The Cult of Shakespeare in Soviet Russia and the Vilified Ophelia

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Abstract

This article examines the representations of Ophelia in Soviet academic and literary texts, as well as in Grigori Kozintsev's internationally renowned film version of Hamlet. Analyzing the Soviet cult of Shakespeare, I argue that Soviet portrayals of Ophelia — ranging from a threatening mechanical creature to a shrinking doll — reflect the difficulty of legitimizing Shakespeare and his plays, even under conditions of strict ideological control. Accepting Shakespeare as a proto-socialist writer, and lauding Hamlet as a people's hero, requires a struggle against the text and a policy of determined misreading. As a disruptive girl character, not easily assimilated into the centralizing force of communist ideology, Ophelia is marginal to the masculine project of state-building into which Shakespeare, and consequently Hamlet, are co-opted. In Soviet portrayals, she embodies the doubt about how Shakespeare's foreign birth and bourgeois origins might affect his potential for properly educating proletarian readers. This representational trend continues beyond the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991; at the same time, post-Soviet women authors query Ophelia's marginal status, using her as a point of entry into the cultural canon.

What does Hamlet have in mind when he remarks to Polonius, cryptically, "For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion —" (2.2.181-82)? In the 1940s, the prominent Soviet literary and art critic Mikhail Morozov interpreted this line as a comment on Ophelia's moral degradation, writing that "in the same way, the beautiful Ophelia, coming into contact with the filth of the court life, can breed evil" (tak i prekrasnaya Ofeliya mozhet porodit' zlo, soprikasayas' s gryaz'yu pridvornoy zhizni) (Morozov 1964a, 213). In Shakespeare's text, Hamlet makes the connection to Ophelia by warning Polonius against letting his daughter walk in the sun, lest she conceive (2.2.182-86). The pun on "sun/son," coupled with a reference to spontaneous generation, suggests a morbid joke about the unseemly consequences of letting Ophelia associate with men, and especially with the prince himself. However, ignoring Hamlet's own part in this potential conception, Morozov interprets his remark as a sober observation of Ophelia's openness
to internalizing the vicious customs of the court and propagating them further. The Soviet scholar directly links Ophelia to dead and decomposing flesh, capable of actively spreading the infection she has contracted from the rotten state of Denmark.¹

Morozov's reading exemplifies the intensely critical and conflicted attitude toward Ophelia in Soviet scholarship. She is perceived as a deeply ambiguous figure whose lovely surface might hide dark and threatening entrails (not unlike those of a dead dog). This reading of Ophelia may be observed not only in academic publications but also in Soviet popular literature and poetry; the proliferation of such (mis)representations of a key Shakespearean character indicates they are performing significant cultural work. The objective of this article is to analyze the provenance and significance of Soviet representations of Ophelia. Throughout the article, I outline the privileged position Shakespeare came to occupy in the Soviet Union, examine the concurrent glorification of Hamlet, and explore the problems of legitimizing the playwright, the play, and its protagonist. Taking into consideration the treatments of Ophelia published shortly before the revolution, I trace her transformation, in the context of the early Soviet cultural politics, from a benign, if ineffectual, figure to an actively dangerous, frequently inhuman cipher. As a girl character, marginal and potentially destabilizing to the ideologically sound interpretations of Hamlet, Ophelia could safely reflect all doubts about Shakespeare's ultimate usefulness and about Hamlet's potential as a revolutionary. However, this marginal status also makes her a useful figure for Soviet and post-Soviet women writers in search of a point of entry into the cultural canon.

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolshevik party found itself in a peculiar position: highly ideological, the new state still lacked a coherent and consistent cultural policy. It quickly became apparent that any hope for rapidly producing a uniquely Soviet (or even, in a pinch, proletarian) culture was futile, since the lower classes were largely illiterate, while those who boasted pre-revolutionary education immediately became suspect as potential ideological enemies. The new state could not simply and unequivocally appropriate the existing works of art as a temporary stop-gap, and numerous writers, including Vladimir Mayakovsky, were passionately calling for the complete destruction of pre-revolutionary culture in order to start over with a clean slate.

