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“OUR REMEDIES OFT IN OURSELVES DO LIE” :
HERBALISM AND MEDICINAL FLORIOGRAPHY AS FEMININE POWER
IN *THE SPANISH TRAGEDY*, *HAMLET*, AND *THE WINTER’S TALE*

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ABSTRACT

Academic study of gender relations during the Renaissance frequently emphasizes women's lack of agency and authority within a patriarchal society. Shakespearean female characters have been similarly examined as powerless and incapable in comparison to their male counterparts.

Renaissance women, however, had a uniquely feminized form of power; they were medical authorities who were responsible for treating their family and community members with specific plants to cure certain ailments. This thesis first explores the historical context of herbalism and Shakespeare's familiarity with its practice. It then argues how Shakespeare adapted herbalistic uses of particular plants for symbolic meanings, resulting in the creation of medicinal floriography. Finally, this thesis provides three sections of analysis wherein the female characters attempt to symbolically remedy "social ills" within their respective plays.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In Shakespeare's *All's Well that Ends Well*, Helena states, "Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie" (1.1.231). Helena is a female herbalist who promises to cure the dying King in exchange for permission to marry whomever she desires. Helena expresses a desire to alter fate, to change circumstances seemingly beyond her control by finding the power to change within herself. By creating a powerful herbal remedy that successfully heals the King, Helena is able to marry the man she loves despite many obstacles. Helena's assertion that one can enact change by creating 'remedies' for one's situation offers a beautiful parallel to the power herbal medicine and medicinal floriography provided early modern women and Shakespeare's female characters.

Academic study of gender relations during the Renaissance has never shied away from examining the powerlessness of women. Literary critics have similarly emphasized how Shakespeare's female characters often lack agency and authority. In their introduction to *The Women's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely write of Shakespeare's female characters: "Good women are often powerless, and powerful women are always threatening and often, in fact, destructive" (6). This view, however, fails to take into account the ways that some of Shakespeare's female characters evoke explicitly feminized forms of nondestructive power—herbalism and floriography—that may be unfamiliar to modern audiences. This thesis will demonstrate how some of Shakespeare's

female characters utilize the language of herbalism and floriography to alleviate “social ills” as though they are physical ailments in order to cure their communities.

During the Renaissance, women had limited authority and were often unable to express their opinions within a patriarchal society. Women were typically expected to obediently and quietly follow their fathers’ and/or husbands’ rules and orders. This gendered behavior was predicated on Christian beliefs about the inferiority and insufficiency of women based on Eve’s creation and fall in the bible (Biscetti 161). The conception of femininity subsequently emphasized submissiveness and, thus, powerlessness. However, women’s practice of herbalism complicated this power dynamic because men often depended upon women to help heal their illnesses. Defined as the use of plants for medicinal purposes, herbalism was a specifically feminized type of medicine. In Gervase Markham’s *Countray Contentments, or the English Huswife*, published in 1623, he outlines the importance of women’s herbal knowledge, stating:

To begin then with the most principal virtues which doth belong to our English housewife; you shall understand, that with the preservation and care of the family touching their health and soundness of body, consisteth most in the diligence: it is meet that she have a physical kind of knowledge, how to administer many wholesome receipts or medicines for the good of their healths as we to prevent the first occasion of sickness, as to take away the effects and evil of the same when it hath made seizure on the body. (16)

The role of “healer” Markham outlines above gave women a way of enacting authority in a respectable manner within their patriarchal society. Acting as healers, women were expected to be conscious of the physical conditions of all of their family members and to impart “receipts or medicines” at the first sign of physical illness to ensure their health. The “preservation and care

of the family” allowed women to possess knowledge and enact authority over their male family members in order to maintain their physical health.

Herbalism thus became an area of study for a variety of Renaissance women.¹ Women most commonly learned herbalism by experimenting with the plants and flowers near their homes to treat particular illnesses; this experimenting often led to learning what plants to use and the best ways of administering them. In turn, these women taught their daughters, other female family members, and female friends what they had discovered and used. While practice and exchanged knowledge were the most common ways women studied herbalism, printed texts classified as herbals were also available during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Herbals contain a comprehensive, indexed guide of particular plants’ medicinal uses as well as recommended treatments for certain ailments; they are practical and accessible guides to this type of medical knowledge. Despite the common association between women and herbalism, male physicians, surgeons, and apothecaries published most herbals at this time (Laroche 3-4). The most widely printed and circulated herbal was *The Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597) written by John Gerard. John Gerard was a surgeon, gardener under the employment of William Cecil, Lord Burghley, and curator of the College of Physicians physic garden (Sidney 540-5). He was renowned for his medicinal work with plants as exemplified in his herbal. Although herbals were written by men in the medical field to be read by other men in this field, women of all social classes also read and utilized these texts to study and expand upon their herbal practices (Laroche 67). In her book, *Medical Authority and Englishwomen’s Herbal Texts, 1550-1650*, Rebecca Laroche discusses how male herbal writers recognized and then attempted

¹ The historical context found in this paragraph is a summary of information found throughout Rebecca Laroche’s *Medical Authority and Englishwomen’s Herbal Texts, 1550-1650*. I highly recommend the text in its entirety and am greatly indebted to Laroche’s research and arguments in understanding Renaissance women’s medical knowledge and authority.

to undermine and discourage female practitioners in order to create a male textual herbalistic authority. She presents a compelling study of the relationship between women's reading of printed herbals— particularly Gerard's— and how these readings influenced and shaped their own herbal practices. This influence occurred in spite of the textual depiction of female herbalists as unqualified and unknowledgeable. Laroche's case studies exemplify the realities of specific, real women and how practicing herbalism gave them influence and authority to circumvent gender hierarchies within their patriarchal society. Herbalism and medical authority thus permitted women to positively influence social situations and enact change in their communities.

Aware of this feminized social power, Shakespeare adapted herbalism's medical connotations into the burgeoning language of medicinal floriography. Floriography can be broadly defined as the use of flowers to convey specific symbolic meanings. Current academic study of floriography has heretofore been considered in relationship to the Victorian period. Shakespeare's adaption of herbalism for symbolic purposes, however, warrants further categorization. I have created the term 'literary floriography' to specify the floriography of the Victorian period and 'medicinal floriography' to describe Shakespeare's earlier herbalistic version. The primary difference between literary floriography and medicinal floriography is the source from which the plants' symbolic meanings originate.

The primary sources for the definitions found in literary floriography are flower dictionaries and sentimental books. In *The Language of Flowers: A History*, Beverly Seaton provides a wonderful study of these texts specific to their development and rise in popularity during the Victorian period. Seaton explains that the floriography of Victorian England is an Anglicized form of the French floriography that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century (48-60). The floriographic writers of nineteenth-century France and Victorian England defined flowers'

meanings based on a haphazard collection of plants' historical/sociocultural uses and associations and, sometimes, pure imagination and invention on the authors' part. As Seaton describes these creators, "... they are primarily middle-class literary folks, writing with an end to some profit, hoping to exploit the sentimental interest in flowers" (78). Ultimately, their floriography lacked concrete evidence as to how certain meanings came to be and, often times, historical context was not discussed or explored. While certain plants have consistent floriographic meanings, these writers often did not trace how or why these meanings transpired. Seaton finally emphasizes that these texts were primarily intended for a female audience, creating a feminized area of study as well as a feminized language. It is this textual phenomenon of literary floriography, contained within numerous Victorian flower dictionaries and sentimental books, that most modern critics and readers associate with Shakespeare's work.

The conflation of literary floriography with Shakespeare's work, however, omits the complex history of herbalism and herbals in shaping his symbolic register. Literary floriography draws upon literary texts to pinpoint these meanings, whereas medicinal floriography draws its symbolic meanings from medical connotations based upon plants' uses in herbalism. When scholars of literary floriography privilege literary texts as source material, it limits the study of floriography from broadening to include this medicinal form. For example, in researching the early modern English history of floriography, Seaton merely uses printed religious poetry and prose texts (43-8); Seaton theorizes that plants were only utilized in religious allegory and within Christian symbolism in England before the mid-nineteenth century (42-6). Seaton thus falsely concludes that floriography was not fully developed and utilized in England until the introduction of the French version in the mid-nineteenth century.

Studying the history of English herbalism and Shakespeare's familiarity with it can enlighten literary critics to his use of plants as vehicles for symbolic meaning in the development of medicinal floriography. Multiple sources have discussed Shakespeare's familiarity with and knowledge of herbalism. According to Mats Ryden, Shakespeare's "...primary, printed sources of his botanical knowledge, including plant names, seem to have been Gerard and Lyte's herbals" (qtd. Thomas et al. 2). This is supported by Jules Janick, Harry Paris, and Marie-Christine Daunay's article, "The Cucurbits and Nightshades of Renaissance England: John Gerard and William Shakespeare," wherein they compare references in Gerard to those found in Shakespeare's plays. More interestingly, they claim the men may have known or interacted with each other due to their proximity in pre-modern London; court records show that one of Shakespeare's residences was opposite of Barber- Surgeon's Hall where Gerard worked and had his gardens (251). Even if Shakespeare did not personally know Gerard, his son-in-law, Dr. John Hall, had herb gardens for use in his apothecary and physician's practice in Straford-upon-Avon (Thomas et. al 6). Shakespeare's audience would have also been intimately familiar with herbalism and plants' medicinal uses. Female audience members would have readily understood the medicinal qualities of these plants and surmised what they were intended to mean symbolically based on these uses. Consequently, herbalism was a readily comprehensible and feminized domain for Shakespeare to utilize symbolically within his work.

This thesis will be a valuable contribution to literary studies because it offers an alternative interpretation of female characters in Renaissance plays. In current Renaissance literary criticism, female characters are often interpreted as powerless and voiceless when they do not act in destructive, conniving stereotypically masculine ways. Additionally, some female characters are even interpreted as irrational or mad due to their association with plants, flowers,

and nature. While there is value and merit to this criticism, it largely fails to acknowledge women's historical practice of herbal medicine and how floriography allowed women to voice concern and exert authority within a patriarchal society. My examination of female characters' use of medicinal floriography will show that references to nature, plants, and flowers do not simply equate to either pastoral fantasy or insanity. I will complicate the characterization of these female characters by examining the logic and meaning of the "social remedies" they offer. These remedies rely upon complex literal herbalistic uses and figurative floriographic meanings to convey female characters' knowledge of their circumstances. Similarly, female characters' use of herbalism and floriography illustrate how they utilized what little authority and power they had to enact positive change in their lives. While it may be easier to interpret female characters who are associated with nature as powerless, naïve, and vapid, I believe that they deserve to be understood as equally complex, intelligent, and capable as their male counterparts.

