlet: *A User's Guide* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 115.

'comforte[d] the inward parts', and columbines cheered with their scent; rue, the herb of grace, offered spiritual consolation, while violet syrup was 'most pleasant and wholesome' and 'comforte[d] the heart'.[16] This means that 'to say that all violets have withered is to say more than beauty and faithfulness have died; it says that the opportunity to feel good, to find comfort, has disappeared'.[17] Laroche's work, emphasising as it did Ophelia's education and intelligence, resonates at a time when women are getting more college and advanced degrees than their male counterparts, as we reckon with the great harm done to young women by dismissing their thoughts and feelings as 'crazy', and as we seek to deepen our understanding of Shakespeare's women characters.

In each of these cases, the plants' wide-ranging original meanings facilitate arguments for their interpretation and reinterpretation that all claim the same grounds for authenticity while speaking to the moment in which they were written. These dramaturgical moves parallel those of productions seeking to bridge the gaps between text and audience while emphasising how integral props can be to this process.

Staging Experiments

We did our explorations over two days. On the first, I gave the students an overview of the above interpretations and let them select the one they wished to work on. To aid them, I provided a handout summarising the evidence each scholar provided to support their argument, pulled from Renaissance herbals and other primary texts. These were broken down in a table and divided by the reading of Ophelia they seemed to support. I also charged the groups with selecting a version of the scene to work with. Two groups (the 'childish' and 'sexually aware' groups) elected to use the Folio text; the 'knowing' group elected to use Q1. These decisions were less about textual variants as who was present on stage to receive the gifts: the Folio groups felt Horatio should be on stage and available for Ophelia to interact with, while the knowing group felt his presence was unnecessary.

Day One

Swayed by Laroche's emphasis on the material import of having nature in the room with us, I brought in real plants and flowers for us to work with for the first round of experimentation. Where possible, I provided the actual plants mentioned in the text, though in several cases I used substitutes, focusing on texture, colour, or other similarities to the original as far as was possible in my mid-pandemic trip to Trader Joe's (Figure 1). As they read the scene and

[16]Laroche, 'Ophelia's Plants', 217.
[17]Ibid.

Figure 1. Plants provided for the first day of experimentation. Photo by Chelsea Phillips.

reviewed the handout, the students eagerly handled the plants, exploring their texture and movement as part of getting to know the scene and character. After about half an hour, the groups pitched ideas for who should receive which plant and why.

The 'childish' group largely adopted Lever's arguments about who receives which plant, mirroring the traditional gifting I mentioned previously. Ophelia connected to her brother in shared grief with her rosemary and pansies. She hoped to please and appease the king and queen with fennel, columbine, and rue. Bereft of her father's protection and support, and alone until Laertes' unexpected arrival, Ophelia largely used her gifts to curry favour. Where Lever suggested the daisy goes to Gertrude, however, the students decided she threw it away, noting the distance implied in '*there's* a daisy'. Violets brought Ophelia to Horatio, someone she may see as an ally because of his friendship with Hamlet, but she had nothing to give. Where Lever saw the violets as a return to meditating on her father, this group suggested a more complicated association, the absent violets conjuring both her father and Hamlet, with Horatio serving as a kind of proxy.

The other two groups offered less familiar gifting patterns. The 'sexually aware' group directed rosemary to Horatio, whom they also suggested Ophelia sees as an ally and possible proxy for Hamlet. The pansies went to Laertes. Gertrude received the bulk of the bouquet: fennel (which 'provoketh flowers'), columbine (associated with adultery), and rue (an 'evil for women with child' and which 'cleanseth the mother [uterus] and bringest out filth and uncleanness thereof').[18] They framed this gift as a 'curse' on the Queen for bearing Hamlet, who has caused such grief to Ophelia (Veshonte Brown).

[18]Newman, 'Ophelia's Herbal', 230.

That Ophelia takes some rue for herself may acknowledge her own sexual history, an unintended pregnancy, or more generally a desire to prevent conception and thus end a cycle of harm. In this case, a gesture toward her own womb allowed for ambiguity. In the bouquet they made for themselves, this group discovered a broken daisy that charged their imagination. Rather than replace it with an unbroken bloom, they elected to give this particular flower to Claudius as an insult, visually dismissing him as irrelevant – common, decorative, and unimportant – to the story in Ophelia's mind. Her regret about the violets was also directed to Claudius, for violet seeds would prevent any conception with Gertrude, whose womb cannot be trusted. Rather than the fear present in the 'childish' version of the scene, this Ophelia barely acknowledged the King as anything other than the Queen's sexual partner. Instead, Gertrude and Ophelia's relationship took centre stage, moving the men to a peripheral position they otherwise never occupy in the story.