In order to resolve this problem and to establish cultural independence, party leaders implemented several strategies. Certain groups, such as Proletkult and a number of avant-garde associations, strove to produce uniquely Soviet art works, with varied success. At the same time, it became clear that, without incorporating at least some elements of pre-revolutionary culture, it would be impossible to educate the illiterate majority of the new state. Without laying claim
to the past, the new state would find itself entirely lacking in cultural capital on the world stage. By the 1930s, the necessity of securing recognition and respect from other countries became a cultural commonplace and one of Stalin's overwhelming concerns. To a certain extent, this attitude shift may be explained through Papernyi's theory of two cultures, which describes the early Soviet attitudes to pre-revolutionary architecture. Papernyi defines the 1920s as a "Culture One" period: during that decade, the new state saw itself as the beginning of a new history and thus deemed the past largely useless and deserving to be destroyed. In early 1930s, however, "Culture Two" takes over: Soviet culture sought to present the "old world" as its own past, positioning itself as the final point of history (Papernyi 1996, 45). After the heated cultural policy debates of the 1930s, all throughout World War II (and specifically the period between 1941 and 1945, known in the Soviet Union as the Great Patriotic War), through the Thaw (which began after Stalin's death in 1953 and lasted until approximately 1965), and until the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Soviet academics and writers worked not only to anchor their ideological projects in the cultural past, but also to argue that their interpretation of this past was superior to all others.

William Shakespeare, extremely popular in Russia throughout the nineteenth century and highly valued by Western countries, was almost immediately implicated in the Soviet project of building cultural capital. Insisting on Shakespeare's role as a proto-revolutionary writer and appropriating his works as evidence that the October Revolution was historically inevitable, by the 1930s Soviet ideology workers had fully launched what Arkady Ostrovsky calls "Shakespearization, as the state policy for Soviet culture" (Ostrovsky 2006, 57). Still, an undertow of doubt — related to Shakespeare's foreign birth, suspect social status, interest in aristocratic characters, and unrealistic plots — persisted. As a foreign writer of uncertain class origins, whose plays, at close reading, failed to yield unequivocal support for the communist cause, Shakespeare remained an inherently suspect figure even as he was adopted as one of the substantiating authorities of Soviet literature and culture. Moreover, the claims that Soviet culture at least partly had its foundations in the Shakespearean text were continuously threatened by the text itself, available both in English and Russian, and demanded constant vigilance, both in scholarship and in performance.

This tension between an ideologically motivated interpretation and a resistant play text is especially evident in the case of Hamlet, whose main character was viewed by Soviet critics as Shakespeare's mouthpiece and his theatrical alter ego. Accordingly, scholarly explorations of the play published in the Soviet Union vigorously resist the idea that Hamlet might be indecisive or unjust, arguing instead that he is at all times a progressive, active, and democratically minded
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hero. Still, because the popularity of this play both in pre-revolutionary Russian and in the Soviet Union ensured that it was widely read, the contradictions between the text and its ideologically correct readings must have been glaringly obvious. In his pamphlet written for English-speaking readers, Morozov describes the Soviet staging process and demonstrates just how closely directors' interactions with the play were controlled by the ideology workers. In the planning stages, the theaters were sent packages of information that included "a digest of critical opinion on *Hamlet*, comments, a bibliographical list and so on." In addition, "if required, a Shakespearian authority [would] be dispatched, who [would] not only give a series of lectures to the actors, but [would] also be present at rehearsals" (Morozov 1947b, 60). These measures would, presumably, ensure that the progressive, revolutionary persona of the Danish prince (and, by extension, of his creator) remained unchallenged.

In this context of strict ideological control, Soviet portrayals of Ophelia identify her as a site where doubts about this foreign playwright and his suitability as a vehicle for communist ideas can be safely expressed. Ophelia is the obvious choice for such a displacement of cultural anxiety, since her relationship with Hamlet presents a whole range of problems that cannot be resolved satisfactorily onstage or in academic writing without throwing a shadow of doubt on the character of Hamlet and thus on the heavily idealized playwright. For Soviet writers and academics, the image of Ophelia as a pure and simple being was both aesthetically appealing and intensely familiar from the nineteenth-century representations, both in Russia and in Europe. However, such an image also required an acknowledgment that Hamlet behaved reprehensibly toward Ophelia. The Victorians, in particular, idealized this character and viewed her as a pitiable victim of the cruel world, cut down before her time. Remarking on Victorian images of Ophelia, Kimberly Rhodes notes that the English audience "is meant to sympathize with Ophelia while Hamlet treats her harshly" (Rhodes 2008, 18). However, in Soviet constructions the suggestion that Hamlet is overly harsh, even deliberately cruel, to Ophelia would have clearly contradicted the ideological idealization of him. When Hamlet is understood to be a proto-socialist hero, neither recognition of his harshness nor subsequent sympathy for Ophelia is a desirable reader response.

