Transcending Tragedy: The Power of the Green World in Renaissance Drama

Sheridan Lynn Steelman

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/698

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters' Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
TRANSCENDING TRAGEDY:
THE POWER OF THE GREEN WORLD IN RENAISSANCE DRAMA

Sheridan Lynn Steelman

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
at
Grand Valley State University
2009
Transcending Tragedy:  
The Power of the Green World in Renaissance Drama  

Abstract  

Hospitals in the twenty-first century are using healing gardens to help patients heal their minds, bodies, and souls by offering views of lush flora from their rooms and calming pathways for their walks. Recent studies have shown that patients who are able to witness nature’s beauty request less pain medication and report shorter stays. Today’s use of gardens as part of a total wellness package may have found its roots in the work of John Gerard (1597) who was the first to study and catalogue over 300 varieties of plants and herbs, many of which had common medicinal uses. Gerard’s findings, including the sleep-induced power of the mandrake root and the sexual significance of Orchis masculata, found their way into early modern playwrights’ works, such as William Shakespeare, whose plays include more than 200 references to an enormous variety of plants and flowers.

The natural, or “green world,” as described by Northrop Frye is a place of magic and often used in Renaissance comedies as a place where characters can escape society’s trappings, where problems are magically solved and lives are put to rights. Surprisingly, early modern tragedy also calls upon the power of the green world, using garden- lovely language to create a space where women in particular go to mourn. Isabella in The Spanish Tragedy (1587) is one such character who, having lost her only son in a brutal murder, returns to the place of the crime, her enclosed family garden. In a haunting soliloquy Isabella journeys through the five stages of grief, ending in an acceptance of her son’s death and her own impending doom. Obviously, the beautiful flowers and trees do not provide a cure; but Isabella, through the destruction of the innocent flora that witnessed the heinous crime, is transformed. She makes the decision to end her life and join her son, rather than live a life immobilized with fear and resentment.

Shakespeare’s Ophelia in Hamlet (1601) is another female character in mourning, crazed about her dead father, Polonius, as well as for Hamlet who once offered her tenders of love but now seems a stranger to her. She must somehow deal with the fact that he killed her father, and she does this by visiting the garden to pick herbs and wildflowers. Before she returns to the castle, 120 lines are delivered on stage, giving Ophelia time to transcend her own misfortune. The garden’s beauty may not have offered her a solution, but it does provide the only place where this young woman feels safe – within the confines of her own mind.

Both Isabella and Ophelia die but not before a considerable amount of time within their own garden walls, seeking ways to cope with the horrific tragedies in their lives. Kyd and Shakespeare planted the seeds that the modern world is learning to nurture: the green world can be the balm for life’s tragic events. Like these Renaissance tragic heroines, we may be seeking the “fair quiet” that Andrew Marvell longs for in his poem “The Garden.” These tragedies do end in death but not before the green world offers us some comforting shade.
Transcending Tragedy:
The Power of the Green World in Renaissance Drama

The Whitman Walker Clinic in Virginia designed a labyrinth in their healing garden where patients may walk their own spiritual pilgrimage. The suffering souls of those who seek sensory solace through reflection and meditation are refreshed and perhaps even renewed. Basing her work on theories of botanical medicine and the healing power of plants, which have been known and implemented for centuries, Paula Steers Brown, free-lance author and lecturer on flowers and herbs, discovered that patients who have views of nature while convalescing have “shorter post-operative stays, [take] less pain medication, and report fewer minor complications” (70). Other medical facilities, such as Sentara Careplex, are following suit by teaming with expert landscape artists from Busch Gardens to create courtyards lush with plantings and waterfalls, creating a peaceful environment where mobile patients may focus on the senses reawakened by the natural world. Patients and their families walk bricked pathways, stopping now and then to rest on benches or gaze on colors that calm and rejuvenate. For immobile patients, more hospitals are looking to green pharmacology and designing rooms with large windows facing gardens through which patients can, at the very least, witness nature’s gifts. Moreover, patients and their healthier visitors are able to study diagrams of plant parts and the corresponding body sections purported to benefit from these natural curative powers.

John R. Ebers, an environmental specialist who was one of the first in the nation to design a hospital green roof, confirms not only the environmental value to the hospital,
but also the medicinal value to the patients. At the new Metropolitan Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Ebers reports, “eighty percent of the patient rooms face the green roof, facilitating happier patients and therefore shorter stays.” Both indoor and outdoor gardens, including waterfalls and gurgling streams of water, known to be symbolic of rebirth on many levels, have since been added for the benefit of staff, patients, and families. Landscape architects have also included plants, such as lamb’s wool, mint, and Michigan-native greens that require a minimum of chemicals, thus appealing to the senses without risk to the patient. Other local hospitals are following Metropolitan’s lead: Grand Rapids’ St. Mary’s Hospital has an indoor terrarium on the fourth floor, and Spectrum Hospitals now have incorporated gardens as additional support to a total wellness package.

New hospital designs, such as Metropolitan, may have been basing their architecture on Roger Ulrich’s research at a suburban Pennsylvania hospital between 1972 and 1981. Recovery records of forty-six patients after a typical cholecystectomy (gall bladder surgery) were studied. Half of the patients were placed in rooms facing a brick wall, the side of an adjacent building in the hospital complex. The other patients faced a window overlooking blooming deciduous trees. Other than what was on the other side of the window, other factors remained the same: the room’s décor, including the paint, the nurses on duty, the surgeon, and the patient’s schedule. What Ulrich found caused other hospitals to seriously consider the implications: “in comparison with the wall-view group, the patients with the tree view had shorter postoperative hospital stays, had fewer negative evaluative comments from nurses, took fewer moderate and strong analgesic doses, and had slightly lower scores for minor postsurgical complications.”
Grand Rapids native John Ebers noted that Metropolitan was aware of Ulrich's work and that Metropolitan's architectural firm, Bazzani Associates, also took into consideration a follow-up study where researchers found that even pictures of trees, rather than brick buildings, provided considerable improvement in patient recovery. What studies have shown us is that nature's effects include more than just beauty. Ulrich's work now provides a roadmap to healing: “That research evidence

![Diagram of hospital plan](http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/reprint/224/4647/420.pdf)

Pennsylvania, 1984] was used to justify the design to provide views of gardens and nature and access to the outdoors for patients, families, and staff” (qtd. in Zamosky 1).

Ulrich is not the first, however, to devote his life's work to a study of the healing power of plants. Surgeon and botanist John Gerard began his study of plants when he moved to London sometime in the mid-sixteenth century. Before being appointed by Lord Burghley [William Cecil, the first Prime Minister to Queen Elizabeth I] to supervise his gardens in 1577, Gerard worked as a ship's surgeon, seeking unique varieties from

---

1 The diagram shows the trees versus wall window views of patients. Data were also collected for patients assigned to third-floor rooms. One room on each floor was excluded because portions of both the trees and wall were visible from the windows. Architectural dimensions are not precisely to scale.
“Denmarke, Swevia, Poland, Livinia and Moscow in Russia, from where he collected rare and exotic plants and seeds to enrich his own fascination with plants and to grow in his own garden. He later makes mention of these collecting excursions in his famous Herbal (Knowles), the first catalogue of home-grown plants. Henbane, cowslips, mint, wormwood, and valerian are only a few of the herbs and plants discussed in The Herbal, or General Historie of Plants (1597). Extremely popular, the book includes Gerard’s catalogue of more than 300 varieties of herbs and flowers. Unfortunately, due to his haste for publication, Gerard’s text had many errors, which were corrected by Thomas Johnson in an enlarged second edition published in 1633, retaining a major portion of the original and now including 2850 entries.² Their work was not, however, limited to scientific categories of plants; both Gerard and Johnson included the medicinal qualities of specific roots, stems, leaves, and flowers, thus enriching the lives of anyone who could read a book, anyone who could listen to a story, or anyone who could watch a play.

Early modern playwrights, obviously cognizant of the green world’s power to heal, infused Renaissance herbal lore into their work. Shakespeare, who referred to over 200 plants in his plays, revealed more than a casual, rural interest in flora. He refers

---
² For an updated version of Gerard’s Herbal, author Holly Ollivander –Thomas’ 2008 The Herbal or Generall Historie of Plantes is due for publication in December 2008.
generally to horticulture but more specifically to the medicinal uses of plants and even
grafting, a new scientific endeavor in the early seventeenth century.

In *Othello*, for example, Iago soliloquizes about the plant-induced
sleep of the poppy seed and the mandrake root: “Not Poppy or
Mandragora, / Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world, / Shall ever
medicine thee to that sweet sleep / Which thou ownedst yesterday”

Fig. 3. “Mandrake” (Atropa mandragora)

This knowledge may have been owed to common lore of Renaissance
England, but Shakespeare would no doubt have had access to Gerard’s quashing of the
mandrake root, or Satan’s apple, and its common applications: “‘There have been,’ he
says, ‘many ridiculous tales brought up of this plant, whether of old wives or runnega
surgeons or phisick mongers, I know not, all which dreames and old wives tales you shall
from henceforth cast out of your bookes of memorie’” (qtd. in Grieve). Thirty years
before *Othello* was published in 1603-04, the mandrake root had just been cultivated in
southern and central Europe, specifically along the Mediterranean coast. We know that
Shakespeare read widely, incorporating other authors’ ideas into his own work; we can
assume, therefore, that Shakespeare was aware of the sleep-inducing powers of this root
and may even have read Gerard’s discount. Whatever the case, Shakespeare probably did
not rely solely on familiar knowledge of the day. Indeed, he must have been not only a
gatherer of ideas, but also a storehouse of plant lore, particularly those stories pinpointing
the effects of the natural world on human behavior.

Shakespeare was not, however, the only Renaissance author who made use of
plants and their attributes in his plays. Robert Palter’s extensive study of fruit in literary
works often refers to unripened fruit, except for the banana, “to have negative connotations” (270). Dutch poet Constantijn Huygens, for example, refers to the greenness of some unnamed fruit in his 1634 sonnet entitled “On the Death of Tesselschade’s Eldest Daughter, and on Her Husband Thereafter Bleeding to Death.” He describes green (unripened) fruit as “Rotted with smallpox; God has plucked it up / To raise its best part to the immortal throng” (lines 3-4). Even though we do not know the exact type of fruit to which Huygens refers, we do know that the ripeness of apricots was particularly problematic as indicated by the etymology of the name. The seventeenth century fruit was called “apricock,” derived from the Latin term *praecox*, meaning early ripening. Apricots, in general, were “a highly prized fruit in the seventeenth century” (Palter 272), confirmed perhaps by Titania’s inclusion of them, along with dewberries, grapes, figs, and mulberries, in the fruity treats she fed to Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (3.1.148-150).

John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) employs apricots as a pregnancy test, an agent of discovery, where villain Bosola assumes the Duchess’ gluttonous craving to be the symptom of the pregnancy she is obviously hiding: “So, so, there’s no question but her tetchiness [irritability] and most vulturous eating of the apricots are apparent signs of breeding” (2.2.163-164). The Duchess, a widow, has secretly married her steward, Antonio, even though she has been warned by her two controlling brothers to remain a widow. Bosola, who brings her apricots as a gift, suspects the Duchess is pregnant and uses the apricot “test” to confirm his suspicions. The apricot scene as well as Webster’s frequent use of other fruit, particularly in the first two acts, sets the mood, simply because of connotations: plum trees (1.1); apricots, pippins (apples), damsons
(plums), and crab apples (2.1); lemons (2.2); and orange trees (2.3). Bosola, the villain, mentions all but one of these fruit in the first two acts of the play: he compares the Duchess' brothers to plum trees, he compares women's lust to orange trees, and he implies the grafting of pippins, damsons, and crab apples. The lemon is mentioned only by the Duchess, but it is the apricot, in particular, that begins to turn the wheels of angry destruction and to initiate her tragic suffering (Palter 275). The Renaissance audience would have predicted the Duchess' pregnancy simply by her gluttonous reaction to Bosola's proffered gift. Clearly, the association between the green world and the human world is becoming more than coincidental. Renaissance authors were using plants to tell stories and relying on plant lore to enrich, inform, and amuse.

Sir Thomas More's witty and subversive *Utopia* (1516), written while on a diplomatic mission during the reign of King Henry VIII, also incorporates natural images, words that offset a would-be sterile mindset on a utopian island. He refers to "a crop of learning" (522), a flower of novelty" (523), and a "fresh look" (my emphasis, 523) amid cogent descriptions of Utopian buildings, cities, and citizens. Through More's language of lush green gardens and more specifically, his references to country life, he may be juxtaposing the ideas of satire and truth. For example, in More's utopian society meals are structured so that the aged sit at both the head table and the other long tables for the purpose of allowing the young to openly honor and defer to their wisdom. Readers might initially believe that the aged are simply monopolizing the dinner conversations to "draw out" the younger folk. Later, we realize that the aged are probably no more than a surveillance team, strategically placed to monitor behavior. More explains this as a typical mealtime in the city, "but in the country, where they are farther removed from
neighbors, they all eat in their own homes” (my emphasis, 556). Country folk never lack 
for food; families eat around one table, in private, without a syphogrant’s surveillance or 
the probability of a stern moral talk beforehand. If we focus on the pastoral image of the 
country house, eliminating or at the very least dismissing More’s details of mealtime in 
the city, we may come to the heart of his intent: family is what matters, and eating in the 
privacy of one’s own home at liberty to speak freely is what More prefers. Couched 
amid the satire are references to the country setting and pastoral images, pointing to 
More’s true intent. More also makes subtle use of garden language. In a detailed 
description of Utopian homes, Raphael Hythloday, the narrator, uses a charming tone to 
describe the enclosed gardens attached to each house. Even though residents have only 
one hour daily in these luscious and elegant gardens to prune, play, and relax, they clearly 
love their gardens, “partly because they delight in it, and also because of the competition 
between different streets” (549). What is left unsaid, however, is that all the toil and time 
invested in these “immaculate” gardens will eventually be tilled when the next 
homeowner moves in after ten years. Utopians, of course, are expected to move to 
another abode because they do not actually possess any private property. In short, the 
gardens are not their own. More contrasts this idea of the enclosed garden with the 
restful, gentle garden in Book One where the three gentlemen, Giles, More and 
Hythloday, begin their discussion of Utopia: “There in the garden we [sit] down on a 
bench covered with turf to talk together” (526). More’s insistence on images of spring 
and new growth, such as “young sprout” and “fine crop of learning” (my emphasis, 522), 
contrasts with the lack of privacy in Utopia. Sir Thomas More’s use of garden language
and natural images helps us to differentiate between his real feelings about the “perfect”
society and those he wishes to couch in satire.