Whereas Shakespeare's Helena is an herbalist who cures the King of his illness with her plants, his other female characters attempt to use their plants to symbolically remedy the social ills within their communities and families. These social ills are societal problems that negatively impact their communities, which the women try to symbolically treat and alleviate through referencing specific plants. I will utilize Gerard's *Herbal* and other early modern herbals to establish a clear relationship between plants and their medicinal usages in order to explain their medicinal floriographic meanings; I will additionally utilize Culpeper's *The English Physitian* (1653), a popular herbal published after Shakespeare's work, to illustrate the longevity and sustained knowledge of herbalism within early modern England. The female characters I analyze undoubtedly exert a feminized form of power that solicits other characters to respond appropriately to their requests. Their power, however, is not threatening to the patriarchal society

in which it is wielded; its exertion is meant to be restorative rather than destructive to their communities. In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Isabella is an herbalist who must accept that her plants cannot bring her son back to life; she attempts to reckon with the social ill of his murder by destroying the garden and arbor that cannot provide her such a remedy. In her mad scene in *Hamlet*, Ophelia attempts to utilize medicinal floriography to prevent further tragedy albeit unsuccessfully. Perdita's plants enable symbolic healing to occur and allow the mending of the broken relationships in *The Winter's Tale*. Like Helena suggests, Isabella, Ophelia, and Perdita all look within themselves and attempt to use their knowledge of herbalism and feminized authority to positively intervene and alter circumstances seemingly outside of their control; they find the "remedies" for their plays' social problems within themselves.

Chapter 2

“Let a Medicine Be Given for Our Suffering” : Isabella in *The Spanish Tragedy*

In Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Isabella attempts to utilize herbalism to bring about social healing. Originally written in 1587, published in 1592, and heavily added to by other dramatists in 1602, the play illustrates a familiarity with women's practice and knowledge of herbalism and dramatizes women's positions as literal and social healers.² Kyd's Isabella provides an early example of using the language of herbalism to discuss social ills in a manner that is not far removed from medical practice. Whereas Shakespeare's medicinal floriography operates on a purely symbolic register, Kyd blends literal and symbolic healing together in his fashioning of Isabella; her plants are meant to heal both physical wounds and the 'social' illnesses that result from them. By acknowledging herself as an herbalist and recognizing her flowers' healing qualities (or lack thereof), Isabella provides a depiction of herbalism on the early modern London stage that predates Shakespeare's.

There is ample evidence to suggest that Shakespeare would have been familiar with Kyd's characterization of Isabella as an herbalist who uses her plants symbolically to enact social healing; his company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, staged a production of *The Spanish Tragedy* sometime between 1593 and 1603 (Neill 1). Shakespeare may have built upon Kyd's work by having his female characters utilize plants to attempt to enact social healing. In his depiction of

² These addendums were not written by Kyd but by an unknown author paid to expand upon the play for print publication. These addendums were mostly a printed publication phenomenon rather than a staged/performed one. Please see Neill's "Dramatist" section of the introduction to *The Spanish Tragedy* for more information. This paper features an analysis of one addendum and two scenes original to the play.

herbalism, Kyd does not heavily emphasize individual plants and their unique healing properties. Shakespeare, however, has his female characters name specific plants to impart their associated medicinal uses and meanings to his audience. In doing so, Shakespeare created a symbolic language based on these plants' medicinal uses. Kyd, by contrast, is more concerned with how herbalism and women's roles as social healers impact Isabella when she is unable to effectively utilize both. I will establish and analyze how Kyd's Isabella utilizes the language of herbalism to illustrate how Shakespeare later builds upon and heavily modifies it for his own dramatic purposes.

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Horatio's murder devastates his parents, Hieronimo and Isabella, who must attempt to heal from the tragic loss of their child. Horatio's rivals, Lorenzo and Balthazar, hang him from a tree in Hieronimo and Isabella's arbor before repeatedly stabbing him (2.4). Awoken by the screams of Horatio's lover Bel-Imperia, Hieronimo cuts down the lifeless body and only then realizes that the body belongs to his son; Isabella soon discovers her husband cradling the deceased Horatio (2.5). Both Hieronimo and Isabella attempt to heal from the emotional and physical pain of Horatio's death. Hieronimo becomes obsessed with avenging his son's murder. His belief that revenge will bring about social healing ultimately leads to his and Bel-Imperia's murders of Lorenzo and Balthazar, her suicide, and Hieronimo's attempted suicide and later murder of the Duke (4.4). Literary criticism has long favored examining how Hieronimo's attempts at social healing ultimately lead to his madness and the murderous play that he constructs to enact this revenge.³

³ See Maslen's "The Dynamics of Kyd's '*Spanish Tragedy*,'" de Chickera's "Divine Justice and Private Revenge in *The Spanish Tragedy*," and Kay's "Deception through Words: A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*" as examples of this.

While Hieronimo's grief and quest for social healing are dependent upon exacting public revenge on Horatio's murderers, Isabella's grief is more insular and focused on her own failure to provide adequate herbal remedies to heal Horatio, Hieronimo, and herself. Interestingly, Hieronimo voices the first reference to the need for a female herbalist and her herbal remedies in Act 2, Scene 5.⁴ As he and Isabella carry Horatio's corpse out of the arbor, Hieronimo states, "I'll say his dirge, singing fits not this case" (2.5. 66). He proceeds to recite a long dirge singularly focused on the need for a woman to create and provide herbal remedies⁵:

Let someone mix me the herbs that beautiful spring produces, and let a medicine be given for our suffering; or let him apply juices, if there are any that can bring oblivion to minds; I myself will collect anywhere in the great world whatever herbs the sun brings forth into the lovely regions of light; I myself shall drink whatever poison the wise woman concocts, and whatever herbs she mixes together with the secret power of spells. I shall face everything, even death until all feeling is extinct in my dead breast. (2.4.67-75)

Hieronimo establishes the idea that a woman can provide "medicine... for our suffering" (2.5.67-8). However, Hieronimo's suggestion that a woman like Isabella could possibly create a medicine capable of healing them from Horatio's death is sardonic. Before beginning his dirge, Hieronimo tells Isabella to "... cease thy plaints" (2.5. 60). The word "plaint," or audibly expressing sorrow (OED "plaint," n. 1a), was a variant spelling of and sounds similar to "plant" (OED "plant"). Hieronimo provides contradictory statements, suggesting in one breath that Isabella no longer utilize her plants, and asking her to do exactly that to create an herbal remedy

⁴ This particular speech/scene appears in the 1602 expanded edition and thus was not written by Kyd. However, it exemplifies cultural awareness and knowledge of women as social healers. The addendum author seemingly expands upon Isabella's plants and her status as an herbalist to clarify/ make overt in Horatio's death scene what Kyd references in later scenes. It is also possible this addendum was meant to make the play more appealing to readers who enjoyed Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

⁵ This dirge was originally written and recited in Latin; I utilize Michael Neill's translation of the dirge for my analysis.

powerful enough to cure him of his grief. Isabella's more insular grief as it is expressed through her focus on herbalism perhaps reveals how she fails to meet these mixed expectations of women's healing capabilities.

Hieronimo's dirge is also significant in that it exemplifies how the play's audience would have recognized herbalism and herbal remedies in a social setting. Neill suggests that these lines are an example of a funerary pastiche (40); this indicates that the additions' author may have directly utilized lines from early modern London funerary speeches that allude to women using herbalism. In the dirge, Hieronimo references how women's practice of herbalism, or physical healing, but he does so at a funeral ritual— an event meant for social rather than physical healing. By doing so, Hieronimo associates and connects the physical, literal healing possible through women's herbalism with the symbolic, social healing alluded to in funerary practices. Hieronimo's dirge illustrates how early modern London audiences were already primed to associate women's herbalistic practices with social healing in addition to literal healing. Interestingly, Hieronimo also reveals a gender bias against female herbalists. It uses the masculine pronoun, 'him,' to refer to more medicinal practices such as 'applying juices.' The feminine descriptor 'wise woman' is used in reference to 'poison' and 'spells.' While women could exert a certain amount of social influence through their herbalistic knowledge, they still faced negative bias and distrust towards their practice of herbalism. Ultimately, Hieronimo's dirge suggests that the play's audience would have been more aware and accepting of these medical and cultural connotations of plants than current modern audiences would.

The next scene in which Isabella appears depicts her realization that she cannot utilize herbalism to revive Horatio from the dead nor to heal herself from her grief.⁶ While talking to her Maid, Isabella states:

So that you say this herb will purge 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)

Isabella's discussion of herbals with her Maid has made her realize that she does not possess any plants that can "purge the heart" or "recure the dead." Isabella finally realizes that she cannot create a remedy that will cure her grief and, more significantly, bring Horatio back to life through her herbals. Immediately following this realization, the stage directions state that "[Isabella] runs lunatic." Isabella is unable to remain mentally sound and begins a very quick descent into madness, which protects her from this reality. The scene concludes with a mad Isabella imagining a heavenly scene where an angelic Horatio is "[dancing] about his new healed wounds/ [singing] sweet hymns and chanting heavenly notes" (3.8.19-20). Isabella can only imagine Horatio's physical body restored to its previous health and liveliness through heavenly intervention. Despite being an herbalist, she recognizes she is incapable of creating a medicine to revive Horatio to this extent. It is this recognition that ultimately leads her to conclude that healing is no longer possible.

⁶ This scene is original to *The Spanish Tragedy*, was written by Thomas Kyd, and appeared in the published 1592 version, meaning it was available in print before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.

Realizing her inability to heal in this situation, Isabella destroys the arbor where Horatio has died and where her herbal plants grew.⁷ Isabella first destroys the tree from which Horatio was hanged, stating “Down with these branches and these loathsome boughs/ Of this unfortunate and fatal pine” (4.2.6-7). While Isabella is literally cutting down the pine tree in which Horatio was hanged, Kyd’s use of “pine” also suggests that Isabella is trying to eliminate her “mental suffering” (OED “pine” n. 2b). Kyd’s use of a pine tree in this scene acts on both a literal and symbolic level to highlight Isabella’s suffering and emphasizes how the garden that should provide her an herbal remedy for solace cannot do so. Isabella goes on, stating, “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,/ Accursed complot of my misery” (4.2.10-3). At this time, herbalists would have used almost every part of a plant for herbalistic uses. By referencing each specific part of these plants, Isabella reveals that she has considered how every aspect of every plant in the garden could have potentially healed her, Hieronimo, and Horatio; she finds that they are all incapable of herbalistic healing and thus are similarly incapable of social healing. Isabella’s destruction of every aspect of her plants exemplifies the hopelessness and despair she feels in her circumstances. In destroying her arbor, Isabella also creates an extensive metaphor of how this action will allow her to destroy herself. Isabella compares her body to the tree she is destroying, stating, “ And, as I curse this tree from further fruit,/ So shall my womb be cursèd for his sake” (4.2.35-6). Recognizing her inability to heal Horatio and thus her grief from his death, Isabella turns her anger from the pine tree onto herself. Isabella commits suicide by stabbing herself in the chest, effectively ending her pain through death.

⁷ This scene is also original to *The Spanish Tragedy*, was written by Thomas Kyd, and appeared in the published 1592 version, meaning it was available in print before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.

Isabella's destruction of the arbor and her subsequent suicide reveal how she fails to bring about social healing that would allow her family to heal from their tragedies. Isabella is ultimately unable to create an herbal remedy that will bring Horatio back to life, cure her husband's need for vengeance, or heal herself from the mental anguish of losing her child. Incapable of utilizing her plants to allow for this necessary social healing, Isabella recognizes the futility of her attempts and displaces her emotions of sadness and madness towards their destruction. However, this action also fails to provide any solace to her. Isabella's recognition that her plants cannot be successful remedies and their unsatisfying destruction seemingly causes her to reflect on her own failures to enact social healing as a woman and a mother; this is reflected in her shift from discussing the pine as a separate entity to drawing comparisons between herself and it. Ultimately, it is this reflection and realization that causes Isabella to destroy herself as well as the arbor.

