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Abstract

Although William Shakespeare's 16th century classical literature is rarely contextualized with the eccentricities of 20th century artist Salvador Dalí, Shakespeare's myriad of works have withstood the test of time and continue to be celebrated and reinterpreted by the likes of performers, scholars, and artists alike. Along with full-text illustrations of well-known plays, such as *Macbeth* (1946) and *As You Like It* (1953), Dalí returned to the Shakespearean motif with his two series of dry-point engravings (*Much Ado About Shakespeare* and *Shakespeare II*) in 1968 and 1971. The series combine to formulate 31 depictions where Dalí interprets Shakespeare's text in a single image with classics like *Romeo & Juliet* as well as some of Shakespeare's more obscure plays, such as *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens*. Gettysburg College owns several of these prints, housed in the library's Special Collections. *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens* were on display in Schmucker Art Gallery as part of the *Method and Meaning* exhibit in the fall of 2014.

Shakespeare's plays are an eclectic repertoire of iconic characters such as Prince Hamlet and Othello as well as timeless themes (both comic and tragic) that easily lend themselves to an extraordinary diverse range of illustrations; from the 18th century historical narratives of Francis Hayman, 19th century whimsical paintings of William Blake, Victorian renditions of John Everett Millais, and then eventually leading to the 20th expressive freedom of Dalí. Salvador Dalí's representations, like his predecessors, aim to capture the essence of each Shakespeare play using specific iconographic elements in order to create a visual narration, bringing together the interpretations of the author, artist, and the viewer.

Keywords

Salvador Dalí, Shakespeare, Surrealism, Hamlet

Disciplines

Contemporary Art | English Language and Literature | European Languages and Societies | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology

Comments

Art History Senior Thesis

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Visualizing Shakespeare:

*Iconography and Interpretation in the
works of Salvador Dalí*

Emily Zbehlik
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Spring 2015

In 1953, the Folio Society printed Shakespeare's *As You Like It* illustrated with costume designs by surrealist superstar, Salvador Dalí. Peter Brook addresses the overt juxtaposition of Shakespeare's classical literature with the eccentricities of Salvador Dalí in an introduction to the edition:

I imagine someone picking up this edition of *As You Like It*: he reads the words 'Folio Society': Folio—the word conjures up ancient manuscripts; echoes of scholarly discussion, the study of the methods of the Elizabethan theatre, of Shakespeare played in Shakespeare's way: he opens the book, there are designs by Salvador Dalí, the most notorious surrealist: one who is famous for his intimate knowledge of the anatomy of spiders but not for his interest in the structure of the sixteenth-century playhouse. What can he and Shakespeare have in common?¹

Much more than meets the eye, it seems. Although Shakespeare's sixteenth century canon of English literature is rarely contextualized with the twentieth century whimsical world of Salvador Dalí, both figures have established themselves not only as leaders of innovation and creativity in their fields, but also as technical masters in their respective crafts. Shakespeare in his poetry, with the rhythm of iambic pentameter, and Dalí with his *trompe l'oeil* realism in oil paint; both Shakespeare and Dalí display works that are quite prolific and relay distinctive messages of unparalleled individuality.

Although the surname 'Dalí' is most closely associated with his contributions to the surrealist movement and psychoanalytic innovation, paintings of melting clocks, elephants with spindly legs, and volcanoes of juxtaposed subject matter (combining hundreds of years of art history into a chaotic episode of *Tuna Fishing* [FIGURE 1]), Dalí was very cognizant to art history and artistic tradition while at the same time considerate of his own creative freedoms; this is evident in many of his lesser known (and

¹ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London, UK: Folio Society, 1953), 6-7.

understudied) illustrations.² Shakespeare, in particular, was a topic that Dalí came back to throughout his career.

In 1946, Dalí completed a full-text illustration of *Macbeth* and in 1953, a costume and stage design for a production of *As You Like It*. In 31 dry-point engravings from his 1968 (*Much Ado About Shakespeare*) and 1971 (*Shakespeare II*) series, Dalí illustrates scenes and motifs from Shakespeare's plays, each summarized in a single image. In 1973, Dalí completed 10 colorful scenes from *Hamlet*. Although the manner of Dalí's illustration evolved over time, he continued in the creation of an optic language that can be analyzed using close reading as well as traditional iconographic imagery. Both techniques serve as a mediator between the viewer and the works of Dalí in order to establish Dalí's interpretation of the plays while directly referencing Shakespeare's original text. Arguably, there are no 'typical' illustrations of Shakespeare, as each image has a unique interplay of artist intent versus the viewer's own comprehension and resonance with the nature of the production, however there are several 'traditional' visual portrayals of Shakespeare that aim to capture the essence of a scene, or in the words of Brooks, "Shakespeare played in Shakespeare's way."³ The works of Dalí surely challenge this traditional approach yet also adopt several aspects of previously established artistic practices.