The perfect society More addresses in Utopia actually emulates the natural world,
or the “green” world that Northrop Frye describes in A Natural Perspective: The
Development of Shakespeare Comedy and Romance as “a symbol of natural society, the
word natural here referring to the original human society” (142). Frye is, of course,
referring to man’s original domain as a golden world he is trying to regain. We may
think of the green world as unnatural if we think of special powers and miraculous
happenings associated with dreams, magic, and spirits. But Frye is referring to the
attributes of nature that might seem “miraculous and irresistible” (142), but in fact are
more about what we desire and less about what we expect. In this world anything is
possible. Thus, we see Hermia and Lysander in A Midsummer Night’s Dream flee the
confines of a restrictive society of men and enter a green world of forest fairies, spells,
and magic where sometimes nothing makes sense but in the end, mishaps are untangled,
and all is right with the world.

Donna Armistead in “Shakespeare and the Green World: Images of Flight and
Fancy” notes that gardens often “become both a setting and a metaphor for unbridled
sensual pleasure” (53), drawing a parallel between the plant world and sexuality and,
ultimately, fertility. In comedies, such as MND, the power of the pansy (love-in-idleness,
2.1.168) is perceived as real; one drop of this flower’s juice in Titania’s eyes provides
both comedy and solution. Both Frye and Armistead are referring to dramatic comedies
in their discussions of the green world; however, tragic characters may also be drawn to
the green world for solutions, but these solutions rarely allow for re-entry into society and
happy endings. Rather than seeking solutions like their comedic-heroine counterparts, tragically heroines, may be drawn to plants to experience a pleasurable, captivating sense of well-being associated with the mixture of aromas, such as the sweet scents of parsley, Lilly-of-the-Valley, or lavender. Logically, if the senses are soothed by aroma and color, plants and herbs naturally beckon to them when they suffer, when they cry, when they mourn. We obviously cannot bring a loved one back to life with flowers, nor can we instantly mend a broken heart by the profound aroma of a hyacinth. What then draws a pitiful soul to the green world when solutions are not within reach? The answer lies within our understanding of mourning.

Sigmund Freud interprets the act of mourning as "the reaction to the loss of a loved person" (164), pointing to the pain or grief associated with the loss as the identifiable signifier. Female characters, more than their male counterparts, may display their mournful reactions more openly, whether or not the loss is permanent, such as the death of a significant person. Unlike melancholia, a more grievous state that, according to Freud, includes a lack of self-esteem (165), mourning is an active response. This response can be lasting but can also abate and then strengthen in intensity, according to the mourner's mounting or receding emotions. In the case of female characters in Renaissance tragedy, the definition need not be restricted to outside losses but may include an inner loss: the loss of self, which for females will probably include issues of fertility, the part most closely related to being female. If mourning is an overt reaction to a loss, and if loss includes the loss of self, then mourning most certainly can be an overt reaction to the loss of the fertile self in the case of tragic heroines. Fertility does not necessarily refer to procreation but to the ability to feel—hurt, anger, love—and therefore
results in movement or change. When we unable to feel, we are in stasis, a state in which some tragic heroines find themselves when all hope is lost. They are unable to react appropriately to the environment upon which they have come to depend and are therefore in a state of stasis where they do not feel at all. The green world, a sensual offering of hope, may be their only answer. The green world of dramatic comedies that Frye and Armistead describe may also be a world in which tragic heroines find a special type of healing, one where senses are opened and feeling is restored.

According to Amy Tigner's article entitled "The Winter's Tale: Gardens and the Marvels of Transformation," the Renaissance garden is often coded as the female body, and fertility is associated with both plants and females: "In The Winter's Tale the garden represents bodies of the Queen and her daughter" (115). The medieval garden, hortus conclusus, was enclosed by a wall, much like the gardens More describes in Utopia. Filled with fruited trees, blooming flowers, and aromatic herbs, the garden provided secluded areas where lovers could meet. Later, the Renaissance Italian gardens, giardino segreto, became an enclosed, private garden, which, simply by its design, lent itself to illicit affairs. The private gardens, however, were often attached to the homes of the upper class - not restricted to royalty. According to A.G. Morton's History of Botanical Science, "the private garden became the fashion and pride of Renaissance princes and wealthy families" (151). This may be why gardens became a logical setting within Renaissance plays and why the audience would have made the connection between garden scenes and sexuality, even without much scenery to set the stage. Gardens provided a ripe setting for sexual innuendo and therefore fertility. Tigner explores this idea more fully when she describes "the garden as a place of renewal" (119), a place
where females (in the case of Hermione and Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*) are able to be transformed or born again. The character Hermione symbolizes the garden itself, “the garden in which her husband falls from innocence” (119); later in the play (5.3.125-135) she is “magically” transformed from death to life before her husband’s eyes. Perdita, the daughter of the King and Queen, is the impetus for the transformation of others. At the Sheepshearing Feast she shares her basket of flowers with others with the hope that her floral friends will be of comfort to others: “Now my fair’st friend, / I would I had some flowers o’th’spring, that might / Become your time of day” (4.4.134-136). Thus the Elizabethan garden, closely associated with the female body, becomes a place where transformation takes place. In essence, the body *is* the garden, such as in the case of Hermione, and vice versa. From the moment of conception, growth, which includes movement and change, is what signifies viability of the fertilized seed. A loss of movement implies stagnation, stasis, or the catastrophic failure to grow. Without movement, we die, not only physically, but also spiritually and emotionally.

Modernist writer E.E. Cummings refers to this continuous movement as the IS: “We are human beings; for whom birth is a supremely welcome mystery, the mystery of growing: the mystery which happens only and whenever we are faithful to ourselves” (65). Cummings is referring specifically to feeling. He believes that deep, emotional feeling is synonymous with continuous movement or rebirth. Thus, without movement, we are not truly all that a human is meant to be: continuously moving, changing, and feeling. In drama mourning women who are drawn to plants are specifically seeking what was lost during a tragic loss: movement or rebirth. The healing power of plants provides the transformative power that restores dynamic movement or feeling to the stagnant soul,
similar to the effect that today’s healing gardens have on hospital patients. Often a severely weakened body reveals a sick soul, one that has, over time, lost its will to live, to feel, to move. Mourning becomes the overt, physical reaction to the sick soul, and returning to the green world is how movement and feeling can be renewed. Renaissance authors may have been the first architects of healing gardens by placing their tragic heroines in the middle of the green world. Their characters’ destinies may have included death but not before their own souls were transformed.

Isabella
Horatio’s mother, Isabella, in The Spanish Tragedy (1587) is a woman who by Act II has changed to a woman in mourning. Although Thomas Kyd does not provide direct evidence in his text that Isabella was happy with her life before the horrific tragedy occurred, we can infer from the play’s exposition that she was indeed the proud mother of Horatio who just returned from war. We know, for example, that according to General Castille in Act I, scene 2, Horatio had earlier challenged Balthasar to a duel and “straight the Prince [Balthasar] was beaten from his horse / And forced to yield him prisoner to his foe” (79-80). This defeat, noted most admiringly by the king, is proudly discerned by Hieronimo, Horatio’s father: “He never pleased his father’s eyes till now / Nor filled my heart with over-cloying joys” (119-120). No doubt Horatio’s brave warring must have filled his family’s home with pride for their only son; therefore, we must assume that Isabella, the mother of Horatio, her healthy, young soldier recently returned from war, is overjoyed. We can also assume Horatio’s mother to be a woman fully in charge of her own feelings, as evidenced by her first words upon entering the stage, which imply that
she is concerned about the absence of her husband: “My husband’s absence makes my heart to throb. — Hieronimo!” (2.4.96-97). Obviously, Horatio’s absence does not concern his mother; she no doubt assumes her heroic son is in no apparent danger on his home soil. But she is concerned about the noise in the garden below and the emptiness in her bed. We can assume from having been awakened from sleeping with her husband and from her immediate reaction upon seeing her dead son — “O gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears” (2.4.105) — that her state has suddenly altered. The heinous murder of her son forces an immediate and frenzied burst of mournful sobbing. Interestingly, our first introduction to this character is when she is in transition. Immediately we see a declining Isabella as she grapples with the sudden knowledge that her only, beloved son, Horatio, has been needlessly stabbed and hung on their fruit tree in the dark of night. Not only is the sight of her son shocking, but the realization that her husband seems unable to cope is incomprehensible. She asks, “Then is he gone? And is my son gone too?” (2.4.102). The pronoun he might be referring to the whereabouts of the murderer, but depending on her nonverbal cues, she could also be referring to the whereabouts of her husband’s mind. Considering the culture and the roles of men and women during the Renaissance Period, Hieronimo’s and Isabella’s reactions seem reversed. Hieronimo woefully refers to his son as a “lovely rose” (108), whereas Isabella, in an outpouring of first wailing, and then vengeance, directly focuses her attention on the alleged murderers: “For outrage fits our cursèd wretchedness” (106). Implied in her outrage, however, is the confidence that this heinous crime will be exposed, and that justice will prevail. Even so, readers may wonder how a parent comes to grips with the death of a child. Isabella eventually finds her grief satiated at the site of her son’s murder, the beautiful garden
where we see her, two acts later, desecrate the verdant foliage with a knife: chopping, pulling, and screaming for justice.

Morton’s research about the novelty of the upper class, enclosed garden explains why Hieronimo’s and Isabella’s arbour in *The Spanish Tragedy* would have intrigued audiences, especially the juxtaposed images of the two lovers, Bel-Imperia and Horatio, alone in such an intimate setting and of the hanging corpse, bleeding profusely on the plants below. The status of Hieronimo’s family is also implied: “At the time of *The Spanish Tragedy*, then, the pleasure garden figure[s] as a relatively recent marker of aristocratic status in England, a recreational space for the well-to-do” (Crosbie 12). Why, then, would Isabella ruin the treasured “Eden” that she and her husband reserved for intimate settings, a place where two young people could luxuriate in the verdant beauty of the walkways, the flora, and the quiet. Paradoxically, the pride she must have had in her garden, contrasts sharply with her need to destroy the life therein. It is here, two acts later, that Isabella, knife in hand, begins her tirade against nature.

With Horatio’s sudden death in Act II, Isabella suffers a mother’s greatest loss, the death of a child. Initially, she verbalizes her shock in four brief responses, although neither she nor Hieronimo seems to be responding to the other but to some personal inner voice. Isabella is most concerned about confirmation - she asks if the murderers are fled, even though she knows they have, and she asks if her son is “gone,” even though she knows he is dead. Next, she confirms Horatio’s death by closing his eyes and finally confirms that justice will prevail, simply by waiting for Time to take care of the wrongdoing: “The heavens are just; murder cannot be hid. / Time is the author both of truth and right, / And time will bring this treachery to light” (2.4.118-120). Each
successive response becomes more passive, indicating that the shock of her loss is paralyzing her will to act. When Isabella asks, “O where’s the author of this endless woe?” (2.4. 101), she is squarely facing the potentially hazardous fact that Horatio’s outrageous murder will be the beginning of the end for her. Having verbalized her fears, Isabella now still has choices, however limited. Two acts later she is drawn to her garden, the place now associated with the horror of her son’s death but nonetheless a place where she may be able to reclaim her “self.” Isabella begins a process of moving from stasis to movement or feeling by returning to the garden. It is here, through the healing power of plants, where she can be alive again, whether or not these feelings are angry; Isabella’s return allows for the restoration of a feeling or moving state, anything to ward off stasis. We know that offstage Isabella takes time to visit her garden before we see her again. One act and three scenes later she and her maid enter the stage; Isabella has found herbs, which may have medicinal qualities: “So that you say this herb will purge [cure] the eye, / and this the head? / Ah, but none of them will purge the heart. / No, there’s no medicine left for my disease, / Nor any physic to recure the dead” (3.8.1-5). The stage directions indicate that after these five lines, she runs lunatic, even while the maid is still talking with her. Apparently, Isabella’s state is fraught more with anger than weeping because her maid attempts to calm her: “Good madam, affright not thus yourself / With outrage for your son Horatio” (7-8). We can assume that, having considered the restorative value of the herbs in question, she decides they might only be useful for specific physical ailments. But something clearly happened in the garden. While walking in the garden, a healing began to take shape, a transformation from paralysis to feeling: “My soul hath silver wings, / That mounts me up unto the highest
heavens” (15-16). Her re-awakened spirit imagines Horatio “Dancing about his newly healèd wounds, / Singing sweet hymns and chanting heavenly notes” (19-20). Freed from her inert state, she now can imagine the role she must play to avenge her son’s death: “[Where] shall I find the men, the murderers, / That slew Horatio? Whither shall I run / To find them out that murderèd my son?” (23-25). Aside from mentioning the herbs, no other textual evidence supports where Isabella has spent her time, and therefore, we can assume that her garden is the logical, and for our purposes, the most interesting place where such a transformation of purpose could have taken place. A stirring movement within her soul, brought about by the awakened senses that only a garden can trigger, is the only possible answer. The soul’s desire to feel, to move, to be reborn [Cummings’ state of IS] allows Isabella the will to act. According to the article “Health Benefits of Gardening,” the physical interaction with plants “can help reduce stress, boost the immune system, and lower blood pressure” (1). When Isabella walked through her garden, senses awakened; she had a moment to reflect and to think calmly about what happened to her son. This awakening of the senses can also be witnessed in the staging of this play.

