

*Hamlet's* Objective Mode and Early Modern Materialist Philosophy

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A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
MA degree in Theatre

Department of Theatre

Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa

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*Hamlet's* Objective Mode and the Materiality of Tragedy, Rachel Lacy, University of Ottawa

Abstract

*Hamlet's* tragedy is constructed as a perspective of matter that is destined for decay, and this "objective," or "object-focused," mode of viewing the material world enhances theatrical and theological understandings of the play's props, figurative language, and characters. *Hamlet's* "objective mode" evokes early modern materialist philosophies of *vanitas* and *memento mori*, and it is communicated in theatre through semiotic means, whereby material items stand for moral ideas according to an established sign-signified relation. Extending an objective reading to *Hamlet's* characters reveals their function as images, or two-dimensional emblems, in moments of slowing narrative time. In the graveyard scene (5.1), characters and theatrical props cooperate to materialize the objective perspective. As a prop, Ophelia's corpse complicates the objective mode through its semantic complexity. Thus, she stands apart from other characters as one that both serves to construct and to deconstruct the objective mode. *Hamlet's* tragic outlook, which depends upon an understanding of matter as destined for decay, and of material items as ends in themselves rather than vehicles for spiritual transformation, is an early modern notion concurrent with theological debates surrounding the Eucharist. Drawing upon art-historical, linguistic, feminist, theological, and theatrical approaches, this thesis contributes to concurrent discourse on *Hamlet's* tragic genre.

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## Introduction

In Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* (1533), two richly-clad male figures stand to the side of a table laden with objects of allegorical significance. What dominates the picture, however, is the anamorphic skull projecting out of the painting's space and intruding into the space of the viewer. This uncomfortably large, distorted image of the face of death inhabits the gap between the picture and the onlooker. In moving from background to foreground, the skull carves out its own space beyond the planes of the painting, evoking a sense of agency (Grootenboer 65). The skull seems to command consideration as a subject in its own right when, catapulting itself out of the frame of composition, it upstages the human figures behind it. These figures seem more object-like than the animated skull, as they are more confined to the painting's two-dimensional space. In *The Ambassadors*, the subject-object relation seems fluid when an inanimate item appears to behave animately and thereby compromise the perceived subjectivity of the human figures behind it.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare does with time what Holbein does with space in his treatment of certain items rendered as subjects onstage, and this aesthetic choice has important religious implications. This thesis examines tragedy in *Hamlet* as an objective perspective of Denmark's material world that is both object-focused—dependent upon significant material items for communicating important ideas—and non-subjective—representing human figures as emblems, or material signs, of Renaissance concepts. Combining approaches from art history and linguistics with an understanding of early modern staging conventions and theatre material culture, I demonstrate how the objective perspective is a construct of materialist philosophies of decay that are communicated, through semiotic means, by icons of *vanitas* and *memento mori* that are evident in the play's dialogue and scenic elements. Reading the objective mode in light of early modern materialist philosophies, I argue that such a mode engages *Hamlet's* contemporary controversies over the relationship between matter and spirit in religious contexts. In this way, my thesis approaches *Hamlet* from several disciplines in order to analyze it through theological

and theatrical lenses. It contributes to a fuller historical understanding of play as well as to current theatrical discourse on semiotics in representation and the phenomenology of spectatorship.

The contemporary study of signs—including their stable or unstable relationship to meaning, which is examined, respectively, in semiotics and phenomenology—resonates with early modern examinations of materiality and spirituality. Indeed, the contemporary study of signs restores early modern understandings of the relationship between image and meaning, although it reformulates these understandings in new terminologies. The early modern emblem was considered to be composed of image (material form) and word (spiritual meaning); likewise, the semiotic sign is composed of a signifier and a signified. Enlightenment philosophers reassessed the image for its *perspective* through the mediating gaze; similarly, the Peircean dyadic construction of the sign in contemporary semiotics accounts for the role of the *interpreter* in the hermeneutic process. The perspective through which *Hamlet's* tragedy is constructed, which is its objective mode of representing the play's material universe, and which renders *Hamlet* readable according to modern theories of representation, is itself a function of historical-philosophical developments relating to the Western European turn to modernity.

Without eliding the differences between early modern notions of the image and contemporary critical theory, I illuminate their similarities of *relation*: relating material signs, or images, to immaterial referents. Fundamentally, I demonstrate how contemporary theories of communication and early modern aesthetic discourses serve as two vocabularies for articulating ideas of the relationship between matter and what lies beyond it. One vocabulary is specific to *Hamlet's* historical time period; it is important for accurately interpreting the play as an historical artifact. The other is specific to contemporary theatrical discourse; it is important for verbalizing the current relevance of such an interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Considering this bipartite lens, I employ the terms “medieval,” “early modern,” and “Renaissance” insofar as they pertain to movements in theatre history.

Due to my multidisciplinary approach, I limit the scope of my study to select visual images in the form of gestures, figurative language, and theatrical props, including actors' bodies. My selection process proceeds from the observation that historically significant gestures, word images and theatrical props in *Hamlet* would have informed its original reception. Theatre is a visual art conversant with other art of its time, and, therefore, the visual means by which *Hamlet* communicates must be posited within its art historical moment. Although art historical sources are various, I focus here on the early modern still life as an example of its contemporary materialist philosophies that communicate through a visual vocabulary of meaningful objects. In early modern still lifes, material items signify certain moral referents according to a popularly acknowledged visual code. *Hamlet* employs this visual code in moments of emblematic *tableaux* — stage pictures that appear as freeze-frames when narrative time stills. In such moments, the moral and material philosophies indicated by the still life are implied by the play's perspective towards its own material universe. This perspective I term the "objective mode," which is the play's "object-focused" and emotionally-removed perspective of the material universe. When understood in light of early modern philosophy, these two characteristics of the objective mode are not as disparate as they might seem. In this thesis, I examine how the objective mode of *Hamlet's* perspective towards fictional materiality communicates early modern material philosophies of decay through semiotic means. Furthermore, I examine how certain props, gestures, and images contribute to the construction, and deconstruction, of the objective mode, and how this mode informs the philosophical basis of *Hamlet's* tragedy.

The objective mode is a perspective on material life that reflects early modern material controversies and indicates a certain critical lens. It is constructed in early modern still lifes through semiotic means: certain items serve as signs, according to a culturally acknowledged visual code, to indicate moral signifieds. Chapter One, "Shakespeare's Objective Mode in *Hamlet's* Still Life Iconography," demonstrates how the "objective" perspective of visual arts towards their subject matter,

as exemplified and epitomized in still life painting, is mirrored in *Hamlet's* perspective towards its fictional material universe. When viewed in the context of *Hamlet's* macabre dialogue, key props and costumes create a visual landscape that brings to mind early modern *vanitas* and *memento mori* still life iconography. Because of this visual resemblance, the props and costumes in early modern productions of *Hamlet* can be read emblematically, in an objective, or object-focused, way, typical of the items that form the subject matter of early modern still lifes. Reading the material elements (both represented onstage and referred to in the dialogue) in Ophelia's mad scene (4.5) and Gertrude's closet scene (3.4) reveals how Shakespeare constructs an objective mode of viewing *Hamlet's* material world, typically associated with early modern still life painting, through stage props and images. As an objective, or non-imaginative, visual language, *vanitas* iconography employs semiotic models of signification to link material signs with socially accepted moral signifieds. The inclusion of such items in *Hamlet's* material world colours the play's visuality with a sense of material degradation, a sense that conforms to early modern Protestant understandings of materials as ends in themselves, objects deprived of mystical potential or resurrection.

Chapter Two, "The Objective Mode and *Hamlet's* Emblematic Characters," extends the study of Shakespeare's objective mode to characters in *Hamlet*, arguing that they can be read as emblems among emblems in a morally meaningful visual landscape. This chapter sets up the argument of Chapter Three, which reads Ophelia's corpse as a complex sign of *vanitas* in the graveyard scene (5.1) by defending the general notion of character objectification through subdued subjectivity in moments of slowing narrative time, particularly in this scene. At such moments, theatrical *tableaux* emerge that render the characters as two-dimensional items amongst other such items in a moral landscape of *vanitas*.

In Chapter Three, "Ophelia's Corpse and the Problematics of the Objective Mode," I argue that

the graveyard scene epitomizes *Hamlet's* objective mode through its *vanitas* symbolism, which dominates both the scene's material landscape and its characters' emblematic significance, the latter centering on Ophelia's corpse as a resistant sign of *vanitas*. Hamlet and the gravedigger's different perspectives of death, which are materialized in the actors' bodies in moments of emblematicism, intersect in a physical manner over Ophelia's dead body. Reading this body through feminist criticism, I demonstrate how the corpse promises to be read as the play's central *vanitas* emblem; however, by means of the stage action involving her corpse, Ophelia turns out to be *Hamlet's* most problematic sign. Ophelia's incomplete burial delivers the uncanny sense that she is not yet dead and that her body of death has potential to resurrect. Thus, her corpse represents the limits of a strict semiotic model and calls for a more phenomenological reading of her body as a theatrical experience in conversation with period discussions of death and materiality. Returning once more to the visual arts, I apply Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the semiotics of materiality in Holbein's depiction of *Dead Christ* (1521) to Shakespeare's complex perspective of materiality in Ophelia's upstart corpse. Holbein's perspective, which is constructed through semiotic and non-semiotic means, situates his tragic paradigm. The construction and deconstruction of the objective mode, and its correlative material and critical implications, implies that *Hamlet's* tragedy exists in the notion that rotting Denmark is devoid of metaphysical redemption, destined for decay, and simultaneously, that this notion is an incomplete perspective of the world. By compromising the semiotic conventions upon which the objective mode is constructed, Ophelia represents the limits of material philosophies that present the world as objectively knowable and destined for decay. Rather, she indicates the desire, or need, to transcend the boundaries of such epistemological reduction through surprise, mystery and awe, as well as the pleasure of the phenomenological encounter with something that does.

In the conclusion, I demonstrate how Shakespeare's semiotic "play" with the materials of

theatre as metonymic representations of *Hamlet*'s material universe reveals an engagement with period controversies surrounding the relationship between matter and spirit in the Eucharist. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, or of Christ's real presence in the bread and wine of communion, establishes the Eucharistic Host as metonym for all natural things. As Christ's body was resurrected, and is continually resurrected in the Eucharistic celebration, so the bodies of all Christians, and their material world, are being and will be restored to new creations. Transubstantiation was hotly contested by Protestant Reformers on empirical grounds: it could not be proven in the sensory experience of communion. In the Anglican Church of Shakespeare's day, transubstantiation was a topic of mystery: Christ communicates His real presence in the Eucharist, although one could not know *how* such communication occurs. The question was one of representation and experience, semiotics and phenomenology. Insofar as these debates would have engaged his audience, Shakespeare playfully alludes to them in his dealings with corpses onstage. Although he had no incentive to embroil himself in religious debate, Shakespeare may very well have exploited such controversy through the *illusion* of reference to such theological notions. In other words, if Christ's corporeal sacrifice and resurrection in the Eucharistic Host was a point of contention in early modern theology, then the *appearance* of Ophelia's corpse rising periodically from the grave may have piqued his audience's interest without engaging dicey theological disputes. Refraining from an outright religious interpretation of *Hamlet*, I conclude that Shakespeare employs theological controversy insofar as it furthers his aims as a playwright: to engage the audience's interest by exploiting theatre's illusionary powers of representing reality according to certain perspectives.

Thus, my multifaceted approach to *Hamlet* opens onto the understanding that the play functions as a *lieu de mémoire* that situates changing theological notions of the relationship between spirituality and materiality—and that continues to situate changing critical notions of representation and

experience—in its own materiality. As Patricia Badir employs the term in her own work on early modern visual and literary culture, Pierre Nora's notion of *lieu de mémoire*, or a memory site, is one that safeguards and thereby restores past associations while simultaneously assimilating them in new terms (Badir 3). *Hamlet* qualifies as a *lieu de mémoire* insofar as its expressions of materiality, which are articulated in period terminologies such as those of the still life, render the play readable also in contemporary critical terms of semiotics and phenomenology. Just as it contributes to historical discourse on materiality as a spiritual element, so the play contributes to contemporary discourse on materiality as an aesthetic element. Nora's *lieu de mémoire* therefore is the central metaphor for *Hamlet* that justifies my multifaceted approach.

My understanding that *Hamlet's* tragedy lies in a constructed objective perspective of the material world begins with the study of melancholy in the play's props and figurative images; the *vanitas* and *memento mori* philosophies of early modern still lifes present the best starting point for this examination.

### The Objective Mode in *Hamlet's* Still Life Iconography

When viewed in the context of *Hamlet's* macabre dialogue, key props and costumes create a visual landscape that evokes early modern *vanitas* and *memento mori* still life iconography. Because of this resemblance, the props and costumes of *Hamlet* can be read emblematically, in the same way as the still life. Such a reading renders a similar objectivity to the material world of the play as has been observed in still lifes towards the material objects they represent. Arthur Schopenhauer suggests that still life painting approaches its subject matter “objectively,” rendering objects as the subjects of artistic inquiry (208). In the same way, props, scenic elements, and gestures that evoke prominent *memento mori* and *vanitas* themes encourage an “objective,” or “object-focused,” reading of Ophelia’s mad scene (4.5) and Gertrude's closet scene (3.4). These themes inform the viewing of Polonius’ corpse as a still life of a dead man. The status of the body as base matter, devoid of any imaginative potential, while formed by “objective” early modern visual arts, can be analyzed in contemporary terminology as a bipartite process of visual and verbal communication. Thus, viewing Polonius' body as an object like those of still life paintings informs the means of theatrical communication in the scene. Reading the stage props and images in Gertrude's closet scene as signs of early modern moral signifieds reveals one means by which Shakespeare constructs an objective mode of viewing *Hamlet*.

First, I establish that the presence of semantically-significant items in early modern still life painting indicates *vanitas* themes through semiotic means, linking certain material things with particular moral meanings. Furthermore, this semiotic means of communication entails an objective approach in still life painting towards the material items it represents. Afterwards, I demonstrate how the presence of the same semantically-significant items in the physical props, implied gestures and imagistic dialogue of *Hamlet* justifies a reading of 3.4 and 4.5 as still life scenes. These scenes iconographically resemble several species of *vanitas* painting, including the market, *memento mori*, and

*vanitas* still lifes. Acknowledging that *Hamlet*, as a piece of live theatre, does not communicate only through visual means, I argue for a reading of these scenes not only as visual (and therefore literal) still lifes, but also as philosophical ones. That is, the engagement of *Hamlet*'s scenography with its contemporary visual art of the still life painting allows for its perspective on materiality to be compared with the perspective of the still life genre towards the materials it represents.

With this aim, I examine Ophelia's mad scene as a flower still life whose visual and verbal imagery indicates that human wit is fragile and beauty is transient. This introductory analysis leads to an understanding of Gertrude's closet scene as a combination of several species of *vanitas* paintings: the boudoir portrait, the market still life, and the game and hunting still life. The presence of *vanitas* items in the dialogue and, perhaps, in the scenography of this scene, as well as in its implied gestures and spatial composition, indicate that Shakespeare purposefully evokes *vanitas* and *memento mori* images in order to recall their philosophies and shape the viewing of such scenes in terms of decay, transience and futility.

### 1. Seeing *Hamlet* as a Still Life Painting

Reading *Hamlet* according to visual methods is not a new development in Shakespearean Studies. The foundations for such an approach to the play text have been richly laid by scholars such as Roland Mushat Frye, Harry Morris, Paul Hamill, Adam Max Cohen, and Bridget Gellert Lyons.<sup>2</sup> The work of these scholars is valuable for justifying my visual approach to theatrical materials in *Hamlet*, which complements the largely-literary focus of preceding scholarship. When read as a piece of

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<sup>2</sup> See Frye, Roland Mushat. "'Looking Before and After': The Use of Visual Evidence and Symbolism for Interpreting *Hamlet*". *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 45.1 (Winter 1982): 1-19; Morris, Harry. "Hamlet as 'Memento Mori' Poem". *PMLA*, 85.5 (Oct 1970): 1035-1040; Hamill, Paul. "Death's Lively Image: The Emblematic Significance of the Closet Scene in *Hamlet*". *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 16.2 (Summer 1974): 249-262; Cohen, Adam Max. "Hamlet as Emblem: The Ars Memoria and the Culture of the Play". *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 3.1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 77-112; and Gellert, Bridget. "The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*." *Studies in Philology*, 67.1 (Jan 1970); 57-66.

embodied theatre, *Hamlet*'s visual landscape emerges as a reflection of early modern still life iconography. I supplement literary perspectives of *Hamlet* with theatrical readings of its props, gestures, and landscapes that recall similar items in *vanitas* and *memento mori* iconography. When visualized in the context of language evoking notions of death and decay, the mirror, portrait, cosmetics, ointment, and rodents in 3.4 not only reinforce, but also complicate, the *memento mori* and *vanitas* themes present in Gertrude's closet scene. To fully exploit *Hamlet* for its *memento mori* and *vanitas* meaning, it is necessary to understand the philosophies behind these paintings, which can be traced back to their historical sources. Therefore, before addressing the text, I will introduce *vanitas* and *memento mori* still life painting as artistic traditions that communicate philosophies of transience and death through a vocabulary of meaningful items.

## 2. The "Objective" Still Life

The *vanitas* still life is a genre of mixed symbolism, "conveying specifically Christian meaning through the use of objects" (Cheney 883). What is at question in such paintings is not what items mean. Their meanings would have been socially understood either as reminders of the ephemerality of all matter or of the sweet-yet-sinful enjoyment of earthly luxuries, or both. The intrigue of *vanitas* still lifes centers on which of these reminders prevails in a given composition. The "specific iconographic symbols" of *vanitas*, such as hair, mirrors, skulls and skeletons, while referring to the ephemeral nature of all matter, are also juxtaposed with objects of fading and worldly beauty (Cheney 883). Symbols of decadent worldliness, "jewels, gold coins, purses, books, butterflies, exotic animals, flowers, hourglasses, wine glasses or pitchers, candles, crowns or scepters, clocks, swords, terrestrial globes, shells," were also the pride of mercantile achievements (Cheney 883). Similarly, items of grotesque decay, such as the human skull -- a "sure sign of a *vanitas* theme" -- warned against hedonistic *joie de vivre*, while simultaneously captivating the onlooker in a macabre narcissism (Cheney 883). The polyvalent significance of items depicted in early modern still lifes indicates that the genre

communicated according to a cultural visual code that, nevertheless, remained open to reformulation. The still life artist may conceal, or render ambiguous, any semantic intent by employing culturally-significant items, whose significance remained open to interpretation.

Still lifes in Renaissance and Elizabethan England were prevalent in portraiture and emblem books, especially those pertaining to *vanitas* and *memento mori* illustrations. Monarchs and courtly figures composed and asserted their public identities through a vocabulary of meaningful objects that were carefully selected to imply specific characteristics. For example, the mythological phoenix is a staple of Elizabeth I's portraiture, signifying her intention to reign despite her childlessness (Auble 44). So also Hans Holbein the Younger's portraits of Erasmus (1523), William Warham (1527) and Thomas Cromwell (1533) externalize the figures' learning and religious piety in the books and bookish materials that frame their portraits. In particular, the skull, juxtaposed with the face of a living person, acknowledges the vanity of human life even as it records and celebrates it. In the portraits of Sir Thomas Gresham (1544) and William Clowes, the skull as a sign of death is also, ironically, a component of a material artifact that would outlive them (Frye 23). In emblem books, the same skull serves as a warning against carnal excess and indicates a fascination with the legendary figure of death. The anonymous English *vanitas* composition, "Death and the Maiden" (ca 1570), as well as Hans Holbein's notable *The Dance of Death* (1538), are two examples from the English emblematic tradition (Hewitt, Aebischer 209). Useful as a means of constructing public identity in England, the still life, *vanitas* and *memento mori* traditions were by no means limited to early modern English art. Rather, they developed nearly simultaneously across Europe in the late sixteenth, early seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For this reason, visual scholarship on *Hamlet*, and other early modern English artifacts, borrows freely from German, Dutch, Belgian, even French and Italian compositions. See Roland Mushat Frye's "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls: Hamlet and the Iconographic Traditions," Bridget Gellert Lyon's "The Iconography of Ophelia," William Engel's *Death and Drama in Renaissance England* and Patricia Badir's *The Maudlin Impression*.

The still life served as a Western European cultural tool for discussing the relationship between image and meaning in artistic representation, as well as the relationship between secular art and the sacred: two relationships that were up for debate in early modernity. The popularity of still life painting in early modern culture cannot be explained by its artistic status, which was considered to be inferior to historical and religious art. Rather, the genre's characteristic semantic ambiguity was rhetorically useful in an environment wherein the role of art was changing. Safe from the danger of religious idolatry, the secular subjects of still life painting were nevertheless capable of making moral, even religious commentary (Cheney 883). Indeed, still life painting exceeds simple moralistic readings and communicates active polarities between birth and decay, pleasure and death, glory and humility (Holderness 225, Berger 92). Cheney's inventory of objects that are signs of a *vanitas* theme indicates that still life paintings may be identified according to the presence of significant items that are readable according to multiple meanings. Nevertheless, these items communicate religious and moral philosophies through a visual vocabulary related to their multivalent significance.

This visual vocabulary lends itself to an objective reading, in the denotative and the connotative senses of the term. The still life reflects an objective approach to the matter it represents insofar as it is defined by objects, which are the items it depicts, and which form the subjects of each painting. Ordinary items, which carry cultural meaning, and which are intentionally placed at the center or periphery of a canvas, indicate the mood, and influence the message, of a still life. Let things replace words, and still life emerges as a semiotic model wherein one sign may equate to several signifieds; these equations are mutually understood by artist and viewer, who clue into the visual language by the presence of semantically-charged objects.

Therefore, according to its semiotic method of communication, the still life reflects an "objective" approach to the materials of representation, in the connotative sense of the term as "a-subjective" or "non-relative." The still life model depends upon a sign-based reading of painted

representation that relies only marginally on the onlooker's subjective experience. Granted some ambiguity of meaning, items depicted in early modern still lifes can only signify a limited number of moral ideas. In other words, as a genre that communicates according to a semiotic model, the early modern still life promises an objective way of viewing material reality that is similar to theatre semiotics, which also "offers to describe performance in 'objective' terms" (Carlson 13). Indeed, the still life's approach to its subject matter is mirrored in *Hamlet's* approach to Denmark's material universe, and so in the remainder of the chapter, I adopt the still life's semiotic methodology as an analogous lens for interpreting *Hamlet's* representation of Denmark's material world.

