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Edited by Emanuel Stelzer

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Emanuel Stelzer*

Introduction

1. "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (*Hamlet*, 1.3.103)[1]

This monographic section aims at investigating some of the receptions of Ophelia from its Elizabethan/Jacobean original context to the end of the nineteenth century, encompassing different fields, including theatre history and the history of literature in England, France, Italy, and Spain; girlhood studies; material culture studies; classical receptions studies; the history of emotions; opera, and iconography. The decision to stop at the end of the nineteenth century has the following motivation (apart from the vastness of the field): psychoanalysis changed how Ophelia has been considered and portrayed on stage since Freudians strongly re-sexualised her (Showalter 1985, 89). Neil Taylor has noticed that, even today, in the responses he collected from a number of contemporary actresses who have played Ophelia "the indirect influence of Freudian thinking was often discernible" (2012, 48), investigating her backstory such as her relationship with her absent mother – although Mary Cowden Clarke with her prose adaptation titled "Ophelia; the Rose of Elsinore" (1851 volume of *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*) anticipated this interpretative angle (see Laura Tosi's contribution in this issue and Del Sapio 2002).[2] But why have Ophelia's afterlives been so rich?

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[1] All quotations from *Hamlet* refer to Shakespeare 2006.

[2] This special issue originates from a conference held on 10-11 December 2024 for *Accessing Ophelia*, an interdisciplinary subproject (PI: Emanuel Stelzer), within a nationally funded project at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Verona, *Inclusive Humanities: Perspectives for the Development of Inclusive Humanities in the Research and Teaching of Foreign Languages and Literatures, 2023-2027*; see https://inclusivehumanities.eu/en/accessing-ophelia/ (Accessed 20 June 2025). *Accessing Ophelia* aims at investigating the representation of cognitive disability

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Ophelia speaks very little. In the First Folio version, her lines count is 173, a number which seems ludicrous if compared to Hamlet's 1506.[3] She is constantly silenced and commented upon by the other characters. Chillingly, when she does speak before her descent into madness, she seems to have internalised the language of patriarchal control. In several productions, Ophelia has been marginalised even more: she has been made to embody little more than vulnerable prettiness. One can argue that her immense popularity stems not despite, but precisely because of what could be termed the 'flimsification' of her character. As Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams remind us:

> Culture, indeed, continues to project its own enterprises upon the malleable figure of Ophelia – but her malleability and absence was always Shakespeare's deliberate invention. If artists and critics have frequently claimed that they wish to 'give' Ophelia a voice, it is because Shakespeare elected to mute hers in the first place. (2012, 2)

Think of her offstage death, narrated by Gertrude, or her mental disorder being described by Laertes with these words: "Thought and afflictions, passion, hell itself / She turns to favour and to prettiness" (4.5.182-3). Laertes' statement "shows how the reading of madness . . . can aestheticize the condition, mitigating both its social critique and its alien aspect" (Neely 1991, 325).[4] Ophelia's "malleability" and relative "absence" do not necessarily imply that her character should be reduced to a mere symbol of femininity, pathetic passivity or "female suicide" *tout court* (Bachelard 1942, 112),[5] although such interpretations have ever so frequently been offered. Tracing

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in drama texts from the sixteenth century to today, with a focus on the reception of a few Shakespearean female characters: first and foremost, Ophelia. The project entails also the creation of a digital database of texts which feature relevant interpretations of the cognitive disability of the selected Shakespearean *dramatis personae.*

[3] These data are retrieved from Crystal and Crystal 2025.

[4] Certainly, one should take into account the madness-as-spectacle culture within which *Hamlet* was composed, an aspect which feels alien and offensive to contemporary sensibilities: in the early modern period, instead, "the stage depiction of mad figures . . . shifts, sometimes disturbingly, sometimes entertainingly, from ridicule to compassion, from 'laughing at' to 'laughing with' the madman or woman" (Escolme 2014, 178). But the fact that one is meant to sympathise with Ophelia in the context of the tragedy is clear – her death is portrayed as a source of "woe" (4.7.161) for Elsinore and she is repeatedly called "Poor Ophelia" (4.5.84; 4.7.183). One proof is the parody of her madness in *Eastward Ho*! (1605) by Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston: parody can operate only when the original subject is intended to be taken seriously.

[5] All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine. Bachelard's argument is that "Water is the element of the young and fair death, of the flowery death . . . Water is the profound, organic symbol of the woman who can only cry over her sorrows" (1942, 112-13).

the history of her receptions in various fields (including drama, literature, the visual arts, and music) invites reflection on how frequently she has been used to prescribe ideals of young womanhood – often emphasising her passivity while overlooking her resistance (see below). It also prompts deeper consideration of how her madness has been interpreted and symbolised, both within *Hamlet* and in broader cultural contexts. Yet, Ophelia "pre-scribes and reabsorbs nearly every replica of her melancholic body" and mind (Del Sapio 2002, 131), and her personal grief and songs of denunciation of both a corrupted state and patriarchal authority can pierce through attempts at simplification or universalisation.

Ophelia's enduring popularity has largely hinged on two key moments in *Hamlet*: her mental disorder and her offstage drowning. Laertes and Polonius' warnings in 1.3, her account of Hamlet's distress in 2.1, the psychological abuse she endures in the nunnery scene, and her comments during the staging of *The Mousetrap*[6] have had comparably less impact in popular culture. We should bear in mind, however, that all these were most probably Shakespeare's own innovations to the Hamlet story. The Ophelia character in the play's main source, François de Belleforest's novella rendition of Saxo Grammaticus's chronicle, does neither run mad nor die.[7] In Saxo/Belleforest, the Ophelia character is a beautiful, unnamed woman whose role is minimal. She is sent to test whether the prince is actually insane, since it was believed that a madman would be unable to engage in sexual intercourse, but that 'naturally' it would have been impossible for an able-bodied man not to seize the opportunity. Saxo puts it like this: "Natura siquidem tam praeceps in Venerem esse ingenium, ut arte dissimulari non possit; vehementiorem quoque hunc motum fore quam ut astu interpellari queat, ideoque, si is inertiam fingeret, futurum, ut, occasione suscepta, voluptatis illico viribus obtemperaret" (1931, 78). In Peter Fisher's translation: "Men's characters are so naturally inclined toward love that no subtlety may keep its existence secret. His cunning could not obstruct so violent an emotion and so, even if he simulated indifference, once the opportunity presented itself he would succumb to the powers of pleasure there and then" (Saxo 1979, 84).[8] In both Saxo and Belleforest, the woman has loved Hamlet from her infancy and alerts the youth of the danger – and that is the end of her narrative function. When one considers that Shakespeare introduced both Ophelia's madness and her death[9] (besides the other moments mentioned above), it becomes clear how significantly he expanded the role, even as he wove it into a framework of gaps and forced silences.

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[6] Often omitted in nineteenth-century productions, the scene can be described as featuring "a dialogue that reveals both Ophelia's knowledge of sexual puns and her ability to assert herself through verbal repartee" – whereas Ophelia's responses in the nunnery scene were routinely kept, "suggesting that Ophelia's behavior [here] was more socially acceptable" (Rhodes 2008, 59).

[7] It is possible that these elements were first introduced in the mysterious *Ur-Hamlet* – a play about which we know very little – prior to Shakespeare's version (see Muir 1977, 163). However, any claims about that earlier tragedy must remain purely conjectural.

[8] William W. Lawrence states that Belleforest omits "Saxo's flat statement that

Despite many attempts to trivialise[10] and downplay it in favour of Hamlet's 'artful' madness, Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia's mental disorder is profoundly compelling. "[W]hile Ophelia's mental condition appears to be physically encoded in bodily signs, the language she employs in her songs seems to reveal a contradictory diagnosis" (Oggiano 2012, 190). Her trauma has somehow emancipated her; "the imagery" of the ballads she sings can "be interpreted as a ritualized passage of her losses[, actual] or imagined ones which are linked together according to a logical frame of reference" (191). Shakespeare has her perform her madness: a performance which, at the same time, arguably "transforms the widely admired and imitated contemporary Italian model of the *innamorata forsennata*" (Nicholson 2008, 96) and channels contemporary views on erotomania (Camden 1964), and yet is "harrowingly character defining" (Henze 2017, 174). Such uniqueness has frequently been banalised, but, already in the seventeenth century, it elicited critical responses on themes such as virtue and innocence, and Ophelia's behaviour was alternatively called indecent (Collier 1698, 10) or defended as natural (D'Urfey 1698, 9).

Virtually every culture which has received Ophelia has made much of her

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indulgence in sexual intercourse would indicate sanity" (1947, 412). It would be more correct to state that he obscures it, since he does not refer to madness but more generally to the fact that "tout jeune homme" (all youths) would find it "impossible de couvrir telle affection, n'y d'en dissimuler les apprehensions par art" (Belleforest 1581, 199-200; impossible to conceal such affection, and dissimulate its hold with artful pretence). However, an early modern audience would have recognised the trope of the insane, and hence, impotent man – see, for instance, how it is used to comic effect in act 4 of Richard Brome's *The Antipodes*, where melancholy-induced madness is considered coterminous with sexual impotence: "So is a madman made a fool before / Art can take hold of him to wind him up / Into his proper centre" (Parr 1995, 306).

[9] There were antecedents: "Ophelia's death is a more complex exploration of the feminine suicide-for-revenge presented in the earlier *Spanish Tragedy*, in which the suicide of Isabella follows directly upon her mad 'vengeance' against the arbor in which Horatio was hanged, and which, along with that of Belimperia during the play-within-a-play, results from 'grief and frustration' over Hieronimo's failure to take his revenge quickly enough" (Gates 2008, 230). On Ophelia and suicide, see MacDonald 1986.

[10] In the anonymous German adaptation *Der bestrafte Brudermord* (Fratricide Punished, seventeenth century?), Ophelia's madness is almost farcical: she believes it is her wedding day and whacks the foppish courtier Phantasmo thinking that he is Hamlet (3.11).

as one of the prototypes of (female) mental illness, bridging the spectrum between prettified, violated innocence and socially disturbing mania. On the other hand, Anglophone-centric studies often forget that Ophelia's figure drastically changed for a long period of time on the Continent: in the second half of the eighteenth century, she became a figure of strength and defiance. Ophelia stayed sane and even survived at the end of the play (as did Hamlet himself) in Jean-François Ducis's Neoclassical adaptation (1769), which for decades exerted considerable influence.[11] Here, Ophélie is Claudius's daughter and is endowed with sophisticated eloquence. She determinedly manages to obtain the queen's blessing for her union with Hamlet and begs him for her father's life. Following Corneille's formula, she and Hamlet forsake their love for one another out of loyalty to their filial obligations. This was the version of *Hamlet* staged in Italian translation in Florence in 1793; this is how the Spanish stage first came to know the play (see Keith Gregor's article in this issue), and various iterations of Ducis's adaptation "were used on the [Dutch] stage at least until 1868" (Delabastita 1993, 226).[12] Ophelia became even more assertive and bolder in Russia, where, in the first adaptations, Aleksandr Sumarokov's 1748 *Gamlet* (prior to Ducis!) and Stepan Viskovatov's 1810 version, she "is a vocal agent, capable of public argumentation and private introspection" (Chernysheva 2017, 191), and "becomes the ideal epicenter for questions on authority and tyranny" (193). This strong, independent Ophelia was, however, destined to withdraw when Shakespeare's prestige, via Romantic Bardolatry, caused *Hamlet* to revert to its original form in the whole of Europe, and Ophelia's figure regained her 'original' character, achieving wider and wider circulation.

Quite influentially, Anna Brownell Jameson drew a paradoxical portrayal of Ophelia. For her, Ophelia is "[l]ike a strain of sad, sweet music, which comes floating by us on the wings of night and silence, and which we rather feel than hear" (1848, 110), while also considering that "[b]eyond every character that Shakspeare has drawn (Hamlet alone excepted), that of Ophelia makes us forget the poet in his own creation. Whenever we bring her to mind, it is with the same exclusive sense of her real existence" (111). For Jameson, Ophelia is both uniquely realistic and impalpably ineffable ("Eloquence is mute before her", 110). This interpretation of the character is drenched in sentimentalism and yet should be contextualised because the Victorians were rediscovering a sense of Ophelia's sexuality, after the eighteenth century had censored the lyrics of her ballads (Leonard 2009, 38) and she had been depicted as "genteel" and "refined" and with "a total ignorance of sexual matters" (Iyengar 2016, 1322). However, scholars are not unanimous on this stance. It has been argued that, in fact, eighteenth-century English Ophelias "exhibit[ed] a powerful, unconstrained, and virtuous (i.e. *unfulfilled*) heterosexual desire that is received as comforting, even reassuring in an unmarried woman" (Lamb 2017, n.n., italics mine).[13] What emerged was a very ambivalent figure which could be politicised, since the character was linked to notions of nature and womanhood: "In a time of rapid industrialization, urbanization and social change, Ophelia [turned into] a romantic *femme eternelle*, intimately connected to nature and therefore the natural roles and character of women" (Rhodes 2008, 4). Ophelia soon became the most easily recognisable Shakespeare character in paintings with portrayals ranging from her being an emblem of sorrowful victimhood to Ophelia as a mermaid-like temptress (118).[14] With the success of Ambroise Thomas's opera adaptation, hers became a role coveted by sopranos, in the wake of Christina Nilsson's mesmerising performances. Ophelia was also regularly regarded as the type for female madness among medical professionals and laypeople alike. The latter point has recently been called into question:

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[11] On Ophelia's reception in France in general, see Vest 1989.

[12] There was resistance in Germany to Ducis's rewriting, also due to to the early Shakespeare translations such as Wieland's (1762-6). Ophelia's portrayal was then influentially discussed by Goethe via the character of Aurelia in his *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796). I thank Albert Meier (University of Kiel) for his paper "'Not much can be said about her'. Ophelias's Emancipation and Individuation Process (Thanks to Goethe)" read at the *Receptions of Ophelia* conference held in Verona in December 2024 (see below).

> Contrary to widespread assumption, Ophelia was not the prototype of female insanity for nineteenth-century alienists. By mid-century, she rarely entered the academic writing of even the most urbane physicians; instead she belonged increasingly to a distinctly secondary body of writing whose principal significance is as a reflection on the social status – and the literary pretensions – of the authors . . . Ophelia came into her own in a context where medical treatment was no longer the main issue. (Small 1996, 57)

Helen Small is right to signal that discussing Ophelia was a way for medical doctors to prove that they were fashionable, gentlemanly members of society. But, increasingly, within as well as outside of the UK (including in Germany, Italy, France, and Spain), articles on her appeared *en masse* in scientific journals and publications, to the point that this interest cannot simply be reduced to the alienists' fashionable pretentions or their attempt at catering to general readers. In his study on the uses of Shakespeare among the first American psychiatrists, Benjamin Reiss, channelling Foucault, has proved that "grabbing the mantle of the timeless genius helped to mask the novelty" (770) of the new powers of these professionals. And this proclivity showed no signs of dwindling in the second part of the nineteenth century. Hand in hand with the progress of psychiatry as a new, separate discipline, Ophelia began to be variously diagnosed with nymphomania, hysteria (as Hamlet himself was),[15] acute *amentia*, *dementia praecox*, monomania, simple mental confusion, erotic and suicidal mania, and so on and so forth. Actresses visited asylums searching for inspiration (most memorably Ellen Terry who found the mentally ill people "too *theatrical*"; Terry 1908, 169), and patients were asked to pose as Ophelia (see Showalter 1985). Recent studies have delved into actresses' experiences of playing Ophelia, and, for instance, Fiona Gregory has studied the dynamics between Mrs Patrick Campbell's performances at the Lyceum Theatre in 1897 and the psychiatric treatment she underwent in a nursing home. At the end of the so-called 'rest cure', she felt "extinguished" because of the isolation she had to endure and the degree of impassivity she was forced to have. "Campbell's psychiatric treatment is figured as a brutal awakening that has extinguished part of her essential self" (Gregory 2018, n.n.). She loved playing Ophelia, but, as she wrote to her sister: "It's only my weak head I am afraid of" (qtd in Duncan 2016, 118).

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[13] Lamb's essay can be seen as a response to Showalter 1985 and the equally insightful essay by Mary Floyd-Wilson, which contends that, "by the late eighteenth century, the era's evolving notions of gender and the paradoxical effects of censorship actually infused representations of Ophelia with 'erotic and discordant elements'" (1992, 397).

[14] It seems that "during the long nineteenth century, Ophelia was the single most represented subject of English literary painting" (Falchi 2015, 175).

2. Ophelia and the Scholars: "We know what we are but know not what we may be" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.43-4)

The contributions of this issue have greatly profited from Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams' edited volume *The Afterlife of Ophelia* (2012), which has marked a key moment in the study of Ophelia's receptions. That volume was (perhaps surprisingly) the first collection of essays to gauge and explore the field from an interdisciplinary perspective, discussing topics ranging from the cultural connotations of the lute Ophelia plays in the madness scene in the First Quarto to YouTube videos, from modern and contemporary photography to East Asian adaptations. The lines of research proposed by Elaine Showalter in her foundational study have since expanded,[16] but they still stem from her insightful assertion: "Ophelia does have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell . . . the history of her representation" (1985, 75). Peterson and Williams have also shown that Ophelia should not be regarded as merely an index of social reality:

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[15] On Hamlet as a woman and/or as a hysteric, see Howard 2007, 21-3 and 148.

[16] One should signal at least the following works: James M. Vest's *The French Face of Ophelia from Belleforest to Baudelaire* (1989), which examines Ophelia's French receptions until the second half of the nineteenth century; other important studies with a focus on iconography such as Carol Solomon Kiefer's catalogue *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia* (2001) and the one edited by Catrien Santing, Flos Wildshut, and

> Ophelia's importance as a cultural and critical body of texts lies not solely in her being a "symptom" or *effect* of the culture that represents her according to its own logic, ideology, and concerns, but also in how she is the *generator* or *site* of meaning or cultural shift, not merely a contingent reflection of an era's already existing preoccupations. (Peterson and Williams 2012, 5)

These words encapsulate the aim of the articles included in this issue.

It should be clear that one, supposedly original, authentic Ophelia is nowhere to be found or retrieved, if only because of the aforementioned malleability based on silences and gaps in Shakespeare's play and due to the instability of early modern texts. Indeed, she behaves differently according to the version of *Hamlet* you are reading or is being staged. For instance, Michael M. Wagoner has analysed the differences in Q1 and Q2 marking the nunnery scene and argued that, in this scene, "Q1 Ofelia demands a space of power and agency that her counterpart in Q2 abdicates in favor of the central male character" (2022, 58). Wagoner critiques the editorial practices of the Arden editors and states: "The usage of asides accords better with Q2 Ophelia who has little or no power in the scene, whereas Q1 Ofelia actively engages Hamlet" (72). Looking for consistency and credibility in a character in one particular version is natural enough, although one should remember that characters "are not people, they are elements of a linguistic structure, lines in a drama, and more basically, words on a page", which poses an interpretative difficulty "that drama itself accepts, [and] indeed, embraces" (Orgel 2002, 8).

The case of Ophelia is peculiar because "in her language and in her person [she] most vividly raises questions of the ways by which we know

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Krien Clevis, titled *Ophelia: Sehnsucht, Melancholia and Desire for Death* (2009); Simone Kindler's *Ophelia: der Wandel von Frauenbild und Bildmotiv* (2004), and the highly interesting monograph *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* by Kimberly Rhodes (2008), which supplemented the more wide-ranging study by Alan R. Young (*Hamlet and the Visual Arts, 1709-1900*, published in 2002). Peterson and Williams' volume has been followed by Sharon Keefe Ugalde's study of Ophelia's receptions in twenty-first-century Spain (*Ophelia: Shakespeare and Gender in Contemporary Spain*, 2020) and has inspired several contributions such as the aforementioned book by Fiona Gregory on actresses' experiences of mental illness and psychological treatment (2018) and Sally Barnden's 2020 chapter on photography's role in perpetuating as well as challenging the objectification of the female body in Ophelia iconography.

things and of the confusion that may result from using different approaches or different sorts of language. Most pointedly, Ophelia provokes questions of character" (Ronk 1994, 25). "We know what we are but know not what we may be" (4.5.43-4), she states, and her loneliness contributes to an interest in inwardness. And thus, it is no coincidence that her creative and critical afterlives have been so vibrantly rich.

3. This Issue

The first three essays in this issue examine how Ophelia was – or could have been – received in the early modern context. Some of these receptions highlight aspects that failed to leave a lasting legacy or are fundamentally at odds with later interpretations, while others laid the groundwork for enduring interpretations in later eras.

The first is Lois Potter's "Lutes and Lobsters: Ophelia and Theatrical Cliché". It elucidates how the figure of Ophelia emerged from and shaped the early modern trope of the forsaken maiden lamenting her fate, ultimately deriving from Ovid's *Heroides* (Ariadne, in particular). Potter compares Ophelia with, among others, the Jailer's Daughter in *The Noble Kinsmen* (1613-1614), Penthea in John Ford's *The Broken Heart* (first published in 1633), and especially Belvidera, the tragic heroine of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682). The transition from maidenhood (as embodied by Ophelia) to wifehood (as represented by Belvidera) within the then ambiguously defined domain of betrothal/marriage contracts creates space for both misrecognition and for (self-)destructive fixation.

Lois Potter's essay is followed by Deanne Williams' "Ophelia, Sewing in Her Closet", which situates Ophelia's sewing within the broader context of early modern girls' needlework and can help us better understand a further level on which Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would relate to the character – one grounded on everyday life and material culture. Williams argues that, beyond its educational function and aesthetic value, embroidery also operated as a means of emotional expression and symbolic communication, which endows Ophelia's figure with yet another element of autonomy.

Theories of emotion are at the core of the next article, Anne Sophie Refskou's "'Her mood will needs be pitied': Emotional Ideologies in the Afterlives of Ophelia". By analysing the 'emotional regime' of Elsinore in its early modern context, Refskou shows that the young woman in the madness scene constitutes a disruptive emotional force in a pointedly different manner from the sentimentalism which came to enshroud Ophelia during Romanticism. Refskou examines a kinship on multiple levels which ties

Ophelia to Cassandra in *Troilus and Cressida*: both women are meant to elicit compassion, but their madness subtly alludes to repressed violence and the denunciation of a rotten state.

With the next essay, we move onto the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Keith Gregor's "Becoming 'Ofelia': Changing Perspectives in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Spanish Drama" offers a comparative analysis of Spanish adaptations of *Hamlet* revealing the significant shifts Ophelia's portrayal went through in the transition from Enlightenment Neoclassicism to Romanticism, the latter being exemplified by Pablo Avecilla's *Hamlet* of 1856 and *El príncipe Hamlet* (Prince Hamlet) by Carlos Coello (1872).

Meanwhile, in Britain, Victorian culture positioned Ophelia as a figure through which to explore ideas of girlhood in various adaptations. Laura Tosi's "Ophelias for Victorian Girls" focuses on probably the most significant of these, Mary Cowden Clarke's prequel *The Rose of Elsinore* (1850-1852). In contrast to didactic retellings, Clarke's work introduced complexity and interpretative depth, enriching the reader's understanding of Ophelia's motives and emotional trajectory, celebrating sisterly relationships and motherhood.

But nineteenth-century adaptations of Hamlet with a special focus on Ophelia were not only textual. Considering the popularity of opera in the nineteenth century and following the Ophelia mania generated by Harriet Smithson's Parisian performances in 1827, it is small wonder that composers tried to adapt *Hamlet* into opera, amplifying and diversifying Ophelia's voice, in Italy and France. In his essay ("'Fatti monachella'. Ophelia in Nineteenth-Century Opera: the Libretti for Franco Faccio and Ambroise Thomas"), Emanuele d'Angelo discusses Arrigo Boito's libretto for Franco Faccio's *Amleto* (1865/1871) and Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* (1868), in which Ophelia became a *prima donna* capable of captivating her audience. Thomas's Hamlet achieved such success that the visual representations of Ophelia frequently drew more from the opera productions than directly from productions of Shakespeare's play, and indeed, as Sandra Pietrini argues in "Bloodless, Attractive, and Silent: Ophelia's Death On- and Off-Stage in Nineteenth-Century France and Italy", visual representations of Ophelia in the nineteenth century in France and Italy developed an independent visual tradition from Anglo-American iconography.

Precisely because French culture was already deeply saturated with representations of Ophelia in iconography, drama, and opera, audiences were well prepared to critically assess new portrayals of the figure. Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine's "Sarah Bernhardt in Her White Coffin, 1886", investigates, thanks to painstaking archival research, the disappointment faced by the Divine Sarah and her legendary *voix d'or* (golden voice) when she decided to play Ophelia in 1886 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin. Bernhardt tried to introduce original elements as she made sure to cater to the necrophilic trends of the era, but her production closed after only twenty-three performances.

Bernhardt's Ophelia flopped, but she would later triumph as Hamlet.

As one reads through these essays it becomes clear that, although Ophelia's most radical, feminist reinterpretations were developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she had already exerted a powerful influence on – and helped shape – ideas of femininity, sexuality, madness, and propriety in earlier eras. Such transmedial responses to Ophelia range from conventional, norm-abiding portrayals that emphasise her role as a passive figure, to more transgressive interpretations that reimagine her as a symbol of resistance. It follows that it is not true to claim that: "If Hamlet changes with the times to reflect the concurrent dilemmas, Ophelia always stays the same: pale, fragile, silent, and dead" (Romanska 2005, 501).

Ophelia's malleability allows for different interpretations: take, for instance, Henrietta Rae's painting *Ophelia* (1890, now in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery, fig. 1). This Ophelia seems to me grief-stricken, but her stance conveys accusation, as if holding those surrounding her accountable for her anguish. Claudius and Gertrude appear in shadow, their faces filled with shock. The young woman enacts her sorrow with intention, transforming grief into a form of expression rather than submission. According to Sandra Pietrini, instead, the painting's focus is on Ophelia's erotic energy in this portrayal of the madness scene: "the young woman [is] shown in a provocative attitude, her body sensually wrapped in a tight-fitting dress" (143). Both interpretations can be correct. It is precisely this interpretative openness that has secured Ophelia a lasting presence in world culture.

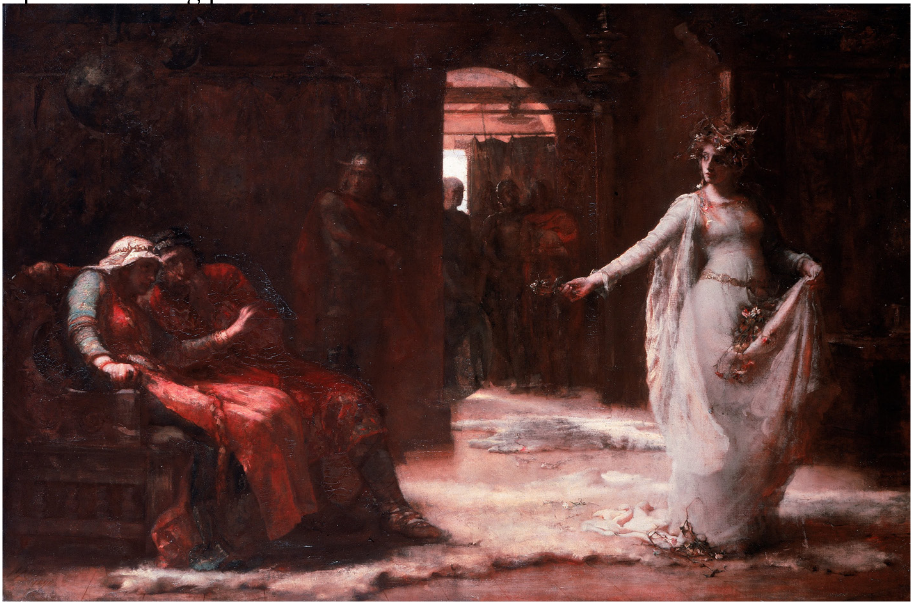

Fig. 1: Henrietta Rae, *Ophelia*, oil on canvas (1890). Wikimedia Commons

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Lois Potter*

Lutes and Lobsters: Ophelia and Theatrical Cliché

Abstract

The parodic mad scene for Tilburina in Sheridan's *The Critic* derives both from Ophelia and from Belvidera, the heroine of Otway's *Venice Preserved.* One of Belvidera's lines ("Lutes, laurels, seas of milk, and ships of amber") represented, for many writers (John Gay, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Horace Walpole, Charles Lamb, and, most famously, Coleridge), an example of disjointed clichés. In fact, these images sum up the tropes of female madness and its end; the sea and ships refer to the Ariadne legend and a repressed desire for vengeance, as seen in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Maid's Tragedy* and Chettle's *Hoffman.* The transition between virgin (Ophelia) and wife (Belvidera), within the vaguely defined world of the contracted couple, leaves room for misinterpretation (the Jailer's Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Constance in Brome's *The Northern Lass*) and tragic obsession (Penthea in Ford's *The Broken Heart*). Harriet Walter's poem, "What Gertrude Couldn't Say", attacks the prettification not only of Ophelia's death but of virginity itself.