Eleanor Tweedie, in her article entitled “‘Action is Eloquence’: The Staging of Thomas Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy,” considers the difference between the modern and Renaissance staging of this play, especially during the scenes when Isabella finds and mourns her son: “The audience [must] use their imaginations to create the enveloping darkness and the sound of singing birds; perhaps they similarly [must] conjure up a bower or arbour from the suggestion provided by a tree” (235). Whether or not we have the benefit of special effects, the parallels of the fruit of the tree and the fruit of Isabella’s
womb would not be lost on viewers from either century. By entering the garden, even as sparsely staged as Tweedie suggests, Isabella enters an area rich with fertility, thereby entering a type of womb itself. In doing so, she and her son’s memory become one as she enters the plant world. Our reliance on imagination allows Isabella and, ultimately, the play itself to have an organic quality, and we begin to see Horatio’s mother differently. She is a living, breathing character in a chaotic state, but her environment is also a fluid, dynamic entity. When she enters the staged garden of her home, we will see an angry Isabella, a frantic Isabella – most definitely alive with feeling. Assuredly, the murder, now closely linked with the garden, is the impetus for the anger, but the sensory impact of the garden should not be discounted. The garden, we know, has also been a place of solace and beauty for Isabella. The only point of intersection for all of these memories is the actual garden itself, which is loaded with sensory input.

Charles Cannon, who has researched the relationship between the five additions written later by another hand and the original Kyd text, insists that the omission of the additions would be “an act of mutilation rather than of pruning” (230). This is indeed the case if we look at the lines: “Till at length / It grew a gallows, and did bear our son. / It bore thy fruit and mine. Oh wicked, wicked plant!” (Fourth Addition, lines 70–71). The inclusion of these lines enlarges the boundaries of the original text, a “breathing” quality enhancing and emboldening Isabella’s emotions. Her loss becomes our loss, the stage our stage, her tree our tree. The imagery of a living breathing organism known as a play is described in the Introduction to The Greenblatt Reader in which Editor Michael Payne discusses the plant metaphor in relation to New Historicism: “In this metaphor of Shakespeare’s age as the soil and his art as the aspiring plant, Greenblatt cuts through
such static images from an older historicism as history serving as “background” to literature as discarded images [C.S. Lewis]” (6). The murder of Horatio thus becomes a fluid, dynamic act affecting each scene [the plant], each fiber in Isabella’s body [stem or bud], and each audience member’s cultural background experience [the soil].

Greenblatt’s analogy allows the fluidity of all three parts of the Aristotelian Triangle to mingle in Venn Diagram form; the play, the audience, and the author interact in a loosely woven fabric that allows threads from all three to interlace. Our perception of Isabella’s suffering becomes the same as her suffering; thus, our understanding of her loss of fertility or the ability to feel clarifies the need to reclaim the movement or rebirth she needs to be whole again. Thus, Cannon’s theory of the mutilation of the play intertwines with both Isabella’s and our own: the staged garden becomes a fluid, dynamic place for audience members, characters, and playwright, and the need for movement and feeling also becomes requisite for all three. If gardens are a place where senses come alive, then Isabella’s garden is essential for “continuous rebirth,” a phrase coined by Cummings to mean feeling or movement.

The actual murder is not the point at which suffering begins and therefore not the point at which Isabella faces immobility. Indeed, we may be at our peak of rebirth when change or even catastrophe penetrates our lives. The quest for fertility is when we are faced with the possibility of stasis, the moment at which we are facing the collision of our own movement and outside boundaries. Stephen Greenblatt refers to this movement as cultural mobility, the idea of culture functioning as a structure of limits. He believes “the limits are virtually meaningless without movement” (14). If The Spanish Tragedy fits...

---

3 See Shea for visual of Aristotle’s Rhetorical Triangle for more information on the interaction between subject, speaker and audience (4).
Greenblatt’s establishment of culture through improvisation, experiment, and exchange, then Isabella, as an integral part in the play, is herself a free, dynamic agent within the play, risking and even challenging the boundaries of that structure. The danger for her, as for all characters, is that moment when characters and boundaries collide, the moment when Isabella discovers she is no longer able to feel.

Jeannette Walls, in her memoir *The Glass Castle* (2005), refers to a similar boundary, the limits of acceptability with which her family often collides, by comparing it to the top of a flame, where the visible shimmery heat dissolves into the air as the zone “known in physics as the boundary between turbulence and order,” a place “where no rules apply” (61). In Walls’ autobiography the boundary, similar to Greenblatt’s New Historicism, is completely fluid: cultural boundaries provide a barrier against which real people or ideas can “bump,” knowing their actions do not culturally fit a situation. When Jeannette was three years old, her body was severely burned when her skirt caught on fire while she was cooking hot dogs. She was rushed to the hospital but after several weeks, her father, against the strict orders of the doctor, sneaked her out of the hospital, risking Jeannette’s life. Time after time, her parents put their children’s needs on hold to satisfy their own lifestyles. Often bumping their cultural boundaries of acceptable behavior but passing through a fluid barrier that allows re-entry, the Walls family faced constant instability. This cultural boundary is what Jeannette Walls refers to as both turbulent and orderly, a place where we often do not know our limits. No rules apply because we are at risk when we face a culturally-accepted limit. On the one hand, modern characters or “real” people, such as Walls and her siblings, are free to operate within the prescribed boundaries their parents place around them. As they grow older, the boundaries expand,
but the children, even at a young age, are cognizant of how to define acceptable behavior in *their* world. Coming into contact with pre-determined boundaries poses problems when mobility is stopped under what Greenblatt refers to as “perfect stasis” (14), an impossible oxymoronic situation. Miraculously, Jeannette Walls overcomes her difficult childhood only because perfect stasis, the exact moment we squarely meet our boundary, never occurs. She never faces complete immobility, even though her parents provide a myriad of opportunities to block growth, to remove choices, to create chaos. Walls finds few opportunities - slim chances and even dumb luck – where she experiences minimal movement, at least ample freedom to feel. Likewise, Isabella is a perfect example of a character who, when faced with the perfect stasis Greenblatt describes, never completely loses her ability to feel. Before losing her inner self, Isabella enters the garden. The green world provides a healing agent for her soul where her senses are awakened and her spirit is able to breathe, feel, and move. Cummings would describe Isabella’s state as being in IS, a continuous rebirth of self. And it is this very rebirth that signifies movement and thus feeling.

The importance of movement within a naturally balanced world cannot be overstated because if we move, we feel. Isabella seeks to strengthen or regain her own fertility or movement through the plant world, a place where balance is found through natural life processes: life and death, growth and movement. Her return to the green world off-stage to commune with nature provides her the wherewithal to proceed. Following nature’s cycle is what happens to all of us when we are in tune with our surroundings and what perchance happens when hospital patients are able to witness nature’s gifts first-hand. We may witness a type of undulated feeling where at times our
feelings are stronger than others. The beauty of nature arouses our sense of sight and smell, and we are euphoric; suddenly, we remember our loss and we cry. Our fond memories of a loved one materialize in our minds, and we laugh. The cause of death, however, plunges our soul into a stabbing fit of anger, similar to Isabella’s experience when her feelings first overwhelm her in the garden when she discovers Horatio’s body in Act II, and when she destroys the plants in Act IV.

Tweedie believes Horatio is “the true center of this Spanish tragedy” (238), which makes the arbour significant as the central emblem of the play. Tweedie’s interpretation of the importance of the arbour, however, establishes the garden as a symbol of Horatio, as in the scene in the Fourth Addition when Hieronimo meets painter Bazardo. Hieronimo asks, “Canst paint me such a tree as this?” (113). He is really asking the painter to reconstruct Horatio’s death on canvas. Such a representation becomes a shadow of the actual death, a Platonic form that becomes more real than reality. Tweedie believes that Kyd actually “seeks to stress visually the ironic circle-within-circles [of revenge] which is the play’s theme” (237). In Tweedie’s circles, the arbour is at the center surrounded by various representatives of justice through revenge. Death is at the center and is represented by the arbour, rather than seeing the plant world as representative of life, growth, and movement. We may sometimes reason that life is merely an action-reaction chain of events, but if we study nature, we would probably come to the same conclusion as doctors and environmental engineers: the green world can be used as a healing balm; it can offer us the same hope that the Duchess of Malfi refers to as “a restorative” (2.2.133). Certainly, we do not all suffer at the same time, nor do we grow at the same rate. Isabella’s desire for revenge does not match her husband’s;
his purpose in the Fourth Addition includes a reconstruction of the crime whereas Isabella’s purpose is to mourn, which, in essence, is the same as her need to be reborn, to use the garden as a tool for rebirth. In short, the death of her son is immobilizing, but the garden is revitalizing. The fact that she fails to find complete peace has nothing to do with not finding what she needs in the green world. She actually finds what she needs once she makes the decision to die.

What transpires in the garden in *The Spanish Tragedy* explains Isabella’s eventual transformation. In Act II, scene 4, we have our first glimpse into the living, breathing arbour, a setting most fitting for the two lovers, Horatio and Bel-Imperia. Horatio suggests this private space as a place of solace and safety: “let us to the bower, / And there in safety pass a pleasant hour” (4-5). Therein, the two communicate in garden-lovely language, a playful, descriptive diction that belies the lurking danger nearby:

Horatio The more thou sit’st within these leafy bowers,
The more will Flora deck it with her flowers.

Bel-Imperia Aye, but if Flora spy Horatio here,
Her jealous eye will think I sit too near.

Horatio Hark, madam, how the birds record by night,
For joy that Bel-imperia sits in sight.

Bel-Imperia No, Cupid counterfeits the nightingale,
To frame sweet music to Horatio’s tale. (24-31)

Horatio uses the word *bower* to describe this place, a word that implies a place of seclusion and safety. He coyly encourages Bel-Imperia to stay within the garden walls even though she is wary of lurking danger. She is right to be nervous because only 22
lines later, Horatio is stabbed and hung on a fruit tree only to be discovered later by his parents in the dark of night. This is the last time the garden will be associated with the language of love, and the last time we hear the word bower in the play, a word associated not only with shelter, but also with a woman’s boudoir. Henceforth, the word changes to arbour, a word specifically referring to plants, plant life, or the green world. We move away from the sexual connotation of giardino segreto and focus on the regenerative powers of hortus conclusus.

The noisy sounds of the arbor during Horatio’s and Bel-Imperia’s interchange can be contrasted sharply with the silence following the moments when Balthazar leads Bel-Imperia away after the murder. Imagine, just as audiences everywhere must do, the shouting accusations of Lorenzo as he mercilessly stabs Horatio: “Aye, thus, and thus!” (54); the pleadings of Bel-Imperia: “Oh save his life, and let me die for him!” (55); the slanderous denunciations of Lorenzo: “Although his life were still ambitious, proud, / Yet is he at the highest now he is dead” (59-60). Finally, all characters leave the stage, and we are left alone with Horatio, watching, horrified, as he hangs quietly from the makeshift tree on stage. In our minds we hear neither bird nor bee, neither the rustling of clothing nor the whispering of lovers. All is silent.

Hieronimo finds his son first. Awakened from his bed by noises from the garden, he stumbles into the arbour in his nightshirt. He is confused by what he has heard: “Who calls Hieronimo? Speak, here I am. / I did not slumber, therefore ‘twas no dream. / No, no, it was some woman cried for help” (2.4.66-68). He cuts down his son from the tree before even identifying the body as his son. Before Isabella discovers her husband missing from his bed, Hieronimo is alone with Horatio’s body, using the full extent of 20
lines to grieve. Dark and blackened words like monster, blood, glutted, profaner, and dishonour (81-83) fill the stage with sorrow as this pathetic man mourns over his son. Once Isabella enters the stage, however, and sees Horatio lying on the ground, she, in an outpouring of vengeance, focuses her attention on the alleged murderers: “O gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears; / Blow sighs, and raise an everlasting storm; / For outrage fits our cursed wretchedness” (104-106). Implied in her anger, however, is the confidence that outrage will expose the injustice. Even so, how does a parent come to grips with the death of a child? Isabella eventually finds remedy at the site of the murder, her own Garden of Eden; two acts later we see her desecrate the verdant foliage with a knife. Her arbour will not solve the immediate mystery of her son’s murderer, but it does help her grieve. Isabella’s loss may be manifested in anger, sorrow, and eventually, resignation, but perhaps the plants that cradle her son at the time of his death also become her salvation. The enclosed garden setting of Horatio’s murder becomes the only possible healing agent for Isabella’s grief because this is the moment when an important transformation takes place. She enters the arbour an angry woman but through her “battle” with the plants, makes the final decision to end her own suffering, a remedy that only she understands. If Greenblatt’s analogy of plants and plays holds true, then Isabella’s desire to die intersects with the audience’s desire to witness her mourning process, the process that allows her to feel and to move. We will, in essence witness Isabella’s “rebirth.”

Isabella does most of her grieving alone in one short scene in Act IV. In 38 lines and only three stage directions, we watch her progress through an angry tirade, which ends in the decision to die. She is not exactly pathetic, although her situation is certainly
pitiful. But her resolve fills readers with awe. Here is a woman who believes an epidemic of injustice is running rampant: no one, including her own husband, immediately avenges her son’s death. Taking hold of the one thing she can control, she blasts through her own creation, cutting away every living plant:

Down with these branches and these loathsome boughs
Of this unfortunate and fatal pine!
Down with them, Isabella; rent them up
And burn the roots from whence the rest is sprung.
I will not leave a root, a stalk, a tree,
A bough, a branch, a blossom, nor a leaf,
No, not an herb within this garden plot:
Accursèd complot of my misery! (4.2.9-16)

Even though we may assume the tree she is attacking is the one that held Horatio’s lifeless body, clearly we are mistaken. The fatal pine’s “loathsome” pliable boughs create an image of arms cradling Horatio, not holding him up as indicated by Lorenzo’s words: “Aye, thus, and thus! These are the fruits of love” (2.4.54). Horatio is stabbed at least twice (“thus, and thus”) and hung, similar to a piece of fruit tenuously dangling from a tree. According to Tweedie, Horatio’s character may have been literally hung from the makeshift tree by a halter (234). But other devices may have been used, such as buckles on his clothing under his arms, which were hooked to sturdy limbs; Horatio could also have been laid precariously over a branch or enclosed within its boughs. Gauging from the allusion to hanging fruit, his body might have been wedged between
the branches of a dense artificial tree, forcing Hieronimo to actually cut him down by cutting some of the branches.