Items and gestures that are morally-significant in early modern still life painting – such as flowers, cosmetics, and contemplating one's image in a mirror – comprise elements of *Hamlet's* visual or figurative backdrop during plot-integral scenes and, when read in light of early modern still life painting, contribute to the meaning of such scenes. Because the early modern still life is defined by the presence of culturally-significant items, deliberately positioned in physical space, the presence of such objects onstage justifies a reading of such scenes in *Hamlet* as still life compositions. Accounting for the reality of Elizabethan performance conventions,<sup>4</sup> I consider the images evoked, and the gestures indicated, by the dialogue in such scenes as contributive to the visual landscape under present examination. Theatrical visibility is the interplay between material things on stage and the audience's imaginative associations with those things, and for this reason, *Hamlet* may be read as a still life through the identification and description of items that recall the visual vocabulary recorded in early modern still life painting. After demonstrating this point with reference to Ophelia's mad scene (4.5) and Gertrude's closet scene (3.4), I conclude with an examination of how the moral notions linked with such culturally-significant items may have influenced the play's early modern reception and

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<sup>4</sup> For a materialist account of such conventions, see *Staged Properties in Early Modern Drama* by Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda.

construction.

### 3. Ophelia's Madness: the Flower Still Life

The flower still life flourished during the Dutch Golden Age, when growing wealth expanded patronage for the arts and exposed continental Europe to an influx of beautiful and fragile things. Although typically understood as Dutch, the floral still life was also prevalent in continental European painting, especially in Protestant areas of Europe. Although England was not a producer of the most celebrated early modern pieces, the ownership history of notable floral still lifes indicates that the English were exposed to such paintings through wealthy patronage (Meijer 29). In such cases, the paintings themselves became commodities of exoticism or fashion, so that, although flower still lifes were evident in English emblem books and engravings, the paintings imported from elsewhere took on added significance as iconic and indexical signs of worldly luxuries.

The flower still life became a means of recording, advertising, and rendering permanent items of wealth, such as the coveted tulip or the fast-fading morning glory (Wheelock 2). Although ostensibly secular in subject matter, the flower still life was also a vehicle of *vanitas* warnings. Bugs and snails creeping around bright blossoms signified the decay that expedites beauty's demise. The "transient beauty of flowers...was a common metaphor used to remind the viewer of the temporality of life," art historian Arthur Wheelock writes (2). In a complex way, the flower still life eulogized the destined decay of earthly beauty and wealth, even as it spectacularized it (Liedtke Metropolitan Museum of Art).

By nature of its prevalence in early modern England, the floral still life was an influential iconographic presence in the English mind, and so the flowers Ophelia carries in her mad scene of 4.5 may be read as emblems of *vanitas*<sup>5</sup>. By 1598, "vanity" would be defined as "a toy" or "lightnes,

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<sup>5</sup> Thompson and Taylor note the scholarly controversy over the use of actual flowers in early modern performances. Q1 implies that Ophelia carries real flowers as props, although it is possible that she

fondness, doting in words or deeds" (Florio LEME). Ophelia's madness correlates with early modern conceptions of vanity as a fixation on frivolous and pretty things while neglecting the grave truth of decay.<sup>6</sup> A noblewoman of marriageable age, Ophelia stands for rare and timely beauty, a blossom just opening to full bloom. Her wits are equated with "a poor man's life," an example of mortality.<sup>7</sup> Her madness is the decay of her wit, the division of "herself and her fair judgment," which makes her but a "picture" of her former self (4.5.85). Thus, Ophelia's mad behavior can be read as extreme *vanitas*, when "Thoughts and afflictions, passion, hell itself / She turns to favour and prettiness" (180-181). Considering very literally the early modern notion of "vanity" as "a void place or grasse plot in a garden," Ophelia's absent wit is alluded to in the consequent voiding of the garden from which she gathers her flowers (Florio). Both fair and frail, Ophelia's decomposing sanity is manifested emblematically in the flowers she carries, which would have been visual indicators of transience and decay to early modern minds.<sup>8</sup>

The symbolism of Ophelia's flowers as manifestations of her dying wits begins when a Gentleman describes her madness as "spurning at straws"<sup>9</sup>. Straws were popular signs of triviality in still life paintings, especially the triviality of human wisdom and the achievements of the mind; straw crowns encircle skulls in numerous *vanitas* compositions<sup>10</sup>. Considering its biological development as

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imagines the flowers, or that she uses weeds or sticks in their place. Whether verbally or physically, the flowers are very-present symbols in the scene.

6 Horatio alludes to a similar trivializing effect of madness when he warns Hamlet that the ocean "puts toys of desperation" into motiveless minds that look into its watery depths. (1.4.75)

7 Laertes laments, "O heavens, is't possible a young maid's wits / Should be as mortal as a poor man's life?"(4.5.158-159).

8 Liedtke exemplifies the seventeenth-century flower still life in the work of Jacob Vosmaer. Flowers in the still lifes of Jan Brueghel the Elder and Younger are often depicted already wilting. See figure 1.

9 Thompson and Taylor make important note of a comparable scene in *The Winter's Tale*, where Perdita's distribution of summer flowers serves the opposite effect of Ophelia's in this scene. Perdita's flowers are symbols of budding beauty, developing fertility, and rebirth into a womanly image of her mother (n151, SD1, p. 385). Whereas Ophelia's flowers may also carry these hopeful connotations, they are mockingly transformed into symbols of *vanitas* by her madness (6, p. 373).

10 Such as those of Hendrick Andriessen, Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts, and Treck Jan Janz. See

dried stems, straw can also be understood as a *vanitas* image of the flower, or in other words, a *vanitas* image of a *vanitas* image. Of the three instances in *Hamlet* where "straw" is used to describe trivialities, all three occur in the sixty-five lines leading up to Ophelia's mad entrance in 4.5 (4.4.25, 4.4.54). The repetition of "straws" serves not only to foreshadow Ophelia's flower-laden entrance, but more importantly, to frame it in the light of vanity and senselessness.

The floral icons of Ophelia's madness also serve to materialize verbal imagery equating gardens and weeds with memory and decay in the play as a whole. The flowers that Ophelia carries, which Gertrude describes as "weeds," complement images of the "unweeded garden," by which Hamlet describes Denmark under Claudius.<sup>11</sup> Although Claudius describes the death of Old Hamlet as an event of which "the memory be green," the Ghost describes forgetfulness as a "fat weed / That roots itself on Lethe's warf" (1.2.2, 1.5.32-33). The play character Lucianus' lethal poison is concocted of "rank...midnight weeds", and Hamlet describes Gertrude's infidelity to Old King Hamlet's memory as a weed (3.2.250, 3.4.149). To Claudius, weeds denote age and foreshadow the grave (4.7.79). Conversely, violets – which Ophelia laments have died with her father – Laertes prays will spring from the fair flesh of her dead corpse (4.5.177, 4.3.35, 5.1.228-229). In this way, the image of Ophelia's flowers, while embodying the *vanitas* philosophy that characterizes her insanity, also furthers the broader metaphor of weed-infested gardens that permeates the play's discussions of political corruption and bodily decay.

Recurring images of flowers and weeds in *Hamlet* further posit mad Ophelia within the flower still life tradition, where insects share space with wilted verdure and vibrant blossoms to communicate

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figures 2-4.

<sup>11</sup> Denmark is a garden that "grows to seed, things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely" (4.7.170-172 and 1.2.135-137).

opposite themes of flourishing and decay. The insects that munch on flowers and the wilted leaves in Dutch, seventeenth-century still lifes remind the viewer of decay, the inverse portrait of flourishing beauty (Berger 93). Rather than delivering a static sense of decay in *vanitas* portraits, these insects (often depicted in the activity of eating) indicate that the early modern concept of decay was as an active process (Berger 93). These invertebrate micro-destroyers present a picture of *dying* nature rather than nature *dead*. However, this picture can be more comforting than the alternative portrait of death, Harry Berger Jr. notes. In the floral still lifes of Bosschaert and Merian, violence in the insects' terroristic munching of the leaves is more familiar than the desolation of the *vanitas* morale (16). To Berger, the *vanitas* philosophy interposes distance between decaying human nature and a Creator capable of resurrection, a distance that implies a certain hopelessness with regard to the spiritual rejuvenation of the material world (93). A livelier alternative of reading death, Berger notes, is as an active process of natural violence of one creature against another.

Although Berger's study focuses on floral still lifes, his observations may be extended, through a reading of Ophelia's floral mad scene, into examinations of decay as political violence within the play as a whole. Metaphors of weeds, sickness and rotting, which indicate violent decay in floral still lifes, also describe the active corruption of economic and political Denmark. Marcellus' political assessment: "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," implicitly refers to the Gravedigger's description of the active violence of pocky disease in "rotten corpses" (1.4.90, 5.1.155). Conversely, the term "wholesome" denotes not only the lack of disease, but also honest speech.<sup>12</sup> Thompson and Taylor note that Horatio's prophecy regarding the Ghost's apparition as boding "some eruption to our state" implies a dermatological metaphor of infection (1.1.68, n.68, p. 155). Just as decay in floral still lifes can be read as a microcosm of natural violence, decay in *Hamlet* is a metaphor for the

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<sup>12</sup> Hamlet contrasts Claudius, "like a mildew'd ear" with "his wholesome brother," whereas he demands a "wholesome answer" from Guildenstern. 3.2.308, 313; 3.4.63.

deterioration of political honesty and monarchical sanctity in courtly economics and politics of Claudius' Denmark.

Within rotting Denmark, Ophelia can be understood analogously to the flower in still life which, by nature of its objective victimization at the hand of eroticized consumers, becomes a vanishing presence on stage that enhances the *vanitas* theme. In his iconographic analysis of Blake's *Sick Rose*, Harry Berger notes the inherently passive position of blossoms in still lifes. "Flowers have been severed from their life source. They have, in a word, been cut...All they can do is wilt" (101). In the same way, Ophelia can be understood as an exhibit of deterioration. Carol Chillington Rutter finds that Ophelia articulates her own "unmediated subjectivity" only in one scene of the play text, a scene which more notable film versions extricate. Furthermore, the sexual implications of dying, severing, and cutting of little *natures mortes*, the French term for "still lifes," enhances early modern analogies of libidinous desire as gluttonous appetite.<sup>13</sup> Although Shakespeare's play text gives no literal indications of Ophelia's deflowerment, iconographically speaking, a portion of her selfhood is realized in the cut stems she carries, which in floral still lifes would be objects of insects' ravenous consumption.

Finally, Ophelia's scarce stage presence within the play as a whole fosters a sense of deprived subjectivity that enhances her characterization as an icon of *vanitas*. Whereas in painting, wilting flowers indicate *vanitas*, the act of painting them refers to the early modern adage *ars longa, vita brevis*. In other words, the act of capturing the beauty of fading blossoms in paint ensures the longevity of the image even past the blossoms' short lifespans (Liedtke Metropolitan Museum of Art). The medium of theatre, however, is as ephemeral as real life, and Ophelia's limited stage time within theatrical performance enhances her characteristic brevity; she is a character who fades in and out of a briefly-lasting representation. As Elaine Showalter notes, Ophelia appears in only five of the play's

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<sup>13</sup> Hamlet describes Gertude's marriage to Claudius as "feeding" on a different "moor," and personifies her custom of sleeping in his chamber as something "who all sense doth eat" (3.4.162).

twenty scenes (Rutter 27). Her seemingly spontaneous entrances and exits in 4.5 with flowers, when understood in her limited stage appearance, her *vanitas* floral symbolism, and her function as a character in an ephemeral art form, render Ophelia's madness readable as a case study of *vanitas*, the inevitable decay of an inherently frail mind<sup>14</sup>.

If Ophelia's flowers can be visually interpreted as indicators of violent decay enacting the demise of brief and frail sanity, then other visually-dense scenes in *Hamlet* may likewise be examined for indicators of *vanitas* images. Next, I examine Gertrude's closet scene of 3.4 for its resemblance to several *vanitas* still life subgenres, including the boudoir luxury still life, the market still life, the still life with a rat, and the hunting and gaming still life. By examining the several ways that this scene employs *vanitas* iconography to represent themes of deception and decay, I defend an iconographic reading of the scene in order to postulate, later in the chapter, how such a reading informs early modern understandings of the material world of *Hamlet* and modern conceptions of Shakespearean genre.

#### 4. Gertrude's Closet Scene: the Boudoir Luxury Still Life

Gertrude's closet scene is a complex portrait of several *vanitas* themes, including the boudoir/luxury *vanitas* portrait, a relative of the market still life, the banquet scene with mice, and the hunting and game still life. The boudoir portrait, popularized in sixteenth-century courts across Europe, depicts a sitter in intimate circumstances, often gazing at her reflection in a glass, surrounded by the gems, cosmetics, and rich fabrics that signify her wealth and fertility (Goodman 324). Boudoir portraits only depict women, and the fact that the Fontainebleau school portrays English subjects in notable pieces indicates that this style was familiar in wealthy portraiture of sixteenth-century England (Goodman 324). The luxury and market still lifes are complex genres that combine symbols of food, luxury items, and human figures with the praise of luxury and beauty and the disparagement of folly

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14 "Frailty, thy name is Woman" (1.2.146).

(Falkenburg 19). The two species of still life can be mutually understood as mercantile portraits wherein a woman advertises her 'wares' as potential wife and mother - namely, her physical beauty, procreative potential, and her extensive dowry - through emblems of luxury around her (Goodman 323, Falkenburg 19). Beginning with an approach to Gertrude's closet scene as a luxury boudoir portrait, I demonstrate how the scene's fictional setting, its physical realization, and the figurative language employed by its characters contribute to a reading of 3.4 as a *vanitas* still life in multiple senses.

#### 5. Gertrude's Closet Scene as Boudoir Portrait: Space and Gesture

Intimate settings and sitting subjects are characteristic of the boudoir still life portrait, and so the private space and seated posture of Gertrude in her closet is a first indication that 3.4 may be read as such a painting (figure 5). Hamlet's imperative "Come, come and sit you down. You shall not budge," indicates that Gertrude takes on the posture of a boudoir portrait subject, who either sits or reclines at her beauty table (3.4.9). Thompson and Taylor note that early modern performances may have included a stage direction for Hamlet to lock the closet door upon his entrance, making clear to the audience that the space is private.<sup>15</sup> The arras, a sign of textile luxury, is also indicative of a private space<sup>16</sup>. When Hamlet holds the glass to Gertrude's face "to see [her] inmost part," he is drawing attention to her physical or figurative proximity to a looking-glass, perhaps placed at a table beside her (3.4.19). In this way, Gertrude's stage posture, when viewed against the fictional background of her closet, evokes early modern boudoir portraits, and the key themes of vanity that were associated with them. Along with a characteristically-intimate setting, the mirror, sensorial allusions, cosmetics and

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15 n7, p. 335. Numerous scholars have noted the erotic connotations of the private setting, which has commonly been understood to be Gertrude's bedchamber. Natasha Korda and Jonathan Gil Harris perplexingly note that, whereas a bed is required for intimate scenes in six Shakespearean plays, it is not explicitly required in this scene. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that Shakespeare intends the space to be the place of Gertrude's toilette rather than her bedchamber (160).

16 Although probably realized theatrically by the curtain of the discovery space, rich textiles were an important component both of *vanitas* and *boudoir* portraits. See figures 6 and 7.

playing cards, and especially, the portraits of Claudius and King Hamlet, are definitive signs of a boudoir portrait in the *vanitas* vein. Such symbols are also present, either physically or figuratively, in 3.4 of *Hamlet*.

#### 6. Gertrude's Closet Scene as Boudoir Portrait: The Mirror

The mirror is indicative of any boudoir portrait, symbolizing both a true copy of a person's appearance and a counterfeit of that reality (Apostolos-Cappadona 871). Hamlet acknowledges this dual potentiality when he commands: "You go not til I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (3.4.18-19). The "glass" is a symbol of superficial self-absorption, but Hamlet demands that Gertrude use the mirror as a means to self-knowledge through interior examination (Apostolos-Cappadona 871). Whereas the mirror in boudoir portraits may serve to warn against vanity and encourage inner reflection, the act of painting a boudoir portrait both reinforces the narcissism that draws the sitter to her own reflection and renders it permanent in the form of paint and canvas, materials which last longer than the fading beauty of youth.

#### 7. Gertrude's Closet Scene as Boudoir Portrait: The Five Senses

The mirror as an "artificial organ of sight" relates it symbolically to portraits of the Five Senses, a prevalent topos in still life art (Apostolos-Cappadona 871). Hamlet reflects Gertrude's gaze onto herself by drawing her eyes to the portraits of Claudius and King Hamlet. Whereas sight is Hamlet's means to procuring Gertrude's repentance, touch and hearing are the senses by which Gertrude has fallen. Claudius woos Gertrude with touch, pinching "wanton on [her] cheek," giving "reechy kisses" and "paddling in [her] neck with his damned fingers" (3.4.79-84). Claudius' behavior with Gertrude recalls the play of a child with her pet, not unlike the young girl holding a soft animal in Jan Brueghel the Elder's "Taste, Hearing and Touch (1618-1620)" (figure 9). By whispering pet names in Gertrude's ear, Claudius also recalls portraits of the Sense of Hearing, which warn against the solicitous whisper

as a means of falling into temptation through the sensual aspect.<sup>17</sup> Hamlet exposes Gertrude's foolishness when he notes that her sensibility, devoid of reason, is to blame for Claudius' success in wooing her (3.4.76-79).

#### 8. Gertrude's Closet Scene: Cosmetics and Playing Cards

As understood from his allusion to 'face paint' here and in the graveyard scene, Hamlet indicates that the Queen wears makeup as a means of warding off impending age.<sup>18</sup> Gertrude's toilette is thus a symbol of *vanitas* and a reminder of inevitable decay, despite its purpose of masking that decay. Although not specified in the stage directions, the proximity of Gertrude's cosmetics to the action of the closet scene (either figurative or literal) is implied by Hamlet's readiness to mock them. Perhaps he gestures toward a pair of playing cards on the table when he refers to "dicers' oaths". The symbols of makeup, cards, and especially, of players' masks, were common signs of *vanitas* in still life painting, for these three forms of self-fashioning were considered to be "nothingness" in the face of Nature's inevitably ageing course (Karim-Cooper 32).<sup>19</sup>

Boudoir still life *vanitas* paintings betray a simultaneously critical and fascinated perspective of the sitters' processes of concealment and self-fashioning, and both perspectives reflect Hamlet's approach to Gertrude. A woman in the act of performing her toilette "both attracts and warns the putative spectator" (Goodman 325). Similarly, Hamlet seems to believe that Gertrude's toilette, while beautifying, conceals an ugly reality of guilt, which can be soothed by "flattering unction," but remain "such black and grievèd spots" (3.4.143, 89). Thompson and Taylor note that Hamlet's reference to

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17 The Five Senses series of Jan Saenredam depict a woman and her whispering lover in the acts of tasting, smelling, making music, and embracing in lascivious sensuality. See figure 10.

18 "Now get you to my lady's table and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come" (5.1.182-4), and 3.4.40-51. Also, see figure 11.

19 These three forms of disguise are prevalent members of luxury still lifes, such as Hendrick Andriessen and Antonio de Pereda y Salgado's. See figures 13 and 14.

Gertrude's remarriage as a disfiguring act like that of blistering a rosy brow, an act that Gertrude is impelled to 'paint over', refers to the Renaissance practice of branding prostitutes on the forehead, a part of the body considered to demonstrate one's inner self (n40, 338). The fact that true beauty needs no concealment indicates that "the activities of the toilette are best served in a brothel" (Goodman 325). Like the falsity of dicers or players, who wear masks to conceal their true natures, Gertrude is an image of vanity, projecting an exterior dissonant with her interior, hiding the blister of guilt beneath rosy skin.

#### 9. Gertrude's Closet Scene: Ointment

Hamlet's allusion to "words" and "unction," two potentially religious things, indicates his frustration that Gertrude's closet scene is a portrait of vanity, and not a portrait of a woman praying in her closet, which is the portrait it ought to be (3.4.46,144). As Claudius demonstrates in 3.3, the closet was considered to be an appropriate place for prayer in early modern England, and an activity that Hamlet alludes to when he mentions "sweet religion" in Gertrude's closet scene. Indeed, the very place where a woman performs her toilette is the most appropriate place to remember the eventual decay of skin-deep beauty (figures 11-12). Uction, a religious oil used to anoint the redeemed, and present in portraits of the penitent woman *à la Madeleine*, also recalls the scented ointments of cosmetics (Goodman 325). That Gertrude's closet is a place where cosmetic oils replace the religious unction of spiritual meditation, and "a rhapsody of words" renders prayer futile, indicates that this scene recalls the moral warnings behind *vanitas* boudoir still life paintings (3.4.46).

#### 10. Gertrude's Closet Scene: Two Portraits<sup>20</sup>

Even more than the mirror or cosmetic ointments, the text indicates that the portraits Hamlet

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<sup>20</sup> 3.4.51-52. Thompson and Taylor note that early modern stage practice would have used actual props (n.51, 339). Therefore, when examining the portraits of King Hamlet and Claudius as props within this scene, I follow Douglas Bruster's advice against a historicist fixation on "the numbers and kinds of stage properties," and will refrain from examining the portraits as particular paintings ("The dramatic life of objects" in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, 88). Rather, I examine how the portraits as props function theatrically as emblems of *memento mori* and *vanitas*.

holds to Gertrude's eyes are physicalized in theatrical props, and this renders an iconographic reading of the scene as *vanitas* plausible according to early modern visual art. As is evident in the images of Evert Collier, Cornelius Norbertus Gysbrechts, and Treck Jan Jansz, the portrait, especially the miniature, is an icon not only of wealth (only the wealthy could afford to have their portraits painted) but also a symbol of vanity. *Memento mori* skulls were painted on the back of portraits, or depicted alongside the sitter, to remind him or her of inevitable death (Frye 244). Thus, the portrait, as an icon, served to complement the skull as a reminder of the inevitable decay of all material things and a warning against inordinate worldliness.

