Shakespeare and Canada

Essays on Production, Translation, and Adaptation

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"The real of it would be awful:"
Representing The Real Ophelia in Canada

"I'm thinking next season, I'm thinking of doing Hamlet."
"Whatever for?"
"Because I have an Ophelia."
"Who?"
"Guess."
"Me? Oh no."
But she is trying not to smile.
"You'd be better off having a Hamlet," she says. "Ophelia has a short shelf life."

(Carole Corbeil, 1997: 45-6)

She went down singing
So they say
Ophelia
Ophelia
Ophelia–

(Elizabeth Burns, 1991: 43)

Being weak is not one of my strengths.

(Frances Barber, on preparing to play Ophelia at the Royal Shakespeare Company, 1988: 138)

Judith Thompson's 1992 "relay" play, Lion in the Streets, opens with an address to the audience by the young Portuguese girl Isobel who provides the through-line and a bridge among the play's linked scenes. Her speech frames the play by introducing, among other things, issues of representation. "Doan be scare," she says pointing to her downtown Toronto neighborhood. "Doan be scare of this pickshur! This pickshur is niitice, nice! I loove this pickshur, this pickshur is mine!" (1992:15). In a later scene, a neighborhood woman, Joanne,
tells her friend Rhonda that she has cancer of the bone, and asks for her help:

You know that picture? That picture I had in my bedroom growing up? [...] My aunt and uncle sent me that from England, the poster it's 'OPHELIA,' from this play by Shakespeare, right? And she she - got all these flowers, tropical flowers, wild flowers, white roses, violets and buttercups, everything she loved and she kinda weaved them all together. Then she got the heaviest dress she could find... you know how dresses in the olden days were so long and heavy, with petticoats and that? And she got this heavy blue dress, real... blue and then she wrapped all these pretty flowers round and round her body, round her head, and her hair, she had this golden, wavy hair, long, and then she steps down the bank, and she lies, on her back, in the stream. (1992: 34-5)

Joanne provides a lengthy reading of Ophelia's death-by-drowning as represented by John Everett Millais, concluding that "she dies... good. She dies good." "I want to die like that," she says. "But... I l... want to do it all alone" (35). She proceeds to ask Rhonda's help, not only in arranging for her death and funeral, but also in controlling her own passage into representation:

I want you to help me, with the flowers, and with the dress, and my hair, I want you to make sure the willow branch is there, and the stream is right, and maybe... maybe that... Frank... sees I... wouldn't mind him seein... me in that stream, with the flowers, and the heavy blue dress... I wouldn't mind if you took maybe some pictures of me like that and then you could have them printed and given out at the funeral, something like that... just, you know, two by four, colour, whatever, it's the one thing that would make it alright - it's the one thing... (1992: 36)

Rhonda, not surprisingly, is reluctant:

[1] It's all very lovely and that, your picture, in your room, but that's a picture, you dimwit! The real of it would be awful, the stalks of the flowers would be chokin you, and the smells of them would make you sick, all those smells comin at you when you're feelin so sick to begin with, and the stream, well if you're talking about the Humber River or any stream in this country you're talkin filth, in the Humber River you're even talkin sewage, Jo, you're talkin cigarette packages and used condoms and old tampons floating by you're talkin freezein, you'd start shakin from head to toe you're talkin rocks gashin your head you're talkin a bunch of longhairs and goofs on the banks yellin at you callin you whorebag sayin what they'd like to do to you, you're talkin... and where would you get dress like that, eh? You'd never find the one in the picture, Jo, it'd be too tight at the neck and the waist, it'd be a kind of material that itches your skin, even worse wet, drives you nut-crazy, the blue would be off, wouldn't look right your shoes

wouldn't match you could never find the same colour, Joanne. You can't become a picture, do you know what I mean? I mean you can't... BE... a picture, okay? (1992: 36)

I am quoting this play and this passage at length to introduce a discussion of the cultural role played by a range of representations — "pictures" — of Ophelia in Canada in the 1990s, and in Canadian drama in particular. These representations, in their very different ways, often explicitly raise, as this one does, the question of who controls women's passage into representation. They also often set an image that makes implicit claims to "reality" against a romanticized version of Ophelia that is implicitly or explicitly associated with 19th-century Romantic or pre-Raphaelite images of Ophelia-as-victim and, in particular, with reproductions of the Millais painting invoked from the childhood of Thompson's Joanne.

Elaine Showalter's analysis of French and English representations of Ophelia, including the Millais painting (which is of course a touchstone for more than Canadians), notes that "Millais's Ophelia is sensuous siren as well as victim," and also notes that "the [male] artist rather than the subject dominates the scene (1985: 85)."

The division of space between Ophelia and the natural details Millais had so painstakingly pursued reduces her to one more visual object; and the painting has such a hard surface, strangely flattened perspective, and brilliant light that it seems cruelly indifferent to the woman's death. (1985: 85)

Showalter includes in her discussion of the Millais work a brief survey of romantic Ophelias, which evince a fascination with, and eroticisation of, female madness and construct her as "the girl who feels too much" (1985: 83).² It is this pervasive and naturalized image, and the culturally reproductive construction of gender that it hegemonically effects and reinforces, with which contemporary Canadian Ophelias must continue to negotiate.

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¹ Needless to say, Rhonda's "real of it" is also an artfully constructed and far from disinterested representation.

