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# Ophelia the Bold

Woman-Centred Interpretations of Shakespeare's Heroine in Young Adult Novels

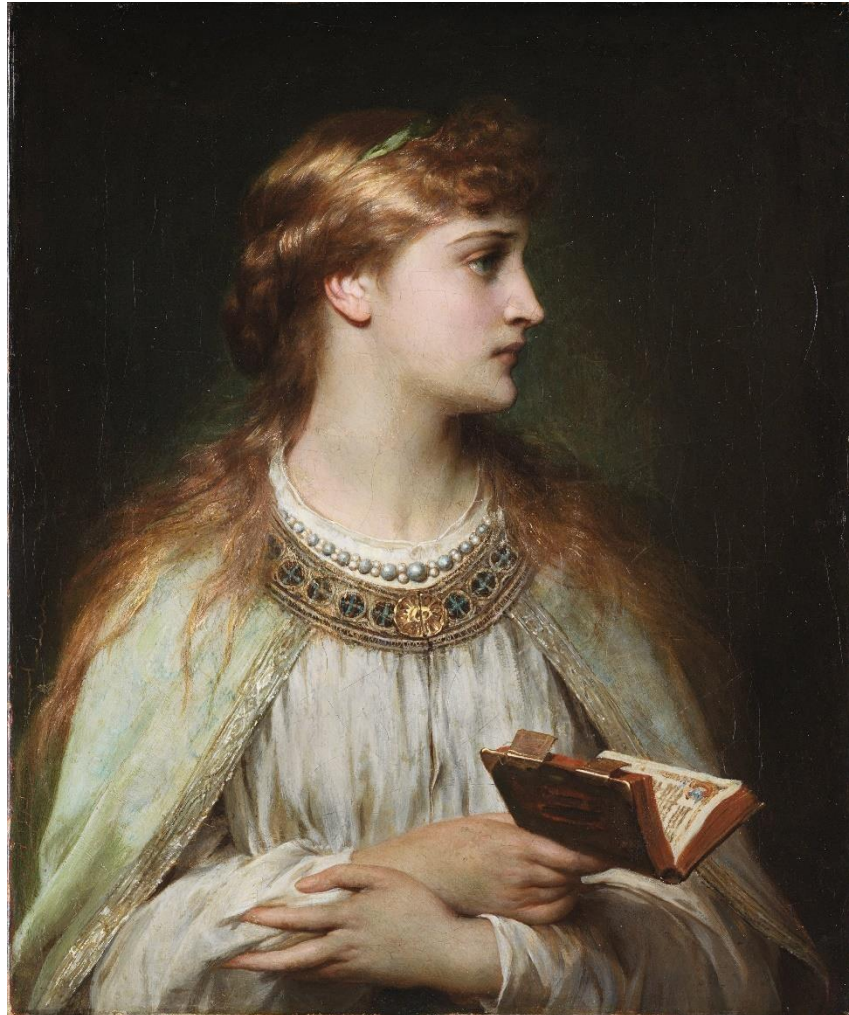


Image: "Ophelia" by Thomas Francis Dicksee (1875)

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## Introduction

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a timeless work and it stars a timeless heroine. The minor character Ophelia has been the subject of much discussion throughout the ages. According to some, Ophelia is a one-dimensional character. Alison Smith, for example, states that she is "a cipher for the projection of filial, paternal, and sexual feeling on the part of key male characters in the play" (Smith 529). However, this disregards the information about the character that the play presents the reader with, however little it may be. Although she is but a minor character, she has a distinct identity. This identity has proven to be fertile ground for several writers of the early twenty-first century. During this period, multiple adaptations were written in which Ophelia is the main character.

Ophelia is suitable as the main character of retellings of *Hamlet* for several reasons. Firstly, there is room for many different interpretations of her character without disregarding the original play because of her small role in the play. Since the reader is not given much information about Ophelia, most of it can be filled in to the modern author's liking. Secondly, she is suitable because there has been much change in the way she has been portrayed by academics and artists. In the nineteenth century, for example, she was fetishized as a sexual and aesthetically pleasing representation of female madness (Safaei and Hashim). By choosing to write about her, the modern authors become part of the tradition of adapting Ophelia's character; how they choose to portray her therefore inevitably interacts with the ways she has been portrayed before. By choosing to make Ophelia the main character and show her thoughts and personality, the modern writers distance themselves from the tradition that has portrayed her as a tool for other people. They show that the current views on Ophelia are different from those of earlier centuries. Particularly, feminist ideology has influenced the way Ophelia is regarded through its focus on female empowerment.

This thesis will attempt to make a comparison between three of these retellings and the original portrayal of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The works that will be analysed are *Dating Hamlet: Ophelia's Story* by Lisa Fiedler, *Ophelia* by Lisa Klein and *Ophelia's Revenge* by Rebecca Reisert. These works have been chosen because, like *Hamlet*, they are all set in the early modern period. The novels analysed in this thesis are all written from a first-person perspective and dive into Ophelia's thoughts. Aside from this, they also show some of Ophelia's actions while she is off stage in the original play. The novels move away from the play's original plot to various extents. All three of them involve a sequel to the play's story and, with the exception of Fiedler's novel, they all introduce a prequel to the story. Aside from this, all three of them are also part of the same genre. This genre, young adult literature, is focused on a particular audience: teenagers. Because of the age of this intended audience, there is an educational aspect to the genre that is similar to that of children's literature. Whereas in children's literature young boys and girls are taught basic lessons about morality and relationships, the young adult genre delves into slightly more complex subjects. For example, these works address mental health, romantic relationships, societal expectations, sexism, racism and politics (Yampbell 350). Many works in the young adult genre are focused on the struggles of teenage girl. Because of the focus on girls, these works often involve feminist principles. The fact that many young adult-writers are women plays into this as well, since they directly experience many of the issues that feminism addresses.

A comparison of these books can give valuable information about the way historical literary works are appropriated to conform to modern culture. Specifically, this bachelor thesis aims to show the differences between the Ophelias in the four primary sources and suggest a possible reason for these differences in relation to modern feminism. Current feminism is focused on "the radical belief that women are human beings" (Rich 7). This goes back to the main principle of feminism: equality between men and women. According to feminist theory,

women have suffered from prejudices and societal disadvantages for ages. The goal of modern feminism is to deconstruct the inferior position of women in society and place them on an equal footing with men (Rich 7). Shakespeare has featured in feminist literary criticism many times. Women have been writing about Shakespeare since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Novy 2). During the seventies, supporters of modern feminism started asking new questions about Shakespeare's work – particularly, about the role and portrayal of women (Swift Lenz et al. ix). Nevertheless, Marianne Novy states that “women's record of creating and transforming readings of Shakespeare has been neglected” (1). Novy describes a new development in which Shakespeare is appropriated for women. The works that are part of this tradition “[make] woman-centered points ... boldly” (Novy 2). The works by Klein, Fiedler and Reisert are part of this new tradition. Their women-centred rewritings of Shakespeare boldly distance themselves from Shakespeare's original work by reimagining a minor character as a heroine. During the twentieth century, Ophelia became an icon for young girls as a result of her prominent role in Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (Hateley 441). This resulted in a new interest in the way she was being portrayed. Momhammad Safaei and Ruzy Suliza Hashim have analysed young adult novels featuring Ophelia before and have come to the conclusion that she is represented as a far more strong-willed character than Shakespeare's Ophelia was (181). The reasons for this apparent personality shift have not yet been explored thoroughly, although it has been related to Ophelia's new role as a role-model for young girls (Safaei & Hashim 181). This thesis attempts to make a clearer connection between the choices made in the portrayals of Ophelia in contemporary young adult novels and the modern conceptions of feminism and female empowerment.