Thus we have Morozov's analysis, which, in drawing a connection between Ophelia and the image of dead canine flesh breeding maggots, suggests that the fault for Hamlet's harshness might lie with Ophelia herself. Elsewhere Morozov describes her as "mincing" (zhemannaya), questions whether she might love Hamlet only for his looks and status, and hints that Hamlet's criticisms of Ophelia are "not for nothing" (nedarom), that "she has been a blind instrument in the hands of Claudius and Polonius" (chto ona byla slepym orudiem v rukakh Klavdiya i Poloniya) and "assisted
in [Hamlet's] death" (sposobstvovala ego gibeli) (Morozov 1964b, 167-68). Morozov is one of the first Soviet scholars to draw the reader's attention to Ophelia's possible failings and to question her relationship with Hamlet and overall function in the play, but this line of analysis regularly recurs in later studies. Consider the analysis of Hamlet in I. Vertsman's article. Generally adhering to the view of a "tender, kind" (nezhnaya, dobraya) albeit "weak-willed, unintelligent" (bezvol'noy, neumnoy) Ophelia, Vertsman is still able to imply that Hamlet's treatment of his former beloved is to a certain extent caused by her own deep-seated flaws. Explaining Hamlet's accusations, he argues that "Hamlet had discovered for himself, behind Ophelia's charming countenance with which nature had endowed her, something repulsive, vile, shameless" (Gamlet otkryl sebe za charuyushchim oblikom Ofelii, kotorym odarila ee priroda, nechto ottalkivayushchee, gnusnoe, besstydnoe) (Vertsman 1964, 108-11). His assertion of Ophelia's double nature, of course, speaks against all suggestions of her tenderness and charm: as in Morozov's reading, she contains a vicious seed of infection, readily visible to Hamlet's perspicacious eye.

Some Soviet writers and directors attempted to evade this conundrum altogether and explain away Hamlet's scandalous behavior toward the innocent Ophelia. For instance, in the notes to his stage production, Nikolai Okhlopkov explains carefully that Hamlet was forced to condemn his beloved in an effort to "save her, preserve her, albeit at the price of a terrible separation . . . so that Claudius should not use her childish naïveté and purity as a weapon for his provocations" (Okhlopkov 1966, 182). Reflecting on the play, Grigori Kozintsev argues that Hamlet's crude behavior toward Ophelia and his treatment of her as "a whore from a cheap brothel" (kak s potaskushkoy iz groshovogo pritona) are simply manifestations of his unwavering dedication to unmasking falsehoods of Elsinore (Kozintsev 1983, 318-19). These explanations do little beyond suggesting a truly monstrous selfishness and failure of judgment on the part of Hamlet; they also indicate the interpretative gap that loomed large, despite the best efforts of Soviet scholars and directors. This interpretative gap could not be simply ignored, since Ophelia is in many ways central to the play and, to a large extent, shapes the audience's reading of it.

As a girl character, vulnerable and changeable but also driven to insanity and eventual death by the actions of the hero, Ophelia could not be made to fit easily into the Soviet Shakespeare project. In this, she is unusual. In her discussion of a Soviet production of Antony and Cleopatra, Irene R. Makaryk points to the relative ease with which, in order "to celebrate a positive hero and his relationship to the masses, and, by extension, to celebrate the centralizing force and importance of the party," the female figure, peripheral to this project and distracting from it, may be in performance "dismissed, submerged, or otherwise assimilated by the centralist impulse" (Makaryk
1993, 189). However, Ophelia's violent grief, her fragile and romantic flowers, and eventual insanity prevent any easy access to a cathartic union between the positive hero and the audience. Marginal to what was perceived as a rational, masculine struggle against oppression, Ophelia becomes a potentially destructive embodiment of opposition to the values of socialist culture. Her very girlhood, her position as a desired and desiring subject, and the potential for disorder demonstrated in her sexually charged ballads all resist the ongoing, ideology-driven attempts in literature and art to defuse the subversive potential of eroticism by creating a culturally dominant image of an asexual woman worker.⁹ Alien to the values of Soviet literature yet central to one of Shakespeare's most famous plays, this girl character poses a complex problem of literary representation.