#### 11. Gertrude's Closet Scene: The Market Still Life

The props and ideas in Gertrude's closet scene that render it readable as a boudoir portrait also allow it to be read as a *vanitas* portrait of luxury. While broad, the *vanitas* luxury still life typically depicts rich, exotic, and pleasurable items, along with icons of religious or political power, under the title of "*Vanitas*".<sup>21</sup> By way of the items it represents, the luxury *vanitas* portrait is iconographically linked to the market still life, a genre that developed out of the economic prosperity of early modern Europe and of the advances of painting as a mercantile art.<sup>22</sup> Eager to demonstrate their exceptional *techne*, artists depicted "base persons and things" in market still lifes in such a way as to draw attention to the transformative power of art.<sup>23</sup> The market still life both accentuates the difference between noble and base, high and low, and draws attention to the function of art itself, making the act of painting a

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21 Pieter Boel's "Large Vanitas Still Life" (1663) is a clear example of the genre, although the works of Evert Collier and Hendrick Andriessen also incorporate these features. See figures 15, 17, and 3.

22 As Norbert Schneider observes, as an art form that depends only on one sense, still life painting nevertheless fixates on the other senses, symbolically alluded to through objects (*The Art of the Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period*. Köln: B. Taschen, 1990, 71).

23 Falkenburg writes that "In this rhetorical tradition, the dignity of form serves to sing the ironic praises of humble and unworthy subjects in order to rouse the admiration of the audience for the technical skills of the orator or writer" (23).

part of the subject matter. The sensual emphasis of the dialogue in Gertrude's closet scene, the presence of luxury items such as the mirror and the arras, as well as the transformative power of the cosmetic arts, which have been addressed above, indicate that the scene may be read as a luxury still life as well as a boudoir portrait. In light of Reindert Falkenburg's research on the market scenes, this secondary reading sheds light on the role of portraiture in the play as a whole.

The sensible difference between noble and base, high and low, which is an integral theme of the market still life, is also at the center of Hamlet's discourse on the two kings' portraits, and in his description of Gertrude's guilt. Hamlet describes the late King Hamlet's picture as a material reflection of nobility, the image of a man like a god (3.4.54-5). In contrast, Hamlet's description of Claudius' portrait recalls the sinister, insect-ridden, half-human and diseased figures of Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" (1503-4), in which the themes of eating and being eaten, insects, bats, rotting and decay prevail.<sup>24</sup> The contrast is not only visual, it is generic: King Hamlet's portrait is like a history painting with a divine subject; Claudius' is like a detail from a violent landscape. Under Claudius, who is ruled by his inordinate passions for food, sexual pleasure and power, the kingdom has become a market scene, where value is measured by desire and appetite. Gertrude has become ordinary by partaking of the King's rank appetites, forgetting the nobility she once shared with King Hamlet.<sup>25</sup> In the hierarchy of painting, the landscape and still life scenes were considered inferior to those of religious and historical paintings, not only because they were thought to require less imagination on the part of the painter, but also because the subjects they depict occupy lower realms in the cosmic

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24 3.4.61-65. Hamlet later refers to Claudius as "a paddock...a bat, a gib" (3.4.188). Compare these descriptions to the subjects in figure 16.

25 George Hibbard notes that the "moor" on which Hamlet accuses Gertrude to feed provides more luscious, but ranker, grass than the "fair mountain" (*Hamlet*. Ed. Thompson and Taylor. n.65, 341).

hierarchy of Nature and Man.<sup>26</sup> By comparing the state of Denmark in the reigns of Claudius and King Hamlet in terms of the generic difference between their painted portraits, Hamlet makes an objective comparison between them. Visual art, as a mixed medium of noble and base genres, thus becomes a metaphor for political rulership in this scene. In particular, the market still life symbolizes the corrupt state of Denmark.

In Hamlet's account of the kingdom under Claudius, Gertrude's fault emerges as that of making herself ordinary by participating in the sensuality of Claudius' corrupt court. Hamlet describes her fault in terms of gluttonous feeding on rank weeds (3.4.64-65), a metaphor particularly indicative of the market scene as a display of a variety of foods, including breakfast and banquet still lifes, which were an artistic development of mercantile towns.<sup>27</sup> It is also a reference to *vanitas* portraits of the "Sense of Taste" and the base pursuit of sensual pleasure. As a participant in the buying-and-selling of Claudius' Denmark, Gertrude's guilt has made her forget her dignity as a royal widow: there is a division "between her and her fighting soul" (109). Like the vendors in Pieter Aertsen's market and kitchen scenes, who betray libidinous desire in the selling of aphrodisiac foods and, according to Falkenburg, a willingness to participate in sexual trade, Gertrude has become a picture of "the ordinary and the 'whoreson' vendor" in market still life scenes (Falkenburg 19). This genre of still life provides a historical framework for understanding the themes associated with Hamlet's perception of Claudius' Denmark, the exotic, luxurious, and edible objects in it, and Gertrude's participation in its mercantile activities.

## 12. Gertrude's Closet Scene: Still Life with A Rat

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<sup>26</sup> For a period illustration of the early modern cosmos, see *The Realms of Nature and Man* by Charles de Bouelles (1509) in Norbert Schneider's *Still Life* (Köln: B. Taschen, 1990) 7.

<sup>27</sup> Although food still life is older than medieval depictions of fruit, bread and wine bordering Madonna and Child paintings, the sixteenth-century market and food still lifes presented these objects in a moral light, rather than according to strictly-religious symbolism (Liedtke Metropolitan Museum of Art). Jan Davidsz de Heem and David Bailly are two such artists from the Dutch town of Leiden.

In banquet still lifes, the rat signifies decadence, sin, deception and decay, and so Polonius' rodent-like presence contributes to a reading of Gertrude's closet scene as a market still life (3.4.30, Falkenburg 19). In the works of Willem van Aelst and Abraham van Beijeren, rodents attack fleshy fruits and tree nuts, which are signs of Christian rebirth: fruits of a thriving spiritual tree (figure 18). The iconographic rat, like the worms and caterpillars that signify active and violent decay in flower still lifes, represent a sinister and subversive presence much like Polonius, when he hides behind the arras.<sup>28</sup> Polonius' death is articulated as the "fool's fortune," also a theme prevalent in *vanitas* compositions. Even after discovering that his victim is not Claudius, Hamlet refers to Polonius in terms of his nuisance presence as a "wretched, rash intruding fool," a "knave," and not according to his name (3.4.29, 213).

### 13. Gertrude's Closet Scene: The Hunt and Game Still Life

It is in Polonius' "most still, most secret and most grave" presence throughout the majority of Gertrude's closet scene that the still life symbolism of the scene centers, and which leads to an understanding of violence, death and the tragic genre of *Hamlet* (3.4.215). Rather than drag the corpse off stage as soon as he kills Polonius, Hamlet leaves the body to the side and commands Gertrude, along with the audience, to redirect her gaze onto the portraits of King Hamlet and Claudius. The body of slain Polonius, an icon of decadence, decay and surreptitiousness, remains a silent presence in the stage picture, just as the bodies of dead animals in Jacopo de Barbari and Frans Snyder's hunting still lifes are uncomfortable shadows of formerly-threatening creatures. Whether a moralistic symbol of the consequences of busyboddiness, an immediate memento of *memento mori* to complement the boudoir composition, or an embodiment of the rank corruption plaguing Denmark, Polonius' continuous, silent presence throughout the scene remains an integral part of the stage picture and, as a once-living body, embodies the *memento mori* topos. In a starkly literal way, Polonius's corpse is a specimen of *nature*

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<sup>28</sup> Hamlet mistakes Polonius for Claudius, who also conceals himself behind the arras in 3.1. The arras is also a symbol of vain luxury (Falkenburg 19).

*morte.*

Theatrically, the body serves to perpetuate the objective philosophy of *vanitas* paintings towards material nature, and especially towards newly-dead things. Far from what would be expected with regards to his potential father-in-law, Hamlet is apathetic towards Polonius' death. He considers himself as Fortune's tool for punishing Polonius' foolishness, a callousness that is manifested in his starkly-objective view of Polonius' dead body. Never calling Polonius by name, Hamlet emphasizes the corpse's anonymity. Polonius is just "a man," or a mass of "guts" to be observed in a similar way as still life painters observe dead animals (3.4.29-30, 201, 214). In game still lifes, painters meditate on *nature morte*, capturing death as a transformation of the kinesthetic and visual qualities of living animals. Hamlet mirrors such fascination when he observes the change in Polonius from "in life a foolish prating knave" to a package "most still, most secret and most grave" (3.4.212-213). Furthermore, dragging the corpse off stage, rather than lifting it, or calling in servants to carry it out, communicates an objective understanding of Polonius' body as debris to be removed, or "guts" to be lugged, just as a set prop is relocated at a scene transition<sup>29</sup>. In the impersonal manner in which Hamlet treats Polonius' remains, as well as in the scientific tone by which he refers to the corpse as a material curiosity, Hamlet's perspective towards Polonius' body echoes the objective approach of still life painting towards its objects.

#### 14. Holbein's Descriptive Mode and Shakespeare's Objective Mode

In terms of its dramatic function as a silent presence in Gertrude's closet scene, Polonius' corpse can be understood as a still life of a dead man, framing the stage picture. Motionless, the corpse is an icon of inevitable death that is juxtaposed against the lively, moving bodies of Hamlet and Gertrude. Its unobtrusive presence "alienates" viewers by attracting their gaze but not returning it

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<sup>29</sup> As Thompson and Taylor note, this stage direction is implied in line 214, and in the Folio edition's stage direction, following line 215 (n210, 354).

(Nuechterlein 85). This toying effect contributes to a reading of Polonius' body as an icon of *vanitas* that not only reminds the audience of impending death but also offers to contribute to theatrical action without truly doing so.

In a similar way, with reference to Holbein's artistic portrayal of Christ's corpse, Jeanne Nuechterlein argues that Holbein's portrait of *Dead Christ* (1521-22) not only approaches the body as dead human matter, but as matter which disappoints the viewer that expects to detect seeds of resurrection in the representation of Christ's remains. Holbein's apparent emotional remove from the subject of his painting contributes to his "descriptive" style (Nuechterlein 86). This "descriptive style" adopts an approach towards dead subjects not as products of artistic imagination, but as faithful accounts of reality. By testing the heights of naturalism which Holbein's own skill enabled him to achieve, Nuechterlein argues that Holbein uses his "objective," or "descriptive," mode to contribute to early modern discourse on the validity of the visible world, and of artistic representations of it. Through the use of Polonius' corpse in Gertrude's closet scene, Shakespeare also experiments with theatrical potential to represent death objectively, and thus, he contributes to similar early modern discourses on meaning and representation as Holbein.

Nuechterlein observes that Hans Holbein the Younger's *Dead Christ* (1521-22), while portraying a sacred religious subject, denies it any metaphysical mystery, and therefore it contributes to Reformation debates on materiality and spirituality (figure 19). There is no hint of the Resurrection in the way Holbein depicts Christ, limp and greenish-blue, with his eyes staring coldly at the ceiling of a square stone tomb. Rather, Nuechterlein argues that Holbein's portrait is a "still life of a man," a study of dead nature, or *nature morte*. *Dead Christ* "examines how death transforms once-human beings into cold uncaring matter" (Nuechterlein 85). Holbein's perspective of Christ's body seems strangely detached. The viewer senses that Christ's body has been forsaken by His spirit and forgotten by His followers. "No one watches [the corpse] but ourselves," Nuechterlein notes (85). This emotional

distance, and the sense that Christ's body has been shed like old skin, is characteristic of Holbein's descriptive mode, predicated upon the philosophy that artistic form can exactly match the truth it claims to represent, that artifice does not have to be deceptive, and that the material world is capable of containing and revealing spiritual truth (Nuechterlein 184).

The descriptive mode engages post-Reformation debates pertaining to the Eucharist and its fundamental assumption that the spiritual and perfect can be contemplated in and manifested by ordinary, material forms. With the Protestant Reformation, religious materiality was suspected as idolatry, and art's capacity to persuade was conflated with Roman Catholic visuality and falsity. Just like popes, bishops and priests, prostitutes and gamblers, who wore glorious costumes but were considered inwardly corrupt, actors, painters and sculptors were also suspect of deception. As Nuechterlein writes, "whether in language or in visual representation, an author's manipulation of his subject to present it to best advantage might be perceived as a distortion of the truth" (Nuechterlein 78). As an intermediary between a thing's true nature and its appearance, art was considered capable of deceiving the sensible, rational mind. Reformers put an end to church-sponsored art, decried theatre and insisted that painting be relegated to the secular, economic sphere (Schneider 75). Nuechterlein argues that at the heart of Protestantism's suspicion of art was its theological disagreement with the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, a doctrine which considered human sensibility as less reliable than the Church's traditional interpretation of the Scriptures. As I elaborate more fully in my Conclusion, this theology, and its reformulation in the Anglican Church, explains Protestant Reformers' political and theological need to emphasize the division between the physical and material realms.

The turn towards naturalistic representations of reality, along with the movement towards meta-art, are complementary aspects of the same philosophical distinction between appearance and truth, accident and essence. Emphasizing the interior-exterior divide was a familiar rhetorical tool in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Maus 3). Art that did not want to be condemned as superstition

sought either to recreate appearances with scientific precision or to acknowledge itself as contrivance, or both.<sup>30</sup> In a similar way, Shakespeare employs meta-theatrical devices, such as asides and plays-within-a-play, to acknowledge theatre's contrived nature. In his objective mode, he also constructs a view of the material world that focuses on its destined decay by recalling images of *vanitas* in Gertrude's closet scene. According to their historical contexts, these images contribute to an understanding of the material world of *Hamlet* as matter that is intransmutable, bearing no potential for refiguration, rebirth, or resurrection.

### 15. Theory and Philosophy of the Objective Mode

Just as Nuechterlein argues for a descriptive mode in Holbein's *Dead Christ* (1521), I argue that Shakespeare employs an objective mode in *Hamlet*. He adopts a particular perspective towards materiality that is linked with early modern philosophy, and that perspective is most easily read according to current theatre theory. Through the incorporation of culturally-significant items in the sightscape and dialogue of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare constructs a fictional material universe that evokes *vanitas* philosophies. Repeatedly evoking such philosophies results in the formation of a permanent perspective of fictional materiality that, as I demonstrate in my Conclusion, contributes to the play's tragedy. In concluding here, however, I examine how such perspective is, first, a construct relating to period material philosophies, and, second, a construct readable according to contemporary theatre theory.

In early modern Europe, artistic perspective was a rhetoric contributing to theological and philosophical controversy, and it reflected changing economic circumstances. Thus, analyzing *Hamlet* for its perspective on materiality and metaphysicality is integral to an historical approach to the play

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<sup>30</sup> In the still life, painters sported *trompe l'oeil*, or eye-tricks, by manipulating central perspective, a Renaissance discovery in the ocular sciences. At the same time, miniature portraits, picture frames, or peeling corners painted onto canvases reminded the viewer that the painting was not reality, but a representation of it. See figure 2.

text. It is no coincidence that the early modern still life reached its peak in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, that it was a commodity of the secular market, and that it was a visual curiosity insofar as it applied nascent discoveries in the ocular sciences to the manipulation of linear perspective (Honour 568). Artistic perspective, or the manner of depicting figures in space, was related to philosophical models of the universe and catholic Christianity preceding the Reformation. Prior to the fifteenth-century, the orientation of figures in space symbolically represented their relationship to one another (Honour 19). Indeed, this artistic philosophy was derivative of a much older understanding. Early and medieval Christianity viewed the icon as a likeness that made present the actual figure it presented, not in physical time and space, but in eternal dimensions (Belting 2). Such depictions did not claim to represent reality in a naturalistic sense, but to represent them in a symbolic one. It makes sense, therefore, that the figures in early Christian icons are positioned in linear, non-naturalistic space. With the iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation, icons were either rejected or reformulated, and their claims of making-present represented figures were either discarded as superstition or systematized for rational comprehension (Belting 2).

In early modern Protestant Europe, the still-life emerged as an economically-convenient alternative to representations of the human figure. Religious figures might be suspect of idolatry, and portraits of nobility were dependent upon wealthy patronage, but portraits of fruit, dead game, crowns and flowers were safely non-religious and widely-marketable in emerging mercantilism. With the shift away from church-sponsored art in Protestant areas of Europe, and the consequential ideological shift from art as an aid to worship towards art as an economic commodity, the perspective of art towards its subject matter changed. Symbolism gave way to signification, as the perspective of the still life towards the materials it represents, and its choice of subject matter, rendered the genre capable of contributing to early modern discourse on materiality and spirituality. For example, the skull as a *vanitas* symbol was isolated from its traditionally religious context in early modern portraiture and, taking on an

existence of its own, came to signify a multiplicity of ideas, including the animation (or resurrection) of death through eroticism (Grootenboer 64). In other words, when isolated from the periphery of the historical and religious compositions in which they originated, still life items were considered as subjects in themselves. This reading inevitably lead to their polysemousness as signifiers of many concepts.

In this way, the still life also emerged as a theologically and philosophically charged artistic genre. The perspective of the object-focused and objective still life betrays a curious skepticism with regards to materiality that mirrors a modern shift towards dualist philosophy and away from traditional cosmologies of a spiritually-inhabited nature (Schopenhauer 208). The Dutch still life, which marks the first era of the secular painting, was a means by which seventeenth-century Protestant "Dutch work out their relationship to things" (*Apples, Pears, and Paint*). This relationship was ambiguous, revealing at once a celebration of material wealth, an inquisition as to its nature, and a "residual religious influence" of preceding church art (*Apples, Pears, and Paint*). Putting aside the classical and medieval Christian notion that the accident of a thing implies its essence, the still life simply examines the accident, the material surface of a sign, its demonstrativeness and its arbitrary relationship as a sign correlating to moral signifieds. Hidden within the early modern still life are indicators of uncertainty concerning the relationship between spirituality and materiality, a relationship that indicates an emerging conception of the two realms as separate, rather than combined. The still life became the favorite genre of early modern Protestant merchants, and its perspectives towards materiality -- curiosity, celebration and "guilty" anti-iconicism -- became associated with Protestantism and modern material philosophies (*Apples, Pears, and Paint*).<sup>31</sup>

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31 The still life flourished in non-Protestant areas of early modern Europe, notably in Spain, but to a different philosophical effect. Rather than glory guiltily in material luxuries, the Spanish still life depicts simple subjects in an austere manner. Popular works of Juan Sanchez Cotán take on an "otherworldly" aesthetic that does not indicate a Dutch fixation on the meaning of materials, but rather,

Examining the material philosophies implied by the perspectives of still life painting contributes to an historical reading of *Hamlet* because theatre is a visual art whose reception is informed by its contemporary visual arts and the religious and philosophical climate of its production.<sup>32</sup> These examinations inform the study of theatre semiotics and phenomenology in *Hamlet*, which in turn informs an understanding of the play's tragedy as a particular perspective of materiality. By demonstrating how *Hamlet* communicates philosophies of decay, through semiotic means, according to a contemporary vocabulary of images, and in doing so, influences the phenomenological reception of the play, I combine theoretical approaches to the theatrical event with an historical understanding of how these approaches constitute a particular rhetoric, in order to read *Hamlet's* tragedy in a more nuanced way.

*Hamlet* employs iconographic still life items in its material and diegetic landscape that evoke philosophies of decay according to semiotic means, with the result of shaping the historical-cultural reception of such items according to specific early modern material philosophies. As previously mentioned, by nature of their association with still life imagery, the *vanitas* items evident in *Hamlet* communicate according to neat semiotic models linking material signs with moral signifieds.<sup>33</sup> The prevalence of *vanitas* items in *Hamlet* persuades scholars such as Paul Hamill and Hanneke Grootenboer that the play's characters and language can be understood to communicate through semiotic mechanisms.<sup>34</sup> To Hamill, *Hamlet* is a play that persuades through its images, wherein "the

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by combining everyday items in curious arrangements, indicates the reverse perspective; it reimbues ordinary materials with metaphysical significance (*Apples, Pears, and Paint*).

32 Furthermore, theatricality is a period methodology for understanding how an artist, painter or playwright, depicts his or her subject matter. See Grootenboer's chapter in *Theatricality in Early Modern Art and Architecture*.

33 Norman Bryson observes the semiotic nature of communicating moral philosophies through material objects in early modern still life painting (150).

34 In addition to Hamill and Grootenboer, Roland Mushat Frye and Katharine Eisaman Maus argue for an emblematic reading of *Hamlet's vanitas* themes. Frye, Roland Mushat. "Looking Before and After': The Use of Visual Evidence and Symbolism for Interpreting *Hamlet*," and Maus 403.

whole stage acquires an emblematic dimension and Hamlet himself is seen as an emblematic character” (249). As in still life painting, thoughts are manifested in images in *Hamlet*, a term which Hanneke Grootenboer terms "visual thought" (Grootenboer 18). Not only does Shakespeare intentionally engage with early modern visual vocabularies in creating *Hamlet's* fictional world, but he also selects *which* visual vocabularies to engage, and *which* corresponding philosophies to evoke; this is his rhetoric.

Perspective was a rhetoric in early modern England, and so examining Shakespeare's "rhetoric of perspective" in *Hamlet* is also a phenomenological task insofar as it relates to the spectator's reception of his works (Grootenboer). Theatre phenomenology has been criticized for historicist tendencies to focus on subjective reception over the particular factors affecting that reception, such as genre and historical moment (Eagleton 305). However, this chapter demonstrates how theatrical phenomenology is integral to an historical understanding of *Hamlet's* tragic construction. Aware of his audience's general familiarity with the *vanitas* still life phenomenon, Shakespeare populates *Hamlet's* fictional material universe with such icons so as to evoke a sense of decay, thus indicating that his construction of the material universe accounts for its particularly historical phenomenological reception. Indeed, it is the evocation of such philosophies that constitutes *Hamlet's* tragic perspective. Thus, rather than "an idealist, essentialist, anti-historical, formalist and organicist type of criticism," phenomenology here constitutes a means of exploring the historical perspective of materiality that constitutes *Hamlet's* tragic construction (Eagleton 305). It seeks to explore how, as Stanton Garner writes, "The embodied *I* of theatrical spectatorship is grounded, one might say, in an embodied *eye*," and how that this embodied eye was formed by early modern visual arts (4).

