

WINTER 2008 WINNER

Emily Rials

INSTRUCTOR'S FOREWORD

EMILY RIALS IS NOT AFRAID of big questions. What is the self, she asks in this essay, and how are characters defined? These are just the sorts of questions IHUM Fellows are trained to dissuade in a six-page paper, tending to fear (as we do) that such papers will set readers afloat upon the ether of abstraction. In the case of Emily's fine essay, however, these complex questions find anchor in a deep understanding of the social contexts and concrete details that flesh out Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Emily's deft analysis helps us discern how, in these texts, resonant questions about identity and freedom become intricately linked to, and are inflected by, the political structures, social codes, and normative gender roles that govern these represented worlds. Despite their differences, Emily discovers that Shakespeare's play and Castiglione's conduct manual pose an interesting dialogue to one another—and to us, as readers.

In staging this dialogue between texts, Emily's essay opens up new insights into *Hamlet* and *The Book of the Courtier*. Moreover, her essay develops its nuanced analysis with a keen sensitivity to language that is as apparent in Emily's readings as it is in her own lucid, eloquent, and judicious prose. Nowhere, perhaps, is Emily's attunement to the language of these texts more evident than in her deployment of the line from *Hamlet* that forms part of her title. "Lord, we know what we are, but not what we may be." Opening with this line spoken by Ophelia, Emily's essay gestures to the grand possibilities of the speaking, unfolding self (in our own world, as in the domain of paper people). And yet this same line, as Emily examines it, comes to betray certain limitations set upon that prospective freedom by the constraints of socially defined authorities, obligations, and sanctioned permissions. "What we *may* be," in Ophelia's case, ultimately proves little enough of what might have been. Inviting us to consider mad Ophelia as a source of potential yet unrealized authority in Shakespeare's play—in contrast to Emilia Pia, in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*—this essay solicits attention to the selves and stories that remain unknown in *Hamlet*, and likewise to possibilities for freedom and self-definition that yet "may be."

—CHRISTINE MCBRIDE

“What We May Be”: Definition of the Self in Castiglione and Shakespeare

Emily Rials

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia observes in her insanity, “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (Shakespeare IV.v.43). In madness, Ophelia touches on a theme central to understanding not only *Hamlet* but also other works we have read this quarter: how are characters defined? Is the self a fixed entity, fundamental, personal, and inalterable, or is one's character a mutable reflection of one's position in society? Ophelia's madness itself also raises the question of how society's definition of self affects gender roles. Comparing Emilia Pia's status in Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* to Ophelia's status in *Hamlet*, we find that cultural understanding of the self has much to bear on how women can function within that culture. For Emilia, a flexible idea of the self and open discussion allow her to flourish; for Ophelia, more rigid political and personal distinctions and the maneuverings of an unstable monarchy predestine her to wither, a violet stifled by the weight of expectation.

In the court of Urbino, in *The Book of the Courtier*, peace reigns. Lack of external threat, “a season deprived” of Italian wars, allows the aristocracy extensive leisure time: tennis and jousting tournaments take the place of military training, and spirited conversation constitutes much of a normal evening's entertainment (9). Castiglione describes the court setting as “the very abode of mirth,” and the courtiers themselves as “all linked in love” (11). In this happy, stable setting, the power structure can afford to be open: a Duke and Duchess whose authorities go unthreatened can trust in and socialize with their courtiers more than can a king, such as Claudius in *Hamlet*, whose kingdom is only marginally his to control. Duke Guido and Duchess Elisabetta have no reason to distrust their courtiers, and so the court dynamics become circular in nature: when the court sits down to its after-dinner discussion, “everyone [sits] down in a circle as he please[s] or as chance

decide[s]; and in sitting they [are] arranged alternately, a man and a woman” (13). Even the Duchess sits among the courtiers in the circle; everyone is allowed to contribute to the discussion. At the same time, because this court system cannot rely on physical, military prowess to separate the most valuable courtiers from the least, a new standard arises. In accordance with this new tradition, courtiers cultivate manners, rather than military knowledge, to gain their superiors’ attention. Such tradition defines the self as variable. If, as Ottaviano claims, “The aim of the perfect Courtier...is to win for himself...the favour and mind of the prince whom he serves,” then the values the courtier upholds and the commitments he will make depend far more on the values and demands of the prince than on the courtier’s initial inclination (244). The game Messer Federico proposes touches on this point as well: the ideal Courtier described by the discussants represents the individual all the aristocratic men aspire to become (19). By debating which merits befit him and which aspects of the self are not becoming, these courtiers offer advice to themselves and to Castiglione’s readers regarding what sort of people they should be. In their circle of discussants, the aristocrats of Urbino portray the self as something to be improved and perfected, something into whose improvement and perfection both men and women can have insight.