This thesis consists of an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion. In the first chapter, Ophelia's portrayal in *Hamlet* is analysed. The second chapter offers insight into the tradition of reimagining Ophelia and the misogynist aspects of Ophelia's portrayal in *Hamlet*.

The third chapter is an analysis of Lisa Klein's *Ophelia*. This is followed by an analysis of Lisa Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* in chapter four and an analysis of Rebecca Reisert's *Ophelia's Revenge* in chapter five. The thesis ends with a conclusion.



## Chapter 1: Shakespeare's Ophelia

When trying to define Shakespeare's Ophelia, there is little to go on for a reader. Ophelia is only present in five out of the twenty scenes that make up *Hamlet*. Still, some things about Ophelia are known. For instance, although there is no textual confirmation, it can be safely assumed that Ophelia, as the daughter of an aristocrat, was raised in and around the Danish palace as a proper young girl. As was usual in the period, much of her life would have depended on the decisions of her father Polonius and, by extension, her brother Laertes (Brown 89). When taking a closer look at Shakespeare's text, more aspects of her identity can be determined.

Ophelia's first appearance displays the good relationship she has with her brother. Laertes is about to leave for France and she is saying her goodbyes to him. Her brother urges her to write to him – “let me hear from you” (Shakespeare 1.3.4) – and she answers him with a question: “[d]o you doubt that?” (Shakespeare 1.3.5). This first interaction between brother and sister suggests a strong relationship between the two: one where it should not be doubted that they shall write to each other while they are apart. Laertes proceeds to warn her about Hamlet's apparent affections for her. He is sure that Hamlet is playing with her and that his feelings are “forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting” (Shakespeare 1.3.8). Ophelia tells him that she will remember his words, but it remains unclear whether she really believes him. Moreover, she tells him to follow his own guidance and not play around while he is in France (Shakespeare 1.3.44-9). This suggests Ophelia values chastity in men. It could also be interpreted as Ophelia standing up against the double standard that Laertes adheres to: whereas she should be chaste, Laertes is not chaste himself.

In the same scene her father Polonius establishes Ophelia's lack of agency. He agrees with his son's earlier words and urges her not to believe in Hamlet's affections (Shakespeare 1.3.90-134). Although it is implied that, up until that moment, she has spent quite some time

alone with Hamlet in a romantic context, he forbids her to continue seeing him (Shakespeare 1.3.9-110). Both men claim their power over her feelings and behaviour in this scene. Ophelia herself states that she does not know what she should think of Hamlet's approaches (Shakespeare 1.3.103). This scene displays her insecurity about Hamlet's feelings as well as the suggestion that she is not allowed to think for herself. Instead, it is her father who tells her what to think and how to act (Shakespeare 1.3.104-34). This is stressed again during her next appearance. During this scene, she reports to her father after Hamlet has frightened her by suddenly bursting into her room, grabbing her, staring at her for a while and then sighing deeply before leaving the room without a word (Shakespeare 2.1.75-97). The fact that she immediately goes to see her father stresses that he is the one in charge of her actions. However, Ophelia does have her own opinion on what has happened: she is shocked by Hamlet's behaviour and believes that his sudden madness stems from his intense feelings for her (Shakespeare 2.1.81-83). Ophelia appears to feel responsible for Hamlet's lunacy. This suggests that Ophelia has a tendency to feel responsible for the emotions of other people. Moreover, it shows that she takes those emotions and the general wellbeing of the people around her to heart. The guilt she feels about being the reason Hamlet has lost his wits could be seen as a device Shakespeare uses to foreshadow her later psychological breakdown. Her next appearance shows Ophelia as a tool in Claudius and Hamlet's schemes. She is used by Claudius and Polonius to test whether she is the cause of Hamlet's madness. Ophelia meets with him while Claudius and Polonius watch from a hidden position. During the encounter, Hamlet is the picture of contradiction: one moment he admits to having loved her – "I did love you once" (Shakespeare 3.1.114) – and the next he denies it – "I loved you not" (Shakespeare 3.1.118). Nevertheless, Ophelia seems to believe him when he says he did not love her: "I was the more deceived" (Shakespeare 3.1.119). When Hamlet continues to

characterise himself as a villain and then to insult the female sex, Ophelia does not answer him anymore. Instead, she is now convinced he has gone mad and begs for “heavenly powers [to] restore him” (Shakespeare 3.1.144). Apparently, she has not yet given up on him completely and still entertains the hope that he may get better. After Hamlet has left, she continues to lament his state and express her own misery, instigated by his lost potential and her own feelings for him (Shakespeare 3.1.149-160). However, despite her affection for Hamlet, she allows herself to be used by Claudius and Polonius. This turns Ophelia into an accomplice in their plot and it could be argued that she thus betrays Hamlet. However, considering the period the play is set in, it is likely that Ophelia had no choice but to obey her father and her king. Nevertheless, Ophelia spurns social authority in this scene by opposing prince Hamlet when he denies ever having given her the gifts she is trying to return to him. She contradicts him immediately by saying: “you know right well you did” (Shakespeare 3.1.96). This statement is the boldest one she makes during the play.

It would seem natural that after this hurtful interaction Ophelia stays away from Hamlet, yet instead she does not shy away from talking to him when they meet again at the play he has organised for his uncle. Moreover, she even asks him a question on her own initiative when she does not understand the play – “What means this, my lord?” (Shakespeare 3.2.129). This may be because she still has hope for his recovery or still cares for him romantically, although it may also simply be because he is the prince and she has a duty to him as his subject. However, it seems that Ophelia has closed her heart to him at least a little, because when he tries to elicit a reaction from her by joking about interacting sexually with her she only tells him: “I think nothing, my lord” (Shakespeare 3.2.111).

The next time Ophelia appears in the play, her father has died and she has gone mad herself. Her father’s death seems to have triggered her descent into madness, but is not necessarily the only reason for her psychological breakdown. She does not speak in

comprehensible sentences anymore according to a gentleman who has seen her (Shakespeare 4.5.4-13), although this does not seem to be the case when she appears on stage again: “[w]here is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?” (Shakespeare 4.5.21). Ophelia starts singing songs alluding to death, which is interpreted by the King and Queen to be about her father’s death (Shakespeare 4.5.23-45). She continues to sing a song about sex, which was extremely shocking during Shakespeare’s time for a proper young woman (Vives 116). The subject of the song suggests that she is alluding to her former romantic relationship with Hamlet and that this has influenced her breakdown as well. When she has finished her song, she mentions her father. She says that she can only cry when she remembers that they have “[laid] him i’th’ cold ground” (Shakespeare 4.5.69-70). This suggests that she is intensely distressed by the sudden death of her father and that this may have caused her madness. Aside from the fact that he was the father whom she presumably loved dearly, Polonius was also the man that made Ophelia’s decisions for her. It is possible that the sudden loss of this person and, consequently, the sudden uncertainty about who is to make her decisions now is also one of the things that triggered her lunacy. The fact that her father died at the hands of another man she cared about could also have resulted in conflicting feelings that worsened her mental instability.