Thus, combining contemporary theatrical theories with an historical understanding of the still life's material philosophies, this chapter demonstrates how the perspective of the still life towards the items it represents is analogous to the perspective of *Hamlet* towards the material universe. Both are objective perspectives of materiality, both examine certain objects as subjects in themselves, both

reflect a fascinated inquiry as to the relationship between materiality and spirituality, "demonstrativeness" and truth, and accident and essence (Grootenboer 122). By way of a visual vocabulary of *vanitas* items that semiotically signify philosophies of decay, *Hamlet* projects a fictional universe that is devoid of the metaphysical. Rotting Denmark is composed of castles, corpses, graveyards, and performance stages whose very materiality (sometimes imagined, sometimes represented by theatrical scenography) communicates a "too, too solid" universe, composed of matter that is devoid of imaginative potential, and "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable" (1.2.129,133). This reading establishes material things as ends in themselves, items devoid of metaphysical essence, and instead, signs whose culturally accepted significances spell out philosophies of *vanitas*.

## Hamlet's Emblematic Characters

This chapter extends the last chapter's visual methodologies to a reading of *Hamlet's* characters as emblems. Moments of slowing narrative time form theatrical *tableaux* that render the characters within these *tableaux* images populating a morally-meaningful visual landscape. Human figures emerge not as active participants in a theatrical narrative, but, temporarily, as items of *vanitas* amongst other such items in a moral landscape. More than any other human figure in *Hamlet*, Ophelia is prone to such emblematicism. Deprived of subjectivity throughout the course of the play, she is constructed as a character who is nearly all-image, and therefore, nearly all-object. Her character construction as such leads to the fulfillment of her two-dimensionality in the graveyard scene, 5.1, wherein her character is embodied by nothing more than a theatrical prop: her corpse. This prop focalizes and completes the *vanitas* landscape, highlighting the emblematicism of the scene's other characters, and enabling the scene to be read as a *vanitas tableau*.

In the last chapter, I demonstrated how a visual approach to the theatrical items, gestures, and figurative images in the dialogue of *Hamlet* is a period approach to the play text. In particular, this approach is useful for analyzing the play's images of death specifically related to *vanitas* and *memento mori* iconography, images that inform the construction of *Hamlet's* objective mode and its tragic perspective. In this chapter, I examine how *Hamlet's* characters, too, emerge as emblems of such philosophies, contributing to the objective mode and to the tragic perspective of the play as a whole. With the aim of demonstrating, in the following chapter, how different perspectives of death intersect in the very matter of Ophelia's corpse, I explore, in this chapter, how *Hamlet's* characters come to emblematicize these perspectives.

Beginning with an overview of scholarship linking *Hamlet* with the Renaissance cultural phenomenon of emblemania, I demonstrate in what ways the play's characters can be understood as

emblems of the concepts they embody. Turning to Bridget Gellert Lyons, Rosemary Freeman, and Roland Mushat Frye, I justify an emblematic reading of *Hamlet* as a complementary approach to an iconographical reading, such as that of the last chapter. In particular, the graveyard scene, 5.1, opens onto iconographic and emblematic readings when fluctuations in narrative time create moments wherein time stands still; theatrical *tableaux* form, stage items emerge as *vanitas* and *memento mori* icons, and characters emerge as emblems. Hamlet and his interlocutor, the gravedigger, momentarily emblemize melancholy, and their emblemization opens onto certain perspectives of death. In moments of emblematicism, character subjectivity is sacrificed to objectivity, as the character becomes an emblem whose significance is momentarily exhausted by his or her visuality. In essence, the matter and material dimensions of theatrical space concretize human subjectivity and objectivity (themselves only fictional constructs) in the graveyard scene.

In the following portion of the chapter, I examine Ophelia as the epitomal representation of subdued subjectivity through predominant visuality; her character is little more than a series of images occurring in moments of stalled narrative time. Taking the entire play text in view, I focus on representations of Ophelia as a two-dimensional character. This analysis takes into account not only the temporal factors that lead to Ophelia's imagistic representation, but also the spatial factors. Alongside feminist analyses of her limited narrative agency, I demonstrate in what ways Ophelia's predominant visuality leads to her narrative and political objectification in moments where she functions primarily as an emblem. Static and nearly all image, Ophelia is nearly all object. Her objective character construction is fulfilled and confirmed in the graveyard scene, when the representation of her entire character is reduced to a single theatrical prop—her corpse.

In the final portion of the chapter, I examine the holes in Ophelia's representation according to Pascale Aebischer's notion of theatrical absence. As a character whose representation indicates an

incomplete subjectivity, Ophelia emblemizes the absence of complete personhood. She invites various interpretations to fill in the blanks of her denied subjectivity. I introduce this concept in order to set up Chapter Three's analysis of Ophelia's body as a sign of *vanitas* that both contributes to, and complicates, the semiotics of the objective mode in the graveyard scene.

### 1. Reading *Hamlet* Emblematically

Before examining *Hamlet's* characters as emblems, it is necessary to define the early modern emblem and to defend its relevance as a critical approach to Shakespeare. In early modernity, the "emblem" was an illustrated idea accompanied by a short verbal description, perhaps explaining or entitling the image. In 1605, Francis Bacon writes that an "*Embleme* deduceth conceptions intellectuall to images senseible," and six years later, Randle Cotgrave describes it as "a picture and short posie, expressing some particular conceit" (Green 1). Early modern emblems were composed of two elements, word and image, which were related to one another as the body to the soul (Gordon 80). They were instances both of representation and of interpretation (Bath 4). For this reason, early modern visual art, from the still life to the portrait, utilized emblems in a hieroglyphic way to indicate elements of broader ideas (Green 26).

As a means of embodying and defining the material world, the Renaissance emblem was an epistemology. With the invention of the printing press, emblems became the means of communicating to an as-yet widely-illiterate populace that nevertheless had access to print works. However, bound up in the processes of creating and dispersing emblems were debates as to the moral and religious status of images. Residual discomfort with the visuality of Catholic worship persisted in England in a pervasive cultural suspicion of the moral, if not religious, power of images. In an age wherein knowledge of the material world, and means of communicating that knowledge, were changing, Renaissance emblems comprised a discourse embodying early modern uncertainties regarding the relationship between

images, words, truth, morality, and hermeneutics (Bath 4).

Painters, poets and playwrights, whose arts were highly visual, made particular use of emblems as vehicles for communicating moral or philosophical ideas. Renaissance poets habitually sought to discover "a relation between simple, concrete, visible things and moral ideas" (Freeman 155). Whereas religious icons had formerly been understood to embody an element of the divine, Renaissance emblem books were a means of conveying moral lessons to Protestant Englishmen and women. As Martha C. Ronk notes, "the emblematic was a received mode of perceiving the world" (27). The prevalence of Renaissance emblem artifacts indicates a popular readiness to see moral lessons in images, but also to assume that the emblems, as opposed to icons, were devoid of mystical significance (Ronk 27). In this sense, images were as much the means to as the end of defining visual representation in Renaissance England.

Considering the importance of emblems to Renaissance culture, examining Shakespeare's works in light of their contemporary visual culture is an appropriate historical lens. It is also a popular critical approach, as reading *Hamlet* emblematically is a well-established methodology in Shakespearean studies. In the seventies, Bridget Gellert Lyons concluded that "it is now increasingly recognized that several of Shakespeare's scenes have iconographic or symbolic significances in addition to, and sometimes more important than, their contributions to the development of action" (57). Lyons was not the first to observe that the emblems in *Hamlet* are historical means of constructing dramatic tone by evoking cultural associations, as well as complementing dramatic dialogue with visual cues. In 1870, Henry Green catalogued Shakespeare's possible emblematic influences in *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers*; that Green's work has been republished twice in the past two decades indicates that his subject continues to be of scholarly interest. Indeed, Renaissance visual culture is of interest to material-cultural, feminist, and linguistic approaches to Shakespeare. Roland Mushat Frye studies how signs

such as the inky cloak of mourning, gestures such as Laertes' grasp of Ophelia in his arms, and references to Mercury and Mars realize central topoi of mourning and melancholy in his article, "'Looking Before and After': The Use of Visual Evidence and Symbolism for Interpreting *Hamlet*." Lyons' work examines Ophelia's emblematic visuality as an indication of her political agency in the narrative, and Michael Bath's *Speaking Pictures* explores the semiotic, philosophical and theological implications of such emblematicism in other Shakespearean works. Rather than indicate that Shakespeare was influenced by Renaissance *emblemania*, such scholarship assumes, and even builds upon, this historical observation.

My own emblematic analysis draws on an art-historical approach to narrative space and time, reading *Hamlet's* characters as emblems in moments of *tableau*. *Tableaux* are stage pictures that form when narrative time stands still and thereby enables the spectator to momentarily contemplate concepts that are often philosophical or moral in nature, and that are evoked by the dialogue and depicted by the stage picture. I focus on the graveyard scene because it provides the richest analysis of *memento mori* and *vanitas* emblematicism, so it is conversant with the last chapter. Also, it can be considered as an emblematic epitome for several of the important themes in the play (Gellert 58). In this scene, *Hamlet's* characters emerge as emblems at particular moments, and in these moments, they can be read as elements of a broader emblematic composition depicted through the stage *tableau*. Thus, they work alongside theatrical props to signify plot-relevant ideas. In order to conduct my analysis, I first identify the moments of slowing narrative time in the graveyard scene that create *tableaux* wherein characters emerge as emblems. Then, drawing upon previous scholarship of *Hamlet's* emblematic characters, I demonstrate how Hamlet and the gravedigger emblematicize certain perspectives of death, and how their momentary emblematicism serves as prologue to the entrance of Ophelia's emblematic corpse.

## 2. Slowing Narrative Tempo and Emblematic *Tableaux*

Slowing narrative tempo causes *tableaux* to form in the graveyard scene, illuminating characters as emblems. Tempo slows from the upbeat banter of the gravedigger and his peer in the first portion of the scene to the seemingly interminable rhythm of Hamlet's monologic speech over Yorick's skull in the middle of the scene. Towards the end of the scene, Hamlet's declaration of identity, "This is I, Hamlet the Dane," ushers in the scene's ending, marked by accelerated narrative tempo (5.1.246-7). The iconic image of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull, which is also an emblematic image, occurs at a moment of slow narrative time. At this moment, Hamlet emerges as an emblem of *melancholia*, a notion that the gravedigger emblematically complements, with his fatalistic perspective of the grave. In the following section, I explicate Hamlet's emblematicism with regards to the gravedigger and their different perspectives of death and identity.

The first sixty lines of 5.1 are marked by an upbeat tempo, as the gravediggers gossip, debate and sing at their work. Queue-to-queue, no dialogic contribution exceeds five lines, and much of this initial exchange takes the form of a debate. The tempo accelerates as the gravediggers hastily debate matters legal and philosophical, without the means or the method to examine the argument thoroughly. Furthermore, the dialogue is frequently interrupted by the manual task at hand. These factors amount to a quickened narrative tempo.

The tempo slows when Hamlet and Laertes enter, and it remains slow for the following one hundred and forty-four lines, constituting the longest segment of dialogue at a more or less consistent tempo in the scene. Unlike the short quips of the gravediggers in the preceding segment, Hamlet's lines often extend past five lines, numbering twelve (93-105), eleven (174-185), and nine (196-205) at their most extensive. Indeed, the gravedigger contributes to the slowing tempo with more frequent lines at longer lengths than in earlier dialogue (155-159 and 160-165). In addition, as prose, these lines deliver a slower effect than rhythmic poetry, which in the latter part of the scene, contributes to the re-

acceleration of narrative tempo.

The deceleration of narrative time is gradual, slowing to a near stand-still when Hamlet contemplates the skull. Before encountering Yorick's remains, Hamlet questions the gravedigger about his trade and about his impression of courtly events. Their interrogative exchange keeps narrative tempo at a steady, if not quickened, pace as Hamlet poses twenty-one questions in the one hundred and eleven lines leading up to the Yorick sequence. Significantly, the questions end with the identification of the skull. In other words, the encounter with Yorick silences Hamlet's curiosity and invites the prince's meditative reflection. This reflection slows narrative time and leads to the creation of a *tableau* wherein Hamlet is the central figure, assuming the posture of the iconic melancholic. For a period of narrative time, Hamlet and the graveyard are lifted out of the three-dimensional world of theatrical representation and into the timelessness of two-dimensional depiction.

The entrance of Ophelia's corpse suddenly shatters the emblematic *tableau*; however, the *tableau's* philosophical residues persist throughout the scene, even as Hamlet's declaration of identity accelerates narrative tempo once again (5.1.246-7). Indeed, these philosophical residues have important implications for the remainder of the scene, as Chapter Three demonstrates. In the following portion of this chapter, I examine how the *tableau* of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull contributes to the emblemization of its composite characters, rendering them pictures of certain philosophies of death and identity.

### 3. Hamlet and the Gravedigger Emblemize Perspectives of Death

I demonstrated in the last segment how narrative tempo slows to its most still point in the Yorick sequence. The gravedigger's line "E'en that," ushers in a pace change that reflects Hamlet's pensive speech and somber tone for the following twenty-seven lines (5.1.173). At this point, the stage props, gestures, fictional setting, and figurative language serve to establish the backdrop of a *tableau*

typical of Renaissance images of melancholy. While restoring medieval tropes of life's transitoriness, the skull in portraits of melancholy was a sign of particular intellectual sensitivity and cultivation (Frye 3). Sitting in a graveyard, thinking upon a skull, Hamlet forms the visual center of an emblematic *tableau* that demonstrates melancholy as a curious fixation on, and questioning of, death. The gravedigger complements Hamlet's pensiveness, as indicated by the gesture of thinking upon the skull, with his own absolute understanding of death as a universal end-all. Here, he emblemizes the earth that erodes identity at death. As Hamlet searches for traces of Yorick's identity in the remains of his skull, he seeks affirmation that human identity lasts beyond death and that the notions the gravedigger stands for are incomplete. These different emblematic threads serve as preliminary lenses for viewing Ophelia's corpse, which is a stage prop that is handled in such a way as to promise to be read as an emblem of either perspective.

Hamlet and the gravedigger's figures work alongside props, ideas and gestures to communicate Renaissance conceptions of melancholy, and so I examine these elements first. In particular, four characteristics of this setting serve as a backdrop to the scene (Lyons 59). First, the graveyard is a traditional backdrop for melancholy happenings in Elizabethan poetry, reflecting a morbid affinity for dark and death-oriented places. For example, Thomas Nashe's *Terrors of the Night* (1594) describes a melancholy vision that takes place in a graveyard (Gellert 58). Second, the posture of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull links him with Renaissance portraits of the melancholy as a contemplative figure (Lyons 59). An extensive body of research traces such a posture with Renaissance portraiture, saintly iconography, medical studies, and emblem books indicating melancholy and contemplation through the pose of holding a skull.<sup>35</sup> Shakespeare is one of the first playwrights to lift

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<sup>35</sup>Among the melancholy-postured saints are Jerome and Mary Magdalene. Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is a notable medical text on the subject. For an introduction to this body of scholarship, see Roland Mushat Frye's "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls: *Hamlet* and the Iconographic

this image out of the visual arts and onto the stage, where it immediately becomes fashionable in contemporary scenography, reprised in works such as Dekker's *The Honest Whore* (1604) and Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) (Frye 15). Third, references to princes, beggars and class divisions, while occurring in the context of *memento mori* themes that death is an end to all, also reinforce the notion that, in the mortal realm, discrepancies between rich and poor are as certain as the cosmic order (Gellert 59). These references bring to mind the planet Saturn, considered to be the celestial personification of melancholia, who afflicts and inspires rich and poor alike (Gellert 59). Finally, the earth, the pick axe, and the skull represent the melancholic fixation with the futility of life and the inevitability of death (Scholten 333). These concepts, which are indicated in the dialogue or theatrical props of the graveyard scene, background its human figures and prepare them to be read as emblems of melancholy.

When read according to these concepts, the gravedigger emerges as a traditional emblem of Saturnine melancholy through his personification of Earth. In medieval art, the characteristic element of Saturn and of the cold, dry, humoral temperament, is the Earth (Scholten 333). It is personified by pick-axe-bearing figures, who were considered to be "children of Saturn" (Scholten 333). The gravedigger affirms this emblematicism in his earthy jokes; thrice he references his own figure as a spade-bearing one, digging in the earth. "Come, my spade. There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers and grave-makers" (5.1.29-30), he notes, arguing that gravediggers and gallows-makers build "stronger than either the mason, the shipwright or the carpenter" (38, 46). Twice he sings a melancholy tune in praise of grave-makers, beginning with the line, "A pickaxe and a spade, a spade" (89,113). Furthermore, he affirms the coldness and dryness of the earth when he notes that its opposite, water, is a decayer of dead bodies (162). At the heart of the scene's earthy and death-oriented themes,

the gravedigger straightforwardly emblemizes Saturnine melancholy. As such, he presents a traditional understanding of the humor that complements Hamlet's own melancholy emblemism.

In the vicinity of the graveyard and the gravedigger, Hamlet also emerges as an emblem of melancholy. He comes to the graveyard shortly after returning from his sea voyage to and from England, exhibiting a melancholy attraction to graveyards that would have been considered typical of someone who has passed considerable time under the influence of Saturn. Saturn was considered an influence on sea voyages and melancholy (Gellert 59). Furthermore, Hamlet emblemizes Renaissance melancholy in the act of walking in the graveyard. The visual tradition is rich in which noble figures, posed contemplating skulls, indicate sensitive, cultured, wealthy individuals in early modern portraiture and emblem culture (Frye 23). For example, Theodor de Bry's 1592 engraving, *Young Gentleman in Graveyard*, depicts a young man walking in a graveyard, exquisitely dressed, holding a rose, and backgrounded by a not-fully-decomposed skeleton sitting on a coffin bearing the inscription *fui, non sum es, nō eris*, or, "I am not as I was, you will not be as you are" (Fly 27). Here, the young man's morbid penchants are projected as a fashionable pursuit; his walk in the graveyard is linked with his high station and noble sensitivity. The skeleton, on the other hand, is at once a sobering reminder of the futility of life and a cheeky onlooker who upstages the grave and pensive youth with a grotesque corporality indicated by his half-naked state and flayed legs. In contrast to the buffoonish skeleton, "The youth is attired in the height of late sixteenth-century fashion—he might be take as 'the glass of fashion and the mould of form,'" as his activities imply (Frye 26-7). Walking in the graveyard, Hamlet indicates a similar cultured sensitivity.

Hamlet further emblemizes melancholy when he contemplates the human remains of the graveyard as reflections of his own noble and politically-important body. He wonders if the bones cast up by the gravedigger's spade are those of a "politician," "courtier," "lawyer," or "great buyer of land,"

great figures with whom he identifies with the lament, "Mine ache to think on't" (5.1.74, 77, 94, 98, 87-88). Hamlet's astonishment at the gravedigger's rough handling highlights the discrepancy between the working class and those, like the prince, with hands of "little employment" and "daintier sense" (65). Turning the earth, with its noble remains, underneath the gravedigger's spade represents a carnivalesque triumph of the lower-class over the upper class, a "revolution" that is only a matter of time, and that recalls the motion of Saturn, the patron planet of melancholics (5.1.85, n.85). Broken, smelly remains of nobility, Hamlet's body according to his own identification of it, and the gravedigger emblemize aspects of Renaissance portraits of Saturnine melancholy (Gellert 59).

The epitomic point at which Hamlet emblemizes melancholy, however, is the moment at which he holds Yorick's skull in contemplation. The figure of the thinker contemplating a skull was common iconography of melancholy in early modernity. From its origins roughly a century before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*, the usage of the skull as a reminder of death and an indicator of melancholy spread throughout Europe, especially Protestant areas, manifesting itself initially in cemetery statuary and then moving into the visual arts (Frye 17). In Dürer's *Melancholia I* (1514), the figure of despondent Genius slumps among unused objects, tools of geometry, contemplating the vanity of scientific endeavor in light of the setting sun, which is a reminder of the ephemerality of human life (Hannsen 1001). The skull functions as a similar object that renders melancholy genius the sitter of English portraits who, in the presence of the skull, is understood to have an exceptional nobility of mind and good breeding (Frye 25). Holding the skull in contemplation, Hamlet studies "earthly concerns in the perspective of mortality," which would have been a melancholy and noble pursuit in early modernity (22). It is in

this kind of pose that personifications of Melancholy, whether male or female, were often portrayed in paintings and engravings, and the picture of Hamlet in the pose of the melancholy thinker, meditating on objects of death and especially on the skull of the court jester, contains the same amalgamation of

the medieval 'vanity' motif with the more modern one of Melancholia which was often seen in the pictorial arts (Lyons 59).

In this way, Hamlet's gesture of holding the skull in contemplation, while incorporating the *memento mori* icon, also represents a portrait of the young, noble prince in terms of melancholy emblematicism.

In these ways, the props, gestures, themes, and dialogue in the graveyard scene work alongside human figures to compose an emblematic *tableau* signifying melancholy. The cooperation between human figures and items entailed by this process indicates that these human figures are momentarily perceived as items populating the emblematic landscape of the *tableau*. Momentarily static, they are as item-like as the spade and skull. The subject-object relation therefore appears to be fluid when, "in *Hamlet*, the tableau in which the central figure is the emblematic one of the melancholy man meditating upon a skull is filled out, visually and verbally, by a group of human figures, animals, occupations and professions traditionally associated with melancholy" (Gellert Lyons 60). In the moment of *tableau*, the human subjects become like items and the items become like subjects in materializing the heroic consciousness. "The sense of meaninglessness that flooded [Hamlet's] consciousness and paralyzed his will in Act IV has now become externalized and objectified in his immediate surroundings, allowing him some distance and mastery over this debilitating mood" (Fly 267). In other words, in the moment of *tableau*, Hamlet externalizes his own melancholy and projects it onto the skull of Yorick. He is, for the first time in the play, able to stare iconic melancholy in the face in order to contemplate beyond its absoluteness a perspective of death that allows for an element of the qualitative and indeterminate. In moving out of *tableau* and into discourse, Hamlet breaks the emblematicism of traditional melancholy in order to conceive of a more refined melancholy, correlated with a more nuanced perspective of death that contrasts with the gravedigger's absolute notion, as externalized by the traditional images of melancholy in the graveyard scene.