Kyd's decision to make Isabella an herbalist who goes mad and kills herself while attempting to enact social healing may have inspired Shakespeare's Ophelia. Shakespeare modeled the plot of *Hamlet* on the revenge tragedy conventions Kyd created in *The Spanish Tragedy*, and it is possible that Shakespeare also took inspiration from Kyd depicting a mad woman attempting to use plants and flowers to fix social ills with no success.⁸ While Kyd utilizes flowers and herbalism to illustrate Isabella's grief at Horatio's death and her subsequent mental decline, the plants in her attempted remedies do not have any symbolic connotations or any relationship to floriography; the only plant Isabella explicitly references is the pine tree in the arbor. Thus, Kyd does not use plants for their symbolic medicinal meanings, instead

⁸ Please see the "*The Ur-Hamlet*" and "*The Ur-Hamlet and The Spanish Tragedy*" sections of Harold Jenkin's introduction to *The Arden Shakespeare Hamlet* for a more thorough discussion of Kyd's revenge tragedy conventions and Shakespeare's use of them.

choosing to keep the herbalism as literal as possible. Shakespeare, on the other hand, utilizes plants and herbalism to illustrate Ophelia's mental decline but also cohesively integrates symbolic meanings based on these plants' medicinal uses. By doing so, Shakespeare created what I have categorized as medicinal floriography. Shakespeare dramatizes herbalism like Kyd, but he differs significantly through his creation of a symbolic, literary language.

Chapter 3

“I Hope All Will Be Well” : Ophelia in *Hamlet*

Ophelia's descent into madness after her father's death is one of the many tragedies to occur in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This tragedy is made particularly heartrending because Ophelia seems unable to properly convey her thoughts and emotions once she becomes, as Laertes calls her, “[a] document in madness” and, as Gertrude suggests, “one incapable of her own distress” (4.5.176, 4.7.149). Literary criticism has sought to explore the significance of Ophelia and her madness; critics have traditionally used Ophelia to discuss, by comparison, Hamlet and his feigned madness. Elaine Showalter nicely summarizes this tradition, stating, “For most critics of Shakespeare, Ophelia has been an insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weaknesses and madness but chiefly interesting, of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet” (77). One famous example is Jacques Lacan, who stated that Ophelia's significance lies in the fact that “she is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet” (qtd. Showalter 77). In her article “Documents in Madness,” Carol Neely similarly takes this stance in her interpretation of Ophelia: “By acting out the madness Hamlet feigns and the suicide that he theorizes, the representation of Ophelia absorbs pathological excesses open to Hamlet and enables his reappearance as a sane, autonomous, individual and a tragic hero in the last act” (326). Ultimately, many critics have asserted that it is only through viewing Ophelia and her madness that audiences can truly see and comprehend Hamlet's. This view is problematic, however, because it oftentimes assumes that Ophelia becomes incomprehensible due to her madness and thus that her insanity nullifies the meaning of her speech.

Feminist criticism has opposed this characterization of Ophelia and has sought to “tell Ophelia’s story” (Showalter 78). Such scholars have been able to illustrate how madness frees Ophelia from her proper feminine behaviors and duties, allowing her to perform her final speech in Act 4, Scene 5. While describing the nature of madwomen in Elizabethan drama, Churney and Churney argue, “Through madness, the women on stage can suddenly make a forceful assertion of their being” (459). Throughout *Hamlet*, Ophelia is expected to be passive and subservient to the requests and demands of the male characters, exemplified in her father and King Claudius’s frequent directions to speak or act in particular ways in Hamlet’s presence. Ophelia’s replies often address these men in a respectful manner, using the phrase “my lord,” which she uses approximately thirty times between Acts I and III. It is only in madness that Ophelia is given the opportunity to “forcefully assert” herself free from the restraints of socially appropriate behavior. Prior to this scene, Ophelia has been the dutiful daughter and subject who has listened and done everything that was asked of her. For example, Ophelia follows Polonius and Claudius’s plans, which ultimately leads to her father’s brutal murder at Hamlet’s hands (3.4.22-4). As a madwoman, Ophelia is given the freedom to speak on her own behalf, which “liberates her from the prescribed roles of daughter, sister, lover, subject” (Dane 412). This allows her to circumvent the proper femininity that would normally be expected of her.

In the beginning of Act 4, Scene 5, Ophelia’s devolution into madness grants her almost immediate access to the castle, where she speaks freely and unabashedly to Queen Gertrude and then King Claudius, despite their resistance to see her (4.5. 13-15; 4.5.40-44). A mad Ophelia is not held to the same standards she was when she was sane, and she is free to behave in whatever manner she pleases. Ophelia sings snatches of bawdy ballads, answers questions with nonsensical responses, and interrupts Gertrude and Claudius as they speak to her. These

behaviors mark her as being mad, and thus free from the social restraints that has dictated her more passive speech and behavior in previous scenes (Churney and Churney). However, a mad Ophelia struggles to effectively articulate her thoughts and emotions through her speech—especially when juxtaposed to a mad Hamlet. Many feminist critics have noted how Hamlet is privileged in his access to both language and an intentionality that demonstrates his madness is truly “feigned,” not only because he says as much but also because Ophelia represents real madness; the content of her speech remains incomprehensible and seemingly devoid of meaning.⁹ Consequently, feminist scholarship has still concluded that Ophelia’s story remains a tragedy because she is incapable of eloquent communication despite the freedom madness grants her.

Ophelia remains a character devoid of agency and intentionality because she is unable to vocalize them; madness continues to nullify the meaning of her speech. Within this scene, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes take pity upon a mad Ophelia and let her speak because she is presumed to be harmless and meaningless; they assume that Ophelia’s “speech is nothing” and that the flowers Ophelia presents are just another facet of her declining mental state (4.6.7). While it gives Ophelia leave to speak, madness renders Ophelia unable to effectively communicate. Gabrielle Dane best summarizes Ophelia’s treatment, stating, “ ‘The fair Ophelia’ (3.1.89) sings snatches of familiar tunes, recites bits of old tales, disburses flowers—like a small child. Although she at last speaks truth, finally defies authority, Ophelia continues to be infantilized, then ignored” (420). Many critics thus maintain that Ophelia’s madness remains tragic in spite of the liberation from her feminine roles because she continues to be ignored

⁹ Please see Neely’s “Documents in Madness: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture,” Ronk’s “Representations of ‘Ophelia,’” Fischer’s “Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in Hamlet,” and Findlay’s “*Hamlet*: A Document in Madness.”

despite attempting to voice her truths. Ophelia's greatest tragedy, then, is her inability to communicate with others about her knowledge of and thoughts about the circumstances of the play.¹⁰

Yet, all of this previous criticism has largely failed to discuss how Ophelia's madness is crucially intertwined with her presentation of specific flowers and the significance this connection may have in interpreting Ophelia's speech. Ophelia has long been relegated to interpretations based solely on her roles as either Hamlet's lover, who is significant only because she exemplifies his sanity, or as a tragic Elizabethan madwoman cursed by her inability to overcome her mental state. Emphasis on Ophelia's madness in literary criticism has subsequently made it easy to assume that, as Laertes states, her "speech is nothing" and to merely dismiss Ophelia as a madwoman (4.6.7). This understanding of Ophelia is based on the premise that Ophelia's speech has no meaning due to madness. However, I will argue that, although it depicts her most troubled mental state, this speech also seems to reflect Ophelia at her most articulate.

Dismissing her speech as nothingness due to her madness robs Ophelia of the agency she possesses to act and speak on her own behalf. While discussing the characters that look on and listen to Ophelia's last "mad speech," Gabrielle Dane states, "Ophelia not only wants 'real listeners,' she requires them. Without anyone willing to listen to or able to hear her incoherent truth, her 'Reason in madness,' any active possibility which seemed to arise from her release into that madness evaporates..." (420). Literary critics risk becoming like Ophelia's audience, unwilling or unable to hear her "incoherent truth" due to her madness. Literary critics have failed to be "real listeners" to Ophelia's speech because they assume that her madness is evidenced by her "meaningless" speech. It is thus important to consider Ophelia's selection and presentation of

¹⁰ See footnote 13 of Gabrielle Dane's "Reading Ophelia's Madness" for a discussion of these interpretations.

these flowers to her gathered audience as an intentional, deliberate, and, most importantly, meaningful act on her part. While this scene may reflect her devolution into madness as many critics have theorized, it also exemplifies how Ophelia, liberated from the social constraints of her gender through madness, attempts to utilize her speech and behavior to serve some greater purpose.

This analysis maintains that Ophelia's madness allows her to enact her role as social healer to attempt to alleviate the social ills of the play. In this scene, Ophelia is given permission to say and act in whatever manner she chooses due to her madness. However, this does not mean that Ophelia's speech lacks meaning or is incomprehensible. As explained by feminist critics, madness liberates Ophelia from her expected feminine roles; she is able to speak free from the harmful consequences of breaking social expectations. She can "forcefully assert her being" through her madness to justify her actions (Churney and Churney 459). In doing so, Ophelia offers each character specific plants that correspond to an herbal treatment for a social ill that they suffer from. The flowers Ophelia provide have tangible, comprehensible meaning rooted in their herbalistic uses. These medicinal floriographic meanings, however, have been obscured or neglected due to the assumption that Ophelia's "speech is nothing" when it is actually a very logical, coherent attempt at social intervention on her part (4.6.7). Whether truly or feigningly mad, Ophelia undertakes the role of healer and utilizes her plants to symbolically treat each of the social ills she, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes suffer from.

The first plant that Ophelia presents to Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and herself in this scene is rosemary, stating, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember" (4.5.173). Ophelia's offering of rosemary to the group can represent an emblematic treatment to aid the audience in remembering her father's death. At this time, rosemary was

medicinally used to treat various ailments affecting the head and memory (Grieves 50). Some of the earliest evidence of this use comes from an entry in *The Grete Herball* published in 1529. It reads: “ROSEMARY.- For weykness of ye brayne. Against weykness of the brayne and coldness thereof, see the rosemarie in wyne and lete the pacyent receye the smoke at his nose and keep his heed warme” (qtd. Grieve 683). Similarly, John Gerard’s *The Herball or General History of Plants* (1597) denotes, “it is also good, especially the floures thereof, for all infirmities of the head and braine, proceeding of a cold and moist caufe; for they dry the brain, quicken the senses and memorie, and strengthen the sinewie parts” (1293). Ophelia’s assertion, “that’s for remembrance,” matches the herbalistic use of rosemary for aiding memory loss (4.5.173). In harkening to this, Ophelia’s offering of rosemary could act as a plea to remember her father’s, Polonius’s, death. Ophelia’s rosemary reflects that her gathered audience needs to remember this and, more importantly, heal from the circumstances surrounding Polonius’s murder and the negative consequences it has brought about.