When Laertes returns from France because of his father’s death, he is shown Ophelia’s changed behaviour. Ophelia is singing of death again and now hands out flowers. She does not seem to even notice her brother being in the room (Shakespeare 4.5.151-192). This is the last time Ophelia appears on stage. In act 4 scene 7 the Queen reports to Laertes that his sister has drowned. She says that Ophelia had made garlands and wanted to put them on a willow’s branch over a creek, but that the branch broke and Ophelia fell into the water. She then started to sing and before long her heavy dress weighed her down and she drowned (Shakespeare 4.7.164-180). However, since her death is not actually shown to the audience, it is not certain

that this is exactly what happened. Ophelia's apparent resignation to her fate when she is in the water also suggests that her death may have been a suicide. The likeliness of this is stressed when the gravedigger expresses concerns about burying her on holy ground (Shakespeare 5.1.1-10). This would have been forbidden if she had committed suicide, since suicide is considered a sin in the Christian faith. The fact that he is told to bury her on holy ground suggests to him that "she drowned herself in her own defence" (Shakespeare 5.1.6-7). This would allow her to be buried on holy ground, but it is a twisted argument. He suggests that the only reason this twisted logic is being used is because of her social status (Shakespeare 5.1-23-25). Regardless of the manner of her death, this is the end of Ophelia's life and of her story.

Throughout the play, Ophelia's thoughts remain hidden. She never talks of her own opinions, except for the fact that she believed Hamlet loved her. Other than that, she is silent until she goes mad. This characterisation is in accordance with the societal norms of the early modern period. Her gender puts Ophelia in a vulnerable position in the patriarchal society of the time and any possible rebellious streaks could not have been explicitly expressed. This is a possible reason for Ophelia's silence in *Hamlet*. This silence results in a lot of opportunity for imagining Ophelia's thoughts and feelings – something writers have attempted to do many times. It has been said that "Ophelia grew to assume greater importance to the audience of *Hamlet* than she had ever held for Hamlet himself, or for Shakespeare" (Wagner 94). The number of times Ophelia has been reused seems to confirm this.

## Chapter 2: Ophelia Continued

*Hamlet* is an ambiguous and complex work of fiction. It is full of wordplay, symbolism and inconsistencies. The character of Ophelia is but one cogwheel in the machine of the play. It has been argued that “rather than stand created as a memorable character in her own right, Ophelia serves the play of *Hamlet* essentially as a useful device” (Wagner 94). This position as a tool instead of an important character in her own right is misogynist. Since her character serves to add to the characterisation of others, her value as an individual is reduced. Moreover, she is overlooked in favour of the male character Hamlet. This strengthens the position that her part is severely misogynist.

According to Linda Wagner, Ophelia’s main role in the play is that of “the evocation of pathos” (Wagner 85): she is meant to draw an emotional response from the audience. To achieve this, Ophelia is the picture of everyday tragedy. Ophelia is an obedient, selfless girl who suffers a terrible fate. Cherrell Guilfoyle takes this even further and argues that Ophelia is “the figure ... of the purity which can atone for the sins of others” (Guilfoyle 5). However, to reduce her to a mere romantic interest is to overlook the other functions of her character. For instance, Guilfoyle argues that she can be contrasted with both Gertrude and Hamlet (5). With regards to Gertrude, Ophelia is the chaste and loyal woman where Gertrude is quick to marry her deceased husband’s brother. This plays into the misogynistic idea that a woman is either a saint or a whore, without there being any grey areas. Furthermore, whereas Hamlet does nothing but feign and lie, Ophelia symbolises truth. Although his madness is a mere act, Ophelia’s madness seems to be genuine. This reinforces the idea of Ophelia as a mere image of purity and virtue. According to Guilfoyle, Ophelia’s honesty and purity might have saved Hamlet if he had not spurned her after his mother’s betrayal because of her sex (Guilfoyle 6). Hamlet supports the idea that all women are the same. Therefore, his mother’s “frailty”

(Shakespeare 1.2.146) convinces him that any other woman would have done the same thing. When Ophelia is used by Claudius and Polonius to find out what Hamlet's madness is about, she is no longer honest. Nevertheless, the fact that she obeys her father and king immediately supports the idea that she is the picture of virtue, since obedience was highly valued in women during the period.

*Hamlet's* Ophelia holds a unique status in the history of Shakespeare's plays. Despite her unimportance in the play, her character has been taken up by readers and has been transformed into many different forms. In the nineteenth century, Ophelia was "the single most often represented female figure" (Romanska 485). During this time, Ophelia was represented "as beautiful, sweet, lovable, pathetic, and dismissible" (Neely 322). However, at the end of the twentieth century, the character of Ophelia has been taken up by feminist critics as an icon of both liberation and victimisation (Neely 322). The work that instigated this is *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher, which was published in 1994. This work describes the struggles of teenage girls, focusing on their "general awkward melancholy and selfdestructive angst" (Hulbert 201). It became immensely popular and turned into "a bible for anyone confronting female adolescence: mothers, fathers, teachers, preteens, and teenaged girls" (Hulbert 200). As a result of the popularity of the work, Ophelia became linked to teenage girls. She was suitable for this purpose because of the nature of her character as "subservient and marginalized" (Hulbert 202). The lesson readers were supposed to take away from Ophelia's tragic end in *Hamlet*, was that they themselves, too, were at risk. They had to "learn to recognize the cultural forces that affect them and learn to take responsibility for their own lives" (Morrison 7). Ophelia's downfall was the result of her blind obedience and adherence to her social position. Through her role in the metaphor constructed by Pipher, the character Ophelia "inadvertently became the Shakespearean spokeswoman for a generation" (Hulbert 200). Whether the new image people had of Ophelia was justifiable by an analysis of

the original play is debatable. As said before, most of Ophelia's personality, thought and cares remain hidden throughout the play. The ambiguity of her motives leaves room for many interpretations of her character.

Considering this link between Ophelia and adolescent girls, it is no surprise that the early 2000s saw the publication of multiple young adult novels that reimagined *Hamlet's* story from Ophelia's perspective. The Young Adult-genre has been defined based on for example the age range of the target audience, the subjects of the stories and the age of the main characters (Stephens). It has been stereotyped as “[l]ess than literary”, “simplistic” and “[w]ritten by less serious or amateur writers” (Stephens). Based on their target audience, critics deem that young adult novels cannot have literary value. Whether or not this is the case, the Young Adult-genre is undoubtedly valuable in other ways. For example, it has been shown that teenagers who read young adult novels display positive development in, amongst others, relationships, social imagination, happiness, knowledge, intellectual and moral stance, writing and critical reading (Ivey and Johnson 262-5). This is explained by stating that “while constructing meaning from text, students were also using text to construct meaning in their lives” (Ivey and Johnson 270). One of the advantages of the Young Adult-genre for the purpose of stimulating development in teenagers is that “by design, they are responsive to the emotional and cultural challenges young people face in their everyday lives” (Ivey and Johnson 257). Besides this positive influence on the target audience, young adult novels also “[offer] a unique window on societal conflicts and dilemmas” (Bean and Moni 638) in a broader literary context.