Keywords: Ophelia; ships of amber; Ariadne; Thomas Otway; Tilburina; Penthea; S.T. Coleridge

Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk and ships of amber.
(*Venice Preserved,* as misquoted by S.T. Coleridge)

It is not surprising that Ophelia's theatrical followers share so many resemblances: as has often been pointed out, theatrical madness is often full of 'quoted discourse' (see, for instance, Neely 2004, 325-6). *Hamlet* itself (or rather, Hamlet himself, an enthusiastic playgoer) quotes and parodies *The True Tragedy of Richard III* and *The Spanish Tragedy* (and probably others that we cannot now recognise). Ophelia not only sings traditional songs, occasionally altering the words to fit her own situation, but, when she says, "Come, my coach!" (4.5.70),[1] she is echoing the end of Zabina's insane tirade from *Tamburlaine, Part 1*: "Make ready my coach, my chair, my jewels. I come, I come, I come!" (Marlowe 1976, 5.1.317). Given what Zabina does immediately after this line – "*She runs against the cage and brains herself*"

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[1] All quotations from Shakespeare refer to Shakespeare 1994.

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(SD318) – the verbal repetition may have prepared an early modern audience for the speaker's suicide, though Ophelia's death differs from Zabina's in being offstage and therefore ambiguous.

These metatheatrical echoes and repetitions can be seen as attempts to reproduce the jumble of memories and emotions in the distracted mind of a theatrical character. But the mind in which they actually coexist is that of the author, and, with the passing of time, what was once "a document in madness – thoughts and remembrance fitted" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.178) dwindles into theatrical cliché. Thus, in the third-rate performance of *Hamlet* seen by Pip in *Great Expectations* (1861), some two and a half centuries later, the actors are so slavishly following outmoded conventions that Dickens pretends to think that these have become theatrical laws: "I believe it is well known in a constitutional country that Mr. Wopsle could not possibly have returned the skull, after moralising over it, without dusting his fingers on a white napkin taken from his breast . . ." (Dickens 1998, 283). Ophelia, too, is "a prey to such slow musical madness, that when, in course of time, she had taken off her white muslin scarf, folded it up, and buried it, a sulky man who had been long cooling his impatient nose against an iron bar in the front row of the gallery, growled, "Now the baby's put to bed let's have supper!'". It is obvious from the spectators' jeering responses that they recognise that these performances are repeating traditional stage business for no apparent reason except that it has always been done. What I propose to do in this essay is to trace the progress of some verbal and theatrical clichés, and, with them, a growing willingness to articulate the problem of writing and performing a particular kind of female madness.

No discussion of this subject can omit the most complete collection of theatrical clichés, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779). Itself deriving from a tradition of metatheatrical plays by, among others, Molière, the second Duke of Buckingham (whose *The Rehearsal* was frequently played with updated theatrical references), and John Gay, it depicts the rehearsal of a play called *The Spanish Armada*. The author is Mr. Puff, whose name refers to his professional expertise at inflating everyone's merits, especially his own. His play deliberately follows every conceivable literary and dramatic cliché (it includes a Senate scene for no reason except that "There has not been one yet", Sheridan 1973, 3.1). His heroine, Tilburina, the daughter of the governor of Tilbury Fort, is hopelessly in love with the son of the Spanish ambassador, Don Ferolo Whiskerandos. When she first enters, to soft music ("Nothing introduces you a heroine like soft music", 2.2), Puff insists that she sob into her white handkerchief. When she and her lover part from each other, he makes them turn back, give each other one last look and sigh, before they can leave. Tilburina's confidante, a device from French drama, allows her to express her emotions in a way that is largely denied to Ophelia, but the uselessness of this character is obvious from the indifference with which Puff treats the actress playing the role. When Tilburina's lover is killed in a duel, she of course runs mad and the confidante is obliged to do so too, but in white linen; only the leading actress can wear white satin. Belvidera displays her madness mainly by rapid transitions from one subject to another and by multiple references to animals – small, apart from the whale – which include not only a squirrel (parodying a moment in Steele's *The Funeral*, as Cecil Price points out in his note on this passage), grasshopper, oyster and bird, but also her lover Whiskerandos. She addresses imaginary characters, utters one would-be profound generalisation about love, and, presumably, runs about the stage in search of her lover ("He's here! He's there!"), while, in performance, her confidante's silent attempts to keep up with her add to the absurdity.

> TILBURINA The wind whistles – the moon rises – see
> They have kill'd my squirrel in his cage!
> Is this a grasshopper! – Ha! no, it is my
> Whiskerandos – you shall not keep him –
> I know you have him in your pocket –
> An oyster may be cross'd in love! – Who says
> A whale's a bird? – Ha! did you call, my love?
> – He's here! He's there! – He's every where!
> Ah me! He's no where! [*Exit* TILBURINA]
> (3.1)

When she has rushed off, Puff turns to Dangle and Sneer, the two critics who have been watching the play, and asks proudly:

> PUFF There, do you ever desire to see anybody madder than that?
> SNEER Never while I live!
> PUFF You observed how she mangled the metre?
> DANGLE Yes – egad, it was the first thing made me suspect she was out of her senses.
> SNEER And pray what becomes of her?
> PUFF She is gone to throw herself into the sea to be sure.

Puff's "to be sure" is a recognition of the now-inevitable connection between mad heroines and drowning.

When *The Critic* was first performed, as an afterpiece, the main play for the evening was *Hamlet* and the actress who played Tilburina (Miss Pope) imitated another actress (Miss Crawford) to great effect (Sheridan 1973, 473). But, although a modern audience would be bound to think of Tilburina as a failed Ophelia, the eighteenth-century audience would almost certainly have recognised her mad scene as a parody of a more extended mad scene in another, almost equally well-known play from the past, Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682). For much of the eighteenth century, Otway was considered a master of pathos, next only to Shakespeare as a tragic writer. *Venice Preserved* had last been staged only three years earlier, in Garrick's last season. It would be revived in 1782 with Sarah Siddons as the heroine.

1. Belvidera's Madness

Venice Preserved is partly based on a historical event, an attempted revolution in 1618 Venice, but it also refers to more immediate political concerns of its first audience, going back to memories of the Civil War and Interregnum (1642-1660) and to the prolongation of this conflict during the Exclusion Crisis and Popish Plot (1679-1682). The topical aspect of the play, including recognisable caricatures of living persons, was largely forgotten in the eighteenth century until the French revolution again gave it a dangerous relevance. Its passion and pathos, however, and the attractiveness of its three central characters to actors, made it immensely popular well into the nineteenth century (see Taylor 1950). The hero, Jaffeir, is torn between his responsibilities, on the one hand, to his wife and children, and, on the other, to Pierre, the republican friend who has drawn him into the conspiracy. His wife, Belvidera, still loves her father, a Venetian senator, even though he has disowned her and refused to help her impoverished family. When she discovers that he will be murdered if the conspiracy is successful, she persuades Jaffeir to reveal it. Almost at once he is full of remorse and self-hatred because of his betrayal of Pierre, to the point where he is almost ready to kill Belvidera; he finally realises that he is incapable of murdering the woman he loves. In a climactic scene, they tenderly recall their former happiness; then he says farewell forever and, hearing the bell toll for his friend's execution, tears himself away from her and rushes off. Her sense of abandonment (and perhaps guilt at her part in these events) finally sends her into madness. In the final scene, the "distracted" Belvidera, watched by her remorseful father and two attendants, sees her husband's ghost and learns that Jaffeir, on the scaffold, has killed Pierre to save him from torture, and then killed himself. By Sheridan's time the ghosts, which often provoked audience laughter, were usually left to the imagination (Taylor 184 and n.). However, Belvidera's lines, like Tilburina's, are addressed both to her father and to her husband, apparently reliving the scene in which Jaffeir had run away from her to join his friend on the scaffold:

Belvidera Come come come come come. Nay, come to bed!
Prithee my Love. The Winds! hark how they whistle!
And the rain beats: oh how the weather shrinks me!
You are angry now, who cares? pish, no indeed.
Choose then, I say you shall not go, you shall not;
Whip your ill-nature; get you gone, then; oh!
[Jaffeir's Ghost *rises.*]
Are you return'd? See, Father, here he's come agen!
Am I to blame to love him! oh thou dear one.
[Ghost *sinks.*]
Why do you fly me? are you angry still then?
Jaffier! where art thou? Father, why do you doe thus?
Stand off, don't hide him from me. He's here somewhere.
Stand off I say! What gone? remember't, Tyrant!
I may revenge my self for this trick one day.
(Otway 1932, 5.482-94)

The most obvious difference between the original and the parody is the grotesqueness of Tilburina's imagery – its grasshopper, squirrel, oyster, whale – but it has the same rapid emotional transitions which were considered the best opportunities for an actor to shine (and, of course, would soon be the best opportunities for a coloratura soprano in innumerable operatic mad scenes, including the operatic version of *The Critic* by Charles Villiers Stanford in 1915). The speech itself is full of echoes, the most surprising one being that of the sleepwalking scene in *Macbeth*, which fits with Belvidera's status as a wife and mother (did Lady Macbeth's "Come, come, come, come", 5.1.64, derive from Zabina's?).

Sheridan did not parody the earlier scene in which, after Jaffeir has left her "for ever", she screams and curses before finally calming down on the arrival of her father and attendants:

Belvidera Are all things ready? shall we dye most gloriously?
Say not a word of this to my old father.
Murmuring streams, soft shades, and springing flowers,
Lutes, laurels, seas of milk, and ships of amber.
(5.366-9)

The last line became famous (or notorious) at an early date; it was parodied by John Gay, along with much else, in his comical-tragical-pastoral farce *The What D'Ye Call It?* in 1715. (Sheridan is indebted to some of its jokes, like the extended parting look and sigh; see Gay 1983, 1.2, last lines). As usual in farce, tragic conventions are made ridiculous by their transfer to characters of lower social status. The heroine, a country haymaker called Kitty Carrot, is driven frantic when her beloved Filbert is impressed into the army: with other haymakers acting as chorus, she enters "*with her Hair loose*" (2.8.SD1) and orders someone to sing a ballad ("'Twas when the seas were roaring") which describes a willow-garlanded maid envisaging the seas and rocks that threaten her departed lover, until she actually sees his corpse floating in the water; "Then like a Lilly drooping, / She bow'd her Head, and dy'd": After contemplating various kinds of suicide, to unsympathetic comments from her audience, she gets so hysterical that "*They throw Water upon her*" (2.8.79SD), which leads her to imagine the whole meadow under water ("The meads are all afloat, the haycocks swim") and she has, like Belvidera, a brief vision of her lover: "Hah! Who comes here? My Filbert! Drown not him!" (82-3). Then, just before the re-entry of her lover enables a happy ending, Gay gives her a parody of Belvidera's lines: "Bagpipes in butter, flocks in fleecy fountains, / Churns, sheephooks, seas of milk and honey mountains" (1716, 2.8). Gay deliberately intensifies the randomness of Belvidera's lines until they become pastoral nonsense. It was the randomness rather than the madness that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu echoed in a verse epistle that she addressed to her friend Lord Hervey in 1734, from her address in Twickenham, cleverly worked into the verse as:

> Twict'nam,
> Where I enjoy in contemplative chamber,
> Lutes, laurels, seas of milk, and ships of amber.
> (Montagu 1966, 2.98)

For Lady Mary, Otway's line simply reflects the casual, even pleasant, randomness of her thoughts. On the other hand, when Horace Walpole quoted the same words in a postscript to his tragedy, *The Mysterious Mother* (1768), he restored them to their original context and made a comment on theatrical madness which was to have an important effect. Recognising that his own heroine, whose guilty past has just resurfaced, often sounds distracted, he adds:

> Yet she is never quite mad – still less does she talk like Belvidera of "lutes, laurels, seas of milk, and ships of amber"; which is not being mad, but light-headed. When madness has taken possession of a person, such character ceases to be fit for the stage . . . it being the business of the theatre to exhibit passions, not distempers.

He went on to discuss King Lear:

> His thoughts dwell on the ingratitude of his daughters, and every sentence that falls from this wildness excites reflection and pity. Had frenzy entirely seized him, our compassion would abate, as we should conclude that he no

> longer felt unhappiness. – Shakspeare [*sic*] wrote as a philosopher, Otway as a poet. (Walpole 2007, 89)

Walpole's concern is with the effect of stage madness on a theatre audience, which suffers as it feels a character suffer and will, he thinks, lose sympathy when it realises that a character is no longer sufficiently in touch with reality to feel any pain. Belvidera's "light-headed" lines are a kind of anaesthetic, removing her from any understanding of her genuinely appalling situation. The comparison between Otway and Shakespeare is not necessarily an unfavourable one: Walpole apparently sees both examples as theatrically successful, but only because neither represents complete and sustained madness.

However, the fact that Walpole placed Otway's Belvidera alongside Shakespeare's Lear anticipated (and surely inspired) the most famous comparison of the two characters in a context often discussed and analysed, Chapter 4 of Coleridge's *Biographia Litteraria* (1815):

> To the faculty by which I had characterized Milton, we should confine the term *imagination;* while the other would be contra-distinguished as *fancy.* Now were it once ascertained, that this division is no less grounded in nature, than that of delirium from mania, or Otway's
>
> Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and ships of amber,
>
> From Shakespear's
>
> What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?
>
> Or from the preceding apostrophe to the elements, the theory of the fine arts, and of poetry in particular, could not, I thought but derive some additional and important light. (2014, 64)

Coleridge had already made the same comparison between Belvidera and King Lear in a lecture of 1810. In a letter dated 2 Jan. 1797, Charles Lamb, commenting on a poem that Coleridge had sent him, not only quoted Otway's line alongside Coleridge's but mentioned Walpole's "witty phrase", "a little light-headed" (Lamb 1905, 76). So, if Coleridge had not already seen the comparison between Otway and Shakespeare, it is likely that Lamb's letter would have sent him to look for it. Unlike Walpole, who sees the two writers as poet and philosopher, respectively, Coleridge clearly sees the two examples as demonstrating Otway's inferiority. It is unlikely, incidentally, that Coleridge ever heard this line spoken in the theatre, though he could have seen the play many times and, as Lowes points out, had borrowed its subtitle, *A Plot Discovered,* for a pamphlet of his own in in 1795 (1930, 347). It seems that "Belvidera's preliminary Mad Scene" was cut from acting texts fairly early in the eighteenth century, possibly because of its burlesque in Gay's farce (Taylor 1950, 277), possibly to make the role less taxing for the actress.

However, Coleridge has misquoted Otway's line. John Livingstone Lowes, whose *The Road to Xanadu* attempted to trace the writer's mental associations through detailed study of his reading, was fascinated by this substitution of "lobsters" for "laurels" and assumed that the word was misremembered: "How did the lobsters get into the list?" (Lowes 1930, 347) Lowes noticed that Coleridge had already quoted as an example of fancy, a couplet from Butler's *Hudibras* comparing the morning to "a lobster boiled". As Lowes puts it, "Butler's lobster has ousted Otway's laurels (not without help, perhaps, from the contiguous "seas")" (ibid.).

There are even more possible sources for Coleridge's examples than Lowes realised. If the poet's attention had first been drawn to the Otway line by Lady Mary's quotation of it, he might also have acquired his untextual lobsters from a couplet in the same poem. Imagining her friend at George II's birthday celebration, Montagu offers comic descriptions of some of the others present, sarcastically comparing fat Queen Caroline and her ladies-in-waiting to sea-creatures:

> And Majesty with sweeping Train,
> That does so many Yards contain,
> Superior to her waiting Nymphs,
> As Lobster to attendant Shrimps.
> (Montagu 1966, 2.99)

It may be, as Roberts suggests in his note on *Biographia Literaria* (Coleridge 2014, 64n286), that Coleridge was not misremembering at all, but deliberately importing the lobster in order to exaggerate the "randomness" of Otway's line. The lobster, like the squirrel, grasshopper and oyster of Tilburina's mad scene, creates a grotesquely realistic image in the middle of the smoothly distancing melody of the passage.

2. Revenger-Virgin-Wife: Clashing Roles From Ophelia to Belvidera

The apparently unrelated images in *Venice Preserved* are keywords of "mad discourse": they may be meant to show the incoherence of Belvidera's mind but cohere perfectly well in the mind of the author. "Murmuring springs, soft shades and springing flowers" are the natural habitat of the stage madwoman. As for the lutes and laurels, Ophelia, who is said to play on a lute in the first Quarto of *Hamlet,* wears "fantastic garlands", though not of laurel. Like many of her theatrical successors (including Tilburina), she is a forsaken maiden, and the willow garland offered to rejected lovers probably explains the association between madness and the rivers where willows grow. The seas of milk and ships of amber sound like pure fancy, appropriate enough for a woman in Venice, but a search of the internet reveals both that the sea is sometimes described as milky and that it can sometimes look like milk. Miniature ships were often made of amber, particularly in the Renaissance. But there are other reasons why Otway thought in terms of these images. Much of the sympathy that contemporary audiences felt for Belvidera derived from her evocation of so many female prototypes. Unlike the young virgins of prewar drama, she is a wife and mother but when her husband leaves her with the conspirators as a guarantee of his loyalty, she becomes sexually vulnerable (and is in fact assaulted by the group's corrupt leader); finally, when her husband runs from her to die beside his friend, she sees herself as a forsaken woman. She is also, though only briefly, torn between passivity and the desire for vengeance. The tension between the roles of sufferer and avenger, virgin and wife, runs through the drama between *Hamlet* and *Venice Preserved* and the impossibility of reconciling them contributes to the language of madness.

The forsaken women of the early modern period ultimately derive from Ovid's immensely popular *Heroides*, in which characters from history or mythology address the men – sometimes faithless, sometimes merely absent – for whose presence they long. In particular, one story haunted the period. Out of love, Ariadne betrays her father Minos by showing the prisoner Theseus the way in and out of the Cretan labyrinth. Theseus later abandons her on an island and artists often pictured her looking seaward, like Virgil's Dido, as his ship vanishes in the distance. Forsaken women took her as their prototype: an early example is Julia's claim, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, that she had once played the part of Ariadne very movingly (Julia knows that her lover Proteus is being unfaithful to her); a late one is the first entry of Tilburina and her confidante, who, as Puff says, are "inconsolable to the minuet in *Ariadne*" (that is, Handel's *Arianna in Creta*).

It is worth noticing other Ariadne figures, because they explain the prevalence of references to ships. In Fletcher's *The Coxcomb* (1609) the heroine's lover fails to turn up at their rendezvous and, although they are finally reunited, her sense of herself as a forsaken maiden dominates much of the play. In Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610) the forsaken Aspatia looks at an embroidery showing Ariadne abandoned by Theseus and asks,

> Does not the story say, his keel was split,
> Or his masts spent, or some kind rock or other
> Met with his vessel?
> (2.2.46-9)

Her desire for poetic justice in the classical story represents a sublimation of her own desire for revenge on her former fiancé Amintor, which clashes with her sense that the proper ending for a forsaken woman is death. She resolves this tension by disguising herself as a man and provoking Amintor into a duel in which he kills her. Her hostile behaviour, though feigned, is also real, and her passive-aggressive actions offer her a delayed revenge, since his anguish and remorse, when he discovers her identity, contribute to his own suicide.

In 1613, Fletcher, collaborating with Shakespeare on *The Two Noble Kinsmen,* returned to the Ariadne story in an addition to the main plot, taken from Chaucer's *Knight's Tale.* Palamon and Arcite are in prison; the otherwise unnamed Jailer's Daughter falls in love with the prisoner Palamon and releases him, although she realises that her father may well be executed for the escape. It is never really explained why Palamon fails to meet her in the forest as she expects him to do (the two characters never share a scene and this part of the play is almost entirely separate from the main plot). Initially, she is aware that he may simply have mistaken the location of their rendezvous, and she understands the full horror of her situation – she has committed a crime that implicates her father and there is no turning back (3.1.1-38). When she next appears, however, after a night's wandering in the forest, she is no longer in touch with reality: she hallucinates a shipwreck and shouts out to the imaginary sailors:

> Yonder's the sea, and there's a ship; how't tumbles!
> And there's a rock lies watching under water;
> Now, now, it beats upon it; now, now, now!
> There's a leak sprung, a sound one! How they cry!
> Run her before the wind, you'll lose all else.
> Up with a course or two, and tack about, boys.
> Good night, good night, you're gone.
> (3.4.5-11)

The last line suggests that the ship has now sunk. Though she partly thinks that Palamon may have been killed by wolves (3.2.11-20; 3.4.3-4), her imagination of this shipwreck scene suggests that she is becoming the forsaken Ariadne. Like Aspatia, she displaces the desire for vengeance onto the gods or nature (the rock under water). Then she drops back into grotesque fantasy:

> Would I could find a fine frog; he would tell me
> Newes from all parts o'th world. Then would I make
> A carrack of a cockle shell and sail
> By east and north-east to the king of pigmies,
> For he tells fortunes rarely.
> (3.4.12-16)

Later, in a description by someone else, she becomes part of the language of nymphs, flowers and water:

> The place
> Was knee-deep where she sat; her careless tresses
> A wreath of bullrush rounded; about her stuck
> Thousand fresh water-flowers of several colours,
> That methought she appeared like the fair nymph
> That feeds the lake with waters, or as Iris
> Newly dropped down from heaven.
> (4.1.81-8)

But, though this passage has often been compared with Gertrude's account of the death of Ophelia, the difference is that these lines are spoken by a character known only as the Wooer, who has loved her from the beginning and goes on to say that he saved her from drowning herself. The play suggests (though somewhat ambiguously) that she is also saved by therapeutic play-acting. The other characters take part in her fantasy of sailing a ship, and a doctor tells the Wooer to impersonate Palamon and "Lie with her if she ask you" (5.2.18). We are told at the end that she has recovered and will soon be married. Given the simplistic assumptions about women's need for sex ("all maids are mad till they be married", says a character in in Brome's *The Northern Less,* though he is in fact shown to be self-deceived), there is always the possibility of a happy ending to the Ophelia story. Ariadne is courted by Bacchus after Theseus has abandoned her.

Ophelia apparently sees herself as a revenger only when she says, "My brother shall know of it" (*Hamlet* 4.5.69), perhaps meaning both her abandonment or her father's murder. However, Lucibella, the heroine of Chettle's *Hoffman: Revenge for a Father,* almost merges the roles of Hamlet and Ophelia. The play's title sounds like an attempt to cash in on the popularity of *Hamlet*, and there are other apparent allusions to it, like the fact that Wittenberg is one of its locations. Hoffman, who wants to avenge the death of his father, is less like Hamlet than Marlowe's Barabas: a Machiavellian schemer given to multiple disguises and deceptions. Lucibella and her lover Lodowick are among his victims. Through his stratagems, their relatives are deceived into stabbing them both and in the subsequent confusion, Hoffman also manages to kill Lucibella's father without being detected. Lodowick dies, but Lucibella recovers; however, these experiences have apparently driven her mad. On her next appearance, she offers her onstage audience a whole anthology of the tropes associated with madness:

> I am going to the riuers side,
> To fetch white lillies, and blew daffadils
> To sticke in *Lodowickes* bosom, where it bled,
> And in mine owne . . .
> (4.1.1432-5)

She refers to "tricks" (1475) which seems to have been something of a keyword in the madness lexicon: Ophelia is said to talk of "tricks i'th' world" (*Hamlet* 4.5.4) and Belvidera says, "I may revenge my self for this trick one day" (Otway 1932, 5.494). Lucibella also sings snatches of popular song, claims to have worked a sampler with a "posy" about her love (1442-5), and says she's going to play "barley-breake" (1495). Ophelia had said, "We must be patient" (4.5.68), perhaps quoting what someone had already said to her. When someone tells Lucibella to be patient, she replies: "Could you be patient, or you, or you, or you, / To loose a father and a husband too [?]" (1449-50). When the others are afraid "Lest she do violence against herself", she reassures them:

> O neuer feare me, there is somewhat cries
> Within me noe: tells me there's knaues abroad
> Bids mee be quiet, lay me downe and sleepe
> Good night good gentlefolks . . .
> (1489-92)

And then, like Ophelia, she wishes everyone goodnight several times, probably running in and out as she does so. The sly reference to her suspicions of others suggests that this madwoman may be curable, or perhaps that she was only counterfeiting madness in the first place and that her language is a self-conscious, even parodic, use of revenge tragedy clichés. At the end, she joins with Hoffmann's other victims – in fact, leads them – in taking revenge. This play was not published until 1631, and it is unfortunately not clear whether the text is the same one for which Henslowe paid Chettle in 1602. It was still popular in the 1620s, according to its title page, and it may well have undergone revision before its publication. If it was first performed immediately after *Hamlet,* Lucibella might have been seen as doing what Ophelia *ought* to have done.

Ophelia's sexual language in her mad scenes used to be altered in performance, as inconsistent with her virginal status; many modern productions, on the other hand, assume and sometimes depict a sexual relationship between her and Hamlet. The apparent contradiction is the result of what has been called "an uneasy transition period" (Ingram 1987, 133), a legal and social ambiguity which furnishes many situations in early modern drama. Church marriage was increasingly considered the only genuinely binding relationship, but verbal contracts were still being made. It was not clear how far mere words could license sexual relations between a couple who had not yet been married in church, but they could have a powerful effect on the imagination. As Orgilus says in Ford's *The Broken Heart,* his engagement to Penthea allowed "A freedom of converse, an interchange / Of holy and chaste love" (*The Broken Heart,* 1.1.29-30). His words perfectly capture the ambiguity in the situation of the betrothed couple, still physically chaste but psychologically married. I have suggested (2014, 162-3) that Gertrude's "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (*Hamlet*, 5.1.239) could mean that the court at Elsinore considers Hamlet and Ophelia to be a betrothed couple. "Freedom of converse" may explain why, in *Hamlet,* no one, even Ophelia herself, seems surprised at the language he uses to her in the *Mousetrap* scene. When, for whatever reason, such a couple is unable to marry, the woman's reaction is, like Aspatia's, invariably tragic. The obsession of the Jailer's Daughter with Palamon can partly be explained by the context of her first appearance. Her father and the Wooer are talking of dowries, although the Daughter seems never to have formally consented to a marriage proposal and the Jailer himself wants to postpone it for the time being. This betrothal discussion, along with the fact that Palamon has apparently told the Daughter that he hopes she will get a good husband (2.4.24-5), may be sufficient to explain the development of her unrealistic sexual obsession with him.