Staging such a scene might have been difficult. One tree center stage would suffice for the focal point of the murder, and a different, smaller tree could serve the purpose for Isabella’s rant. A tree large enough to hold Horatio’s body would have been too large for Isabella to demolish and clearly the garden area includes more than one tree, because of her reference to not leaving any tree intact (4.2.13). Even though she directs her tirade at one tree, she specifically names other plant parts, such as stalk, root, blossom, and leaf, providing the readers/viewers with the tools to imagine the former beauty of her enclosed, lush garden. Tweedie discusses this idea of ‘word pictures,’ which allows the audience to “use their imaginations to create the enveloping darkness and the sound of the singing birds” (235). Thus, we see the flower blossoms flying behind her as she pulls them from the ground and flings them over her head. She calls herself by name as if creating a new Isabella, the one who has the strength to destroy the garden and even to die, quite separate from the Isabella who is ready to fall apart and collapse on the stage: “Down with them, Isabella; rent them up / And burn the roots from whence the rest is sprung” (4.2.8-9). Disturbed beyond measure -“I will not leave a root, a stalk, a tree, / a bough, a branch, a blossom, nor a leaf” (9-10) - Isabella’s destruction is actually necessary for her to feel capable of living through her misery, at least for the moment. The fact that she can direct her hands to follow her own command of pulling out roots, stalks, and even a tree is empowering. According to the original stage directions, she begins cutting down the arbour at the exact moment she directs her own actions: “Down with these branches and these loathsome boughs / Of this unfortunate
and fatal pine!” (6-7). In stripping the green world of its fertile plant life, Isabella is also stripping herself of her own fertility, which is, in essence, creating a barrenness of heart, mind, and soul. But it is this very interaction with the green world that will allow her to heal through seemingly destructive actions. The garden is actually providing her with a healing agent and similar to Frye’s description of the green world in comedies, not necessarily what readers expect but what Isabella desires (142).

Critics such as Christopher Crosbie and Molly Smith refer to the creativity of absence in this scene. In other words, Isabella needs to create infertility in an otherwise prolific setting: “Not only must the earth remain fruitless and barren but so, too, must the human mind preserve a sense of absence” (Crosbie 20). Isabella sees the fruit of her own womb as lifeless as the scene she intends to create, “a continual reinforcement of negation” (Smith 9). Isabella becomes “blank” or to use Crosbie’s and Smith’s word, absent. This is the point at which Isabella comes into contact with the boundaries of her culture, the place where no rules apply, the place between turbulence and order. Rather than creating absence, Horatio’s mother could use the garden as a healing agent, the place where her senses could ground her in a dynamic, fertile space. She could, to use Greenblatt’s idea, collide with the boundaries of her life and perhaps even pass through to achieve cultural mobility, a space where we are not only free to move within the boundaries of our own culture sets, but also daring enough to move beyond those cultural restraints. In Isabella’s case her own cultural boundaries would be defined by a patriarchal world in an age of reason. The cultural boundaries within which she grows up, falls in love, and raises a family would allow her to remain mobile and to “feel” as it were. But because Horatio is murdered in the bower outside her own home, a sensual
place where he should have been safe, this garden world now becomes Isabella’s personal enemy and therefore its destruction becomes a way to keep her safe as well as a venue for her grief. When she enters the garden and says, “Since neither piety nor pity moves / the king to justice or compassion, / I will revenge myself upon this place” (4.2.2-4), she is doing the only thing that makes her feel worthwhile, useful, valuable. Rather than retreating to the inner sanctum of her mind where she might remain in a static state, she is working through her grief, even though it may seem destructive. The transformative power of the garden, however, will provide Isabella with a way out – a transcendence – the only form of cultural mobility open to her. Even though Stephen Greenblatt was not using death as a way to cross boundaries of culture, in this case Isabella’s collision course did not immobilize her. What her culture expected her to do was to wait until Hieronimo avenged her son’s death. Her mourning would have been bound up in hopeless wailing. Instead, the garden becomes the very place where she can act and in doing so, weigh the few options her culture provides women in her situation. Thus, the garden becomes a healing agent, the force that allows her to feel, to move, to decide.

Her attack is not on a human enemy, but rather on nature and its inability to be completely controlled even though her efforts to wreak havoc are only temporarily successful. Ironically, the tree she wishes to destroy is the same tree that provides healing. By pulling out the plants by their roots, she is, in effect, confirming her own infertility. In other words, she is identifying the state she rejects, which paradoxically confirms what she most desires – fertility. Isabella is deliberate in her attack on the garden; by pulling out plants, roots and all - “I will not leave a root” (10) - she is eliminating any chance of regrowth. This is, in effect, a devastation of future fertility, a
parallel of her life without Horatio. Isabella may be too old to have more children, but without her only child, she now feels totally barren. The fertilization of her own seed has been destroyed, and now she will avenge his death in the only way she can: by obliterating any future fertilization of her green world, she is essentially destroying her own. Isabella, in her angry tirade, curses not only the land, but also anyone who may be a future tiller of that land: “Fruitless forever may this garden be, / Barren the earth, and blissless whosoever / Imagines not to keep it unmanured!” (13-15). The word blissless followed by the double negative in line 15 is worth considering in relation to Isabella’s personal goals. Her meaning is clearer if the reader reverses lines 14 and 15: fertile grounds are only for the unhappy. In other words, in order for her to make any sense of this murder, she must produce infertile grounds and in doing so, create her own infertility. She is simply taking revenge upon herself, and the green world is providing the means to an end.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her best-selling book On Death and Dying (1969) recounts the four stages of grief people go through before the final fifth stage of acceptance. Kübler-Ross originally applied these stages to any form of catastrophic personal loss, such as devastating events resulting in depression and/or suicide. Anger and denial mark the beginning stages; immediately after finding Horatio’s body in the arbour, we see a vindictive Isabella showering her green world with words that depict her as what Kübler-Ross describes as “the [woman] who has been in control all [her] life and who reacts with rage and anger when [she] is forced to give up these controls” (67). Certainly, once Isabella actually comprehends not only that her son is dead, but also that her husband is dead in a figurative sense, she must handle these deaths in her own way.
It may seem as if Isabella returns to the crime scene only to destroy what ironically has drawn her in for healing. She does, after all, bring a knife. But her words belie the obvious intent. Her 38-line soliloquy is a journey through the five stages of grief, ending in an acceptance of her son’s death and her own impending doom.

After experiencing anger and vengeance as the reactive, beginning stages of mourning, Isabella begins a sorrowful, reflective stage, which allows her to stop briefly and think. Isabella ceases her tirade after 22 lines to confirm what has happened:

Aye, here he died, and here I him embrace;

See where his ghost solicits with his wounds

Revenge on her that should revenge his death.

Hieronimo, make haste to see thy son;

For sorrow and despair hath cited me

To hear Horatio plead with Rhadamanth. (4.2.23-28)

Isabella’s anger is mitigated as depicted by word choice and sound. The words *embrace, solicits, and sorrow*, polysyllabic words softened by the *s* sound, are a distinct change from the one-syllable, harder sounds of *down, rent, no, and not* found in the first 22 lines of her soliloquy. Her focus also changes: where earlier she directs herself to anger, she now directs Hieronimo to “see” his son. Overtaken with a heavy sadness, she is no longer able to take action. Even though she is alone, she verbally wades through this murky area of sorrow by transferring the burden of “seeing” to her husband. In this instance the infinitive “to see” may not actually refer to physically looking at Horatio’s body, but rather to “see to it” or “take care of this situation.” The consideration of joining her son in death is beginning to germinate in her mind as indicated by her
reference to Rhadamanth, a just but inflexible judge in the underworld. Ironically, in Act I, scene 1, the ghost of Andreas is brought back to Earth as if it were a place of purgatory where Revenge tells him, “thou shalt see the author of thy death” (87). Like Andreas, who must listen to his judges decide where his soul will find its final resting place, so too will Horatio’s soul plead with his judges for a final “rest.” Perhaps now Isabella seeks the life of the underworld, chaotic as the legal underworld may be, to once again be with her son. Thus, Isabella’s green world, the place of Horatio’s murder, becomes a powerful healing agent, helping her to transition from anger to sorrow. The aroma of both the plants and the dirt probably remind her of the numerous, peaceful hours spent planting and pruning. Even though she is choking on anger, the location, which has always been abundant with growth, calms her in a way nothing else can. Where earlier in Act IV, scene 2, she violently attacks the plants, she now reflects on the actual purpose for the garden - peaceful solitude where she may embrace Horatio’s memory: “Aye, here he died, and here I him embrace” (23). Even though no stage directions exist for her movements other than “she cuts down the arbour” after line five, we can assume that by now she has finished her physical tirade. Wilting plants in hand, Isabella likely wraps her arms around her own body just as she utters the last word.

Other examples of intense sorrow are found in the First and Fourth Additions of the play (1602), inserted in Acts II and III, and perhaps written by Ben Jonson (82). Both additions take place in the arbour and are in the dark, thus requiring torches. In the First Addition Isabella recognizes that grief is at the heart of her husband’s madness. Hieronimo is delusional about whether or not Horatio is really dead: “Can thy soft bosom entertain a thought / That such a black deed of mischief should be done / On one so pure
and spotless as our son?” (2.4.36-38). Isabella is still in control here. She treats Hieronimo as she would a child, admonishing his weak will: “Cast a more serious eye upon thy grief: / Weak apprehension gives but weak belief” (39-40). In the Fourth Addition she is again condescending to Hieronimo, warning him not to stay outside in the garden, which only serves to increase his sorrow. Her husband’s response is a reminder of the true purpose of the garden: “Not I, indeed; we are very merry, very merry” (3.12.58). Within one act Isabella begins to recognize the irony implicit in the green world: “Is not this the place, and this the very tree, / Where my Horatio died, where he was murdered?” (my emphasis, 60-61). She now perceives the tree upon which Horatio hung as an enemy to her, giving her great cause to do battle with the plants in Act IV.

Cannon speaks to the issue of sorrow in the garden, specifically the tree as “an emblem of betrayal” as well as a “symbol of grief” (236) in relation to how both Hieronimo and Isabella are each grieving. Cannon points to the painter’s scene in which the sufferings of two men, the painter and Hieronimo, are synthesized into a piece of art as they describe a potential painting of Horatio’s hanging. Cannon asserts that this part of the play “sensitiz[es] the viewer to a scene in which outlines blur and objects and individuals become symbols” (236). True, Horatio’s description again paints us word pictures, allowing the viewers/readers to imagine art without actually having to witness the canvas. The darkened stage also allows us to focus only on Hieronimo, and not on the plant world. Interestingly, in both additions to Kyd’s original play Hieronimo asks Isabella to leave the garden. Hieronimo’s sorrow is borne and bred in the darkness, focusing not on the fertility of the plant world, but rather on the darkness of the murderous act itself. His suffering eventually prompts him to the action that Isabella
seeks – revenge. Both deal with their grief in different ways, but only Hieronimo finally avenges Horatio’s death within cultural boundaries. Isabella uses the garden world for her setting and the garden language as her tool to take control of her grief. In this way the plants, including the tree, become medicinal in that they allow her to react to her grief, rather than to remain stagnant. Through the destruction of her garden she deals with her anger, and by the reflection on her garden as the setting of the murder, she is able to transfer to Hieronimo the responsibility of finding the murderers and avenging the death.

Without the burden of responsibility, by line 35 Isabella is able to move to the final stage of grieving – acceptance. In this case the plant world provides an answer to her questions Why? and What now? An acceptance of her fate includes a cathartic state in which she feels free of the burden of grief much in the same way most of us feel a burden lifted once we have taken control of a problem and can now work on the solution. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross makes the point that the final stage is not one of euphoria: “Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage. It is almost void of feelings. It is as if the pain [is] gone, the struggle is over, and there comes a time for ‘the final rest before the long journey’ as one patient phrased it” (124). Isabella does not find a way to solve the mystery of her son’s death; rather, she is moving to the “white” space in which she is protected from her own suffering. She now begins to see the connection between the green world, specifically the tree, and her own womb, between the barrenness of the desecrated garden and her own emptiness. Isabella not only curses the tree in the garden, but also her own ability to reproduce, now making the conscious association between the tree’s fertility and her own:
And as I curse this tree from further fruit,
So shall my womb be cursed for his sake;
And with this weapon will I wound the breast,
The hapless breast, that gave Horatio suck. (4.2.35-38)

Rather than brandishing the sword, which is Hieronimo’s final modus operandi, Isabella uses plants as a self-righteous cleansing. She turns on herself the knife she first used to cut down the garden greens. The word “hapless” gives us the key to Isabella’s state of mind in that she sees her body, her self and her situation as ill-fated, unfortunate, or even unlucky. She has transcended the stages of anger and sorrow and now accepts her condition as part of her fate.

In an interview with Daniel Redwood, Kübler-Ross equates the five stages of grief to a type of transcendence that most people follow where we actually give up one stage (depression) as we traverse to the next (acceptance): “I think everybody who is on a path of spiritual evolution, which all human beings are at different levels . . . you will know yourself what you have to give up. It will be one giving up after another. But it is replaced with things that are much more precious and much more valuable than what you give up.” As Isabella moves from anger to depression, for example, she gives up the need to destroy the plants; when she moves from depression to acceptance, she becomes calmer, and no doubt slows her speech. The alliteration in the last four lines before she stabs herself would need to be pronounced more slowly in order to attain the full effect: “from further fruit” (35); “with this weapon will I wound” (37); and “hapless

---

breast...suck” (38) all require the pronunciation depicting a woman who is sad but
determined, scared but purposeful, resigned but hopeful.