The status of young adult novels as a means of supporting adolescents in their selfdiscovery combined with the interest in Ophelia as a symbol of the teenage girl has led to interesting similarities between the young adult novels written about the Shakespearean character. This is especially the case when it comes to Ophelia's personality and actions.



Analyses of the novels show that their Ophelia displays sensuality, agency, voice and defiance (Safaei and Hashim 181). It has been argued that “these new dimensions of Ophelia’s characterization should be construed not only as a response to the Shakespearean text but as a reaction to the bulk of literature which has yielded to the predominantly male-oriented readings of Ophelia” (Safaei and Hashim 181). The new Ophelia is portrayed the way she is “in order to imagine Ophelia as a positive role model for young women in the twenty-first century” (Hateley 441). When looking at the three young adult novels this thesis focuses on, another important similarity can be found: instead of coming to a fatal end, Ophelia always survives. Now that the young girls from the nineties have learned what they need to do to save themselves from an end like Ophelia’s, they try to save Ophelia as well by rewriting her story from a more feminist perspective. In the young adult novels, Ophelia takes charge of her own life and defies the cultural and social norms that she has been raised with. This leads to alternate endings in which she may not always be happy, but where she is always alive.

### Chapter 3: *Ophelia* by Lisa Klein

In *Ophelia*, the main character follows a rags-to-riches plotline. Ophelia starts out as the youngest child and only daughter of Polonius, an informant of Denmark's court during the early modern period. Together with Ophelia's brother Laertes, they live in the village of Elsinore (Klein 14). Although her family is wealthy enough to own "a fine house" (Klein 14), the plotline she follows carries her to even greater heights. First, she moves to Elsinore castle when her father wins favour at court (Klein 17). Later, she becomes a lady-in-waiting to Queen Gertrude (Klein 30), before turning into one of Gertrude's personal favourites (Klein 43). Moreover, she marries Hamlet, the crown prince of Denmark, and is therefore next in line to be queen (Klein 104). Her rise to a higher class is empowering for young readers: it teaches young girls that their future is not defined by the class they were born in. Although her rise in status involves marrying a man, this is not all that different from rising through becoming a favourite of Gertrude. After Ophelia's marriage with Hamlet falls apart, she falls down the social ladder again and eventually ends up being a healer at a convent in France. By choosing to end on this note, Klein shows a different kind of empowerment: that of independence. Ophelia chooses to remain a lower-class woman and is happy with her life. This, in turn, shows that being in a higher social class does not have to be the ultimate goal. Instead, Klein shows that what is important is choice.

Whereas Shakespeare's Ophelia is characterised by her obedience, Klein's Ophelia's defining trait is her intellect. She receives the same education as her brother did "from the time [she] could babble" (Klein 15) and once she becomes a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, she continues her studies while also developing the skills that are valued in women (Klein 40). The subject she focuses on from this moment is that of herbs (Klein 40). Klein's Ophelia is a fast learner and soon she is well-versed in the language of plants. By focusing on her intellect as a defining trait of her heroine instead of obedience, Klein shows the value of having

knowledge. Whereas Shakespeare's Ophelia seems to only do what others tell her to do, Klein spends time on developing her heroine's own opinions and plans.

Ophelia's intellect does not end with her knowledge, but stretches into the width of her strategic thinking and theatrical skills. She learns how to please people and earn their trust, starting with her mentor at the castle, Elnora, and continuing with Gertrude. Considering her gender and social position, Ophelia does not have many tools to reach her goals. However, she manages to use the misogynistic standards by using obedience to Elnora and Gertrude to get closer to her own goals. This way, Klein gives Ophelia some agency while still acknowledging the obedience that Shakespeare's Ophelia displays. Interestingly, the only people whom Ophelia tries to win favour with are women. By writing this, Klein showcases female solidarity: women protect each other, instead of constantly competing or being indifferent to each other like they are expected to by the patriarchy. They help each other reach their goals, even unwittingly. Once Ophelia's loyalty is won, she refuses to give it up. When she finds out her father plans to use her to spy on Queen Gertrude, Ophelia spurns him (Klein 46). This way, Ophelia explicitly chooses female solidarity over the obedience that is expected of her. Moreover, although Ophelia's life choices are mostly dictated by her father and brother because of their gender, she manages to escape this to some extent by choosing the Queen over her father. Because of Gertrude's political position, Polonius cannot oppose her will. This way, Gertrude protects Ophelia as well. Furthermore, it teaches Ophelia the power of silence: anything she does not want to share, whether about herself or others like Gertrude, she can keep to herself. Her father cannot pry the words from her lips.

Secrecy becomes a tool of power which Ophelia handles with skill. Like manipulation, it is an alternative source of power for women in the early modern period. Through keeping secrets, Ophelia gains leverage over other characters – which gives her some degree of power over them – and even marries a prince, which is something she might have been prevented

from doing by others because of her social class. Ophelia knows how to use secrets to her advantage. This becomes clear once she enters into a secret relationship with Hamlet. This relationship starts when Hamlet returns from his studies abroad. They have a discussion about male and female nature, during which Ophelia stands up for her sex and puts the blame on men in a manner that impresses Hamlet (Klein 55). He states that “this lady’s mind is a fair match for [his], and her beauty grows with wisdom she speaks” (Klein 55). By making Hamlet’s first attraction to Ophelia be about her intellectuality, Klein establishes a relationship based on similar minds instead of pure desire. This makes Hamlet’s subsequent love for Ophelia more satisfactory for young female readers, since he views Ophelia as an equal. Once the two characters begin a romantic relationship, they keep this a secret, aware of the social inequality of their match and yet defying it. They take to donning costumes and going into town undercover to spend time together in a carefree manner (Klein 65). Through this secret, they can develop their relationship freely. Eventually, the two also marry in secret (Klein 104). To hide their relationship, Ophelia devises a plot in which Hamlet pretends to court her and she pretends not to want him (Klein 117). The fact that Klein has her Ophelia plan the cold reactions that Hamlet gives her in Shakespeare’s original play mitigates the severity of Hamlet’s later hurtful actions against her. Moreover, since the plan works and people remain unaware of Ophelia and Hamlet’s relationship, Ophelia is presented with an intellectual victory instead of the harsh reaction Shakespeare subjects her to.

