

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 10
Number 1 *Forum Theme 1: Cornerstone, Forum
Theme 2: Shakespeare Alive Cluster, & Theme
3: The State of Higher Education Cluster*

Article 17

3-2015

A Contemporary Ophelia Reads the Sonnets

Vicki J. Simpson
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2015 Vicki J. Simpson

Recommended Citation

Simpson, Vicki J. (2015) "A Contemporary Ophelia Reads the Sonnets," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 10: No. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol10/iss1/17>

This Forum Theme 2 is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Offensive Materials Statement: Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.



A Contemporary Ophelia Reads the Sonnets

Part of the journal section "Forum: Shakespeare Alive Cluster"

Vicki J. Simpson, "A Contemporary Ophelia Reads the Sonnets"

1. Shakespeare's Ophelia is a complex character—she's multilayered, conflicted, and evocative. Exactly how a woman from such a golden age of exploration and expansion in England's history could have lived such a circumscribed existence is certainly understandable, given the time period, but it's also an incalculable tragedy. In this piece, I invite you to suspend your disbelief and join me in an imaginative quest to see how this star-crossed noblewoman from Denmark might approach Shakespeare's Sonnets 29, 30, and 122, from a decadent, epicurean, self-indulgent, and entirely postmodern perspective.

2. Accompany me in exploring an empowered Ophelia, one who reads the following from Shakespeare's sonnet 29:

Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings (10-13)

I suggest that as she reads, she thinks, and as she thinks, she becomes euphoric. Her euphoria takes her back to her fateful night with Hamlet, when he cast her aside in the harshest terms.

3. Following suggestions made by Elizabeth Harris Sagaser, especially her invitation to readers to consider how the sonnets can be seen as Elizabethan vehicles to reframe one's romanticized thoughts toward his or her beloved as innately positive and empowering rather than overtly dark and swooning, I am suggesting that we defamiliarize the way in which we typically respond to thoughts of one's romantic beloved. Such demands our full attention and further creative and speculative consideration, and Shakespeare's sonnets are the perfect vehicles for such further and alternative consideration. For my speculation using the sonnets, I take Sagaser's method farther, adding this: Is it not redemptive, restorative, and in fact salvific to simply contemplate the beauty of one's own carnality? Are not one's thoughts fully freeing, restorative, and regenerating when they are given the license to be blatantly and shamelessly sexualized? Moreover, while I agree with Sagaser that these three sonnets should be recognized as watershed ways of perceiving love in Elizabethan England, another benefit in today's society is in their ability to give the reader a new platform from which to explore the positive side of their own sexual desires. Certainly,

Shakespeare found it so; talk about self-confidence! Haply, perhaps, possibly, maybe, perchance, serendipitously, contemporary readers would do well to take the Shakespearean lead.

4. What “wealth” does this unconventional form of “sweet love” bring? In Hamlet, Ophelia pines, “‘Before you tumbled me / you promised me to wed’” (4.5.62-63). A feminist interpretation of this line from Hamlet illustrates the perfidious predicament that women throughout time have found themselves in. Hamlet has moved on, while Ophelia has not. She is deeply entrenched in the throes of lunacy via the double tragedies of the loss of her father, Polonius, and the love of her life, Hamlet. She can think of nothing else but her pain as “death’s dateless night” has her in its grasp. She cannot get beyond him, or perhaps she chooses not to do so.

5. I invite you to imagine a different ending. Certainly, a postmodern interpretation of this verse must note that one may now tumble about shamelessly with the object of one’s affection without being “‘promised...to wed,’” haply, without even the thought of a second date. Or, simply enjoying beauty for beauty’s sake. And then, no longer “sullen,” she, like a lark, partridge, quail, or some other small, but nonetheless significant bird of the field, from the conspicuous calandra larks to the arresting robin-redbreast, is filled with a joy that only a bird in flight at daybreak can know.

6. Hear a new Ophelia pine as if she herself had penned Shakespeare’s lines:

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste:
Then can I drown an eye, unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night. (Sonnet 30, 1-6)

Ophelia ruminates incessantly with tears falling from eyes unused to crying, at least “unus’d to” before she met Hamlet. One would imagine that on that fateful night she hungrily grasped his shoulders and, this contemporary Ophelia might feel that she let the warmth of his flames dance audaciously, erotically, hedonistically in my belly as candlelight onto the walls, walls that shamelessly enclosed us in that small space, surrounding our forms there on the bed, innocent yet, you know—blameless still. Heady with excitement, she succumbs to the scent of burning prairie flowers and wild musk, cottonwood, and cherry blossom, exotic, fiery scents fashioning their magnetic, sweltering influence over her better judgment, reveling in her mind, just as “the lark at break of day arising” in Shakespeare’s lush, verdant Eden (Sonnet 29, 11).