Thus, in Soviet literary re-imaginings, Ophelia emerges as a deeply unsettling character — a source of delusion and deception and sometimes a direct threat that extends beyond the fictional world to the reader. Her very isolation from the members of the court and, indeed, from the audience by the impassable gulf of her insanity means that she cannot be easily subordinated to the centralizing and unifying ideological impulse. In literary works, and especially those by male writers, Ophelia thus becomes the ultimate Other, with her representations ranging from a monstrous and murderous machine, to a deceitful mechanical guide, to a Nazi matron, as I will show.¹⁰ As I suggest later in my analysis of Dmitriy Golubkov's poem (1959), the only possibility of assimilating the figure of Ophelia into Soviet discourse is by explicitly re-imagining Shakespeare's plot in order to remove all morally ambiguous moments, especially those related to the play's protagonist. In other works, Ophelia vividly embodies a range of outdated, foreign, or ideologically flawed values of which Shakespeare might have been reasonably accused, if the evidence of his text were allowed to stand in the ideological court. The ideologically ambiguous Ophelia in non-dramatic texts allowed this cultural anxiety to be safely enacted and dismissed; shape-shifting, illusion-mongering, and back-stabbing, an enemy of progress and realism, she took on every quality of which Shakespeare was covertly suspected but of which, as a cult figure, he could never be directly accused.

Making Shakespeare in the Soviet Union: The Case of *Hamlet*

"Shakespeare stood before us as a poet-philosopher, inspired by the cutting-edge ideas of his time, as a great writer of the people. Soviet theatre restores to Shakespeare's humanism the primordial meaning that it had during the great revolutionary epoch of the emancipation of the individual" (Shekspir predstaval pred nami kak poet-filosof, proniknutyy peredovymi ideyami svoego vremeni, kak velikiy narodnyy pisatel'. Sovetskiy teatr vozvrashchaet
gumanizmu Shekspira tot pervozdannyu smysl, kotoryy on imel v velikuyu revolyutsionnyu epokhu raskreposhcheniya chelovecheskoy lichnosti) (Nel's 1960, 8). So writes Soviet scholar Sof'ya Nel's in the introductory chapter of her book 
Shakespeare on the Soviet Stage (a portion of this book was later published in English as "Shakespeare and the Soviet Theater: The Optimism of Tragedy," 1964). The claims that Shakespeare wrote for the people, that he sought to communicate humanistic and revolutionary ideals, and that Shakespearean text needs the communist party to regain its original import are commonplace in Soviet scholarship. Indeed, in his essay "Shakespeare: Social and ideological description" (originally published in 1933), Anatoly Lunacharsky argues that "[w]ithout us, without our era [. . .] such people as Shakespeare (and there are many of them in cultural history) would, in a manner of speaking, be meaningless" ([b]ez nas, bez nashey epokhi [. . .] takie lyudi, kak Shekspir (ikh nemalo v istorii kul'tury), byli by kak by bessmyslenny) (Lunacharsky 1965, 310). In Soviet readings, Shakespeare became a proto-communist playwright, whose ideas have been over time deliberately obscured and sometimes openly distorted by bourgeois academics, writers, and directors.  
The ability to produce "correct" interpretations of Shakespeare thus functioned as a distinction between "us" (the perceptive socialist readers) and "them" (the blind bourgeoisie). At the same time, the construction of a Soviet Shakespeare forbade direct and attentive engagement with Shakespeare's text, lest the reader find troubling inconsistencies. In essence, Soviet culture engaged in a more extreme version of what Marjorie Garber calls "the fetishization of Shakespeare." Garber speaks of the desire, in the Western academia, to participate in "the fantasy of originary cultural wholeness, the last vestige of universalism" and ",[t]o believe in something, in someone, all-knowing and immutable" (Garber 1999, 67). The stakes of literary analysis for Soviet directors, writers, and scholars, however, were frighteningly high. Soviet ideology workers heralded an unproblematically immutable Shakespeare as concrete proof of historical wholeness and continuity that explained and justified the existence of the communist state. To suggest that this wholeness might be merely a self-serving nationalistic illusion meant to cast doubt upon the Soviet Union as the end product of a smooth and expected historical development. Such a suggestion was punishable by accusations of anti-Soviet leanings, which potentially meant the loss of one's livelihood, freedom, or even life.