John Ford's *The Broken Heart* (sometime before 1633) depicts the most subtly disturbing portrait of the virgin/wife situation, as well as an attitude to revenge that can only be called passive-aggressive. Penthea has been engaged to Orgilus but, after her father's death, her brother Ithocles broke the engagement and forced her to marry someone else. Since Penthea and Orgilus consider themselves to be man and wife, she sees her marriage to another man as adultery: "The virgin-dowry which my birth bestowed / Is ravish'd by another" (2.3). In a scene with her brother, she emphasises the extent to which he has made her wretched and urges him to kill her:

> For she that's wife to Orgilus, and lives
> In known adultery with Bassanes,
> Is at the best a whore. Wilt kill me now?
> (3.2)

Although she says that she has forgiven him, what she really feels is clear later, when, in a distracted state, she speaks to Orgilus:

> Remember.
> When we last gathered roses in the garden,
> I found my wits, but truly you lost yours.
> That's he, and still 'tis he. [*Pointing at Ithocles*]
> (4.2)

Intentionally or not, she is urging Orgilus to kill her brother. At one point she compares herself to a siren singing, and it is in fact a song (sung offstage) that lures Ithocles to the room where he is killed. By then she has starved herself to death. The imagery of gathering roses refers to an earlier interview with Orgilus in a garden but it also seems an intrusion from conventional mad discourse. As with other forsaken maidens, the lyrical beauty of her language conceals the anger that results from the incompatibility of the virginal role with the unleashing, and then the checking, of sexual desire.

3. Epilogue: the End of the Pathetic Virgin

The lovely, frail passivity of the forsaken maiden may, then, have been indirectly critiqued in some plays even before the Civil War, and that she continued to arouse mixed emotions seems clear in Dickens' account of the unsympathetically viewed Ophelia. Another intriguing example is Anthony Trollope's novel, *The Small House at Allington* (first published serially in 1862). Even the name of his heroine, Lily Dale, suggests recollection of the "drooping lily" and the "soft shades and springing flowers" associated with forsaken madwomen. In her introduction to the Penguin edition of this novel, Dinah Birch notes that some critics have regarded Lily Dale, who is jilted by her fiancé when he has the opportunity to make a more advantageous marriage and who chooses never to accept another suitor, as a pathological case of "the 'erotomania' often thought to be characteristic of women's psychological vulnerabilities in mid-century Victorian England" (Trollope 2015, xxii). But I believe that Trollope is also drawing on early modern examples when, significantly, Lily is described as behaving like "a forlorn damsel in a play-book" (Trollope 2015, chapter 44). Trollope knew Shakespeare's works well, owned a copy of the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio, and, in search of plots for novels, had read most of the plays in that canon between 1850 and 1853. Shortly after writing *The Small House at Allington* he began an ambitious program of reading in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, eventually writing notes on over 270 plays (see Epperly 1988). Trollope certainly knew Aspatia, whose situation parallels Lily's. His virginal character differs from Penthea, who feels unclean because of her sexual experience with her husband Bassanes. Yet, when Lily explains why she cannot recover from her fiancé's shabby treatment and marry the nice young man who loves her, her reply suggests a view very similar to Penthea's:

> In my heart I am married to that other man. I gave myself to him, and loved him, and rejoiced in his love. When he kissed me I kissed him again, and I longed for his kisses. I seemed to live only that he might caress me. All that time I never felt myself to be wrong, – because he was all in all to me. I was his own. That has been changed . . . (Trollope 2015, 517)

Trollope's readers were very fond of Lily. In his *Autobiography*, however, he claims to be unsympathetic toward her failure to get over her broken heart and to make what he always believes the right choice: to marry and have children (Trollope 1953, 154).

The fact that motherhood is such a crucial part of Belvidera's character is probably due to the difference between the women who played the role and the boys who played the pre-war heroines that I have been describing. But the Jailer's Daughter imagines Palamon as a figure of incredible potency – "There is at least two hundred now with child by him" (Fletcher and Shakespeare 2014, 4.1.128) – and, when she agrees to marry the suitor whom she may or may not take for him, she says, "We shall have many children" (5.2.94) The mad Penthea also laments the loss of the children she might have had with Orgilus: "Since I was first a wife, I might have been / Mother to many pretty prattling babes" (4.2). No such imagination is present in Ophelia's language but it may have become part of her performance in the nineteenth century theatre. Elaine Showalter attributes to Harriet Smithson (the famous Ophelia with whom Berlioz fell in love) a piece of business that apparently became traditional: "the actress would carefully wrap her flowers in the long black veil that she wore over her white dress, then mime a burial of the bundle" (Showalter 1984, 83). As we have seen, this is what the Ophelia actress does in the famous account of Mr. Wopsle's Hamlet in *Great Expectations*. If Ophelia was in fact burying an imaginary child (as the irreverent spectator seems to imagine), this elaborate business might have been influenced by the madness of Gretchen in Goethe's *Faust*, who kills the child who is born after Faust has abandoned her. It also suggests a displacement of frustrated sexuality onto frustrated motherhood.

I shall end with some modern examples that show the desire to liberate Ophelia from the language of forsaken virginity. An essay by Jeremy Lopez in the Peterson-Williams collection wonders what would happen if we took this character to be "merely *acting* mad because she perceives and is interested to enjoy the freedom that histrionic insanity provides Hamlet" (2012, 38). Lopez mentions other critics who have wondered about the effect on her of overhearing Hamlet's meditations on suicide. A book by the actress Harriet Walter –*"She Speaks!": What Shakespeare's Women* Might *Have Said* – suggests both these possibilities, which Walter seems to have arrived at independently. The verses supposedly written by Ophelia are called "Ophelia Fooled Ya", and they begin, "'Twas overhearing Hamlet that inspired me" (Walter 2024, 83). Ophelia then reveals that she faked her own madness and suicide and, still following Hamlet's advice, got her to a nunnery, where "I fit right in among the lost and found" (84). Other poems in this remarkable collection also offer pertinent comments on the Ophelia legend. A series attributed to Cressida attacks the period's obsession with virginity and "passive womanhood" (95-6). In "What Gertrude Couldn't Say", the Queen admits that her entire lyrical account of Ophelia's death had been only a lie for Laertes' benefit. People often ask how Gertrude knew about Ophelia's death (often implying that she should have tried to help instead of just standing there admiring the aesthetic spectacle). Here, she explains that she learned the truth from a shepherd who saw the whole thing and was traumatised by it. In blank verse choked with consonants, the opposite of its melodious predecessor, she now gives a true account:

> There was no singing nor no flowery bower.
> Her bloated corpse was found downstream, impaled
> On piercing hawthorn, shredded flesh fish-grey,
> Her lips blue-black, her buckled limbs askew,
> Bruised and smashed, half naked and mud-caked.

Looking back over the centuries, she regrets the way in which her speech has been repeated so often, as well as memorialised in the famous Millais painting:

> And now 'tis bitter irony to hear
> My doctored version spoken as if true
> By hopeful students at a drama school;
> Or view the image of a red-haired maid
> Upheld by floating garments in a stream,
> Shrouded by garlands, all inspired by me,
> A frozen beauty in a gilded frame.
> (158)

A frozen beauty is also a frigid beauty, the opposite of the happy, fulfilled woman in the Ophelia poem. Walter's female characters argue for their right to sexual desire and fulfilment. The lutes and laurels of Belvidera's madness are, increasingly replaced by other kinds of life: the lobsters that Coleridge imported into Belvidera's lines and the squirrel, grasshopper and oyster that Sheridan helpfully added to his parody. There is no longer any room for the pretty, flower-crowned maiden singing under a willow tree, and Ophelia in most modern productions is not a virgin.

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Deanne Williams*

Ophelia, Sewing in Her Closet

Abstract

Ophelia recalls that she was "so affrighted" when Hamlet bursts in on her, "as I was sewing in my closet" (2.1.74). Scenes of Ophelia's madness and drowning, later in the play, surround her with flowers: from the "pansies: that's for thoughts" (4.5.170) and the violets that "withered all when my father died" (177), to the "crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples" (4.7.167) that she makes into garlands before she drowns. Scholarly discussion of Ophelia's flowers is ample, but little attention has been paid to her sewing. This essay considers Ophelia's sewing, an activity that she enjoys in the sequestered privacy of what the Folio text calls her "chamber", within the wider context of early modern girls' needlework. In dialogue with Roszika Parker's classic 1984 study, *The Subversive Stitch*, and in conversation with more recent work by Susan Frye and Anne Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, who draw attention to the connections between needlework and women's authorship and political agency, I explore the special relationship between early modern girlhood and needlework. An essential part of a girls' education as well as a popular pastime, girls' needlework also provides some new contexts for understanding Ophelia's association with flowers. Floral motifs are ubiquitous in early modern embroidery. Historical examples include the heartsease, or wild pansy, that the teenaged Princess Elizabeth Tudor stitched on the book cover of a translation that she made for her stepmother, Katherine Parr, in 1544. And on the Shakespearean stage, Emilia in *Two Noble Kinsmen* makes plans to embroider a daffodil on a skirt, at the very moment when Palamon and Arcite fall in love with her. Whether it reflects an aesthetic impulse for adornment, or the expression of an emotional bond through gift exchange, it is easy to imagine Ophelia sewing embroidered versions of the pansies, violets, daisies and other flowers later identified with her madness and death.

Keywords: Ophelia; *Hamlet*; needlework; embroidery; flowers; girlhood

We often forget that she was sewing. We picture Ophelia mad, drowned, singing, sometimes even playing a lute – but not, so much, sewing. At this moment in the play, however, when Ophelia relates her encounter with Hamlet, who disturbs her, "as I was sewing in my closet" (2.1.74),[1] the audience

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[1] All quotations from *Hamlet*, unless otherwise noted, refer to Shakespeare 2006a and 2006b.

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witnesses Ophelia's powers of keen observation and evocative rhetoric. It is all about Hamlet. Ophelia recalls every detail of Hamlet's appearance, which she describes as a flurry of fabrics: jacket left open, dirty, flapping stockings, and white as a shirt (or as a ghost). She describes Hamlet holding her in his hands, and peering closely at her face, "as 'a would draw it" (88). We even imagine him squinting a little bit as he peers at her, and Ophelia's account ends with Hamlet's eyes fastened to her as he leaves the room; they "bended their light" (97) on her, just as her eyes are fastened on him, with equal intensity. Ophelia's words convey her emotional enmeshment in Hamlet; Polonius's diagnosis of Hamlet, "this is the very ecstasy of love" (99), equally applies to Ophelia. The vivid detail in Ophelia's speech illustrates W. H. Auden's equation of love with the "intensity of attention".[2] But Ophelia's words convey, as well, the intense attention that she had been giving to sewing, before she was interrupted. The picture that she paints of Hamlet – the loose and undone textiles, searching eyes, even the quality of the light – all reflect back on her activity "as I was sewing in my closet", or, as the Folio text reads, her "chamber" (2.1.75), and the abrupt shift in her attention as she looks up from her needlecraft to focus on her beloved.

The fact of Ophelia's sewing has received surprisingly little scholarly attention, although a great deal of recent feminist scholarship explores sewing, in combination with embroidery and needlepoint, as essential skills for early modern girls and women. As both practical work and a creative pastime, sewing was a crucial element of a girls' education. This essay situates Ophelia's sewing within the larger body of feminist historical work that recovers the creativity and labour of girls and women as they were expressed through the textile arts in the Renaissance. Whereas Ophelia's is the most famous female name in Shakespeare, and one of the most iconic dramatic names, ever, the majority of the early modern needlework that survives is by girls and women whose names are forever lost to the historical record. Practiced, ubiquitously, by so many anonymous craftswomen, sewing is represented in remarkably consistent ways throughout the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries as what Carol Humphrey calls, in her *Sampled Lives*, "accomplishment, education, and employment" (2017, 13). Shakespeare uses the key detail of Ophelia sewing, as I shall argue here, to suggest an abundant and potentially salvific imaginative and creative inner world, one cultivated in the face of, and in resistance to, a patriarchal order that was as indifferent as it was repressive.

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[2] The quotation is from Auden's review of Violet Clifton's *The Book of Talbot*: "the first criterion of success in any human activity, the necessary preliminary, whether to scientific discovery or artistic vision, is intensity of attention or, less pompously, love" (qtd in Mendelson 2017, 364).

Sewing was an emphatically gendered activity. Since Rozsika Parker's classic 1984 study, *The Subversive Stitch*, it has been framed as an essential part of a girls' education: keeping girls' and women's idle hands busy, and eyes modestly down. It was one of the ways, as Lena Cowen Orlin (1999) explains, for women to be "invisible in the Renaissance" (183). 'Sewing' could range from humble mending to practical piecework, and include, as well, a wide range of related embroidery and needlepoint activities, workaday as well as ornamental. As a craft, it expressed itself in many different forms, bringing together women from all walks of life, from laundresses and seamstresses, to noble ladies and highly-skilled professionals. The textile arts in particular have been recognised as a rich space for female agency and self-representation in the early modern period. In their *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass explore how embroidery, professionally practiced by men as well as women, was framed as a feminine activity, but also enabled women to "stitch themselves into public visibility" (2000, 134). Susan Frye's wonderfully titled *Pens and Needles, Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* brings together women's textile and textual works as related forms of "expressive media" (2010, 15). The well-known etymological relationship between the weaving of textiles and the creation of textual narratives, via the Latin root *texo*, is reinforced by such classical precedents as Arachne, whose flawless tapestry instigates the ire of Athena, who transforms the girl into a spider, and Philomel, who stitches her testimony about sexual trauma into a sampler. When Marcus compares Lavinia to Philomel in *Titus Andronicus*, "Faire Philomela, why she but lost her tongue, / And in a tedious sampler sowed her mind / But, lovely niece, that mean is cut from thee" (Shakespeare 2007, 2.4.39), he laments that her mutilation by Chiron and Demetrius has deprived her of the opportunity that Philomel had to communicate the details of her trauma through sewing. With no hands, Lavinia must resort to text, instead of textile, by guiding a stick with her mouth to turn the pages of Ovid to find the story of her 'precedent', Philomel.

Ophelia similarly moves between sewing and testimony in *Hamlet*. Her famous speech may be described in terms of *ekphrasis*, a vivid verbal evocation of her visual experience, or even more precisely as *prosopographia*, which the German humanist Susenbrotus describes as: "when either a real or fictional person is described as though by a picture, and is placed before our eyes in the physical form".[3] It is also possible to contemplate this rhetorical moment in relation to the quintessentially Renaissance genre of the emblem: the image of Hamlet "ungartered and down-gyved to his ankle" (2.1.77) is described by Ophelia, with Polonius supplying the motto, "this is the very ecstasy of love" (99). Ophelia's verbal account is so graphic it is almost as if it were actually staged. Film versions of *Hamlet* have made use of the opportunity it provides for a flashback or a kind of silent dumbshow. In Laurence Olivier's 1948 film, it is a recollection spoken by Jean Simmons as an interior monologue, not addressed to Polonius. In the 1990 Mel Gibson *Hamlet*, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, the scene is acted out in an enormous sewing workshop, where Helena Bonham Carter appears to be sewing the Bayeux Tapestry, and Polonius looks down from above. Sewing also features in Grigori Kozintsev's 1946 film; Anastasia Vertinskaya keeps a large sewing frame in her bedchamber, which Hamlet enters. Ophelia sewing is not only part of the conventions of film adaptations of Hamlet: Alice Birch and Katie Mitchell's 2016 stage play *Ophelias Zimmer* opens up and explores the idea of Ophelia's "room of one's own", which is also a prison.[4] Ophelia spends a lot of her time in her room sewing, which Aneta Mancewicz describes as "trapped in trivial and meaningless actions" (2022, 75), and at the end of the plays she uses the scissors in her sewing basket to commit suicide.

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[3] This translation of Susenbrotus' *Epitome* is by Richard Meek, who discusses this scene in *Hamlet* in Meek 2016, 90.

Depictions of Ophelia sewing in her closet regularly appear, as well, in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century traditions of illustrating Shakespeare (see Young 2002 and 2013). In Henry Fuseli's *Hamlets Besuch bei Ophelia* (Hamlet visiting Ophelia, 1810-1815), for example, Ophelia is encircled by a sewing basket, a lute, a book, and a rosary, expressing her confinement by the approved activities of girlhood.[5] However, rather than representing her active engagement in sewing, illustrations of this moment in *Hamlet* instead picture how the activity has been put aside and forgotten by Ophelia, as her attention shifts to Hamlet. In Albert Robida's illustration of Jules Lermina's 1898 French translation of Shakespeare, sewing rests down on Ophelia's lap, while she looks up at Hamlet (Lermina 1898, 33). It is placed on a table in Frank Howard's 1833 *The Spirit of the Plays of Shakespeare*. Harry Perronet Briggs represents Ophelia turning away from it to watch Hamlet as he enters the room.[6] Ophelia casts it to the floor in Charles Taylor's 1783 *Picturesque Beauties of Shakspeare*, which is where it remains in William Egely's mid-nineteenth-century sketch for a subsequent oil painting of Hamlet and Ophelia, now at the Folger Shakespeare Library (Fig. 1). As one of the ways that women can be, as Orlin puts it, "invisible in the Renaissance", sewing tells us many things about Ophelia's character as well as the expectations

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[4] See the helpful and detailed account of this production in Mancewicz 2022.

[5] Henry Fuseli, "Hamlets Besuch bei Ophelia. *Hamlet* 2.1". Kunsthaus Zürich, https://collection.kunsthaus.ch/en/collection/item/8487/ (Accessed 16 June 2025).

[6] "Hamlet and Ophelia (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 1)" by William Greatbach after Henry Perronet Briggs (London: Hurst Robinson & CO., 1825-1826), MET, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/739701 (Accessed 16 June 2025).

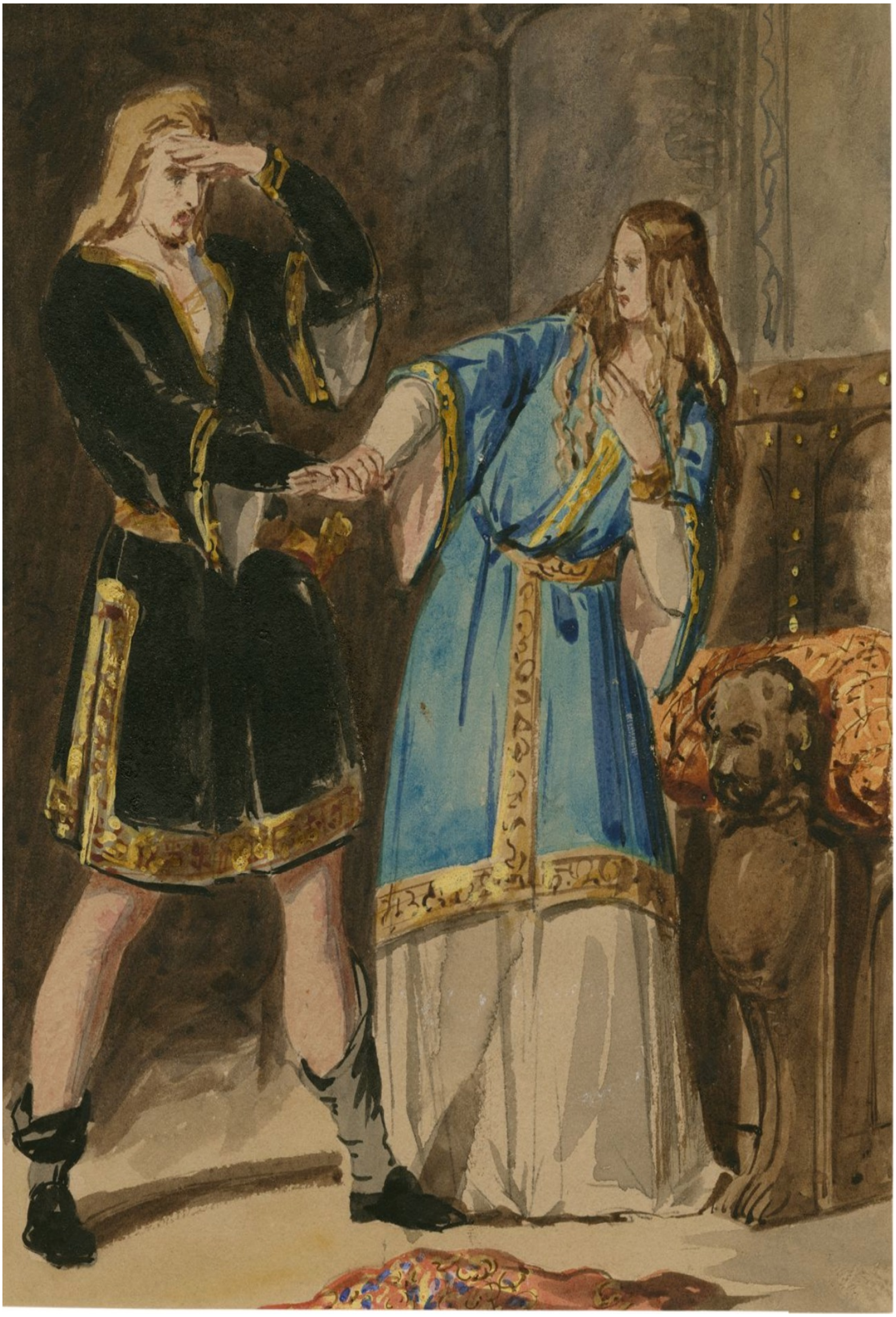

Fig. 1. William Egley, *Original Sketch for His Painting of* Hamlet and Ophelia, Folger Shakespeare Library.

placed on her. It is an everyday activity in which she is engaged in her own private space: one which Hamlet enters, uninvited, and frightens her. Setting her sewing aside in favour of Hamlet, Ophelia sacrifices her creativity, productivity, and privacy to give her lover all of her attention.

Sewing also identifies Ophelia as a girl – or, as Polonius puts it, a "green girl" (1.3.201) – like the skilled Arachne and the testifying Philomel. Along with lute-playing, which I have explored elsewhere, sewing is an activity learned in girlhood that endows Ophelia with skill, independence, and even creativity: qualities that are entirely overlooked by the other characters in *Hamlet* (see Williams 2014 and 2014, 73-91). In his treatise on religious life, *The Pilgrimage of Perfection*, William Bonde connects girlhood with learning to sew: "Whan a virgine begynneth first to lerne to sewe in the sampler" (1526, sig. Siiii). For over a decade now, scholarship on early modern girlhood has called attention to the girl characters in the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, as well as to historical girls as readers, writers, and performers in their own right.[7] This work has revealed girlhood as a time of unusual potential, before marriage and motherhood intervene, that allows girls to develop their abilities, whether they need to earn a living or simply pass the time productively, and use their minds, even achieving, in some cases, 'public visibility'. For dramatic characters as well as for historical figures, sewing and the related textile arts of needlepoint and embroidery enable independent self-support, facilitate communication both subversive and sanctioned, and support creative self-expression. At the same time, they provide an opportunity to develop bonds of friendship in the context of an intergenerational community in which girls and women of different social classes work together.

But what is it exactly that Ophelia is sewing? Of course, Shakespeare's text leaves the sewing open to a range of interpretative possibilities, although her social position in Elsinore suggests it would be something fancy, and decorative. Elsewhere in his work, Shakespeare associates girlhood with embroidering flowers. Emilia, the girl heroine in Shakespeare and Fletcher's 1613 *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, spies some narcissus growing in the garden where she strolls with her Woman: "This garden has a world of pleasures in't. / What flower is this?" (2.2.118-19), she asks. "'Tis called narcissus Madam" (119), is her Woman's reply.[8] (Here we have to just allow for dramatic purposes that Emilia would need to have a narcissus – a daffodil, that most ubiquitous of spring flowers – identified for her: a flower that grows plentifully in Athens as well as in the traditional Amazon birthplace of Themiscyra, on the southern coast of the Black Sea, at the mouth of the Thermodon River). Emilia decides that she would like to "have a gowne full of 'em" (128). She admires their "pretty colour" (129) and imagines how her Woman might "work such flowers in silk" (127). She might have in mind something like this daffodil-embroidered jacket, worn here by Elizabeth Wriothesley, Countess of Southampton, circa 1600 (fig. 2).[9] Pondering, "will't not do / Rarely upon a skirt, wench?" (129-30), Emilia uses a term synonymous with "girl" that reflects both their intimate familiarity and their difference in rank: the noble Emilia, Amazonian Princess and sister-in-law of the Duke, envisions the work, her unnamed Woman actions it.

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[7] See Higginbotham 2013, Lamb 2019, 151-90, Eubanks Winkler 2020, Bicks 2021, as well as Williams 2012 and 2023. See also the helpful entry on "girl" in Findlay 2014, 155-8.

[8] Quotations from *The Two Noble Kinsmen* refer to Shakespeare and Fletcher 1996.

At this moment of complete absorption in the creative process, in collaboration with her Lady, Emilia is observed by the imprisoned cousins, Palamon and Arcite, who fall madly in love with her: "By heaven, she is a Goddess" (134). Emilia is thus absorbed by the "expressive medium" of embroidery and the prospect of her own self-adornment at the precise moment when she is perceived as "marriage material" by the two cousins. Shakespeare and Fletcher thus dramatise the contradiction that her sewing project represents between independence and obedience, and freedom and confinement, as well as the larger contradiction in Emilia's condition, as an Amazon princess held captive by the Athenians. Palamon and Arcite are in prison, while Emilia strolls about the garden, but their male gaze imprisons Emilia in their own scenario of courtship and rivalry that confines her at the very moment that she is contemplating the satisfaction of her own creative vision through needlework.

Emilia's choice of flower provides an occasion to bring up the Ovidian tale of the beautiful boy, Narcissus, indifferent to the love of the nymph Echo, whose self-loving downward gaze at his reflection in the pond follows the same curving shape of the spring flower that shares his name. Here, however, Palamon and Arcite take on the role of Echo rather than Narcissus, while Emilia remains indifferent, looking down, not at her reflection in the pond but at her own source of artistic inspiration. In the ancient world, the narcissus was known to have narcotic properties. The name comes from the Greek ναρκῶ, "to make numb", and it was said to grow along the banks of the river Styx. Because of their association with the underworld, Greeks planted them near tombs: the drooping heads of their flowers thus denote

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[9] This portrait of Elizabeth Wriothesley (née Vernon), Countess of Southampton (1572-1655) and wife of Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southhampton (1573-1624), and likely the dedicatee of Shakespeare's sonnets, was painted by an unknown artist in about 1600. The painting is now in the private collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry (Buccleuch Collection, Broughton House, Northamptonshire, England).