Dalí uses a blend of Shakespeare's traditional iconography with his own interpretations, while also incorporating a variety of other influences as well. He

² Salvador Dalí is known for his innovations in the arts and had a profound interest in capturing the mysteries of the subconscious, as evident in his work during the surrealist movement. He also worked closely with psychoanalytic philosophy, such as his development of the paranoiac-critical method, described by Robert Descharnes in *The World of Salvador Dalí* (1968) as "spontaneous method of irrational knowledge founded on the critical interpretive association of the delirious phenomena

³ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Introduction

embodies several aspects of surrealism including empty landscapes and contorted forms, while paying very close attention to Shakespeare's language to formulate a visual narrative of the scene that breaks away from the stage and into the mind of Dalí.⁴

Dalí's 'New' Tradition

In order to illustrate Dalí's adherence to artistic tradition, let's first consider his *Quinze Gravures* (Fifteen Etchings) from 1968. In this series, Dalí etched portraits of notable figures in the art world such as Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Picasso. This series displays a sense of respect to their artistic servitude that would certainly expand to the literary genre as well as Dalí's particular affinity for the literary arts. *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* and the *50 Secrets of Master Craftsmanship* are two books on Dalí's resume, which also includes multiple poems and essays, some serving as complimentary pieces to some of his better-known oil paintings, such as the "Metamorphosis of Narcissus." (1937).⁵ [FIGURE 2]

Dalí included his self-portrait [FIGURE 3] within *Quinze Gravures*. The inclusion of the self-portrait not only links Dalí to other legendary figures in the art world, but is also remarkably similar to his portrait of William Shakespeare from the same year (1968), the first image in his first *Much Ado About Shakespeare* series [FIGURE 4]. The Dalí self-portrait features his signature mustache, printed subtly as a dark upward crescent and a ruff, a neckpiece that was in fashion during the sixteenth century.⁶ His half-turned face protrudes from a crosshatched shadow as he gazes at the viewer. The

4 Weiss Davidson, *Homage to Salvador Dalí*, 135.

5 Joan Marie Weiss Davidson, trans., *Homage to Salvador Dalí* (New York, NY: Leon Amiel Publisher, 1980), 160.

6 "Ruff." In Merriam Webster.

Ruff: : a large round collar of pleated muslin or linen worn by men and women of the late 16th and early 17th centuries

Much Ado About Shakespeare includes 15 dry-point engravings, a printmaking technique in which a metal plate, usually copper, is scratched with a needle and printed to create the image.⁷ In this first Shakespeare series, along with the subsequent series in 1971, Dalí captures each play in a single image. The dry-point engravings are geared towards a consumer audience; the technique allows for the printing of multiple editions that were both affordable and accessible to consumers. The familiarity of the name ‘Dalí’ attached to the familiarity of the name ‘Shakespeare’ also served as a powerful marketing tool to the graphic works that used the popularity of the names together to appeal to buyers in the market. Shakespeare’s portrait is the first print in the 1968 suite, and also features a similar upturned moustache and goatee, as well as a fluffy ruff around his neck to Dalí’s self-portrait. This striking similarity does not only tie Dalí to the literary giant but also makes apparent his veneration of tradition and application of Shakespeare’s language as a catalyst for his creation of imagery through his numerous illustrative works.

Perhaps Dalí felt an allegiance with the great poet and playwright William Shakespeare or perhaps he was trying to become the Shakespeare of the art world. Dalí opens his autobiography with an anecdote “ At the age of six I wanted to be a cook. At seven I wanted to be Napoleon. And my ambition has grown steadily ever since.”⁸ The works of Shakespeare allow Dalí to play with a range of material that is of interest to his avant-garde personality and also to themes that were a popular playground for his roots in surrealism. Shakespeare’s plays deal with dreams, sexuality, lines between fantasy and

7 Ralf Michler and Lutz W. Löpsinger, eds., *Salvador Dalí: Catalog Raisonné of Etchings and Mixed-Media Prints* (Munich, Germany: Prestel-Verlag, 1994), 14

8 Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (New York, NY: The Dial Press, 1942), 3.

reality, and ponderings on the human condition, all aspects that also interested surrealist artists and thinkers.⁹

Visage and Racial Ambiguity in *Othello*

The poetry and prose of Shakespeare are widely regarded for their diverse range of material, including his myriad of intriguing and dynamic characters. *Othello*, for example, has been met with increasing attention and discussion of race. Although the racial element of *Othello* to some is considered an “accident of the plot,” the portrayal of *Othello* on stage has been heavily debated and contested.¹⁰

“If [Othello] did not begin as a play about race, then its history has made it one.”
- Ben Okri¹¹

To Shakespeare’s audience, the race of *Othello* may have been overlooked but subsequent stage productions of the play have led to further investigations of the issues of race in *Othello*, particularly in the 1950’s and 60’s in America where a black man married to a white woman left some audiences outraged.¹² To downplay social tensions, *Othello* has been imagined as more oriental to some audiences, including the Victorian theater, while as a lighter skinned North African by others.¹³ The “blackness” of *Othello* and the “whiteness” of *Desdemona* are highlighted in English artist and poet William Blake’s rendition of *Othello and Desdemona* [FIGURE 5]. Blake’s oil painting marks a contrast of dark/light, with the figure of *Othello* camouflaged in the dark background with his dark skin and dark wardrobe, while *Desdemona*, portrayed in monochromatic cream is heavily contrasted. Blake’s painting uses a heavy opposition of dark and light to

9 Amy Dempsey, “Surrealism,” in *Styles, Schools, and Movements* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 153.

10 Michel Neill, “Reading Blackness,” introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16

11 “Leaping out of Shakespeare’s Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*” in *A Way of Being Free* (1997), 113

12 *Ibid.*, 113

13 Neill, “Playing Black” introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 45.

exemplify the tensions between Othello and Desdemona, but could also be indicative of other insecurities in their relationship, such as Othello's older age versus Desdemona's youth.¹⁴ Blake's rendition could also portray Othello with features of a white man with dark skin in order to lessen Othello's African heritage.