#### 4. Emblematic Perspectives of Death

Embedded in the emblematicism of the graveyard are two notions of melancholy, which I term the medieval and the Renaissance notions, and two correlated perspectives of death, the absolute and the nuanced. These notions are personified by the gravedigger and Hamlet, who stand not only for the old and new models of melancholy, but also for different perspectives of death. Rather than opposites, these different perspectives actually constitute two layers of understanding the relationship between death and identity. More concretely, these perspectives are materialized in the emblematicism of the gravedigger and Hamlet. Whereas the gravedigger emblemizes a traditional notion of melancholy that is absolute and consistent, Hamlet emblemizes a sophisticated, intellectual and Renaissance melancholy. These diverse perspectives on death, and their material manifestations in the images of the graveyard scene, serve as preliminary material to understanding other characters as emblems.

The first perspective is personified by the gravedigger; it is an absolute notion of death and identity that is linked with medieval depictions of melancholy in the *memento mori* and *vanitas* traditions. Grounded and earthy, this notion focuses on the observable aspects of death. The gravedigger's emblematicism of the Earth and children of Saturn is connected to his "absolute" logic and his empirical knowledge of rotting corpses (5.1.129). Having worked at his trade thirty years, the gravedigger knows by experience that decay is universal. He seems to understand no other use of the term "grounds" but the literal, so much has his profession de-habituated him to the term's figurative meaning (5.1.151). Furthermore, the liberty that the gravedigger takes with tossing up bones and portions of skulls indicates that his perspective of death is grounded in the mortal phenomenon and linked with the mottos of *vanitas* and *memento mori* arts, such as, *fui, non sum es, nō eris*. Indeed, "the clownish gravedigger is a most formidable spokesman for the vanity and ephemerality of all human endeavor" (Fly 266). With no view beyond the material life, he presents a perspective of death as the absolute end to identity and even humanity.

According to the gravedigger's perspective, death equates to universal and final anonymity. His pun that gravediggers were the first gentlemen to "bear arms" indicates an underlying persuasion that death is the leveler of all distinctions, including titles, names, laws, and estates (30). He also indicates that, at death, Ophelia loses not only her name, but her human identity. Dead, she is "One that *was* a woman" (my emphasis, 5.1.127-8). According to this perspective, the limit of identity is death. Alexander the Great and "Imperious Caesar" are, in the end, stops for beer-barrels and draughts (201, 203). When considered absolutely and concretely, no earthly thing can extend beyond the grave. The gravedigger's materially-embedded conversation and visuality establish him as an emblem of such a perspective.

Hamlet emblemizes a different perspective, which builds upon the gravedigger's but nevertheless transcends it. Hamlet seeks to prove that identity continues after death, through distinctions of name, renown, or progeny. His melancholy at the loss of his father reflects the specificity of this loss: Denmark never has had, nor ever will have, a king like his father. Whereas the gravedigger's occupation has bred in him an absoluteness that is correlated with disregard for distinction, Hamlet clings to distinction. Without denying his father's death, he seeks to pass from grief into memory by ensuring his father's legacy as a superlative husband and king, to be distinguished from all other husbands and kings: King Hamlet was to other husbands as "Hyperion to a satyr" (1.2.141). The melancholy that sets upon Hamlet with his father's death, according to Fly, is the loss of a world of distinctions, and with those distinctions, individuality: "On all levels of life distinctions are giving way to confusion, so 'disjoint and out of frame' is the state of Denmark" (Fly 264). Hamlet's depression is related to his conviction that distinctions and differences are irrelevant. His attempt to overcome melancholy is materialized, in the graveyard scene, as an attempt to move past the 'absolute' boundaries of medieval emblemism into a restored, or reformed emblemism of Renaissance melancholy.

Rather than a melancholy grounded in the material, Hamlet personifies a more nuanced notion of melancholy. His notion reflects Renaissance understandings of the ailment as an intellectual fashion associated with inquiry and the formation of individual identity. According to early modern psychology, melancholy was a particularly intellectual affliction appearing most frequently in poets, philosophers and scholars (Radden 62). Whereas the gravedigger's perspective of death is empirical and materially-grounded, Hamlet's melancholy is an intellectual affliction related to fixating on distinctions and chaffing under universal absolutes (Fly 261).<sup>36</sup> Rather than meditating on death as an end to all earthly things, which is the characteristic activity of the medieval melancholic, Hamlet questions the relationship between death and identity. He emblemizes a particularly Renaissance melancholy in pondering what lies beyond death without resigning himself to absolutes, contemplating the nuances of post-mortem identity, such as fame, name, or monuments. Furthermore, in the act of pondering, he reveals his own culturedness and intellectual sensitivity, a quality of Renaissance melancholy that is to be distinguished from that of the Middle Ages: "Where the medieval skull, frequently meditated on by saints, had pointed to a moral about the shortness of life and the transitoriness of all things, the melancholic meditating on a skull was cultivating and dramatizing his own sensibility as much as pointing to any objective lesson" (Lyons 59). Thus, medieval notions of melancholy acknowledged the universality of death, but Renaissance melancholy was not so much about death as about the individualizing act of contemplating it. The emblematic Renaissance child of Saturn was the intellectual figure who probed the limits of human existence, contemplative and alienated from others, a particularly-cultivated genius.

These two perspectives of death, the medieval-absolute and the Renaissance-nuanced, are

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<sup>36</sup> By contrast, Gertrude suppresses a melancholy reaction to King Hamlet's death by diminishing the particularity of the event; "Thou knowst 'tis common all that lives must die," she tells Hamlet (1.2.73).

introduced in the first part of the graveyard scene through the emblematicism of the gravedigger and Hamlet, respectively. Each perspective promises different outcomes, either "to diminish the uniqueness of death by understanding it as merely the common fate of all things in nature, [or] to deny the apparent finality of death by understanding it as only the passage to another life in eternity" (Fly 257). The prevailing perspective, in the graveyard scene of *Hamlet*, is determined by the scene's central sign of *vanitas* and melancholy: the body of Ophelia, which offers to be read according to either perspective. Before addressing the significance of Ophelia's body in this scene, however, it is necessary to establish her emblematicism as a character leading up to 5.1. The construction of Ophelia's character as a series of emblems informs the reading of her body as a sign of *vanitas* and melancholy in the graveyard scene, and the emblematicism of the gravedigger and Hamlet in the first portion of this scene functions as a prologue to reading Ophelia in this way.

## 5. Emblematic Ophelia

Of all the characters in *Hamlet*, Ophelia emerges as the one most capable of emblematicism by way of her heavily visual nature. Turning from art historical to feminist criticism of *Hamlet*, I examine how the construction of Ophelia's character as a composite of *tableaux* underscores the object-like nature of her character. Combining Lyons' study of Ophelia's character construction in the first four acts of the play with Ronk's analysis of her *ekphrastic* death (4.5), I argue that Ophelia's dominant visuality in the scenes leading up to the graveyard gradually objectifies her, informing her function as an emblem and a theatrical prop in that scene. Building upon these conclusions, I explore how the gaps in Ophelia's representation underscore the absence of a complete representation of subjectivity, rendering Ophelia readable as primarily an emblematic character. Conversely, she represents the negation of a subjective character. Incorporating the work of Pascale Aebischer, Carol Chillington Rutter, and Walter Benjamin, I explore how Ophelia serves to signify a metanarrative, metaphysical,

uncanny and mythological presence in moments of predominant emblematicism. In the following chapter, I use these observations to examine Ophelia's role as emblem in constructing the objective mode.

Shakespeare constructs Ophelia's character as a series of *tableaux* in 1.3, 2.1, and 3.1. In 1.3, Polonius and Laertes emblemize Ophelia as a young virgin whose chastity is a rare asset that is in danger of pollution. Laertes and Polonius lecture Ophelia on the importance of guarding her chastity using lengthy monologues that, requiring little response, force her to be a predominantly inactive and visual presence in the scene. Of the one-hundred and thirty-five lines in this scene, only nineteen are Ophelia's, the last of which is the line containing the silencing gesture, "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.135). Laertes and Polonius issue nineteen imperatives to Ophelia in this scene, indicating an anxiety with regards to her potential to *act*, to move, to escape the emblematic *tableau* into which they have talked her. They fear that, by choosing to respond to Hamlet of her own accord, Ophelia might break the image of chastity that her brother and father construct.

In 2.1 and 3.1 Ophelia appears as an emblem of pious femininity by restoring elements of saintly iconography. First, Ophelia emblemizes herself as a picture of feminine industriousness and fertility when she describes her encounter with crazed Hamlet. She begins by setting her own image as a *tableau* in the background: "As I was sewing in my closet" (2.1.74). Creative textile arts associated with women's, and not necessarily professional, work, were characteristic activities of St Anne, the Virgin Mary, and the Magdalene figure in medieval and Renaissance iconography (Jolly 19). The act of sewing metaphorically parallels the events of conception and development, with particular echoes to the 139th Psalm "thou hast couered me in my mothers wombe" (KJV 1611). Here, "couer" means "To worke Linnen" (LEME). By recalling iconographic activities pertaining to holy women, Ophelia's picture of herself not only emblemizes her according to the visuality of holiness, but it also represents

her as frozen in time, the scenic background of a diegetic event.

Once again, in 3.1, Ophelia appears as the emblem of a pious woman when her father commands her to "read on" a book (3.1.43). Commanding this, Polonius inscribes upon Ophelia's figure a posture signifying devotion and recalling the iconography of the Virgin of the Annunciation and the penitent Mary Magdalene.<sup>37</sup> In the moment of Hamlet's entrance, and during the course of his monologue "To be, or not to be--," Ophelia is frozen in a backgrounded *tableau* wherein she is "a pure iconic image of devotion" (Ronk 31).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, static, backgrounded and picturesque in this moment, Ophelia is pure image.

In her madness, Ophelia is a picture of her former self, and it is a poor resemblance, for mad Ophelia renders ambiguous the image of perfect femininity that previous scenes serve to construct (4.5.86). Although her appearance signifies distress, her dialogue and actions frequently indicate bawdy pleasure. Her untied hair "depicts madness or the victim of rape; her blank white dress stands in contrast to Hamlet's inky and scholarly black; the emblematic flowers which she gives away and which surround her at death signal her participation in deflowering," Ronk notes (24). Similarly, her mournful tunes signal pious grief (lines 23-44), only to be followed by racy ditties (lines 48-66). Mad Ophelia's meaning is further complicated by the flowers she brings onstage, which are signs with ambiguous referents. On a first level, they recall Renaissance iconography of Flora, the prostitute-turned-nymph of Roman mythology who, "calculating in the bestowal of her favours," enjoys the sexual act when it

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<sup>37</sup> In *The Maudlin Impression: English Literary Images of the Magdalene 1500-1700*, Patricia Badir demonstrates how the image of a solitary, reading woman recalls the art-historical tradition of the contemplative saint, Mary Magdalene, who is traditionally understood as a model of purified femininity. Even after the Protestant Reformation, the Magdalene-as-read remained a didactic image to inspire feminine piety. Also interesting to this discussion is Lyon's hypothesis that Ophelia offers to be read as a ghost of Catholic female iconography.

<sup>38</sup> In a similar moment of staged piety, Richard III reads upon a book in the presence of two bishops, thereby persuading the citizens of London that he is deserving of the crown.

brings monetary returns (Lyons 61).<sup>39</sup> It seems as though Ophelia's flowers, of which she is also calculating in the bestowal, also serve as a symbols. However, it is unclear what all of Ophelia's flowers signify. For example, "rue" is defined "with a difference;" it is a sign whose significance is open-ended (4.5.176). Even the flowers Ophelia defines, such as pansies, hold up to questioning as Ophelia's linguistic capacities are compromised by her madness. Ophelia and her flowers are "a problem in iconography," a composite of signs that clearly signify *something* but just *what* is ambiguous (61). In the end, all that can be certain of mad Ophelia is her image. Even more than her sane self, mad Ophelia can be interpreted as a composite of emblems that stand in contrast to the pious femininity she has previously emblemized.

It is not necessary to examine every appearance of Ophelia in the play in order to understand how her character is constructed as a series of emblems that are contrived by Polonius, Laertes, and even herself. As the above examples illustrate, Ophelia's early appearances onstage draw attention to her predominantly emblematic and symbolic significance. "To Hamlet," as well as to other characters and the audience, "Ophelia is the emblem of mother, bride and finally, grave," and "it seems fair to say that her importance is primarily emblematic rather than consequential" (Ronk 24, Lyons 61-62). Ophelia's representation is so predominantly visual that it excludes representations of her subjectivity, at least to the same extent. In other words, "The picture disrupts any notion of 'self' by turning 'self' into pure figuration" (Ronk 33). Thus, as an emblematic character, Ophelia serves the narrative in different ways than do more naturalistic characters, such as Hamlet, Claudius and Gertrude, whose representations include moments of fleshed-out subjectivity. As the following section demonstrates, Ophelia's emblemism serves her allegorical function in the narrative. "Of all the characters in

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<sup>39</sup> In Renaissance art, the nymph was imagined both in the context of traditional compositions and of noble courtesan portraits, which, when painted *à la Flora*, signified fertility and youth (Lyons 64). Titian's "Flora" (1515-1517) dispenses blossoms that are clearly an offer of herself (Lyons 64).

*Hamlet*," Lyons points out, "Ophelia is most persistently presented in terms of symbolic meanings. Her behavior, her appearance, her gestures, her costume, her props, are freighted with emblematic significance...Ophelia's symbolic meanings, moreover, are specifically feminine" (2). This symbolic function is most clearly demonstrated in the means of representing Ophelia's death.

#### 6. Ophelia's *Ekphrastic* Death

Shakespeare presents Ophelia's death to the audience as a picture, as Gertrude's picture, through the rhetorical means of *ekphrasis*. Although the process of *ekphrastic* narration takes place in time, and although Gertrude's description accounts for the progress of events leading up to Ophelia's demise, its net result is to compress the painfully long death into the temporal span of seventeen lines (4.7.164-181). The picture that Gertrude creates of drowning Ophelia stands in for the staged representation of the event; the picture, unlike the staged event, requires negligible space and time to occur in this substitutionary way. In the move from representing a three-dimensional woman to depicting a two-dimensional image of a woman, Shakespeare constructs a representation of Ophelia that has unique implications for the meaning of the play as a whole. To an extent unlike any other character, Ophelia escapes the material dimensions of the fictional world and approaches allegory. Her picture-death summates the visual trajectory of her character construction as an emblem whose significance reaches beyond fictional time, change, and action and into realms beyond the narrative.

In recounting Ophelia's drowning, Gertrude makes her death scenographically present by means of *ekphrasis*, creating a mental picture that is itself timeless (Ronk 24). Here, *ekphrasis* describes Gertrude's diegetic description of the picture of Ophelia's death (Ronk 24). As a rhetorical tool, *ekphrasis* presents the subject being described as caught in a moment of stand-still, an imaginary *tableau*. Ophelia, in Gertrude's description, is a victim whose drowning is forever in process, occurring according to "a forever-now" motion (Krieger 118). Opaque temporal descriptions only compound this

sense of timelessness, as phrases such as "awhile," "which time," and "long it could not be" seem to disregard the drowning's forensic details in favor of description (4.7.174, 175, 178). Indeed, the structure of Gertrude's monologue enhances this lackadaisical tone. Rather than describing Ophelia's demise immediately, Gertrude devotes the first six lines, one-third of her total monologue, to setting the stage for the story (17). The pace and structure of the monologue work alongside its rhetoric of *ekphrasis* to capture Ophelia, quite literally, in an elaborate portrait, presenting her as an *objet d'art* to be contemplated and interpreted, rather than as a victim of a fatal incident (Showalter 4).

Gertrude's extensive focus on the images and materials involved in the death scene further the picture-like quality of this representation of Ophelia. In the first six lines of the monologue, Gertrude provides ten mental images of the scene's natural features. Of the twelve verbs in the entire monologue, nine are attributed to inanimate agents of action (such as "clothes" and "garments"), and only one describes action on the part of Ophelia (4.7.73,79). Furthermore, Gertrude lingers on the material elements of the scene; she seems to delight in their emblematic significance. Several times she references Ophelia's clothing, even implicating them as the direct cause of death. She meditates on the brook's natural decorations: the flowers and the trees. "Gertrude's stylized speech is notably attentive, not to the human tragedy at its center, but to the decorative aspects of Ophelia's drowning" (Ronk 22). Furthermore, her word-picture is so rife with emblematic significance that it seems as though Gertrude seeks, in the materials of Ophelia's death scene, a fatalistic confirmation that her demise is providentially-ordained, as is "the fall of a sparrow" (5.2.198). The willow symbolizes unrequited love;<sup>40</sup> the nettles signify "pain, poison or betrayal"; the daisies imply "forsaken love"; the crow-

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40 "The willow – here given (like Ophelia) not directly but by means of a representative reflection – is itself an emblem described by Thomas Fuller in *The History of the Worthies of England*: "A sad Tree, whereof such who have lost their love make their mourning garlands" (Ronk 144). In *Othello*, the "willow" song stands for romantic betrayal.

flowers indicate despair, and the long purples signal the link between sexual intimacy and death (Ronk 26). Ophelia's compulsion to hang garlands on the willow branches emblemizes fatal chance, implying that, in the interplay between providential fate and human choice, the odds are stacked against Ophelia's favor (Showalter 3). Her madness has divided herself from her wits, which are the seat of intentionality, and material nature has taken over. The emblematic world of the drowning scene, which is created in the mind of the spectator according to Gertrude's account, seems to engulf Ophelia. Deprived of human agency by a fatal turn of events, Ophelia becomes emblem amongst other emblems in Gertrude's picture of her elaborate death.

Finally, the passive tone of Gertrude's description contributes to the sense that the *tableau* of Ophelia's dying moment is more like a picture to be gazed upon than an event occurring in material time. Gertrude's tale seems to lack *pathos*; she "describes the event as if it were a scene to be contemplated in careful detail rather than a scene to be reacted to" (Ronk 28). Her passive grammatical tense contributes to the sense of emotional remove, as of the thirteen verbs in Gertrude's account, only four describe actions on the part of Ophelia. Essential verbs involved in the drowning, such as the fall into the brook, the floating in it, and the pull down to the muddy depths, all present Ophelia as the object, rather than the subject, of the actions (4.7.173, 174, 180). While distancing the audience from the emotions involved in recognizing Ophelia's death as a unique occurrence, Gertrude invites the audience to mentally gaze upon her. "Ophelia seems in her death to be held up as a statue or visual exhibit designed to be contemplated and interpreted" rather than as a character with whom the audience sympathizes (Ronk 27). Gertrude's emotionally-removed tone towards Ophelia's death, as indicated by her narration in the passive grammatical tense, compounds the sense that Ophelia's death does not take place in material time, but transcends time, even as an unchanging picture can be understood as always depicting, and yet never moving.

## 7. Allegorical Ophelia

Frequently frozen in time, Ophelia's character is fascinating because it functions allegorically to point insistently beyond the fictional world of *Hamlet*. Allegory, to Walter Benjamin, is the product of incomplete representation and the move into signs (Cowan 110). Constructed through *tableaux* that present her as an emblem of various feminine virtues, Ophelia nevertheless calls attention to the aspects of her own representation that are missing, such as the representation of her subjectivity. One might wonder why the Queen, or the onlooker who is the source of the Queen's story, lingers to observe the details of Ophelia's death rather than trying to save Ophelia? In finishing off Ophelia, Shakespeare is not concerned with forensic completeness. Rather, he employs her as a rhetorical device to draw attention to representation as such. All aesthetic, Ophelia becomes all image in her last moments; she is the picture of her own death, as narrated by Gertrude. Whereas this *ekphrastic* presentation seems to be the appropriate summation of the emblematic trajectory of representing Ophelia, it also draws attention to what such representation fails to show. Pointing beyond the narrative, allegorical Ophelia draws attention to the conceptual realm beyond the fictional world of *Hamlet* by embodying its elements of absence, or incompleteness.

Allegory is an experience provoked by the encounter of an incompletely-represented sign (Cowan 110). Intimately connected with melancholy, Walter Benjamin argues, the motion to move into allegory stems from disillusionment with literal signs and a sense that what is material is transitory, impermanent, and destined for mortality (110). It expresses a sudden awareness of meaning beyond the present that, invisible and incomprehensible though it may be, is nevertheless hinted at through allegorical figures. According to Benjamin's understanding, allegorical figures must therefore be incomplete representations of conceptual entities in order to maintain their potential to signify concepts that cannot be materially comprehended (Cowan 110). In other words, the allegorical experience takes

"the form [of the] fragmentary and enigmatic; in it the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs" (Cowan 110). The move into allegory is also a move into signs, an acknowledgment of the limits of materiality and the existence of a conceptual realm beyond it. This realm can only be hinted at by incomplete material representations, but it can never be comprehended.

In her death scene, Ophelia functions as allegory in pointing beyond the material realm of Gertrude's focus and instead, to realms mythological. The *tableaux* in which she appears, and the narrated picture of her death, represent moments wherein fictional time stills, creating space for reflection. In this still *ekphrastic* moment, the image of drowning Ophelia, her gowns spread wide, floating amongst the flowers in the waters that will be her grave, offers to be read meta-narratively and mythologically (Ronk 33). Describing Ophelia as "mermaid-like" and "like a creature native and endued / Unto [the watery] element," Gertrude provokes an impulse in the audience to retain the mental image of Ophelia's corpse as a curiosity to mull over in the mind's eye (4.7.174, 177-178). The image, constructed howsoever in each audience member's mind, is a curiosity because of the mythological connotations it evokes and the mystery surrounding it. "The figure of Ophelia behaves allegorically then in pointing insistently beyond itself as a key to something hidden, mysterious, unexpressable" (Ronk 35). Ophelia's mythological associations promise some secret meaning behind the image of her death. Rather than explicate this meaning, Shakespeare leaves it open-ended and mysterious, a matter for further contemplation.