Because the Renaissance view of women focuses primarily on marriage and
child-bearing, her purpose for living is now moot. Amy Tigner’s research on the
transformational power of gardens codes the female body with garden language. She
points to several writers, such as Chaucer and Shakespeare, who “use the iconography of
the garden to represent female genitalia” (117). Beginning with the gate as representative
of the vagina, we can see how Isabella’s enclosed garden is closely tied to her image of
self. The fallopian tubes, or branches of the tree, however unconsciously perceived, are
certainly destroyed once Horatio is cut down. The fruit of her womb, Horatio, is dead.
Lorenzo’s words, “Thus, and thus” now become Isabella’s when she stabs herself and
according to the stage directions, exits, dying.

Paradoxically, the garden becomes Isabella’s agent of acceptance and therefore
healing. By associating her own body’s fertility with the garden’s visible evidence of
growth and therefore beauty, she is able to destroy herself by physically eliminating any
evidence of life in her green world. Horatio’s murder and the inherent repercussions of
that murder are indeed at the heart of the play. Molly Smith’s article on how death is
staged in The Spanish Tragedy speaks to the fact that the actual on-stage hanging is the
focus of the play in that it is a spectacle with which the Renaissance audiences are
familiar: “the playwright exploits the value of the mutilated body as spectacle by holding
Horatio’s body up to view either literally or metaphorically several times in the course of
the play” (5). Whether the spectacle of hanging is a source of tragedy or entertainment,
Smith argues for “the earliest coalescence of the theatrical and punitive modes in
Elizabethan England” (1). Regardless, the arbour is notably center stage and thus the centerpiece of the play, forcing the green world into the characters’ lives and the audience’s attention. Isabella and Hieronimo are forced into the garden when their son dies, but Isabella is drawn to the garden later to confront her own feelings and to deal with Horatio’s death in a personal way. Somehow she temporarily takes control of her suffering by destroying the place where the death occurred. In this way she also destroys the viability of her husband’s seed and thus her son’s life before he was born in order to create a new Isabella, a childless Isabella. Having achieved this state, she is now able to transfer the avenger’s duty to her husband, relinquishing any personal involvement in the outcome. Her detachment, as evidenced by the final stage of grieving, now gives her permission to remove herself permanently from the scene. The plant life becomes a salve or healing agent, one that allows Isabella to mend on her own terms, the only way she knows how – in death. Horatio’s death seriously mars her life, so she must destroy the imperfection. In doing so, she enters the green world where powerful healing takes place. Death becomes transcendence, a place where she too can plead with Radamanth, side by side with Horatio.

Ophelia

Shakespeare’s masterpiece, Hamlet, (1601) is another tragedy where a female character in mourning is drawn to the green world for comfort and healing. Like Isabella, Ophelia is portrayed at the beginning as a strong woman whose senses are intact, specifically the inner sense of feeling. Unlike Isabella, however, whose spirit crumbles the moment we meet her on stage for the first time, we have two acts of the play to acquaint ourselves
with Ophelia and to helplessly witness her deterioration. We know, for example, that by Act I, scene 3, Ophelia and Hamlet are exchanging vows of love. Apparently, she feels close enough to her brother and confident enough about her feelings to talk openly, even though Laertes is concerned about both her chastity and her future. He warns her to be wary of young Prince Hamlet and any private moments where her virginity might be compromised: “Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister, / And keep within the rear of your affection, / Out of the shot and danger of desire” (1.3.33-35). The it to which Laertes refers may be not only Hamlet’s offered love, but also a summary of all that her brother has mentioned: her lost honour, her broken heart, and even her chaste treasures, “open / To his [Hamlet’s] unmastered opportunity” (31-32). Perhaps Ophelia should be nervous about Hamlet’s attentions, but she trusts her feelings and instead aptly and wittily dismisses Laertes’ comments:

Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,

Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven

Whilst like a puffed and reckless libertine

Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads

And recks not his own rede. (1.3.47-51)

These two siblings speak easily and frankly, but Ophelia is not particularly concerned about her brother’s words. In fact, she frankly chastises him for his hypocrisy by comparing him to men of the church who spout off advice to sinners about the “thorny” obstacles we must confront and destroy to enter the gates of heaven while they rarely model the exemplary behavior they prescribe. At this point Ophelia is a young woman who may be flattered by Hamlet’s attentions but is in charge of her own feelings.
Thus, in this state of mind, Ophelia, immediately confronted with her father’s
desire to ascertain her exact relationship with Hamlet, now innocently reveals that she has
been receiving tokens of Hamlet’s affection. Initially, she divulges only that he has “of
late made many tenders / Of his affection to me” (99-100), but is surprised when Polonius
undermines her feelings: “Marry, I’ll teach you: think yourself a baby / That you have
ta’en his tenders for true pay, / Which are not sterling” (105-107). After her open, even
light-hearted, conversation with Laertes, her father’s words must indeed seem harsh,
especially because of the implication that Hamlet might be toying with her feelings. Her
surprise is evidenced in her reply, which is laced with defensiveness and hurt: “My Lord,
he [Hamlet] hath importuned me with love / In honourable fashion” (110-111). But
Polonius is relentless. He blames Hamlet for preying on her vulnerability, for trapping
her like a gullible bird (“woodcock”), and for beguiling her with sweet talk. As her father,
Polonius feels completely within his rights to demand that she, from this time forward,
not speak anymore with Hamlet. Rather than battle the injury, Ophelia defers to her
father’s wisdom in accordance with her filial role. Ophelia’s mood, now severely altered,
is revealed in her parting words, “I shall obey, my lord” (136). Certainly, Ophelia is
crushed at the thought of not seeing Hamlet anymore, but her feelings are nevertheless
intact.

In Act II, however, after a disheveled Hamlet invades Ophelia’s chamber, a
shaken Ophelia reports the news to her father. Hamlet’s clothing is askew, his crazed
expression akin to someone “loosed out of hell” (2.1.84). Her father immediately
assumes the invasion to be a madness related to love, an uncontrolled feeling for Ophelia
that has taken on a separate identity. Hamlet is simply not “himself.” Perhaps Polonius
realizes the lengths to which love drives men and the ensuing madness resulting from spurned affections. While Ophelia recounts the incident, her voice undoubtedly trembles with fear, but her feelings for Hamlet, however unsettled, are still intact. The reference to his “sigh so piteous and profound” (95) and her emphasis on how he keeps his eyes on her “to the last” (101) as he tries to find his way out in the dark show us that she is still very much interested. Certainly, Polonius is aware of his daughter’s feelings. Why else would he suddenly accuse her of giving Hamlet “any hard words of late” (108). And why else would he later use his daughter as a pawn to gather information about Hamlet’s “antic behavior”? Polonius is clever, but Ophelia is wise, truly a dutiful daughter but one who knows full well that only a denial will placate her father’s suspicion. She reassures Polonius that she has returned Hamlet’s letters and has denied him access to her. Still, this is the same daughter who formerly disclaimed any hint of inappropriateness in Hamlet’s affections. She must now at least concede, even to herself, that his mental state is out of kilter. When Polonius blatantly suggests that Hamlet’s madness stems from his desire for her, Ophelia admits, “truly I do fear it” (1.3.33), words that echo Laertes’ warning to her in Act I. She describes Hamlet’s unseemly behavior as actions belying a prince: first, he holds her wrist with one hand as he holds his brow with the other and stares at her as if her feelings for him were written there. Having received the answer he sought, he “raised a sigh so piteous and profound / That it did seem to shatter all his bulk” (95-96). At this point Ophelia, the obedient daughter, is torn. Still referring to her father as “my good lord” (my emphasis, 109), she wavers between wanting to please him and knowing she has disappointed Hamlet who has previously opened himself to her with the expectation of favorable return.
Even though shaken, Ophelia still feels *something*. A healthy mental state requires that our inner life, or conscious feelings, moves within the boundaries of acceptable parameters. We change and grow, based on the frequency and intensity with which our emotions “bump” these parameters. Ophelia, for example, trusts Hamlet to treat her appropriately and not, as Laertes earlier suggests, like a “canker [that] galls the infants of the spring” (1.3.39). Her disappointment or even incredulity at his invasion of her space may cause her attitude toward him to change, but she may now stretch or widen the boundaries of acceptability in her own mind. Her feelings are in constant flux, but her deep, emotional well-being changes with each life encounter. As Cummings suggests in his definition of continuous rebirth, Ophelia is truly alive because she *feels* or moves within the boundaries set for her by society and by the strength of her own personal trappings. Similar to seeing our own reflection in a mirror and knowing the image is nothing more than the refraction of light rays, so too is our knowledge of self, nothing more than a reflection of continuous movement of feelings, bumping and stretching our self-made inner boundaries. Thus our feelings are in constant motion, creating new “shades” of attitudes and emotions, which are borne out of our former self, a continuous birthing of a new “us.” Ophelia’s feelings of doubt are surfacing and bumping up against her own boundaries of acceptability. This may be her most “fertile” state, a condition where movement is crucial, and boundaries are pliable. Her feelings for both her father and Hamlet may be changing, but she now faces more compelling challenges with

---

5 *Ibn Sahl* is credited with first discovering the law of refraction, usually called Snell's Law. He used the law of refraction to work out the shapes of lenses that focus light with no geometric aberrations, known as anastatic lenses. Ibn Sahl (Abu Sa‘d al-'Ala' ibn Sahl) (c. 940-1000) was a Muslim Arabian mathematician, physicist and optics engineer associated with the Abbasid court of Baghdad. In 984 he wrote a treatise on how curved mirrors and lenses bend and focus light.
hypothetically devastating results. If inner turmoil vanishes because she has ceased to move or feel, she will have reached a static state, one where she is no longer able to feel at all. Like Isabella, Ophelia will be drawn to the green world where she will find the wherewithal to cope in a world that no longer makes sense.

The pivotal point in the play for Ophelia, the point where she moves away from a “fertile” state is in Act III when she and Hamlet, seemingly alone, are speaking together. The audience knows that King Claudius and Polonius, unseen, are privy to the couple’s conversation, each with his own duplicitous motivations; the King and Polonius are both seeking evidence to substantiate Hamlet’s behavior: “We may of their encounter frankly judge, / And gather by him, as he is behaved, / If’t be th’affliction of his love or no” (3.1.36-38). This, of course, has been revealed to Ophelia who is to execute the ruse. The king is specifically interested in what Hamlet knows or thinks he knows about the death of his father. Polonius’ motivation and perhaps his own reputation, on the other hand, are more closely linked to Ophelia and the underlying sexual implications of Hamlet’s recent intrusion into her inner chamber. Ophelia’s awareness of the complete picture, however, has gaps. Certainly, she knows she is to play a role where she deceives Hamlet. Undoubtedly, she knows nothing of the King’s alleged murder of Hamlet’s father, but she can probably assume her father’s disdain for the young prince. Even so, she knows she is clearly a helpless pawn, and her world is now beginning to crumble.

Hamlet, during his “chance” meeting with Ophelia, continues his “antic behavior” by denying he has any affection for her. When she tries to return the “remembrances” he once gave her, he refuses to acknowledge them: “No, no, I never gave you aught” (3.1.98). She persists. But now he wants to know why she is returning his gifts. When
he asks, “Are you honest?” (105), he may be asking why she is pretending not to love
him anymore. When he asks, “Are you fair?” (107), he may be asking her to differentiate
between character and physical appearance. According to the Oxford English Dictionary,
the word “fair” would have been referring to Ophelia’s beauty. Hamlet wonders if
honesty and beauty could ever be qualities owned by the same person (“admitting
discourse”), a question that may be directed more at his mother than at her. Finally, he
admits, “I did love you once” (116) and then chastises her for believing him. His mood is
beginning to deteriorate as the truth dawns on him: she has been planted by her father
and his uncle to find out the truth, the reason for his strange behavior. He skillfully reads
her face, his second attempt to analyze physical features rather than words, deciphering
her motivation for deceit and factoring out her beauty, which he knows often masks truth:
“the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd” (113-114).
Ophelia’s surprise at his questions and her fumbling for words gives Hamlet all he needs
to know; she is the willing pawn of her father and King Claudius and therefore someone
who cannot be trusted. She is no different from Queen Gertrude, his mother, who he
suspects is part and parcel of the conspiracy and, most terribly, at least partially
responsible for his father’s death. Even though Hamlet does not initially seek
information from Ophelia, his “gut” feeling about her is satisfied. He now knows where
her allegiance lies, and once he asks her the whereabouts of her father, her answer, “At
home, my lord” (131), is all the proof he needs. Of course, without stage directions,
dialogue, or telling nonverbal clues, readers and viewers are left to assume that guilt is
written on Ophelia’s face. A simple nod of her head in the direction of Polonius’ and
King Claudius’ hiding place would have changed everything.
As Shakespeare skillfully builds the suspense in Hamlet, he is also unravelling the spirit of Ophelia and thus her need for rejuvenation. The juxtaposition of her strong mental state in Act I with her weakened state at the end of Act III, scene 1, sharpens the contrast. We know what Ophelia could have become – a loving, capable woman. Her father’s manipulation of his compliant daughter and the king’s manipulation of a dutiful servant places Ophelia on unsteady ground. She endeavors to please everyone around her but loses at every turn, having failed in her mission to follow their mandates to expose Hamlet’s secrets. Hamlet’s cruelty and directive to “Get thee to a nunnery” (122) may be the one line that sends Ophelia over the edge. Whether he means that she should devote her mind and body to God, or according to the slang definition of nunnery, get herself to a brothel, Ophelia has been excoriated most severely. Hamlet has the last word before he exits the stage - “To a nunnery, go” (148) - leaving Ophelia to unleash her feelings one last time. She is on the stage alone pouring out her soul:

Oh what a noble mind is here o’erthrown!
The courtier’s soldier’s scholar’s eye, tongue, sword,
Th’expectancy and rose of the fair state,
Th’observed of all observers, quite, quite, down!
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That sucked the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason
Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh;
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me,
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1.149-160)

Ophelia's twelve lines are her final tribute to the senses and ultimately her last words before her feelings break through the acceptable boundaries of her mind. She juxtaposes two ideas: Hamlet's former, unmatched form of nobility with her own present state, dejected and wretched. She has no one with whom to talk, neither brother, father, mother, nor friend. King Claudius and Polonius are waiting in the wings, yet neither comes to her rescue, even though both hear what she is saying. They know about her pain but leave her, tortured and wailing, alone. These are certainly the words of someone who wants to die, yet when Claudius and Polonius come out from behind the curtain, they dismiss her most inhumanely. The King focuses on Hamlet's behavior: "There's something in his soul / O'er which his melancholy sits on brood" (163-164). With even less concern for Ophelia's state, her father avoids dealing with her feelings by completely dismissing her: "You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said; / We heard it all" (178-179). In essence, they are telling her that she has served her purpose. Ophelia must realize now that her usefulness has expired.