Othello is a Moor and is defined by his difference from other characters in the play. He is greatly characterized by his dark skin, commonly shown as contrasting with other figures, as seen clearly in Blake's rendition. Dalí's 1968 version [FIGURE 6] shows a crowned figure with an arm reaching out to the sky in an orator's pose, seen as a composition of power beginning in classical antiquity. In the other arm, the figure grips a long cane, perhaps a regal staff. Dalí's energy resonates through the image with a brisk gestural figure etched into the engraving plate, shown particularly in the shadowy skin of the figure. A faceless statue is the focal point of Dalí's *Othello*, the heavy crosshatching to produce the dark skin of the figure is very much indicative of Othello's physiognomy but also indicative of the ambiguity in his stage presence. Therefore even with this sketchy, gestural rendition of a figure, with careful attention to the characterization of Othello, one is then able to establish a deeper meaning behind the print that is at face value, presented as an enigmatic, shadowy king.

The vagueness of Dalí's figure could also make a statement of the issues of race in *Othello*. By portraying Othello alone as a faceless figure, Dalí introduces a more metaphorical interpretation that is not only analyzed as a portrait of Othello. The crown of the shadowy figure is curved like that of horns, the figure could be a metaphorical demon that might allude to the perils of jealousy, which ultimately leads to the demise of

¹⁴ Neill, "Desdemona" introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare*, 101.

Othello's wife, Desdemona, thus exposing an overarching theme in the personification of the character.

Perhaps the essence of Othello's character is to be considered as equally as his physical appearance. "In Othello, the appeal for colour blindness is much more emphatic. Desdemona presents Othello's face as an obstacle that is to be transcended in order to obtain a clear view of the true inner being. Her claim, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (1.3.251), urges the bystanders to disregard the external appearance, which according to her judgment belies a fair soul."¹⁵ Desdemona sees through Othello's overt 'otherness' and communicates the 'seeing' of the mind, more of a conceptual element that cannot be captured with a physical representation. Dalí's surrealist background aims to capture something more authentic about the self that is otherwise impossible to portray, shown by his interest the Freudian principles of psychoanalysis and practices such as automatic writing.¹⁶ Dalí's figure is void of facial expression but his stature and orator's pose shows power and gives a sense of authority without fully revealing every detail of scene.

Dalí's enigmatic figure deviates from the typical representations of Othello, and also breaks from the depictions of staged scene. In the early 1700s, British artist Francis Hayman, known for his illustrative work and depictions of British history, completed a series of scenes from the works of Shakespeare.¹⁷ In *Othello* (Act 4, scene 6) [FIGURE

15 Sibylle Baumbach, *Shakespeare and the Art of Physiognomy* (n.p.: Tirril, Penrith, 2008), 49.

16 Dempsey, "Surrealism," in *Styles, Schools, and Movements*, 151.

17 1. "Biography of Francis Hayman," *Oxford Art Online*,

http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T037065?q=francis+hayman&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T037065?q=francis+hayman&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

7], Hayman delivers a scene that is very indicative of his time period with 18th century dress and décor; he very much caters to the fashions and aesthetic desires of his time. Although Dalí's depiction of *Othello* is far less representational of a particular act or scene than Hayman's, both aim to capture the essence of the play in their own manner, using their own resources. Until Shakespeare's plays became better known and more commonly represented in illustration, artists were only able to draw upon performances of the plays, simply as no other visual tradition existed.¹⁸

“The story of Shakesperean art over two centuries and more, like that of Shakespearean stage production, is the story of a reaching towards greater and greater imaginative freedom. That process inevitably reflects the story of art as a whole during those years, but Shakesperean art, especially in the printed editions, was very largely a public art: it was commercial, it sought to appeal to a wide audience, to give them what they wanted to see, what accorded with the taste of the time. So inevitably we find this succession of pictures a neoclassical Shakespeare, a rococo Shakespeare, a romantic Shakespeare, a bourgeois Victorian Shakespeare, a fin-de-siècle Shakespeare, a modernist Shakespeare and so on. We have to ask whether, during this process, the artist is coming closer to some essential inner truth of the play or whether the increasing freedom of his own imagination, and the public's changing taste, are both taken him further away from them?”

Contemporary artists have the freedom of interpretations beyond staged performance, they are able to not only look at theatrical depictions of the play but are able to take reference to other artists' interpretations.

Shakespeare's Obscurity and Dalí's Ancient Reference in *Troilus and Cressida*:

Dalí uses icons that have not only developed in the world of Shakespeare, but are also visual cues that can be understood within a particular historical context as a tool for the viewer to establish a sense of setting before establishing meaning. *Troilus and Cressida* has long been considered one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" with a convoluted plot that thematically deviates from a love story between the title characters, Trojan prince Troilus and his lover Cressida, the daughter of a priest who defaulted to the

¹⁸ Jane Martineau, *Shakespeare in Art* (London/ New York: Merrell, 2003), 49.

Grecian side.¹⁹ The story shifts from forbidden love to a dialogue about the morality of war and the morale of soldiers during the Trojan War. The play, however, infamously leaves the viewer with loose ends and frankly not very well liked or popularly performed.²⁰ Without any other quantifiable evidence as to why Dalí chose to create a rendition of *Troilus and Cressida* in both his *Much Ado About Shakespeare* and *Shakespeare II* suites, one can surmise that the ambiguity of play interested Dalí, a man very attuned to the mysteriousness of humankind, known for his involvement in a movement that sought to capture such mysteries.²¹

Troilus and Cressida is very much underrepresented in theater and in art thus leaving room for Dalí's interpretations to shed light on different aspects of the play. Dalí presents one figure in each scene; the 1968 engraving [FIGURE 8] depicts the profile of a Trojan soldier waving a leaf, seemingly a palm. A smokestack with a small door sits atop the horizon line and a suggestion of a figure in red stands in the background of the soldier, its shadow protruding into the foreground. In the 1971 series [FIGURE 9], a Greek soldier is the focal point, dressed in armor with an exaggerated helmet and shield. The figure appears to be moving across the picture plane of the landscape cut with lines that converge back into a vanishing point, giving the illusion of receding space. Both figures are composed with very crisp, clean line work that situates each figure within an empty landscape, reminiscent of Dalí's empty dream-like landscapes included in well-known works such as in *The Persistence of Memory*, and also extremely prominent

19 Michael Delahoyde, Dr., "Troilus and Cressida," review of a book, Washington State University, <http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd/shakespeare/t&c1.html>.