#### 8. Ophelia as Emblem of Absence

Due to the overall construction of her character, Ophelia functions allegorically because she is an incomplete sign of a human subjectivity. By emphasizing her visuality over her agency, Shakespeare constructs a character that draws attention to the absences in her own representation: the moments wherein Ophelia acts with agency. These absences become apparent not only in the means by which

Ophelia is represented (for example, as an emblem of female piety), but also in the means by which she is not represented. Ophelia is the play's non-hero, the figure whose subdued subjectivity highlights, by contrast, the subjectivities of primary agents of action. She is a character in the service of constructing other characters, and in particular, she is the negation of the tragic hero.

Previously, I mentioned that Ophelia's predominantly-visual representation results in an absence of interiority that "disrupts any notion of 'self' by turning 'self' into pure figuration," and this informs an understanding of Ophelia as an emblem of absence (Ronk 33). With every appearance of Ophelia, we glimpse not her true self, but some picture of herself imposed by her father, brother, or even herself.<sup>41</sup> With every piece of information we receive about her, we wonder what we *don't* see, the moments of absence, the "O"s of obsolescence, or narrative zeroes (Showalter 3). "If there has been an enormous identification with Ophelia over the years since the first production of Hamlet, it may have to do with how much of her story is missing from the play (and therefore how many gaps there are for the imagination to fill), but also with a visual operation established by [*ekphrastic*] scenes" (Ronk 27). In other words, Ophelia's construction as a series of images invites the spectator to imagine those moments wherein she demonstrates her own "noble mind," those moments that are absent in the play's representation (3.1.160). Furthermore, the mystery of Ophelia's incomplete character allows her to move into allegory, especially in her death scene, where the gaps in her representation become most notable (Ronk 26). Madness and death constitute Ophelia's most allegorical moments, where the incomplete construction of her character as a series of gaps, or absences, becomes most apparent, and the spectator's imagination must conceive of an explanation to her mystery.

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41 In theatre, "true self" is, of course, only what the playwright chooses to reveal of a character. Similarly, the term "subjectivity" is deceptive when used in relation to theatrical characters, which are, after all, artistic constructs and *representations* of human characters (Coddon 71). Here, I employ both terms "true self" and "subjectivity" to describe a character's ostensible volition, agency and enfranchisement in the world of the play.

In relation to other characters in the play, Ophelia emerges as the non-hero who highlights, by contrast, the agency and subjectivity of the hero. If Hamlet is the play's most present character, then Ophelia is its most absent. Whereas the prince appears in thirteen of the play's twenty scenes, Ophelia appears in five. In one of these scenes, she is mad, and, unlike Hamlet, her madness is not admittedly feigned. Hamlet has fifteen monologues; Ophelia has four, two after she loses her wits. While Ophelia seems to transform her appearance to accommodate Renaissance ideals of "dutiful daughter" and "beloved beauty," Hamlet's interiority is so well-developed that it "passeth show" (Ronk 21, 1.2.85). In this way, Ophelia's exteriority highlights by contrast Hamlet's interiority, and her visuality, his subjectivity. "If Hamlet threatens to become all language and eventually all story, Ophelia as his counterpart becomes all picture, displayed in her final moments by means of description" (Ronk 25). As the absence of heroic qualities in many regards, Ophelia represents the negation of heroism. "Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia's story becomes the Story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference" (Showalter 3). Ophelia is the non-hero; she draws attention to what is *not* spoken, represented, and subjective. Nevertheless, she is essential to the development of Hamlet's character insofar as she completes the representation of his own subjectivity by contrast.

### 9. *Hamlet's* Emblematic Characters

*Hamlet's* characters can be read as emblems in moments of theatrical *tableau*, when slowing narrative time renders human figures static images in a morally-meaningful fictional landscape that is informed by theatrical props, gestures, and language. In the graveyard scene, the gravedigger and Hamlet emerge as emblems of two sorts of melancholy. The gravedigger emblemizes medieval melancholy, its universal perspective of death as an absolute end to vain human life. Hamlet emblemizes a more nuanced, Renaissance melancholy that perceives in the mystery of death an

opportunity for developing the individual mind through a questioning spirit. These two perspectives of melancholy, and of post-mortem death and identity, form the prologue to the entrance of Ophelia's corpse in the final portion of 5.1. In the following chapter, I explore how these two perspectives of death confront one another in the very matter of Ophelia's corpse, which promises to be read as an emblem of either perspective.

To prepare for an emblematic reading of Ophelia's corpse in the graveyard scene, it is necessary to understand the emblematic trajectory of her character construction in the scenes leading up to 5.1. More than any other character in *Hamlet*, Ophelia appears as a series of emblems through theatrical *tableaux* in which she functions not so much as an agent of action, but as its collateral. In the five scenes leading up to her death, Ophelia is presented as the emblem of ideal Renaissance womanhood, silently heeding her brother's and father's advice, or sewing alone in her closet, or meditating upon a prayer book. Even in her madness, flower-bearing Ophelia emblemizes early modern anxieties regarding chastity and feminine sexuality. In all her emblematic permutations, however, Ophelia's complicity remains unclear, as moments wherein she acts with true agency are notably absent.

Ophelia's iconic death epitomizes the two-dimensionality of her character construction, as the rhetorical device of *ekphrasis* obscures any understanding of Ophelia's agency in her own death. Rather than see Ophelia dying onstage, the audience only hears Gertrude describe a picture of the drowning. The Queen's emphasis on the materials involved in Ophelia's death, and the grammatical structure of her account—which ascribes agency to those materials rather than to mad Ophelia—confuse notions of subjectivity. According to a literal reading of Gertrude's monologue, Ophelia drowns as a victim of malicious materials rather than as a victim of her own compromised sanity. Gertrude's *ekphrastic* rhetoric illuminates the absence of subjectivity entailed by the pictorial method of representing Ophelia's death.

Understanding Ophelia as an emblematic character is crucial to analyzing the function of her corpse in the graveyard scene. Shakespeare employs emblematism and *ekphrasis* in constructing Ophelia's character in order to indicate, through her, the presence of something verbally inexpressible that can nevertheless be visually embodied (Ronk 35). Because words represent one sign system and images represent another, by shifting from one system to another through *ekphrasis* and emblematism, Shakespeare indicates a gap in comprehension that simultaneously implies the presence of something unmediable. In other words, "Ophelia appears as an emblem of Ophelia, but not in order to be dismissed, but rather to mean differently from the ways she has meant before" (Ronk 25). In the following chapter, I apply these conclusions on Ophelia's emblematic character to a reading of her corpse as a sign of death in the graveyard scene. Her visuality, while indicating an absence of subjectivity, allows for her semantic versatility. As a stage prop, her corpse physically embodies the scene's *vanitas* philosophies and forms the visual center of its theatrical *tableau*.

### Ophelia's Corpse and the Problematics of the Objective Mode

Ophelia's construction as a visual character, or as a series of images, renders her corpse readable as an object like the emblems of *vanitas* and *memento mori* that populate the visual landscape of the graveyard and of *Hamlet's* Denmark as a whole. However, unlike other inanimate objects in the graveyard, Ophelia's corpse seems to come alive through the dialogue and dramatic action of her incomplete burial ceremony. In this chapter, I demonstrate how such behavior renders Ophelia's corpse the center of *Hamlet's* melancholy perspective and the embodiment of its tragedy in the objective mode.

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how Ophelia, as an *ekphrastic* character, can be understood as *all* object, a two-dimensional emblem without subjectivity. In this way, she epitomizes the emblemization of character that contributes to the objective mode. In this chapter, I demonstrate how she complicates the objective mode by introducing an element of semiotic chaos into the graveyard scene. As an object that behaves like a subject *en scène*, Ophelia's corpse reverses the subject-object relation and compromises the integrity of subjectivities both on and offstage. That is, by refusing to play by the rules of semiotic signification in the graveyard scene, Ophelia's body blurs the boundaries between living and dead, time and space; boundaries by which Hamlet measures his own existence, and the spectator measures his or her relationship to the play. As an "improper property, Ophelia's corpse shockingly stares back at the audience that watches her, throwing its gaze back upon itself. In its unruly behavior, Ophelia's corpse therefore serves to deconstruct the objective mode.

As an emblem of many things, including absence, Ophelia embodies the "epistemological gap" between picture and meaning. She draws attention to all that is not known of human subjectivity in language. In this way, the starkly visual representation of Ophelia signifies melancholy, which is the depression resulting from a loss of faith in language. Returning to Hans Holbein's the Younger's 1521 portrait of *Dead Christ* through Julia Kristeva's work on the portrait, I demonstrate how Ophelia's

corpse works like the image of *Dead Christ* to embody the middle ground of non-meaning, or of epistemological inquiry. As such, she indicates the presence of melancholy in the scene, a presence that is affirmed in the melancholy language of Hamlet and Laertes.

In order to confirm the presence of melancholy in the speech of Hamlet and Laertes, I apply Kristeva's theories to a textual analysis of their dialogue in the graveyard scene. Hamlet loses faith in language because language does not do justice to his melancholy. Laertes uses allegory in his eulogy for Ophelia. Allegory is the language of melancholy in literature, according to Walter Benjamin. Therefore, Hamlet and Laertes present two cases of melancholy language in the scene; Ophelia's corpse embodies it. By representing all that cannot be known of objectivity and subjectivity in language, Ophelia's corpse constitutes the melancholy sign that Kristeva argues is Christ's body in *Dead Christ* (1521). It epitomizes and emblemizes the melancholy idea in the scene.

Having linked melancholy with reversed subject-object relations in the graveyard scene, I conclude the chapter with a historical analysis of *Hamlet's* melancholy in light of early modern aesthetics. Employing Hans Thies-Lehmann's overview of tragic theory in his preface to *Postdramatic Theatre*, I demonstrate how the traditional notion of tragedy as a particular *perspective* on life can, in the instance of *Hamlet*, be understood as the melancholic perspective. Not only do *Hamlet's* characters and theatrical items emblemize melancholy, but the audience, too, is impelled towards melancholy by gazing upon Ophelia's corpse as an emblem of epistemological gap between language and meaning. Ophelia's active object-ness in the graveyard scene renders the audience passive subjects, compromising their own subjectivity. This enforced melancholy forms the theoretical foundations of tragedy in the objective mode. In order to set up an analysis of Ophelia's corpse in the graveyard scene as an improper property, I demonstrate how her body frustrates notions of narrative time by returning to Fly's work on the subject.

### 1. Ophelia's Corpse Transcends Narrative Time

Hamlet and the gravedigger's philosophies of death, and their respective effects on narrative time, intersect over the dead body of Ophelia, which has potential to be read as an icon of both philosophies. The gravedigger's fatalistic acceptance of death leads to dramatic stasis in the graveyard scene, a stasis that is upset and accelerated by Hamlet's insistence on post-mortem individuality. Into the fray of changing narrative time enters Ophelia's corpse, which becomes the virtual testing ground for the legitimacy of these perspectives. Laertes' eulogy ascribes to the corpse a sense of immortality that serves as an affront to Hamlet's subjectivity and the gravedigger's nihilistic perspective. These philosophies of death, and their manifestations in narrative tempo, confront in the dialogue spoken over Ophelia's dead body.

On the one hand, Ophelia's body is a picture of eternal stillness, a silent presence of anonymous death. The gravedigger indicates that at death, Ophelia loses not only her individuality, but also her very humanity when he refers to her as "One that was a woman, sir, but rest her soul, she's dead" (5.1.127). Indeed, historical staging conventions may have engendered this view, as a shrouded or covered actor would have stood in for dead Ophelia. The body enters the scene as a "corse," either covered, in a temporary coffin, or on a bier (Rutter 28). Whatever the transport mechanism was, the corpse would have been detached from it and lifted on Laertes' line "Lay her i'th'earth" (5.1.228). At that moment, the corpse's "blank stare" would have been evident through the gaps in the facial shroud (Rutter 42). The limp body would have been elevated and made visible to the audience as a body of some importance. Recall that in the celebration of Holy Communion, the body of Christ is elevated before the congregation, in the form of the Host. However, unlike the body of Christ, Ophelia's corpse emblemizes the power of death over life in this scene.

Furthermore, Ophelia's corpse potentially emblemizes the gravedigger's long perspective of the grave when viewed in the context of the scene's dialogue and emblematic references. The priest describes the burial as a returning of earth to earth, a notion that is recalled by Laertes' reference to the

“dust” that will envelop his sister’s corpse (5.1.227). The adage, “dust to dust,” reinforces a sense of death’s inevitability and anonymity. In the context of the graveyard’s *vanitas* and *memento mori* iconography, Ophelia’s body potentially signifies the “anonymity and formlessness” of humanity in the face of eternity (Fly 268). Indeed, the procession that transports her body to the grave seems itself emblematic of the slow, eternal procession of time that carries all humanity to the grave (Fly 268).

Yet, on the other hand, Ophelia’s individuality has promise to persist after death, according to her brother’s eulogy. Laertes’ language ascribes to Ophelia a sense of Christian immortality suited to the divine. “A ministering angel shall my sister be,” he promises, indicating that although her body is buried, Ophelia’s soul will live on (5.1.230). Indeed, Laertes assures her Christian resurrection when he refers to “her fair and unpolluted flesh” as the source of new growth and the proof of her chastity and faithfulness (5.1.227-9, n.171 p. 388). As if to reinforce his certainty, Laertes indicates that the priest will also experience the after-life, only he will be cursed (5.1.231). Thus alluding to Christian doctrines of the after-life, Laertes defense of Ophelia’s everlasting memory contributes to accelerating narrative time by insisting upon the grave as the resting-place of a valued individual (Fly 269).

However, Laertes does not found his hope in Ophelia’s immortality in Christian theology alone; he reinforces his argument through metaphorical allusions to classic mythology, and also through numerical hyperbole. He commands a monument for his sister taller than Pelion and Olympus, indicating that her excellence has earthly expressions that will outlive her (5.1.242). Furthermore, as if ordinary language is insufficient to describe his thirst for revenge, Laertes expresses his grief in numerical hyperbole.

O, treble woe  
 Fall ten times double on that cursed head  
 Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense  
 Deprived thee of (5.1.235-238).

This prayer does not attempt to quantify the revenge Laertes desires. Rather, it appeals to the divine

meaning imbued in such numbers to render them cosmically significant. The number three appeals to divine justice in the image of perfect Trinity, ten refers to divine completeness, and two to the harmony of Christ's human and divine natures (Hopper 42, 144). Multiplication appeals to divine power and disponibility, which is able to bountifully increase material referents in the same way as Christ, praying, fed thousands from a few loaves and fish. Through such rhetorical techniques, Laertes argues for Ophelia's immortality, as well as her Christian resurrection. His eulogy works in the same way as Hamlet's defense of his father's post-mortem individuality to combat the anonymity and formlessness engendered by the gravedigger's long perspective of the grave.

These two perspectives of the grave, then, intersect over the dead body of Ophelia, which offers to be read according to both philosophies. However, Ophelia's body actually transcends narrative time by behaving as an Aebischerian "improper property". Pascale Aebischer terms an "improper property" a stage object that resists its "accessory roles and takes on the principal role of subject" (208). Ophelia's corpse behaves improperly by giving the illusion of being animate, even though it signifies a static idea: death. After summarizing Aebischer's notion of improper properties, I describe in what ways Ophelia's corpse seems to come alive in the graveyard scene. Combining these two ideas, I read Ophelia's animated corpse as an improper property in order to demonstrate how such behavior affects notions of narrative time and subjectivity, all of which are associated with the emblematic construction of character in the objective mode.

## 2. Ophelia's Animated Corpse as an "Improper Property"

Ophelia's corpse transcends narrative time through the illusion of subjectivity. As an "improper property," her body is a stage object that reverses the subject-object relation of normative dramaturgy by giving the sense that it is uncannily animate. Fundamentally, such properties can be understood as items that are capable of more than one interpretation at any given time. For example, Yorick's skull, already in its first, and most straightforward, meaning...manages to stand for

Yorick as a fictional character, for iconographic Death in general, and as such potentially for all the separate identities that Hamlet attributes to it (Cain, a politician, a courtier, a lawyer, a buyer of land, Alexander, or Caesar), and for 'antic' Hamlet himself (210).

Thus, Yorick's skull may signify many ideas; it even "may contain signifiers that the originators of the performance (the designer, the director) did not intend to be perceived" (Esslin 46). In other words, improper properties are unpredictable properties: one never knows just how they may behave semantically *en scène*. It is this "polysemous denotative and connotative richness" that imbues such properties with an illusion of subjectivity (Aebischer 209). When confronted with live subjectivities, in the form of human characters, such properties have the effect of out-subjectifying those characters. In other words, they are capable of blending the boundaries between individuals, between individuals and their environment, and between past and present.

Although Aebischer's primary example is Yorick's skull, she makes clear that Ophelia's corpse qualifies as an improper property. The stage business involving Ophelia's corpse in the grave delivers the illusion that her corpse is motive, uncannily animate. This confuses not only the distinction between the dead and the undead, but it also ascribes a sort of subjectivity to Ophelia's corpse. By acting as an undead icon of death, Ophelia introduces an element of "semiotic chaos" to the scene's construction of character, and this chaos is temporal as well as narrative (Aebischer 212). After demonstrating in what ways Ophelia's corpse is animated in this scene, I describe its effects on narrative time and subjectivity.

Narratively, drowned Ophelia is certainly dead; nevertheless, theatrically, her corpse behaves as though it were animate. The theatrical action at the gravesite involves Ophelia's corpse in movements that make it seem to momentarily resurrect, as Pascale Aebischer notes. This sense is delivered in three ways. First, visual and thematic references to early modern tales of "Death and the Maiden", not the least of which is the macabre backdrop of the graveyard, remind the viewer that her burial is an artistic creation, and bodies in art are only dead insofar as the creators desire them to be so. Second, Ophelia's

burial is never completed and so the suspicious corpse of the suicide is never safely tucked away. Third and finally, the dramatic action surrounding Ophelia's funeral involves her corpse in motive ways that suggest an uncanny sense of liveliness. Borrowing Aebischer's approach, I examine these three ways in greater depth.

Ophelia seems to come alive in this scene, first, by contributing to cultural associations of animated death, such as the "Death and the Maiden" *topos* prevalent in Renaissance emblemism (Aebischer 214). "Death and the Maiden" was a thematic series of emblems portraying Death as a skeleton, jesting or courting young women. The juxtaposition of rotting decay with fair flesh, of morbidity and comedy, reinvigorates the concept with erotic energy, personifying it according to living, human qualities. Many of these qualities, which are evident in the graveyard scene, serve to animate Ophelia's body with cultural associations of living Death, Aebischer notes (212). By the 1540s, the themes associated with typical "Death and the Maiden" portraits would have been "remarkably close to Shakespeare's graveyard scene...in [their] combination of Death as a jester, a virtuous maiden associated with the flowers in its background, and a motto reminding the viewer of the transitory nature of beauty" (Aebischer 214). By way of its resemblance to the virtuous young maidens of the "Death and the Maiden" series, Ophelia's corpse carries potential to be animated according to Renaissance personifications of Death.

The graveyard's spatial context contributes to the scene's emblematic resemblance to "Death and the Maiden" Renaissance iconography, and by extension, to the inanimate behavior of Ophelia's corpse. The graveyard, in "Death and the Maiden" portraits, is "common ground" where courtier lies with pauper, where rotting corpses and dry skeletons are mixed with "fair and unpolluted flesh", and where no one has proprietary rights (5.1.215, Aebischer 212). In the grave bed, Ophelia's maiden corpse is superimposed upon that of another anonymous tenant, indicating that, in the space of the dead, her body not only succumbs to decay, but also to a sort of necro-erotic debauchery (Aebischer 214).

Gertrude's lamentation that the flowers strewing Ophelia's grave ought to have decorated her bridal bed reinforces the notion that Ophelia's dance with Death has robbed her of maidenhood as well as youth; the two are often conflated in Renaissance art. Yorick's jesting presence within the jumbled grave indicates his own post-mortem participation in this orgiastic "dance of death" (Aebischer 214). The necrophilic sentiments present in "Death and the Maiden" portraiture, which can be extended to the graveyard scene by way of similar spatial context, reanimate Ophelia's body with erotic energy.

In addition to her associations with Renaissance emblems of animated Death, Ophelia seems to come alive in a second way: through the disrupted proceedings of her unfinished burial. The dramatic action surrounding the ceremony -- Laertes jumping into the grave, Hamlet following suit, the two violently wrestling -- disrupts the scene's sober atmosphere and prevents Ophelia's final rest (Rutter 41). The "grotesque deformations and disruptions [of the ceremony] are nothing less than...the relentless, incremental deritualizing of the ceremony that is meant to accommodate the living to death," Rutter writes (42). Indeed, the rite that is intended to bring closure to Ophelia's death is never completed; Ophelia is never actually buried (Rutter 42). One wonders if, like other Shakespearean corpses, she might come back to life in the play.

Finally, the motility of Ophelia's corpse within the grave contributes to the sense that she is not fully dead. Laertes embraces Ophelia in the grave; at this moment, she *moves*, literally rising from the dirt. Rutter describes the ideological significance of this moment: "Reanimated (like the Ghost, like Yorick) she re-enters the field of play, her dead eyes gazing at the audience. And for this moment when she won't play dead [she embodies] really what death looks like" (42). As her corpse is "manhandled," Ophelia's "deadness" is repeatedly called into question by the very fact that dead things do not move (42). The unseemly, uncanny image of what death really looks like is embodied in her blank stare. Here, "no sweetness, no flights of angels, no rest," accompany Ophelia's corpse (Rutter 42). Rather, refusing to play dead, her corpse plays up metatheatrically in the role of animated corpse.

As an animated corpse, Ophelia qualifies as an improper property that transcends narrative time and acquires a sense of subjectivity. She problematizes the scene's temporal flow by resisting the transformation from previously-living individual to presently-dead object. In Fly's understanding, "Urgency and leisure, closure and openness cohere in the dramatic figure of Hamlet" when he pauses to contemplate Yorick's skull, thereby allowing narrative past to overtake narrative present (Fly 272). However, Ophelia's "polysemous denotative and connotative richness" ruptures this cohesion by acting both to the narrative past and to the narrative present (Aebischer 209). Furthermore, Ophelia's body complicates semiotic definition: it signifies both *vanitas* iconography and a loved and valued character; both a moving being and a dead one. By signifying a plurality of ideas, Ophelia's corpse acquires the illusion of subjectivity, and it problematizes neat semiotics by playing both to and beyond the narrative.