² Rebecca West, in The Court and the Castle: Some Treatments of a Recurrent Theme (New Haven: Yale UP, 1957), 18, argued that Ophelia as a "correct and timid virgin of exquisite sensibilities" who dies of a broken heart is "a misreading that would not have lasted so long in England had it not been for the popularity of the pre-Raphaelite picture by Sir John Millais which represents Ophelia as she floated down the glassy stream, the weeping brook; for his model was his friend Rossetti's bride, the correct, timid, sensitive, virgin, and tubercular Miss Siddal." I am indebted for this reference, and throughout my discussion of Margaret Clarke's play, to Burnett, 1997.
Judith Thompson’s use of Ophelia, and her evocation of the specificities of a contemporary Canadian landscape—the Humber River and its attendant “filth,” together with the speech rhythms of the characters, the (mis)reading of the “tropical” flowers and other iconography from the Millais painting, and the source of the print as a gift sent from England, all contribute to the perverse humor of the passage and communicate through a kind of grotesque realism some of the characterizations of a postcolonial critique. Canadians familiar with Christmas-card robins, Gainsborough prints on the bedroom wall, and Shakespeare-at-Stratford will recognize the dislocation articulated by Rhonda in her search for “the real of it,” if some might also recognize the comforts of a childlike, colonialisist submission to the fantasy authorities of cultural certainty, however absurd, at a time of stress. The invocation of Shakespeare, of “olden days,” and of an English pastoral landscape is not unique to Canada, of course, but it plays a particular, and in the context of recent postcolonial critiques, familiar role in the cultural life of former English colonies. It is this comforting role that Joanne imagines being replayed in funeral rituals and in the circulation of photos of her own romantic drowning to “Frank” and her other survivors and mourners, though there is also something refreshingly self-assertive, however comically naïve in this context, in her desire to orchestrate her own passage into representation.

Thompson is not alone in evoking the high-culture, colonialisist comforts of submission to romantic and dehistoricized imagery from Shakespeare, and from Ophelia in particular, though not all such representations constitute critiques. One thinks, for example, of the stunningly beautiful representation of Ophelia’s suicide in Robert Lepage’s one-man Hamlet, Elsinore, described in Chapter Four, in which the (re)emergence of the actor as Hamlet contained the representation within a closed narrative, a closed semiotic system, and single (male) body. The audience was left moved and perhaps comforted by the aesthetic beauty of the sequence, but also functioning at some comfortable remove from any “real of it.”

Ophelia plays a similar, if more oblique because more radically de-and re-contextualized role in “Never Doubt I Love,” Ted Dykstra’s setting and recontextualization of Hamlet’s letter to her as recorded by pop singer Melanie Doane on her album, Shakespearean Fish (Doane and Dykstra, 1996). Hamlet’s lines, “doubt that the stars are fire/doubt that the earth doth move/doubt truth to be a liar/but never doubt I love,” read in II.ii by Polonius to Claudius and Gertrude (satirically, in most productions) as evidence of the source of Hamlet’s distraction, are here beautifully sung in the lyrical female voice of Melanie Doane, and framed as chorus to a song that plays variations on the theme established by the first verse:

in an age of troubles
in an age of uncertainty
in an age of dwindling hope
you still have me

The song ends with an astonishing shift in context, appropriating lines from the marriage negotiations of Beatrice and Benedick from V.ii of Much Ado About Nothing, and effectively invoking closure, effacing Ophelia, and invoking conventional, and conventionally gendered comforts: “I know your pain I won’t pretend/Serve God, love me, and mend.” The song also, of course, without taking on any serious revisioning of Hamlet—in fact without explicitly invoking Ophelia, Hamlet, or the play at all—stakes an implicit claim to a particular kind of “high-culture” seriousness within the pop music pantheon through its use of “olden-time” Shakespearean language and through its placement on an album which invokes both Shakespeare and Yeats. In doing so, of course, it also allows listeners the dubious

It is the specificities of place and localized language that set Thompson’s Canadian confrontation of the romantic image with “the real of it” apart from a comparable moment in Scottish poet Elizabeth Burns’s poem, “Ophelia.”

This is not the beautiful floating death by water
She will not have her skirts drawn out around her
billed along by the current
her hair floating like some golden weed
and a cloak of wildflowers scattered round her
This death by water
will be sticky with mud
Her wet clothes will drag her down
and the stones in her pockets
sink her quickly. (1991: 41-2)

The lyrics for the album’s title song, “Shakespearean Fish,” were adapted from Yeats by Melanie Doane. For a discussion of female pop vocalists, including Canadian Jane Siberry, in relation to high and popular culture, see Lucy O’Brien, “Sexing the Cherry”: High or Low Art? Distinctions in Performance.” The use of Shakespeare by pop musicians in Canada to position themselves culturally is similar to that elsewhere, ranging as it does from Loreena McKennitt’s high-culture Celtic settings of Shakespearean songs and speeches (together with others by Blake, Tennyson, and Yeats), to the entirely gratuitous title, Shakespeare My Butt, of the debut album of the rock group, The Lowest of the Low—gratuitous in that the album contains no other Shakespearean references. Both of these types, of course, serve to reinforce the high/low-culture binary, and police its borders. Somewhat more complex is the song “Cordelia” by the Tragically Hip, with its reference to stage superstitions, “Treading the boards, screaming out Macbeth/Just to see how much bad
and self-congratulatory pleasures of intertextual recognition, or at the very least of sophisticated taste that unlike Thompson's intertextual references are fully congruent with continuing colonialist submission to British cultural imperialism.