20 Peter Whitfield, *Illustrating Shakespeare* (n.p.: The British Library, n.d, pg. 13

21 Dawn Ades and Matthew Gale, "Surrealism," Oxford Art Online, accessed December 6, 2014,"http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article_citations/grove/art/T082410?q=surrealism+&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1.

backgrounds in many of Dalí's other paintings. In this case, the empty landscape may represent an expansion of the story, or extended scenes. The landscapes also connect the figures to the same setting, although devoid of a sense of place. Neither have any suggestion of the romance of the title characters; instead, Dalí's interpretations pay special attention to the distinction of a soldier's armor in war, which is essentially a matter of life and death. This is exemplified in Hector's penultimate lines from act 5, scene 9 which are as follows:

“Most putrèfied core, so fair without,
Thy goodly armour thus hath cost thy life.
Now is my day's work done, I'll take my breath.
Rest sword, thou hast thy fill of blood and death.”²²

Dalí utilizes Shakespeare's original text that exemplifies the aesthetic importance of armor but also digs a bit further. For example, at face value, the denotation of the octopus shield in the 1971 edition might seem like a decorative piece of armor. The connotation of the image, however, can be understood within a particular social or cultural context. When considering the identification of the octopus, the object reveals something more about the soldier, and a specifically Greek identity. The octopus can be traced back to an image on a Greek vessel excavated in Knossos [FIGURE 10]. This Minoan symbol is immediately recognizable as a specifically Greek, especially when considering the original text and trying to make observable differentiations between the images of the soldiers. The other Trojan soldier that is holding a palm leaf, could be identified as Achilles, one of Troy's best warriors who, although talented, had a tendency for idleness despite his skill. The palm leaf, although associated with martyrdom could

²² The Oxford Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, Hector is a Trojan soldier from *Troilus and Cressida* who utters these lines in the final battle, just before killing a Greek soldier (which he only identified by the differences in his armor)

also be associated rest and leisure, as the soldier is shown fanning himself rather than in the act of battle.

Uncovering Language in *Timon of Athens*

Dalí is not only interested in capturing literal depictions of plays, but also ventures into a more overtly metaphorical territory. This can explain some of his more obscure renditions. Dalí pushes away from the stage, and the real, to create an image that is in a realm of complete fantasy, while at the same time also closely adhering to Shakespeare's original text. Dalí's literary background shows a great interest in the overlap of disciplines and the production of a visual language. One may argue that because the main goal of illustration in the most general of terms to be visually complimentary to original rhetoric, let's consider language as a reference that on face value may not be so directly related. The production of such visual language in comparison with the written word is the subject of O.B. Zaslavskii's article analyzing *Language as an underlying idea in Salvador Dalí's work*. His conclusion is as follows, "A Dalí painting proves to be synthetic in the sense that semiotic languages of mutually complementary kinds are essentially active in it – the language of images (continuous type) and a verbal one (discrete type). Such a combination within the same artistic text demonstrates with special prominence that semiotic heterogeneity inhere in such systems as culture, works of art and intellect."²³ In layman's terms, Zaslavskii acknowledges that the visual language can be traced back to the original text, which is essential for understanding, citing an example not with illustration but with one of Dalí's more widely

23 . O.B. Zaslavskii, "Language as an Underlying Idea in Salvador Dalí's work," *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/ Visual Enquiry*, 10.1080/02666286.2005.10462100 ser., 21, no. 9 (2005):

recognizable paintings, *Dream caused by the Flight of a Bee Around a Pomegranate a Second Before Awakening* [FIGURE 11]. Zasliviskii argues that the elephant in the background, with long spindly legs is a direct, visual interpretation of the Russian proverb ‘Make an elephant from a fly,’ which serves as a warning about exaggerating matters that are in actuality very unimportant.²⁴ Seemingly an obscure relation between a Russian proverb and a disproportioned elephant is not so farfetched when looking towards the foreground of the painting where Dalí’s Russian wife, Gala, lies naked in a dreamlike state. An initial analysis may lead the viewer astray without previous knowledge of the proverb, therefore the language in combination with other visual, symbolic elements in the composition require each other to establish meaning. With the analysis of original text, only then can the visual language be fully understood.

Dalí’s method can also be applied in an analysis of the depiction of *Timon of Athens* [FIGURE 12] from his Shakespeare II series from 1971. The entire image refers to one specific line hidden within the dialogue, while at the same time serves as an expansion of the rhetoric into a metaphor to explain an overarching motif in the play. The image is composed with a one-point perspective and a whirlwind swirling with energetic spirals down the frame into the foreground opening to a red skull, foreshadowing the title character’s eventual demise. The red in the skull can also be associated with the color of blood. In act 4 of the play, shortly after the protagonist Timon, a once overly generous Athenian, became suddenly impoverished and escaped to the wilderness beset with the animosity of his former friends who turned their backs on him after he lost his wealth. In

²⁴ Michael R. Taylor, ed., *The Dalí Renaissance: New Perspectives on His Life and Art after 1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

a moment of intense frustration, he dug his hands in the dirt and miraculously found gold. Shortly thereafter, he ran into a comrade from Athens and their dialogue is as follows:

APEMANTUS: What wouldst thou have to Athens?