The 'knowledgeable' Ophelia group used the Q1 text and found in the medicinal and healing properties emphasised in Laroche's essay a capable mind still operating under extreme duress. This group suggested Ophelia share her rue, the first item gifted in this text, with Claudius. In doing so, she recognised him to be in some measure penitent and regretful for his brother's murder and her father's death. The daisy, too, went to Claudius, for its ability to relieve mental pain, anxiety, and guilt. Next, rosemary and pansies went to Laertes, a shared moment of grief for their father. Finally, the Queen received fennel – good for cleansing and comforting the 'inward parts' – but no violets, which here symbolised beauty, faithfulness, and comfort. Laroche suggests Ophelia's bouquet is an attempt to medicate herself; in their staging, this group showed her attempting to medicate others as well.

One of the most striking things about this first day was how each group's analysis of the bouquet and its use in the scene suggested a different focus for Ophelia (Figure 2). The 'childish' group distributed her attention between her brother, the royal couple, Hamlet, and her father. The 'sexually aware' group saw her primarily focused on communicating with Gertrude, the 'knowledgeable' group on the King. Using the bouquet as our primary point of entry into the scene offered not simply three versions of the scene and Ophelia's character, but different configurations of power and focus.

Day Two

Entering the classroom on our second day we eagerly unpacked tubs of props containing picture frames (some filled with paintings of Hamlet, some empty), artificial flowers, glass vials and perfume bottles, a variety of children's toys, rings, rosaries, and other items (Figure 3). After reviewing the aims for this class together, the students spent time working with this new set of props.

Figure 2. (Left to right) Kate Fischer, Sarah Stryker, Luke Davis, Aly Gonzalez, and Timothy Storey. Photo by Kimberly Reilly.

The 'sexually aware' group immediately seized upon a collection of perfume bottles, drawn to the implied expense and intimacy of such a gift. Its application to the body, the effect of scent on bestower and receiver, and the myriad associations scent can conjure were all useful to this group as they conceived of their scene (Figure 4). While we were masked throughout both days, the presence of real plants with varied textures and scents on our first day helped us keep the sensory experiences of the bouquet in mind as we continued working. One group member highlighted how, for a modern audience, perfume could evoke a similar multiplicity of meanings to those offered by the original plants:

> The intimacy & power of perfume as a gift charged the scene with a sensory indulgence. An anointing, a smudging, a flicking of the essence.
>
> Perfume as poison
>
> Perfume as sin
>
> Perform as the unleasher of memories. (J. Bean Schwab)

While we had no actual perfume that day, this group noted that the specific scents used in each vial would add a further layer, especially as they envisioned Ophelia dropping and breaking each vial as she used it, allowing their overlapping scents to permeate the air.

In their staging, Ophelia first took her 'rosemary' to Horatio, anointing his forehead as she traced a cross there, a gesture recalling the Ash Wednesday invocation to 'remember that you are dust'. She then delicately applied a different perfume to her brother for 'pansies', gently caressing the side of his

