



*Ruta graveolens* L.

Wm. a. d. Nat.

In act 4, scene 5 of *Hamlet*, Ophelia gives away a number of flowers with medicinal properties, keeping only rue for herself:

OPHELIA: There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

LAERTES: A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted.

OPHELIA: There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me; we may call it "herb of grace" o' Sundays. You may wear your rue with a difference.

(170-177)

Rue is a plant with yellow flowers that "emit a powerful, disagreeable odor and have an exceedingly bitter, acrid and nauseous taste" ("rue" *Botanical.com*). According to John Gerard's *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597), rue has a wide range of medical uses, one of which is as an abortifacient. Provoking an abortion was its "most recognized use in classical antiquity and the Middle Ages," as John M. Riddle argues in *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (48).

I read Ophelia's rue as a purposeful allusion to abortion, one that informs the age-old critical questions *Hamlet* begs of audiences: What makes a life *count*? How is one life valued over another? When one commits murder, does the gravity of the sin exist along a continuum? The play conjures a wide variety of ways in which life is extinguished: murder, suicide, and war—through vengeful, accidental, reasoned, and passionate action. Discussing abortion and abortifacients, most certainly practiced and used in this period, adds to the complexity of these questions, whether or not Shakespeare intended "rue" to allude both to a plant that has abortive properties as well as an "affective state of sorrow, distress; penitence, repentance; [and] regret" ("rue, n.1" *OED Online*).

While Riddle notes that knowledge of the abortive properties of rue and similar herbs "disappeared from herbals and medical textbooks at the beginning of the Renaissance" (42), research suggests that this knowledge never "disappeared." In compiling early modern gynecological manuals, physicians consulted "receipt books" written by midwives that offered guidance on provoking, purging, and obstructing menstruation. Feminist materialist scholars often propose that these recipes offer veiled information about herbal abortifacients, describing the process through euphemisms such as "bringing down the flowers" (McLaren 102, 111). In medical texts published by male physicians, midwives are warned of the serious moral implications of using herbal menstrual stimulators to end an unwanted pregnancy—warnings that don't seem necessary if, in fact, abortifacients were not a viable option for terminating a pregnancy. The garden Eucharius Rösslin references in the very title of *Der Rosengarten* or *The Rose Garden* (1513), one of the best-selling gynecological manuals of Shakespeare's time, is a reference to the "Physicke" garden in which midwives grew, nurtured, and gathered herbal remedies such as rue. Rösslin chooses to frame this medical text with a poem—a ballad entitled "Admonition to Pregnant Women and Midwives." The poem knits the pregnant female body with the rose garden, ending with the promised "admonition": "Such roses which your hands do take / Will come in time before God's face" (qtd. in Arons 36). These admonitions, these shrill warnings, support Riddle's argument that women taking their fertility into their own hands, through the use of herbs and plants, was common practice despite male physicians' attempts to obscure and police this knowledge.

These histories are absent from annotations of Ophelia's rue in various scholarly editions of *Hamlet*. A "symbol of repentance," the editors of the *Norton* (2011) and *Arden* (2014) editions agree, although the *Arden* edition notes that "rue or herb of grace signifies repentance and may therefore be appropriate to the Queen or to the King (though not so obviously to Ophelia)."

So why does Ophelia keep some rue for herself? Editors who erase rue's abortive properties from these annotations act as "historical gatekeepers," to use José Esteban Muñoz's phrase from *Cruising Utopia*, obscuring possible answers to this question:

When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present, who will labor to invalidate the historical fact of queer lives—present, past, and future. Queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understandings of the term. The key to queering evidence, and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor. (65)

As Muñoz suggests in this passage, annotations are one way to privilege and maintain "traditional understandings" of *Hamlet*, readings that idealize and romanticize Ophelia. Jeffrey Masten makes a similar argument in *Queer Philologies*, "all is not glossed": "there might be some benefit in more and different explanatory whispering at the margins and in the notes" of Shakespeare's plays (428). When it comes to representations of fertility and female sexuality in plays like *Hamlet*, the erasure of rue's abortive properties, as well as the erasure of abortive practices in all periods, is a queer erasure in that it allows for the myth of a "regular," "normal" pregnancy to exist—one that is intentional, occurs within a heterosexual marriage, and is carried to term.