TIMON: Thee thither in a whirlwind. If thou wilt, tell them I have gold; look, so I have.²⁵

This visual representation is only identifiable with close reading of the play and a very clear familiarity not only with the thematic elements that define the essence of *Timon* but also with direct language visually expressed to represent the play with one sole, sparse image as a dark warning tale of the repercussions of greed. The depiction of *Timon of Athens* shows that Dalí had a working knowledge of Shakespeare's original text and his compositions were very deliberate and far from a quick, mindless sketch of the play. While the whirlwind does make reference to a specific line from the text, it also serves as a metaphor for the spiraling greed in Athens, a central theme of the play as well as a visual representation of the bitterness of Timon at the loss of his friends. The motif of the destruction of greed is a driving force of the play and therefore the image of the whirlwind becomes a way to expose a direct line of dialogue to exemplify an overarching theme. Timon is fiercely hurt by the betrayal of the citizens of Athens and the people that he had once called friends; just as the whirlwind leaves a path of destruction, the greed of the city spirals into battle of morality and betrayal.

“To Dalí or not to Dalí?” *Hamlet* and the Skull

Salvador Dalí's interest did not only lie in exposing themes and motifs from Shakespeare's more obscure literature, but he also ventures into a play with a stronger visual tradition in his depictions of *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* is a quintessential tragedy that

²⁵ Shakespeare. *Timon of Athens*

struggles with the “tensions between reality and representation.”²⁶ Dalí exploits one of the most famous scenes (Act 5, scene 1) in his 1968 engraving.

Illustrations of the graveyard scene feature Yorick’s skull and also capture a somber mood and mimic the dark contemplative quality of Hamlet’s existential rationalization, as seen in Eugène Delacroix 1840 lithograph of *Hamlet and the Grave-Diggers* [FIGURE 13]. Delacroix’s lithograph is monochrome black and white with gestural brushy gray clouds that capture dreary environment and that foreshadow danger.²⁷ The bold cross-hatchings of form come together to create a very morbid, eerie air.²⁸ The expressions of the figures look pained and anguished, especially Hamlet who is featured with a scowl and concerned eyes while gazing intently upon the skull being handed to him by the gravedigger. There is sadness in Hamlet’s eyes as he gazes at the skull of a man who had once made him laugh and is now an object deceased. Delacroix’s composition features the skull of Yorick unmistakably in the center of the image, not suggested as aside, marking the direct interaction and subsequent dialogue that chronicles Hamlet’s gripes with mortality.

Dalí uses the image of the skull prominently in his version from 1968 [FIGURE 14], though composed in the same narrative sense. In Dalí’s image, a shadowy figure creeps into the foreground with arms outstretched to a floating skull. Orthogonal lines emit from the skull and off beyond the picture plane and a spider swoops in through the top of the print, remarkably similar to the smirking spiders of Odilon Redon, a French painter and printmaker who was also an inspiration for Dalí and other surrealists in the

26 Man Ray *Human Equations* (n.p.: The Phillips Collection, 2015), 91

27 Hamlet is killed by Ophelia’s brother, Laertes in the final scene who is, in laymans terms, wicked mad at Hamlet.

28 *Illustrated Shakespeare*

1920's and 30's, an innovator in imaginative imagery and "aesthetic of imaginary... able to depict what only exists in the mind."²⁹ Redon's spiders [FIGURE 15] and other monster-like figures straddle the lines between the real and the imagined, another theme prevalent in *Hamlet* due to the interactions of Hamlet and the ghost of his father. At first glance, Dalí's scene may appear whimsical and dream-like, but due to the iconographic tradition of the skull, it can be directly related to the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet* that captures a similar dark and morbid feel to the Delacroix rendition, while at the same time, exercising Dalí's artistic freedoms. The image captures the essence of the scene with the recognizable icon of the skull, though only suggesting other elements a sense of place. In this way, Dalí's image encompasses the thematic elements of the scene with the gravediggers without the constraints of a setting; therefore the interaction of Hamlet with the skull becomes seemingly distant yet the suggestions of Hamlet's existential ponderings remain comprehensible and interpretive. The skull in *Hamlet* leads to a broader iconographic tradition.

The story of the skull in *Hamlet* is as follows. After the murder of his father by his uncle (who then married his mother) and immediately following the suicide of his lover Ophelia, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, enters a graveyard with his comrade Horatio and stumbles upon men singing while digging a grave. Hamlet inquires about the identity of the deceased and learns that the skeleton belonged to Yorick, a court jester whom Hamlet had known. Hamlet holds the skull of Yorick and ponders the fragility of life while coming to a realization about the equality of the dead. The skull is an iconic

29 Jodi Hauptman, *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), pg. 16

element of the dark scene, thus becoming a symbol of Hamlet as a play and through the iconography, a symbol of the eminence of death, or a *memento mori*³⁰.

HAMLET: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now, to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come; make her laugh at that. Prithee, Horatio, tell me one thing.³¹

The skull as an icon has seen transformations and developments prior to production and even writing of *Hamlet*. In medieval art, the skull mostly appeared within a Christian context, commonly seen in images of Mary Magdelene or St. Jerome.³² Albrecht Dürer provides an early example in a 1514 copperplate engraving *St. Jerome in His Study* [FIGURE 16].³³ In the image, a scholarly St. Jerome sits at his desk and the skull sits atop a windowsill, not only a reminder of eminent death but also the Christian ideals of salvation.³⁴ The associations with scholarly St. Jerome, who translated the bible into Latin, relate the skull back to the connotation of thoughtful contemplation. Roland Frye defends Hamlet's dialogue as a similarly careful contemplation rather than descent into utter madness, arguing "... if we are careful and attentive to the careful and

30 William Harnett's grim oil painting *Memento Mori* from 1879 features a skull and a book with lines from the dialogue of *Hamlet* [FIGURE 20]

31 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Oxford, UK: The Oxford Press, 1998), 329

32 Roland Mushat Frye, "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls: Hamlet and the Iconographic Tradition," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Winter 1979): 18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2869658.pdf?acceptTC=true>.