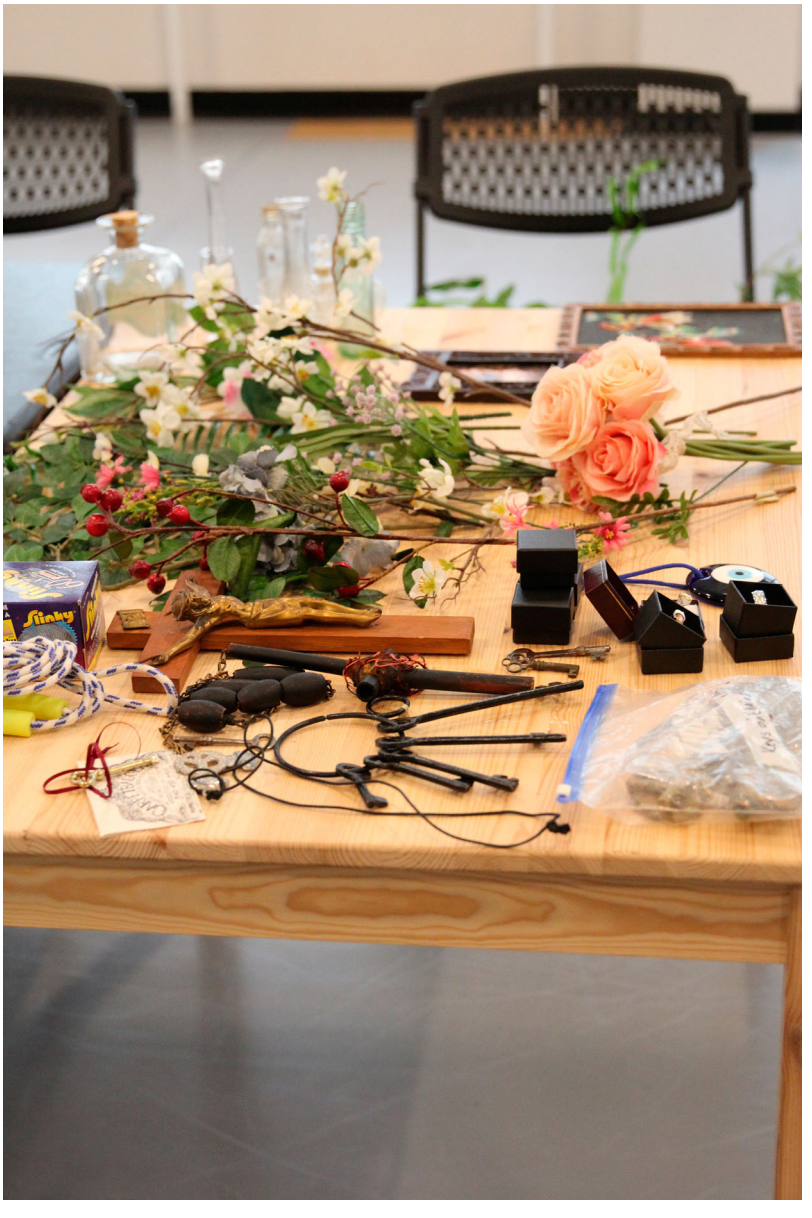

Figure 3. Props provided on the second day of experimentation. Photo by Kimberly Reilly.

face. Gertrude was once again laden with fennel, columbine, and rue, this in a different bottle and one dragged slowly up the wrist in a gesture meant to evoke both the innocuous application of perfume and death by suicide. Gertrude's increasingly agitated reaction made it clear she understood both meanings. Ophelia made the same gesture on herself, perhaps foreshadowing her death and the complicated question of intent which surrounds it. Retaining their initial attitude toward Claudius as largely irrelevant to Ophelia at this

Figure 4. Veshonte Brown examines a vial of perfume as Kenzie Lynn Bradley (left) and J. Bean Schwab (centre) look on. Photo by Kimberly Reilly.

moment, the final vial of perfume (the daisy) was flicked at Claudius from a distance, an act less intimate and more dismissive than the previous ones. One member of the group described their version of the scene as a 'carefully calculated way to expose her true sentiments' (Kenzie Lynn Bradley). Thus, they suggested Ophelia, like Hamlet, found in genuine or enacted madness a safety to express herself that otherwise would be unavailable to her. Her sexual knowledge did not equate to sexualised behaviour, but instead facilitated communication and understanding between Ophelia and Gertrude.

The 'knowing' Ophelia group gathered a wide range of objects, each meant to evoke the subtext that might exist in Ophelia's gifts for a historical audience. Rather than a single symbol, like perfume, that encoded a range of meanings, this approach foregrounded the importance of each singular gift, creating

> an opportunity to shade the medicinal meanings of the flowers with accusations, recommendations, or comforts relating to each recipient. It was our hope that the significance of the flowers, and the objects which Ophelia associates with them, would act as messages hidden in plain sight. (Sarah Stryker)

Rue became a rosary, given to Claudius to symbolise his need for repentance. A wooden snake toy substituted for the daisy – which 'purgeth the head mightilie of foule and slimie humours' – and also went to Claudius.[19] This served as a reference to the lie that a serpent stung the old King, suggesting to Claudius she knows what he did (Figure 5). They also noted the snake's Christian

[19]Laroche, 'Ophelia's Plants', 217.