Ophelia's words, after Hamlet's departure in this scene, may remind us of Isabella's when she first enters the stage to find her son hanging from a tree in her own garden. Both women feel themselves to be the victims of life's cruelest circumstances. Isabella's words, "O gush out, tears, fountains and floods of tears" (2.4.105), mirror the intensity of Ophelia's "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched" (3.1.153). Sisters in suffering, both women feel the safe walls of their lives crumbling, and both refer to a world out of kilter: "bells jangled out of tune and harsh" and "everlasting storm[s]," setting the stage for a total breakdown. No wonder both Isabella
and Ophelia, from this point forward, are not able to cope in their own world and are drawn to the green world for healing.

According to Theodor Lidz in *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in "Hamlet,"

Ophelia breaks down because she fails in the female developmental task of shifting her sexual attachment from her father "to a man who can bring her fulfillment as a woman" (88, 113). Ophelia’s desire to please her father, however, may not be that complicated. She may be on the cusp of realizing her own doom, that her feelings about both Hamlet and her father were wrong. During the nunnery scene when Hamlet implies that she has made him a fool, - "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the / fool nowhere but in’s own house" (3.1.132-133) - Ophelia cries out to no one in particular, “O help him, you sweet heavens!” (134). She is undoubtedly referring to Hamlet but could also be speaking of everyone in her life, including herself. At this point she is totally falling apart. Later, alone on stage, she refers to herself as wretched and dejected for having been warned by her father and fooled anyway: “And I, of ladies most deject and wretched” (154). No doubt both Ophelia and the audience as they watch her suffer are troubled by the loss of her former “self.” Unlike Isabella, whose former state we can only surmise, Ophelia’s painful deterioration becomes part and parcel of us all; like her, we are saddened, helpless, paralyzed.

Katharine Goodland’s analysis of female mourning in early modern drama describes Ophelia’s laments as the realization of “the lost value and beauty of Hamlet’s life and their potential future together” (193). Goodland is describing Ophelia at this one moment on stage: her present state is not death itself but an *imitation* of death (191). She sees the truth about the men around her, the men who, under normal circumstances,
would have supported and protected her. But now she is invisible to the important people in her life; she will now begin her journey inward to a place where her invisibility will not make her sad or vulnerable. As Goodland suggests, at this point Ophelia loses her voice, the only instrument she has for making her feelings known. Unlike Isabella, whose voice helps us transition with her through her stages of grief, Ophelia retreats into the static state of nothingness. The meaning of her words becomes less predictable, and her own understanding of what is happening around her becomes less apparent.

The next time Ophelia sees Hamlet is during Act III, scene 2, when she, like Hamlet, is waiting for *The Mousetrap* to begin. She may appear totally composed, but her words seem both uncertain and vague. Hamlet refuses his mother’s request to sit by her, instead choosing to sit by Ophelia and referring to her as “mettle more attractive” (3.2.99). His reference to her is mean-spirited in that he is calling Ophelia a younger version of his own mother. Their conversation, a significant stichomythic exchange, consists of sexual innuendos on Hamlet’s part and defensive but rather ambiguous words on Ophelia’s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hamlet:</th>
<th>Lady, shall I lie in your lap?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia:</td>
<td>No, my Lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet:</td>
<td>I mean my head upon your lap?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia:</td>
<td>Ay, my lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet:</td>
<td>Do you think I meant country matters?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia:</td>
<td>I think nothing, my lord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet:</td>
<td>That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia:</td>
<td>What is, my lord?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hamlet: No thing.

Ophelia: You are merry, my lord.

Hamlet: Who, I?

Ophelia: Ay, my lord. (101-112)

Certainly Hamlet is goading her, but she is not aroused. In fact, Ophelia’s vapid remarks reveal a startling absence of thought or presence. When she responds “Ay” to Hamlet’s clarification of lying in her lap, does she mean she now understands him, or does she give him permission to do so? When she says she “thinks nothing,” does she mean she is not responding to his sexual bravado, or does she think only about sex with him? When she comments that he is “merry,” does she think he is making fun of her, or that he is using sexual innuendo because of their past relationship? Regardless of her intent, her limited but open-ended word choice during this scene depicts her emotional state – caught in a mousetrap that the king, her father, and now Hamlet have set for her. She raises a wall between them with her words. Compared to their conversation in scene one, her words are now what Elaine Showalter describes as “white.”

In her feminist essay entitled “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism” Showalter traces the visual representations of Ophelia as a roadmap to interpretations of Ophelia in relation to her madness and sexuality. Eighteenth-century images depict a polite Ophelia in a “white dress, loose hair, and wildflowers,” followed one century later in France where Ophelia enters the stage in “a long black veil, suggesting the standard imagery of female sexual mystery in the Gothic novel” (226). Although costuming may have changed the audience’s initial impression of Ophelia, nineteenth century poets continued to write about a “white”
Ophelia, comparing her to wispy clouds, snowflakes, or a simple lily. Showalter references French poets, such as Rimbaud, Hugo, Musset, Mallarmé, and Laforgue, who assume “whiteness was part of Ophelia’s essential feminine symbolism” (234). Showalter moves the idea of a “blanche” Ophelia one step further by attributing this emblematic whiteness to the idea of transparency: “Yet whiteness made her a transparency, an absence that [takes] on the colors of Hamlet’s moods, and that, for the symbolists like Mallarmé, made her a blank page to be written over or on by the male imagination” (234). This blank-slate persona is indeed the state to which Cummings is referring when he describes what is not in IS; Ophelia, at this moment, has lost her ability to feel, similar to Goodland’s interpretation of Ophelia as a woman who has lost her voice. If Showalter is correct in her connection of transparency to absence, we can see how Ophelia is moving toward, if she is not already in, a state of infertility or the inability to feel. Retreating to the quiet corners of her mind where she cannot be hurt by those around her, she now only reacts to “the colors of Hamlet’s moods,” rather than creating her own colors, so to speak. Laertes’ reference to her in the beginning of the play as an “infant in spring” (1.3.39) has changed dramatically if we think about seedlings whose only job is to grow. Ophelia’s confidence in her own place in the world, as demonstrated by her ability to handle the warnings of her brother, is shattered much like Cummings’ description of the inner mirror into which we peer to witness our true “self.” Tragically, Ophelia’s ability to grow, to move, and to feel is overcome by stasis. Consider, if you will, the image of bombarding marbles in a box, which has just been shaken. The marbles move about, continuously bumping up against the box’s parameters. Eventually, however, once the box is no longer in motion, the marbles come
to rest. Likewise, Ophelia’s world is now still, and her feelings, formerly in a healthy state where they moved and bumped, are now disturbingly silent. Continuous rebirth, which is life itself, is now lost, and Ophelia is in mourning.

What happens next is a mystery because by the next time we see Ophelia at the end of Act IV, scene 5, she is transformed into a disheveled, disjointed, and distracted “mess.” What happens off-stage, however, is probably more important to our understanding of mourning. If we revisit Freud’s signifiers of grief and pain associated with loss, we can better understand Ophelia’s state of mind. She has accumulated many losses: first, the loss of her promised relationship with Hamlet; second, the loss of her father; and finally, the loss of “self.” What we realize when we now witness her sudden decline is that she is in mourning, a state in which she tries to reclaim her balance by reaching out to nature. After *The Mousetrap* ends, she must have wandered outside for a considerable amount of time because while she is gone, Hamlet has witnessed King Claudius in prayer, visited his mother’s chamber, killed Polonius, and argued with his friends Rosencrantz and Gildenstern. Having lost all of her senses, including her ability to feel, Ophelia begins a mourning process, one that deals with her loss of “self,” the healthy part of us that is, according to Cummings, in continuous rebirth. In *The Spanish Tragedy* Isabella was first drawn to nature off-stage where she found medicinal herbs and second, on-stage where she destroyed the setting where her son was murdered. In her battle with the green world, however, she was transformed from a seething, destructive “machine” into a resigned, sorrowful woman who made the decision to transcend horrific circumstances and join her son in death. Isabella’s transformation is one to which the audience is privy. In *Hamlet*, however, Shakespeare does not allow his audience the
luxury of first-hand knowledge. We know neither where Ophelia has been nor what she has been thinking, although references to nature spill out of her songs. In Act IV, scene 5, Queen Gertrude enters the stage boldly announcing to Horatio that she “will not speak with her [Ophelia]” (1). Horatio, more compassionate because he may have been with Ophelia, describes her behavior as “importunate / Indeed distraught” (1-2). In an attempt to relay to the queen that Ophelia’s words and actions are not normal, he says, “her speech is nothing” (my emphasis, 7); we know, however, that indeed her speech is something, sing-song words filled with references to the natural world outside the castle walls:

How should I your true love know

From another one? –

By his cockle hat and staff,

And his sandal shoon. (23-26)

He is dead and gone, lady,

He is dead and gone.

At his head a grass-green turn,

At his heels a stone. (29-32)

The “cockle hat” (25) may have been referring to rye grass as well as to cockle-shells; “grass-green turf” (31), to the grass around a grave; and “sweet flowers” (37), to the flowers that were not on her father’s grave. Ophelia’s engagement with flowers and herbs is her mourning, her effort to deal with her losses or to tease out her silent self from
the recesses of her mind. Like the Walker Clinic’s healing garden in Virginia, her own labyrinth outside the castle walls beckons. She is drawn to nature through a natural magnetism, the force we now recognize as healing for those in hospitals as well as for those who desire a respite from life’s cruel turns-of-events. Perhaps the green world provides an awakening of the senses when they have become muted or even dead; the floral beauty rouses our sleeping faculties, and we yearn to be fully alive, no matter how painful that may be.

Unfortunately, no text or stage directions indicate that Ophelia has flowers in her hand when she first enters the stage at the beginning of Act IV, scene 5, so we must rely on connotations of words, minute details, and visual cues that might vary, depending on each director’s interpretation. We know from the stage directions preceding this scene, for example, that Ophelia is “distracted; the additional details are taken from Q1” (text note #4, 1730). The scene opens with Horatio’s description of Ophelia’s new state to the queen: “She speaks much of her father, says she hears / There’s tricks i’th’ world, and hems, and beats her heart” (4-5). Without attempting to guess at the cause and even after Queen Gertrude gives him permission to admit Ophelia to the room, he quickly withdraws to the side of the stage, probably because his purpose is concluded, but perhaps a less obvious reason exists: he is unsure of what to do with Ophelia. Gertrude is also confused by the change in Ophelia, who enters playing a flute and singing snatches of nursery rhymes. Even after King Claudius enters the stage, no one on stage seems to know what to make of Ophelia’s behavior. Goodland describes their reaction in terms of

---

appropriateness: "a woman’s public display of grief is always disturbing and never correct" (187), which might be one reason why Horatio remains strangely silent and the King and Queen keep their distance. Another reason might be what Richard Brathwait suggests in his 1641 book, *The English Gentlewoman*, where he outlines appropriate behavior for women. Even though published at least 40 years after the publication of *Hamlet*, the book describes how women in the early seventeenth century, especially women of the upper class who should know how to behave in company, should act: “Silence in a woman is a moving rhetoricke, winning most, when in words it wooeth least...More shall wee see fall into sinne by speech then silence” (Qtd. in Fox-Good). A woman singing in public would have aroused suspicion, and would probably only be tolerated if the woman were suspected of madness. What may have been most disturbing to the witnesses of Ophelia’s behavior was the sexual innuendo within the song lyrics. In her transparent or “blanche” state Ophelia has indeed taken on the colors of Hamlet’s moods by making connections to the men in her life and relating them in disjointed phrases to both sex and death. She first asks how to recognize her true love and moves from that lyric to “he is dead and gone” (4.5.29), probably referring to Polonius’ recent murder. Her thoughts then turn to shrouds, flowers, graves, and finally end with a St. Valentine song describing what happens to promises of marriage when sex comes first:

   By 'Gis and by Saint Charity,

   Alack and fie for shame,

   Young men will do’t if they come to’t-

   By Cock, they are to blame.
Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,

You promised me to wed."

“So would I a done, by yonder sun,

And thou sadst not come to my bed." (4.5.57-64)

Jacquelyn Fox-Good, in her article entitled “Ophelia’s Mad Songs: Music, Gender, Power,” speaks to the inclusion of singing in this scene: “She [Ophelia] is constituting her own story, using her voice for her own grief, and for rage and protest” (222). According to Fox-Good, without Ophelia, Hamlet has no story (223), which may not be entirely true. Hamlet indeed has a story to tell; however, Ophelia’s energy, especially her “mad” energy, creates the stopgap causing characters to pause and audience members to stir in their seats. On the surface Ophelia’s songs might seem like nursery rhymes, yet the repetition of phrases (“He is dead and gone”) and rhythms (measures 1-2 and 5-6 in “St. Valentine’s Day) propels the words in what Fox-Good describes as a “burgeoning sense of power” (227). Ophelia’s singing, persistent and threatening, unsettles the king. His question to Gertrude, “How long hath she been thus?” (65), and his directive to Horatio, “Follow her close. Give her good / watch, I pray you” (71-72), are telling. He is no doubt wondering how much she knows and whether or not this knowledge is responsible for her new state or is a threat to him personally. Most importantly, his own obligations may be troubling him. Her father is dead, and Hamlet is not her betrothed. What duty does the newly crowned King of Denmark have to Ophelia other than to keep close watch and to make sure she does not cause trouble?