The power of secrecy emerges again when Ophelia joins Hamlet in his plot to expose Claudius. Again, Ophelia is made an active participant in a situation where Shakespeare makes her the innocent victim. Whereas Shakespeare’s Ophelia is continuously kept in the dark, Klein’s Ophelia has the knowledge of what is happening and the chance to form her own opinion on it. This way, Klein gives her Ophelia agency. At first, Ophelia is wary of

Hamlet's desire for revenge and the ghost which he speaks of (Klein 109). Soon, she is unable to keep up with his complicated plans and lies (Klein 129). When Hamlet claims he never loved her, she believes him and refuses to see him again (Klein 133). Nevertheless, when she comes into the possession of the vial of poison that was used to kill Hamlet Senior, she still wants to give it to Hamlet (Klein 146). This stresses Ophelia's morals: she recognises justice to be more important than her emotions. By disregarding her feelings for Hamlet this way, Klein's Ophelia moves away from the role of mere love interest. Instead, she is given importance as an individual. She loses the vial, however, and with it her chance to prove Claudius' crime through the justice system by using it as evidence. Soon afterwards Hamlet kills Polonius (Klein 148). Klein's Ophelia is overcome with grief, but when she comes out of her stupor she realises that Hamlet is gone and her knowledge of the vial's existence puts her in grave danger, since the knowledge makes her an immediate threat to King Claudius (Klein 154). This stresses the importance of knowledge and secrecy and shows the power that it gives Ophelia. To ward off anyone trying to discern her knowledge, she, like Hamlet, pretends to be mad (Klein 155). However, she needs a more lasting protection, so she uses her knowledge of herbs to fake her own death (Klein 165). Klein subverts Ophelia's ultimate victimisation in *Hamlet* by not only removing her tragic death, but turning it into a deliberate and intricate plot that Ophelia comes up with and performs faultlessly. After her fake death, Ophelia flees to France, carrying her biggest secret with her: she is by now with Hamlet's child (Klein 204). Once she reaches the convent of St Emilions, she keeps her secrets and works her way into her new social environment: first as a prospective nun, then as a healer. In the end, she and her son Hamlet live happily at the convent, where they are joined by Horatio (Klein 287). Ophelia and Horatio end up in a romantic relationship, completing the happy ending. This happy ending is Klein's ultimate subversion of the tragic end that Shakespeare gives Ophelia in *Hamlet*. In her version of the story, Ophelia's resourcefulness and strong will prevent her from becoming a victim of

the patriarchy. Instead, she takes her life into her own hands, with the aid of other women, and ends up getting a happily ever after as a reward.

Ophelia is not the only character whose personality is explored further in Klein's retelling. Klein also gives the reader insight into the Queen's mind. Like Ophelia, Gertrude has a rebellious streak: while she is supposed to be doing "pious exercises" (Klein 42), instead she is listening to one of her ladies-in-waiting reading out "tales of love and desire" (Klein 43) to her. Aside from this rebellious aspect to Gertrude, Klein also shares glimpses of Gertrude's love for her first husband and her grief when he dies. Ophelia turns her back on Gertrude once she marries Claudius, but in the end, after Ophelia's faked death, the two are reunited and Gertrude helps her on her way, calling the girl her "would-be-daughter" (Klein 197). By helping Ophelia, Gertrude defies her husband the king and shows that she values female solidarity more than patriarchal obedience. Like Ophelia, Gertrude is portrayed as having a mind of her own and following her own course, despite the norms that are imposed on her. Since the main character looks up to her, this establishes these feminist traits as desirable.

Apart from the Queen, multiple female characters are added to the narrative. By making all these characters, who play an important role in Ophelia's life, female, Klein assigns importance to women. She also showcases more ways of female empowerment, giving her readers a range of examples to choose from. Amongst them are the lady-in-waiting Cristiana, the widowed lady Elnora and "the wise woman" (Klein 37) Mechtild. Cristiana is introduced as a possible friend to Ophelia, but quickly turns into one of the main enemies of her childhood. Besides being beautiful and mean, Cristiana is also cunning. Whereas Ophelia uses her skills in herbs and acting to manipulate others, Cristiana uses her position and beauty and tries to obtain a place for herself higher up the social ladder (Klein 150). She and Ophelia use similar tools and although Ophelia condemns her cruel personality, she does not look down on Cristiana's methods in general. Elnora, widow of the late Lord Valdemar, takes on

an important role for Ophelia. She is both her mentor and a motherly figure to the young girl when she first comes to Elsinore Castle (Klein 40). This role is later taken over by the head of the French convent of St Emilions, Mother Ermentrude. The character Mechtild is known for her “legendary” (Klein 37) skill in medicine. She is respected, despite her gender, and even feared. She was even charged with witchcraft. However, this accusation was withdrawn when her accuser became victim to a mysterious ailment (Klein 38). She is powerful both as a person and as a character, for she seems to have the power to foresee developments in the story. When Ophelia visits her for the first time, Mechtild offers her a remedy “against the passions of the heart” (Klein 38), foreshadowing Ophelia’s upcoming love affair with Hamlet. When the two meet again, Mechtild offers her more herbs – this time to lighten the burden of pregnancy (Klein 196). Before even Ophelia is sure of her condition, Mechtild knows of it. She is an embodiment of wisdom, power and independence, with skills that parallel Ophelia’s. Possibly, Klein means to show Ophelia’s potential through the character of Mechtild: Ophelia might become just as powerful and independent, given the right choices and turns of fate. This turns into reality at the end of the novel, when Ophelia is the healer at the convent of St. Emilions.

The number of female characters in the story and their respective powers – be they their position, knowledge, cunning or cleverness – stresses the importance of female empowerment in the book. Klein’s Ophelia is a girl with agency, who takes it upon herself to change the course of history and her own fate. She cannot prevent the deaths of Shakespeare’s play except for her own, but by carrying a new heir to the throne, she gains the power to change history. Her choice not to use this power and instead choose personal happiness over political advancement is a clear message to the young readers: happiness is more important than status.

## Chapter 4: *Dating Hamlet: Ophelia's Story* by Lisa Fiedler

Despite the modern title, Lisa Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* is set during the early modern period, just like Klein's *Ophelia*. However, there are significant differences between the two novels. Whereas Klein's Ophelia is defined by her intellect, Fiedler's Ophelia is defined by her luck. Despite being an intelligent young woman in the same way Klein's Ophelia was, Fiedler's Ophelia receives vital information without having to put in much work on several occasions. For example, when Horatio is about to meet the ghost of Hamlet's father, Ophelia feels a "mystic messenger" (Fiedler 6) that calls for her to go to the guard's platform. The recipe for a sleeping potion also comes to her through luck: it is merely her mother's favourite perfume with one more ingredient added to it (Fiedler 22). This luck is completely opposite to the misfortune Shakespeare's Ophelia is subjected to. It is also unrealistic, which suggests a rift between the narrative and real life. This way, Fiedler's novel gets the air of a fairy tale: the vital knowledge seems to reach Ophelia as through magic.

The way Ophelia reacts to information signifies another important aspect of her personality: her temper. According to her best friend, the servant girl Anne, Ophelia was "born to misbehave" (Fiedler 7). This defies Shakespeare's narrative, in which Ophelia does nothing but obey the men around her. Fiedler's Ophelia is energetic and restless. When she is faced with something she disagrees with, she can also become violent. For example, when she finds out that Claudius has murdered Hamlet Senior, she smashes a flower pot and throws a book across the room (Fiedler 28). Immediately after, she is ready to act: she will use poison to murder Claudius (Fiedler 28). This tendency for violence stresses a kind of power: that of being able to bring physical injury to someone. Moreover, if she were left to her own devices, she would immediately murder Claudius, which would not only give her power over him, but also over the course of history, considering his status as a king. Like Klein's Ophelia, Fiedler's heroine also gains agency by possessing knowledge of Claudius' crime and



Hamlet's plan to bring him down. Despite her readiness, Ophelia tells Hamlet that she "despises the custom of vengeance" (Fiedler 29). However, she is convinced it is "the only course – or so the dull-witted, war-mongering *men* of this earth will have thee believe" (Fiedler 29, italics in original). Ophelia herself may not agree with vengeance, but she will support Hamlet as he seeks it. This shows that Ophelia feels trapped by patriarchal conventions. Even though she does not hesitate to speak out against them, she still reluctantly adheres to them.