As an improper property, Ophelia's corpse complicates the objective mode by resisting neat semiotic signification. As Chapter One demonstrates, the objective mode of viewing *Hamlet's* material universe depends upon the stability of the sign-signified relation. *Vanitas* and *memento mori* iconography assumes that this relation is stable: certain material items signify certain moral knowns. Improper properties, such as Yorick's skull and Ophelia's corpse, problematize this model because they can be read as signs of many signifieds. In this way, Ophelia's corpse in the graveyard scene both focalizes and begins to deconstruct the objective mode of the play as a whole.

Complicating the objective mode, Ophelia's corpse in the graveyard scene lays bare the tragedy of *Hamlet*, which consists in a melancholic perspective on life, especially material life. Although the idea spans centuries, melancholy in early modernity corresponded to depression resulting from recognizing the limits of language. Marked by a loss of language, or an allegorical use of language in an attempt to articulate that loss, early modern melancholy found its most comprehensive expression in emblems and images. Turning to two examples of melancholy in early modern art, I demonstrate how the melancholic image is evidence of a despair of words, and thereby it reveals a fixation with allegory,

and a perspective towards material items as objects of contemplation and as subjects in themselves.

After defining early modern melancholy in this visual way, I read *Hamlet* as an example of early modern melancholic art.

### 3. The Emblematic of Early Modern Melancholy

Renaissance melancholy found expression in images, in emblem books and in the visual arts. Numerous scholars attribute the ideological development of early modern melancholy to the period language of emblems. Art historians Erwin Panofsky, Raymond Klibansky, and Fritz Saxl approach the condition of melancholy through its manifestation in period images, such as Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I* (1513-14). Melancholy was a condition that was "displayed", not only for the purposes of externalizing grief, but of advertising genius in social milieux (Schmidt 1). Like a crest, early modern melancholy was a vocabulary of "forms, moods, shapes" (Schmidt 1). It is this social perspective that Nicholas Dewey links to theatrical manifestations on the early modern stage. "The philosophical and iconographic significance of melancholy (a long and rich tradition)" contributed to the creation of "many and varied masks of melancholy with which the playgoer at the comedies and tragedies of Shakespeare...would have been familiar" (Dewey 255). Early modern drama engages in the common visual vocabulary of melancholy, as the previous chapter demonstrates with reference to Hamlet's visuality. His "black clothes, book, and skull are only the best known of the many symbolic renderings of melancholy on the Renaissance stage," Huston Diehl writes (119). Another manifestation of early modern melancholy occurs in the *tableaux* that, as the last chapter shows, render characters momentarily emblems (Mehl 46).

This emphasis on melancholy as an early modern visual phenomenon does not exclude its manifestations in language, for the emblem is composed of word and image. Epigrams gave meaning to their corresponding illustrations. The emblem was considered to be a union of picture and word (Mehl 41). Indeed, language encompassed the emblem's moral kernel. The relation between "the picture and

the word...was likened to that between body and soul: The picture was quickened or animated by the word" (Engel 3). In a mutually-informing relation, the word and the image of the early modern emblem cooperated in communicating moral ideas through languages of signs, both verbal and visual.

The cooperation between word and image in early modern emblems necessitates a dual approach to studying the relation of language to melancholy. On the one hand, the melancholy gaze transforms surrounding material items into "petrified relics, allegorical fragments, and enigmatic cultural objects" (Hanssen 1002). On the other hand, the melancholy subject loses faith in the signifying power of language, having despaired of "Words, words, words" (2.2.189). After exploring the interrelationship between visual and verbal language in art dealing with melancholy, I analyze their points of divergence. Both analyses reveal the melancholic perspective at play in *Hamlet*.

#### 4. Melancholy and the Subject-Object Reversal

Objects of contemplation, rather than of utility or even of beauty, are a product of the melancholic gaze. Melancholy, and its corresponding perspective of "metaphysical desolateness" triggered by "the flight of the gods" from early modern philosophy, produces a human subject that is distanced from the self and from the material world (Hanssen 1003). The melancholy figure is "a self-alienated, torpid human subject...crouched amidst an array of petrified relics, allegorical fragments, and enigmatic cultural objects" (Hanssen 1002). This transformation of material items from objects of utility and pleasure to subjects of painting and philosophy is an extension of the transformation of the human from a divine-like subject to an object. With regards to Benjamin's reading of Dürer's *Melancholia I*, Hanssen writes that "In the proximity of...*Melancholia*, the utensils of active life are lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation" (1003). When the human subject began to be considered as a mind in a body that was alienated from itself and, by extension, from the material world of which it was a part, the melancholic gaze became the normative gaze for understanding the material universe. Melancholy was an early modern epistemology formed around "a disenchanting

world of cultural, fetishistic artifacts" (1003). For this reason, Benjamin argues that the cultural historian must be immersed in "natural and cultural objects" (1002).

On the other hand, the melancholy subject loses faith in the signifying power of language, having despaired of "Words, words, words" (2.2.189). All language is sign insofar as all words signify invisible, idealized referents. Melancholy is a condition that semiotics can diagnose, for depressive language reveals "an apparent destruction of the signifying sequence" (Kristeva 55). Indeed, Hamlet betrays such faithlessness in speech when he remarks that "Words, words, words" are not sufficient to describe "that within which passeth show" (2.2.189;1.2.85). In his melancholy state, he questions the power of language to signify material reality. Furthermore, he doubts that language is a vehicle to obtaining divine audience, as he mocks Laertes' cries to the divine. Mythology, like language, is a collection of signs questionably related to real life. "Let Hercules himself do what he may, / The cat will mew and dog will have his day" indicates, in the change from the subjunctive to the simple future tense, the dubitable relation between divine intention (and the human intention thereby related through language and prayer) and the real world (5.1.280-1).

Insofar as language is a collection of signs, visual and verbal, the melancholic may despair of both when she loses faith in the signifying power of language. However, the melancholic subject may find expression in allegory, which constitutes the union of visual and verbal signs. Allegory is the language of melancholy in literature, according to Walter Benjamin (Hanssen 1002). The melancholic's suffering may be elevated into allegory, which does not signify directly, but indirectly. In this way, allegory approaches more nearly than simple words or images an expression of inexpressible loss. In allegory, the metaphorical language of signs (which is speech) and the material language of objects intersect and sanctify the unspeakable by describing it in terms outside of itself.

##### 5. Melancholy in the Language of the Graveyard Scene

Laertes is the presence of melancholy in allegory in the graveyard scene, for he refuses to read

the material signs of Ophelia's death, or the meaningless words of Hamlet's speech, as representations of the truth. Appearances indicate that Ophelia is now no more than the dust that covers her, but Laertes argues for her figurative immortality. When he commands, "Lay her i'th'earth / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring," he refuses to read the material signs of corpse, earth and flower according to their literal significance (5.1.227-9). Rather, he argues for their metaphorical significance as witnesses to her purity. By nature of their remove from their immediate, material referents, metaphors elevate their figurative referents to an ideal, even sacred, realm. Metaphors, as Walter Benjamin notes, "from the very fact of their pointing to something else, [attain] a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them" (176). Through the genre of metaphor, Laertes *enacts* Ophelia's innocence with his speech act. He also reveals his own suffering and melancholy by indicating that her virtue, and by extension, his loss, is so great that it is nigh inexpressible, or expressible only in allegory.

In this way, Laertes and Hamlet both present cases for melancholic disillusionment with language in the graveyard scene, although in different ways. Whereas Hamlet expresses a general resignation from language, Laertes employs language that is removed from the ideas he attempts to express. It is *within* this removal -- in the gap between the word pictures and their meaning -- that Laertes' grief is located. His grief, which is inexpressible, can only be expressed as the unknown middle ground between image and meaning. Allegory acknowledges this gap, even more so than realistic language, by linking dissimilar images and meanings. It is in the gap between picture and meaning that *melancholia* most nearly approaches expression, and therefore, resolution.

The epistemological gap inherent in allegory is integral to *Hamlet's* tragedy, as it reveals the presence and cure of a melancholic perspective. In order to demonstrate this point more clearly, I elaborate upon the notion of the epistemological gap in Kristeva's reading of Hans Holbein the

Younger's *Dead Christ* (1521). Returning once more to this portrait as an example of early modern discourse on materiality, spirituality, and humanity, I demonstrate how Kristeva's theory that Holbein's *Christ* inhabits the middle ground between picture and meaning can be applied to a reading of Ophelia's corpse in the graveyard scene, which functions visually (Ronk) and allegorically (Benjamin) as a sign of absence (Rutter, Showalter) pointing to the unknown in visual representation (Aebischer). Having established this connection between Ophelia's corpse and *Dead Christ*, I conclude that her corpse as a theatrical sign works like the image of *Christ* to indicate the presence of and the cure for melancholy.

## 6. Curing Melancholy through Signs

Grief may be inexpressible in the language of words; nevertheless, it can be embodied in signs. *Dead Christ*, according to Kristeva, is grief signified (Kristeva 108). Holbein's 1521 portrait, which depicts the body of Christ newly dead and descended from the cross, is "a faithful representation of the dead body," "a man who is truly dead, of Christ forsaken by the Father" (Kristeva 108, 110).<sup>42</sup> Unlike traditional renderings of the subject, *Dead Christ* gives no impression of transcendence and no clue of the Resurrection. There is "no trace of beauty" or even eroticism in Holbein's portrait, only "morbid suffering" and loneliness (Kristeva 112). This unconventional, if not shocking, perspective towards a sacred subject reveals personal suffering. Kristeva notes the correlation between Holbein's painting and changes in his family and religious faith. This portrait, she argues, translates Holbein's suffering into signs: it is "grief itself" (346).

In this way, *Dead Christ* embodies Holbein's grief in the language of signs. To Kristeva, death and suffering can be comprehended, contained, and overcome in the transformation of idea to sign. She writes that "Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components -- that is doubtless

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<sup>42</sup> See figure 19.

a way to curb mourning" (97). Death is not simply the loss of physical life, but it is also the loss of meaning in language. To cope with one's own death, and with the death of others, Kristeva writes that "I bring forth -- or at least I rate highly -- an artifice, an ideal, a 'beyond' that my psyche produces in order to take up a position outside itself -- *ek-stasis*" (Kristeva 99). The ideal that stands in for death is easily rendered sign, and by comprehending that ideal, the sign conquers "death as ultimate non-meaning" (Kristeva 101). The image is a cathartic release of grief.

Like Holbein's portrait, Ophelia's corpse embodies the epistemological gap between sign and meaning. As a predominantly visual character, she signals the absence of subjectivity, an absence that allows her to be read as allegory, rather than as a realistic representation of humanity. Returning to the work of Ronk, Rutter, Aebischer and Benjamin, as explained in the last chapter, I review this argument in order to demonstrate how it is integral to the scene's overall tragic perspective. In the context of melancholy dialogue and the subject-object reversal provoked by the presence of *vanitas* items and emblematic characters, Ophelia's corpse embodies the epistemological gap between language and meaning, the gap in which melancholy finds its visual expression.

#### 7. Ophelia Embodies the "Epistemological Gap"

As the last chapter demonstrates, Ophelia is an incomplete character: all picture, she functions more as allegory than as realistic representation of human character. Shakespeare utilizes *ekphrasis* to imply the limits of representation, Ronk argues. *Ekphrasis* enables a temporary shift outside of the narrative and into a mythological realm, a realm of allegory (Ronk 35). The construction of Ophelia's character is predominantly visual; however, an allegorical reading of her *ekphrastic* moments expands the representation of Ophelia's character. In such moments, she belongs to the realm of allegory, and not simply of images. She belongs to something mythological, which cannot be embodied but is nevertheless "inescapable" (Ronk 24). "That is, ekphrasis becomes a poetic device to render a presence which cannot be rendered or to represent that which cannot be represented" (Ronk 35). It works

alongside words to indicate what can be known, in the relationship of sign to signifier, and what cannot be known, in the relationship of image to referent. Thus, "if the word is the sign for symbolic and arbitrary mediation, the image becomes a sign for the unmediated" (35). Ophelia, as a character constructed of images, also becomes a sign for the "unmediated."

Furthermore, as the last chapter shows, Ophelia's predominant visuality signals the absence of subjectivity, and it works within the narrative to complicate the dynamics of agency. Both the corpse and Yorick's skull "are theatrical signifiers whose presence points to an absence, whose present points to a past, thus blurring the boundary between life and death," Aebischer writes (211). Just as "Yorick's skull in fact signifies its own absence and lack: lack of the lips that Hamlet has 'kissed I know not how oft' (5.1.179-80)," so Ophelia represents her own absence of subjectivity (Aebischer 210). In life a visual allegory, Ophelia offers to be read as a form without identity in death. Her corpse is "a body without subjectivity," Elaine Showalter writes (3). As such, it represents the place that Ophelia occupies throughout the play: an anonymous center of "the Story of O -- the zero, the empty circle or mystery" (Showalter 3). Without comprehensive human subjectivity or agency, Ophelia stands in contrast to Hamlet as the non-hero (Aebischer 219). She signals all that cannot be known of death, time, language, and reality.

Finally, as this chapter shows, Ophelia's improper behavior as a corpse in the graveyard scene complicates the subjectivity of well-formed characters, thereby reinforcing the presence of the unmediated, as expressed in Ophelia's body, and upstaging those subjectivities. As an improper property, Ophelia's corpse blurs boundaries between fictional space, time and character (Aebischer 211). In doing so, it creates the illusion of subjectivity. Ophelia stands in contrast to Hamlet not only as the non-hero, but by extension, as the object-turned-subject that infringes upon his own defined identity. She begs a rereading of Fly's Hamlet as the figure in which the extremes cohere, indicating the incompleteness of Fly's argument that "the languid rhythm of eternity and the crescendo of crises - are

resolved in the capacious and disciplined mind of the sea-changed Hamlet, whose participation in both dimensions of time serves to regulate the pace and to sustain continuity" (269). Rather, Hamlet's ringing declaration of identity seems to be a reaction against the upstart subjectivity of an object that, in its emblematic of absence, has the capacity to dissolve distinctions between time and personality. Through the illusion of subjectivity, Ophelia complicates all that the characters in the graveyard, and by extension, the identifying spectator, stand for. She challenges the subjectivities of humans, and representations of humans, with which she comes into contact by presenting the absence of subjectivity: all that cannot be known of space, time, and the human identity formed therein. Ophelia's corpse, when read in light of feminist scholarship on absence and presence, indicates that Hamlet's declaration of identity -- far from being the thread of continuity resolving time and space in the graveyard scene -- is actually a reaction to Ophelia's upstaging, "upstart" corpse (Aebischer 219).

As the past two chapters demonstrate, Ophelia's character encourages her body to be read, in the graveyard scene, as an emblem of the "epistemological gap" between picture and meaning (Ronk 24). In the work of Kristeva, her presence as such an emblem indicates the presence of the melancholic perspective. If melancholy is an instance of signifying the incomprehensible, of putting suffering into signs, then Ophelia's emblematic of absence indicates a gesture of melancholy, the gesture of relieving the suffering accompanying a loss of faith in language by rendering in image the gap between sign and signified. Ophelia's integral position within the scenography, dialogue and symbolism of the graveyard scene indicates the pervasiveness of the melancholy perspective in the scene as a whole. When considered in light of the play's emblematic patterns, from the objects of *vanitas* and *memento mori* to the characters as emblems, Ophelia's embodiment of absence can be seen as the triumph of the objective mode (in which a character is rendered object) and its undoing (in which an object attains subjectivity). Turning to theatre theory, I demonstrate how *Hamlet's* tragedy is predicated on a perspective linked to early modern melancholy as a visual language that gives shape to the

epistemological gap between sign and meaning, and how this perspective informs theatrical understandings of historical constructions of genre, as well as the semiotics and phenomenology of the body and dialogue on stage.

#### 8. Tragedy and the Melancholy Perspective

Modern tragedy is not a so much a product of theatrical content as it is a product of perspective. The aesthetic experience is one of semantic indeterminacy, wherein the spectator loses a sense of subjectivity in the loss of concrete references in language and image (Lehmann 39). “Tragedy focuses on [a] particular possible way of viewing life” (Lehmann 93). This perspective is not equivalent with a tragic outlook on reality,” but a matter of a certain artistic approach to and rendering of it” (Lehmann 93). The modern aesthetic affects the spectator not by portraying universal truths, but by disorienting the spectator in the simultaneous portrayal of opposites, and in disestablishing semiotic systems. The power of the tragic perspective, therefore, lies in its affective potential. By throwing the spectator into an experience of the unknown, tragedy imposes a sort of melancholy on the spectator by enacting his or her loss of subjectivity in the encounter of linguistic and epistemological uncertainty in theatrical representation. The rise of abstraction in modern aesthetics is testament to this approach in modern tragedy, which draws attention to the experience of reality rather than to its faithful representation. Rather than contradict this point, naturalism in modern theatre only reinforces the notion that reality is an object to be experienced in the abstracted gaze of spectator towards theatrical representation. Modern tragedy can be understood as a rhetoric of artistic representation, and its methodologies of rendering human experience as a philosophy of life.

The tragic perspective is one that, in combining opposites, disestablishes meaning. “For the onlooking consciousness the result of experiencing the tragic conflict is, according to Hegel, that we are deeply moved (*erschuttert*) by the fate of the hero, but at the same time satisfied (*befriedigt*) in the recognition of colliding opposites” (Lehmann 92). In other words, colliding opposites produces a tragic

aesthetic that has power to affect the onlooking spectator. This power of affect is related to the disestablishment of “normative and conceptual” signifying systems and to dissolution of semantic certainty. The tragic experience is one in which “we are taken to the edge of [self-assurance] by the uncanny mental and physical experience of entering the twilight zone, where the sustainability of cultural norms which we adhere to is put into doubt” (Lehmann 93, 99). The “twilight zone” is the zone of epistemological uncertainty created through the collision of opposites, such as word and image, slow and rapid, narrative and meta-narrative. The twilight zone is a realm of disestablished signification, of uncertain boundaries between space, time and the self.

The aesthetic throws the spectator into an experience of linguistic uncertainty. In Schiller, “art appears...as a sphere beyond and free of conceptuality,” the markers of which are traditional signifiers: words and images with established significations (Lehmann 100). Such a sphere favors references to cultural experiences over concrete, universal ideas. It is marked by semantic indeterminacy and a playful use of language and images (Lehmann 100-1). To Schiller, the aesthetic deals with “overlapping experiences and perceptions” rather than universal truths (101). This approach towards language and meaning in the aesthetic product assumes that the essence of art lies in its relation to the spectator, and that its purpose is distinctly phenomenological, related to the power of art to affect.

Tragedy affects the spectator by throwing him or her into an epistemological “grey zone” where, losing concrete signifiers, he or she loses a sense of subjectivity in the disorientation of time and space. Schiller’s theoretical place of the aesthetic, the place of “overlapping experiences and perceptions,” is a grey zone (Lehmann 101). It is one of subjective and semantic neutrality, in which the onlooker undergoes “an experience of ‘zero’” through the disorientation resulting from blurred boundaries of self, time and space, which are themselves results of indeterminate signifiers (Lehmann 101). “In the aesthetic state the human is zero,” Schiller writes (Lehmann 101). Without discrete signs, the conscious onlooker can apprehend neither the boundaries of the aesthetic product (such as the space

and time of the fictional world) nor the boundaries of the self, encountering the aesthetic product.

By compromising the onlooker's sense of subjectivity, the tragic aesthetic product imposes melancholy on the onlooking subject. If melancholy is the loss of faith in language and signs, then tragedy, which disestablishes meaning by embodying the collision of opposites, engenders such loss of faith in the disoriented onlooker. Tragedy is posited in "an *interruption* and caesura of our cultural existence," and it results in "the blurring of the boundaries of the self, of conceptual understanding as such" (Lehmann 99). Brought to the limits of language and communication, subjective spectators might lose faith in the universal truths that tragedy explicitly refrains from representing, including the truth of the concrete self. In short, the "realization of the 'self'" engendered by the tragic encounter coincides with a sense of the loss of self, "so that constitution and loss of the self are experienced as inseparable" (Lehmann 94). Paradoxically, the tragic experience enforces melancholy through the loss of a sense of self, but it also provides a means of transcending such melancholy through the confrontation of such loss. The self, having been deconstructed through the experience of "namelessness," or anonymity, is yet presented with "a recognition of the radical possibilities of the human being to transcend itself and its world" by transcending its own melancholy (Lehmann 93, 107). Such transcendence occurs in the encounter with the middle-ground of artifice, the epistemological gap, which leads both to the loss and to the reconstitution of the self.

Ophelia's emblematic of the epistemological gap between picture and meaning, when contextualized in the dialogue of melancholy and the items of *vanitas* and *memento mori* in the graveyard scene and in the play as a whole, indicates the presence of the melancholic perspective. Encountering Ophelia, alongside the objects, dialogue and philosophies of loss, death and decay in the graveyard scene, constitutes an encounter with epistemological uncertainty, an encounter that challenges notions of the spectator's integrated self and engenders melancholy. And yet, in challenging the self by questioning meaning in sign and word, this encounter reveals a way of escaping

melancholy: through the image that inhabits this epistemological gap. In the embodiment of uncertainty, melancholy is both provoked and alleviated. It relates tragic perspective with subjective onlooker through the material body that emblemizes uncertainty, and in this way, Ophelia as an emblem of the epistemological gap stands not only as the centre of *Hamlet's* particular tragedy, but also for the typical modern aesthetic product.