I am not the first to suggest that Ophelia's reference to rue suggests an intimate knowledge with fertility control and, consequently, deviant sexual practice. There are a few notes and articles on the topic.[i] These readings of *Hamlet* are vehemently contested, however, and qualified even by the authors of articles that trace rue's properties as an abortifacient. Etienne van de Walls argues that, in the early modern period, plant substances were taken primarily to stimulate the natural process of menstruation: "use of abortifacients was a rare deviation from the norm" (184). In *Medical Authority and Englishwomen's Herbal Texts, 1550-1650*, Rebecca Laroche acknowledges Ophelia's rue only to say that, in her book, the "herbal will not be viewed simply as a reference text to buttress our twenty-first-century understanding that Ophelia, in her gesture to Gertrude, points to their sexualized bodies in rue's abortifacient qualities" (2). In the most extensive article on the implications Ophelia's rue has on readings of *Hamlet*, Lucille Newman takes pains to point out that she is by no means arguing that Ophelia *used* these herbs to provoke abortion or induce menses, simply that they were "widely known" (227). Robert Painter and Brian Parker end their short note, "Ophelia's Flowers Again," with similar sentiments, "How far can such a level of reference be pushed?" they ask, arguing that these "medical implications are all latent, at a level beneath more current emblematic associations" (43).

The existing scholarly conversation about Ophelia's rue tells us more about "current" attitudes towards abortion and abortifacients, and how "emblematic associations" that conjure them are received, than it does about what and how Ophelia's rue *means*. Even the rhetoric used in the few articles discussing rue's anti-fertility properties erases the common, lived experience of ending a pregnancy. Based on the fact that I could not find rue's medicinal properties as an abortifacient glossed once in scholarly editions of *Hamlet*, it's clear to me that what is usually accepted as the more viable reading of a reference such as "rue" is the more normative reading. The assumption that most audience members would not be familiar with the use of abortifacients such as rue, both in the early modern period and today, works to reproduce methodologies that silence scholars interested in queer lives.

Skepticism about representations of abortion in Shakespeare play's has been shaped by heteronormative readings, by readings policed by individuals that do not, as Riddle argues, "know what a difference rue would have made" to Shakespeare's audience members (49). I would add, individuals who do not know the difference herbal abortifacients make to women today. A recent medical study by Aref Hoshyari et al. (2014) confirms that rue is, in fact, an effective abortifacient, that its extract "decreased the embryo growth and fertilizing ability in female mice" (133). While Riddle argues that rue's anti-fertility properties are its least recognized use for audiences today, countless women continue to use herbal remedies as a means to control their fertility and abort unwanted pregnancies. Even medical professionals who disagree with Riddle on the efficacy of these herbal medicinals admit that there are a lot of plants and herbs that are well known and used by women who do not have access to medicalized abortions, conceding that these plants may help cause abortions, but are less effective and more dangerous (Kolata n.pag.). Painter and Parker note that remedies such as rue "have been proved efficacious by recent research in endocrinology, and they are still used in countries such as China, India, and Latin America where medicine remains mainly herbal, besides cropping up from time to time in the modern West, usually when things go wrong" (42). "When things go wrong" it is usually in private; abortion is still a practice shrouded in shame, and consequently silence, which is why references to abortifacients in plays such a *Hamlet* are so easily dismissed.

Taking the abortive properties of Ophelia's rue seriously, "as trace, the remains" of the lived experience of women in the early modern period is a step towards breaking the silence and shame that surround abortion today. To return to act 4, scene 5 of *Hamlet*, Ophelia distributes these flowers in an attempt to heal those around her. Laertes reads Ophelia's flowers as "a document in madness," much like the physicians in the period who argued against fertility control. Laertes is the first "historical gatekeeper" that labors to invalidate Ophelia's speech. To give Ophelia, and her rue, consideration, to heed her call to "remember," is the first step to resisting these historical gatekeepers that continue to invalidate certain stories, certain lived experiences. Indeed, while the Latin roots for "rue" hold negative connotations, the Greek *ρευο*, another origin for the name, means to set free (Brewer 1082).

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"rue, n.2." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/168530>. Accessed 25 November 2017.

[i] In "Ophelia's Herbal," Lucile Newman argues that Ophelia's evocation of rue might "be better read as a shocking enumeration of well-known abortifacients and emmenagogues" (227). In "Ophelia's Flowers Again," Robert Painter and Brian Parker outline the sexual symbolism in all of the flowers Ophelia conjures, and do not dispute the fact that "several of Ophelia's key flowers were also well known to the Elizabethans as contraceptives, abortifacients, and emmenagogues...with rue most effective of all" (42). In a note to the editor in *The New York Times*, Colin Hugh Buckley suggests that rue's abortive properties might suggest that Ophelia's "deranged state and subsequent suicide are prompted by more than just heartbreak" (n.pag.).