In a way, Fiedler's Ophelia is also greedy: greedy for knowledge, for action, for agency and power. She states that "[she] thirst[s] for more, for more..." (Fiedler 8), without defining exactly what that 'more' entails. When Horatio and the guards decide to tell Hamlet about his father's ghost, Ophelia is determined to "beat them to it" (Fiedler 11) and tell him herself. She refuses to be silenced by men and let them take action if she has the power to do so as well. This is a clear defiance of the patriarchal norms of the early modern period and Shakespeare's weak-willed Ophelia. Fiedler's Ophelia is also determined to make her own decisions about her relationship with Hamlet. Aside from refusing not to see him anymore, she is also very clear about the extent of their sexual relationship. At the start of the novel, she states she will not sleep with him soon (Fiedler 21). She decides this not because her brother and father tell her not to, but because she herself does not want it (Fiedler 21). The fact that a sexual relationship before their marriage is even possible is a modern concept and leaves room for a modern perspective on sex. Fiedler stresses the importance of consent and a liberal attitude towards sex as something to do for fun instead of as a means to procreate or consummate a marriage.

Fiedler's Ophelia, like Klein's, has a considerable intellect. Hamlet is described as brilliant, especially with words, and Ophelia's "understanding is tipped at an angle that would make most others dizzy" (Fiedler 5). In other words, although Hamlet's quips and wit are almost impossible to keep up with, Ophelia still has the ability to do so. Putting her intellect on par

with his raises Ophelia to the same level Hamlet is on, which suggests that her importance and value as an individual is equal to his as well. Considering that in this adaptation Ophelia has grown up at Elsinore Castle as a young lady of class, this intellect has probably been stimulated by her education. She also has knowledge of flowers and their properties (Fiedler 21). She is confident in her intellect and often thinks that she knows better than others. When she eavesdrops on Horatio talking to the ghost of Hamlet Senior, she disagrees with his methods and states that she would take over and do it herself if she was not afraid that the guards would attack her in their agitated state (Fiedler 10). Moreover, when the ghost returns, Ophelia thinks it “true to his gender” (Fiedler 10) that “Horatio accosts the noble spirit with ... politics” (Fiedler 10). Again, she thinks she could have done better by asking the spirit philosophical questions, which she thinks are the most important (Fiedler 10). She is disgusted with “this *boy* [who] seeks military advancement” (Fiedler 10) instead. The narrative does not explicitly address Ophelia’s high opinion of herself – it neither justifies nor contradicts it, which leaves the reader to believe Ophelia on her word that she is right. Her supposed superiority adds to the unrealistic and fairy tale-like properties of the novel. In concordance with her confidence, Fiedler’s Ophelia does not hesitate to disobey men if she thinks they are wrong – which is often the case. For example, when her father and brother tell her to stay away from Hamlet, she mocks them and sees him nonetheless (Fiedler 20). The same happens when Horatio tells her not to tell Hamlet about the ghost of his father (Fiedler 12). Ophelia considers that but for a moment and then decides that “[she] will act!” (Fiedler 12), since she is “not one to suffer the plague of indecision” (Fiedler 12). This contrasts with the obedience of Shakespeare’s Ophelia. By choosing this narrative, Fiedler suggests that once one knows something is wrong, it is admirable to stand up against it even if the odds are not in one’s favour.

Another interesting aspect of Fiedler’s novel is Ophelia’s allure: almost every man introduced has a romantic or sexual interest in her. Before Horatio falls in love with Anne, he

has feelings for Ophelia (Fiedler 8). He is supposed to give his courtship up when Hamlet started pursuing her, but he does not hesitate to flirt with Ophelia throughout the book. The guard Bernardo attempts to claim her, albeit in a far more violent manner. Convinced that she wants him, he attempts to rape her (Fiedler 57). Claudius attempts to take advantage of her as well when Ophelia pretends to be mad (Fiedler 77). At the end of the novel, when Fortinbras comes to take over Denmark, he is affected by her as well and asks her to stay at court with him (Fiedler 118). The fact that every man she meets wants to be with her is another unrealistic aspect of the novel. Fiedler suggests that everyone recognises Ophelia's superiority, which puts her on a pedestal like a kind of goddess or magical creature – once again strengthening the fairy tale theme in the novel.

The men in the book are characterised as violent and stupid. Ophelia is often stunned that they cannot see the right course of action when it is so clear to her. For example, when Horatio speaks to the ghost of Hamlet Senior, he offends it by ordering it around (Fiedler 9). Fiedler's Ophelia states that men "[cannot] think of anything but conquest, of one sort or another" (Fiedler 11), which means they are either warring amongst themselves or flirting with women. This hunger for violence is also what convinces Ophelia that revenge is the only suitable course of action when it comes to light that Claudius has murdered Hamlet Senior. Interestingly, in the end she finds a way around bloody vengeance – she puts all the original victims of Shakespeare's play under a sleeping curse instead of letting them die. Not only does this carry fairy tale-like properties, it subverts the entire tragedy of Shakespeare's play: instead of ending with multiple deaths, everyone lives and Ophelia and Hamlet run off to Italy for their happily ever after. This way, Fiedler turns the tragedy into something resembling a Shakespearian comedy. This reading is supported by the fact that Fiedler's Ophelia shows a likeness to the traditional feisty heroine of Shakespeare's comedies.

The men also have a significant amount of jealousy in them. Even Hamlet, who is portrayed as the ideal love interest, states that he is jealous of any man that is ever in Ophelia's company (Fiedler 15). Fiedler also spends a scene on laying out sexual violence in her novel. Ophelia's friend, the servant Anne, has been assaulted by a man, merely because she smiled at him (Fiedler 32). Because of her status as a servant, she was in no position to say no and she was grateful the assault did not lead to rape (Fiedler 33). Ophelia lingers on how horrible it is that this is possible and states that women "exist, to men's minds, only to be of use to them" (Fiedler 33). This serves to portray the men as inferior beasts and is contrasted with the portrayal of the women, particularly Anne's brave attitude in the face of abuse and Ophelia's readiness to fight the system and injure men who try to harm them. This shows their superiority over them and through this the apparent superiority of women over men. This superiority is what distances Fiedler's novel the feminist principle of equality and instead relates it to misandry: the belief that women are superior to men. This view has been held up by a group of feminists since the start of the movement.

Ophelia states that she "regret[s] that men record history [since] they include only the details which reflect well upon themselves" (Fiedler 19). It seems as though, since Shakespeare's *Hamlet* paid attention only to male characters, who created both history and the future throughout the narrative, Fiedler has decided to give a woman the power to record history this time. Moreover, this woman has the ability to thwart fate and turn the tragedy into a comedy instead, suggesting that situations can end much better when a woman is in charge.