And so, the Soviet Union set out to claim Shakespeare for its own. As Solomon Volkov argues throughout his fascinating, if not always well supported, overview of the Soviet art world, Stalin, after becoming the supreme state leader by the late 1920s, was himself deeply invested in obtaining from Europe the recognition of the Soviet Union as capable of appreciating "real" music, art, and literature (2004).  
Volkov's book shows Stalin intervening directly in the ideological directives
contemporary understandings of teen-girl anguish, as Mary Pipher's well-known *Reviving Ophelia*. The Tiqqun collective, "Raw Materials for the Theory of a Young-Girl," which links the fetish for girlhood in contemporary commodity culture with the triumph of capitalism and the decline of the women's movement, opens with Hamlet's devastating works to Ophelia: "I did love you once." But Natalia Khomenko's essay on Soviet representations of Ophelia offers a startlingly different take on Ophelia as a corrupt and untrustworthy villain. What, in the West, serves as confirmation of her innocent girlhood is transformed, in the Soviet context, into evidence of moral decadence and bourgeois indulgence. This allows for the celebration of Hamlet as a political revolutionary, but it also takes Ophelia quite seriously as a villain. As Khomenko demonstrates, this vilification of Ophelia, however unfair it seems, provides feminist authors post-1991 with a rich opportunity to reclaim and remodel — dare we say revive? — this long-maligned heroine.

Dianne Berg's discussion of Mary Cowden Clarke's Ophelia explores the earliest and most influential attempt to fictionalize Ophelia's girlhood and, interestingly, provides another example of what she calls "abuse" — in this case, not by recasting Ophelia as a villain, but, instead, by promoting her wide-eyed, even vapid innocence, and, moreover, by inflicting upon her a set of traumas that provide extra background for her madness. Ophelia becomes an object lesson in vulnerable girlhood — an example of how important it is to take care of young girls — and part of a general tendency in Cowden Clarke (and in Victorian society as a whole) to underestimate and eliminate the agency of girls by constructing them as material to be molded. But Jenny Flaherty shows how contemporary young adult novels succeed in positively "reviving Ophelia," representing her as a survivor, with strength of character and numerous capabilities, rather than as a fragile victim, even as they use Ophelia's sense of being marginalized and an outsider to resonate with contemporary teenaged alienation. Reading a premodern text and heroine unabashedly through the lens of feminist theory and criticism, these novels thus successfully manage to, as Showalter puts it, "liberate Ophelia from the text."

To liberate Ophelia from the text: this is the project of adapting and appropriating all of Shakespeare's girls. The dream of liberation resonates, as well, with a variety of conditions in which girlhood is experienced. In some cases, girls require liberation from their circumstances: the freedom to be themselves apart from social and familial stricture. In others, girlhood offers a space for freedom, possibility, and creativity before the choices and responsibilities of adulthood. In some cases, girlhood is constrained by a materialistic and capitalist system that seeks to commodify their sexuality for private gain. In others, popular images of the young girl provide a spur and pretext for a satirical and subversive critique of the complicity of the commodification of girlhood with the triumph of neo-liberalism and the ideologically motivated perception of the failure of feminism.
As the adaptations and appropriations of Shakespearean girlhood that are collected here engage with and contend against a set of inherited and idealized notions of girlhood that may be traced to Shakespeare, they also reflect the creative energies and independence of thought that Shakespeare himself linked, time and again, with girls.

Notes
1. For discussion of these terms see Deanne Williams, *Shakespeare and the Performance of Girlhood* (2014), 4-5.
References