Interestingly, Ophelia’s choice to provide rosemary to not only her audience but also herself has an additional interesting herbalistic implication. Another passage found in the *Banckes’ Herball* (1525) provides this use of rosemary: “Also put the leaves under thy bedde and thou shalt be delivered of all evill dreames” (qtd. Grieve 682). The belief that rosemary could ward off “evill dreames” may reflect Ophelia’s attempt to cure her own mental state. Polonius’s death is often cited as the cause of Ophelia’s madness, and her offering of rosemary may reflect Ophelia’s attempt to treat her own declining mental state.

Through her presentation, Ophelia seems to not only be referencing the herbalistic associations of rosemary but also its cultural one as a funerary flower. Rosemary’s herbalistic uses seem to interestingly correlate to its cultural use in funerals and memorials. Presenting

rosemary to attendants would encourage them to remember the dead but also help to ward off “evill dreames” caused by mourning. In *A Modern Herball, Volume II*, Maud Grieve explains this custom, stating “[a] sprig of Rosemary was carried in the hand at funerals, being distributed to the mourners before they left the house, to be cast on the coffin when it had been lowered into the grave” (682). In Shakespeare’s earlier work, *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Laurence refers to this use of rosemary in funerals, stating “Dry up your tears, and stick your rosemary/ On this fair corse; and, as the custom is/ And in all her best array bear her to church” (4.5. 2724-5). This use of rosemary could also be Ophelia darkly foretelling her own death since Cladius, Gertrude, and Laertes are present at her funeral in Act 5, Scene 1,

The second plant that Ophelia gives to all of her audience and her self are pansies, stating “And there is pansies; that’s for thoughts” (4.5. 174). Ophelia’s qualification, “for thoughts,” aligns with the medicinal use of pansies as a treatment for issues of the brain, such as fevers and seizures. Similar to rosemary, Ophelia’s offering of pansies is meant to treat illnesses that impact mental clarity to further aid her audience in remembering King Hamlet and her father’s deaths and fixing the consequences of them. Gerard writes, “It is good, as the later Phyitions write, for such as are sicke of an ague, especially children and infants, whose convulsions and fits of the falling sicknesse it is thought to cure. It is commended against inflammations of the lungs and chest, and against scabs and itchings of the whole body, and health ulcers” (855). Gerard notes that wild pansies are particularly beneficial at helping solve issues surrounding the brain diagnosed with “ague,” and “the falling sicknesse.”¹¹ Similarly, Culpeper, in his *The Complete Herball*, states, “The spirit of it is excellently good for the convulsions in children, as also for the

¹¹ “Ague” is the term used to refer to a high fever (“Ague” OED). “Falling sickness” is the term used to refer to epilepsy (McCord 3).

falling sickness, and a gallant remedy for the inflammation of the lungs, and breasts, pleurisy, scabs, itch, & c.” (119).

The medicinal use of wild pansy was to help ease inflammations and fevers that harm the brain, as well as the pain of scabbing wounds and itchiness. In this sense, Ophelia may be attempting to provide additional treatment for the murders of King Hamlet and Polonius. These men’s deaths have caused “inflamed,” unhealthy feelings that resulted in irrational (feverish) behaviors in Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes. Similarly, these deaths have also caused “open wounds” in the relationships amongst the various characters who refuse to allow themselves to heal. For example, Hamlet refuses to forgive his mother and potentially heal his wounded relationship with her due to her marriage to Claudius. Claudius similarly refuses to repent for the murder of King Hamlet and does not show any remorse for his actions, causing Hamlet to put plans into place for revenge against him. Ophelia’s giving of pansies is thus an attempt to heal the damage that King Hamlet and Polonius’ murders have caused.

As with rosemary, Ophelia also provides pansies to herself; this self-offering may convey why Ophelia attempts to intervene as a social healer. Ophelia could be attempting to symbolically convey her desire to solve the issues surrounding her father’s death. In Shakespeare’s time, wild pansies were referred to as either Heart’s Ease or Heartease. In *The Herball or General History of Plants*, the plant is listed as “Of Hearts-ease, or Pansies” (853). Ophelia may also be trying to articulate her need to ease her heart from the pain of her father’s death by openly discussing the matter with Claudius, Gertrude, and her brother, who were all complicit in this crime. Ophelia intervenes by encouraging her audience to remember what has happened but to also forgive each other before further harm is done.

Although rosemary and pansies were given to all of her audience, Ophelia proceeds to give very specific plants to individual characters for their individual social ills. The first recipient is Claudius, to whom Ophelia gives fennel and columbine. By giving Claudius fennel, Ophelia provides an herb that critiques Claudius for his actions but provides him a way to repent for them. Fennel had a broad range of medicinal uses, but its most significant use was as an antitoxin and anecdote to poisoning, Culpeper states, “the seed boyled in wine and drunk, is good for those that are bitten with Serpents, or have eaten poysonful mushrooms” (99). Fennel’s use as an antitoxin “good for serpent bites” could be Ophelia’s attempt to remind Claudius about his poisoning of King Hamlet, his brother. In fact, King Hamlet’s ghost refers to Claudius specifically as a serpent during his visitation to Hamlet in Act 1, Scene 5, stating, “The serpent that did sting thy father’s life/ Now wears his crown” (1.5. 39-40). Additionally, Claudius comments on Ophelia’s madness by stating that it is caused by “the poison of deep grief” following her father’s death (4.5. 72). By providing him with an antitoxin to treat not only King Hamlet’s poisoning but also the subsequent “poisonous” social consequences that have impacted her, Ophelia attempts to give Claudius an opportunity to redeem himself and prevent further tragedy from occurring.

The second plants that Ophelia specifically gives to Claudius are columbines. Culpeper writes, “The leaves of columbines are commonly used in lotions with good success for sore mouths and throats” (72). Gerard states that columbine is used for inducing fevers to get rid of infections (1095). Ophelia’s gifting of columbine to Claudius based on this medical use suggests that she wants to treat and/or alleviate the social ills that Claudius has caused by murdering King Hamlet. King Hamlet’s ghost describes how the poison Claudius used caused him to get “a vile and loathsome crust” (1.5.72). Ophelia may be providing columbines as a potential remedy for

the deceased Hamlet's poisoned skin, or at least reminding Claudius of his crime. Gerard's suggestion that columbine induces fevers to get rid of infections may allude to the fact that Ophelia wants to remind Claudius that King Hamlet's murder has caused an "infectious," all-consuming obsession in Hamlet that must be healed before any positive changes can occur.

Having given Claudius his plants, Ophelia next gives them to Queen Gertrude. Ophelia gives rue specifically to Queen Gertrude and herself, stating "There's rue for you, and here's some for me. / We may call it herb- grace o' Sundays. / O, you must wear your rue with a difference" (4.5. 177-9). Ophelia's choice of this flower for Queen Gertrude is rife with both symbolic and medicinal meaning. Similar to fennel, rue was considered a powerful antitoxin that could be used against a wide variety of poisons. Culpeper states that rue "... causeth all Venomous things to become harmless" (325). Gerard writes:

The leaves of Rue beaten and drunk with wine, are an antidote against poisons, as Pliny faith. Dioscorides writeth, that a twelve penny weight of the seed drunk in wine is a counterpoyson against medicines or the poyson of Wolfs-baane, Ixia, Mushrooms, or Tode stooles, the biting of Serpents, stinging of Scorpions, spiders, bees, hornets, and wasps and it is reported, that if a man be anointed with the iuyce of Rue these will not hurt him; and that the Serpent is driven away at the smell thereof when it is burned, insomuch that when the Weesell is to fight with the Serpent, she armeth herself by eating Rue against the might of the Serpent. (1257)

This is most significant in terms of its use against "the biting of Serpents," since Gerard identifies serpents and snake bites in relationship to rue. This harkens back to King Hamlet's reference to Claudius as a serpent. The heavy emphasis on rue's ability to ward off serpents may be a very obvious warning on Ophelia's part to Gertrude. It implies that all possible protections

from Claudius's harm should be taken immediately. It also perhaps foreshadows Gertrude's death by drinking from a chalice that Claudius has poisoned (5.2.253-4).

By providing rue, Ophelia could also be helping Gertrude to comprehend and contend with other social ills that her marriage to Claudius has caused. Culpeper similarly writes of rue as an antitoxin against poison, but adds, "being often taken in meat and drink, it abateth venery, and destroyeth the ability to beget children" (325). Based on these side effects, Ophelia's gift of rue provides methods of treatment for the social ill of Gertrude's sexual relationship with her former brother-in-law and current husband, Claudius. In particular, Hamlet frequently suggests that it is Gertrude's sexual desire for Claudius that has thoroughly corrupted her. In Act 3, Scene 4, following his murder of Polonius, Hamlet tells Gertrude:

O shame, where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,
 If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,
 To flaming youth let virtue be as wax
 And melt in her own fire. Proclaim no shame
 When the compulsive ardour gives the change,
 Since frost itself as actively doth burn,
 And reason panders will. (3.4.72-8)

Hamlet essentially argues that Gertrude is unable to resist Claudius's sexual charm and is unable to think clearly because of it. Ophelia may provide Gertrude with rue not only to ward off the "snakelike" Claudius, but to also help her stop feeling sexually desirous towards him.

Rue was also symbolically important for Gertrude due to its connotations of repentance and virtuousness. It is important to note that Ophelia's line, "We may call it herb-grace o' Sundays," references a synonymous name for rue. According to Grieve in *A Modern Herbal*, the

synonymous names of “herb-grace O’Sundays” and “Herb-of-Grace” originate in the plant’s use in religious practices. She writes, “At one time the holy water was sprinkled from brushes made of Rue at the ceremony usually preceding the Sunday celebration of High Mass, for which reason it is supposed it was named.... the Herb of Grace” (695). Gerard’s entry for Rue reflects this and is aptly titled “Of Rue, or herbe Grace” (1252). Rue’s literary floriographic meaning is often associated with “repentance” and “morality,” which closely aligns it to its use in Christian high masses for the Sacrament of Penance (Seaton 192-3; Greenway 50). This Christian tradition essentially allows one to request forgiveness and be absolved of their sins. These symbolic connotations of rue may have come about due to its use as an anti-toxin and/or a purificant. Utilizing rue to sprinkle holy water during Penance masses would suggest both physical and spiritual purification for the audience members. Ultimately, Ophelia seems to imply that Gertrude should stop having sexual relations with Claudius, repent and be forgiven for her past digressions, and be the “virtuous queen” that King Hamlet remembered her as (1.5.46).