## Chapter 5: *Ophelia's Revenge* by Rebecca Reisert

Much like the main characters from the previous two novels, Reisert's Ophelia is far from the meek and obedient girl Shakespeare presents his readers with. Instead, she is clever and bold, unafraid to speak for herself and willing to go to extreme lengths to achieve her goals. Especially her boldness is quite contradictory to the zeitgeist of the early modern period. However, Reisert presents the reader with a possible reason for this aspect of Ophelia's personality by letting her heroine be raised in a village as a lower-class girl. Polonius sent her there to be raised after her mother committed suicide soon after Ophelia's birth – an interesting play on Ophelia's own suicide in *Hamlet*. Although Ophelia grows up without even a name to call her own, she believes she is destined for great things. She claims that “[I]f life was meant to be a heroic endeavour” (Reisert 9) and she dreams of exploring the world or rising above her common birth and her gender (Reisert 4). However, throughout the novel, Ophelia shows an awareness of the limitations that her gender brings her. She knows she cannot travel the world like a man can or even become a sculptor if she would like to. Instead, she is forced into being “everything a woman should be ... [:] [m]odest, docile, demure, quiet [and] compliant” (Reisert 183). She accepts this and even suffers misogynistic comments, although she “long[s] to tear into [them] like a hound attacking a marauding badger” (Reisert 305), because she is convinced this is necessary to reach her goals. Like Fiedler's Ophelia, Reisert's heroine renounces the misogynistic standards of the time while still adhering to them. Instead of letting them be obstacles, she tries to live up to those standards and use them to her own advantage. This way, Reisert assigns her heroine some agency and power, while not disregarding Shakespeare's text or the time period in which her novel is set.

The young Ophelia is impatient for change to come around; even more so after she meets the dazzling prince Hamlet. Although he is over fifteen years her senior, she is enchanted by his wit and his wealth (Reisert 22). She is convinced of his superiority to every other human being.

When she is whisked away to Elsinore Castle at twelve years old (Reisert 32), she hopes this will bring her closer to prince Hamlet. She is determined to be a part of Hamlet's life and takes initiative to put herself in his line of sight. Her active attitude towards gaining Hamlet's affection contrasts with the way Shakespeare's Ophelia quietly lets things happen to her. Ophelia succeeds and she and Hamlet enter into a wild courtship when Ophelia is fourteen and Hamlet thirty (Reisert 138). However, Hamlet leaves for Wittenberg soon. Ophelia is both enraged and saddened by Hamlet's sudden departure and her determination to be with him fuels her efforts to become a perfect lady (Reisert 182). By the time Hamlet returns, almost two years later, she has succeeded in her goal and is regarded as a fine lady by everyone at court (Reisert 187). Ophelia has learned to hide the bold girl she used to be when she lived in the village and although her personality has not changed, she has convinced everyone it has. This shows how she uses the expectations people had of women to rise in status. However, before she can ensnare Hamlet for good, he is sent back to Wittenberg again. The next time Ophelia sees Hamlet, everything will have changed.

By now, Ophelia has realised that not everyone believes Hamlet to be as perfect as she does. Nevertheless, once Reisert's Ophelia's loyalty is won, it is never lost. She never wavers in her love for her foster brother Piet, nor does her loyalty to Queen Gertrude or Hamlet ever falter. Even her stepmother, who abandons her for the sake of eloping with a merchant, manages to win back her love once her initial rage and hurt has passed. Like Klein, Reisert shows the value of remaining steadfast and loyal to people – something that contrasts significantly with Shakespeare's Ophelia, who betrays Hamlet on the orders of her father and the king. Reisert takes Ophelia's loyalty to extreme heights and combines it with her morals. During the book, Ophelia realises that Hamlet is not the perfect man she thought him to be, but is instead plagued by fits of genuine madness. Moreover, she realises her own love for him was little more than a childhood fancy for the glamorous life she wanted to live. Unable to do the things men were

able to do during the time period, she attempted to follow her desires by getting close to a man who lived the life she wanted to live. However, after she realises Hamlet is mad, she still remains loyal to him, desperate to save the life of someone whom she deems an innocent victim of the environment he has grown up in.

Unfortunately, Ophelia's willingness to protect those she loves is what almost becomes her undoing. The thing that changes Ophelia's life forever is her love for Gertrude, combined with her sense of justice. Ophelia has long suspected King Hamlet Senior of physically abusing his wife, but since Gertrude does not stand up to him, there is little she can do. This frustrates her to no end, since her sense of justice tells her that this abuse is despicable. Moreover, when the king devises a plan to murder the Queen and marry Ophelia instead so she can bear him more sons, Ophelia decides she has to stop holding back and act (Reisert 227). To protect the Queen she loves, Ophelia is willing to murder the king. Not only does this stress her sense of justice again by showing her opinion on punishment for abusers, but it also shows her love for Gertrude: for her sake, she is willing to damn her eternal soul. Ophelia enlists the help of Claudius, who is in love with Gertrude and would do as much for her as Ophelia would. Ophelia supplies him with poison and tells him to murder Hamlet Senior (Reisert 234). In a way, Ophelia is acting through him. This means she is both using a man to achieve her goals and recognising that men have power that she does not. Claudius agrees and before long the deed is done.

In participating in the murder of Hamlet Senior, Ophelia shapes the rest of her life. When Hamlet returns, she is terrified that he will find out the truth about her part in his father's death (Reisert 246). This becomes even more vital to her once she has married Hamlet in secret (Reisert 297). To prevent him from finding out she played a role in his father's death, she sabotages Hamlet in his plot to expose Claudius. This can be seen as a betrayal to Hamlet in favour of her own position – not only as his lover, but also as an unpunished criminal. This contradicts Ophelia's role as nothing but a love interest for Hamlet in the original play and

gives her more value as an individual. Ophelia encourages Hamlet's acted madness, in the hopes of distracting him from his purpose, and tries to convince him the apparition he saw was nothing but an evil spirit (Reisert 283). However, her plan fails when Claudius gives himself away during the play (Reisert 342). As a result, Hamlet is sent away to be murdered in England. To prevent this, Ophelia sends her childhood friend Ragnor after him to save his life (Reisert 375). By doing this, Ophelia takes fate into her own hands and prevents the death of a prince. However, once again she does this through the hands of a man. Once Ophelia has saved Hamlet, she convinces Claudius to let Hamlet and her leave court and live together in isolation (Reisert 425). For this purpose, she has to be presumed dead and she asks Claudius and Gertrude to take care of this. In doing this, Reisert moves even further away from Ophelia's tragic ending in *Hamlet* than Klein and Fiedler do: Ophelia's death is not faked, it is merely a story. Hamlet, who is unaware of all these schemes, is supposed to be drugged with a sleeping draft during his fight with Laertes to ascertain his cooperation during the flight, but at the last moment Claudius decides against Ophelia's plan. This leads to the deaths of Hamlet, Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius himself. Unlike Fiedler, Reisert follows the tragedy of *Hamlet's* narrative. However, by offering a solution and having a man actively choose against it, she shows that things could have ended very different if the vengeful men of Shakespeare's play were not in charge. Nevertheless, the tragedy takes place and Ophelia, who only ever wanted to protect the ones she was loyal to, has failed them all. She is now willing to live her life without happiness or effort as the new Queen of Denmark. The only thing that stops her from accepting this fate is the discovery of her pregnancy. Aware of the fact that her child will be killed by the new king, Fortinbras, she flees (Reisert 518). The death of her child is the only one she can prevent and she vows that she will, even if it means abandoning her former companions when they come back as ghosts and beg her to stay. The only thing that could finally convince her to disregard their wishes is her loyalty to a new person – her unborn



baby. However, aside from her loyalty and protectiveness, Reisert's Ophelia also has a darker side. Her instinct that she is somehow destined for better things borders on arrogance: she states that "[d]eep within [her] soul [she] was sure [she] was superior to the village folk" (Reisert 11). She also believes her own plans to be fool proof, even if her head tells her this is impossible (Reisert 401). She is not a forgiving person and is prone to violent behaviour when angered – something which happens quite often. When her stepmother Judith leaves her, she "wanted to rip worlds apart with [her] bare hands" (Reisert 81) and even something as simple as Hamlet not appearing at a meal makes her "furious enough to bite the heads off live salmon" (Reisert 147). Even murder does not shock her. When she is told of the suspicions that her father may have murdered one of his wives, she feels this makes him more interesting (Reisert 34) and she is quick to consider murder when someone she loves is in danger. Moreover, she confesses to taking pleasure in the idea of murder, stating that killing Claudius "might satisfy [her] deeprooted anger" (Reisert 368). She even considers leaving Hamlet to die in England before deciding against it for the sole reason that she believes him to be an innocent man (Reisert 377).