After 150 lines of discourse, Ophelia re-enters the stage, but whether or not she has flowers “in hand” is a mystery. Depending on the director, audiences may see
her empty-handed, flowers in-hand, box in-hand (containing flower pieces), or even photos in-hand. Laertes gives us one clue when he watches his sister enter the room in her distracted state: “Nature is fine in love, and where ’tis fine / it sends some precious instance of itself / After the thing it loves” (160-162). Laertes’ mention of nature could be referring to human nature, but he could also be referring to the natural world, specifically the world of plants and herbs, which are the “precious instances of itself.”

Perhaps the wildness he sees in his sister’s eyes is also in her hair and hands, remnants of flower petals and stems, and he immediately makes the connections between nature (plants) and love (Ophelia). In any case, between her two appearances on stage, it is possible that Ophelia wanders outside without initially planning to commune with nature. But the abundance of colors, scents, and textures most definitely provides a focus for her disjointed mind. Perhaps Shakespeare chose specific flowers based on their symbolic meanings to Elizabethan audiences. But the wandering Ophelia might have been drawn to the delicate purples of rosemary and violet, the white clusters of daisies, the starbursts of yellow fennel, and the ruby red of columbine. Why is it that, during her absence, everyone, including the audience, is with Hamlet? Who is with Ophelia, the one character who most needs someone to help her climb out of the recesses of her mind? Perhaps by allowing Ophelia time off-stage to “dissemble,” the audience can focus on the King’s developing plan to use Laertes as his new pawn. But the green world does provide a temporary shelter and at some point while she is outside, Ophelia is transformed. She has come undone. The world of flowers probably seems preferable to

---

the impossible situation inside the castle walls. Perhaps the flowers help her achieve the
state of euphoria where she now permanently resides. Certainly Ophelia's new state
allows her to cope with a world she no longer recognizes or trusts. Isabella may have
deliberately chosen her own end, but Ophelia's mind simply slips away, her reality now
tied up in flowers and herbs - a state of madness, or perfect stasis, that allows her to cope
with reality. In this sense, the green world becomes Ophelia's saving grace, the only
place where she feels peace.

When Laertes arrives, Ophelia's behavior changes. She becomes temporarily
lucid. In seven short lines she relinquishes her floral treasure-trove to the three remaining
characters onstage: Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes. Ophelia is amazingly pragmatic in
her gift-giving logic. Not only is she able to associate the symbolism of each flower with
the recipients' needs, but she is also giving up pieces of herself, flower by flower, leaf by
leaf. In Elaine Showalter's feminist criticism, she refers to Ophelia's behavior during
this scene as not only explicit, but also sexually explicit: "In giving away her wildflowers
and herbs, [she] is symbolically deflowering herself" (224). Showalter's interpretation
resonates with the text as well as with the license directors take, due to missing stage
directions, to depict Ophelia's state of mind. We assume, therefore, that she hands the
rosemary and pansies to her brother because of what he says and where he may be
standing. This is the first time he has seen her since he left for France in Act I, scene 3,
when he asked her to remember his advice. At that time she quickly assures him, "'Tis in
my memory locked, / And you yourself shall keep the key of it" (85-86), a loving answer.
Now, as her only sibling, he is no doubt amazed at her transformation and is the closest in
proximity to her on stage. She tells him, "that's for remembrance. Pray, love, /
remember. And there is pansies; that’s for thoughts” (4.5.173-174). Jessica Kerr, in her 1969 book, *Shakespeare’s Flowers*, provides some historical significance to these two plants. Rosemary, for example, is not merely known for its fragrant addition to stew or even for its meaning as a token of remembrance between lovers. Kerr notes,

> It [Rosemary] has also a long and honorable reputation as a remedy for many disorders of the body. Not so well known is the fact that the stem of the plant, when it [has] grown thick and tall against a garden wall, was used to make the beautiful lutes that provided so much of the music in Elizabethan England. (55)

Pansies are also “romantic” in that they are often given in conjunction with newlyweds and marriage feasts and often handed to the bridegroom on his wedding day. In the Ballad of 1543 “there was a fair bride-cup of silver gilt carried before her [the bride] wherein was a goodly branch of rosemary” (qtd. in Kerr 56). Not surprising then is Ophelia’s willingness to give away this particular flower and herb. They would be painful reminders of what she would never have.

James Persoon also explains the meaning of this gift to Ophelia’s brother in his article “Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*”: “The rosemary and pansies that Ophelia gives to Laertes seem not so much to signify mourning at the loss of a father as to recall her bruising at the hands of Hamlet and the loss of her in his memory” (70). If this is true, then we can see how she actually gives away her remembrances or memories, having now repressed the hurt Hamlet has caused. But Ophelia also advises her brother. She tells him to “remember” (174), a ghostly echo we have heard many times before in this play. Perhaps she is saying, “I don’t want to remember anymore. This is too painful.
Take the memory from me, so I can let go.” The void that is created by giving up the memory of Hamlet is crucial in that she seems to be relinquishing her purpose for living.

Stripped of her memories and thoughts, Ophelia next gives away four more plants to Gertrude and Claudius with directions for their use. “There’s fennel for you, and columbines” (177). According to Painter and Parker in “Ophelia’s Flowers Again,” several of Ophelia’s flowers may have been “well known to the Elizabethans as contraceptives, abortifacients, and emmenagogues [agents to induce menstruation]” (43). Fennel, notes the two authors, induces abortion, and columbine is linked to marital infidelity, which may be a subconscious fear in Ophelia’s mind, especially given the warnings of Polonius and Laertes. Ophelia gives both fennel and columbine as a “set,” and Gertrude is the logical recipient; Ophelia is only too willing to give up her deep-seated fears to Hamlet’s mother. Unfortunately, by giving up her fears, she is also giving up her ability to resolve them in her own mind. Ultimately, she is becoming less able to deal with reality and having lost her ability to feel, she is thus more likely to give in passively to death. Thus, these flowers and herbs provide her with a way to cope, even though she may not have consciously understood her own actions at the time.

Ophelia uses the word “you” several times in these five lines of prose, indicating when she turns to face a new character. Now, finally, she allegedly offers Claudius a woody medicinal herb. “There’s rue/ for you, and some for me. We may call it herb-grace o’ Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference” (177-179). Greenblatt’s textual notes tell us that “rue is associated with repentance and Ophelia identifies it with
the "herb of grace"” (1734). She is asking him to repent and to perhaps wear humility like a coat of arms. Interestingly, she keeps some for herself, which obviously, she does not need. Ophelia wears her repentant heart on her sleeve for all to see and takes that with her to her death. She also offers Claudius a daisy, representative of faithfulness. Her gifts to him are hopeful and innocent, but we know that these indulgences are futile. The king cannot repent, cannot even pray about what he has done to Hamlet’s father.

What Ophelia chooses to give away is in all probability what is most important to her at this time, but we can see her gifts divided into two categories, cognitive and affective. What she gives to her brother is her ability to think and remember, which when given away, allows her to separate reason from emotion. She gives the “dangerous” or darker side of herself to the two people who most understand the gifts. Ophelia may not be ready to deal with her passionate self, having been, as we have seen, subjected to warnings about desire and seduction. The fear that she could submit to these feelings might be more than she can face, but now that she relinquishes both reason and emotion, life is not worth living.

The final offer is the gift Ophelia does not physically have in hand- violets. “I would give you some violets, but they withered all/ when my father died. They say a made a good end” (180-181). Associated with faithfulness, the violet may represent the part of her that is now dead, the part she is actually unable to grasp and therefore unable to share. She believes she has buried this flower with her father but suddenly launches into song, forgetting about her gifts and even those around her. For now she is concentrating on the imaginary violet buried with her father who “will a not come again, / And will a not come again” (185-186). Clearly, she is now merely rambling, having lost
interest in those around her. Interestingly, the flowers become the focus of her thoughts and words, the core or center of her happiness. She has retreated to a place where no one can hurt her and the green world has provided her this escape. Like Isabella, Ophelia is drawn to the garden for comfort and is transformed but for both tragic heroines, as in all tragedies, the ending is expected.

Gertrude returns two scenes later to announce Ophelia’s death: “Your sister’s drowned, Laertes” (4.7.135). Unlike her direct announcement to Laertes, Gertrude’s subsequent retelling is most poetic, beginning first with the description of a willow tree near a brook and indicating the proximity of the tree to the water below. She tells the story with the vivid detail of a person who might have witnessed the event: the “fantastic” garland woven by Ophelia, the common plant names known by shepherds, the jilted-lover’s tradition hung on a willow bough, the floating Ophelia borne up by the stream’s weeds and finally, the tragic ending of her drowning. We can also make pertinent assumptions from Gertrude’s description. She tells us, for example, that the willow tree “grows aslant a brook / That shows its hoar leaves in the glassy stream” (my emphasis, 137-138). In other words, the tree actually grew out over the water because the leaves could be seen reflected therein. Unless she climbed the tree and onto the branch in question, she would have had to reach out and over the water’s edge to hang her garland. Gertrude uses the word “clamb’rng” (144) to describe Ophelia’s actions, so we must assume that she either climbed the bank to reach a branch, or she actually climbed the tree. Logically, if she had climbed the tree and then crawled out onto a branch to hang the garland, she would have fallen face-down. Ophelia is reported to have “chanted snatches of old tunes” (148), meaning that if she fell at all, it would have been
on her back. We must assume, then, that Ophelia was on the bank reaching up and out over the water's edge to hang her garland. The fact that "an envious sliver broke" (144) means that she opted to hang her flower crown on a smaller branch at the far reaches of the trunk of the tree. If she had fallen backwards and landed on her back, her weight would at least partially have submerged her face under water, something that would have startled her and does not support the fact that she was "chant[ing] snatches of old tunes, / As one incapable of her own distress" (148-149).

Gertrude also describes Ophelia as "mermaid-like" (147) as she floated down the brook singing happily. Could it be that Ophelia was actually moving her legs enough to make her floating sustain her on top of the water? Is it possible that Ophelia went into the water on her own after having tried unsuccessfully to hang her jilted-lover's crown on a branch over the water? The report describes anything but a struggling, drowning victim. Her mind at that point did not suspect the danger of wet clothes pulling her to death. The image Gertrude's story supports is one of a woman in another world, one who has chosen to ignore the cues of her environment, all the hints of danger so obvious to anyone in touch with reality.

In addition to the clues Gertrude provides about Ophelia's actions resulting in her drowning, we might also analyze the images and implications of the types of flowers Ophelia chose to make up the garland and how they were woven into place. Harry Jongerden, Head Gardener of the Stratford Festival of Canada, describes the significance of the greenery used in her garland in his book *This Other Eden: The Gardens of the Stratford Festival of Canada*: "Shakespeare's plants reinforce every aspect of Ophelia's state of mind and of her drowning" (14). Jongerden believes that the "pendant" (4.7.143)
whips from the willow tree were what Ophelia probably used as a backing for the garland. These whips would have strengthened the garland, providing a mesh structure into which the other flowers would have been woven. Certainly, this structure would not have fallen apart even if the garland had fallen off a branch. In both Figures 5 and 6 the artists have captured Ophelia floating down the stream with the garland in her hand.

Fig. 5. “Ophelia’s Death.” <www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2007/sep/25>.

Fig. 6. “Ophelia’s Death.” <www.clayfox.com/usp/images/Simmonds.Ophelia.jpg>.

In neither picture is the garland intact. The flowers are strung together but not attached at the ends to make the flowers into a perfect circle. In other words, the artists imagine that Ophelia probably had not finished her handiwork, cut off in her prime before her work of
living was finished. Figure 7 depicts an Ophelia who is still alive. She appears to be clinging to a willow branch with the garland under her arm. Contrary to her dangerous predicament, she does not look particularly distressed, nor does the water look particularly deep as close as she is to the bank. These visual texts certainly coincide with the text in that Ophelia looks quite peaceful, in life and in death. Jongerden attests to the fact that “she [was] adorning herself with the customary garlands that brides were draped in at their weddings” (14), so perhaps she was either thinking about the wedding she would never have, or she was “pretending” to be a bride at that moment, similar to the playacting of children. In either case, Ophelia’s madness at this point was as intertwined with her actions as the flowers in her coronet and was so complete that Gertrude’s description accurately portrays an Ophelia who was oblivious to the danger “like a creature native and endued / Unto that element” (150-151).
Certainly, the irony of the plants responsible for holding up Ophelia as she floats down the stream and then, finally, giving way to the weight of her body and clothing is not lost on us. But we may wonder why Shakespeare gives Gertrude the right to make this announcement. The scene may have been more laden with emotion had Hamlet or Laertes found her. The queen, however, is not particularly connected to Ophelia, thus making the death seem less monstrous. But perhaps Gertrude is the perfect choice. She understands the feelings of being stripped away to nothing, first losing her husband and then having to face Hamlet’s accusations of treachery and conspiracy. The Queen’s details are filled with floral images, especially the poignant “weedy trophies” (145), the tell-tale garland of flowers, which first floated alongside her but finally, after Ophelia sank from the weight of her heavy, wet clothes, floated alone.

Gertrude, of course, is speaking to an audience who probably knew the “grosser names[s]” (141) of the plants used to weave the garland. According to the article “Hamlet: Ophelia’s Long Purples” by Karl Wentersdorf, “Crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and arums are indeed an unlikely combination of flowers for a maiden’s coronet, and this is precisely what Gertrude implies when she describes the garland as ‘fantastic’” (416). Crow-flowers, nettles, and daisies, so-called by their common names, are all considered wild flowers and probably appear predominantly in wooded groves or along riverbanks. During the spring these flowers bloom, and certainly this would be the season when Ophelia would have fashioned her coronet. One plant used in the garland, which would have reinforced her state of mind is the nettle, which is covered with stinging hairs. According to Jongerden, “a stinging nettle must be the ultimate masochistic plant
symbol. Either Ophelia is immune, in her distraction, to the nettles’ burning sensation, or she is quite willing to harm herself” (15).