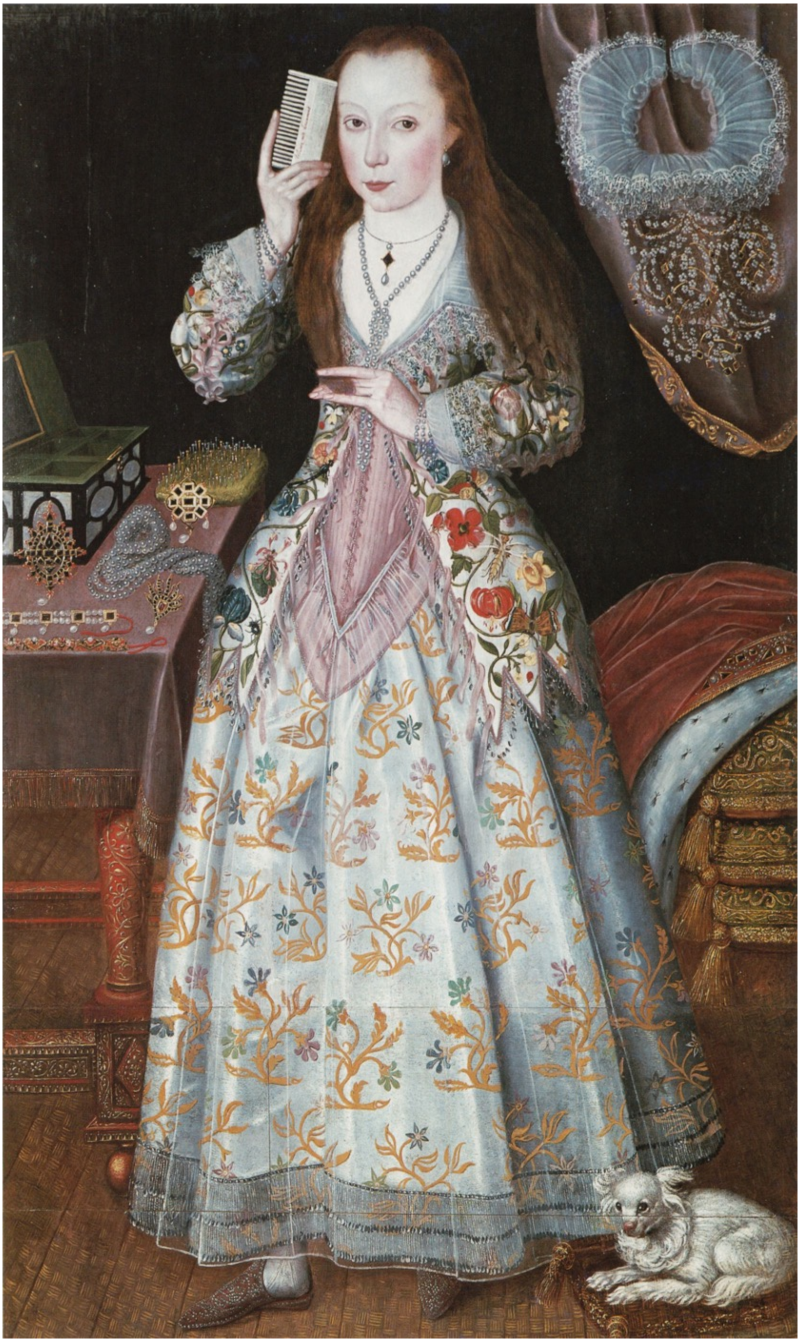

Fig. 2. Elizabeth Wriothesley, Countess of Southampton, circa 1600. Buccleuch Collection, Broughton House, Northamptonshire, England. Wikicommons.

not only the self-love of Narcissus but also the downcast heads of the grief-stricken. In Robert Herrick's "The Dirge for Jephthah's Daughter: Sung by the Virgins", daffodils are laid on the grave of a girl described as a "virgin martyr" (Herrick 1891, 196). A flower associated with loss and grief, the daffodil anticipates the fate, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, of the young warrior Arcite, killed in a fall from his horse just after he wins, in combat, the hand of Emilia, and it resonates, as well, with the grief-stricken Queens who interrupt the nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta by begging the Athenian Duke to help them bury their husbands at the play's opening.

Elsewhere in Shakespeare, daffodils are listed first among the earliest "flowers of the spring", including primroses and violets, that Proserpina was picking when she was abducted by Pluto, or, here, Dis [ie. Hades], when Perdita addresses her fellow shepherdesses in *The Winter's Tale*:

> O Proserpina,
> For the flowers now that frighted thou letst fall
> From Dis's wagon! Daffodils
> That come before the swallow dares, and take
> The winds of March with beauty.
> (4.4.110-20)[10]

We could think of Emilia, in this mythographic context, as a flower plucked from a garden, and, like Proserpina, waylaid, even abducted, by male desire, at a moment when her attention was otherwise engaged with flowers. Perdita, however, "most goddess-like pranked up" (10) as the goddess "Flora" (2), creates a rhetorical bouquet, in this speech, that includes violets, primroses, oxlips, and lilies. Over the course of her dialogue with Florizel, and as an indication of the perfection of their love, the bouquet transforms from an adornment for the "virgin branches" (115) of her fellow shepherdesses to a garland for her lover to "a bank for love to lie and play on" (130). They are, later, an expression of an artificial, staged love in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* when the Wooer brings them to please the Jailer's Daughter, "I'll bring a bevy, / A hundred black-eyed maids that love as I do, / With chaplets on their heads of daffodillies" (4.1.71-3). By contrast to the eager and willing Perdita, or the eternally-frustrated boy-crazy Jailer's Daughter, the chaste Emilia describes her reluctance to wed as "bride-habited but maiden-hearted" (5.1.150-1), in her prayer to the goddess Diana. She would rather be embroidering daffodils with her lady.

The daffodil thus offers Shakespeare and Fletcher, as dramatists, a set of rich associations with loss and grief, girlhood and pathos, fused with the renewal and hope of springtime and its attendant erotic impulses.[11] But what would Emilia say, as a crafter, of her own sewing project? At first glance, the idea of embroidering a daffodil – with the mutually-reinforcing downcast gaze, intent on needlework – reflects the decorative and ornamental value of a modest and submissive femininity within a patriarchal system, and thus reflects back to Emilia the transitory nature of a girlhood that is, ultimately, not her own. On the other hand, Emilia is inspired by nature to make something "rare" and "pretty" to please herself, with all the agency of the artificer. Blurring the distinction between the adornment, and the adorned – and the adorner – the daffodil offers a meditation on Emilia's selfhood, on her girlhood. Embroidery allows girls – whose experience is distinct from women, as they are children, and from boys, as they are female — to draw an urgent, personal connection between the flowers that they sew and their own experience. Although real flowers – cultivated, plucked, arranged, admired – eventually wither and die, an embroidered flower provides imaginative access to an ideal of girlhood and selfhood that the sewing girl can create, control, and preserve.

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[10] All quotations from *The Winter's Tale* refer to Shakespeare 1996.

In her dialogue with her Woman, Emilia also illustrates the collaborative nature of a craft that brought girls and women of different ages and stages together, establishing reciprocity, mutuality, and exchange through shared activity. Elsewhere in Shakespeare sewing is represented as an intergenerational female enterprise: a stage direction in *Coriolanus* reads: "*Enter Volumnia and Virgilia, mother and wife to Martius. They set them down on two low stools and sew*" (Shakespeare 2013, 1.3 SD), and when Valeria joins them, they create an intergenerational trio of maid, wife, and widow. In *Pericles*, Marina who is raised, as a child, alongside Philoten weaves, together with her friend, the "sleided silk / With fingers long, small, and white as milk" and "would with sharp needle wound / The cambric" (Shakespeare, 2004, 4.0.21-4). "Sleded" is a kind of untwisted silk specifically used in needlework, providing an emblem of the simplicity their girlhood friendship by contrast to the twisted designs of Dionyza, anticipated by the wounds inflicted by the needle, "hurting it" (25, see *OED s.v.* "sleded"). And after she is kidnapped by pirates, and sold to a brothel, sewing is part of a bouquet of activities that broadcast Marina as a cultivated, educated girl, rescuing her from sexual enslavement; as she begs her captor, Bolt, "proclaim that I can sing, weave, sew and dance" (4.5.186). Singing also goes along with sewing in *Twelfth Night*, when Orsino associates Feste's song "Come Away Death", with "the spinsters, and the knitters in the sun", and recalls that "the free maids that weave their thread with bones, / Do use to chant it" (Shakespeare 2008, 2.4.42-7). Although Orsino is evoking the labours of working women, who weave and knit for their livelihood, he reminds us that unmarried maids, like Ophelia, are spinsters, illustrating the inextricable connection between sewing and the single girl. [12]

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[11] In *Cleansed*, Sarah Kane challenges her directors and designers with this stage direction: "*out of the ground grow daffodils. They burst upwards, their yellow covering the entire stage*" (1998, 133).

For Emilia, sewing daffodils on a skirt allows her to draw an urgent, personal connection between the flower that she spies in the garden and her own experience, and this activity locates her within the kind of vibrant, chatty, female community pictured elsewhere in Shakespeare. Ophelia's sewing, by contrast, has more in common with Orlin's idea about the ways women can be "invisible in the Renaissance". Located in her "closet", the second quarto Ophelia sews in an enclosed room, derived from the Anglo-Norman *closette* and the French *clos*, via the Latin root, *clausum*, for closed, or shut. Angel Day in the 1586 *The English Secretorie* states: "Wee do call the most secret place in the house appropriate vnto our owne priuate studies, and wherein wee repose and deliberate by deepe consideration of all our waightiest affaires, a Closet" (1592, 109; see also Stewart 1995, 83 and Orlin 1998). In the Folio, Ophelia is "sewing in my chamber", an equally private location but more akin to a bedroom than a study or *studiolo*. "My Ladye", writes John Paston in one of his letters, "hathe takyn hyr chambre", borrowed from the French *chambre* and related to the Latin (and Greek) *camera* (see Gairdner 1896, 3: 64). The idea of Ophelia's seclusion in a private "closet" before Hamlet enters, uninvited, carries over to the expectation, later in the play, that Hamlet visiting Gertrude in her "closet" will provide the occasion for intimate conversation; Polonius's presence in Hamlet's "mother's closet", concealed behind the arras (a tapestry, named for Arras, a city famous for its textiles), constitutes a further invasion of a private female space. Ophelia's Folio "chamber", similarly, anticipates the line "And dupped the chamber door" (4.1.52) in the song "Tomorrow is St. Valentine's Day", which Ophelia sings in her mad scene. Ophelia's location, in chamber or closet, raises the whole issue of Elsinore itself as a place defined by chambers and closets, staircases and battlements and other sites of enclosure. As Richard Brathwaite writes in his conduct book, *The English Gentlewoman* (1631, 45), "Be you in your Chambers or Private Closets; be you retired from the eyes of men". But be it her closet or her chamber, Ophelia's private space is, in the patriarchal culture of Elsinore, far from a "room of one's own", simply there to be invaded.

Studies of the Renaissance chamber and closet by Alan Stewart (1995), Georgianna Ziegler (1999), Lena Cowen Orlin (1998 and 2008, 296-326) and Mimi Yiu (2015, 97-137) show us how these are spaces of intensely private but not always entirely solitary retreat and recreation. Orlin's work in particular demonstrates how access to women's private rooms was limited but nevertheless potentially open to family members, friends, colleagues, servants. For example, Lady Anne Clifford (who was also devoted to sewing) snubbed prominent male visitors by taking refuge in her chamber recording her solitude in her famous diary: "I did not stir forth from my chamber".[13] But Ophelia does not say, "as I was sewing with my ladies" in her chamber. A quick look at the first quarto of *Hamlet*, where Ofelia is "walking in the gallery all alone" (6.43), a covered place for walking, rather than sitting and sewing, suggests how Shakespeare uses different strategies across the quarto and folio texts of *Hamlet* to establish how Ophelia seeks solitary refuge from the plays' relentlessly male dominated world. The invasion of her private space in her chamber or closet would read, and be staged, very differently if we were to imagine her sitting in the company of a group of girls and women, singing or chatting away merrily as they sew.[14]

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[12] On working women, see McNeill 2007 and Korda 2011.

Shakespeare typically identifies sewing as a collaborative, rather than individual, activity. Just as Emilia selects daffodils with her Woman in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Helena and Hermia pursue a shared sewing project in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Helena's recollection of her friendship with Hermia centres how, "like two artificial gods" (or goddesses) they "have with our needles created both one flower, / Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion, / Both warbling of one song, both in one key" (3.2.203-6).[15] She describes their friendship vividly in a moment of cooperative needlework, reinforcing their identical appearance and aesthetic taste. Helena's recollection of the pair as "artificial gods" – artificers – recalls Palamon and Arcite's description of Emilia as a "goddess" ("behold! And wonder!", 2.2.133). Their friendship itself is also like a floral sampler, a pleasing thing they actively created together, and as her speech moves metaphorically, biologically, from flower to fruit, their flowering and ripening friendship is compared, with innocent and unabashed eroticism, to "a double cherry":

> So we grew together
> Like to a double cherry, seeming parted

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[13] Lady Anne Clifford, *The Memoir of 1603 and the Diaries of 1616-1619* A Critical Edition ed. Katherine Acheson (Peterborough: Broadview, 2007): 185. She writes "Upon the 25th came down hither to see me my Lord Russell and my cousin Sir Edward Gorge. My Lord made very much of them and showed them the house and the chambers and my closet but I did not stir forth of my chamber". Note Clifford's use of both "chamber" and "closet" here, and the distinction between a closet as a place that can be shown to male visitors, and the chamber as a place where she can avoid them completely.

[14] On sewing and tale-telling, see Hester Lees-Jeffries 2017, 165-73.

[15] All quotations from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from Shakespeare 2017 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

> But yet an union in partition,
> Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
> So with two seeming bodies but one heart
> (3.2.208-12)

When Helena concludes her speech by describing their ancient love as a textile, "And will you rend our ancient love asunder?" (215), suggesting a grief-stricken rending of garments, she reworks the image of their separation as two cherries, broken apart.

In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare elaborates the girlhood friendship of Helena and Hermia into an even more passionate bond between Emilia and her childhood bosom buddy, Flavina. As she describes it to her sister, Hippolyta:

> The flower that I would pluck
> And put between my breasts (then but beginning
> to swell about the blossom), oh, she would long
> Till she had such another, and commit it
> To the like innocent cradle, where phoenix-like
> They died in perfume.
> (1.3.66-71)

A figure for the fleeting nature of their childhood – the innocent cradle! – as well as for their lost love, since Flavina has died, the flower embodies the girls' swelling feelings as well as their incipient adolescence. Flavina's desire to possess the same flower as Emilia represents the mutuality and reciprocity of their relationship through adornment and imitation: "on my head no toy/ But was her pattern" (71-2). The word "pattern" here conveys how Emilia mirrored Flavina, following the pattern set by her friend. However, this sense of replication and mirroring in their friendship also recalls the common practice of pricking out, on fabric, a floral image from an embroidery pattern book or even an illustrated botanical text such as John Gerard's 1597 *Herball, Or General Historie of Plantes.* The holes made by pricking through the paper were filled with charcoal power, transferring the floral image onto the fabric in a process called 'pouncing', which provided a pattern of the flower to be followed with thread.

The phoenix-like death of their flowers reduces the friends' two separate natures to one, since there is only ever one phoenix. This non-sexual form of reproduction underpins Emilia's pronouncement on the singular closeness of girlhood friendship, which seems both intensely erotic but also chaste: "The true love 'tween maid and maid may be / More than in sex dividual" (81-2). But for Ophelia, sewing in her chamber or closet is a solitary activity.

It brings with it none of the camaraderie or emotional intensity enjoyed by her counterparts in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Pericles*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. Sewing may endow her with creativity and craft, but in *Hamlet*, it also underscores her solitude, revealing what she is so tragically lacking in her life, and leaving her open and vulnerable to Hamlet's brutal and traumatic invasion. Where is the mother who taught her to sew? Or the friends to sing along with? Ophelia's sewing in *Hamlet* raises the idea of skill, agency, creativity, and community, only to draw attention to their absence.

To return to the question, then: what is Ophelia sewing? While a contemporary director could select anything from mending a shirt to sewing a shroud to Zeffirelli's Bayeux Tapestry, surviving historical examples of girls' sewing projects invariably involve floral motifs.[16] One famous example is the young Princess Elizabeth's embroidery of her signature flower, the pansy, on her translation of the *Mirour de l'ame pêcheresse*, which she presented as a New Year's gift to her stepmother, Katherine Parr, in 1544.[17] She was eleven at the time: the same age that Emilia was when she was friends with Flavina. The English "pansy" is derived from the French *pensée*: as Ophelia explains in *Hamlet*, "pansies, that's for thoughts" (4.5.170). The pansy signifies many aspects of the young princess's translation and embroidery project. The French origins of the flower's name reinforce the nature of her translation from French into English, while the flower's association with humility conveys the precarious nature of Elizabeth's position in the royal household. Otherwise known as "love in idleness", the pansy may also serve as an emblem of the Princess's studious, reclusive girlhood at Hatfield House, while its other name, "heartsease", speaks to the spiritual consolations of the text she was translating. Along with fanciful names such as "Kiss me at the garden gate", the flower is also known, in various European languages, as the stepmother's violet: perhaps alluding to Elizabeth's familial relationship to Katherine, and, behind that, the loss of her own mother, Anne Boleyn, who spent her own girlhood in France, and who would also have never been far from her thoughts.

The pansy or heartsease had a long connection with Queen Elizabeth: it is the very same "little western flower" juiced by Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and associated with that "fair vestal", Queen Elizabeth, who passes on "in maiden meditation, fancy free" (2.1.166). Lady Elizabeth Russell dramatises this connection in her 1592 Bisham Entertainment, which was performed for Queen Elizabeth when she visited her home at Bisham Abbey on her summer progress. Lady Russell's two teenaged daughters, Anne and Elizabeth, play the parts of the shepherdesses, Isabella and Sybilla, described in the entertainment as "two Virgins keeping sheepe, and sowing in their Samplers" (Nichols 2014, 3:604)[18]. Pan engages them in dialogue about their needlecraft, which represents the "follies of the gods" and "the honour of Virgins" as well as "Roses, Eglentine, harts-ease, wrought with Queenes stitch" (603) an intensely complicated diamond-shaped stitch. Along with the Tudor Rose, the spiky eglantine, and thoughtful pansy, the sampler serves as a nod to their royal audience, reflecting an image of the Queen back to herself, as well as the girls' aspirations to join the community of Maids of Honour at Elizabeth's court ("in maiden meditation, fancy free"). When Pan later chides them, "How doe you burne time, & drowne beauty in pricking of clouts, when you should bee penning of Sonnets?" (605), their ambitious mother also imagines the girls as authors of texts as well as textiles, working in the genre *par excellence* of the Elizabethan court.

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[16] Marvin Rosenberg, in *The Masks of Hamlet*, has some other suggestions: "a wedding dress? A scarf for a man?" (1992, 364).

[17] See Elizabeth I's translation of Marguerite de Navarre's *Le Miroir de l'âme Pécheresse* in Elizabeth I 2008, 40-128. For discussion of her embroidery as a gift, see Klein 1997.

Lady Anne Clifford's Great Picture depicts the Russell sisters' cousin, Anne, aged 15, with her hand resting on a floral sewing project (Fig. 3). It connects the girlhood pastime of needlework with personal grief and loss. The first panel represents her at the age she was in 1605, when she lost her father, the Earl of Cumberland, who appears in the central panel with her mother and brothers who died in childhood. Anne commissioned the panel in 1646, after her properties and title were restored to her: in one of the most famous legal cases of the period, Anne had lost her inheritance which was meant, in accordance with absolute primogeniture, to go to her. This is an image, then, of girlhood, interrupted: it looks like Anne has just set aside her lute and rested her open music book on her embroidery work, in a room that, along with its caseful of books, some of which are even scattered on the floor, is a veritable hub of girlhood activity. Anne's library includes John Gerard's ever-popular and multi-purpose *Herball*, Gerard was one of Shakespeare's neighbours in the city of London, and his important botanical text was a much-used source for floral embroidery patterns.

Anne Clifford's embroidery depicts the Elizabethan heartsease, beside the tulip-shaped green leaves, a stylised ornament: evoking, like Elizabeth's book cover, a girlhood that was lost or compromised by a situation that required serious, vigilant, thoughts of self-preservation and strategy. Heartsease may also, circa 1605, serve as a nostalgic recollection of her father: she includes it on the upper right corner of the letter she embroidered to him at age 8, beside the word "service". It also appears among the roses, cornflowers, and carnations embroidered on her stunning dress, studded with the occasional

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[18] I discuss the Bisham Entertainment at greater length in Williams 2023, 131-43.

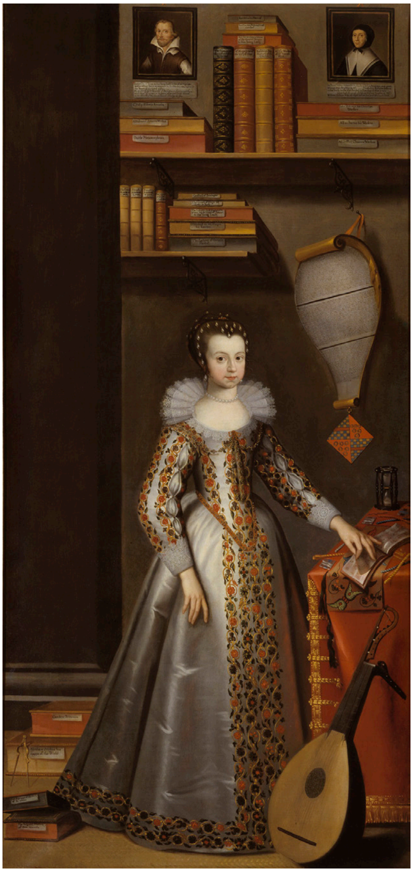

Fig. 3. Jan Velcamp, *Lady Anne Clifford's Great Picture*, 1646 (left panel). Wikicommons.

owl: a figure of wisdom, identified with the goddess Minerva, to which Anne compares herself, in her lonely existence, as an "an owl in the desert". A lifelong avid embroiderer, Anne Clifford kept her famous diary from 1603-1675 (age 13-85). It is filled with updates on various projects, lists of the silk thread and pearls she purchased, and accounts of the embroidered "work" she completed for friends or sent to them to complete, with her ladies in her private chambers.

Floral embroidery serves as textile counterpart to the sequestered lives of early modern girls with too much "time on their hands", but it also demarcates all-female devotional and educational spaces. In the early sixteenth century, the Augustinian sisters of the Hospital of our Lady in Mechelen, Belgium, constructed elaborate mixed media "Enclosed gardens", retable cabinets in which hundreds of silk flowers create an idealised spiritual paradise that encloses statuettes, or *poupées*, of the Virgin Mary and virgin martyrs such as St Ursula and St Catherine (Watteeuw and Iterbeke 2018). The embroidered flowers serve here as extensions and expressions of their religious commitment to figures identified with girlhood and virginity.

In early French Canada, the nuns of the Ursuline convent of Quebec, founded in 1639, the oldest institution of learning for women in North America (named for the virgin martyr who crossed the ocean with 11000 virgins), were famous, for centuries, for their embroidery (Turgeon 2002). Attributed to its founder Marie l'Incarnation, their famous altar cloth, with its embroidered daffodils, roses, and lilies, emblem of the Virgin Mary, and central image of St. Anne's education of the Virgin Mary, reflects the convent's founding pedagogical and religious mission, which was to convert and educate indigenous girls. The craft of embroidery here forms part of the imposition of European religion and culture within the broader context of colonial expansion, linking the extensive global history of the ancient Silk Road, which connected Europe to Asia, to the educational institution founded, all the way across the Atlantic, in colonial Quebec (Marie de l'Incarnation had been, in her previous life in Tours, married to a 'master silk worker'). Embroidery and the silk trade supplied economic and artistic opportunities for women. But altarcloth, with its floral embroidery and iconic image of the education of the Virgin Mary, serves as an early example of a centuries-long Canadian history of using educational institutions to suppress indigenous culture and people. However, the indigenous students brought their own rich traditions of embroidery, using moosehair, porcupine quill, and birchbark, which they shared with the nuns, before hopping over the convent wall to rejoin their families, resisting Marie l'Incarnation's attempts to "Franciser" or frenchify them (de Stecher 2002 and Cowan 2018).

A very different kind of pedagogical institution produced the embroidery gifted to Queen Anne at the conclusion of the masque of *Cupid's Banishment*, performed by the girls of Deptford Ladies School in Greenwich on May 4, 1617.[19] Transposing the February tradition of medieval Candlemas plays, in which girls celebrate the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary through a candlelight procession, into a Stuart masque of spring, *Cupid's Banishment* features girls' sewing at a climactic moment in the conflict between Cupid, accused of "lust and rape and foul incestuous acts" (64) and the classroom/ garden, peopled by girl student/ nymphs. Sporting their needlework "cornets of artificial flowers" (285 SD) as well as "many curious flowers wrought with silver and silk with pleasant colours", Queen Anne's Goddaughters (children of courtiers, all named Anne) welcome the queen into their chaste circle with "needlework gifts" (302 SD) that follow the alphabetising logic of the schoolroom: one an acorn (A for Anne), symbol of steadfastness – and of small things that grow up to become big, the other a rosemary (R for Regina) – and, as Ophelia says, "for remembrance" (White 1996).[20] The alphabetical logic of their needlepoint gifts illustrate Frye's point that "writing and needlework were . . . separate but related forms of expression" (2010, 9). Although the girls' description of it as "a piece of work far richer than the golden Fleece" (319) may be a bit far-fetched, their sewing projects bring the Queen, with what they call "silent rhetoric" (327), into their own community with a slogan of tidy self-reliance: "our muse is homespun, our action is our own" (332).

For Marina, the sewing skills learned side-by-side with Philoten, with the guidance of Cleonyza, stand her in good stead after she is deprived of their company, and is forced to make her way on her own when she is ejected from Tarsus, kidnapped by pirates, and sold into sex work. Marina begs Bolt the brothel-keeper to, instead, "Proclaim that I can sing, weave, sew, and dance/ With other virtues which I'll keep from boast, / And I will undertake all these to teach" (4.5.186-8). In a world where female fortunes are vulnerable to masculine whim, which is as true of the ancient Mediterranean of Pericles as it is of medieval Elsinore and early modern London, it helps for a girl to have a skill, especially a teachable one. We thus find Marina in "an honest house" (5.0.2), toward the end of *Pericles*, putting her education to work: "Deep clerks she dumbs and with her nee'le composes / Nature's own shape, of bud, bird, branch, or berry, / That e'en her art sisters the natural roses./ Her inkle, silk, twin with the rubied cherry" (5.0.5-8). With her inkle, a kind of linen tape used in weaving, and silk, Marina flowers that rival the natural beauty of the rose.

Flowers – not servants, or sisters, or classmates, or students – keep Ophelia company throughout *Hamlet*. Well before her mad scene, the discourse that revolves around Ophelia is consistently floral in nature. In his conversation with Ophelia, Laertes compares Hamlet's favour to a "violet in the youth of primy nature" (1.3.7); at the end of the play, Laertes expresses the wish that "from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring" (5.1.228-9). Ophelia herself frets about her brother on the "primrose path of dalliance" (1.3.49); Ophelia describes Hamlet as "th'expectation and rose of the fair state" (3.1.151) and herself as a bee, "sucking the honey of his musicked vows" (155). Laertes calls Ophelia, herself, the "rose of May" (4.5.156). And, later, Gertrude's incestuous love for Claudius, "takes off the rose / From the fair forehead of an innocent love, / And sets a blister there" (3.4.40-2). The floral lore consistently identified with Ophelia anticipates, of course, the "sweet flowers" of Ophelia's mad scene, where her singing comes out as jumbled fragments or, in Q1, a solo performance, as opposed to the unison "one note" or harmonious "chant" of other sewing girls in Shakespeare. We can imagine her tiny but iconic speech as a kind of sampler, featuring rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbines, rue, daisy, and violet, translating the lessons of girlhood to a study in heartbreak. We may think of her drowning as a brilliant embroidered skirt, like Emilia's, with garlands of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples. Floral garlands, described as "virgin crants" (5.1.220) and "maiden strewments" (221), are finally scattered on Ophelia's grave, which Gertude "thought thy bride-bed to have decked" (234-5). Flowers evoke all of the promise of Ophelia's girlhood, as well as its tragic end.

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[19] I discuss *Cupid's Banishment* in Williams 2023, 171-6.

[20] On literacy and embroidery samplers, see Calabresi 2008.

Flowers thus represent the actual content of early modern girls' sewing, but they also perform a symbolic double duty that richly incorporates all of: fleeing time, evanescent youth, growth and renewal, delicate vulnerability, pleasing ornament, and creative potential. Ophelia's flowers have been read as figures for her sexual desire, her virginity, her menstruation, her sexuality, her contraception, her desire to self-medicate, and even her abortion. They have been taken, as well, evidence of her medical expertise, her gifts as a gardener, and her resistance and rebellion and even as an emblem of the entire ecofeminist enterprise. As I have suggested here, Ophelia speaks the language of flowers through sewing. By recovering this quintessential activity of early modern girlhood, we root Ophelia in the material practices of her day. And we open up a space where we can imagine her independent thoughts blossoming, and where textile arts engage with the natural world in a private space – however fleeting and vulnerable – of creative absorption and meditation on beauty and wholeness and growth and renewal.