It seems curmudgeonly—“that’s a picture, you dimwit”—to suggest that the artful and aesthetically beautiful appropriations of Ophelia by Lepage and Doane play essentially affirmative, reproductive, or colonizing cultural roles, particularly given Thompson’s representation of the comforts they can provide to those in particular kinds of need. But the larger cultural work performed by them is not without significance, aligning as they do the “high”-cultural authority of Shakespeare and of old-world culture with romanticized validations of feminine passivity, victimization, and service to masculinist artistic, cultural, and social goals.

Other Canadian productions, revisionings and recontextualizations of Hamlet, however, tell different stories of their Ophelias, attempting to redress historical imbalances in order to recover or represent “the real of it” in their various ways, and play a range of different cultural roles. These include productions of the play featuring the now conventionally strong-willed Ophelias of such actors as Marti Maraden at Stratford in 1976, who played her truly frightening mad scenes strapped to a yoke which she wielded with considerable danger to those around her; of Sheila McCarthy at Toronto Free Theatre in 1986, whose Ophelia’s steely will was reflected in her determinedly expressionless countenance, particularly in the wake of a II.i scene in which she was exhibited to the Court by her father as a virtual prop in support of his argument to the King and Queen concerning Hamlet’s madness; or of Linda Griffiths in The Passe Muraille Hamlet in 1983, in which the character cited to the Court by her father as a virtual prop in support of his argument, that will become familiar below, the victim of Gertrude’s machinations, who nevertheless appropriated the “to be or not to be” soliloquy and its attendant assertion of independent subjectivity, and successfully fought off an attempted rape by Hamlet. Her suicide was falsely reported by Gertrude as a romanticized drowning: in fact she died singing “It was a lover and his lass” (interpolated from As You Like It), covering her face with a piece of lace, and lowering herself with some deliberation into a coffin. These inconsistencies in what seems to be an attempt to represent a strong and independent Ophelia in The Haunted House Hamlet are typical of attempts to revisit the character in contemporary versions of the Hamlet story. They perhaps point to the difficulties associated with attempting to portray a strong character whose role in the received text is nevertheless a minor one, in the face of so resilient a residue of the Millais archetype.

But “strong” Ophelias have become the rule rather than the exception, even in mainstream productions of Hamlet since the 1980s, even at the Royal Shakespeare Company, as my third epigraph indicates. In the Canada of the 1990s, however, there was a shift in direction, as the Judith Thompson intertext with which I began might suggest. And of course in the 1990s, in the wake of post-structuralist destabilizations within Canada as elsewhere, the question of “the real of it” shifts its ground.

Showalter’s history of the representation of Ophelia in England and France, which neither begins nor ends in the romantic period, of course, historicizing her objects of analysis as well as her own method, takes this cultural turn into account. Focusing on “the representational bonds between female insanity and female sexuality” and beginning with Elizabethan stage conventions and the representation of Ophelia’s madness as “erotomania,” Showalter moves through Augustan, romantic, Victorian, and Freudian representations to contemporary “postmodern” depictions of the character as schizophrenic—post-Laing—and post-Deleuze and Guattari. Showalter carefully distinguishes between contemporary male and female representations, the former tending to focus on schizophrenic fragmentation, complete with “head banging, twitching, wincing, grimacing, and drooling,” the latter on protest and

luck you really get,” and its revisionist refrain. “It takes all your power to prove that you don’t care! I’m not Cordelia. I will not be there” (1991).

Although I saw both the Passe Muraille and Toronto Free Theatre Hamlets, I am indebted for my accounts of the productions to G. B. Shand, who worked on both productions, for lending me archival videos of the productions and for his article “Two Toronto Hamlets.”
rebellion, including representations of "the madwoman as heroine" (1985: 91).7

Canadian and Québécois representations of Ophelia in this decade are also gendered, but if the stuttering Ophelia of Ken Gass's play, Claudius, would seem to echo the thumb-sucking and twitching characterizations in Jonathan Miller's productions,8 the gender divide is perhaps not so clear on this side of the Atlantic - at least in Canada - where postcolonial menfolk are perhaps more likely to identify with the character, and women more likely to distance themselves from her apparent passivity (not to mention the text's cultural authority)

E.D. Blodgett, problematically, in his construction of women as metaphor, and in his swallowing of feminist practice in the interests of an essentializing - "natural" - Canadian alterity, may nevertheless have a point that accounts in part for Canadian fascination with revisionist, and revisionist feminist representations of Gertrude, Ophelia, and other Shakespearean women: he argues that

A Canadian is, it would seem, by nature of but not in, and thus endowed with attributes similar to those of a woman in a patriarchal world. To accept these conditions is to become, by definition, a heretic, refusing the official version, whose text consequently becomes the articulation of such a state, such a country. Life and history, as [Janice Kulyk] Keefer has remarked, happen to Canadians elsewhere. (1990: 5)9

Gender-conscious representations of Ophelia in contemporary Canada and Québec include, in 1990, Carbone 14's astonishing production of Heiner Müller's Hamletmachine, directed by Gilles Maheu, with its Ophelia (in one of her four guises) as Marilyn Monroe (as victim - in this case victim-as-simulacrum) who could nevertheless on occasion be found in the erotic costume of the Monroe of The Seven Year Itch slapping her Hamlet senseless. The effect, although undoubt-edly eroticized, was that, in the words of the production's reviewer in TDR (The Drama Review), "some in the audience, like Ophelia, have seen through the veils of representation" (MacDougall, 1988: 18) - whether to infinite postmodern reproducibility or to some (other?) form of "the real of it" was unclear. There is little doubt, however, that the Carbone 14 Hamletmachine worked to destabilize and denaturalize conventional gender roles, together with the cultural authority of canonical texts and the simple binary division between high and popular culture.