Figure 5. Kate Fischer's Ophelia holds a journal for Laertes, and a wooden snake and rosary for Claudius. Photo by Kimberly Reilly.

associations with deception, betrayal, and original sin, and suggested a more realistic looking (dead) snake prop could serve as an overt threat to Claudius. Next, Laertes received a framed picture of their father as the rosemary for remembrance. He also received a journal as the pansies, a place to record his thoughts. For Gertrude's cleansing fennel, they used a large squat glass container labelled 'Ladies' Tonic', its almost comical size suggesting both an abundant need for intervention and the possibility for 'addictive self-medication' (Sarah Stryker). Through her gift, Ophelia 'beseeches the Queen to … get better for Hamlet's sake' (Luke Davis). The absent violets, also directed to Gertrude, were represented by an empty vase – Ophelia wished she could provide more comfort but had not the means. Rather than cursing the Queen or being fearful of her, this iteration of the scene presented Ophelia as compassionate toward the older woman.

The 'childish' group was similarly drawn to a range of props, pulling artificial flowers, picture frames, a vial they imagined filled with Holy Water, and a whoopee cushion from the table. Rosemary was a framed portrait of Polonius and given to Laertes. Pansies were an empty frame, something for Laertes to fill. Fennel and columbine were artificial flowers, pretty gifts gathered to please and flatter a king Ophelia fears in the wake of her father's death. Ophelia sprinkled her rue, the vial of Holy Water, on Gertrude aggressively to cleanse her before hugging it to her own chest. To break the resulting tension, Ophelia used the whoopee cushion to pretend to fart and then loudly and delightedly declaimed, 'There's a daisy!' In intermixing moments of insight and moments of play, this group sought to highlight a more complicated approach to childishness – not a sterile ideal of innocence, but children in their sometimes startling depths of awareness and delight in earthy embodiment. As one group member put it,

> children, even from a very early age are incredibly intelligent and aware of what is going on around them. I think we came up with a 'solution' (for lack of a better word) for the props representing each flower that plays to both the innocence and the awareness of children. (Timothy Storey)

The second day of experimentation highlighted two different yet equally effective ways of preserving the complexity and ambiguity of Ophelia's bouquet. The 'childish' and 'knowing' groups did so by substituting each plant in the bouquet with a distinct item chosen for its ability to convey historical meaning to a modern audience. The 'sexually aware' group did so by selecting a single category of item (perfume) that on its own evokes a multiplicity of meanings for a contemporary audience, using gesture to shade each interaction with the meaning they found most relevant. Since it would be quite possible to make perfume out of these plants, this was the only iteration in which Ophelia gifted the item she named. The 'knowing' group's approach, however, suggested Ophelia understood the disconnect between what she named and what she held; only in the case of the 'childish' group did the dissonance perhaps indicate an actual disconnect with reality.

Conclusion

I asked the students to log their thoughts and impressions in the commonplace books they kept for class. The impact of having worked with specific material objects was clear in their entries. Many dried the plants from the first day and used them to adorn their reflections, preserving colour, texture, and scent as epistemological aides. In several cases, these acts of reflection inspired further meditation on the props and how they could impact staging, a lovely illustration of the way research and practice continue to feed one another beyond a particular moment of exploration.

For example, when detailing their choices at the end of the second session the 'knowing' group positioned the journal – their substitute for the pansies – as a way for Laertes to express himself through writing as an alternative to violence (Luke Davis). Later, another student mused upon the possibility that the journal was actually Hamlet's 'tables', which Ophelia has read and used to discern the truths with which she now confronts those on stage (Sarah Stryker). In shifting her thinking about this prop from a general object (a journal) to a specific object (Hamlet's journal), Stryker provided an entirely different approach to the same scene without changing the physical object. In production, this decision would have implications beyond 4.5, as audiences would need to be able to recognise this prop from earlier in the play. It would also change the tone of the scene itself and Ophelia's focus within it: if Ophelia re-enters hoping to reveal the King's sins to the brother who has brought a potential rebellion to the court, the scene no longer seems suspended out of the rest of the play's action but contributes to and heightens the tension. Ophelia is not merely a tool to spur her brother's anger, increase the play's pathos, or suggest the collateral damage of the play's events, but an agent, a character who poses a threat.