The court situation of *Hamlet* could hardly be more different. Rather than directly inheriting a peaceful duchy, Claudius comes to the Danish throne through a hasty marriage to the Queen after the death of his brother the King; Claudius’ claim to his crown, then, is disputable at best. Not only that, but Claudius also has a threat of a Norwegian invasion, led by Fortinbras, with which to contend. We see from the interaction between Barnardo and Francisco as the play begins that everyone is on heightened alert, everyone is suspicious (I.i.1–6); there are no round table discussions of courtly love at Elsinore. Instead of a circular power structure where rulers may debate openly with courtiers, the structure in *Hamlet* is a linear hierarchy, where the power slowly trickles down from king to advisors to everyone else. Everyone has a set status, and the only way to advance is by deposing another. Just as the power structure differs in Denmark, so do the societal traditions stemming from that structure. The courtiers of Elsinore replace the courtly artistry of Urbino with crafty deception: when one can advance only by demoting another, there is no open discussion about how best to promote oneself socially. It becomes clear that the court of Denmark operates under different assumptions regarding the nature of the self, too. When Hamlet asserts, “I have that within that passes show” (I.ii.85), he means he has a fundamental, personal self a self impervious to Polonius’ spying, a self whose grief will not abate if he takes his mother’s advice and “cast[s] [his] nighted

colour off" (I.ii.68). Many Urbino aristocrats focus on how an ideal courtier should look and dress; for example, Messer Federico desires "that our Courtier may be neat and dainty throughout his dress, and have a certain air of modest elegance" (102). Hamlet dismisses such concerns. Hamlet defines his self as something particular to him, unchanged by his attire, and it is that self whose interest Hamlet serves. He does not seek to "improve" himself for the sake of a superior, but rather seeks to honor the self he feels is his. If Castiglione's vision is of a chameleon soul, Hamlet's is that of a monolith.

What does all of this have to do with women? In *The Book of the Courtier* and *Hamlet*, the female characters have a certain degree of power. Both Emilia Pia and Ophelia are able to influence the futures of the men around them: Emilia through interaction with her courtly peers, Ophelia through relationships with her family and the monarchy. The extent to which these young women can exercise their influences, however, depends on their individual status within the larger court. For Emilia Pia, the elasticity of the courtly self allows her to engage in debate with her male counterparts. Women sit among the men in the discussion circle at Urbino (13), and are invited by their presence there to undertake the role of the courtly lady, which is to "teach the Courtier how to make himself loved rather than how to love... to do the world so great a benefit" (226). This role is, admittedly, assigned to Emilia and her female peers by the men around them, as it is Lord Unico who defines the court lady's "task" thus, but the authority of the position is such that Emilia can challenge the societal values she finds flawed. For example, Emilia answers Unico's ideas of courtly love and the court lady's role with her own thoughts and suggestions (226–7). Emilia, as a woman, a court lady, assumes a teacher's role, and from that position she can teach the courtiers to uphold her values. Emilia is an equal participant in the court's discussion, an independent agent who derives power from her position as the Duchess' companion (11) but who, as Castiglione introduces us to her, "was endowed with such lively wit and judgment that, as you know, it seemed... as if everyone gained wisdom and worth from her" (11). Because her society views the self as flexible, Emilia Pia's insights as a woman, as an outside observer, factor just as much into the shaping of the courtier's self as do others: as the self for her is adaptable, so too are the gender roles around her.

If, indeed, a flexible sense of self allows for flexible and empowered women, we might expect that in a culture with a more calcified vision of the self, female characters would have less room to alter and interpret their societal roles. When the self is something ever to be improved, women can safely assume influence without overtly threatening the men: everyone seeks to be better, so everyone benefits from advice. This universal acceptance of

advice and influence is likewise reflected in the idea of power in Urbino: the Courtier's ultimate goal, his motivation in seeking power, is the "noblest philosophy" of "bring[ing] into civilized living... savage people" (282). In Hamlet's Denmark, however, power is something won for individual advancement rather than something focused on bettering the planet. In Elsinore, where the self is not constructed but innate, one must do with one's given self what one can. When achievement of power involves putting one self over another, those whose selves are less assertive or aggressive can easily become instruments rather than influences. This is certainly the case for Ophelia.