7. That ever evasive hint of red-hot scent and scorching shade, wafting deep into my lungs, curling, caressing, crowing. Limiting all the while my ability to hush my savage heart from its ever-increasing, frenetic, frantic, fluttering cadence. His beautiful body melts me mystically, somehow he tears down all of my deep-seated walls, alleviates my anxieties, my objections. All excuses tumble haphazardly away, and I am left only with an intense longing solely for him and his physical beauty. And then he rolls over on his back. And I am so caught up in looking. Unable to look away, helpless to return to the safety of my own thoughts. I am powerless to do

anything but go to him—in every sense of the word. I am falling away from myself, away from my definition of decency, into the delicious, erotic look in his eyes, his smile, his breath so close to mine. What to do now?

8. Had this Ophelia lived in contemporary society and taken the time to write about her adventure like this, she may have simply seized the moment and moved on rather than descend into madness.

And weep afresh love's long since cancell'd woe,
 And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight:
 Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
 And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
 The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
 Which I new pay as if not paid before.
 But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
 All losses are restor'd and sorrows end. (Sonnet 30, 7-14)

Here, again, imagine: now, all alone, Ophelia commits her love to paper, in the absence of her beloved. Letting the “blank book,” the “tally,” and the “tables” of her mind hold the record.

Till each to razed oblivion yield his part
 Of thee, thy record never can be missed.
 That poor retention could not so much hold,
 Nor need I tallies thy dear love to score;
 Therefore to give them from me was I bold,
 To trust those tables that receive thee more;
 To keep an adjunct to remember thee.
 Were to import forgetfulness in me. (Sonnet 122, 7-14)

Then she writes as follows: Remembering. The wantonness of feeling him. Dynamic, energetic, quick, and erotic; but, lazy, slow, and sticky, too, like sweet molasses, or a timeless whispering journey down some blue-green river in spring. Just like his tattoo: a bubbling stream across a bulging tricep covered with eternal ink. This iconography is part of his legacy. I just want to lose myself in it, he is so dazzling, magnificent, stunning. I will take my fill of him.

9. Note her active versus passive language—female empowerment is reaching full fruition here—I am helpless. He kisses like there is no tomorrow. He kisses as if a thousand years past have suddenly eclipsed the future, and all of time is halted, suspended, hovering above. All of my desire for him is caught on his sweet, wet, probing tongue. I lose myself in that kiss. He is biting my lower lip, tenderly. I need this, in the decidedly here and now. “Therefore to give them from me was I bold...” lest I should “import forgetfulness” (Sonnet 122, 11, 14). Embrace beauty, be redeemed by it, remember it, write about it, and move on. This is courage complemented by a Shakespearean education. Shakespeare’s sonnets can embolden a shamelessly hedonistic Ophelia. No longer the tragic figure, today she is the fully inspired, incessantly sensual creature who not only chooses life but loves it in all of its complexity,

uncertainty, and subjectivity. Most importantly, she lives it on terms that are life-affirming for who she is: a woman who loves the beauty of her own sexuality.

Works Cited

Sagaser, Elizabeth Harris. "Shakespeare's Sweet Leaves: Mourning, Pleasure, and the Triumph of Thought in the Renaissance Love Lyric." *English Literary History (ELH)*. 61.1 (Spring 1994). 1-26. Web. 01 Jan. 2015.

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (1604-5) *The Arden Shakespeare*. Eds. Thompson, Ann, and Neil Taylor. 3rd London: Cengage L P, 2006. Print.

--- "Sonnet 29." Iowa State U eServer. 1997. Web. 01 Jan. 2015.

--- "Sonnet 30." Iowa State U eServer. 1997. Web. 01 Jan. 2015.