Both Ophelia and "the real of it" in Canadian Hamlet plays of the 1990s has been variously represented. The remainder of this chapter will focus on three quite different approaches to Hamlet as source text for dramatists: feminist "revisionist mythmaking," politico-personal meditation on morality, sexuality, politics, and survival; and revisionist re-source-making in the guise of a "Viking Hamlet Saga."10

In her three-person version of the story, Gertrude and Ophelia - the only contemporary Canadian dramatic revisioning of Hamlet by a woman that I know of - Margaret Clarke dramatizes two versions of the "real:" she incorporates the female subject and the action involving the play's women that Shakespeare's Hamlet leaves unrepresented, and, in a metatheatrical frame, attempts to represent the "real" situation of women like herself working in the theatre in Canada and attempting to provide alternative theatrical views of canonical texts. The framework consists primarily of a debate between the Playwright, who plays Gertrude, and the Actor playing Horatio, who insists on offering rewrites "to represent the men who are missing from the action." After all, he argues, "You're a feminist. You believe in all this process stuff" (1993: S2). This frame allows Clarke to give voice to her own frustrations about the "real" patriarchal nature of the professional theatre in Canada, including a workshop process for new play development which often serves to bully playwrights into rewrites that betray their politics in the interests of what "we all agree" is "better" dramaturgy. It also allows her to voice critiques of her Shakespearean source texts, and thereby to justify her own revisioning. As she tells the Actor/ Horatio early on,

[What you don't understand is that as "The Mother," Gertrude is like an ideological sponge. The crap and piss left over from shaping the play is sucked up into the Gertrude character, where we can safely feel all the disgust and contempt we want. Then we're supposed to identify like crazy with Hamlet and his pals, feeling our ever-so-neat fear and pity, because all the nasty bits have been displaced into her. Well, I'm here to tell you it's a crock. I identify with Gertrude and I don't like the bad press she's been getting. (1993: S2-S3)]

7 On schizophrenia Showalter cites and discusses R. D. Laing's The Divided Self, but might also have made reference to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Her descriptions, respectively, are of Jonathan Miller's 1981 production at the Warehouse, London, and Melissa Murray's agit-prop play, Ophelia, written for Hormone Imbalance in 1979, in which "Ophelia becomes a lesbian and runs off with a woman servant to join a guerrilla commune.


9 Blodgett is quoting Janice Kulyk Keefer (1986: 289).

10 "Viking Hamlet Saga" is Michael O'Brien's characterization of his play, Mad Boy Chronicle, in his foreword (1995: 9).
The main plot, the play-within, is essentially that of Shakespeare's version, although neither Hamlet nor Claudius appears on stage, a point of some concern to the only male in the cast: the Actor argues to the Playwright that “Everyone agrees. Your play needs a Hamlet,” and later asserts that “no play can stand on its feet just on the strength of two women talking” (1993: S3, S10). But this is more or less what we get, as the traditional “action” takes place offstage and is recounted by Ophelia to Gertrude, who gives advice and is portrayed as a skilled political manipulator.

Linda Burnett has argued that what Gertrude and Ophelia does is amplify what Stephen Greenblatt calls (in reference to Caliban) “the voice of the displaced and oppressed” (Greenblatt, 1990: 232) in Shakespeare so that it can be registered clearly. Acknowledging that the play does more to criticize existing structures than to counter them, she argues that it “does function to permanently change the way we view Shakespeare's tragedy” (Burnett, 1997: 26), to operate as “revisionist mythmaking,” and to work “to change our notion of the masculine canon and [...] make cultural change possible” (26). The play's placement of its women at centre stage, and its treatment of Gertrude as strong, astute, and unscrupulous - a complex and coherent central character - can certainly be cited in support of Burnett's attractive feminist argument, which is also strongly supported by the arguments of the Playwright in the metatheatrical frame.

The play's treatment of Ophelia and “the girl” (Clarke, 1993: S3) who plays her, as Burnett acknowledges, is somewhat less encouraging. Noting that “unlike her Gertrude, Clarke’s Ophelia is not a coherent character,” Burnett finds “at least four possible Ophelias in Gertrude and Ophelia” (Burnett, 1997: 21): the delicate, virginal, and naive figure of the Millais archetype; the innocent victim of the court's machinations, robbed of her honesty, driven to insanity and suicide; the not-so-innocent accomplice with the court who spies on her lover, aborts herself with little regret, and loses her integrity, referring to herself before her suicide as “a very great sinner” (Clarke, 1993: S12); and finally “the madwoman of recent feminist criticism” (Burnett, 1997: 22), who gains insight and strength from her “madness” (understood as any deviation from societal norms) and spurns the status quo that Gertrude survives by embracing. Burnett argues that this “problematic melange of types” (22), which she suggests is not so much a reading of Ophelia as a reading of what the critics have had to say about her, serves some of the same purpose as Elaine Showalter’s history of Ophelia in representation, but it also ultimately reproduces the problematic of Hamlet itself. It is impossible, it seems, to employ the plot of Shakespeare's play essentially unaltered - to be, in a curious way, “faithful” to the (masculinist) authority of the source story - and at the same time avoid its gendered pitfalls: the story, after all, is by, for, and about men.