### 9. The Melancholy Modern Aesthetic

The modern aesthetic product is marked by a melancholy perspective of materiality. In the transformation of Ophelia's body from a sign of integrated subjectivity to one of epistemological uncertainty, an inherently metaphysical understanding of matter is lost. This transformation, and its associated loss, signal the shift from medieval to modern thought, as Beatrice Hanssen argues with regards to Benjamin's theory. "Brought on by the flight of the gods, the epoch's metaphysical desolateness left a self-alienated, torpid human subject" (Hanssen 1002). Like Dürer's *Melancholia I*, the modern human is detached from the God of the Middle Ages, and thereby alienated from the matter that God sanctified and spiritualized in the Incarnation. Looking to the material world to define the self, the modern human experiences melancholy in discovering that the material world is simply an extension of the self. Both are simply matter, both are objects of *vanitas*, both are dust and decay, both are objects of contemplation. With the transition to modernity, matter loses its metaphysical meaning (humanity and the materials of ritual no longer signify images or pieces of divinity with accepted certainty) and is defined according to its physical meaning: as material being. The modern human subject is alienated from the material world when alienated from the self, and the purely physical, objective perspective of both the self and the material world produce the modern melancholic gaze.

By transforming material items into objects of contemplation, the melancholy gaze is a modern methodology that finds transcendence in artifice. Melancholy, as Benjamin suggests, "truly opened up onto a new methodology and theory of knowledge" (Hanssen 1002). It is not only a

mood to be experienced, but also a perspective by which to view the modern material landscape. It is not only an ailment of the human subject, but also of the material world by which the subject attempts to define the self. Indeed, in Benjamin's terms, it is an "existentialist *mode*...fundamentally, a technique of disclosure and knowledge that replaced the old rationalistic epistemological model" (1003). It is not only a mode of viewing the things themselves, but also a mode of defining them, and of defining the self in relation to them.

This methodology finds transcendence not in the metaphysical nature of materiality, but in its capacity to overcome melancholy through artifice. Modernity begins where graphics surpasses words, Benjamin writes. The modern aesthetic image serves as an artifice through which death, as an abstract idea, can be contained and overcome (Kristeva 55). Melancholy, which results from the despair of words in representing the loss inherent in modern reality, is cured by externalizing such despair in image (Hanssen 1002). If "language can evoke death and thus alleviate our suffering," it can also "transcend and conquer death on the level of signs" (Lechte 345). Putting suffering into signs relieves the suffering that accompanies loss of faith in language. Having lost the capacity for speech that refers to concrete reality—to the life and death of the body—the melancholic yet finds meaning in allegorical speech, relating to the life and death of the psyche (Kristeva 67). Recall that Kristeva understands the cure for Holbein's melancholy to be the image of *Dead Christ*, the embodiment of loss. In a similar way, the cure for *Hamlet's* melancholic perspective is the improper property of Ophelia's corpse.

Kristeva's notion of "sublimation dynamics" promises to redeem the modern melancholic from the loss accompanied by a realization of the meaninglessness inherent in language by rendering that loss an image. It seems a little victory—overcoming words with graphics—yet it opens onto a new "dignity" and a new dimension of humanity (55). For the melancholic, facing the epistemological gap between words and meaning is, for Kristeva, facing a sort of death that opens onto a new sort of life. This vision, "that of man subject to death, man embracing Death, absorbing it into his very being,

integrating it not as a condition for glory or a consequence of a sinful nature but as the ultimate essence of his desacralized reality...is the foundation of a new dignity" (Kristeva 118-9). Paradoxically, the modern cure for melancholy, and the despair with meaninglessness inherent in language, is found in artifice, in the language of images. "Melancholy persons triumph over [sadness] through an unbelievable effort to master signs," she explains (67). Visual art, by way of its artificiality and abstraction from reality, is able to articulate the lack of transcendence—which is the fault line of knowledge running between word and referent—more precisely than words themselves.

#### 10. The Tragic Objective Mode

This is the tragedy of *Hamlet*: a melancholy perspective of the world that, although externalized and cured in the sign of Ophelia's corpse, nevertheless perpetuates the melancholy perspective by drawing attention to the artificiality of language in the very sign that stands in for the gap between sign and signified. As an object-turned-subject, Ophelia is the symptom of that tragic perspective. However, she also indicates the cure for the tragedy by inhabiting the epistemological gap between picture and meaning.

Ophelia's corpse signifies a plurality of ideas, even signifying the absence of meaning, when comprehended in the context of the scene's dialogue and dramatic action. Through its semantic versatility, her corpse is an improper property that seems to come alive in the action and dialogue of the graveyard scene, blurring the distinction between past and present, subject and object, dead and undead. By doing so, Ophelia's upstart corpse problematizes the semiotics of the objective mode, which depends upon the stable relationship of sign and signified.

The theatrical feat that Shakespeare achieves in relation to Ophelia, similar to that of Holbein in *Dead Christ* (1521), is rendering sign—through image and through allegory—the melancholic loss of faith in linguistic signification. Staring at Ophelia's body, "staring back at us," constitutes an encounter with the unknown that is inherent in language and epistemological systems (Rutter 42). The experience

is uncanny, but it is also cathartic: Ophelia inhabits the gap between language and meaning and so overcomes it with artifice.

Encountering Ophelia, as a symbol of death in the graveyard scene, is to encounter the loss of meaning inherent in language, and to rise above that loss through the polyvalent image. "A knowledge of the limits and liberties associated with language is tied inextricably to death," William Engel writes (88). Understanding Ophelia's theatrical function in the graveyard scene demonstrates in what ways her predominant visuality, her emblemization of death, and her improper behavior are necessary for her character to relate as it does to Hamlet's melancholy and to the play's tragedy as a whole. Ophelia, as the image-product of a melancholic perspective, is an epistemological lens for understanding the construction of tragedy in *Hamlet* as a whole.

As a corpse with the illusion of subjectivity, Ophelia continues to furnish study in theatre semiotics and phenomenology, if only by eluding neat theoretical interpretation. As a corpse that looks back, Ophelia complicates "any theoretical model—like semiotics—that offers to describe the performance in 'objective' terms," Stanton Garner argues (49). On the other hand, her improper behavior in the graveyard scene problematizes a purely phenomenological reading. Emblematic Ophelia represents what Derrida calls "the moment of crisis" for phenomenology, which is the "'moment of signs,' for the *sign* is that which is both inside and outside, a phenomenon to be seized in an act of meaningful perception and that which points beyond itself in the plane of referentiality" (14). By emblemizing all that cannot be known of language and sign systems, as well as by representing an absence of subjective experience, Ophelia both focalizes and problematizes theoretical approaches to *Hamlet's* tragedy and character construction. Encountering Ophelia is an experience of the uncanny that incorporates lived experience with an accuracy only attainable through abstraction.

In this way, Ophelia demonstrates that the methods of constructing *Hamlet's* tragedy, which

were important to early modern theories of materiality and art, continue to relate to contemporary theatre theories. While I address Ophelia's semiotic and phenomenological significance separately from her historical-aesthetic significance, (the latter discussion follows in the forthcoming conclusion) the distinction is deceptive. As an artifact of early modern art history, *Hamlet* informs the study of modern and post-modern theatre as its earliest demonstration of modern aesthetics. Reading Ophelia phenomenologically reveals that, rather than a distinctly post-modern method, phenomenology is applicable, even necessary, to understanding historical artifacts. Indeed, phenomenology "has the potential to offer history its living face and thereby offer experiential grounding to the facts of history" (Garner 9). The aesthetic methods of constructing *Hamlet*'s tragic universe are representative of changing perspectives of materiality and art in early modern England, but these methods become clearer when approached through contemporary theatre theory.

## Conclusion

Shakespeare's construction of tragedy as an objective perspective of the material world implies an engagement with period controversies surrounding the relationship between matter and spirit in the Eucharist. The objective mode is a modern philosophical construct produced, in part, by changes in sacramental theology. Understanding the theological climate behind *Hamlet's* production informs the play's themes on materiality, spirituality, and melancholy, and demonstrates how Shakespeare exploits period controversy to engage an early modern English audience.

The objective mode is predicated on a stable semiotic relationship between sign and signified that establishes material signs as signifiers of immaterial referents. In Chapter One, I demonstrated that the "objective" perspective of the early modern visual arts towards their subject matter, as exemplified and epitomized in the still life and emblem genres, is mirrored in *Hamlet's* perspective towards Denmark's material universe. The meaning of still life items is related to their resemblance to the ideas they signify; they serve as substitutes or stand-ins for these unrepresentable truths. In Chapter Two, I argued that *Hamlet's* characters can be read as emblems in moments of stilled narrative time, and that in such moments they appear as animate-subjects turned inanimate-objects through the objective gaze. This gaze renders fluid the subject-object distinction between humans and material items, and between animate and inanimate bodies. In particular, Ophelia's corpse serves as emblem of *vanitas* and *memento mori*. However, by virtue of her predominant visuality, she also emblemizes the absence of subjectivity. Drawing on these arguments, in Chapter Three I examined how Ophelia's semiotic playfulness in the graveyard scene produces the *illusion* of resurrection and juxtaposes the truth of the fictional situation. In Ophelia, artifice overshadows fictional reality, providing a thrilling encounter with the uncanny that delights even as it surprises. In concluding, I demonstrate how this thrill amplifies when examined in the context of early modern controversies surrounding materiality and spirituality in art, controversies that inform and reflect modern epistemologies.

Entailed by the significatory operations of the objective mode is a divide between the material and the immaterial realms. Still lifes communicate through a process of substitution, whereby material items signify moral concepts according to a somewhat arbitrary, but nevertheless culturally accepted, code. Like hieroglyphs, still life's vocabulary of meaningful objects reveals an understanding of what Walther calls "the potential significance inherent in all things as bearers of coded and decipherable messages" (Walther 216). Implied by this understanding of material items as bearers of coded messages is an ontological separation between the members of the code and their referents. That is, understanding material items as a visual code somewhat arbitrarily constructed with relation to non-visual ideas indicates that these material items are devoid of meaning in themselves. Instead, they only *mean* in relation to immaterial ideas. In other words, implied by the significatory system of the still life is a divide between the material, perceptible world of items and the spiritual, imperceptible world of ideas.

This perceived material-spiritual divide, which was brought to the fore in Renaissance philosophy, is related to the changing philosophical, scientific, and theological climate, not only of England, but also of Western Europe during this time. Although these changes were intertwined, I focus here on how reformed theologies of the Eucharist, themselves informed by Renaissance philosophical climates, reveal and contribute to early modern English understandings of the material universe and of material performances in artistic and religious events. Although these understandings were largely developed after *Hamlet* was written, nevertheless, the play reveals seeds of these understandings in its constructed perspective of Denmark's material universe.

Protestant doctrines of transubstantiation, or lack thereof, reformulated the relationship between Christ's bodily presence and the elements of Holy Communion: the wafer and the wine. Whereas Catholicism maintains that these elements transform *in essence* into Christ's full presence, influential early modern Protestant doctrines hold that the elements serve as either symbols or as vehicles

accompanying Christ's presence, rather than embodiments of it. Linguistically speaking, Protestant reformulations of the doctrine of transubstantiation reinterpret the meaning of the material signs in communion according to empiricist perspectives. However, the implications of reformed doctrines of communion extend far past the intellectual and professional spheres of Renaissance Europe. Rather, they enact fundamental cultural change: understanding the materials of communion as ontologically distinct from the presence of Christ in the Eucharist contributes to the socio-economic, as well as philosophical, turn to modernity.

Catholicism teaches that Christ's full body, and His eternal presence, are fully realized in the wafer, or the blessed Host, of Holy Communion (Novak 106). The doctrine of transubstantiation explicates that the wafer and the wine change in *essence* into the body and blood of Christ, respectively, although their *accidents* remain the same. The distinction between *accident*, or the perceptible qualities of a thing, and *essence*, or its true nature, depends upon Aristotelian definitions, and it was a favorite topic of Protestant discourse (Pendergast 47). Rather than an embodiment of Christ's real presence, the communion elements serve as its symbols, according to Calvin (Wolterstorff 109). Although he does not deny the presence of Christ in communion, Calvin notes that it exists separately from the matter of the Lord's Supper; it is delivered to the soul of the communicant through spiritual vehicles at the same time as the matter of the elements are delivered to the body of the communicant (Wolterstorff 109). Similarly, Luther maintains that Christ's real presence accompanies the elements of communion, but one cannot be certain that the presence inheres *in* the essences of the elements themselves, for they do not perceptibly change. Rather, Luther holds that the sensible imperceptibility of the real presence in the elements of communion indicates that Christ desires Christians to seek Him in the invisible, spiritual realm (Novak 109). Indeed, more radical Protestants insist on the absence of Christ's body altogether in the Eucharist; Zwingli, for example, implies that the elements serve as symbols for the body and blood, and that they are indirectly associated with the real

presence, famously stating, "Jesus ascended into heaven; He's sitting at the right hand of the Father, not on a table here in Zurich" (Euler 58). Insisting on the discreteness of Christ's body despite His spiritual omnipresence, Zwingli implies a fundamental difference between bodily and spiritual presence. Although Zwinglian theology influenced early modern Europe only minimally, and although Shakespeare's Anglican Church adhered to more Catholic conceptions of the Eucharist, nevertheless, the Zwinglian emphasis on Christ's absence in the elements of communion was a culturally-pervasive presence (West 103). Calvin and Luther's more influential divergences from Catholic theologies of the Eucharist, without denying the union of spiritual and material realms, nevertheless introduce an element of separation between them, as signified by the shift from understanding the elements as *embodiments* of Christ's presence to *accompaniments* of it.

In this linguistic shift from embodiment to accompaniment, Protestant reformulations of Eucharistic theology introduce an element of absence into the relationship between the materials of communion and their spiritual referents. A relationship of accompaniment, or symbolism, assumes a fundamental difference between the material nature of the signifier and the immaterial nature of the signified. In other words, understanding the wafer as the material indication of a non-corporeal presence is to understand the material and spiritual aspects of communion as related by similarity rather than contiguity. Whereas doctrines of transubstantiation indicate that Christ's spiritual presence is also physical at the Eucharistic table, Protestant metaphors imply that Christ's presence is only spiritual. In a Lacanian-like chase of meaning in symbols, Protestantism reformulates the terms of Catholic Eucharistic doctrine to indicate that, by engaging in the symbolic act of communion, the worshipper substitutes for the absence of Christ's corporeal presence by ingesting the materially present wafer and wine.

The implications of Protestant reformations of Eucharistic theology extend further than the religious context of early modern life. These reformations constitute an epistemological and semiotic

shift away from medieval understandings of the Eucharist, and, more generally, from a holistic philosophy based upon Catholic doctrines. Medieval Europe, which adhered to the doctrine of transubstantiation, saw in the physical world potential for spiritual embodiment: as Miri Rubin suggests, "In the Middle Ages the language of religion provided a language of social relations, and of a cosmic order; it described and explained the interweaving of natural and supernatural with human action...with the Eucharist at its heart" (1). The Host, or the consecrated wafer, stood as metonym for all material things, especially the material body. On one level, the Host embodies Christ's full and corporeal presence; on another level, it signifies the redemption of the material world of which the body is a part. As an embodiment of "the saving body of Christ," the Host signified that "the lives of men and women, of cities and nations, could be encompassed, redeemed, transformed or forsaken through it" (Rubin 1). Because of, and through, the Eucharistic Host, the medieval European world assumed a union between the spiritual and material realms. As an element of the material world, so too the human body could be physically restored through the total salvific power of the Eucharist.

The philosophical turn to modernity—which was reflected in the Protestant Reformation—was marked by an increased general perception of a divide between an inner, spiritual, invisible realm and an outer, material and sensible realm. At the risk of eliding important nuances between the Renaissance, Baroque, and early modern eras, as well as differences in thought between geographical areas and philosophical currents in Europe, it can be argued that Protestantism more generally tended towards empiricist, rationalist, and scientific approaches to understanding material nature in light of Christian theology.<sup>43</sup> The early modern emblem reflects this pervasive distinction between spirituality

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43 One of many examples is Lutheranism's subordination of divine revelation to reason in affirming miracles and the fulfilment of prophecy (Hillerbrand 1). Another example is the dismissal of holy artifacts by Protestants who insisted that bodies could not occupy two locations at once (West 1). The effect of this distinction between the materials and the spirit of worship is to emphasize the interiority and invisibility of faith. Consequently, the materials of worship were perceived as spiritually neutral,

and materiality. The epithet, considered to be the soul of the emblem, described the meaning of the emblematic image, considered to be its body.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the human person was studied according to the categories of invisible soul and visible body. The latter was rendered a subject of science, the former the subject of religion. The body, contiguous with the material world, could be perceived as an item of *vanitas*, pertaining to the secular realm, like the image of Holbein's *Dead Christ* (1522). Without potential to be physically restored through Eucharistic redemption, the modern Protestant worshipper clings to a faith that pertains to the spirit and soul. According to this division, the human soul is alienated from the body and, by extension, from all the material world, which is resigned to decay and permanent loss. Turning inwardly to nourish the immaterial soul, the human figure is therefore surrounded by meaningless materiality.

The pensive human subject reflecting upon an empty materiality is the image of early modern *melancholia*. The notion that an individual's redemptive aspect lies primarily in his or her inner person engenders a perceived dissonance with oneself and with the material world of which one is corporeally a part. As Hanssen suggests with regards to Benjamin's interpretation of Dürer's *Melancholia I* (1513-14), "Brought on by the flight of the gods, the epoch's metaphysical desolateness left a self-alienated, torpid human subject behind, crouched amidst an array of petrified relics, allegorical fragments, and enigmatic cultural objects" (1002). Hanssen perfectly describes the melancholy figure in a material world divided from metaphysical import. Alienated from the useless items of materiality surrounding the melancholy figure, he or she is also alienated from the body, or self-alienated. The formal cause of the melancholy state is the flight of the gods, or the nascent modern understanding of items as materials in themselves rather than vehicles for spiritual embodiment. Changing materialist philosophies brought

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and materiality in general was ascribed to the secular realm.

44 Bound up in this discussion is the modern turn towards the written text over the visual text, associated with Protestant emphases on *sola Scriptura*.

on by the European turn to modernity, as complex and multidirectional as this turn was, engendered the melancholy subject as one whose interior is alienated from the exterior. The characteristically melancholy penchant for contemplation arises from the need to define, unify, reanimate and comprehend the subjective interior, which is notably *not* that which is allegorical, enigmatic and petrified. Unable to identify with the material world, the melancholy person turns to "that within which passeth show" (*Hamlet* 1.2.84).

Changing conceptions of materiality that are associated with the late medieval turn to early modernity, which I have traced through changes in Eucharistic theology, manifest themselves in the objective mode of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Vanitas* and *memento mori* philosophies evoked by the items of still life indicate a perspectival focus on material decay. This focus increases in light of the play's macabre dialogue and verbal imagery, and the emblematic significance of *Hamlet's* characters reinforces themes of the separation between sensible exterior and invisible interior. Hamlet's melancholy is reflected in his frustration that the materials of the graveyard appear as meaningless objects, despite their previous association with individuals of lasting renown. Indeed, one might argue that the tragic perspective of *Hamlet* is based in this objective perspective of the material world, the perspective that engenders *melancholia*. Nevertheless, Ophelia's predominantly visual character highlights the insufficiency of an objective focus on the human experience. Her corpse as dead matter refuses to be read as an icon of decay. Rather, it behaves in an animate way, signifying the unknown, the uncanny, the mysterious, and the immaterial. Encountering Ophelia in the graveyard is at once thrilling and relieving, for by repeatedly rising out of her grave, she signifies all that cannot be known of *Hamlet's* material world. In the midst of tragedy, dead Ophelia is an instance of Romance.

Appendix: List of Figures



Figure 1. *Bouquet in a Clay Vase*, Jan Brueghel the Elder (1599-1607)  
photo courtesy of "Brueghel, Jan the Elder," The Web Gallery of Art;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 2. *Trompe l'oeil with Studio Wall and Vanitas Still Life*, Cornelis Norbertus Gysbrechts (1668)  
photo courtesy of "Cornelius Norbertus Gysbrechts," Statens Museum for Kunst/National Gallery of Denmark;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 3. *Vanitas Still-Life*, Hendrick Andriessen (1650)  
photo courtesy of "Collections Database Five Colleges and Historic Deerfield Museum Consortium;"  
Amherst College, Hampshire College, Historic Deerfield, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, UMASS Amherst;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 4. *Vanitas Still Life*, Treck Jan Jansz (1648)  
photo courtesy of The National Gallery Picture Library;  
The National Gallery, London; Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 5. *Woman at her Toilette*, School of Fontainebleau (1550-70)  
photo courtesy of "Woman at her Toilette," Worcester Art Museum;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 6. *Woman at her Toilet*, School of Fontainebleau (1585-95)  
photo courtesy of "Collections," Musée des Beaux-Arts Dijon;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 7. *The Five Senses*, Giovanni Battista Manierius (1675-1700)  
photo courtesy of "Colección Santander," The website of Fundación Banco Santander;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 8. *The Sense of Hearing*, Jan Breughel the Elder (1618)  
photo courtesy of "Brueghel, Jan the Elder," Web Gallery of Art;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 9. *Sense of Hearing, Touch and Taste*, Jan Brueghel the Elder (1618)  
photo courtesy of "Brueghel, Jan the Elder," Web Gallery of Art,  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 10. *Tactus*, Jan Pietersz Saenredam (c. 1565-1607)  
photo courtesy of The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.;  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 11. Austrian *Vanitas*, Anonymous (18th century)  
photo courtesy of "Austrian School, 18<sup>th</sup> Century, A Vanitas Still Life;"  
Christie's European Furniture and Works of Art Sale;  
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Figure 12. *Still Life with a Mask*, Hendrick Andriessen (1650-55)  
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The Ashmolean - Museum of Art & Archaeology, University of Oxford;  
Web; 10 April 2015.





Figure 15. *Vanitas Still-Life*, Edward Collier (1662)  
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Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 16. *Triptych of Garden of Earthly Delights*, Hieronymus Bosch (1490-1510)  
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Web; 21 May 2015.



Figure 17. *Still-Life with Mouse and Candle*, Willem van Aelst (1647)  
photo courtesy of "Aelst, Willem van," Web Gallery of Art,  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 18. *Banquet Still-Life with a Mouse*, Abraham van Beyeren, detail (1667)  
photo courtesy of "Beyeren, Abraham van," Web Gallery of Art,  
Web; 10 April 2015.



Figure 19. *Dead Christ* or *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* Hans Holbein the Younger (1521) photo courtesy of "Holbein, Hans the Younger;" Web Gallery of Art, Web; 21 May 2015.

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