Furthermore, Culpeper’s suggestions of using rue to eliminate ear pain and clear eyesight are significant to Gertrude’s “blindness” to Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet. Culpeper writes of rue: “The juice thereof warmed in a pomegranate shell or rind, and dropped in the ears, helps the pain of them. The juice of it and fennel, with a little honey, and the gall of a cock put thereunto, helps the dimness of the eyesight” (325). The use of rue to eliminate ear pain is relevant to King Hamlet’s murder, wherein Claudius places poison in his ear. As King Hamlet’s ghost states, “Sleeping within my orchard, / My custom always of the afternoon, / Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole, With juice of cursed hebona in a vial, / And in the porches of my ears did pour / The leperous distilment“ (1.5.60-64). Ophelia seems to once again allude to her knowledge of King Hamlet’s death, specifically implying this information to Gertrude. Similarly,

Culpeper's combination of fennel and rue with honey and chicken liver to clear eyesight can be Ophelia's way of suggesting Gertrude reexamine her relationship with Claudius and to be realistic about her new husband's murder of her former one. In essence, Ophelia provides Gertrude rue so she can stop being 'blind' to Claudius's actions and motives, particularly due to the fact that fennel, a flower given only to Claudius, is specifically combined with it to bring about this cure. The combination of these plants asks Gertrude to consider her relationship with Claudius as a social ill. Up until this point, Gertrude has refused to acknowledge how her marriage to Claudius has further compounded the issues present within the play— particularly Hamlet's quest for vengeance. Ophelia seemingly pleads with Gertrude to recognize their relationship as poisonous and unhealthy due to the circumstances that allowed it to occur, thus preventing further harm from occurring.

Last of all, Ophelia presents a daisy to her audience, which she specifically gives to her brother, Laertes. Ophelia states, "There's a daisy" (4.5.179-80). Although it is not explicitly stated that the daisy is given to Laertes, there is ample evidence to suggest that Ophelia intended it for him. The common daisy was very prevalent in herbalism. In *The Herbal*, Gerard writes, "The Daisies doe mitigate all kinde of paines, but especially of the ioynts, and gout proceeding from an hot and dry humor..." (637). Upon his return from Paris and as result of the social ills that other characters have committed, Laertes does in fact suffer from "all kindes of paines" caused by his father's murder and his sister's madness. Gerard goes on to write that, "... the iuyce of the leaves and roots snift up into the nostrils, purgeth the head mightly of foule and filthy slimie humors, and helpth the megrim... The iuyce put into the eyes clearth them, and taketh away the watering" (637). Culpeper also states that daisy juice dropped in watery eyes "doth much help them" (83). This medicinal use is significant in that it reveals Ophelia's

compassion for Laertes, who has begun crying when he first sees her. Upon her entrance to this scene, Laertes proclaims, “Tears seven times salt / Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!” (4.5.154). By offering him a daisy, Ophelia gives him a symbolic gesture of easing his pain by helping him to stop crying over her mad state.

Ophelia then uses the other medicinal elements of daisies to convince Laertes to not allow his sorrow and pain to dictate his actions— particularly in seeking vengeance against Hamlet. Culpeper writes that the daisy is a “... wound-herb of good respect, often used in those drinks or salves that are for wounds, either inward or outward... The decoction made of them, and drank, helpeth to cure the wounds made in the hollowness of the breast” (83). Culpeper also states “ [an] ointment made hereof doth wonderfully help all wounds that have inflammations, or by reason of moist humours having access unto them, are kept long from healing” (83).

Immediately preceding and following this scene, King Claudius and Laertes discuss murdering Hamlet. Through her offering, Ophelia suggests that Laertes needs to clear his head of the “foule and filthy, slimie humors” that King Claudius suggests, as well as to “clear his eyesight” to allow him to see Claudius’s plan in which he manipulates Laertes’ grief to kill Hamlet. Similarly, Ophelia’s daisy offers a treatment for Laertes’ wound that needs to be fixed both “inward and outward,” especially his heartache, which emits from the “hollow of his breast.” This correlates also to Culpeper’s ointment meant to treat wounds “long kept from healing,” like Laertes’ obsession over his father’s death and quest for vengeance that has brought him to this scene in the first place.

While the daisy is the last physical flower in her bouquet, Ophelia references one last flower in Act 4, Scene 5. She states, “ I would give you some violets, but they withered all/ when

my father died” (4.5.180-1). In “Ophelia’s Plants and the Death of Violets,” Rebecca Laroche describes the ‘death of violets’ as such:

To say that all violets have withered is to say more than beauty and faithfulness have died; it says that the opportunity to feel good, to find comfort, has disappeared. At this point in the tragedy, no greater truth could be told; after Polonius’ death, there is no possibility of return from tragedy within the confines of the play. (217)

Laroche’s assessment is interesting as it echoes the medicinal and symbolic connotations of pansies at this time; she discusses pansies in relation to Polonius’ death. However, pansies seem to be more closely aligned with Ophelia herself than with Polonius.

Ophelia’s reference to violets may be a metaphor drawn between herself and this particular flower. In Act 1, Scene 3, Laertes compares Hamlet’s affections for Ophelia to a “violet in the youth of primy nature,” continuing on to explain that it was “[forward], not permanent, sweet, not lasting,/ The perfume and suppliance of a minute,/ No more” (1.3.7-9). Laertes suggests that violets’ value lies only in their ability to momentarily represent pure beauty before dying; this understanding of violets can be also supported by Gerard when he states that violets “... admonish and stir up a man to that which is comely and honest for floures through their beautie, variety of color, and exquisite form, do bring to a liberall and gentle manly minde, the remembrance of honestie, comliness, and all kindes of vertues” (850). Correspondingly, violets are associated with faithfulness in literary floriography.

Although Laertes clearly uses the violet metaphor to describe Hamlet’s affections *towards* Ophelia, it is possible that Shakespeare intended this metaphor to also *be* Ophelia. Interestingly, the medicinal use most associated with violets is their use as a sleep-aid. Gerard writes that violets “... causeth sleep” (853). Culpeper echoes this, stating “...it is likewise eases

pain in the head, caused through want of sleep” (366). In her assessment of violets, Ophelia may be communicating her desire to “sleep,” or, rather, to die. Like the metaphorical violet, Ophelia is in the “youth of primy nature” as well as “sweet” but ultimately “not lasting.” Ophelia’s appearance in the play, within this scene particularly, seems to even echo Laerte’s assertion that the scent of the violet lasts “...of a minute/no more.” Ophelia’s appearances in the play are fleeting, and she seems to be absent more often than present. Like Laertes’ metaphorical violet, the pure, beautiful Ophelia quickly begins to wither and die, particularly after her father’s murder.

Ophelia also seems to possess the qualities that Gerard associates with violets, particularly that she is meant to remind the audience of “honestie, comliness, and all kinds of vertues.” Thus, Ophelia’s line “they withered all when my father died” illustrates how the physical plants, but also honesty, faithfulness, and other positive virtues have died within her. Ophelia’s assertion seems to suggest that all of these events have occurred because she has ‘died’ the moment Hamlet murdered Polonius. Like the “withered” violets that could last “no more,” Gertrude soon reports the mystifying circumstances surrounding Ophelia’s death. This use of violets to induce “sleep” may suggest that Ophelia’s drowning in Act 5, Scene 7 was, indeed, intentional since she exploits nature to bring about her death. This lone and ambiguous reference, however, is too insufficient to prove Ophelia’s intentions. Ophelia’s death can just as easily be interpreted as a representation of the momentariness of life, more similar to Laertes’ violet than not. Understanding Ophelia as a ‘violet’-like figure more closely resembles Gertrude’s assertion that she was “ a creature native and indued/ Unto that element,” having died due to circumstances beyond her control (4.7. 150-1). Whichever interpretation of Ophelia’s death a

reader chooses to believe, the relationship between Ophelia and her violets remains an intriguing insight to understanding both her and her outlook on the events within the play.

Although she attempts to intervene and treat the social ills of her audience, Ophelia ultimately fails to do so. Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes fail to understand that Ophelia's offerings are not simply mad speech. Laertes' assertion that "[this] nothing's more than matter" transfigures into his belief that Ophelia "[turns] to favour and to prettiness" to cope with her madness (4.5.173; 184). Ultimately, Laertes is unable to listen to the content of Ophelia's speech because he sees it only as a nonsensical facet of her madness. Claudius and Gertrude seemingly share Laertes' belief that Ophelia's offerings represent only her descent in madness. Claudius has previously addressed Ophelia as "pretty lady" and describes her as "Divided from herself and her fair judgment" (4.5. 81). Gertrude merely asks, "Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?" (4.5.27). It is important to recall Gabrielle Dane's assertion that "Ophelia not only wants 'real listeners,' she requires them. Without anyone willing to listen to or able to hear her incoherent truth, her 'reason in madness,' any active possibility which seemed to arise from her release into that madness evaporates..." (420). Dane's assertion is important because it emphasizes how Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes are 'unwilling' or 'unable' to listen to the greater possibilities or deeper meanings behind the flowers Ophelia provides them due to her deteriorating mental state.

It is possible that Ophelia's audience simply refuses to acknowledge that there can be 'meaning' in her madness, or they do not understand that the flowers she offers them are remedies to their problems. However, Ophelia's failure to cure these social ills is not a consequence of her ineffectively communicating her points to her audience. Rather, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes fail to be "real listeners" to the coherent, clear meanings that they are required to understand for Ophelia's intervention to be successful. None of the characters accept

the flowers offered to them, and the social ills they suffer from worsen following Ophelia's drowning in Act 4, Scene 7. Hamlet forces Claudius to drink from the poisoned chalice Claudius had intended for him (5.2. 267-9). Claudius dies from his own poison. Gertrude also drinks from Claudius's poisoned chalice and then immediately perishes (5.2.253). Following the news of his sister's death, Laertes pursues a duel with Hamlet, and is poisoned by his own sword (5.3. 244;273). All of their social ills prove to be fatal.

Literary critics have struggled with how to characterize Ophelia and her role within *Hamlet*. This interpretation holds that Ophelia attempts to act as social healer but is ultimately unsuccessful at her endeavor. This characterization provides a more nuanced understanding of Ophelia as an agent equally matched in intelligence and capability to Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes, although she possesses considerably less authority than they do. Ophelia is undoubtedly mad during her speech and gifting of flowers. While Ophelia's madness liberates her from the social constraints of her gender, it ultimately nullifies her attempt to forcefully exert her authority so she can treat Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes' social ills before further tragedy occurs; they simply cannot or will not comprehend the meaning found within her speech due to her madness. It is important that literary scholarship reconsider how Ophelia's characterization and agency is discussed because our current understanding is oversimplified and does not take into consideration the relevance of her flowers outside of representing her madness. Ophelia's use of medicinal floriography necessitates her being an agent capable of authority through the symbolic meanings she provides to her audience; she is thus not entirely clueless or powerless. Ophelia is a mad woman capable of creating complex meanings in madness through her intentional presentation of specific flowers. Just because her audience could or would not understand her flowers does not mean that Ophelia's speech was devoid of meaning. It is

important to reconsider Ophelia's character as one capable of communication despite her madness. Ophelia's greatest tragedy is not her inability to meaningfully speak to her audience but rather her inability to be fully understood by them.

The receptiveness of an audience is crucial in allowing for the successfulness of a social healer. Ophelia's attempt to heal Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes through medicinal floriography proves to be unsuccessful because they cannot or refuse to understand what these plants are meant to convey. On the other hand, Shakespeare's Perdita proves to be much more successful as a social healer because her audience is receptive to the possible healing her flowers represent. Perdita is able to engage her audience in interpreting and comprehending the possible treatments that her plants represent, allowing her to successfully intervene and treat past social ills. While Ophelia fails to be an effective social healer, Perdita thrives and blossoms in this role.