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Anne Sophie Refskou*

“Her mood will needs be pitied”: Emotional Ideologies in the Afterlives of Ophelia[1]

Abstract

This essay discusses emotional ideologies in the afterlives of Ophelia in order to note the very different ways in which Shakespeare’s first audiences might have perceived her affective impact in the play. Rather than reading Ophelia and her madness through the lens of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations, which turned her into an aesthetic object of pity, I suggest that Shakespeare reintroduces her in the play’s penultimate act as a figure with a powerful affective impact on others and with the potential to overturn what the emotion historian William Reddy might call the “emotional regime” of the court of Elsinore. Ophelia’s madness ostensibly encourages politically subversive emotion, as we learn in the cryptic description of her effect on those who listen to her distracted speech – a description given by Horatio in the First Folio and by an unnamed Gentleman in the Second Quarto of *Hamlet*. In providing Ophelia with this effect on others, I suggest that Shakespeare demonstrates his characteristic engagement with classical literature and that early modern audiences too might have associated Ophelia with certain female forebears of classical literature whose madness is both affective – in the sense of provoking pity in others – and subversively connected with violence and revenge. I focus, in particular, on the classical figure of Cassandra who also appears in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, a play roughly contemporary with *Hamlet*, arguing that the Ophelia/ Cassandra comparison helps the critic shed the debilitating emotional ideologies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations.

Keywords: *Hamlet*; Ophelia; emotion; pity; representation; classical literature; Cassandra

Throughout her extensive afterlife – on the stage, in visual culture and in literary criticism – one of Ophelia’s key functions has been to inspire feelings of pity and compassion. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, first according to Claudius and later her brother Laertes, she is “poor Ophelia” (4.5.84 and

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[1] This essay began as a paper at the conference ‘The Receptions of Ophelia 1599-1900’ at University of Verona in 2024. I am grateful to Emanuel Stelzer for organising the conference and to other delegates for helpful comments on the paper. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewer for the *Skenè* journal whose generous and constructive suggestions helped improve this essay.

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4.7.183)[2], and in Gertrude's beautiful, if doubtful, elegiac description of her drowning, she is a "poor wretch" (4.7.180-81) – "poor" implying an emotional poverty contrasting sharply with her courtly status. Yet it is not so much Shakespeare's play as her countless subsequent representations that have made "poor Ophelia" into an object of our perennially pitying gaze. Visual culture especially – above all, John Everett Millais's portrayal of the passive, aesthetically impeccable Ophelia in the process of drowning as she floats down a woodland brook (1851-1852) – has taught us to 'feel sad' when we look at Ophelia. However, as I will argue in the following, the cultural framing of the pitying of Ophelia also means that the *kind* of pity she is repeatedly made to elicit on the stage, page, screen or canvas is subject to radical change across time; it is not simply an automatic and universal affective response to her fate that connects audiences, readers and viewers regardless of their historical, cultural or geographical contexts. Rather, the different ways in which Ophelia has been represented at different moments in history reflect different understandings of what sort of an emotion pity *is*, and also what feelings of pity are meant to *do*, aesthetically, socially and politically.

That changing representations of Ophelia should reflect changes in understanding of what it means to pity her should hardly be surprising, since Ophelia's representations also reflect other kinds of cultural-historical change – changes in attitudes to female beauty, for example, or to female madness. As Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams write, citing Elaine Showalter's influential essay from the mid-eighties on historical representations of Ophelia:

> there is no story of Ophelia that is not properly the history of her representation, reflecting each era's characteristic construction of women's roles, madness, and essentialized notions of femininity. Ophelia is a screen on which a culture projects its preoccupations and reflects its values back onto itself. (2011, 2)

As Sally Barnden has moreover shown in her careful analysis of photographic iterations of drowning Ophelias – so many of which reference Millais's iconic *Ophelia* and other nineteenth-century paintings derived from Millais – Ophelia as a cultural trope and icon has come to exist independently of *Hamlet*, not least because the vast majority of her representations show a moment that does not exist on the stage – that is, her offstage death as it is narrated by Gertrude in the play (Barnden 2020, 152). The persistent cultural act of representing Ophelia in the moment of death by (suicidal) drowning has enabled the equally persistent shaping of Ophelia into the cultural representative of female psycho-pathology *par excellence*. In 1942, Gaston

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[2] All quotations from *Hamlet*, unless otherwise indicated, refer to Shakespeare 2000.

Bachelard coined the term "Ophelia complex" to describe what he saw as a fundamental association between feminine suicide and the element of water – an element which lends a certain kind of projected beauty to Ophelia's death: "Ophélie pourra donc être pour nous le symbole du suicide féminin. Elle est vraiment une créature née pour mourir dans l'eau, elle y retrouve, comme dit Shakespeare, 'son propre élément'. L'eau est l'élément de la mort jeune et belle . . . " (Bachelard 1942, 112-13; Ophelia, then, becomes for us the symbol of female suicide. She is truly a creature born to die in water; she has found, as Shakespeare says, 'her true element'. Water is the element of youthful and beautiful death).[3] Citing Bachelard, Barnden points out that:

> her death by drowning is treated as psychologically determined for Ophelia and for women who are 'like' her: mad women, tragic women, women who are unlucky in love . . . As Ophelia is reproduced, she drifts further and further away from *Hamlet*; no longer a character but a complex. (2020, 154)

This aesthetically driven pathologising of Ophelia and, as Barnden wryly phrases it, of women 'like' her, is compounded by her endless representations, which simultaneously stipulate a certain understanding of how to *pity* Ophelia. Longstanding traditions of interpreting and representing Ophelia have ensured that pitying her is an emotional experience that largely relies on perceiving her madness and her suicide as aesthetically appealing – never ugly, repulsive or frightening. The same emotional experience also relies on perceiving Ophelia as a passive object, a prettified vision of psychopathology that remains unthreatening by rarely confronting the viewer in any direct way.

Showalter's essay made it clear that one of the responsibilities of feminist criticism when dealing with the afterlife of Shakespeare's Ophelia is to expose the "ideology of representation" (1985, 92). In so doing, Showalter argues, the feminist critic "brings to the foreground the issues in an ongoing debate about the cultural links between femininity, female sexuality, insanity, and representation" (78). In this essay, however, I will develop Showalter's prerogative by proposing a critical responsibility to expose the ideology of emotion in the afterlife of Ophelia. By which I mean that pitying Ophelia is not, never has been, and never could be, a neutral emotional act, nor is it, or can it be, automatically a positive one, given that it participates in longstanding representational traditions of objectifying and pathologising her femininity. Moreover, I will suggest, the ways in which we still pity Ophelia, no matter how 'contemporary', or even 'universal', they may feel, have been heavily influenced by her late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century afterlives.

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[3] All translations, unless stated otherwise, are mine.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries irrevocably shaped Ophelia into what is now a familiar figure of pathetic grief and madness, at times adding a veiled element of sexuality. Paintings – above all, Millais's *Ophelia* but also John William Waterhouse's *Ophelia* paintings (1889, 1894, and 1910), which resemble Millais's painting in their Pre-Raphaelite style and indeed, *pace* Showalter, in their representational ideology – established a visual iconography that is still widely reiterated by popular culture and that saturates the internet. As I will show, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary criticism also tended to emphasise Ophelia's fundamental lack of agency, her helplessness, encouraging an *un*critically pitying response to her fate, one that like so many of her visual representations traps her in a static and passive state.

To be sure, feminist critics, such as indeed Showalter, have done much valuable work to change the critical perception of Ophelia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and contemporary theatre productions frequently seek ways to provide Ophelia with at least a degree of agency, yet the influence of earlier Ophelias has turned out to be remarkably hard to shake, perhaps because doing so would require us somehow to 'unsee' the many representations of beautiful and placid victimhood that we have inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In other words, seeing Shakespeare's Ophelia without also seeing Millais's *Ophelia* – or other 'Ophelias' from the iconographic catalogue that Millais unwittingly spawned – seems like a near-impossible endeavour.

Nonetheless, in order to revisit and reassess the emotional impact of the reception of Ophelia, I will suggest a comparative route that might allow us to bypass that catalogue. Rather than looking at Ophelia through an eighteenth and nineteenth-century lens, I suggest that we adopt an entirely different epochal frame and look at her by way of her classical forebears, or more specifically that we place her alongside key female characters from classical antiquity who find their way into Shakespeare's plays through his characteristically intense reception of classical literature, but who also help unsettle the idea of what it means to pity Ophelia. I will focus on the figure of Cassandra, the Trojan princess and prophetess, who appears as a character in a Shakespearean play that is roughly contemporary with *Hamlet* – though its critical reception has been very different – namely *Troilus and Cressida.* Comparing Cassandra and Ophelia may be an unorthodox move, but, as I will show, this reading has a key function, because it offers an alternative way of pitying Ophelia – one that recognises that her emotional impact in Shakespeare's play, so easily categorised as pathetic, is instead filled with a political tension that exposes the putrid core of the power structures of Elsinore. The differences between Cassandra and Ophelia are obvious enough. Cassandra belongs to the epic and dramatic traditions of classical antiquity, and the world she inhabits is a great deal more spacious than that of Ophelia in Shakespeare's play, both physically and metaphysically speaking. Cassandra converses with the gods and her madness and prophetic frenzy are of a divine nature, whereas Ophelia's madness is 'just' pathological, even if poetically framed. Shakespeare also gives Ophelia a much smaller world to move in, one that is narrowly defined – or confined – by the physical spaces of Elsinore and its internal politics. In other words, there can be no simple mapping of Cassandra and Troy onto Ophelia and Elsinore. But reading Cassandra and Ophelia together has distinct value in prompting another look at Ophelia, one that defamiliarises her representational history and underlines the limitations of that history.

In seeking to disentangle different ideologies of pity in respect of Ophelia and her representations, I draw inspiration from current critical developments in the historical and literary study of emotions. The well-established and prolific field known as the history of emotions (or, in some contexts, the cultural history of emotions) has for some time now examined human emotions as historically contingent phenomena. Emotion historians including William Reddy, Thomas Dixon, Monique Scheer, Barbara Rosenwein and Rob Boddice have demonstrated the myriad ways in which emotions are deeply entangled with cultural and social discourses, norms and practices – or ideologies – that belong to particular moments in history (Reddy 2001; Dixon 2003; Scheer 2012; Rosenwein 2016; Boddice 2023). In different ways, these scholars all show that emotions 'have a history', in terms not only of how we understand emotions but also of how we feel them, because emotional discourse and emotional experience refuse to be independent categories.

Shakespeare studies too have developed methods for studying emotions from a historicist perspective, notably in the pioneering work of Gail Kern Paster on early modern emotions and humoral theory (Paster 2004; Paster, Rowe and Floyd-Wilson 2004) and in the many studies that have grown subsequently from Paster's work. For Shakespearean emotion scholars, the predominant focus has been on expounding early modern contexts for reading the emotions in the plays as historically situated rather than on the role of emotion in Shakespearean reception studies. Certain Shakespearean scholars working on emotion have sought to integrate reception studies into a broader critical landscape of Shakespearean emotion studies (White, Houlahan and O'Loughlin 2015; Megna, Philips, and White 2019; Craik 2020), yet there is clearly great potential still for diachronic studies of emotion in the afterlives of Shakespearean plays and in particular in the subsequent cultural history of individual characters such as Ophelia, whose ongoing and unflagging reception history provides the richest of test cases.

As Showalter notes, the eighteenth century turned Ophelia's 'erotomania' – that is, her melancholy lovesickness and sexuality – into something a little more polite that suited the sentimental tastes of the age (Showalter 1985, 82). Ophelia on the eighteenth-century stage was primarily pretty and pathetic, a picture of innocent, unthreatening feminine grief and mild distraction – a model extended in endless apolitical accounts of the 'innocent victims' of early modern drama, who are invariably female – while the more sexually suggestive lines from her 'mad' scene in Act 4 were often cut from performance scripts (Showalter 1985, 83). We might also get a sense of what late-eighteenth-century audiences would have expected from representations of Ophelia by looking at one of the most popular sentimental novels – Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* of 1771, in which the young male hero, the proverbial 'man of feeling' of Mackenzie's title, visits London's Bedlam hospital. Here he is deeply touched by the sight of a young woman of noble birth whose tragic loss of her childhood sweetheart has reduced her to insanity: "Her face, though pale and wasted, was less squalid than those of the others, and showed a dejection of that decent kind, which moves our pity unmixed with horror" (Mackenzie 1771, 51). Like Ophelia, this young woman expresses her distracted sorrow through snatches of song, and when she sings, the novel tells us, "there was not an unmoistened eye around her" (53). The hero himself cries copiously. This portrait of plaintive, delicate femininity chimes with the dominant moral and emotional tastes of the second half of the eighteenth century, while the hero's pity expresses the sympathetic (male) imagination typical of the age and promoted as a moral sentiment by philosophers such as Adam Smith in his widely popular *Theory of Moral Sentiments,* first published in 1759. The representational ideologies that underwrite this kind of polite pitying of a lovely young women who unhappily has lost her mind can also be traced in an early nineteenth-century print of 'Miss Bolton as Ophelia' by Edward Scriven – that is, Mary Catherine Bolton who played Ophelia opposite John Kemble as Hamlet in 1811.[4] In the print the actress stands upright in an empire-style white gown in a soft and floaty material. She holds a garden basket of flowers in one hand while the other hand holds a flower up to her breast, which is gently encircled by her loose – but not too loose – curls. Her facial expression is one of calm – not unhappy – bewilderment. Such a representation shares a fundamental impetus – which is to make Ophelia's madness and death into an aesthetically pleasing vision – with later nineteenth-century paintings such as those by Millais and Waterhouse, but there are manifest changes in aesthetic tastes and therefore in emotional ideology too. The later paintings take that earlier feminine innocence (with its discreet touch of sensuality) to a more ambiguously erotic place – Millais's Ophelia, floating down-stream on her back with her blank look and visibly parted lips, seems not only to be in an indeterminable state somewhere between life and death but also somewhere between pleasure and pain, while Waterhouse's 1889 Ophelia, lying in a flower meadow on her back in a twistedly tense position with one arm entangled in her hair, looks at the viewer in a way that might be perceived as enticing. In other words, these later images, which are still so embedded in contemporary visual representations of Ophelia, invite a kind of voyeuristic pity. The emotional ideology involved is one that is less decorous than earlier examples, where pity does not also involve desire (at least not so openly), but either way Ophelia is still subject to a pitying gaze that turns her into an object of pleasure, whether aesthetic or erotic or indeed both.

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[4] The print is a stipple with etching held by The Royal Collection Trust: https://www.rct.uk/collection/651163/miss-bolton-as-ophelia (Accessed 30 May 2025).

The Romantics may have been more morally adventurous than the eighteenth century in their readings and stage representations of Ophelia's madness (Showalter 1985, 83), but early nineteenth-century critics still highlighted the idea of her inherent innocence and her guileless ability to provoke pity in others. In Coleridge's 'Notes on Hamlet' for his early nineteenth-century lecture series on Shakespeare, Ophelia is entirely innocent and free from the usual faults of the female sex (Coleridge 1907 [1849], 151), and her primary function in the play is as an instrument of affect. Coleridge writes that she is re-introduced in Act 4 by Shakespeare as "a probable stimulus of passion in her brother" (154), and he describes her death as "affecting" (155). Similarly, for William Hazlitt in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, Ophelia is "almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon" (Hazlitt 1921 [1817-1818], 85). Showalter notes Hazlitt's remark too as an example of a romantic tendency to regard Ophelia as an object to be looked at rather than talked about: "the romantic critics seem to have felt that the less said about Ophelia the better; the point was to *look* at her" (1985, 83). Thus literary criticism seems to have aligned itself with visual representations of Ophelia, both reshaping her into an "object d'art", as Showalter observes (84) but also as an object of pity. Rather than a character who moves freely about Shakespeare's stage, Ophelia becomes increasingly static, pitied by her observers while trapped within a frame of stillness, a living painting or photograph.

Nineteenth-century women critics had more to say about Ophelia than did their male counterparts but for Mary Cowden Clarke Ophelia was still very much a delicate and diffident being. Ophelia, or the "Rose of Elsinore", in Clarke's famous portraits of the childhoods of Shakespeare's heroines from 1852,[5] is the innocent victim of consecutive traumas – she sees two of her childhood friends commit suicide after being disappointed in love – and these traumas prepare the ground for her later insanity. In other words, she has very little agency or ability to resist the impact of the world on her life. A few decades earlier, Anna Jameson in *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical, and Historical* (1832) – later published as *Shakespeare's Heroines* – had written about Ophelia that "[h]er sorrow asks not words, but tears; and her madness has precisely the same effect that would be produced by the spectacle of real insanity, if brought before us: we feel inclined to turn away, and veil our eyes in reverential pity and too painful sympathy" (Jameson 1900 [1832], 136-7). Here we might hear a distinct echo of eighteenth-century sentimentalism and sympathy, as Mackenzie describes it in *The Man of Feeling*. "Ophelia – poor Ophelia", Jameson writes, "Oh, far too soft, too good, too fair, to be cast among the briers of this working day world" (136). This Ophelia is still innocent and without any means to resist her fate and those characteristics are precisely what make her such a pitiable object. Jameson compares her to a dove caught in a storm and writes that "[i]t is the helplessness of Ophelia, arising merely from her innocence, and pictured without any indication of weakness, which melts us with such profound pity" (139).

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[5] See Laura Tosi's essay in this issue of *Skenè.JTDS.*

Crucially, though, at a certain point, Jameson turns to classical literature in order to explain the affective impact of Ophelia on audience and reader, and she seizes upon the example of Iphigenia, ill-fated daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who – in a prelude to the Trojan War – is sacrificed at Aulis so that the Greek ships may proceed to Troy. With a reference to Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Jameson evokes this famous sacrificial virgin as a prototype for Ophelia, stating that:

> Iphigenia led forth to sacrifice, with her unresisting tenderness, her mournful sweetness, her virgin innocence, is doomed to perish by that relentless power which has linked her destiny with crimes and contests, in which she has no part but as a sufferer; and even so poor Ophelia, "divided from herself and her fair judgement", appears here like a spotless victim offered up to the mysterious and inexorable Fates. (153)

Jameson's comparison of Ophelia with Iphigenia is intriguing – if not entirely surprising – because it captures so well much of the emotional attitude towards Ophelia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Ophelia's affective impact – her ability to provoke compassionate feelings – is measured by what Jameson also sees in her classical counterpart – that is, a combination of "unresisting tenderness", a "mournful sweetness" and a "virgin innocence".

This reading of Ophelia – as the innocent and tender-hearted victim of circumstances far beyond her control – has maintained a firm grip on cultural imaginings of her character. Although modern criticism and performance have sought to provide her with greater agency, plaintive Ophelias were nonetheless prominent in *Hamlet* productions in the twentieth century too – the Ophelia played by Jean Simmons in Laurence Olivier's film from 1948 being one obvious example. I wish, however, to investigate what happens if we bracket for a moment the association of Ophelia with Iphigenia – the tender sacrificial virgin – and instead compare her with another iconic female character from classical Greek tragedy: Cassandra, daughter of Priam and Hecuba and unheeded prophetess of the downfall of Troy and the end of the Trojan War. As I have already noted, Cassandra may appear an unlikely classical forebear for Ophelia, belonging as she does to a different epochal and cultural setting and because she is strident and insistent rather than meek and passive. Yet if we look at Ophelia alongside Cassandra, we gain an instructively different understanding of the kind of pity that Ophelia elicits – an understanding which, at the same time, helps us bypass the pervasive influence of eighteenth-and nineteenth-century readings and representations. Cassandra belongs to a strand of female characters in classical literature – such as Antigone, Medea or indeed Hecuba – who may certainly provoke pity but who are also in different ways noncompliant, either by challenging patriarchal power structures and/or by avenging themselves on male malefactors. Rather than comparing Ophelia with figures such as Iphigenia or Polyxena, who, even if admired for their bravery when facing sacrifice, have comparatively little agency within the power structures that surround them, I would like to explore what happens to our perception of Ophelia if we place her, as it were, in the other camp of classical tragic women. This hermeneutical change of lanes helps tease out certain political and subversive aspects of Shakespeare's characterisation of Ophelia and of the pity that she inspires on and off stage.

In the short scene in act 4 of *Hamlet*, just before Ophelia enters in full 'madness' mode, we learn some strange and interesting facts about the affective impact that she has been having at and beyond the court – and, importantly, why this impact is a problem and must be stopped. The speakers in the scene are the Queen and Horatio in the First Folio version, with the addition of an unnamed Gentleman in the second Quarto version:

> QUEEN I will not speak with her.
> GENTLEMAN She is importunate – indeed, distract.
>   Her mood will needs be pitied.
> QUEEN   What would she have?
> GENTLEMAN She speaks much of her father, says she hears
>   There's tricks i'th'world, and hems and beats her heart,
>   Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
>   That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
>   Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
>   The hearers to collection. They yawn at it

And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there would be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.
HORATIO ’Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew
Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.
Let her come in.[6]
(4.5.1-15)

Whatever Ophelia is saying to these anonymous listeners, who are moved by her speech and who use it to fill the gaps in their own thoughts and imaginations, the effect of her emotions is deeply political and clearly dangerous to the Danish state. The gentleman’s advice that “her mood will needs be pitied” is not so much a sentimental statement as it is a warning: if Ophelia is allowed to roam freely in her distracted state, affecting others with her mood and her distorted speech and gestures she will cause disturbance and possibly even riots. This cryptic depiction of Ophelia who “speaks of things in doubt”, of “tricks i’th’world” and “beats her heart”, while her listeners gape, “yawn”, at her words, is very far from the representations of a passive, pathetic victim that have become so familiar to us; rather it makes her sound much more like a sooth-sayer or prophetess with considerable affective power over others.

The emotion historian William Reddy has coined the valuable concept of “emotional regimes” to explain how any state or institution worthy of the name will establish and police a set of normative emotions in order to stay in power. Not surprisingly, individuals whose emotions deviate from the approved set of emotions in such regimes are punished or ostracised (Reddy 2011). Erin Sullivan, in an illuminating essay on Hamlet’s grief, has shown how this process plays out at Shakespeare’s Elsinore, where Hamlet’s stubborn insistence on grieving comes into conflict with the collective joy stipulated by – demanded by – the wedding celebrations of Claudius and Gertrude (Sullivan 2020). Hamlet’s negative emotions are both unwelcome and politically problematic because they run against the grain of the approved mood at the court at a moment of regime change. Ophelia’s emotions – her grief for *her* father – also become a disturbing factor within the emotional regime of Elsinore, especially because she inspires a kind of pity that might lead to “dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds” . In other words, she provokes political subversion. Her affective power is confirmed by Laertes, who addresses her, when he sees her in her distracted state, by saying "Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge / It could not move thus" (4.1.166-7).

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[6] The First Folio gives these closing lines to the Queen, which does seem more appropriate than giving them to Horatio, whose interest in preserving order here is difficult to explain as is his presence in the scene. The Arden editors also acknowledge this as puzzling.

In Shakespeare's play, then, Ophelia's emotions and the emotional effect she has on others who find themselves contemplating revolution and revenge at the sight of her are very different from the subsequent readings and representations of Ophelia in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visual culture and criticism that I have cited in this essay because, rather than being pathetic, her emotional power is very clearly political. In Shakespeare's hands, Ophelia sees things, she hears things and, most importantly, she speaks. Even if her speech is "nothing" and "unshaped", it appears to be dangerously effective, which is why it must be rejected and repressed by the Danish court. It is these qualities that make her a fitting counterpart not for an Iphigenia or a Polyxena but for Cassandra, a female figure famous for her prophetic but highly unwelcome speech and frantic emotions both in classical literature and in the early modern cultural imagination that was so often inspired by the classics.

We may also re-imagine an affinitive relationship between Cassandra and Ophelia when we reflect on their relative closeness in Shakespeare's writing career. Shortly after *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote *Troilus and Cressida*, a play which includes Cassandra in its list of characters. Cassandra in *Troilus*, even more so than Ophelia in *Hamlet*, may be only a minor character but she is also an affective focus of the stage action, loudly and uncomfortably voicing the audience's knowledge of the fate of Troy. It is intriguing to speculate about the possibility that the boy actor who played Ophelia might also have played Cassandra a year or so earlier, if the two plays were performed close together in the Lord Chamberlain's Men's repertoire. This we cannot know, but Cassandra's entrance in act 2 of *Troilus* would surely have looked distinctly familiar to any members of the audience who had also attended the first performances of *Hamlet*. Certainly, if we compare the stage directions for the respective entrances of Ophelia and Cassandra, there is unquestionably a recognisable pattern. The stage direction in the First Folio version of *Troilus* reads "Enter CASSANDRA, with her hair about her ears." Or in the Quarto version: "Enter Cassandra raving".[7] By way of comparison, the Folio version of *Hamlet* has "Enter OPHELIA distracted", and Q1 has "Enter Ofelia playing on a Lute, and her haire down singing".[8] Clearly, to the cultural imagination of Shakespeare's first audiences, scribes or printers, Ophelia and Cassandra would have looked very much the same: madwomen with a stock set of attributes, physical, aesthetic and emotional. Moreover, those first audiences or readers would also have known that Cassandra's apparent ravings were predictions of the unpalatable truth.

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[7] See David Bevington's textual note on the different stage directions in the Arden third series edition from which I cite in this essay (1998, 196).

[8] See Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor's textual note on the different stage directions

Tonally, Cassandra's speeches differ markedly from those of Ophelia. Cassandra's "Cry, Trojans, cry! Lend me ten thousand eyes, / And I will fill them with prophetic tears" (2.2.101-2) has an insistent forcefulness that Ophelia lacks – although this is where I also wonder whether my own perception of Ophelia's madness as somehow 'softer', more 'feminine', in its expression may be contaminated by the prettification of her eighteenth- and nineteenth-century afterlives. Either way, the disturbance and unease both these characters cause when they speak and bring their distracted emotions onto the stage are similar. When they enter, they inevitably attract attention by breaking into the ongoing stage dialogue and action, and their intrusive affect is a tangible cause of tension and of the fragmentation of the dominant mode of male discourse. Their stage movement too – the ways in which they repeat their entrances and exits – is a cause of instability and disorder, an insuppressible reiteration of unwelcome and implicitly political emotion. Thus, the ways in which these two female characters are both associated with motion – literally and emotionally: they move about the stage, and they 'move' others – provides a strikingly contrast to the visual iconography, created by Millais and others, that has made Ophelia's afterlife so entirely static and passive. Yet if we look at Ophelia alongside Cassandra it becomes much harder to view her as forever embodying stillness.