But I wonder if this is the only problem to take into account in analyzing the cultural work done by Clarke's play. Presenting itself explicitly as feminist revisionism, the play nevertheless represents the victimization of women by women in an empathetic if not positive light, moving towards a kind of neo-cathartic understanding, and therefore acceptance, of such collaboration with patriarchal oppression. And precisely because this is presented as feminist it is perhaps all the more problematic. Gertrude and Ophelia's Playwright argues that “Ophelia may be dead, she may even have to die offstage, but I will not have it passed over with some bracketed phrase - 'She should have died hereafter'. ... Women are always dying in asides” (S13). But in spite of these intentions, “the girl” playing Ophelia is left during the play’s framework debates, as the stage directions indicate, “carrying a basket of flowers. She waits for their exchange to end and rehearsal to begin” (1993: S3). And Ophelia herself doesn’t really fare much better in the “play proper,” where her victimization includes her rape by Hamlet and betrayal by a Gertrude who, forced to choose between her child, Hamlet, and her allegiance to Ophelia as a woman, is serving the interests of her son. Ophelia’s madness is a direct result of Gertrude’s abandonment of her, as is her suicide. But the play-within ends with Gertrude rocking Ophelia’s bridal veil-as-shroud in her arms, and laying it out on her bed:

Ophelia, if you hear me, if such a place exists where you can hear me, forgive me. You knew that all I did was for him. It was never for you. I could not play your mother, although we would both wish it so. In being true to him, I wronged you. I was as true and as wrong as any woman can ever be. (1993: S15)

All that follows this speech is a very brief closing of the metatheatrical frame after “the guys have all gone,” in which the Ophelia actor

11 Burnett takes the term “revisionist mythmaking” from Alicia Ostriker, “The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking.”
thanks the Playwright for some unidentified rewrites, and they leave together, thinking and hoping, respectively, that “everything will be fine” (1993: S15).

If Gertrude and Ophelia represents “the real of it” as, on the one hand, the actual professional situation facing women attempting to do feminist work in the theatre in Canada, and on the other as the internalized, hegemonic operation of gender-based oppression through women such as Clarke’s Gertrude, two Canadian Hamlet plays written and produced by men have reconceived the “real” Ophelia in quite different ways. The closer of these plays to both Hamlet and Gertrude and Ophelia is Ken Gass’s Claudius, which is more about Gertrude than Claudius in its explorations of sex and power, but which acknowledges in its title the centrality to Gertrude and to the play of what its author calls “the Claudius factor” (1995: 7).

Gass’s Gertrude is an astute political manipulator and realist. Discussing with Emilia (imported into the play from Othello) the proposed marriage between Hamlet and Ophelia, she notes that “people who are in love sleep together, but marriage is always political” (1995: 120). She controls much of the play’s action, puts Hamlet up to killing Polonius, and ends the play alive and in power, having decided in the best Elizabethan tradition (and after two marriages and a birth) that “it’ll be safer, much safer, if I remain celibate” (121). In fact, Gass’s Gertrude is not dissimilar to that of Margaret Clarke, though she has more power and fewer regrets, and her view of Ophelia echoes that of Clarke’s version of the character: “Ophelia isn’t fit to be queen. She’s weak, stupid, neurotic, not useful at all” (Gass, 1995: 121). Or, in Clarke’s somewhat softer version, “She could not have been a Queen. She’s too delicate for the strain of it” (1993: S13).

But the Ophelia we actually see in the play is no wilting flower. She exists as an independent subjectivity and exercises what control she can within a plot that isn’t of her own devising. Early in the action, although she knows that Hamlet wants to marry her for political reasons, and knows of his mistress, Genevieve, she is nevertheless seen to be capable of relatively unbridled sexual/textual/conceptual fantasies undreamed of in the imaginary of Clarke’s, or Shakespeare’s version of the character:

With him, I am chaste only in deed. My body is still, not even twitching, but my mind is racing, galloping over lips, cheeks, lips again, again. I love

13 Hamlet’s mistress, Genevieve (with whom he spends a good deal of the play in bed) echoes Gertrude’s judgement, though with a proto-feminist slant: “Did it ever occur to you Ophelia might have thoughts of her own,” she asks him, “even if she is a fucked-up, fucked-over moron?” (1995: 67).

Hamlet. I love the idea of Hamlet, the notion of Hamlet stirring my body into liquified madness. Nothing is dry any more. I’m an ocean of desires. Mad, watery desires. Wet, delirious, excruciating, blazoning, disgusting, delicious wet, wet, wet, wet, wet, wet Hamlet desires... (Gass, 1995: 52)

At this point in the action, Ophelia’s fantasies are essentially passive: her body is imagined as being still, as she is acted upon by Hamlet (which may, of course, simply reflect the male authorship of the play). But her fantasies also evince a concentration on the conceptual rather than the material — it is “the idea of Hamlet” that she loves, “the notion” of his sexual stirring — and this perhaps prepares the way for what later emerges as a fantasy fascination with the textual. It is unclear, however, whether the idea of Hamlet that she loves is the one inherited from Shakespeare — the scripted Hamlet, as it were — or from the character’s own experience in the represented world of Gass’s play — a point to which I will return.