Chapter 4

“Come, Take Your Flowers”: Perdita in *The Winter’s Tale*

In Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita and Florizel’s impending marriage signals the end of conflict between their respective fathers, King Leontes and King Polixenes, and a return to a congenial social order. *The Winter’s Tale* is initially characterized by the loss of friendship, congeniality, and love between King Leontes, King Polixenes, and Queen Hermione. The eventual relationship and marriage between their children, Perdita and Florizel, is pivotal in allowing forgiveness and reconciliation to happen amongst them. This marriage is the culmination of Perdita’s successful intervention as a social healer wherein she alleviates and treats these previous social ills.

To better understand Perdita’s role as a social healer and how her use of herbalism and medicinal floriography enables this social healing, it is first helpful to categorize *The Winter’s Tale* by genre. The play is an example of a Shakespearian “tragicomedy.” Tragicomedy combines tragic elements that explore personal and societal flaws usually remedied through a marriage or marriages by the end of the play. Typically, tragicomedies have a scene or series of scenes that mark the transition from tragic to comedic within the progression of the plot.¹² In *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita’s role as “Queen of the Feast” enables her to take on the role of social healer when she hands specific plants to treat specific social ills to her guests—specifically King Polixenes and Camillo. By utilizing medicinal floriography, Perdita is able to bring about social healing that is necessary in transitioning from tragedy to comedy. Furthermore, it is within this

¹² See Theresa M. Krier’s “The Triumph of Time: Paradox of the Winter’s Tale” for a thorough discussion of Shakespeare’s use of tragicomedy. Krier believes Time’s speech in Act 4, Scene 1 acts as the beginning of this transition from tragedy to comedy.

scene that Florizel and Perdita's future marriage is addressed and begins to set in motion the reconciliations within the play.

While other critics have also considered this scene as a turning point from tragic to comic, they have largely struggled with how to characterize Perdita, interpret her role, and determine her level of agency. For example, both William O. Scott and Peter B. Erickson grapple with how to characterize Perdita. Scott ultimately offers reductive views of Perdita, stating that she can be viewed as having "...a maiden coyness... and the traditional pastoral submission and contentment with lower estate," or as possessing "... the trembling and uncertain hope of budding spring, not yet confident that all will end well" (416; 417). While he recognizes the significance of her actions within the scene, Scott ultimately is unable to view Perdita beyond the idealized expectations for young female characters in Shakespearian drama.

Peter B. Erickson similarly struggles with Perdita's characterization in his article "Patriarchal Structures in *The Winter's Tale*." Employing feminist criticism, Erickson interprets the relationships between male and female characters based on their expected gendered behavior traits within a patriarchal system. He writes of *The Winter's Tale*:

The dramatic action consists partly in the fashioning of a benign patriarchy— in the transition from a brutal, crude, tyrannical version to a benevolent one capable of including and valuing women. *The Winter's Tale* enacts the disruption and revival of patriarchy. The male-oriented social order undergoes a series of challenges and crises that reveal how unstable it is until it can be reestablished on a new basis. (819)

Erickson goes on to explore the multiple ways in which the conflicts of the play stem from patriarchal conflicts that have resulted in damaging social consequences. Erickson finally suggests that Perdita's willingness to submit to Polixenes' views signals the establishment of a

“benign patriarchy” (825). Erickson places a great deal of emphasis on how Perdita is particularly submissive to patriarchal figures and fulfills her expected feminine gender roles: “...she readily enters into her socialization as the all-providing female; she instinctively attends to the prerogatives of paternal power” (825). Erickson argues that Perdita’s ability to portray proper femininity and to participate in this benign patriarchy allows for the reestablishment of an effective, albeit still male-dominated, social order that is cemented through her later marriage to Florizel. While he views the reestablishment of this order as positive for the play’s progression, Erickson portrays Perdita as a young woman who willingly submits to the patriarchal forces that initially allowed the tragedies of the previous acts to occur, potentially enabling further suppression of Paulina, her mother, and herself (827).

Ultimately, the emphasis on Perdita’s youthfulness and status as a shepherdess has limited critical understanding of her facilitation of social healing. In some of the earliest literary criticism on her character, Anna Jameson writes, “[Perdita] is the union of the pastoral and romantic with the classical and poetical, as if a dryad of the woods had turned shepherdess” (112). Perdita has been continually relegated to this kind of overly feminized and idealized depiction as exemplified in Scott and Erickson’s work. Yet, this characterization undermines the significance of Perdita’s role as “Queen of the Feast” and the significance of her imparting plants with specific medicinal uses and symbolic meanings. While literary critics are willing to note Perdita’s contributions to the transition from tragedy to comedy in *The Winter’s Tale*, they have been unable to satisfactorily explain why this floral exchange allows such a transition to occur. For example, Scott emphasizes how Perdita’s plants incite reflectiveness in Polixenes based upon medieval symbolism, but he believes that the circumstances of the feast rather than Perdita herself are responsible for imparting these meanings (417). Similarly, Erickson emphasizes how

Perdita's naïveté in submitting to Polixenes' view enables this transition (825-6). In these readings, Perdita is a powerless, pastoral young woman who accepts patriarchy and, in doing so, allows the world of the play to return to a semblance of social order. Literary critics' inability to understand or interpret Perdita's use of medicinal floriography often results in their characterization of her in a limited, disempowering way.

This characterization of Perdita is perhaps a consequence of her lack of knowledge of the past events of *The Winter's Tale*. Perdita's intentionality is severely complicated by the fact that she has very limited knowledge of the social ills that have occurred prior to Act 4. Perdita does not know about the misunderstandings between her parents and Polixenes, that she is a princess and of the same social class as Florizel, or who Polixenes and Camillo actually are since they are in disguise. Perdita knows essentially none of the necessary information that would allow her to intentionally treat and alleviate the specific social ills that have previously occurred. Yet, there is a great deal of agency required of Perdita when she enacts the role of "Queen of the Feast." The Old Shepherd's discussion of the role suggests that it was one of social significance and power for women, since he lists all of the feminine roles that his wife inhabited on this day (4.4.55-63). In asking her to take on this role, the Old Shepherd tells Perdita to "Come, quench your blushes, and present yourself/ That which you are, mistress o'th'feast. Come on, / bid us welcome to your sheep-shearing/ as your good flock shall prosper" (4.4.68-9). The Old Shepherd's comparison of Perdita's guests being her "good flock" conveys a need for the gathered audience to follow Perdita's lead and guidance. While Perdita's intentionality may be hampered by her lack of knowledge, she is still asked to successfully lead her guests to prosperity. At this time, prosperity

was closely associated with possessing good health and being physically well.¹³ Recognizing her ability to help her audience “prosper” through their physical health, Perdita does her best to provide them with plants that could be potentially used to treat their illnesses— despite not knowing exactly what to treat. In doing so, Perdita accepts the role of “Queen of the Feast” and does what she can to fulfill her duties of leading her “good flock” to this prosperity.

While Perdita is unaware of the specific social ills Polixenes and Camillo suffer, the play’s audience is well aware of them. The intentionality and specificity behind Perdita’s plants is made possible then through Shakespeare’s use of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony occurs when the audience or readers of a play are better able to understand the irony of a particular statement or action than characters are. Through his use of dramatic irony, Shakespeare seemingly asks Perdita’s literal audience, *his* audience, to make sense of and comprehend her plants in a meaningful way that even she herself may not be able to. Interestingly, Shakespeare’s use of dramatic irony in relationship to Perdita’s plants remains readily recognizable and thus interpretable by modern audiences when she and Polixenes discuss streaked gillyvors or, as Perdita calls them, “nature’s bastards” (4.4.83). Modern audiences are still able to understand the irony of both Perdita and Polixenes’ stances of gillyvors considering the information they know about the characters. Perdita, believing she is a shepherdess and not a princess, argues that gillyvors are unfit flowers for her garden because they are not pure bred. Meanwhile, Polixenes argues that this makes gillyvors better and heartier for their crossbreeding, yet he is currently at the sheep shearing to prevent his son’s relationship with Perdita. Perdita and Polixenes’ positions are ironic since they do not match their actual stances and circumstances.

¹³ According to the Oxford English Dictionary’s Historical Thesaurus, “heal” (n 2a, c950), “health” (n, 5a c1325), “well-doing” (n2, c1440), “quartfulness” (a1483), and “well-being” (n1, c1561) were all concurrent synonyms for “prosperity” at this time. All of these words emphasize the physical body and good physical health.

While modern audiences have the ability to recognize Perdita and Polixenes' stances as ironic, they are less able to identify and comprehend Perdita's use of herbalism and medicinal floriography. They may not be able to recognize how these plants would have had very different meanings and connotations to early modern London audiences. In her article, "Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets," Rebecca Laroche discusses how Ophelia's flowers have had very different associations over time. Laroche states, "[there is a] very strong possibility that for early modern London audiences, there were reasons other than adorning a grave, gathering love tokens, or expressing symbolic meaning that a young woman could be picking flowers" (215). Laroche makes an interesting point about how Shakespeare's use of the language surrounding herbalism may have been more readily understood and interpreted by early modern London audiences; their knowledge would have allowed them to view Perdita's herbal remedies more readily as an element of the dramatic irony within the scene. Additionally, Laroche points out that herbalism was often a specialized and feminized form of knowledge that gave women authority and power in an androcentric world (215). The failure to comprehend the herbalistic uses of Perdita's plants as well as the authoritative female position she holds is perhaps why literary critics have struggled to give Perdita proper credit and perhaps accounts for her submissive, disenfranchised depiction.

Understanding Perdita as a social healer who successfully utilizes medicinal floriography results in a very complex and empowering characterization. Shakespeare places Perdita in an authoritative female position when she takes on the role of "Queen of the Feast" and as a hostess for "her father" (4.4.71-2). As discussed previously, the significance in this role is Perdita's guidance and leadership of her audience to prosperity; this prosperity can only occur if the past social ills can be treated, alleviated, and cured. By inhabiting this role and acting as a social

healer, Perdita utilizes her plants to symbolically enable the reconciliation of King Polixenes and King Leontes' friendship, her parents' marriage, and, most importantly, her marriage to Florizel. Perdita is able to employ her feminine roles and knowledge to treat the social ills from the previous acts through providing specific plant, even though she may not know she is doing so. By acting as a social healer, Perdita is able to guide her "good flock" and allow their return to "prosperity" through providing them herbal remedies (4.4.69). While literary critics have previously read Perdita's plants as unwittingly submitting to patriarchal forces, they have failed to see how Perdita has obtained a feminized form of agency that also enables her to use specifically feminized knowledge. Regardless of her awareness or intentionality, Perdita and her plants either enact or at least foreshadow social healing.