In *Troilus and Cressida*, Troilus is keen to dismiss his sister's prophesies and refuses to avoid fighting the Greeks simply because, as he puts it, "Cassandra is mad" (2.2.222), yet the fact remains that Shakespeare's audiences would have known perfectly well that Cassandra is right in her predictions of what will happen to the Trojans. The point is that whether Cassandra's brothers listen to her, she disturbs the male-dominated scene, adding a discordant note to her brothers' bravado, their insistent but brittle protestations of valour. Looking back at Ophelia via Cassandra in *Troilus* demands that we pay attention to the ways in which Ophelia's emotions, in their tangible effect on others, create discomfort both personal and political and need glossing over and suppressing. However, we might also gain an additional perspective on the relationship between Ophelia and Cassandra by looking further back to how Cassandra appears in some of the classical texts that Shakespeare could have inherited through different channels. A familiar classical figure to early modern English literary culture, Cassandra would have been available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries in several Greco-Latin texts as well as their later mediations and translations. In Seneca's *Agamemnon*, for instance – translated into English by John Studley and printed in 1566 – Cassandra

in the Arden third series edition from which I cite in this essay (2000, 404).

occupies a significantly more central part in the narrative than Shakespeare gives her in *Troilus and Cressida*. Moreover, Studley inserted an epilogue into his translation of Seneca's play in which Cassandra's offstage death is narrated in considerable detail inspired by the narration of the death of Polyxena in Seneca's *Trojan Women*, which had been translated into English by Jasper Heywood in 1559. Studley's epilogue is in many ways an oddity and arguably out of place in respect of the rest of the play (although such additions and insertions were commonplace in early modern English translations of classical texts), but his choice to revisit Cassandra's fate at least demonstrates a marked interest in her as a significant female figure. Furthermore, it is worth noting that Studley seems so intent on enhancing Cassandra's tragic potential by narrating her death in a manner that clearly links her to Polyxena. Very much like Polyxena, who is sacrificed on Achilles's tomb in Seneca's *Trojan Women* (and Heywood's translation), Cassandra in Studley's epilogue meets her execution with courage and inspires pity in the onlookers: "When looking round on euery side / she toke her leaue of all, / From vapourd eyes of yonge and ol / the tryclyng teares do fall" (G7*v*). In Seneca's original play there is no such pity for Cassandra, however. Rather than having her death narrated by someone else, she is allowed the last and ominously defiant words of the play. When Clytemnestra orders her execution, Cassandra taunts the Mycenaean queen with the promise that she will soon be able to narrate the manner of Agamemnon's murder in the underworld – and that she is happy at that very prospect. To Clytemnestra's angry "Die in your madness!", Cassandra's response – and the final words of the play – is simply (if ominously) "Madness will come upon you too" (1012, transl. Fitch).

In Seneca's hands, then, Cassandra is a forceful and clearly disturbing agent who defies not only Clytemnestra but also Agamemnon himself with her unwelcome prophesies. Earlier in the play, she undermines the celebration of Agamemnon's triumphant homecoming by delivering a series of prophetic hints at his imminent death. Irritated, Agamemnon orders her removal: "My loyal band of servants, restrain her until she throws off the god's influence, lest her wayward madness should commit some offense" (800-1, transl. Fitch). Once again, we see a pattern in which the supposed 'madwoman' must be silenced and removed lest she unsettle the male-dominated power structures. Cassandra's affective impact here has less to do with inspiring pity than with provoking anger. Shakespeare may have had access both to Seneca's original *Agamemnon* and to Studley's 1566 translation, but while Studley's Cassandra has her agency somewhat deflated by the translator's epilogue, which turns her into an object of unthreatening pity, Shakespeare's Cassandra – and, I suggest, his Ophelia – seem to have more in common with the original Senecan figure who refuses to be silenced.

In addition to comparing Seneca's representation of Cassandra in *Agamemnon* with Shakespeare's dramatisation of subversive female behaviour in *Troilus* and *Hamlet*, it is worth looking at a further classical text, one that may be less obvious than Seneca in terms of its Shakespearean reception. Critical understanding of the Shakespearean reception of Euripidean and classical Greek drama has been the subject of transformation in recent years. I refer to the excellent work of scholars including Silvia Bigliazzi, Tania Demetriou, Tanya Pollard and Laurie Maguire, each of whom has demonstrated the pervasive presence of Euripides in early modern English culture and hence Shakespeare's likely encounter with his drama in some direct or indirect form (Maguire 2007; Pollard 2017; Pollard and Demetriou 2027; Bigliazzi and Demetriou 2024). Attending to the representation of Cassandra by Euripides in *The Trojan Women* also shows why Cassandra's emotions are disturbing rather than pathetic and why she acquires so subversive a quality in respect of the male-dominated power structures of Shakespeare's Troy. When Cassandra appears in Euripides's *The Trojan Women* – the action of which takes place directly after the fall of Troy – she is claimed by Agamemnon as a trophy of victory. She enters the stage, coming out of the tents that temporarily house the soon-to-be-enslaved Trojan women and engages in a frantic solo wedding dance, celebrating her unlawful betrothal to Agamemnon with grim irony, all the while predicting his murder and the fall of his house: "Agamemnon, the famous lord of the Achaeans, will marry me in a union more disastrous than Helen's. Yes, for I shall kill him, and I shall lay waste to his house in revenge for my brothers and my father" (357-60; transl. Morwood). Here too Cassandra is an agent of violence and revenge, and she creates a disturbing emotional environment by 'celebrating' her fate rather than meekly accepting it. Something of the dissonance in Cassandra's dancing and singing – her call for wedding garlands and her looking forward to her wedding bed mingled with visions of death and destruction – resonates with Ophelia's equally disturbing distribution of flowers and her songs of sex and death. In the case of both characters there are attempts to 'hush' them, to redirect their affective impact so that it becomes less disturbing, less threatening and more manageable. In *Hamlet*, Claudius interrupts Ophelia's bawdy songs with "Pretty Ophelia" (4.5.56), and throughout her afterlife many interpretations and representations have followed suit. Yet when Ophelia is seconded by Cassandra, her voice is amplified. They become, as it were, awkwardly choric.

My key point in this essay, then, is that critical understanding of Shakespeare's Ophelia – and especially of her affective power – stands to be revitalised if we look at her not through the lens of the sentimentalised afterlife imposed on her in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and sustained almost endlessly by visual culture and in theatrical productions of

Hamlet ever since, but as belonging to a group of female dissenters from the classical tradition that was such a core element in Shakespeare's dramaturgy. Among these dissenting women Cassandra stands out, both because Cassandra is Ophelia's forebear – in the sense that Shakespeare receives her from Euripides and other classical sources – but also her immediate successor on the early modern English stage, given that Shakespeare appears to have written *Troilus and Cressida* almost immediately after he wrote *Hamlet* – a succession that has been effectively suppressed by the highly contrasting afterlives of the two plays. The power of two female characters to affect and disturb their respective emotional regimes is enhanced when we see them next to each other on the page and on the stage. In the end, Ophelia does not *become* Cassandra any more than Hamlet *becomes* Hercules: Ophelia's affective powers lack the divine inspiration that lends authority to her classical counterpart, even when Cassandra is ignored or hushed by her surroundings. But thinking of Ophelia as Cassandra's sister, as it were, as in part at least a *version* of Cassandra, helps the twenty-first-century critic shed the debilitating effect of intervening emotional ideologies on her comprehension of Ophelia's power, of the tension she invokes. A certain kinship between Ophelia and the kind of figure that Cassandra represents – an actively speaking and disturbing female agent – haunts Shakespeare's play and is reinforced by the proximate appearance of the two characters on the late Elizabethan stage. This kinship with Cassandra forces us to question the validity of the representations of Ophelia as a silent and passive victim which have become so familiar to us, and it offers a transformed understanding of what it means to pity Ophelia, one that helps disentangle her from the stifling effect of subsequent ideologies of emotion. Above all, it demonstrates that pitying Ophelia in *Hamlet* is not a 'pure' or 'innocent' emotion but instead one filled with political tension and the potential for subversion.

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Keith Gregor*

Becoming "Ofelia": Changing Perspectives in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Spanish Drama[1]

Abstract

The essay charts the changing perspectives of the character of Ophelia in Spanish drama from the first neoclassical versions of the Frenchman Jean-François Ducis's adapted *Hamlet* to the 'original' compositions of the late nineteenth century. Still steeped in Enlightenment rationalism, the first translations, like Ducis's original, eschew such unseemly spectacles as the display of female madness, while enabling the emergence of a strong and even defiant Ophelia. This version of Shakespeare's character, which persists until the 1820s, will, in the light of women's actual situation in nineteenth-century Spanish society as well as of their representation in contemporary male culture, be revised and rewritten in later iterations: first, in Pablo Avecilla's *Hamlet* of 1856, an 'imitation' of the original where, without succumbing to full-on "hysteria", Ofelia's agency is significantly reduced, to the extent that she becomes a political puppet in the hands of Polonio and Hamlet; last, the 1872 *El príncipe Hamlet* [Prince Hamlet] by Carlos Coello, 'inspired' on Shakespeare, but also on recent Italian productions of the play, where, despite a momentary surge of female desire, the Ophelia as victim trope, so carefully cultivated by the Romantics, is fully installed.

Keywords: Ophelia; Spanish drama; representation; neoclassicism; Romanticism

1.

Como la brisa que la sangre orea
sobre el oscuro campo de batalla,
cargada de perfumes y armonías
en el silencio de la noche vaga,

Símbolo del dolor y la ternura,
del bardo inglés en el horrible drama,

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> la dulce Ofelia, la razón perdida,
> cogiendo flores y cantando pasa.
> (Bécquer 1981, 19)

> [Like the breeze that blows the blood over the dark battlefield, laden with scents and harmonies in the silence of the night she roams. A symbol of grief and tenderness, in the fearsome play of the English bard, sweet Ophelia goes by, her reason gone, picking flowers and singing.]

"Rima VI" from *Rimas y leyendas* (1871), is the Spanish poet Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer's tribute to "poor Ophelia". An innocent victim of the political feud that has destroyed Elsinore, she wanders fair but ghost-like over the wreckage, a "symbol" of female sensibility. The act of picking flowers and singing, meanwhile, helps immortalize her madness as the defining image of the character's Spanish Romantic afterlife.

Bécquer's vision, the fruit of what seems a larger reflection on the iconicity of Hamlet as a play and particularly Ophelia (Keefe Ugalde 2020, 22-3), chimes with other representations of the character that flood the nineteenth-century cultural scene. For at least 200 years the name Ophelia had been synonymous with what has been called "tragic collateral damage in Hamlet's pursuit of psychological resolution or vengeance against the system" (Lanier 2016, 584). In the play's adaptation for the English-speaking stage by William Davenant, the elimination of crucial dialogue (e.g. Laertes's and Polonius's advice to steer clear of Hamlet, Ophelia's exposure and replies to Hamlet's ribald comments during the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* and her own bawdy lines in the mad scene) left a figure that was little more than the critics' ideal of "gentle daughter and loving sweetheart, bruised and confused from the experiences forced upon her by those from whom she expects support" (Rosenberg 1993, 240). It was not until the latter half of the eighteenth century that her innocence was coupled with the diminution of her reason. Insisting on her "passivity and emotionalism", adapter David Garrick encouraged actress Susannah Cibber to stress the character's fragility and so how easily someone of her delicate nature might succumb to madness (Young 2002, 63).[2]

With the transition to the new century, however, something resembling Bécquer's Ophelia began to emerge. If, as Elaine Showalter argued (1982, 83), "the Augustan response to madness was a denial, the romantic response was an embrace", especially as the play, and Ophelia, were represented in Spain's closest neighbour and (still) prime cultural influence, France. Harriet Smithson's impactful performance of the role in Paris in 1827 not only obsessed Hector Berlioz but inspired painters like Eugène Delacroix, who injected still more pathos (as well as considerable amounts of erotic energy) into the symbol in four separate portrayals between 1838 and 1853 (Britland 2013, 69-70; Rhodes 2008, 51-3; 90-2). What John Pemble calls these "scrappy Shakespearean evenings" proved an authentic "rite of passage" for Romantics like Alexandre Dumas, Théophile Gautier and Victor Hugo (2005, 9). Despite embracing many different tastes and sensibilities, nineteenth-century artists were, as Jane Kromm puts it, completely "captivated by this unsalvageable, love-struck, melancholy woman" (1994, 511).

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[2] Meanwhile, Garrick's elision of the account of her death would seem to reduce the responsibility of madness in her death.

Although the Kemble *Hamlet* in which Smithson appeared does not seem to have crossed the Pyrenees into Spain, accounts of it almost certainly did, to judge from the various white-robed, loose-haired women that began to emerge in Spanish letters of the nineteenth century. Her presence is felt in the arch-Romantic José de Espronceda's dramatic poem *El estudiante de Salamanca* (The Student of Salamanca, 1840), where the victimhood of the character called Elvira is established from the beginning of Part 2 of the poem. As in the pictorial representations of Ophelia of the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Young 2002, 325), Elvira first appears as a solitary figure within a beautiful natural setting. White-dressed and with free-flowing locks, she is seen plucking leaves from the flowers she is weaving into a bridal crown – a reminder of the promises made (and broken) by her seducer, the fiendish Don Félix de Montamar, the student of Salamanca. Her behaviour as she performs this task meets all the requisites of the "hysterical" nineteenth century woman (Gies 2005, 215). "See her," pleads the poem,

> postrada su Piedad implora
> cual si presente la mirara allí:
> Vedla, que sola se contempla y llora,
> miradla delirante sonreír.
> (Espronceda 2006, 306)
>
> [how she falls and asks for mercy, as though it were present before her; see how steeped in solitude she weeps, look how in delirium she grins.]

In his appeal to the reader to "see" and "look" with him, the speaker seems to have a theatrical audience in mind and, very probably, Smithson's much-discussed performance that would set the tone for all subsequent nineteenth century 'Ophelia' representations. Although none of these women were called "Ophelia", their integration into the Spanish imaginary owed much to the Romantic re-invention of the character by Smithson.

Like so many of their Romantic and late-Romantic fellow-travelers, Espronceda and Bécquer have rightly been taken to task for seeking to erase female subjectivity by fixating purely on Ophelia-as-victim (Keefe Ugalde, 21).[3] There is, however, another side to Espronceda's Elvira that challenges the "hysteria" trope and recalls an earlier Ophelia that neither Bécquer nor his male contemporaries had contemplated. I am not referring to the vengeful figure who, in Part 4, lures Don Félix to a gothic hellscape, where she reveals her lifeless, skeletal face to couple with him in death. I mean the more contemplative Elvira who, shortly before her death and in complete control of her reason, pens a missive to her callous lover in which she actually forgives him for his sins and wishes him well in his future endeavors:

> Y jamás turbe mi infeliz memoria
> con amargos recuerdos tus placeres;
> goces te dé el vivir, triunfos la gloria,
> dichas el mundo, amor otras mujeres:
> Y si tal vez mi lamentable historia
> a tu memoria con dolor trajeres,
> llórame, sí; pero palpite exento
> tu pecho de roedor remordimiento.
>
> [And may my wretched memory never wrack with painful recollections your pleasures. May life bring you joy; triumphs bring you glory, the world brings you happiness and other women love. And should perchance my lamentable story pain your memory, cry for me, do; but may your breast beat free of gnawing remorse.]

Espronceda's recourse to Elvira's letter may be interpreted as a submission to that patriarchy and denial of her desire; if not quite blaming herself, she seems to exempt Don Félix from any share of the blame and even encourages him to guiltlessly enjoy any future liaisons. Alternatively, it can be seen as a sign of her complete moral superiority and capacity for understanding that renders everything susceptible to forgiveness, even conduct such as his.

In what follows, I intend to relate this spectrum of Ophelias, or Ophelia figures, to the development of the drama in nineteenth-century Spain. The spectrum starts with the first appearance of "Ofelia" on the Spanish stage, an appearance that predates Smithson's in Paris and emerges from successive, if rather free, translations of the late eighteenth-century adaptation by Jean-François Ducis. Still steeped in Enlightenment rationalism, these versions, like Ducis's original, eschew such unseemly spectacles as the display of female madness, while enabling the emergence of a strong and even defiant Ophelia. This version of Shakespeare's character will be revised and rewritten in later iterations: first, Pablo Avecilla's *Hamlet* of 1856, an "imitation" of the original where, while not succumbing to hysteria, Ofelia's agency is significantly reduced, to the extent that she becomes a political puppet in the hands of Polonio and Hamlet; last, the 1872 *El príncipe Hamlet* (Prince Hamlet) by Carlos Coello, 'inspired' by Shakespeare, but also by recent Italian productions of the play, where, despite a momentary surge of female desire, the Ophelia as victim trope is fully installed.

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[3] In the case of *El estudiante de Salamanca*, the erasure is often compounded by a tendency to celebrate the courage of her Byronic lover; for a spirited example, see Sebold 1978.

2.

> The whole education of women ought to be relative to men. To please them, to be useful to them, to make themselves loved and honored by them, to educate them when young. (Rousseau 1918, 352)

Despite his reputation as a mouthpiece of Enlightenment values, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's views on the education of women hark back to the times when Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was first received. As represented in *Hamlet*, Ophelia's "education" is at the hands of her brother and father in 1.3. First, after a brief introduction to the concept of the king's two bodies, Laertes ensures she remains "in the rear of [her] affection, / Out of the shot and danger of desire" (1.3.35-6),[4] as becomes a woman of her status relative to Hamlet. "I shall the effect of this good lesson keep," she replies, even though, deep down, she knows her brother is teaching her "the steep and thorny way to heaven" (46, 49) while being more than likely to sin himself. When she mentions the signs of Hamlet's affection towards her, Polonius merely dismisses her as a "green girl" (103) who has no business to believe Hamlet's so called "tenders". Her memorable response, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (106) projects her as a kind of tabula rasa for Hamlet's later manipulations or the 'lessons' in female comportment offered nearly two centuries later by Rousseau.

Addressing Rousseau's assertion about the educational needs of women, Mary Wollstonecraft contended that:

> According to the tenor of reasoning, by which women are kept from the tree of knowledge, the important years of youth, the usefulness of age, and the rational hopes of futurity, are all to be sacrificed to render women an object of desire for a short time.
>
> Besides, how could Rousseau expect them to be virtuous and constant when reason is neither allowed to be the foundation of their virtue, nor truth the object of their enquiries? (1891, 11)

---

[4] References to the text of *Hamlet* are from the third series Arden edition (Shakespeare 2016).

Certainly, the image of Ophelia that was transmitted to the non-Anglophone French playwright Jean-François Ducis via his countryman Pierre Antoine de la Place's 1746 synopsis of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* adheres to the Rousseau Esque ideal of dumb obedience. From the few, carefully sanitized, scraps handed down to him by La Place,[5] it is to Ducis's credit that he was able to construct a character that not only emerges as Hamlet's intellectual equal but who, after Wollstonecraft, is in a position to put reason and truth before any other consideration, marital or otherwise.

First performed in Paris in 1769, Ducis was intent on removing what, in a letter to David Garrick, he called the "irrégularités sauvages" (wild irregularities) from Shakespeare's story, including for decorum's sake Ophelia's mad scene or indeed any scene in which she might be construed as being guilty of or privy to Shakespearean bawdy (Golder 1992, 20). From what he conceived as the core of the tragedy, the closet scene in which Hamlet confronts Gertrude with her part in old Hamlet's murder, his aim was to "faire un role intéressant d'une reine parricide, et de peindre surtout dans l'âme pure et mélancolique d'Hamlet un modèle de tendresse filiale" (Albert 1879, 14; to make an interesting role out of a parricidal queen, and to portray above all in the pure and melancholy soul of Hamlet a model of filial tenderness). That "above all" is revealing: on the one hand, it makes Hamlet the focus of one of the play's core 'values', namely: absolute loyalty to one's parent, in this case his father, even if it means taking his mother's life. On the other, it encourages the spectator to see Ophélie in a similar light: her father, who in Ducis is Claudius, may not enjoy the honourable status of old Hamlet, but is a child (the play seems to ask) no less duty-bound to protect him even if, like Hamlet, this means abandoning the only partner that could make her happy?

Although Ophélie's presence is condensed into even fewer scenes than that of her Shakespearean predecessor, that does not detract from the strength of a character capable, as the daughter of future royalty, of addressing Hamlet on equal terms. In contradistinction to what is often seen as the Romantic denial of Ophelia's desire (Marino 2017, 817), Ducis's character is the first to make her amorous intentions known: "Mais c'est moi dont les feux trop prompts à me trahir . . . Ont aux regards du prince osé se découvrir . . . Son désespoir, ses maux sont nés de notre amour" (1809, 27; But it is I whose passion is too quick to betray me that has dared to reveal itself to the Prince . . . His despair, his ills are all born from our love). The French "feux" (literally, fires) conveys a passion that, as she wrongly believes in her confession to Gertrude, has only intensified Hamlet's despair. Having then elicited Gertrude's happy consent to the marriage, a decision that, were it to materialise, would disable Gertrude's own marriage to Claudius, Ophélie's interview with Hamlet in Ducis's 4.2 takes an unexpected turn: rather than Hamlet's gruff rejection and entreaties to join a nunnery, an explanation of why their love cannot be and, when broaching the subject of the desirability of death, Ophélie's sharp retort:

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[5] The only words she is given in La Place's resumé are to describe Hamlet's actions in 2.1 (1746, 322), and her enquiry into the meaning of the "Pantomime" of *The Murder of Gonzago*, with her remark on the brevity of the prologue (342-3). When a few scenes later (Shakespeare's 4.5) she appears again before Laertes, she is tactfully reported as singing "des morceaux de vieilles Chansons ridiculement lugubres" (343; some scraps of old and preposterously mournful songs) and making "quelques propos de même genre" (some comments in the same vein), before exiting and not being heard of/from again.

> Entends à tes côtés le Danois qui te crie:
> "J'ai remis dans tes mains mon sort, ma liberté.
> Entre ton peuple et toi, n'est-il pas de traité?
> C'est à toi que le faible acommis sa défense.
> Punir les oppresseurs, soutenir l'innocence,
> Protéger tes sujets contre leurs ennemis;
> Voilà les droits sacrés que le ciel t'a remis.
> De leurs malheurs cachés préviens, détruis les causes.
> Ce sont là tes devoirs, meurs après si tu l'oses!"
> (31)
>
> [Hear around you the Dane that cries: "I have placed my fate, my freedom, in your hands. Is there no trust between your people and you? It is unto you that the weak entrusts his defense. To punish oppressors, to uphold innocence, to protect your subjects against their foes these are the sacred rights with that heaven has conferred upon you. Prevent their hidden ills, destroy the cause. Those are your duties; die afterwards, if you dare!]

By assuming the voice of the state, and that of the "people" who conform it, Ophélie's appeal to the king's true duties does not challenge monarchy as an institution – at the height of Louis XVI's reign, it would have been foolhardy to do so. But what it does do is elevate her role not just as initiator of a romance but as an insightful and politically literate character.

The social equality between the lovers is, of course, matched in Ducis by a familial coincidence that, from the perspective of bourgeois ideology, obliges them both to answer for their fathers: Hamlet's, who is now dead, and Ophélie's, who is in immediate danger. By 5.2 the amorous crisis has turned into a full-blown familial one, as Ophélie intercedes for Claudius whom she now knows to be the true cause of Hamlet's malaise and the object of his revenge. In what has been dubbed a "pseudo-Conelian standoff" (Harris 2024, 11), to Hamlet's pompous "Ma gloire est d'être fils" (My glory is to be a son) her response is incontestable:

> Et la mienne, à mon tour,
> Est au devoir du sang d'immoler mon amour
> . . .
> Je n'examine point si mon père est coupable;
> De complots, d'attentats je le crois incapable.
> Mais eût-il sous mes yeux sacrifié son roi,
> Criminel pour tout autre, il ne l'est pas pour moi.
> . . .
> C'est ton amante en pleurs qui tombe à tes genoux.
> Sur l'auteur de mes jours suspens du moins tes coups!
> . . .
> Ne mets pas entre nous un rampart éternel,
> Et ne me réduis pas au supplice cruel
> D'avoir ma flamme à vaincre … et, que sais-je?, peut être
> De trahir en t'aimant le sang qui m'a fait naître!
> (40)

> [And mine, in my turn, is to sacrifice my love to the duty of blood . . . I ask not whether my father is guilty; I believe him incapable of conspiracies and assassinations. But even if he had slain his king before my eyes, he may be a murderer for everyone else, but not for me. . . It is your lover who falls in tears before you. At least do not strike the man who brought me into the world! . . . Do not put an ever-lasting rampart between us, and do not reduce me to the cruel torture of having to put my feelings behind me … and (who knows?) to betray the blood in my veins by loving you!]

Though Claudius's merits are questionable, and the audience knows that he is guilty of regicide, the intensity of Ophélie's "filial tenderness" is extreme, stretching the boundaries of what Ducis's predominantly middle-class audience would consider appropriate. Significantly, Ophélie's only 'feminine' gesture – prostrating herself before her heartless lover – is to beg him to save her father's life. When Hamlet refuses, Ophélie unleashes the full verbal force with which Ducis has endowed her. In what will be her final intervention in the play, she condemns the "tigre impitoyable" (implacable tiger) Hamlet has become, while assuring him that even as he runs to avenge his father, she will do the same to save hers, even at the cost of her own life:

> Le temps, l'amour, le ciel vont bientôt t'éclairer.
> Ou si de ton erreur rien ne peut te tirer,
> Je n'entends plau alors, à te perdre enhardie,
> Que l'intérêt du sang qui m'a donné la vie.
> (41)

> [Time, love, heaven will soon shed the light you need. Or if nothing can draw you from your error, resigned to losing you, I await nothing else but the wellbeing of the blood that gave me life.]

Drawing mainly on Ducis's revised version of the tragedy of 1770,[6] Ducis's Spanish translators appeared to subscribe to this 'strong' version of Ophelia, albeit with certain nuances. So, the version attributed to the mainly comic playwright Ramón de la Cruz in 1772 mirrors Ophélie's view of responsible government in 4.2, but adds the cautious qualifier: "Amarte, obedecer y mantenerte / es todo lo que está de parte nuestra, / pero la misma ley pide que vivas / para nosotros y que nos defiendas" (Pujante and Gregor 2010, 88, emphasis mine; To love, obey and maintain you is the full extent of our duty, but the same law demands that you live for us and protect us). Under the 'enlightened despot' Charles III, and just six years after the Esquilache uprising threatened to derail the Bourbon monarchy (Pujante and Gregor 2008), La Cruz's interpolation could be construed as somewhat risqué. However, the fact that Ofelia claims to be speaking about a common duty and she is not, after all, asking that much of her monarch seems to have been enough to keep the censor at bay. For the liberal reformer Antonio Saviñón, defender of the short-lived 1812 Constitution that promulgated national sovereignty and the king's submission to parliament, the whole speech seemed to have expunged for performance, while José de Carnerero, an arch-royalist who saluted the absolutist Ferdinand VII's return to power in 1813, has Ofelia simply declare: "Al trono va el camino / que has de seguir. Reinar es tu destino / y no morir, Hamlet" (316; The path you must follow leads to the throne. To reign is your destiny, and not to die, Hamlet).

When it comes to Ophélie's decision to stand by her father come what may, La Cruz has Ofelia express her obedience and support to Claudius himself: "Señor, ya os obedezco. Y ya adivino / del rey en los furores y en los vuestros / que ya el cielo os prepara sus castigos, / y que a mí no me queda otra esperanza / que morir con los dos, ni más alivio" (118, Sir, I obey you. And I already sense in the fury of the King [i.e. *Hamlet*] and yourself that heaven is readying your punishment, and that my only hope and satisfaction is to be able to die with you both). As well as preparing the ground for her possible demise, something that does not seem to concern Ducis, La Cruz stresses the force of the dilemma facing Ofelia in her twin role as daughter and lover. In both Saviñón and Carnerero, Ofelia's thoughts echo more clearly those of Ducis's character, especially in her final words to Hamlet. First Saviñón:

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[6] In the revised version of 1770 her role is somewhat extended, to the point of carrying out her promise to defend Claudius: according to Golder, "not only is she seen to carry out her promise and try to save her father, but also her character remains entirely consistent with itself" (51). For the Spanish translations, all references will be to the critical edition by Pujante and Gregor (2010), in which, with the exception of the version attributed to Ramón de la Cruz which first appeared in 1900, they are published for the first time.