From the first to the final act of *Hamlet*, Ophelia transforms from a young woman confident in her love for and from Hamlet into a selfless wraith into a madwoman. Emilia Pia was on an equal footing with the men around her in her discussion circle. She could argue and debate ideas she felt needed further discussion, and we have already seen that Castiglione's peers viewed her as a source of wisdom as well as wit. Ophelia is not autonomous, Emilia is. Rather than finding herself a free agent at the Duchess' court, where young people seem parentless and free to pursue whatever leisure they deem courtly, Ophelia resides in a palace where her father, Polonius, her brother, Laertes, and even her lover, Hamlet, feel compelled and entitled to advise her on every aspect of her behavior. Ophelia's first reaction savors of Emilia Pia's dialogue with Unico: when Laertes warns her to protect her chastity in her relationship with Hamlet, Ophelia charges him not to "show [her] the steep and thorny way to heaven" while he honors a different standard (I.iii.48). She makes Laertes defend himself. However, when Polonius echoes Laertes' concerns, Ophelia becomes less confident, answering him, "I do not know my lord what I should think" (I.iii.104). Polonius' approach is very different from Unico's. While Unico tells Emilia that "to avoid such grievous errors... perhaps it was well to teach [women] first how to make choice of a man who shall deserve to be loved, and then how to love him" (226), Polonius' reaction to his sense of Ophelia's naiveté in her relationship with Hamlet is a condemning dismissal: "Puh! You speak like a green girl, / Unsifted in such perilous circumstance" (I.iii.101–2). Polonius does not assume that Ophelia's "self" can be enlightened. She is what she is, and what she is to him is a "green girl" whose inexperience leaves her open to manipulation, both by Hamlet and by himself. Polonius' concern is clearly not for Ophelia's self, but for his own: "Tender yourself more dearly," he advises her, "Or... you'll tender me a fool" (I.iii.107–9). If Ophelia has, as Hamlet does, "that within that passes show," Polonius and Laertes do not seem to recognize its authority.

Indeed, Ophelia's function within the hierarchy of the Danish court is not as an individual, a teacher like Emilia Pia, but rather as a pawn, a symbol of her family's honor and a bargaining chip. Polonius uses Ophelia as bait to watch Hamlet's behavior and "of their encounter frankly judge" whether or not Hamlet's madness is based on love (III.i.34). Ophelia, previously assured of Hamlet's affections, now obeys without argument (I.iii.99–100). Her self, intrinsic and unchangeable as Hamlet's philosophy would define it, has been overthrown and obscured, its colors cast off and replaced with those provided by the demands and expectations of others. Her lack of self-determination is clear when, in the mousetrap scene, Ophelia answers Hamlet's joking: "I think nothing my lord" (III.ii.104). It is not that Ophelia's self ceases to be defined, but that she ceases to have any say in its definition. Rather than choosing who she will become, Ophelia defines herself by what Polonius expects. Thus, when Polonius dies and Ophelia goes mad, it is not ironic for Laertes to remark, "is't possible a young maid's wits/ Should be as mortal as an old man's life?" (IV.v.159–60). Polonius defined his daughter according to his own identity: the *Dramatis Personae* introduces Ophelia from the beginning as merely "*his daughter*," a stark contrast to the introduction Castiglione gives Emilia Pia. Ophelia literally loses her sense of herself when Polonius is no longer around to direct her.

Emilia Pia's last words are a challenge to the man who has been most critical of women: "if my lord Gaspar wishes to accuse women...he shall also give bond to sustain his charge, for I account him a shifty disputant" (306). Emilia calls on Gaspar to convince her of the legitimacy of his claims. Ophelia, on the other hand, departs from the earth singing songs about her father's death. In her world, the self is not something created through interaction with courtly society. In her world, the self is something inherent to each individual, but something vulnerable to the manipulation of others. Urbino's embrace of a flexible self-determination allows Emilia to both offer and receive advice about what sort of self to be. It is not that men are less critical of women in Urbino, but that the women have enough influence to answer for themselves. While Emilia receives praise for her judgment and wisdom, Ophelia exists only in her relationship to Polonius, a relationship that shatters her self-confidence and draws her into madness when that source of self-definition is gone. In Ophelia's Elsinore, a more rigid idea of self-differentiation and a more linear power structure create an atmosphere in which one is either handling or handled in quest of greater political standing, and Ophelia is a casualty of such manipulation. Her self wilts under the pressure of others' expectations, others' ideas of who she is, and when she has no way to assert her own authority, her destiny is inevitable. In another time,

another place, Ophelia might be an Emilia Pia, empowered by the courtly system at its most liberating, but caught in the tide of Denmark's political turmoil, Ophelia reveals the court system at its most confining. ◆

WORKS CITED

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