During the course of her floral scene, Perdita gives a total of eight plants to King Polixenes and Camillo that share similar medicinal uses. It is important to note that herbalism was not an exact science. Multiple plants could be used to treat the same illness or symptom; one flower could be used to treat a wide variety of illnesses and symptoms. Some flowers worked better for some people. No flower was the only option for a specific ailment. Herbalists had to take this information into consideration when administering their remedies. Consequently, they sometimes gave multiple plants that treated the same or similar illnesses and symptoms in hopes that one would take effect and work well for a patient.¹⁴ This is seemingly the approach that Perdita takes with the plants she gives to Polixenes and Camillo. These eight plants share similar properties that can be used to treat five categories of illnesses: memory loss and illnesses of the mind, heart pain, blood purification, poisoning, and illnesses related to women's reproductive

¹⁴ See Rebecca Laroche's third chapter, "Gentlewomen's Herbal Readings and the Absent-Present Physicians" in *Medicinal Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550-1650* for a thorough understanding of how women utilized herbals and herbalism to come to certain diagnoses and used multiple plants to treat illnesses.

health. Each of the plants listed in these categories would have been equivalent with the others in terms of their uses.

Perdita first gives King Polixenes and Camillo herbalistic treatments for memory loss and the mind to reflect the need for remembrance and reconciliation amongst all of the characters in the play. Rosemary, hot lavender, mint, marjoram, and marigold were all commonly used to treat memory loss and other illnesses of the mind. In *The Herball*, John Gerard writes of rosemary, “it is also good, especially the floures thereof, for all infirmities of the head and braine, proceeding of a cold and moist cough; for they dry the brain, quicken the senses and memorie, and strengthen the sinewie parts” (1293). Nicholas Culpeper similarly writes in *The English Physician* that lavender is “...of special good use for all the griefs and pains of the Head and Brains” (140). Both Gerard and Culpeper agree that mint is successful in alleviating headaches (681) (159). By providing Polixenes and Camillo with rosemary, lavender, and mint, Perdita conveys that the men must reflect upon, to paraphrase Scott, “the seasons of their lives,” which have brought them to this place and time. Interestingly, Perdita hands rosemary to Polixenes stating, “...remembrance be to you both” (4.4.76). Perdita’s association of rosemary with remembrance suggests an attempt at helping the men, specifically Polixenes, to remember the social ills that have resulted in the loss of Leontes’ friendship to Polixenes, Camillo’s banishment from Sicily, the death of Leontes’ son, and the loss of Perdita. Similarly, the emphasis on memory and the past is necessary for all of the parties to forgive previous social ills and for future healing to occur.

Perdita’s offering of rosemary, marjoram, and marigold also provides a symbolic treatment for alleviating the heart pain that Polixenes has suffered due to the loss of his friendship with Leontes. In addition to treating illnesses of the head, rosemary was used to cure

symptoms impacting the heart. Culpeper writes, “ The Flowers, and the Conserve made of them, are a singular good to comfort the heart” (320). Similarly, Gerard notes “The floures made up into plates with sugar after the manner of Sugar Roset and eaten, comfort the heart, make it merry, quicken the spirits, and make them more lively” (1294). Symbolically, rosemary was not only associated with remembrance but also with love and loyalty due to these effects on the heart. In a sermon entitled, “A Marriage Present” (1607), Roger Hacket speaks of not only this medicinal quality of rosemary but also these symbolic connotations:

Speaking of the powers of rosemary, it overtoppeth all the flowers in the garden, boasting man’s rule. It helpeth the brain, strengthen the memorie, and is very medicinable for the head. Another property of the rosemary is, it affects the heart. Let this rosmarinus, the flower of men, ensigne of your wisdom, love, and loyaltie, be carried not only in your hands, but in your hearts and heads. (qtd. Grieve 681)

To insure that Polixenes’ heart pains are adequately treated, Perdita also gives him marjoram and marigolds. Gerard writes that marjoram is used against “the swooning of the heart” (667). Culpeper describes marigold as “comforter of the heart” and writes that it “...strengthens and succors the Heart infinitely” (154). In effect, Perdita’s gift may encourage Polixenes to remember the loyalty and love that he and Leontes once had for each other. These plants all provide remedies to fix Polixenes’ “broken heart” due to the loss of his friendship with Leontes. Ultimately, Perdita’s dispersal of rosemary, lavender, mint, marjoram, and marigold signals a need to remember and heal the friendship between these men.

Having addressed the past issues of Polixenes and Leontes’ friendship, Perdita goes on to address the current social ill that needs to be treated and alleviated – her relationship with Florizel. The only impediment to Perdita’s relationship with and marriage to Florizel is their

perceived social class difference. Perdita's offerings of carnations and gillyvors are commonly associated with blood purification, which is indicative of Perdita's desire to be of the same social standing as Florizel so that they can marry. In *The English Physician*, Culpeper writes that these plants were used to "cleaeneth the blood" (368). Perdita's offering of carnations could suggest her desire to have a purer heredity and to "clean her blood" to be able to marry Florizel. However, Perdita's offering is also an ironic one because her eventual marriage to Florizel does, in fact, keep the royal bloodline pure and prevents the debasement Polixenes fears. Perdita and Florizel's marriage also signals the end of "bad blood" between their fathers; Perdita could be unknowingly conveying that this marriage, like carnations and gillyvors, could enable this to occur.

Perdita goes on to offer the antitoxins rue, mint, marjoram, and marigold to further treat and alleviate the "bad blood" between Leontes and Polixenes by unknowingly addressing her father's request for Camillo to poison Polixenes. Although Perdita is unaware of these past events, the audience is aware of the "poisonous" effects of Leontes' doubt. In Act 1, Scene 2, Leontes orders Camillo to poison Polixenes on his behalf. Interestingly, this conversation is heavily laden with floral and herbalistic references. Believing that Camillo has failed to tell him that Hermione and Polixenes have cuckolded him, Leontes is particularly offended because he views Camillo as a "servant grafted in my serious trust," referencing the concept of botanical grafting to suggest his closeness with him (1.2.248) (Greenblatt et al. 1534). To prove his loyalty to him, Leontes then orders Camillo to act as Polixenes' cupbearer and implores him to "...bespice a cup/ To give mine enemy a lasting wink/ Which draught to me were cordial" (1.2.318-20). In these lines, King Leontes suggests that the poison that Camillo will give to Polixenes

would be a “cordial” (or remedy) for the heartache that this perceived betrayal has caused him.¹⁵

While he originally agrees to poison Polixenes, Camillo ultimately does not, choosing instead to escape with him to Bohemia to avoid Leontes’ death warrants (1.2.462). Subsequently, Perdita’s offering of antitoxins would be both fitting and ironic.

By offering Polixenes and Camillo powerful antitoxins, Perdita is not only reminding the men about these past social ills but also providing a treatment to foster forgiveness and reconciliation with Leontes. Both Gerard and Culpeper note mint as being excellent at treating poisonings. Gerard states, “... it keepth a man from being poyfoned: being inwardly taken, or outwardly applied, it cureth them that are bitten of Serpents: being burned or strewed it drives ferpents away...” (688). Culpeper similarly writes of marjoram: “[it] helps the biting of Venemous Beast, and such as have poyfoned themselves by eating Hemlock, Henbane, or Opium” (153). Gerard writes that marigolds are “... thought to strengthen and comfort the heart very much, and also to withstand poison” (741). Perdita’s offering of these plants offers a symbolic treatment to heal the “poisoned” relationship between Leontes, Polixenes, and Camillo and allows forgiveness to occur for Leontes’ planned poisoning of Polixenes by Camillo. Acting as a social healer, Perdita is able to effectively begin the process of treating, alleviating, and reversing the effects that this attempted poisoning has had on all of these male characters.

The last set of plants that Perdita gives to Polixenes and Camillo are mint, hot lavender, marjoram, summer savory, and marigolds, all of which provide remedies related to childbirth and women’s reproductive health. These plants remind the audience that Hermione still needs to heal from these past social ills that denied her a relationship to her children. Although Hermione is

¹⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary provides this definition of cordial: “Of medicines, food, or beverages: Stimulating, ‘comforting’, or invigorating the heart; restorative, reviving, cheering” (“cordial” 2a).

not present at the sheep shearing, she is perhaps the character to suffer the most. The primary reason that Leontes becomes deeply distrustful of Hermione's friendship with Polixenes is that she is pregnant and Polixenes has been in Sicilia for "nine changes of the watery star," which coincides with her pregnancy (1.2.1). Although both Hermione and Polixenes deny any sexual relationship and the Oracle of Delphi verifies Perdita's legitimacy, Leontes refuses to believe their innocence. In the process of accusing Hermione before the court, Leontes denies Hermione her childbirth customs and health practices when he places her in prison and forces her to stand trial. Hermione refers to this denial when states, "The childbed privilege denied, which 'longs/ To women of all fashion; lastly, hurried/ Here, to this place, I'th' open air, before/ I have got strength of limit" (3.2.101-4). In these lines, Hermione is alluding to the practice of bed rest and seclusion for women who have just given birth to children. Hermione's pain is both physical and emotional. While she is physically experiencing the painful effects of childbirth, Hermione also must endure the emotional pain of Mamillius' death and having Perdita taken from her (3.2.140-3) (3.1.170-83). Hermione is tragically unable to fulfill her role as a mother due to Leontes' social ills.

The aforementioned plants provide a variety of treatments for women's reproductive health issues that remind the audience of Hermione's need to recover from the traumatic circumstances surrounding Perdita's birth. Culpeper writes that mint "... taken with Wine, it helpeth Women in their sore Travel in Child bearing" (160). Culpeper similarly notes that summer savory is an excellent plant for expectant mothers, writing "[it] is a present help for the rifting of the Mother procured by Wind, provoketh Urine and Women's Courses, and is much commended for Women with Child to take inwardly and smell often unto" (334-5). Culpeper and Gerard respectively list lavender and marigold as useful in helping to expel the secundine, or

after birth (140) (741). By providing these plants, Perdita suggests the need to treat and alleviate the physical and emotional pain that Hermione has suffered. Hermione loses her ability to have a relationship with her children and to act as a mother because of Leontes' actions. Perdita's plants are a reminder of how Hermione has been impacted by Leontes' jealousy, and they begin to prepare Shakespeare's audience for Hermione's reunion with Perdita and the restoration of her maternal role (5.3.120-8).

By providing plants that symbolically enable Polixenes, Camillo, and Hermione to begin to recover, Perdita successfully fulfills her role as a social healer while acting as "Queen of the Feast." Polixenes and Camillo's acceptance of these plants signals that necessary healing is beginning; the "sad [tale] best for winter" is coming to an end and a new story of spring, filled with restoration and budding love, is about to begin (2.1. 629). Perdita provides plants with medicinal florigraphic connotations to Polixenes and Camillo because they are the ones who have suffered from the consequences of the earlier social ills within the play. Hence, Perdita gives herbalistic plants that bloom in fall and winter to alleviate their pain and ultimately heal them. Perdita's remaining audience members do not require this socio-medicinal intervention; Mopsa, Dorcas, and Florizel are all young and socially healthy. Consequently, Perdita merely suggests plants that she would like to give them but does not actually possess. The suggested plants for these characters did not have significant medicinal uses, but rather sociocultural significance, in Shakespeare's time. During this period, audiences would have had a multifaceted understanding of plants that drew upon medicinal, symbolic, and sociocultural awareness. As "Queen of the Feast," Perdita is not solely acting as a social healer or relying on only medicinal plants and knowledge. The plants Perdita suggests for Florizel, Mopsa, and Dorcas exemplify her

knowledge of plants outside of their medicinal contexts, illustrating how Shakespeare's own audience would have understood plants in multiple ways.