In any case, it is clear that over the course of the action Ophelia as represented by Gass develops quite a different relationship to language, words, and text than Clarke’s version of the character evinces. The weakness of Clarke’s Ophelia is signalled in Gertrude and Ophelia by her lack of access to or power over (patriarchal) language, and the onset of her madness is marked by what is seen to be a regression into the pre-symbolic, or what Julia Kristeva calls the “semiotic” realm (see Kristeva, 1986). She says to an imagined Hamlet, “I will make words, like you, and be the victor...” but, as the stage directions indicate, she then “mouths words which have no sound. Finally giving in to the pain, sound does come from her in the form of a long howl [...].” The passage ends with her complaint that “the devil has all the words” (1993: S11). Gass’s Ophelia, by contrast, seems to have been reading (or writing) Barthes, evincing as the action proceeds a well-developed understanding of the pleasures of the text and the determined materiality (as opposed to the meanings) of language, which figures as itself pre- or a-symbolic. “I love books,” she tells Hamlet, in a scene in the middle of the play in which she insists that he “keep asking” her to marry him:

There’s something about the printed word that conjures up a spiralling imagination. Books are my passion. I eat words, I devour syllables, I suck, chop, chew into vowels with a violence that language itself is powerless to describe. I love archaic words, words that defy meaning, words whose meanings are obscure, hidden in time, suggestive only in the traces of their lettering. I feed on etymology and symbiotics. I fantasize on the power of

14 Kristeva of course also associates madness, creativity, and resistance with the semiotic realm, particularly in Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.
When Hamlet tries to interrupt and ask again, as it were, for her hand, she protests, “don’t say any more. Especially pale words like sweet and love and queen. If you must talk, use brave talk with compound nouns and a lack of adverbs.” By this point, then, Gass’s Ophelia has abandoned the passivity of her earlier sexual fantasies, and both within her fantasy life and beyond seems quite capable of seizing the first person singular.

Indeed, her actions through most of the play are anything but weak or passive. She has to leave the funeral of her father because she can’t contain her laughter, and she is capable of telling Hamlet that his mad games are “b-b-boring,” (she stutters when she’s nervous), that he’s transparent, “like a pale glass of water,” and that, “even if you ask a hundred times. I’ll kill myself before I m-marry you” (32-33). Which she does, though not in the canonical manner. This Ophelia is last seen naked in a bathtub with Hamlet, sharing vows, a ring, and a double suicide: “Till death do us part,” asks Hamlet? “Till death do make us one,” she replies, and dies (109).

The “real of it” as represented by Gass’s Ophelia, then - her ultimate response to her brother’s early plea, “get real” (30) - is quite complex. On the level of dramatic fiction she remains, I think, the sacrifice that validates (yet again) Gertrude’s “plotting” and signals, like The Haunted House Hamlet and Gertrude and Ophelia, the difficulty involved in evoking the Hamlet story without a more radical disarticulation while attempting to shift the cultural ground. But on another level of representation this Ophelia might be seen to choose and seize a world of meta-discourse that exists outside the represented fiction, a realm of the material text that in its focus on words as things rather than signs, and on eating, fucking, and other bodily functions, textually embodies a “reality” that the play’s represented world, with its ghosts, mysterious, and lies, denies. Her mad scene directly invokes her earlier sexual and textual fantasies, completes a shift from passive ingestion of words, and of lies, proceeds through plot fragments from the play, and arrives at her own textual body and subjectivity - her own “I.”

Even so, in terms of the represented world of the play and the persistent shape of the Hamlet myth itself, this Ophelia’s seizing of subjectivity has little impact on the action, and doesn’t get her very far. Gass’s play, like that of Margaret Clarke, suggests that it’s easier by far to rewrite Gertrude than Ophelia.15

In the Forward to Claudius Gass responds to the question, “why the Hamlet story?” by referring to Shakespeare’s own borrowings: “it wasn’t original with Shakespeare, and anyway, this has nothing (almost) to do with Shakespeare. But, like many great legends, it rests firmly in our consciousness and allows me, the writer, to tinker around, to do my mischief with a minimum of explanation” (1995: 7). Michael O’Brien, in Mad Boy Chronicle, goes one step further than Gass, and perhaps does more mischief. Drawing on the so-called “bad quarto” and on the Gesta Danorum of Saxo Grammaticus, a primary source for the Hamlet legend, he shifts the historical ground to that of Shakespeare’s own source material, locates the action at the historical moment of Christian contact with the Viking world represented in Saxo, and uses the opportunity to deal with the currently topical issues in North America of Christianity, hypocrisy, and power.16