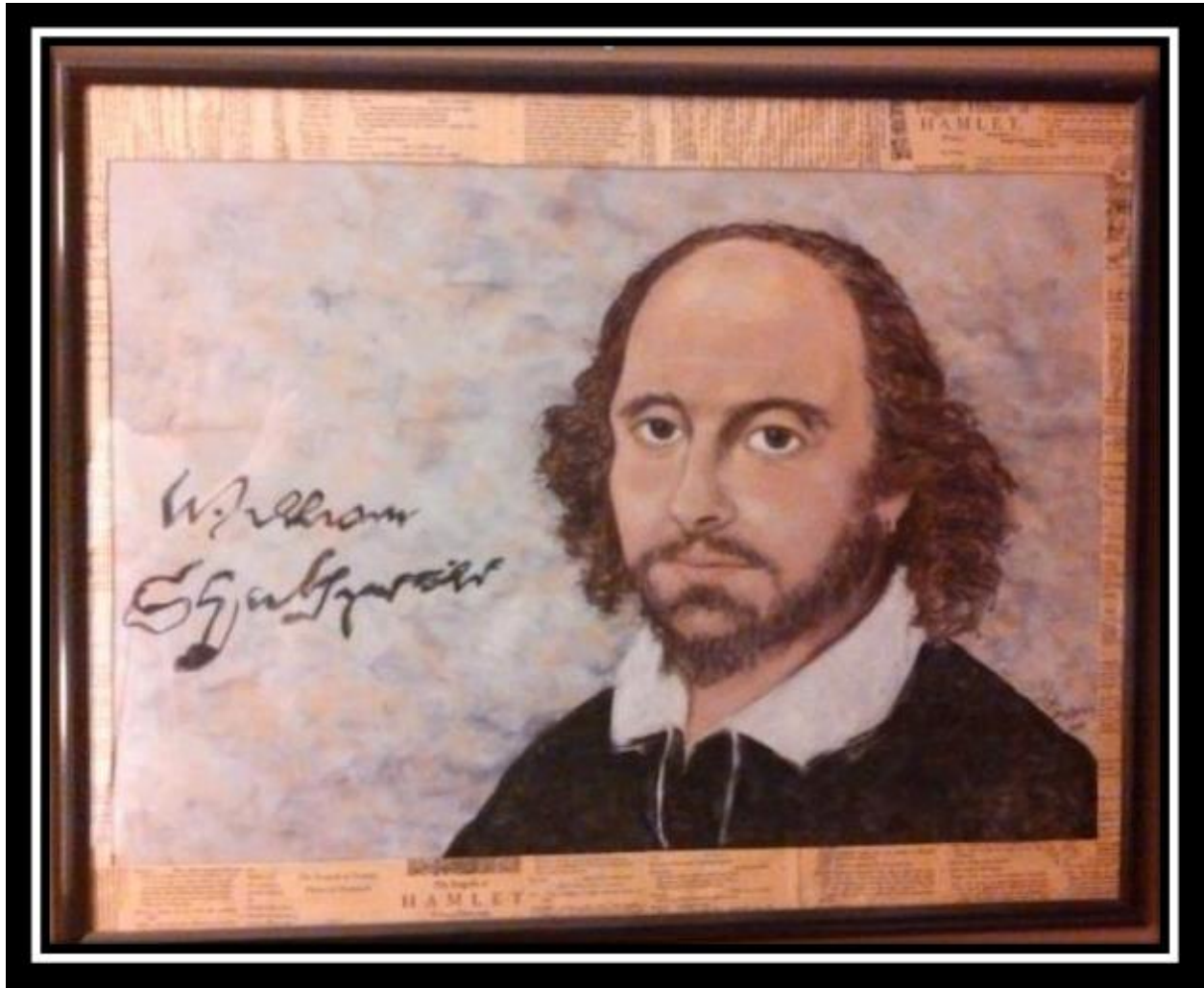
--- "Sonnet 122." Iowa State U eServer. 1997. Web. 01 Jan. 2015.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Will the Wordsmith



“Will the Wordsmith” (2012)—Vicki Simpson—chalk pastel on 21” x 27” velour paper encased in torn book pages from *Hamlet* (Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet, 2006), with a provenance of Cedar Falls, IA. Operating out of my reactions to an ephemeral world around me—a world permeated with texture, chiaroscuro, and juxtaposition—I pursue an expression of nuanced articulation wherein I utilize visual, verbal, and auditory cues to create a sensual, tactile, multifaceted work. This piece investigates my interests in the mystical origins of chance, passion, beauty, and fluidity.