Yet, Perdita's suggestions of primroses to Dorcas and Mopsa and daffodils, crown imperial, and fleur-de-luce to Florizel imply that social healing has already occurred; these youthful characters can more freely express their romantic and sexual feelings in a positive, optimistic way, unlike the older characters in earlier acts wherein romance and sexuality are overwhelmingly portrayed as negative and sinful. For example, Leontes and Polixenes' conversation in Act 1, Scene 2 is filled with their wishes to be youthful and free of sexual desire like they were as children. Polixenes points out that Hermione and his wife are responsible for corrupting this innocence, although Hermione suggests his conclusion is unfair and unwarranted (1.2.75-88). Similarly, Leontes goes on to greatly overanalyze this discussion, leaping to the belief that Polixenes and Hermione must be cuckolding him due to their discussion of sex (1.2.110-21). This view of love and sex is greatly contrasted with the younger characters, particularly Perdita and Florizel, who do not view sex as corrupt or sinful. This is evidenced by Perdita's suggested flowers for Mopsa, Dorcas, and Florizel, which all would have invoked social knowledge of romance and sexuality to Shakespeare's audience. Through mentioning these flowers, Perdita openly discusses romance and sexuality with Mopsa, Dorcas, and Florizel in a positive, healthy way.

Perdita openly teases Mopsa and Dorcas about their sexual desires by wanting to give them primroses and suggesting that they may suffer from green sickness if their love triangle with the Clown goes unresolved. At this time, doctors and herbalists believed that young,

virginal women could suffer from a kind of anemia known as green sickness.¹⁶ Green sickness was commonly associated with virgins who were suffering a wide range of physical symptoms such as paleness, puffiness, headaches, nausea, and more (Dawson 49). As Helen King writes, “the cure for the disease of virgins was to cease to be a virgin” (qtd. Dawson 49). There was a prevailing superstition that women suffering from green sickness who died from the “illness” would be transformed into primroses (Greenblatt et al. 1567). Perdita refers to this phenomenon when she states, “pale primroses,/ That die unmarried ere they can behold/ Bright Phoebus in his strength— a malady/ Most incident to maids” (4.4. 122-5). Perdita’s suggestion of primroses for Mopsa and Dorcas is a reminder that they need to resolve their love triangle with the Clown.

The first flowers that Perdita proposes for Florizel are daffodils, which suggest Florizel’s “foolish love” of her. Perdita’s suggested gifting of daffodils is meant to tease Florizel about their relationship. Daffodils are alternatively known as narcissus (Gerard 94). This alternative name comes from the flowers’ association with the character of Narcissus from Greek mythology. Gerard writes on this connection, stating,

Ovid hath made mention in the third booke of his *Metamorphosis*, where he describeth the transformation of the faire boy Narcissus into a floure of his own name; saying:

But as for body none remain’d; in stead whereof they found

A yellow flour, with milke white leaves ingirting of it round. (131-2)

Gerard’s reference to daffodils’ association with Narcissus exemplifies how Shakespeare’s audience would have been familiar with its association with “foolish love.” Narcissus is so vain he falls in love with a reflection of himself and dies because his love of his reflection is

¹⁶ For a thorough study of green sickness’s medical diagnosis as well as its symptoms and cultural implications, please see the second chapter of Lesel Dawson’s *Lovesickness and Gender in Early Modern English Literature*.

unrequited. A sixteenth century literary critic, Tommaso Stigliani, expressed his belief that the Narcissus myth "... clearly demonstrates the unhappy end of those who love their things too much" (qtd. Donaldson 36). Shakespeare's contemporary, Robert Greene, also uses daffodils to imply foolishness, writing "yellow daffodil, a flowre fit for gelous Dottrels"(25). When Perdita recommends daffodils for Florizel, she seemingly implies that their love is foolish in that it cannot be fully requited due to their differing social classes. Perdita's emphasis on realistic love is also echoed in her statement, "Your resolution cannot hold when 'tis/ Opposed, as it must be, by th'power of the King" (4.4.36-37). By wanting to gift him daffodils, Perdita is seemingly teasing Florizel for his inability to be realistic about their relationship and its future, suggesting that he may suffer a fate similar to the infamous Narcissus if he does not change his intentions.

Perdita goes on to suggest more flowers for Florizel that were associated with exoticism, sexuality, and royalty to Shakespeare's audience. Crown imperials would have been a fairly new and exotic flower for Shakespeare's audience and would have been widely sought after when *The Winter's Tale* was published. The Norton Shakespeare editors note that crown imperials were a type of lily first imported into England from Turkey in the late sixteenth century (1567). Their association with Eastern culture made crown imperials evocative of exoticism and eroticism (Ellacombe 68-9)(Thomas 94). These associations were also made due to crown imperials' appearance. Crown imperials do not blossom upwards from the stem towards the sun like most plants but downward toward the ground; their petals also overlap each other with crinkled edges that resemble folded blankets. Crown imperials are also known for having little droplets of nectar at the base of each petal. Gerard describes this, stating, "In the bottome of each of these bells there is placed six drops of most cleere shining sweet water, in tast like sugar, resembling in shew faire Orient pearles" (202). Ultimately, the flowers' origins in the Middle

East and their appearance was suggestive of strangeness, sexuality, and desirability. Possessing such a rare, unique plant like the crown imperial was a novelty as well as a status symbol, creating such a demand that prices for crown imperials rose rapidly (qtd. Thomas 94). Gerard's note that crown imperials "made denizons in our London gardens, whereof I have plenty," is illustrative of how possessing this flower was a trendy status symbol worthy of bragging about (203). Crown imperials were thus more likely to be owned and possessed by nobility and people of a higher social status; their Anglicized name also associates them with nobility. Similarly, fleur-de-luce was associated with royalty and nobility due to its deep purple petals and its use as France's national flower (Greenblatt et al. 1567).

Based on these connotations, Perdita's suggestion of crown imperials and fleur-de-luce is most likely intended to illustrate her romantic and sexual desires for Florizel. Perdita is highlighting his status and his nobility as desirable. Similarly, crown imperials' sexualized, exotic connotations express her desire to be intimate with him. Although Perdita recognizes that their relationship may not last through her offering of daffodils, she nonetheless expresses her desire for Florizel when she states she would like to give Florizel crown imperial and fleur-de-luce so she can "strew him o'er and o'er" (4.4.128). Florizel seems to recognize that Perdita is attempting to impress him with these flowers and teases her by stating, "What, like a corpse?" (4.4.129). Florizel illustrates his own awareness of flowers' sociocultural significance through referencing their alternative use in funerary practices. By doing so, Florizel is able to jokingly chide Perdita for the obviousness of her sexual desires for him. Perdita persists, however, on expressing these desires in her heavily sexualized response: "No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on, / Not like a corpse— or if, not to be buried, / But quick and in mine arms" (4.4.130-2). Perdita is very clear about her sexual desire by describing how they could or should be

physically intimate. Ultimately, Perdita's sexual forwardness with Florizel and vice versa illustrates a healthy relationship with open communication about love and sex that would have benefitted Leontes, Hermione, and Polixenes.

In her role as "Queen of the Feast," Perdita acts as a woman who bridges the past and future through her gifted plants. Perdita unknowingly provides plants with medicinal purposes and implications to treat the social ills Polixenes, Camillo, and Hermione have suffered from. In doing so, she provides remedies for past social ills that have festered for far too long. Perdita and her plants ultimately provide a possible future for the world within the play. Perdita's suggested flowers for Mopsa and Dorcas, and, most importantly, Florizel, reflect how their views of love and sexuality could possibly prevent such social ills from occurring again. Perdita and Florizel are able to more openly discuss their emotional and physical desires for each other without the hindrances of gender bias found in their parents' relationships. Perdita's plants ultimately reflect a sense of renewal and hope about the future, since her relationship with Florizel is not a winter's tale but rather one of springtime.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have offered three interpretations of female characters who act as social healers, attempting to positively alleviate social ills and restore social order within their respective plays. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Isabella recognizes that her plants cannot be successful remedies that will bring Horatio back to life, cure her husband's need for vengeance, or heal herself from the mental anguish of losing her child. Her perceived failures as a mother and a healer ultimately lead her to commit suicide. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's Ophelia also faces a tragic fate. Although she attempts to positively intervene, Ophelia's audience cannot or will not comprehend her potential remedies due to her madness. Ophelia fails to be an effective social healer, leading to her, Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes' deaths within *Hamlet*. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita is ultimately successful as a social healer because Polixenes and Camillo accept her plants and thus the symbolic healing that she provides them.

Renaissance literary criticism, however, has often interpreted these female characters as powerless and voiceless since they do not act in destructive or stereotypically masculine ways. Even more troubling is the fact that these female characters are often presented as examples of either incoherent madness or pastoral fantasy simply because they are associated with nature. Some feminist critics have opposed these particular characterizations, but they depict Isabella, Ophelia, and Perdita as particularly powerless within patriarchal hierarchies. These oversimplified characterizations of Isabella, Ophelia, and Perdita are a consequence of their gender and their perceived inability to possess agency and power. Female characters should be

understood as equally complex, intelligent, and capable as their male counterparts. Studying the history of women's herbalism allows literary scholars to execute more nuanced characterizations because it complicates our understandings of gender politics between women and men in early modern England.

Most significantly, studying this history allows literary critics to understand why and how Shakespeare dramatized this medical practice as a symbolic language. As explained in the introduction, Shakespeare's plays demonstrate herbalism's significance as a feminized form of power, which would have been known to his audience; medicinal floriography, then, was a feminized symbolic language for his female characters to utilize. Analyzing Shakespeare's female characters as social healers who utilize medicinal floriography reveals that they have a great deal to "say" about their circumstances without speaking explicitly. Both Ophelia and Perdita utilize medicinal floriography to criticize Kings for their actions. If these critiques had been said directly to Claudius or Polixenes, they could have faced serious repercussions. Ophelia and Perdita thus can discreetly critique these men through medicinal floriography because these critiques appear to "just" be pretty flowers. The remedies Ophelia and Perdita offer rely upon complex literal herbalistic uses, figurative floriographic meanings, and socio-cultural associations to convey their knowledge of their circumstances as well as their hopes for future outcomes.

Ultimately, female characters' use of herbalism and medicinal floriography illustrates how they utilized what little authority and power they had to attempt to enact positive change in their lives. Isabella, Perdita, and Ophelia all attempt to alleviate social ills and restore their communities to social health. The languages of herbalism and medicinal floriography grant these female characters access to a feminized form of power and knowledge that they attempt to use to

positively intervene and alter circumstances seemingly outside of their control; they find the “remedies” for their plays’ social problems within themselves.

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- Provide private instruction to individual or small groups of students to improve writing skills in various academic fields
- Specialized sessions to best accommodate students with learning disabilities such as autism and/or nonnative English skills

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Correspond and schedule class meetings with instructor.

- Prepare lesson plans or learning modules for in-class sessions according to students' and/or the instructor's needs and goals
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HUDSON LOFTS STUDENT HOUSING ERIE, PA.

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- Ensure customer satisfaction