

‘EVERYTHING TO EVERYBODY’ FESTIVAL THEME: OPHELIA’S FLOWERS, BRINGING SHAKESPEARE TO LIFE IN BIRMINGHAM

**Professor Ewan Fernie, Project Director, introduces the
‘Everything to Everybody’ festival theme**



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John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*

George Dawson said that Shakespeare was ‘the water of life’. He and the founders of the Birmingham Shakespeare Memorial Library wanted to bring Shakespeare back to life in Birmingham and the ‘Everything to Everybody’ Project shares in that ambition, aiming to bring Shakespeare to life in Birmingham now.

In what he called ‘A Week-Day Sermon from Shakespeare’, Dawson preached on the theme of ‘Ophelia’s Flowers’ in the city, taking as his text, as though it were a verse from scripture, ‘There’s a daisy: – I would give some violets; but they withered all when my father died’ (*Hamlet*, Act IV, Scene 5). One of the exciting things about Dawson’s approach is that he treats Ophelia as though she were a real person. He treats *Hamlet*, perhaps the greatest play in Western literature, as though it were completely analogous to my life or yours, observing that Ophelia’s dad, Polonius, wasn’t ‘anything exceptionally great, beautiful, wise, or good’. ‘And yet,’ he insists, ‘to this bright and beautiful girl, he was a part of the world’s light and fragrance, and when he died, all the loveliest flowers withered.’

Dawson trembles with Ophelia’s grief, and he calls upon his listeners to do the same. He wants them to feel for Shakespeare’s heroine because he believes that this could wake them up morally, opening a channel of sympathy to the many real women in nineteenth-century Birmingham who were vulnerable to being suddenly devastated by grief and thrown into a life of financial insecurity and hardship in a context where women were literally the property of their husbands and fathers. Dawson insists to his listeners that there are Ophelias all over contemporary Birmingham. And he explains:

All our Ophelias do not go insane when their fathers die, but none the less do the violets wither for some of them. And, truly, they stand greatly in need of charity’s tenderest sympathy, who, having been cared for all their lives by a good father who planned and strove that they might want for nothing, but live in the sunshine and be beautiful and happy, suddenly find that life means toil, and

strife, and forethought, and the 'hope deferred' that 'makes the heart sick,'—who have to pay the world's price for daily bread, so difficult always for girls to win. Summer friends, who had known them when the world was a garden of roses to them, and every day a holiday, will know them no longer. Eyes are red with work and weeping; the sweet fragrance of youth is going, and the gay colours are all gone. Alas! alas! thousands of beautiful young Ophelias, not insane, are saying today—'Here is rue, in plenty; and one poor daisy left; I would give you violets, as I used to do, but they withered all when my father died.'

He concludes as follows:

This is not a fate to be lightly spoken of. It is so natural to wish to be bright, and winning, and free from care; it is so hard to forego the sunshine that we may earn wages, and to see the face lose its beauty that the hands may win bread; it is so pleasant to be sought, and loved, and admired; it is so hard to mix only with masters, bargain-makers, and self-seekers; it is so pleasant to have the hands filled with violets; it is so hard to put down the flowers and take up work. Farewell, old home, old pleasures, and old friends; there are no violets now: 'they withered when my father died.'

Dawson sees Ophelias everywhere; he sees Ophelia's flowers as a suitable theme for a sermon, because he recognises that Shakespeare's plays actively address contemporary life. He imagines Shakespeare's sad words in the mouths of real working women. He urges us to respond sympathetically to the crushing bereavement suffered by Shakespeare's tragic heroine and then to open our hearts to 'thousands' of real, once privileged women whose lives might be suddenly devastated by death and the threat of poverty.

The 'Everything to Everybody' Project takes its cue from Dawson's attempt to bring Shakespeare to life in the contemporary city. Dawson perhaps did most for the working

men of his time but, like Shakespeare, he sympathised with everyone. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Ophelia is suppressed and drowned. Dawson believed there was still a chance to rescue Ophelia, or at least the 'thousands' of Ophelias that were alive in his day from their Shakespearean original's tragic fate. More positively, Dawson tried to give such women, and everyone in Birmingham, a richer, fuller and better life. In honour of Ophelia, Shakespeare and Dawson, the 'Everything to Everybody' Festival will cover the Shakespeare Memorial Room at the top of the Library of Birmingham with flowers. It will celebrate the 'thousands' of Ophelias – of all ages and races – alive in Birmingham today. And it will turn a funeral into a carnival in a suitably festive climax to the four-year 'Everything to Everybody' Project.



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For more information about the 'Everything to Everybody' Project please see the project website

<https://everythingtoeverybody.bham.ac.uk/> or email shakespeare@birmingham.gov.uk