15 Other Canadian considerations of Gertrude, in which Ophelia does not figure very prominently, include Carole Corbeil’s novel, In the Wings, from which my first epigraph is taken, and G. B. Shand’s article “Realizing Gertrude: The Suicide Option.”
16 In addition to the play’s roots in the Hamlet story, its conclusion seems to echo another early modern revenge play, Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta, in its representation of opportunistic Christian hypocrisy: king Fengo, newly “converted” to Christianity for political reasons, responds to the vicious murder of the Mad Boy, impaled by a monk on a wooden cross, with “Well done, my Christian soldiers” (1995: 149).
O'Brien's play is the most radical deconstruction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* of the three plays under consideration, deconstruction seen as a re-source-ing of the play—a returning to the play's sources in search of another kind of anarchic, multiple, and textually unstable author-ity. In a sense, O'Brien begins his work having come to the point at which Ann-Marie MacDonald's Constance arrives toward the end of *Good-night Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (discussed in Chapter Six, below), when in her search for the original manuscript and author of Shakespeare's plays she comes to understand that “it's not the man you seek, [but] the Manuscript” (that is, ‘the man you script’), yourself, as reader and therefore author of the plays' meanings (1990a: 73). As O'Brien describes his writing process, he began with “scissors and glue” and “a pile of mangled scripts” that included the “Bad Quarto” of *Hamlet* and the *Gesta Danorum* and set about “trying to debase the greatest play of all time.” “Eventually I began tossing in a line or two of my own. Soon more lines appeared, the setting and scenes began to change, and so too did the names of all the characters” (1995: 8). The result was a “Viking Hamlet Saga” set in a mythical “Helsingor” and featuring (in addition to a disreputable pair of Christian Brothers, two sweet, he asks, to which she replies, “Bugger your dog” [95]); killing her abusive father and brandishing his severed head at the Court; and urging Horvendal (both in her own voice and that of his father's ghost) to take “VENGEANCE” (123). She is finally murdered in action by her own brother, who mistakes her for “the Mad Boy” after she has, in the interests of getting something accomplished, exchanged clothes with the weak-willed Horvendal/Hamlet. (The latter, in a role and gender reversal from *Hamlet*, attempts to drown himself in a hole in the ice while roaming the landscape dressed in Lilja's clothes, but he characteristically botches the job.) Even after she is dead, however, this Lilja/Ophelia remains a presence—she is heard singing to mark the murder of Gertrude—and even seems to retain agency: she appears to lop off her father's head than quietly drown in a river,” as reviewer Martin Morrow noted (1995: 153). She is first seen as the object of Fengo's lust and public abuse in a courting scene where she slaps the king across the face in the presence of her father and calls him “a fukkin animal” (1995: 18). The “advice scene” with Ragnar/Laertes and Matthius/Polonius sees her making an obscene gesture at both of them, and ends with an exchange that sets the gendered tone interrogated by the play:

MATTHIUS. I know it's hard to be the girl, my dear. I know it's hard, me lovin him more than you. But ye gots to accept yer lot in life. It's the god's will.

LILJA. Aye, I do accept it. At least I'm not a horse.

MATTHIUS. That's the spirit. That's the feminine spirit. Oh Lilja, Lilja, me sweet sweet pride and joy. A fine woman yer turnin out to be.

LILJA. You too, father. (33)

These scenes establish the background for her converting to Christianity-as-resistance (though Christ is established by Lilja as “the god of being... Crucified! Crucified! I think – I'd like to be Crucified!” [45-6]); getting stigmata and wearing a crown of thorns—appropriating for herself the role of Christ; converting Horvendal/Hamlet to her brand of Christianity, in the course of which conversion—a revision of the eavesdropping scene—he bites off her ear; considering suicide (though she is advised by her father that “suicide's for men... It's an honourable death” [75]); rejecting an arranged political marriage with Fengo (“Say somethin sweet to old Fengo. Say somethin all girlie and sweet,” he asks, to which she replies, “Bugger your dog” [95]); killing her abusive father and brandishing his severed head at the Court; and urging Horvendal (both in her own voice and that of his father's ghost) to take VENGEANCE (123). She is finally murdered in action by her own brother, who mistakes her for “the Mad Boy” after she has, in the interests of getting something accomplished, exchanged clothes with the weak-willed Horvendal/Hamlet. (The latter, in a role and gender reversal from *Hamlet*, attempts to drown himself in a hole in the ice while roaming the landscape dressed in Lilja's clothes, but he characteristically botches the job.) Even after she is dead, however, this Lilja/Ophelia remains a presence—she is heard singing to mark the murder of Gertrude—and even seems to retain agency: she appears to effect her own revenge, for example, when Horvendal emerges from her coffin and shroud, imbued with her spirit, to impale his brother Ragnar/Laertes on “Skull-Byter,” Ragnar's own petard, as it were.18 O'Brien's Lilja, then, may be the most consistently and disruptively revisionist of the Canadian Ophelias under consideration here, resisting the romantic comforts of victimization or virgin martyrdom, the pleasures of guilty complicity, and the early feminist comforts of resistant "madness," in favor of an active seizing of agency and assertion of female subjectivity, in the context of however masculinist a script (or

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17 The names come from a variety of sources, and some seem to be pure invention. "Fengo" and "Horvendal" are from Saxo, though the latter is an adaptation of what is there the name of Hamlet's ("Amleth"')s father. "Gerutha" also derives from Saxo.

18 This moment might be seen as a reversal of the appropriation of Ophelia within a male actor's and character's body in Lepage's *Elkins", described above, in that here the intellectual male body of Horvendal is appropriated and transformed by Lilja's active female spirit.
scripts). But Lilja nevertheless finally passes into (mis)representation in *Mad Boy Chronicle* even as Ophelia has done in critical discourse, through a eulogy delivered by the murderous and hypocritical Fengo before her funeral pyre:

Hold off your torches just a little while;  
Gots to allow for any tardie guests.  
Let's remember this girl, the example she set.  
A good and gentle angel, inspirin to us all [...]  
At times like this, we often do reflect,  
Does life, does death, harbour any hope?  
Or is we haccidents, tossd upon this earth,  
Doomed to fight and hack each others bones?  
I tell ye verily, look upon this girl,  
And try to say to mee, there's no hope for this world. (145)

The eulogy ends with a breezy and delightfully undercutting couplet that, in a manner that I would argue is characteristic of drama, theatre, and artistic representation in general in Canada, is rich with the type of irony that invites a critical revisiting of the play’s action, and perhaps also of critical considerations of Ophelia and her sisters:

All a man can say is – God is Love;  
Let’s torch this child and praise the Lord above. (146)

The cultural work performed by O’Brien’s representation of Ophelia might be seen as emerging from the contrast that is made visible (and risible) between this speech and its masculinist appropriation of representation — its seizing of control of the ways in which women pass into representation — and the wildly vibrant character we have examined in the course of the action. The speech is part of a pattern in the play that echoes a pattern in critical discourse about Shakespeare’s women, in which men insist on the fragility, sweetness, or appropriate femininity of “their” women in spite of all evidence or protestation to the contrary.  