33 Dalí was quite familiar with the works of Dürer, in 1970 he was commissioned to make a series of prints that marked the 500th anniversary of Dürer's birth (*Hommage à Dürer*). (Michler and Löpsinger, Salvador Dalí: *Catalog Raisonné*, 22

34 "St. Jerome in His Study," The British Museum,

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/a/albrecht_d%C3%BCrер,_st_jerome.aspx.

systematic allusions that Shakespeare has built into Hamlet's reflections in the graveyard, we... are prepared to accept the sanity, composure, and tranquility Hamlet displays in the final scene of the tragedy."³⁵ Caravaggio painted St. Jerome in the Baroque period, featuring the skull at a desk where Jerome sits and ponders [FIGURE 17]. Visual depictions also associated the skull in a more secular context yet with a similarly thoughtful connotation, with portraits of gentlemen, such as Holbein's *The Ambassadors* [FIGURE 18], which in the foreground, features an anamorphic skull in a noble context, the skull in *The Ambassadors* can only be seen in the painting from certain angles. The skull is also a prevalent icon in the vanitas symbolist tradition seen in example by Dutch painter Pieter Claesz [FIGURE 19]. The term *vanitas* is defined as a "type of painting concerned with the fragility of man and his world of desires and pleasures in the face of the inevitability and finality of death."³⁶ Painters in the vanitas still-life tradition include skulls and other human remains as a *memento mori* starting in the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century. Claesz proximately features the skull in his oil painting from 1656 along with an extinguished candle with the lingering of smoke, a reminder of the light that once flickered and the skull, a physical reminder of the body that once held life.

The Colorful Dissonance of Ophelia

Perhaps it would be unfair to discuss Prince Hamlet without discussing his Ophelia. Although Ophelia's suicide is performed on stage, it has become "one of the most familiar images of all... its combination of poetic beauty and tragic death irresistible. Once it had been attempted, its attractions as an image became enormous to

35 Frye, "Ladies, Gentlemen, and Skulls," 16.

36 Hans J. Van Miegroet, "Vanitas," Oxford Art Online,

http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T087870?q=vanitas&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

later artists and produced scores of images. In this iconographic tradition art fed upon art, imagination upon imagination, so that the artist felt keenly the challenge of adding something new by making a powerful composition out of a scene never chosen before, or by treating a familiar scene in a novel and original way.”³⁷ The only basis for visual representations of Ophelia’s death are derived from Hamlet’s mother, Queen Gertrude’s eloquent description of the episode:

GERTRUDE:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook
That shows his hoar leaves in the grassy stream.
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of cross-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious silver broke’
When down the weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like awhile they broke her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death.³⁸

The vivid details of the scene have allowed artists to have a description of an action that exits the stage and enters a realm of vivid imagery. On stage, Ophelia is characterized by her youthful innocence yet her story is swallowed with tragedy; she is driven mad by a conflict of allegiance to Hamlet or her own brother, Laertes. Magda Romanska argues that “Gertrude’s description alone emphasizes the accidental nature of Ophelia’s death, adding to her image of existential vacuum, and creating a void filled in by the aesthetic imagination.”³⁹ Perhaps the most famous expression of ‘aesthetic

37 Peter Whitfield, *Illustrating Shakespeare* (n.p.: The British Library, n.d.), pg. 12.

38 Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: Hamlet*, 319.

39 Magda Romanska, "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia," *Womens Studies* 34, no. 6 (September 2005), pg. 496

imagination' of Gertrude's description is in the Victorian rendition of John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) [FIGURE 21]. Romanska argues that the Millais, along with other artists, beautified the tragic death of Ophelia, which serves conceptually as 'two bodies', one who is a performer on stage and one as an abstract figure of sexuality. Romanska states that "her corpse became both a source of visual production and an identificatory beauty model of desirable femininity."⁴⁰ Millais' iconic *Ophelia* floats in a brook, clutching delicately flowers, surrounded by bushes of greenery; the pale figure appears floating in a flowing dress in a scene that is both tragic and eerie.

Millais's image plays directly on the poetry of Gertrude's vernacular. "*There with fantastic garlands*" refers to the flowers in her hand and the crown of colorful petals that floats at her feet. "*Mermaid-like*" could describe Ophelia's position, her long dress covering her legs like they could potentially be attached, "*Her clothes spread wide*" as the an elaborate Victorian dress spreads wide, floating atop the brook. Edgar Allen Poe claimed the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetic topic in the world."⁴¹ Along with using a popular model of the time, glamorizing the image⁴² the peaceful, glorified representation of her suicide is seen within the pre-Raphaelite romanticism, to the chagrin of feminist scholars, such as Elisabeth Bronfen (author of *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and Aesthetic*) and Romanska. Both scholars critique the image, and subsequent representations as an overly sexualized image of a woman's suicide, catering to the male gaze, and challenging "association of femininity

40 Ibid, 486.

41 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over her dead body: Death, femininity, and aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59.