A member of the 'childish' group, meanwhile, began thinking of the daisy not in terms of its symbolic or medicinal meaning, but in light of cultivation practices, namely the way 'deadheading' mirrors

> the ideal action of building a strong monarchy: a systematic and deliberate removal of the dead weight; the weeding of enemies of the crown; and simultaneously fertilizing the soils of the kingdom to ensure suitable conditions for progeny to proliferate and thrive … By keeping the presentation of the daisies short, Ophelia leaves room for both passing this moment over as an insignificant afterthought as well as a clever expression of her understanding of the gravity of the moment by using the daisy as an analogy of the events that have recently transpired. (Alycia Gonzalez)

This reconsideration led her to consider what it would mean to give the daisy to Claudius instead of Gertrude. Like the snake used by the 'knowing' group, this reading of the daisy, along with enacted gesture, would convey a more sinister meaning to the audience.

Overall, the groups did not want to see or stage a victimised young woman dismissed for her mental anguish. Nor did they want that anguish to manifest as a titillating sexual spectacle or fetishised innocence. They were most drawn to interpretations of Ophelia and her bouquet that had the greatest capacity for agency:

> I was most drawn to the idea of Ophelia's madness as an act of agency because it illustrates her shrewd intellect within a world which continually depreciates her thoughts. It is not a reimagining in which Ophelia suddenly breaks free of her social bondage, but rather an indication of the covert rebellions which one must resort to when every aspect of one's existence is controlled by oppressive or neglectful forces. (Sarah Stryker)

While some ultimately advocated for using the plants themselves and some with finding analogues, all the students came to appreciate the impact of these props and this moment on the play and character:

> while so much of her life is taken up by her father, her brother, and Hamlet himself, her final moments are just hers. Whether they be of the knowledge that she is a sexual being, a childish or a knowledgeable one, they are her final will and testament and must be carried out as such. (Kenzie Lynn Bradley)

For me, these in-class inquiries offered an opportunity to think again, and more deeply, about a scene, a play, and a character I thought I knew well. It also provided a wonderful opportunity to bring practice, research, and pedagogy together and to involve my graduate students in that process. I came in a far bigger fan of Ophelia carrying something rather than nothing for her bouquet, and always inclined to specificity rather than generality on stage; I walked away with that not only affirmed but strengthened, and with renewed confidence that the combination of specificity and ambiguity in Ophelia's original bouquet can be productively engaged with and conveyed today. More than this, we all realised the importance of these props to not simply convey, but to some degree determine, Ophelia's character. As Showalter argues, Ophelia's history as a character is not a detailed backstory exposited in the play itself, but the '*history* of her representation', to which each new performance, artist rendering, and critical interpretation contributes.[20]

Watching the fruitful investigations and conversations our experiments provoked suggested the great value in entering a rehearsal process with the intent to discuss and select such props in collaboration with performers, as part of coming to know and understand text and character, rather than making such decisions in pre-production meetings. Dramaturgy aims to understand the play and its original context as well as the specific aims of the production and the production's relevance to its contemporary world, then bring those threads of knowledge together in ways accessible and meaningful to an audience. In this, the selection and use of props is a crucial dramaturgical act.

Coda

Our Shakespeare on Stage met in the fall of 2021. In preparing our class to engage with material in early modern herbals and the text of *Hamlet*, my first and foremost concern was the psychological safety of everyone involved. To that end, I offered clear content guides to the material, namely that we would be touching on discussion of depression, reproduction (including pregnancy, miscarriage, and abortion), suicide, and menstruation. As I reflect on the work post the June 24, 2022 Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, I am struck by the fact that I never considered the potential physical dangers of

[20]Showalter, 'Representing Ophelia', 79.

the work. I did not foresee the popularity of online videos promulgating potentially dangerous 'home remedies' for those seeking abortion in the wake of the Dobbs decision. I did not anticipate that Justice Alito would cite seventeenth-century judge Matthew Hale, whose family may well have owned and used similar texts to those we were drawing on in their domestic medicine, in his decision. I did not, in short, imagine a world in which the information in these herbals might be taken literally as opposed to a historical reflection of beliefs and cultural conditions before the advent of modern medicine. The last months have been a lesson in both how much privilege I exercised in thinking of these materials as distant, and how the history we study is so often still with us, only a breath, a decision, a moment away.

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