In his Playwright’s Foreword to *Mad Boy Chronicle* Michael O’Brien suggests, without expanding on the idea, that “only in Canada could such a play get writ” (9). I don’t know if this is true; other cultures have produced irreverent and culturally productive revisionings of canonical texts. But it is true that Shakespeare has played a very particular and crucial cultural role in a postcolonial Canada for whom British cultural imperialism, as represented by institutions such as Ontario’s Stratford Festival, remains alive and well. It is true, too, that intertextual, parodic, and ironic revisionings of canonical, and particularly Shakespearean texts, proliferate in a country known for its sophisticated production of incisive and politically satiric work that ranges from television’s “Codco,” “Kids in the Hall,” and “This Hour Has Twenty-Two Minutes” to the early days and greatest successes of Second City — not to mention scholarly workers in the field of parody, irony, and intertextuality such as, most notably, Linda Hutcheon.  

Parody, in Hutcheon’s definition as “repetition with a critical difference” (1985: 6; if also in Canada a respectful if double-edged critical deference in the case of Shakespeare), may itself be seen to be characteristically, if schizophrenically Canadian, as Hutcheon suggests in *Splitting Images*, her book on contemporary Canadian ironies. Hutcheon indicates that ironic intertextuality is a mode peculiarly amenable to Canadian sensibilities, an argument made in a different but compatible mode by E.D. Blodgett when he argues that “our history […] is a matter of ambiguous and multiple positionings between the desires of culture, the subject, and discourse that finish the text with its inevitable ephemeralism” (1993: 16).

It seems in any case to be true that Canada, with its extraordinarily complex postcolonial matrix as a settler/invader colony founded on displacements, is well positioned to engage in intertextual ironies, parodic “tributes,” and complex revisionings.  

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19 In addition to Matthius’s speech to Lilja, quoted above, and Fengo’s eulogy, such passages in the play include the following exchange between Fengo and Gertrude:

FENGO. Oh straind Gerutha, paragon of womanhood.  
What a rack this plight of yours must be!  
Faithful wife, loving mother, honourable, brave;  
Sometimes woman, I think ye too good for this world.  
GERUTHA. No I ain’t.

FENGO. Course you is! (60)


21 See also “Canadians Can’t Spell; or, the Virtues of Indeterminacy,” in Richard Paul Knowles, “Representing Canada: Teaching Canadian Studies in the United States.”

22 As I have indicated in the Introduction to this volume, Canada may be seen to have been founded on displacements of First Nations peoples by European settlers, of course, but also by settlers who were themselves displaced in the Highland clearances, the “potato famine,” the expulsion or escape of United Empire Loyalists during the American revolution, the expulsion and return of the Acadians, and more recently in various immigrations from a wide variety of countries suffering from economic or political repression. Colonial and postcolonial relationships exist...
Canadian postcolonial and feminist revisionings of Shakespeare, including those considered in this survey, for all of these reasons and more, often have at once a harder edge and a more pronounced and politicized seriousness than do many attempts to “poke fun at the Bard” that emerge from British or American sources, or that are regularly performed “in good fun” at venues such as the Edinburgh Festival. Shakespeare, it seems, has come to serve Canadians in complex ways as a site for the serious negotiation of social and cultural identities, gendered and otherwise.

Showalter’s history of Ophelia in representation concludes that “there is no ‘true’ Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must unambiguously speak, but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts” (1985: 92). What this survey of Canadian Ophelias may do, beyond asserting that some of her parts reside in Canada and providing another plane face of the cube, is to locate some problematically gendered revisionings of Shakespeare within a postcolonial settler-colony culture founded in the 19th century, where the contemporary push against Shakespeare as symbol of high-cultural, imperialist oppression registers directly against the continuing pull of Shakespeare as authority and source. It is not surprising, if it is also somewhat discouraging, that Ophelia, a minor character in Hamlet, plays a central and determinate role in none of the representations under consideration here, and this, again, may mark the difficulty and complexity of attempting to write revisionist cultures and do politically productive cultural work by evoking, however critically or irreverently, canonical texts. But perhaps the cumulative effect of such revisionings is to remind us, sometimes forcefully, that, however “niiiiice” the dominant representation of Ophelia-as-woman-as-victim may be, like other representations, “that’s a picture, you dimwit!” “You can’t... BE... a picture, okay?

Within Canada between the two “founding cultures” themselves, as the English, historically and currently, play a colonizing role in relation to the French, and both these groups act as colonizers in relation to First Nations peoples within Canada and Quebec as they do in relation to various “ethnic” groups. In addition, of course, Canada has continued to experience culturally colonial relationships to France, England, and other “homeland” cultures, and to function as an economic and political colony of the United States.