Wickedness can also be found in Ophelia's attraction to Hamlet. She states that she wants to "tumble him into madness, evil, hell itself" (Reisert 141) when he keeps himself from touching her because of her chastity. In the moments she is most attracted to him, she notices "devilry in his eyes" (Reisert 154) or compares him to the devil (Reisert 336). She compares herself to God, saying that both of them "choose to spit the lukewarm out of [their] mouth" (Reisert 167). She wants to be "more important than truth" (Reisert 309) to Hamlet, more important than anything. This attraction to madness and self-centeredness humanises her, distancing her from a heroine who serves as a flawless example for young readers. It stimulates readers to consider Ophelia as a person and not simply take her actions as the right ones. It also shows that negative emotions are something everyone experiences, albeit probably not to the

extent which Reisert's Ophelia does. The fact that Ophelia manages to find some happiness despite of her bad qualities shows that even though one should always strive to be better, negative emotions or character traits do not ruin one's chances at happiness or even at being a good person.

It is only after all the deaths that a horrible truth comes to light. Throughout the novel, Ophelia has been advised by the ghost of Yorick, whom she was able to see when no one else could. Ophelia was under the impression that Yorick had been murdered by Hamlet Senior, but it turns out it was Hamlet himself instead who killed the jester (Reisert 499). To avenge himself, Yorick has been manipulating Ophelia into making the choices that ended with the death of Hamlet. Ophelia, who was devoted to making her own choices despite her gender, has been played by a man all along. This is what finalises the status of *Ophelia's Revenge* as a tragedy from a feminist perspective. The deaths of the characters are unfortunate and are portrayed as such, but the true tragedy is the fact that Ophelia has tried hard to gain the power that she has been denied because of her sex and in the end she is used as a mere pawn by a man, who makes her into an accomplice in the deaths that she was trying to prevent. Ophelia's failure to solve the problems of *Hamlet* is the crux of the story that Reisert presents. However, although Reisert's Ophelia suffers a great tragedy, in the end she heads off into a future with the possibility of being happy. Even though she has been used by Yorick, in the end she is released from his grip and is now able to choose her own path. This way she is rewarded for the qualities that Reisert assigns her. This, in turn, suggests that they are desirable traits, which serves the feminist perspective of praising girls who take their fate into their own hands and refuse to be silenced by men, even in situations where a happy ending seems almost impossible.

## Conclusion

Shakespeare's Ophelia is defined by her usefulness to other people, whether that is as a love interest, a daughter or a subject. She is forced to do the bidding of the people who have a higher standing – particularly men – and she does not speak up against this. Instead, she lets them use her until she breaks. The reason she breaks is because of her caring nature:

Shakespeare strongly suggests that she cares for her father and Queen Gertrude to some extent and cares deeply for her brother and Hamlet. She is not allowed to be an important character in her own right and is instead reduced to a plot device. This contrasts with Ophelia's portrayal in the three young adult adaptations that have been analysed. These novels show a more feministic perspective. Aside from the portrayal of the men in the story, it is mostly the characterisation of the main character Ophelia that shows this feminism. She is portrayed as clever, ambitious, resourceful and important in various ways. For example, she receives some manner of education in all three novels, whether that is through joining her brother's education, being taught privately or studying a subject as a hobby. Related to this, she also has the power of knowledge – in all three novels she is aware of Hamlet's plans and pretensions. Furthermore, in *Ophelia's Revenge*, she is also aware of Claudius killing Hamlet Senior before Hamlet does and considers using this information to blackmail Claudius. Ophelia's part in Hamlet Senior's death in *Ophelia's Revenge* is another way in which she is important – not only does she resort to violence by proxy to resolve a problem, but she also becomes important in a more historical sense by causing the death of a king. Her importance is also evident on a more relational level: in all three novels, Ophelia is very important to Hamlet. In both *Ophelia* and *Ophelia's Revenge*, she marries him in secret and although they are not married in *Dating Hamlet*, they are secretly in a romantic and sexual relationship. He goes to her for comfort and expresses his love for her on multiple occasions in all books. Moreover, in all three novels Hamlet is not the only one to notice Ophelia's charms. In *Ophelia*, she ends

up in a relationship with Horatio, who has presumably loved her throughout the entire book. In *Dating Hamlet*, she becomes the subject of affection to several men, including two kings and a prince. *Ophelia's Revenge* also provides the reader with another man who loves Ophelia: Ragnor, whom she leaves with at the end of the book. In all three novels, Ophelia is given agency. This shows Ophelia's value as both a character and a person. Together with the way men are portrayed in the books, this leads to a significantly feminist reading of *Hamlet* in all three cases.

Whether the plotlines the modern authors come up with are realistic is debatable. Disregarding the fact that it is unclear whether young girls from the early modern period would have the opportunity to develop slightly more rebellious mindsets, several plotlines also depend on suspension of disbelief. Especially *Dating Hamlet* reaches almost fairy talelike properties by its use of luck as a plot device and the popularity of Ophelia among the other characters. These unrealistic aspects of the books may serve an educational purpose. After all, the heroines serve as examples for readers in our current society, not those in the early modern period. The character traits that are praised and rewarded in the works correspond with the ideals of current feminism and are therefore suitable to present to the intended audience of young adult literature.

Although these results give valuable information about modern appropriations of historical texts, they are still limited in a few ways. Firstly, only three books were compared in this thesis. For an even more valuable conclusion, more books could be looked at. Secondly, this thesis focuses mostly on Ophelia and does not thoroughly look at the other female characters of the books. For example, Gertrude is given agency in a similar way that Ophelia is in Klein's *Ophelia*, but a thorough analysis of this goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Lastly, the decision to only look at young adult novels does not make the contrast between the young adult genre and retellings in other genres evident. These things could be

taken into consideration during further research. Ideas for this are for example looking into the character of Ophelia in retellings in a different genre. Other than this, characters besides Ophelia could also be looked at in a more focused way. For this, other female characters could be chosen, but retellings focusing on male characters could also be taken into account. For example, retellings focused on Hamlet himself such as *Simon* by Michael Mullin could give a new perspective on Shakesperean retellings. It might also be interesting to look at retellings which make the setting of *Hamlet* a modern one and transpose the story to contemporary times. To conclude, this thesis analyses the women-centred perspective on *Hamlet* that is shown in 21<sup>st</sup> century young adult novels and opens up the possibility of interesting further research.

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