Often associated with fertility, other flowers’ sexual significance prompts writers to speculate on the “long purple” (4.7.140). Gertrude describes this wild orchid in three lines, including its more common name, “dead men’s fingers” (142), a name referring to “our cold maids.” Her words are vague; we are unable to ascertain whether or not she places Ophelia in the “chaste” category. Karl Wentersdorf gives us the scientific name of this flower, Orchis mascula, belonging to the orchid family and “known in Renaissance England either as ‘Standelwort or Standegass’ or as ‘Stones or Testicles’” (Gerarde qtd. in Wentersdorf 414). Shakespeare’s audiences most probably would have known many of the pseudonyms of this plant, and that the flower is long, purple, and phallic in appearance. Another possible source for “long purples,” according to Wentersdorf, is Arum maculatum, but this plant is “unsuitable for making into the crazed Ophelia’s wreath because the stalks droop and the scent is most unpleasant” (Savage qtd. in Wentersdorf 416). The fact is many wild flowers, such as nettles, may be unpleasant to smell and wilt quickly, which might make the wearer seem even more pathetic.

In any case, Ophelia’s choice of flowers for her crown may not be based simply on what is in bloom during a particular month and which stems weave easily. She, no doubt, is not cognizant of her actions and is merely intent on
hanging her final artful message on the bough of a willow, a tradition for “deserted lovers” (text notes 2, Greenblatt 1740). Shakespeare, however, was aware of herbal lore, choosing flowers by names so closely linked to sexuality that “in the wearing of them she appears to bring dishonor upon herself” (Otten 402). Certainly, Ophelia did not take the time to weave a crown with the intent to leave them behind. Her probable goal was to hang the floral wreath on a branch much like relinquishing her memories to Laertes, but her final act was cut short. Given the clues provided by the text and our knowledge of Renaissance herbal lore, Ophelia, attempting to hang the unfinished garland on a willow branch, probably dropped her treasure, picked it up, and then, thinking about the loveliness of the stream, simply wandered in and lay back to enjoy the experience.

Singing was simply part of her reverie, and she had no idea what was happening to her.

Scholars have studied the meanings of Shakespeare’s flowers for decades, but the question we need to ask ourselves is whether or not the type, color, or texture of the flower is even relevant. On a deeper level we may wonder why Ophelia gives up. Hamlet does come home, after all, and Ophelia’s death may be one of those pivotal moments where we may consider what might have happened if she had lived. One reading is that Ophelia is pure innocence surrounded by evil and treachery. Perhaps she cannot deal with the poison that runs through Denmark. Paradoxically, like Isabella, in order to save herself, she must die. Elaine Showalter describes the Romantic Ophelia as “a girl who feels too much, who drowns in feeling” (author’s emphasis, 228). I see Ophelia’s death as Cummings might have described it: here is a girl who stopped feeling, a girl who once knew love but began to mourn or seek a state of rebirth, a place where she could love and live again to counteract the losses around her. The transformative
power of the green world provided Ophelia with a place of comfort, but unfortunately, this was a place she never wanted to leave, so she retreated in a state of euphoric delight into the recesses of her mind. Because she was unable to deal with reality, continuous rebirth was not possible anymore. Ophelia was not drowning in feeling any more than she was drowning in love. She was drowning in emptiness.

In *The Divided Self* R.D. Laing describes Ophelia as an empty space: “In her madness there is no one there. There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances. Incomprehensible statements are uttered by an empty shell, by nothing. She has already died. There is now only a vacuum where there was once a person” (qtd. in Showalter 236). Laing’s pointed argument, according to Showalter, equates Ophelia with “nothing,” a term that effectively describes the lack of feeling more than a lack of voice. To achieve a balanced state we must be able to feel, and this inner activity, what we might think of as a soul, is what embodies continuous rebirth. To change and grow is synonymous with becoming new over and over again. This describes Ophelia’s initial state at the beginning of the play. The loss of movement is what sets her mourning in motion, but is also what prevents her from continuing her search, for once she enters the green world, the peace she finds there is not something she is able to lose. The return to nature restores the senses she must relinquish in order to withstand pain, so instead, she creates her own world, the world of greenery, flowers, and even nettles. In this world she can use all her senses but live only in the moment. Ophelia gives up the memories of all those people who have destroyed her, so she can finally live in peace.

Similarly, the goddess Persephone is abducted by Pluto and taken to the underworld to be his bride. Her flower belt slips from her waist and falls into the river.
We know that the meanings of individual flowers tell one story, but we also know that what characters, specifically women in mourning, do with these flowers may tell us more. Subconsciously, Ophelia cannot deal with the tragedies in her life so in essence, she begins the process of disrobing. First, she gives up memories. Next, she gives up her passion. Finally, she discards the disappointment of unrequited love and any chance of a sexual being. Similar to the river that carries Persephone’s story, so too the weeping brook engulfs Ophelia. A wilted, discarded crown is the only remnant of her life’s end.

Conclusion

Gardens have been used for centuries as backdrops for stories. Adam and Eve, in The Bible, may have been the first known couple to live in innocence in the world’s most perfect setting, but their story was not the first accounting of the healing power of the green world. Gilgamesh found his best friend living in nature with the animals. The Greek poetess Sappho “wove violet tiaras” and “braided rosebuds” on the Island of Lesbos, and Homer’s Odysseus beat the odds with Circe simply by eating Moly. But not until John Gerard published his intense study of plants in 1537, categorizing their types and uses, did authors begin to see how much richer their stories became by allowing their characters to be influenced by a plant’s leafy properties. During the Renaissance, writers began to make use of garden rhetoric to tell their stories of illicit love, unexplained illnesses, and heinous crimes. Audiences across class lines could laugh at Bottom eating figs, could scream at Romeo drinking poison, and shudder at Ophelia’s death.

---

9 Sappho has many poems that include nature, not as worship of nature or for itself, but rather as a setting or "backdrop." Poems 2, 14, and 15 specifically reference flora, groves, and nature, in general.
Recently, we have seen a resurgence of plant lore in contemporary fiction. J.K. Rowlings' *Harry Potter* series includes a plethora of plants within her realm of fantastic potions and antidotes. Today's audiences, however, are not as savvy as our Renaissance theatre-going and book-buying counterparts. We have much to learn about the medicinal value of plants and how they can contribute to the tension of a good plot. Today, unless we are botanists or plant-lovers, we are unaware that geranium petals, if soaked, make soothing poultices for feet, that the vanilla bean aroma triggers synapses in the brain to facilitate learning, that simple paprika gives us energy. Unlike modern readers and viewers, sixteenth century playwrights and essayists were much more adept at using plant lore to help tell a good story.

Scholars were beginning to sit up and take notice of how plants took on a life of their own in stories. The physical and chemical properties as well as modes of propagation and growth were charted and graphed. Cultural complexities began to open the door to stories and traditions that went far beyond wine-drinking and festivals. The perishability of a cherry blossom began to symbolize the fragility of life as believably as a hollowed-out pumpkin shell could become a home for Peter's wife. And yet stories about fruits, vegetables, and flowers were not enough without their magical properties. *Jack in the Beanstalk* came to life only because we could accompany Jack up to a magical castle where danger lurked around a golden egg. Apples became evil only because Satan coerced Eve to take the first bite and were redeemed only when Johnny Appleseed used them to populate the earth with more trees.

We have always known the beauty of plants made a difference in our own dispositions. Our senses awaken when we hear that first bird chirp in the spring, and we
seem to be happiest when we feel the first warmth of summer spread through us. Our own seeds, which have lain dormant all winter long, suddenly germinate and sprout. New roots take hold, and we are the better for it. No wonder, then, hospitals all over the world are harnessing this pleasurable response to the beauty of nature and using the energy to full capacity. Who wouldn’t feel more like waking up early to have our blood drawn if we had the chance to be wheeled through a lush garden with a waterfall, the sight of which tickled our color palates? The question is... why? Why is it we just plain feel better when we witness God’s green earth, plant a seed, and watch it grow? Is it the pride we have in a job well done? Is it something in the air that raises our serotonin levels that works better than an anti-depressant? Or are we chemically changed for the better?

Sir Thomas More understood the dynamics between plants and people when he wrote *Utopia* at the beginning of the century. He was both celebrated and criticized for his satiric *Utopia*. Readers of his day could not understand how a man of such religious devotion could possibly believe that old people who became too much “trouble” could be euthanized, so they could make an earlier get-away to heaven. Yet, upon closer reading, we realize that although More’s utopian island was surrounded by barbed wire, inside, beyond the throngs of crowded cities, the openness of the country beckoned. Sandwiched between glib accounts of six-hour work days and day-long passes to neighboring cities, short descriptions of the green world revealed bits and pieces of More’s real vision: people in the country were free to enjoy the privacy of their own homes, to work as many hours as they wished, to take their education seriously, and to love their God with the fervent passion of true servitude.
Thomas Kyd made use of the new Italian enclosed, private garden as the setting for his lovers in *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587), complete with anadiplosis to underscore the language of longing. He allowed Horatio and Bel-Imperia to meet in the garden but chose the same, unthinkable site to juxtapose the heinous crime of murder. As mother of the murdered Horatio, Isabella returns to the scene of the crime for a cathartic moment of ridding her garden of every plant and tree. By purifying her soil through the elimination of its “poison,” she is perhaps excoriating her own toxic thoughts. Somehow, though, the plants give her pause to think, and she is transformed. She works through her own stages of grief and decides to join her son in death. Unfortunately, tragedies, especially revenge tragedies, end in widespread death, but the very plants that have been with us since the beginning of time now take on a curious healing power. And Kyd uses this power to tell his story.

E. E. Cummings writes at length about the IS, a continuous rebirth that he discovered during World War I when he was imprisoned by the enemy and wrote about in *The Enormous Room*. In our very basest form, human beings are capable of constant change and according to Cummings, we are able to feel the deepest when we are in our most base form. Thinking without feeling is not really living, and it is this idea that became the germinating seed of this study. Isabella was transformed by her ability to feel Horatio’s murder deeply; she was not able to feel, however, until she entered the garden and made contact, emotionally and physically, with the plants. Nothing was more poignant about Kyd’s story than this mother’s decision to join her son in death, to sit side-by-side and argue with Rhadamanth, one of the underworld’s most astute judges. Plants became her salvation and their destruction segued into a transcendence of death.
Hieronimo's revenge for the death of their son did not surpass Isabella's courage and insight, however many people he killed.

So too was the courageous Ophelia drawn to the garden for healing. Can any of us modern-day women who have the freedom to do and say whatever we choose, come what may, even imagine what it must have been like to be manipulated by all the men in our lives, especially our fathers? Shakespeare included over 200 plants in his plays, probably more than just a casual interest in wildflowers would justify. His personal catalogue of the medicinal value and the social implications of certain plants and herbs help to send his characters on wild goose-chases, to lovers' beds, and to the depths of despair. His audiences knew that Ophelia was intimately involved with Hamlet and that her father had reason for concern. No wonder some scholars have wondered about a possible pregnancy when arum maculatum was one of the flowers in her garland. And isn't it the flowers she dispenses, imaginative or real, the real "skinny" when it comes to deciding who is faithful and who is not? Is her choice in flowers enough to send her brother on his own mission of destruction? Shakespeare made extensive use of symbolism and herbal lore when he wrote his stories, but he also was sensitive enough to understand the power of beauty and its effect on our psyches. Our senses can be awakened enough while we are under the power of a lush garden to transform us into the person we want to be, even at the expense of our own sanity. Perhaps no one knows exactly what happened to Ophelia when she was off-stage in the garden during Act IV as 120 lines of script were delivered without her. Perhaps there wasn't even enough time for her to fully enjoy the beauty of the green world, let alone pick the flowers and herbs she desired. But something happened to her, and she shared that "something" with her
brother, the king, and the queen as best she could before transcending her own reality and becoming a permanent resident in her own mind. Perhaps the power of plants gave her the language she didn’t own herself to communicate what she needed to say before she gave in to death.

Many readers, although they agree that *Hamlet* is really about Hamlet the university student who comes home for his father’s funeral to eat “the funeral baked meats / [that] Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables” (1.2.179-180), know that the play is also about a young woman who in a very short time experiences the death of her own spirit. Cummings would have referred to her tragedy as the death of IS; she lost her ability to feel and therefore was no longer able to move within the societal boundaries preset for her. She was drawn to the garden for some type of awakening but instead found a beauty so profound that she was reluctant, yes, even unable to leave it. The plants became medicinal in that they were a salve for her soul, the very poultice she needed when the real world’s burn became simply unbearable.

What Ophelia seeks is the “Fair Quiet” that Andrew Marvell longs for in his poem “The Garden.” The sacredness of his green world becomes the antithesis of a rude society and therefore medicinal in its purpose: “Here at the fountain’s sliding foot, / Or at some fruit-tree’s mossy root, / Casting the body’s vest aside, / My soul into the boughs does glide” (374). Like Marvell, Ophelia seeks this same refuge. She is more than willing to cast aside her own body’s vest and transcend the ugliness of life. Her soul glides easily into the cradling arms of a pine’s bough, forsaking all that is evil. Her only thought is comfort, a green thought in a green shade.
Works Cited


Cannon, Charles K. “The Relation of the Additions of *The Spanish Tragedy* To the
Original Play.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*. (Spring 1962): 229.

Crosbie, Christopher. “*Oeconomia* and the Vegetative Soul: Rethinking Revenge in


Ebers, John R. Personal Interview. 01 January 2009.


Fox-Good, Jacquelyn. “Ophelia’s Mad Songs: Music Gender, Power.” *Subjects on the
World’s Stage*. A. Allen, David and Robert A. White, eds. Newark: University

1963.

Frye, Northrop. *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and

Publishers, 1636.

Goodland, Katharine. *Female Mourning and Tragedy in Medieval and Renaissance
Drama: From the Raising of Lazarus to “King Lear.”* Aldershot, UK:
Ashgate, 2005.


Tweedie, Eleanor M. “‘Action is Eloquence’: The Staging of Thomas Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy.*” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 16 (1976): 223-239.


Works Consulted


University Press, 1957.


Heritage Centre: *The Healing Power of Plants*. April 24, 2006. 06 June 2008 <www.replondon.ac.uk/heritage/plants>.


Kazin, Alfred. “E. E. Cummings and His Fathers [i:Six Nonlectures].” *E. E Cummings*:

Kelley, Sharon A. “Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale.” The Explicator 64.3 (Spring, 2006): 140-141.