> El tiempo, y el amor, y el cielo, acaso
> sabrán calmar tu bárbara violencia;
> mas si tu error a la razón no cede,
> escucharé mi obligación primera,
> me aplicaré a perderte y con tu sangre
> satisfaré la sangre que tú viertas.
> (254)
>
> [Time, love and heaven will, perchance, calm your barbaric violence; but if your error does not yield to reason, I shall meet my first obligation, learn how to forsake you and, with your blood, satisfy the blood you shed.]

Then Carnerero:

> Voy al momento,
> a prevenirle de tu terrible intento;
> ya ni un punto me aparto de su lado.
> Y si el cruel destino ha decretado
> que a su insaciable atrocidad sucumba,
> ¡encerrarme con él sabré en la tumba!
> (330)
>
> [I shall go directly and warn him of your terrible intentions; I shall not leave his side for a second. And if cruel destiny has decreed that he should succumb to his insatiable atrocity, I will know how to entomb myself in the grave by his side!]

As has been noted, having taken her stand against Hamlet, Ducis's Ophélie tends to drift out of the play. [7] Whether deliberately and consciously to take her own life, as she hints, or to join the cloister is not clarified. That said, the steadfastness and loyalty of Ducis's Ophélie, prepared to back her father to the end even at the expense of her relationship with Hamlet, reflect a woman equipped with the capacity for the "reason" and "truth", which according to Wollstonecraft, her exclusion from education would have rendered unattainable. Though this is, of course, simply replacing one form of patriarchalism for another and ultimately involves being written out of the end of the play, her choices are never shown as being determined by anything but a strong sense of duty, together with the resistance to the lure of sexual-romantic desire and, as Ducis's Hamlet is already king, of a seat beside him as Queen of Denmark. The absence of a Laertes-figure and recasting of Polonius as a mere confidant to the pretender Claudius is key here: there is no one either to show her "the steep and thorny way" to virtue or, as Shakespeare's Polonius puts it, to "tender [her]self-more dearly". Her decisions are her own and Ducis at least allows her the means to fulfil them, even though it requires her disappearance from the play itself. With some exceptions,[8] the neoclassical Spanish versions tend to follow this same line, thus honouring France's own dramatic tradition of decisive, if doomed, women as if it were their own, while suppressing the more 'unseemly' traits of desire, madness and self-destruction.

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[7] The exception is the 1783 revised version published by Gueffier, where she returns to plead with and fails to convince, her father to give up his ambitions.

3.

When translation was replaced by original creation and French-inspired Romanticism began to infiltrate the drama, a more 'Shakespearean' concept of Ophelia began to emerge upon the Spanish stage. Despite being ruled by a queen until 1868,[9] and for most of that reign enjoying a constitutional monarchy that ended years of absolutism, Spanish women had gained very little in the way of freedom from existing structures of masculinist dominance. For the country's dominant nineteenth-century class, the new bourgeoisie, the ideal feminine figure remained the "ángel del hogar" ("the angel in the house"), a model of domesticity who was nonetheless deprived of the legal means of either controlling or inheriting the wherewithal with which to manage her 'domain'. Images of women, not just in male literature but in the popular press, presented them as little other than "objects of male perdition"; not just working-class women but "aristocratic and bourgeois women, who were imagined as merely extreme consumers of extravagant clothing and men's hearts" (Charnon Deutsch 2000, 129). Even when achieving their ultimate aim which, according to all the handbooks, was to secure a husband, women were bound by a strict code of behaviour which, in return for her spouse's protection, demanded absolute fidelity to and obedience of her husband.[10] It is into this restrictive and firmly masculinist social and cultural climate that male authors like Espronceda and Bécquer could disseminate unanswered their Opeliaesque fantasies that a Shakespeare-inspired drama would begin to give concrete shape to.

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[8] In the manuscript versions of his 1772 translation, La Cruz takes his cue from a suggestion in Ducis that Hamlet may, despite all, be reconciled with Ophélie. La Cruz goes one stage further and has the play conclude with their embrace. Needless to say, this happy ending was never performed and may even be the work of a copyist with an eye on publication (see Pujante and Gregor 2005, 136).

[9] Isabella II, Ferdinand VII's eldest daughter who succeeded to the throne, under the regency of Ferdinand's fourth wife, María Cristina, in 1833.

[10] In Section 4, Article 57 of the Civil Code passed under the regency of María Cristina.

In writer and politician Pablo Alonso de Avecilla's unperformed, self-styled "imitation" of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* written in 1856, the Ophelia role has much the same substance as it does in Ducis, but she has already begun to lose some of the agency and self-sufficiency of her neoclassical counterpart. As early as 1.2 in this five-act play, we find Ofelia grieving her father's decision to put an end to the relationship with the "hot-blooded" Hamlet but apparently agreeing to return all his letters and forbid any future visits, the reason, she assumes wrongly, of the Prince's current malaise. In fact, although in successive visits to Claudio and Gertrudis, Hamlet and Horacio assure the monarchs that Hamlet's condition is the consequence 1) of his great love for Ophelia and 2) of her uncompromising coldness, Hamlet's suspicions regarding the death of his father and the ghost's confirmation of the facts have already diminished any agency she might possess in the unfolding of the plot.

Rather, Avecilla seems keen to exploit the irony and pathos of the situation by having Ofelia present her predicament to Gertrudis as the (unresolved) struggle between passion and reason, while framing the relationship in the political context of royal matchmaking, in which not even a prince is free to choose his prospective partner. Thus in 3.2, a scene that develops Shakespeare's 3.1, to Gertrudis's candid belief that only Ofelia can set Hamlet free, Ofelia responds:

> Por desgracia, señora, no me es dado sofocarla llama que en mi encendieron sus obsequios.
>
> Mi padre me hizo conocer muy al principio, que mi amor con el primogénito de Dinamarca me arrastrara a los peligros de ilusorios sueños; y yo hija obediente, comencé a poner diques a una pasión que nacía del centro de mi pecho, y que me arrebatara hasta el precipicio.
>
> La razón al fin, sin que pudiera dominar mis inclinaciones, me arrastró a devolverle sus billetes, y a negarme a sus visitas. (Avecilla 1856, 31)

> [Unfortunately, madam, it is not in my power to douse the flame that his gifts lit within me. / My father let me know at the very outset that my love for the firstborn of Denmark would incur the dangers of illusory dreams; and obedient daughter that I am, I began to build barriers against the passion that was arising in my bosom and was dragging me to the cliff edge. / Finally, and though I could not control my inclinations, reason brought me to return his letters and to refuse his visits.]

Not revoked until 1889, items such as these are largely a rehash of stipulations in the Napoleonic code of 1804 (Álamo Martell 2011, 17).

There are echoes of Ducis's Ophélie in the power of her emotions, expressed with surprising candour, but also in the obedient and 'rational' way she is able to put them behind her. And when her father makes the crucial political argument that in Denmark a prince can only choose his partner with the people's consent, the low-born Ofelia (her father is a minor courtier) adds: "Y no puedo ser suya, porque es Príncipe" (32; I cannot be his, because he is the prince).

The conflict between the lovers' social incompatibility and popular support for the marriage will dominate a play that foregrounds the question of Ofelia's merits to become Queen of Denmark. But in 3.2 the question acquires a gender dimension as male and female characters appear to opine differently. For Ofelia, who nonetheless evinces some of the naivety beloved of the Romantics, the question is straightforward enough: "Yo adoro a Hamlet, y Hamlet me adora" (I adore Hamlet and Hamlet adores me). While Hamlet's obsession with the ghost has already qualified that certainty, Gertrudis is, like her Shakespearean counterpart, supportive of the match. The reputation of Ofelia's father Polonio, her beauty and virtue, are, she argues, sufficient credentials for the rightness of the match, a view Claudio counters with an appeal to the "ancient and just customs" of the Danes to approve all royal marriages (32). Gertrudis's comparison, once Claudio has exited, of her own passionate nature with Ofelia's is offered as further confirmation of the appropriateness of the marriage. But Polonio, who has been wary of the match from the beginning, raises another, more subtle consideration:

> Conozco vuestro poder en Dinamarca por el amor que os granjeasteis en todos los corazones: sé que Hamlet es el ídolo del pueblo, y fácil os fuera conseguir su consentimiento para el enlace; pero el Rey se opone, y sería preciso procurar la voluntad de los súbditos por secretas negociaciones que cada cual interpretará a su arbitrio.
>
> Duro fuera a los daneses prestar un consentimiento que contrariara intereses populares, y procurándolo conseguir por secretos medios, se creyera obra de la baja ambición de Polonio, y efecto de la vil corrupción de Ofelia. (33)
>
> [I know the power you have in Denmark because of the love you have awoken in every heart. I know that Hamlet is the idol of the people, and it would be easy for you to get his consent for the match. But the King is opposed, and it would be necessary to secure the will of the subjects through secret negotiations that everyone will interpret in their own way. / It would be hard for the Danes to give their consent to something that goes against the people's interest, but trying to secure it by secret means would prompt the belief that it is the work of Polonios's crude ambitions and of Ofelia's base corruptness.]

Faced with the subtlety of such sophisticated male polity, Gertrudis can but declare her sense of utter impotence as a woman, foreshadowing what would, in other circumstances, would be a romantic tragedy of doomed love, so beloved of Spanish audiences:[11]

> ¡Ay amigos! cuan desdichada es la Reina de Dinamarca. Yo que he sentido todo el poder de las pasiones; yo que por ellas precipitada derramaré hasta la tumba un llanto ardiente que sin desahogar mi pecho abrasa mis mejillas, yo no podré prestar alivio a un amor puro, celestial . . . (33)
>
> [Ah, my friends! How wretched is the Queen of Denmark. I who have felt all the power of the passions; I who for their sake will fall and shed unto the tomb a flood of burning tears that scorch my cheeks but do not sate my breast, I can give no relief to pure, celestial love. . .]

Though not detracting from the fact that the cause of Hamlet's malaise lies elsewhere, the discrimination between "the people" and the "Danes" made by male characters like Claudio and Polonio proves a gesture that simultaneously enables and contains Ofelia' and Gertrudis's freedom to fulfil their desires. While possibly referencing the contemporary political instability in Spain, which was wracked by a series of pronunciamientos against the perceived unrepresentativeness of Isabel's parliament, culminating in the Revolution of 1854 (Tronch 2012, 248-9), the distinction serves to override the (tragic) narrative Gertrudis has concocted. After being unceremoniously invited to get herself to a "desierto" [wilderness] by Hamlet in 3.7, and having momentarily lost both her father and Hamlet on a peace-keeping expedition to England mandated by Claudio, Ofelia might be said to draw some comfort from reports that "the people" in this case, the sailors sailing the ship had wanted her to embark too. Once more, it is Claudio, with her father's connivance, who closes that particular avenue:

> Escucha: el pueblo que penetra en los palacios más de l que creemos, está acaso en el secreto del amor de Hamlet y Ofelia; pudiera creer que era forzada la marcha del Príncipe: Hamlet furioso de amor, querido del ejército, pudiéramos hallar obstáculos. Pero tú calmas todas las inquietudes; el pueblo no desconfiará cuando te vea a la cabeza de la tripulación, y nadie más interesado que Polonio en conservar su honor puro. (42)
>
> [Listen, the people who enter palaces more often than we think, may know the secret of Hamlet and Ofelia's love. They may believe that the prince was

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[11] The archetypal expression of doomed love was, for years, Juan Eugenio Hartzenbusch's play *Los amantes de Teruel* (The Lovers of Teruel, 1837), based on a story that dates back to the Middle Ages about a couple that die for love. Ofelia may be referencing this, or possibly even *Romeo and Juliet*, the play it is said to have inspired.

> forced to depart: a love-incensed Hamlet, with the army's full support, we might find some hurdles. But you calm their worries; the people will not be mistrustful when they see you in charge of the crew, and there is no one more concerned than Polonio with the integrity of his honour.]

Ruinously for the Gertrudis love narrative, it is a rumour that Hamlet himself helps propagate. The "people"'s support for the match with Ofelia is precisely the excuse Hamlet uses to persuade the sailors to abort the England mission and bring him back to Denmark, where of course he concludes his real business, which is to avenge his father. Ofelia's final intervention before Claudio and Gertrudis, as Hamlet at the head of a popular army is about to storm the palace, expresses realization of the deceit: "En tanta precipitación ni Polonio me tendió sus brazos cariñosos, ni Hamlet sus tiernas miradas" (In so much haste neither did Polonio hold out his loving arms, nor Hamlet extend his affectionate gaze). Ever the optimist when it comes to love, Gertudis forsees a pact of friendship with Fortimbrás [sic] and the possibility of a happy resolution to the conflict; but Ofelia's thoughts are already on her likely fate: "Asi lo quiera el Dios de los justos, pero las abundantes fuentes de mis ojos presagian mi destino. . ." (50; May the God of the just will it so, but the flowing fountains of my eyes announce my destiny). The shadow of a tragic ending, however, whether for her loved ones or for herself, is soon dispelled in an adaptation where neither Polonio, Hamlet nor Ofelia perish; nor, as in Ducis, is there any indication that there will be anything else between the lovers, certainly not the royal wedding Gertrudis had hoped for.

An admirer of Shakespeare, whose Hamlet he claimed to have read in the 'literal' translation of 1798 by Leandro Fernández de Moratín,[12] Avecilla cautions that for his own "imitation", it has been necessary "variar en todo la marcha y desenlace de la acción; variar el carácter de los personajes, y modelarlos a un gusto racional" (Avecilla 1856, n.p., to vary in all ways the progress and denouement of the action, vary the nature of the characters and mould them to the rational taste).[13] The appeal to reason, which rules out the possibility of Hamlet's own death in the play, seems again to recall the "wild irregularities" which, for Ducis, included the representation of Ophelia's madness and apparent suicide. Contrariwise, rather than endowing her with the strength and resolution, however misguided, of her Enlightenment predecessor, Avecilla emphasizes not just her innocence but her ignorance of those that surround her. Foremost amongst these is Hamlet, who cynically ‘politicizes’ her emotions and the ‘popular’ appeal of a Hamlet-Ofelia pairing to address what he conceives as the real issue affecting the state: the usurpation of his crown by Claudio.

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[12] Despite translating the play from the English original, in what was the first Spanish translation of *any* play by Shakespeare, Moratín claimed to have done so only to show how wary Spanish playwrights should be of repeating the Englishman's gross errors.

[13] An ambivalence already reflected in his earlier *Poética Trágica*, where he envisions a Shakespeare "magnifico, lleno de pompa, en medio de su abandono y monstruosidades" (Avecilla 1834, 75; magnificent, full of pomp, surrounded by looseness and monstrosities).

Avecilla’s Ofelia appears in only seven of the 34 scenes into which the play is divided. In dramatist and journalist Carlos Coello’s 1872 *El Príncipe Hamlet*, she appears in seven of 40 but, coming just a year after Bécquer’s famous “rima” and four years after the production of *Hamlet* in Spain by the company of Ernesto Rossi, the impression she leaves is much deeper. Hers, Coello would acknowledge in his Prologue to the second edition of the play, is a “tipo dificilísmo” (extremely difficult part), and he complements the actress who first performed it at the Teatro Español in Madrid for proving “que lo que se ve con los ojos del alma puede verse también con los ojos del rostro” (1876, 11; that what can be seen with the eyes of the soul can also be seen in the eyes of the face). Ofelia’s importance to the plot, despite her limited presence, can be seen in the fact that she both opens the play, picking flowers, and ‘ends’ it, as a dying Hamlet hands the crown to Horacio and exclaims. “Yo. . . me voy con Ofelia . . . que me llama!” (86; “I’m leaving with Ophelia, who beckons me!).

As in Avecilla’s adaptation, Coello’s Ofelia is urged by her father, Polonio, to put an end to the fledgling relationship with the prince, but not because of Hamlet’s youthful hot-bloodedness; rather, what disqualifies her is her own low status. Ofelia’s response is both ambiguous and full of forboding:

> Mataré el amor si puedo
> . . .
> pero no sé si podré.
> Lo débil que con él fui
> siempre, acrecerá su brío,
> y es más fácil, padre mío,
> que el amor me mate a mí.
> (17)
>
> [I will kill the love if I can, but I don’t know whether I’ll be able. The weakness I have always shown him will only give him strength and, my father, it’s more likely that love will kill me.]

Despite Ofelia’s “weakness”, as she puts it, it is, as in the previous versions of the character discussed, her filial obedience that shines through. And when in Coello’s 1.5 Hamlet declares his “idolatrous” love for her, vowing that all her hopes will be fulfilled, she responds simply: “Nuestro amor puro. . . es imposible!” (Our pure love . . . is impossible!). The ellipsis denotes hesitation, just as in the slightly enlarged version of the same scene published in the play’s second edition,[14] Ofelia makes it plain that it is her father's wish that the affair should come to an end, not hers. But the fact remains that she does not deviate from the decision even when Hamlet gives her one last chance to recant. The scene ends almost comically, with a somewhat petulant Hamlet asking her to go and, when she does, peevishly exclaiming to no one in particular: "Y se va" (27; And she has!).

As a play that Coello claims was "inspired" on Shakespeare, Ofelia's rebuff is a cue to rewrite Hamlet's "Frailty, thy name is woman" outburst, immediately followed by an adaptation of his most famous soliloquy – a clear pointer to the fact that he feels let down by the two women in his life, Gunhila (the play's Gertrude) and, latterly, Ofelia. Polonio's embassy to Gunhila and Fengo (Claudius) to admit his part in the breakup of what, in this play, is a fully requited relationship prompts Fengo's politically motivated attempt to engineer a reconciliation between them – not without a swipe at modern girls (the play, like Shakespeare's, is set in the Middle Ages) who, or so he is informed, "para afirmar, lo que hacen (Con bondadosa broma) / es poner los ojos bajos, / callar y ruborizarse. . . (44; to consent (In kindly jest) do droop their eyes, stay quiet and blush).

Against this gruff misogyny, both Hamlet's and Fengo's, Ofelia stands as a model of filial loyalty, forgoing her relationship with Hamlet on her father's advice but also of honest feminine integrity belying Fengo's account of modern girls with a refusal to be silent. In the very next scene, she is given a soliloquy, presented as a love sonnet from the perspective of a female speaker, which, belying the apparent demureness of the opening scenes, gives full rein to her feelings for the man she recognizes as the object of her desire:

> Tu esposa . . . No es delirio! No es locura!
> Y tiemblo . . . Y el sudor baña mi frente . . .
> Pero, de un solo golpe, ¿quién se siente
> capaz de soportar tanta ventura?
> Tan dulce realidad, gloria tan pura,

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[14] In the earlier version, Ofelia's explanantion "Mi padre . . ." (My father . . .) is violently interrupted by Hamlet, who exclaims: "¡Al defenderte de nuevo, no te infames!" (Coello, 1872, 12; In defending yourself once, do not debase yourself!). Clearly feeling Hamlet should react to something more substantial than that, as well as enhancing his status as an arch-Romantic who puts love on a par with God, the revised version interpolates: "OFELIA Mi padre halla en la muerte de nuestro amor su anhelo. / HAMLET Ni Dios, que le dió vida, puede matarlo, infiel! / El amor, santa esencia del rey de tierra y cielo, / es Dios, y omnipotente, y eterno como Él. OFELIA Considerad . . . / HAMLET Pensando defenderte, te infamas" (1876, 26-7; OFELIA My father finds his pleasure in the death of our love. HAMLET Not even God, who gave life to it, can kill it, unfaithful one! Love, the holy essence of the king of earth and heaven, is God, omnipotent, and eternal like Him. OFELIA Bear in mind . . . HAMLET In trying to defend yourself, you debase yourself).

> debe entrar en el alma lentamente. . .
> Con esa gloria, hay gloria suficiente
> para esta vida y la que eterna dura!
> Funde la propia hoguera en que me inflamo
> mi corazón, y crece, y en rocío
> de lágrimas felices lo derramo.
> ¡Sangre del alma! ¡Rey del albedrío!
> Ahora que no me escuchas, oye . . . te amo,
> te adoro, te idolatro, dueño mío!
> (45)

> [Your wife . . . It's not an illusion! It's not madness. And I tremble . . . And the sweat drenches my brow . . . But, come all at once, who feels able to bear such happiness? Such sweet reality, such pure glory, should enter the soul slowly . . . With that glory, there's glory enough for this life and life that lasts eternally! My heart melts the very bonfire on which I become inflamed, and it grows, and as a shower of joyous tears I shed it. Blood of my soul! King of my will! Now that you can hear me, listen . . . I love you, adore you, worship you, my liege!]

As well as returning some of the "idolatry" Hamlet had expressed earlier, this piece of poetic virtuosity is the clearest expression yet of Ofelia's desire. And though in it the structure of social and sexual power remains firmly tilted towards her "liege" Hamlet, the speech helps solidify what, even in Shakespeare, remains latent and inchoate.

Predictably, the triumph of desire is short-lived. In the very next scene, Ofelia's tidings of the King's consent to the marriage brings only contempt from a revenge-driven Hamlet who, like Shakespeare's hero, enquires into her honesty, denies he has ever loved her and scolds her with his "Get thee to a nunnery" outburst, followed by some further reflexions on female frailty. That Coello's Hamlet is not immune to the feelings that brought him and Ofelia together in the first place is made evident by at least one momentary wobble "Temí un instante / que me vencieran sus lágrimas" (49; For a moment I feared her tears would overcome me). But it is not enough to prevent him from completing his destiny, killing Fengo and leaving both Polonio and, of course, Ofelia as "tragic collateral damage", with Ofelia now completely out of her wits. Once again, as in Shakespeare's tragedy, the latter's love has been sacrificed on the altar of the 'greater good' of Hamlet's revenge which, as in Avecilla, but arguably here as a reminder of the "Glorious Revolution" of four years earlier, receives popular consent.[15] True to Shakespeare, Coello completes his adaptation with a mad scene in which a white-clad Ofelia distributes flowers to all and sundry, including Hamlet, whose face she poignantly claims to have seen reflected in a lake, asking her to marry him. After her death and Gunhila's mournful account of how she appears to have seen Hamlet calling her from the lake before throwing herself in, Hamlet claims to have never ceased to love her.

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[15] Unlike previous *pronunciamientos*, military coups with little or no help from the populace, the 1868 Revolution that would topple Isabel II and bring in the so-called "sexenio democrático", enjoyed considerable civil support.

Through later disparaged as a piece of mawkish, après-la-lettre Romanticism pressed into a classicist mould, the premiere of Coello's *El príncipe Hamlet* appears to have been a success and, despite the fact that the play was written primarily as a platform for the actor performing Hamlet, Ofelia, played by Elisa Boldún, was wildly applauded, especially for the mad scene. One review (*La América*, 13 December 1872, 10) paints a particularly vivid picture of the impact of the scene and actor on the audience:

> Elisa Boldún ha fascinado al público en la tierna Ofelia, en la escena final de su locura con su traje blanco sembrado de flores, que derramaba a manos llenas, sobre el desolado Hamlet sin conocerle, ha tenido arranques de inspiración sublime: ¡qué sencillez inocente! ¡qué virginal candor! ¡qué variedad de tonos!
>
> Natural, sin énfasis, triste; alegre o apasionada, ha recorrido todas las escalas de la demencia con un abandono y expansión tan espontáneas, que hacían brillar sus dotes naturales y su buen gusto artístico.
>
> La ovación ha sido general, los aplausos unánimes a tan simpática y estudiosa actriz.
>
> [Elisa Boldún fascinated the audience in the part of the tender Ofelia, in the final mad scene in a white gown strewn with flowers that she tossed all around and on the disconsolate Hamlet, without recognizing him, she has had moments of sublime inspiration. What guileless simplicity! What virginal candour! What a range of tones! / Natural, unemphatic, forlorn; whether joyful or passionate, she has covered the complete scale of madness with a freedom and expansiveness that were so spontaneous, that they allowed her natural gifts and artistic good taste to shine forth. / The ovation was complete, the applause unanimous for such a kindly and studious actress.]

Coming in the light of the Bécquer image, and of the 1868 production of the play in Spain by Ernesto Rossi, who saw Ophelia as the "victim of other people's guilt" who is rightly rejected by Hamlet (1868, 49-51),[16] the performance was a manifestation of simplicity and madness a late-Romantic audience could finally relish.

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[16] In his address to the Ateneo of Barcelona on 3 August 1868, a speech delivered in Italian and translated in a bilingual Italian Spanish edition that same year. For an account of Rossi's *Hamlet* performances and the visits to Madrid by his and other Italian companies, see Valleja (2010). Apologies for Hamlet's mistreatment of Ophelia were of course legion in the Romantic period; for an account and justification of Coleridge's, Hazlitt's and Lamb's critical apologiae, see Palmer Hudson (1942).

4.

In their Introduction to *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, Kaara Peterson and Deanne Williams have noted the extreme "malleability" of Shakespeare's Ophelia – a malleability and also absence that allows different cultures to project upon her their own concerns and self-images but that was never anything than "Shakespeare's deliberate invention" (2012, 3). Deprived of anything resembling 'authentic' Shakespeare until the last few decades of the nineteenth century, Spain's predominantly male playwrights practically had to craft the character anew, replacing Shakespeare's invention with borrowings from other (non-Shakespearean) cultures or adapting it to their own imaginings. Inheriting the neoclassical tenets of late eighteenth-century drama, the translators of Ducis's 1769 *Hamlet*, perhaps unintentionally, produce an Ophelia whose strength and conviction not only ran contrary to the representation of women on the Spanish stage but unwittingly questioned their status in Spanish society. With only Moratín's unperformable prose version of the play to guide him, Pablo Alonso de Avecilla went some way to correcting this vision, sharing Ducis's vision of filial obedience but, while reinstating her as the daughter of Polonio, limiting her agency and her ability to fight on equal terms with Hamlet. It is only with the poetic groundwork of Romantics like Espronceda and Bécquer and the theatrical influence of Ernesto Rossi and his troupe that an Ophelia recognisable as Shakespeare's invention takes her place on the Spanish stage. And though in Carlos Coello's adaptation, and reputedly through performance, she acquires a presence that even Shakespeare seemed keen to deny her, victimhood and madness would, for decades, remain the character's defining traits.

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Ophelias for Victorian Girls

Abstract

Victorians firmly believed in the relevance of Shakespeare's cultural inheritance, particularly for women. Abridgements, adaptations, and appropriations mediated the cultural relationship that girls or young women established with Shakespeare's works. In this essay I provide an overview of the characterisation of Ophelia in several Victorian and Edwardian retellings aimed mostly at a female audience. I contrast narrative abridgments in the short-story format with Mary Cowden Clarke's longer and more imaginative version, *The Rose of Elsinore* (1850-1852), a prequel that, unlike the adaptations in the tradition of the Lambs, offers an explanation for Ophelia's behaviour by exploring her distressing and traumatic past. Clarke's work creates a unique proto-Freudian connection between Ophelia's childhood and the character we encounter in Shakespeare's play. While abridgments simplify the narrative by offering clear justifications for characters' words and actions, Cowden Clarke's version introduces an added layer of complexity by subtly linking the struggles of early modern heroines to those faced by Victorian young women.

Keywords: Ophelia; *Hamlet*; Mary Cowden Clarke; Victorian literature; girlhood; adaptation

Victorians firmly believed in the relevance of Shakespeare's cultural inheritance, particularly for women. It was as if the gap between Shakespeare and the Victorians could easily be bridged, allowing the Bard to inspire Victorian girls on how best to be feminine (or 'womanly', a favourite adjective of the period). Abridgements, adaptations, and appropriations mediated the cultural relationship that girls or young women established with Shakespeare's works. It is very tempting to paraphrase Ian Kott's old "adage" and declare that "every historical period finds in Shakespeare's heroines what it is looking for and what it wants to see" (1965, 5), as for most of the nineteenth and twentieth century female characters acted as sites of projection and negotiation for different constructions of femininity. In this essay I will provide an overview of the characterisation of Ophelia in several Victorian and Edwardian retellings aimed mostly at a female audience. I will contrast narrative abridgments in the short-story format with Mary Cowden Clarke's longer and more imaginative version, *The Rose of Elsinore* (1850-

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1852), a prequel that, unlike the adaptations in the tradition of the Lambs, offers an explanation for Ophelia's behaviour by exploring her distressing and traumatic past.