42 The story goes that the model, Elizabeth Siddell, posed in a bathtub for Millais, with candles underneath the tub to heat it up. Apparently, the candles went out unbeknownst to Millais who was preoccupied with painting and Siddell remained in a freezing tub until saved by others who came in and rescued the model. Misogyny or lost in the artistic process? Who knows. (Bronfen *Over Her Dead Body*; 169)

with death-- innocent, passive, fading woman as signifier for the desired Otherness of the sublime.”⁴³

Nevertheless, Millais’ *Ophelia* is a renowned rendition of the character, serving as the inspiration for subsequent artists, including Dalí. In 1936, Salvador Dalí commented on the pre-Raphaelite painters: “How could Salvador Dalí fail to be dazzled by the flagrant surrealism of English pre-Raphaelitism? The pre-Raphaelite painters bring us radiant women who are, at the same time, the most desirable and most frightening that exist.”⁴⁴ Dalí’s *Ophelia* [FIGURE 22] shows a woman lying horizontal on the picture plane with arms across her chest with aquatint splashes of yellows, browns, and blues across the image, reminiscent of Millais’ colorful scene. A profile outline of another figure is seen from betwixt the flowery grasses, suggestive to Millais’ motif of growth and decay.⁴⁵ The curvature of Dalí’s thin black lines of the figure fits seamlessly with the currents of the water, merging the body and the scene in a harmony of form and nature. The face of the reclining figure is blank while the profile in the foreground is a more formative portrait, suggesting transcendence in between bodies, from life to afterlife. The profile appears to sink into a puddle of color with eyes closed and wavy suggestions of long hair gliding into the ripples of water.

Dalí’s *Ophelia* also shows influence from the *Ophelia*’s of Odilon Redon, Redon has multiple depictions of *Ophelia*: a pastel [FIGURE 23] from 1900 shows a profile view of Hamlet’s “tragic heroine” with a wild array of flowers almost spurting out of her

43 Bronfen, *Over her dead body*, 223.

44 Benjamin Sceher, "Ten things you never knew about Ophelia," *The Telegraph*(UK), August 2014, Art,

45 Man Ray Human Equations (n.p.: The Phillips Collection, 2015), 91

chest.⁴⁶ She is enclosed in a smudgy crescent of blue in which the flowers are confined within the boundaries of the watery arch. Perhaps the arch shape is meant to mimic the shape of a gravestone, as the water is in a way, her resting place. In this way, Ophelia's body is directly connected with the forms of nature and the surrounding water. Redon "uses water to liquefy Ophelia's body as well as the garlands that bedeck her, causing them all to bleed (in vibrant color) into the river which is her grave that does not truly belong in the graveyard where Hamlet holds the skull of Yorick but in the brook where her body comingles with a penetration of nature. The dematerialization of body into liquid seen in Redon's Ophelia's and the dissolution of organism into foam in his works beneath the sea stand for a broader metamorphosis in his colored pictures: from representation to abstraction."⁴⁷ Redon, like Dalí, also presents the two bodies of Ophelia in *Ophelia among the Flowers* in 1905 [FIGURE 24]. In this version, Ophelia's profile is ghostly, and the colorful flowers take over the picture plane. The flowers seem to stem from the multi-colored background that the profile of Ophelia blends into, thus suggesting the relationship between growth and decay.

Hamlet certainly makes for a plethora of imaginative illustration due to the nature of the play that has been dubbed "full of riddles and paradoxical enigmatic statements, *Hamlet* is an even greater paradox than any of those it contains... time after time, the action pauses while the hero gives vent to his feelings, works out a plan, or speculates on the human condition in general,"⁴⁸ thus leading to much imaginative imagery.

46 Ibid., 41

47 Ibid., 41

48 The Oxford Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, page 28

Dalí is not the only artist to take a more allegorical approach to illustrating Shakespeare in a departure away from tradition. 20th century American painter and photographer Man Ray (mostly known for his contributions to the Dada and Surrealist movements⁴⁹) completed the *Shakespeare Equation* of 23 paintings based off of photographs of three-dimensional mathematical models, each of which he named after a Shakespeare play, thus not only exploring the relationship between visual art and literature but jumping across disciplines by “exploring the intersection of art and science.”⁵⁰ Man Ray’s geometric shapes use Shakespeare simply as a selling point for recognition, a ploy for some sort of comprehension, and even though the compositions are not directly related to the play itself they still lend themselves for interpretation.⁵¹ The paintings, made after the photos, made after the mathematical models, are somewhat of a reverse illustration. Using the paintings as the inspiration for the play rather than the play as an inspiration for the paintings challenges the very nature of illustration. Man Ray’s inclusion of the Shakespeare title in his pieces forces an interaction with the viewer as they try to interpret the combination of signs within the painted models into a new visual code so that they can make their own visual clues to identify why the particular image was assigned to the particular play and what elements of that image are reminiscent to their preconceived iconography of how the play is “supposed” to be imagined. In this

49 Merry A. Foresta, "Man Ray," Oxford Art Online, last modified February 11, 2013, accessed April 12, 2015, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T053862?q=man+ray&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

50 "Man Ray - Human Equations: A Journey from Mathematics to Shakespeare," The Phillips Collection, last modified 2015, <http://www.phillipscollection.org/events/2015-02-07-exhibition-man-ray-human-equations>.

51 Richard Studing, *Shakespeare in American Painting: A Catalogue from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present* (n.p.: Associated University Press, 1993), 24.

way, Man Ray leaves each painting completely open for viewers to establish their own interpretation, deciphering duality of reality and fantasy in the play.⁵²

Man Ray's version of *Hamlet* [FIGURE 25], a heavily shaded, cone figure floats amidst a two-toned gray background. The form appears include an abstracted skull of Yorick or the augmented breast of Ophelia, who "endured Hamlet's attacks [and is both the] idea of femininity and the victim of abuse," an explanation of her tragic suicide.⁵³ Man Ray was not the only artist to challenge the traditional iconography of Ophelia, as we see in Stanley Hayter's rendition of *Ophelia* from 1936 [FIGURE 26]. Hayter's goal was to capture the "action" of drowning⁵⁴ and although abstracted, he visualized the objects floating in water, like Millais's *Ophelia*, using 'automatic writing.'⁵⁵

Hayter's *Ophelia* is an explosion of color and shape with wide solid figures morphing through the background and in the foreground, more varied line work and shapes, as well as an inclusion of blacks and reds. The interaction of foreground and background creates a tension of opposite colors making the figures in foreground stand out of a receding space. The colors could pose a representation comingling of Ophelia's body with the flora and fauna around her, yet retaining their own forms. The energy in the line work is more suggestive of a darker, more visceral interpretation of Ophelia's death, compared with the seamless melding of background, suggestive of the harmony of nature.

52 Hamlet is an introduction to the supernatural in Hamlet, as the ghost of Hamlet's father appears to Hamlet and tells him that his uncle killed him and he must seek revenge. (Studing, Shakespeare in American Painting, 24.)

53 Man Ray Human Equations, 91.

54 Studing, *Shakespeare in American Painting*, 25.

55 "Ophelia - Stanley Hayter." Tate Modern. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hayter-ophelia-t03408>.

hayter-ophelia-t03408. Automatic writing is a surrealist technique where Hayter would have "looked at the object he was trying to portray but not his hand."

Conclusion

‘Shakespeare’ is synonymous with a plethora of interpretation that crosses the barriers of time and place, having been translated in over 80 languages and performed globally since the 16th century.⁵⁶ Michael Olsson explores the lasting significance of Shakespeare in his article “Making Sense of Shakespeare: a Cultural Icon for Contemporary Audiences.” His findings circle around the debate of the ‘authenticity discourse’ and the ‘creativity discourse’ illuminating the delicate balance of honoring the traditions and legacies of Shakespeare with the push for “new and fresh” interpretations, in theater and in art.⁵⁷ Olsson argues that the problem with these creative and more avant-garde interpretations is that it results in an unrecognizable new form of play that distorts the harmony of tradition and creation and frankly leaves the viewer unsatisfied. In art, the ‘traditional’ iconography serves as a basis for the visual representation of the play; this is not to say that an artist must choose a ‘traditional’ approach in favor of a more contemporary endeavor, as we see in the graphic works of Salvador Dalí who combines such icons with a method that at the same time challenges the viewer to craft their own interpretation.

Do artist like Man Ray and Stanley Hayter strive too far away from the traditional iconographic representations of Shakespeare? Is the Shakespearean air lost in creative innovation? Although unsuccessful in an iconographic perspective, both artists offer a unique point of view and display their own thoughts and feelings about the play in their respective image. The origins of these representations are not based on nature but based

⁵⁶ Michael R. Olsson, "Making Sense of Shakespeare: A Cultural Icon for Contemporary Audiences," *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 5, no. 3 (2013): 14

⁵⁷ Ibid, 26

off based off another form of imagination; does the play get lost or enhanced in these images? The “original” is stabilized by recognizable icons that allude to signs of the origin, the play, which then is interpreted and contextualized by the artist and then, the viewer. Dalí is quite successful in using discreet imagery that can not only be related to the direct likeness of a scene or character but rather only simply using a series of signs and icons that lead the viewer to an identifiable image and relate that image back to either a theatrical performance or the original text of William Shakespeare.

Narratives originate with language; thus the nature of illustration is the visual representation of its respective rhetoric. The resulting image is essentially a convergence of comprehensible signs and icons in a pictorial assemblage in order for the viewer to decipher the meaning of the original text.⁵⁸ The term ‘iconography’ is made up of the words *eikon* (image) and *graphie* (word) or defined as “the way in which an artist “writes” the image, as well as what the image itself “writes”-- that is, the story it tells.”⁵⁹ The illustrations of Shakespeare’s plays have progressed in the art world as representative of their time period, from the historical screen shots of production to the interpretations of Dalí takes a unique approach to Shakespeare.

The works of William Shakespeare are quite a popular theme for artists due to their adaptability for interpretation with a diverse range of plot, characters, and themes that cross the boundaries of time and place. Contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare never cease to be innovative or abstract.⁶⁰ Peter Brooks claims, “In this age of chaos, no chaos

58Potts, Alex. *Critical Essays in Art History*. “Signs. 20.

59 Adams, Laurie. *The Methodologies of Art: Iconography*

60 In popular culture, Romeo and Juliet has been translated into a love story between gang children in Venice beach (Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet) and the city of Detroit has become a stage for a progressive theater company (Shakespeare in Detroit), bring arts to the streets of an poor, industrial city.

is greater than the theory of Shakespeare production, if one can use the word ‘theory’ to cover the jumbles of styles and manners that are inflicted on the play. What connecting thoughts are there on the interpretations of Shakespeare?”⁶¹ Visual artists use iconography as a tool to help make sense of the artists’ interpretation to the viewer and in the case of Shakespeare’s works, to help identify significant elements in the original play. Salvador Dalí incorporates a balance of recognizable iconographic elements with allegorical representations of Shakespeare’s original text in his renditions, thus leaving the viewer with a flavor of Shakespeare’s language, and a taste of Dalí’s perception, and an image that ultimately leaves the door open for the viewer’s own interpretation.

61 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (London, UK: Folio Society, 1959), Introduction

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