Ever since the *Lambs' Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), the first attempt to adapt the plays into narrative for children, young female audiences have been an essential part of the history of children's adaptations of Shakespeare. In the "Preface" to the *Tales*, we read that the intention was to "make these tales easy reading for very young children" (Lamb 2007, 3). Immediately after, though, the author of the "Preface" (presumably Mary), added that:

> For young ladies too it has been my intention chiefly to write, because boys are generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently having the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book. (2007, 4)

However, in the second edition of the *Tales* (1809), an "Advertisement" identifies a more specific readership than the 1807 edition:

> The Proprietors of this work willingly pay obedience to the voice of the public. It has been the general sentiment that the style in which these tales were written is not so precisely adapted for the amusement of mere children, as for an acceptable and improving present to young ladies advancing to the state of womanhood. (Lamb 1809, iii)

This edition clearly indicates that the original reference to young children is no longer applicable. A relationship between prose adaptations of Shakespeare and girls is therefore established very early on and is crucial in the construction of a Shakespearean canon for children. Gail Marshall, in *Shakespeare and Victorian Women* (2009), offers a perceptive analysis of how the Victorians firmly believed in the significance of Shakespeare's cultural legacy for women but were also aware that young readers needed to be guided in accessing that legacy. Only rarely did middle-class girls learn about Shakespeare at the theatre; instead, they discovered it at home, within their family circle, at a time when reading Shakespeare aloud was common. They also encountered it through solitary reading, often mediated by adaptations and bowdlerisations (the *Preface to the Tales* suggests the brother as an intermediary). Prince (2007) also examines how certain Victorian periodicals, such as *The Girl's Own Paper*, contributed to the popularisation of Shakespeare through essay competitions and various articles advising girls on how they ought to read his works. These efforts helped cultivate "a nascent sense of national identity among youth, embracing . . . self-sacrificing daughterhood, and eventually motherhood – for girls" (153). In the nineteenth century, women and girls engaged with Shakespeare's works in various ways: through children's and adult editions, actresses' memoirs, critical articles in journals, and the formation of women's reading groups. Broadly speaking, nineteenth-century narrative retellings of Shakespeare's plays for young readers fall into two categories: 1) those following the tradition of the Lambs and their Victorian successors who adopt the short story collection format. They function primarily as reductions or abridgments of Shakespeare's works. 2) Those by Mary Cowden Clarke, which expand upon Shakespeare's plots by incorporating additional details, such as prequels, new characters, and extra narrative elements (see Tosi 2021). In both types of retellings, the narrator plays a crucial role, often adopting the characters' words as their own while interjecting with commentary and interpretations. This process transforms the rich, multifaceted perspectives of the original play – where viewpoints frequently conflict – into a singular, cohesive version of character and plot tailored for young readers. By converting Shakespeare's inherently dialogical and theatrical form into a linear, monologic narrative, these retellings tend to limit the range of possible interpretations. Unlike the narrative abridgements in short story format, which tend to present less nuanced characters and often follow a neat good/bad polarisation, Clarke's *The Rose of Elsinore* creates a unique proto-Freudian connection between Ophelia's childhood and the character we encounter in Shakespeare's play. While abridgments simplify the narrative by offering clear justifications for characters' words and actions, Cowden Clarke's version introduces an added layer of complexity by subtly linking the struggles of early modern heroines to those faced by Victorian young women.

Most retellings in the tradition of the Lambs (abridgments in short story format) portray Ophelia as a weak character, incapable of controlling her own destiny – a victim of both her disposition and circumstances (see Tosi 2013). These versions tend to focus on Hamlet's rejection of her in the nunnery scene, often skipping over his bawdy talk during the *Mousetrap* performance. They then fast-forward to a depiction of her madness and death, with the narrator attempting to make sense of both and offering a possible explanation. As in the play, these retellings do not present Ophelia as a central character, as they tend to follow 'Hamlet's story' instead.

Charles Lamb gives very little space to Ophelia in his retelling of *Hamlet*. She is described as a "fair maid" (2009, 231), a "good lady" (232), and an "honoured lady" (ibid.) (in *The Tales* characters are often introduced through labels of this kind, to establish unambiguously their moral characteristics). Hamlet's "unkindness" (ibid.) toward Ophelia, who is willing to forgive him, is mentioned only briefly, as is her madness, which is attributed to her father's death "and by the hands of the prince whom she loved" (239). Lamb is more focused on justifying Hamlet's actions than on dwelling on his harsh treatment of Ophelia. In contrast, Mary Seymour's version in *Shakespeare's Stories Simply Told* (1893) takes a more ambivalent approach. It initially emphasises the distress and alarm Ophelia feels due to Hamlet's neglect and later rudeness; yet her madness and death are dismissed in just a few lines, with no mention of Hamlet's responsibility: "She, poor maiden, had been most unhappy since her father's death and became, indeed, quite distracted with sorrow, so that she would go about among the ladies of the court, giving them flowers, in a foolish, simple manner" (1893, 112). Mabel Surtees Townesend's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, from her collection *Stories from Shakespeare* (1899), emphasises Ophelia's grief and disappointment at Hamlet's change of heart towards her. Deeply in love, this Ophelia had expectations of a future with Hamlet, which are shattered, for example, by his "many hard and bitter words, bidding her get her to a nunnery" (1899, 501). It is unsurprising that this grief, combined with her father's death, drives her to madness.

Similarly, Mary Macleod's retelling of *Hamlet* (1902), uncharacteristically for the short-story format, imagines a childhood friendship between the lonely Hamlet and Ophelia, which deepens into love over time. This background intensifies Ophelia's suffering, making Hamlet's rejection even more devastating and primarily responsible for her descent into madness and death: "Hamlet's strange behaviour had been the first shock, and on her father's sudden death and Hamlet's departure for England, the slender strength snapped utterly" (212).

According to Thomas Carter's version in *Stories from Shakespeare* (1910), Ophelia is "gentle in nature and thought . . . but was not strong in herself and easily yielded to the influence of others" (1910, 87), especially her father's warnings, which take root in her mind so that she doubts Hamlet's sincerity. Her madness is caused by "the double tragedy of her broken love and her father's untimely death" (99), and her death is described poetically as "a strain of sad sweet music which comes to us on the wings of night and silence, and which we rather feel than hear" (100). Constance and Mary Maud, in *Shakespeare's Stories* (1913), also portray Ophelia as an obedient daughter and sister, emphasising that her father and brother "spoke out of love for her" (311). Even Hamlet's hurtful words are given a plausible motivation by the narrator, as the prince is merely pretending not to love her: "For her happiness, he judged it best that she should forget him and marry someone else, or, better still, enter a nunnery where she would be safe from the wickedness of the world" (317). This version suggests that one's elders or betters are always right – Ophelia's madness and death are dismissed in a couple of sentences. Alice Spencer Hoffmann's version differs slightly from others, as the narrator subtly suggests that Ophelia bears some responsibility for being too easily led. In her *Children's Shakespeare* (1911), Ophelia is a lonely creature who suffers in silence. However, from Hamlet's perspective, she appears to have changed inexplicably after Polonius warns her to be wary of his promises: "Still, it was an added pain to feel that she was inconstant" (1911, 260). When Hamlet tells her, "I loved you once", as in the play, he does so almost in self-defence, as "he had sworn to wipe from his memory everything but revenge" (264). This has a devastating effect on Ophelia, who, until then, had believed that "the strange disease of her mind" had "clouded his love for her" (264). As the narrator later explains, "his words had been as blows on her fragile body" (266). Lonelier than ever after her father's death, Ophelia realises that "a love that had come into her desolate, unmothered existence, had changed it into glorious, joyous life, and then had roughly left it to a loneliness, darker and more despairing than ever she had known before" (271). The lady who "never dreamed . . . of putting forward her own desires" (254) "became again a little child" (271) in her madness. In this retelling the narrator allows the reader to enter into these lovers' minds, and appreciate the reactions to each other's words and behaviours, and the destructive impact that their fathers had on their relationship and lives. What emerges from these retellings in the form of the short story or abridgement is a lonely and delicate Ophelia, who pays a high price for obeying her father and who is destroyed by Hamlet's words of rejection.

At a time in which criticism focussed on character study, this interpretation was echoed by female scholars such as Grace Latham, who in an address read at a meeting of the New Shakespeare Society in 1884, blames education: "or a weak woman who has been thoroughly cowed, a kind of paralysis of the will takes place, and her acts come not from her own volition, but from that of the stronger nature under whose domination she lives" (qtd in Thompson and Roberts 1997, 167). The double standard in education is also noted by Anna Jameson in the hugely popular *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical* (1832). In her catalogue of Shakespeare's heroines, Jameson divides Shakespeare's female characters into four categories: Ophelia is listed, with Juliet, in the group of characters of *Passion and the Imagination.* It is interesting that when she approaches Ophelia, she holds Polonius responsible: "have we not the very man who would send his son to see all . . . but keep his only daughter as far as possible from every taint of the world he knew so well?" (Jameson 1858, 260). As Julie Hankey (1994, 427) notes: "After Jameson it became commonplace to describe Shakespeare as the 'champion' of women". In contrast, in his lecture *Sesame and Lilies* (1864), Ruskin focuses on Ophelia almost exclusively in relation to Hamlet and blames her for not being there for him: "Ophelia was weak and timid . . . when Hamlet most needed a friend – most needed her – she miserably failed him" (1905, 242). One feels a similar sense of disappointment in Mrs. Elliott's depiction of Ophelia in *Shakespeare's Garden of Girls* (1885), which follows Jameson's structure of a portrait gallery of female characters. Elliott portrays Ophelia as unable to provide Hamlet with the sympathy and "tender friendship" he needs and even, like Ruskin, holds her partly responsible for his madness: "She closed the door of refuge on his 'betossed soul' and left him at the mercy of the storm that finally drove him and her to madness and death" (1885, 51). She makes allowances for what she imagines must have been a mother-deprived childhood, noting that "there was something wanting in her training that must have been supplied . . . had she enjoyed a mother's sympathy and care . . . her mind would have been strong enough to bear the strain put upon it by Hamlet's real or feigned madness" (48). However, she downplays Hamlet's cruelty (claiming that "Hamlet's bearing towards her had always been strictly honourable", 52) and instead emphasises Ophelia's weakness. She concludes her portrait with surprising, and frankly rather uncharitable, words: "we often wonder how different everything might have been had he met with a woman of stronger nature than that of 'poor Ophelia'" (57). These last positions seem to align curiously with the Victorian concept of 'separate spheres', which held that women – remaining at home while men faced the hardships of work or public life – were expected to provide comfort and emotional security, something men could not find in their business or professional relationships (Burstyn 1980, 32). If we substitute the challenges of the professional world with the difficulties of navigating life at Elsinore, a similar dynamic seems to emerge. To sum up, the Ophelia that emerges from these nineteenth-century interpretations in tales and character portraits is unprepared, possibly immature, lonely (motherless), sensitive, incapable of providing Hamlet with emotional support, and weak – ultimately failing to meet Hamlet's expectations.

Cowden Clarke's novella *The Rose of Elsinore*, arguably the best tale in *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850-1852),[1] presents a much more complex character, highlighting that Ophelia's emotional instability is the consequence of both education and trauma – and the well-meaning mistakes of *both* living parents. Mary Cowden Clarke was a formidable female scholar of Shakespeare and had already established a career as an editor and philologist – having published the first *Full Concordance to Shakespeare* in 1845 – when she wrote *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*. Cowden Clarke was convinced that "himself possessing keener insight than any other man-writer into womanly nature – Shakespeare may well be esteemed a valuable friend of woman-kind" (Clarke 1887, 355). Her version expands Shakespeare's plot by providing causal connections and substantial additional information. In Cowden Clarke's novellas, characters are "round". and the idealisation of her heroines is compatible with realistic, insightful portrayals set in specific, not improbable, places and periods. These imaginary portraits closely resemble the way actresses of the time, such as Helena Faucit, envisioned a character's past to enhance their performances. In *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (1899), Faucit, who identified with Ophelia's loneliness as a young girl and played the role of Ophelia in Paris in 1844 (Carlyle 2000, 129-42), similarly imagined details of Ophelia's early life. Like Cowden Clarke, she speculated that after Ophelia's mother's death, the infant was left in the care of a nurse, "tended only by roughly-mannered and uncultured natures" (Faucit 1899, 7). This, she argued, could explain "how Ophelia came to utter snatches of such ballads as never ought to issue from a young and cultured woman's lips" (ibid.). Faucit also imagined Ophelia having an affectionate relationship with Queen Gertrude but a strained one with Hamlet, who speaks in allusions and reproaches that she may not even fully understand. She pictures Ophelia as a "tender willow, swaying, bending before the storm-bursts of his wrath, the cutting winds of his fierce words" (14), in an anticipation of her death.

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[1] For an analysis of the character of Ophelia in Cowden Clarke's novella see also Thompson and Roberts 1993, Maria del Sapio Garbero 2002, and Brown 2005.

In *The Girlhood* mothers, notably absent in Shakespeare (and Faucit's speculative later portraits), are co-protagonists. We should not forget that mothers were also the recipients of these tales, which were suitable for family reading. As Gorham has argued: "much Victorian idealisation of femininity was concerned with its manifestation by adult women in their roles as wives and mothers" (1982, 5). The mother-daughter relationship played a central role in a girl's upbringing at a time when most middle- and upper-class girls were educated at home. In this domestic setting, the mother often served as the primary educator, shaping not only her daughter's moral and social values but also her intellectual development. This dynamic placed the mother at the heart of her daughter's formation, reinforcing the idea of maternal influence as both essential and formative.

In an article titled "Shakespeare as the Girl's Friend" (1887), Clarke writes:

> Happy is she who, at eight or nine years old, receives a copy of *Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare*, opening a vista of even then understandable interest and enjoyment! Happy she who, at twelve or thirteen, has *Shakespeare's Works* read to her by her mother, with a loving selection of the fittest plays and passages! (369)

Although a girl's introduction to the Bard was ideally placed within an affectionate family setting for both Mary Lamb (who authored the Preface and wrote the comedies in *The Tales*) and Mary Cowden Clarke, the shift from Lamb's male mediator to Clarke's maternal figure (Tosi 2013, 62) appears to indicate that mothers are implicitly asked to guide their daughters in the study and appreciation of Shakespeare as part of their training for life. In these stories, we follow in detail the heroines' emotional, intellectual, and sentimental education (or its failure, as in Ophelia's case). Everything that happens in the plays is accounted for in the tales, and everything the girls say or do in Shakespeare aligns with the education they received in these fictional speculations. Acting as both moral emissaries of Victorian ideology and creative reimaginings of Shakespeare, the novellas bridge didacticism and literary adaptation. As Osborne has noted (2015, 22), they anachronistically describe and attribute Victorian ideals and challenges – particularly regarding womanhood – to characters from seventeenth-century plays, situating these values safely in a time before the events of the plays unfold. These are also double-edged cautionary tales: they reinforce traditional notions of femininity by pointing out, through the use of invented female characters as alter egos, the dangers girls must identify and escape. Yet, they also expose double standards in male and female sexual conduct. This happens in a particularly remarkable way in *The Rose of Elsinore.*

In the novella, Ophelia is described from a young age as observant and perceptive – the narrator often focuses on her violet eyes and her capacity to retain impressions. When one of her maids scolds her nurse Bothilda for singing inappropriate songs to the baby, the worries are dismissed because the nurse is persuaded that she will never remember them. Later, when Ophelia's mother decides to leave her daughter with the same nurse and her family, she does so under the assumption that Ophelia is too young to "acquire coarse habits, or imbibe unseemly notions" (Clarke 2009, 187). The play contradicts this conviction – fragments of old songs re-emerge when Ophelia loses her reason, and what happened during her time with the nurse leaves lasting impressions. This is also a cautionary tale for mothers in general, as Ophelia's mother, Lady Aoudra, is unable to oppose her husband's will and ultimately sacrifices her child's well-being to follow Polonius to Paris to further his political ambitions. She mistakenly assumes that "health of body, vigour of frame, activity of limb" are "the main things to be secured for her child" (ibid.). In focusing on raising her daughter in the open air rather than nurturing her perceptive mind, she makes a serious mistake. Again, there is a touch of anachronism here, especially when we consider that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, young aristocrats typically spent extended periods of their adolescence in other noble households (Elizabeth I is a notable example) – though certainly not in servants' homes, as is the case for Cowden Clarke's Ophelia. By contrast, in the Victorian period, the family was the most powerful agent of socialisation, playing a significant role in shaping personality (Dyhouse 1981, 30). The home was seen as a protective space, where the daughter was regarded as a sheltered flower – one that this Victorian Ophelia is compelled to leave behind in order to venture into vulnerable, inadequate environments and questionable company. The mother figure for young Ophelia under these new circumstances is, therefore, Jutha, the adolescent daughter of a peasant couple, who takes good care of her and tries to protect her from the unwanted, albeit insistent, attentions of her aggressive "idiot brother" Ulf, who is described as a ravager and a destroyer of "things of beauty and fragility". He is always compared to animals, which he treats with "uncouth cruelty". He seemed like "some wild beast, ravening his prey" (198), and "made the little girl always feel somehow as if she were the bird, or the fly, or the rose that he destroyed".

It is Jutha who introduces Ophelia to the flowers and herbs of the woods and their herb garden: "she would take her to bowery thickets in the wood, where the pansy and the columbine grew wild" (195). Unfortunately, Jutha falls in love with Lord Eric, a knight they meet in the woods during their daily rambles. This is described as a fairy-tale encounter, but Eric, for all his milky steed, polished looks, and gallant behaviour – appearing like a prince from a fairy tale (202) – is, deep down, made of the same stuff as Ulf. Even though the novella fully exploits the contrast between refinement and uncouthness and repeatedly emphasises Ophelia's inadequate upbringing in this household, it becomes clear at this point that a gentleman's education is no guarantee of gentlemanly behaviour and that a girl must remain on her guard at all times, as Ophelia's mother will reiterate later in the novella.

After Jutha is abandoned by Eric, she tells Ophelia sad stories of abandonment and metamorphosis, like that of the baker's daughter turned into an owl, and increasingly, tales of unfortunate lovers and suicides. Until one day, Jutha is found dead, with her stillborn child, by Ophelia:

> Could that indeed be the face of Jutha? – that white, still, rigid thing? . . . And what was that, lying upon her breast, encircled by her arm? A little, little face – a baby's face! It looked so transparent, so waxen . . . that the child involuntarily stretched forth her finger, and touched its cheek. The icy cold shot, with a sharp thrill, to her heart, and she screamed aloud as she turned to Jutha's face and flung herself upon it with wild kisses and tears. (214-15)

Even before Jutha's untimely death, though, life in the cottage does not seem to suit Ophelia's disposition: "among these rough cottage people, more and more did the child feel herself alone and apart" (205). However, after Jutha's death, Ophelia is left to her own devices and is even more vulnerable to Ulf's advances. One day when he sees her asleep in the wood, he leans down over her: "the hot breath reached her face; like the rank fumes of a charcoal furnace, it seemed to stifle her with its tainted oppression" (216). After a struggle, she manages to escape. On the night Ophelia's mother finally comes to collect her after a few years, no one notices that Ulf has entered Ophelia's bedroom, even though Ophelia is plagued with a feeling of impending danger and terror.[2]

Later, at court, and reunited with her family, Ophelia relives this vicarious experience of abandonment and encounter with death of a loved one when she finds the lifeless body of her friend Lady Thyra, who has hanged herself after being abandoned by the same seducer, Lord Eric. On both occasions, Ophelia hardly recovers from these traumatic incidents, which foreshadow her own story of yielding to passion and rejection by a socially superior lover. As George C. Gross has observed: "Mrs Clarke seems to have understood very clearly the sexual innuendos in the mad scene, and to have taken the hint from them to create her own vivid and detailed incidents to teach her young readers and their mothers about the pitfalls in the path of virtue" (1972, 54).

In the novella, the narrator describes Ophelia's relationship with her father before her mother's death. Even though Polonius is described as being fond of his little girl, one cannot help but notice the objectification of Ophelia. When he returns from a day's work at court, "he would pat her cheeks, or pass his hand over her fair head, and say some fondling words of rejoicing that he now possessed so pretty a living toy at home as his little daughter, to beguile his leisure hours" (221). However, Clarke's Ophelia at court is not entirely lonely or isolated, as she is in Shakespeare's play. Cowden Clarke provides her with a mother who acts as both confidante and counsellor – yet she makes crucial mistakes, yielding to her husband's plan of encouraging a friendship with the older and more worldly Lady Thyra. As Polonius argues, "Polish, refinement . . . are attained only by associating with those accustomed to move in courtly circles" (225). And yet, despite Ophelia's mother's initial neglect and later misjudgements, the narrator at one point takes the opportunity to reaffirm the importance of motherly love

> Holy mother-love! Nearest semblance vouchsafed to mortals of Divine protection! Benignest human symbol of God's mercy to man! There is a

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[2] Two years after Mary Cowden Clarke's death in 1893, her sister Savilla Novello published an abridged, single-volume edition of *The Heroines*, replacing the original three volumes. This version is heavily bowdlerised, with the most 'improper' elements removed – such as the mention of Jutha's dead baby, the 'child of sin'. The revised text also omits the implication that Ophelia's unease the night her mother returns is linked to Ulf's presence in the bedroom, even if she remains unaware of it. In Novello's version, Ophelia's distress is portrayed as just the fruit of her vivid imagination, devoid of any real threat. Additionally, the passage in which Ophelia's mother warns her about the dangers of sexual passion is entirely cut. Compared to Novello's censored edition, Cowden Clarke's novella is far more explicit about the perils facing Ophelia – and, by extension, the Victorian girl – such as seduction, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and sexual assault.

> blessed influence, a sacred joy, a plenitude of satisfaction in the very presence of a mother, that plainer speaks the mysterious beatitude of Heaven itself to earthly intelligence, than aught else in existence. (219)

Cowden Clarke's novella is pervaded by ambivalence, balancing the repeated emphasis on the value of having a mother who can exert a "blessed influence" with the actual results of such an education.

Cowden Clarke also accommodates Shakespeare's supernatural elements (the ghost) in her novella; she does so by showing Ophelia having prophetic dreams, like the one where the two girls' spirits and the armoured ghost of the king point ominously to a third mysterious girl (obviously Ophelia herself):

> Close beside me, there gradually shaped itself into substance a form that seemed to grow out of the shadowy night air. It became the distinct semblance of the king, as I saw him ride to the Norwegian wars, in coat of armour, and with truncheon in hand, not long since; save, that his face, in lieu of being lighted with hope of conquest, life-like, and animated, was pale and all amort – ghastly, and set in death. He turned this wan visage full upon me, as he pointed to the figure of her who sat lamenting; and then she vanished . . . But there were two others, I saw. One was poor Thyra . . . Then I saw one approach, whose face I could not see, and whose figure I knew not. She was clothed in white, all hung about with weeds and wildflowers . . . and then the white figure moved on, impelled towards the water. I saw her glide on, floating upon the surface, I saw her dimly, among the silver-leaved branches of the drooping willow, as they waved around and above her, up-buoyed by her spreading white garments. (248-9)

When she relates the dream to her mother, the lady shudders "as her eye fell upon the white night-gear of her child, telling her vision" (250). But this moment of premonition is interrupted by Polonius entering the room. Ophelia's heightened sensibility and childhood experiences make her the ideal receptacle for words like those of Laertes in the play: "be wary then; best safety lies in fear" (1.3.43). Fear, indeed, is her hallmark, the way she responds to a threatening and violent male world in *The Rose of Elsinore* a world that speaks to her through the premature deaths of her friends and terrifying nightmares. But *The Rose of Elsinore* is also a tale of multiple seductions, with heavy Gothic undertones. Ophelia is always in danger from her surroundings and the people she associates with, and she never learns that, in her world, seduction inevitably leads to death. This includes Gertrude's seduction by Claudius, which Ophelia witnesses without understanding its implications, though readers are well aware of them. We see Claudius "greedily noting every particular of her [Gertrude's] luxuriant beauty" (238), going pale, and trying to suppress "a sharp inward groan" (ibid.) when the king is affectionate toward his wife. Meanwhile, the "weak-souled" (241) queen enjoys her brother-in-law's attentions, underestimating the extremes to which desire can lead in the pursuit of seduction. But is there an effective way to protect yourself against seducers? the novella seems to ask. Ophelia's friends have not been protected from their seducers: Jutha's mother is only a low-class nurse, while Thyra is an Emma-like character – having lost her mother as a child, she presides over her father's establishment, "the petted child of a fond father, who knew not how to refuse her anything . . . she liked to have her own way" (226-7). Together, they discuss Hamlet, a scholar, whom Thyra describes as too thoughtful: "his studious habit, which moreover, will, if he don't (*sic*) take care, spoil his figure – for he's inclined to fat; and a fat gentleman, even though he be a prince, can never form a lady's ideal of a man" (229). When Eric reappears, Ophelia suddenly remembers having met him many years before, but unlike the reader, she never seems to understand the role he played in her first friend's tragic death. Thyra is taken in by his promises: "This man cannot ask me to become his wife, until the redemption of his patrimony from mortgage . . . he has more than once told me he looks upon me as his affianced bride, his wedded wife; and I regard him as my husband" (243).

But soon enough, he leaves, besieged by creditors, having accumulated gambling debts: a libertine, a practiced seducer. Ophelia's mother turns Thyra's suicide following Eric's departure into an educational lecture on the perils of men and double standards:

> Let the multitude be tolerant as it will to the titled libertine, I, for my part, must ever hold deliberate seduction as one of the most heinous of crimes, and continue to manifest my abhorrence of the seducer in proportion with my estimate of guilt. I hold it to be a base guilt – a cruel guilt – 'tis the advantage taken by the knowledge of ignorance, by selfishness of generosity; 'tis the infliction of deadly injury, beneath the mask of feigned love. 'Tis cowardice and treachery in one, and in the vilest form. Shame, double shame, on the betrayer rather than on the betrayed. (246)

According to Hateley, "Cowden Clarke uses Ophelia as a foil for critiquing rather than affirming the sexual double standard of the nineteenth century" (2013, 439). Jutha and Thyra provide cautionary tales for Ophelia in the same way that *The Rose of Elsinore* is a cautionary tale for its readers – Victorian mothers and daughters. *The Girlhood* is, unsurprisingly, centred on girls – although, as Dyhouse (1981, 115) notes, adolescence as a distinct phase of life was only 'discovered' in the late nineteenth century. One of the earliest studies on the subject, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology*

(1904) by G. Stanley Hall, emphasised that while adolescence was a period of ambition and challenge for boys, it was regarded as a vulnerable and potentially dangerous time for girls, during which they required particular protection from society. And protection in her early years is precisely what Cowden Clarke's Ophelia seems to have been denied.

Before her death, Ophelia's mother tries to warn her daughter, anticipating Polonius's words in the play, that even "the good, the gentle, the refined in manner, the accomplished" (251) are not good enough – such qualities can "betray her into a premature gift of that heart, fatal to her peace of mind". However, even if "Ophelia had the perils which awaited her, in her future life at court, peculiarly impressed upon her mind" (252), the novella closes with Ophelia beginning to get closer to Hamlet.

Even if Ophelia and the reader are warned of the dangers a Victorian woman might face in her teenage years, Ophelia does not seem to have learned from her "doubles", and the reader wonders whether this is at all possible. A loving mother's advice clearly hasn't been much use, and childhood trauma did not act as a deterrent. As a lady "habitually silent; observant, rather than given to make remarks in words" (215), she seems to fall victim to a repetition compulsion: in the play, during the mad scene, she becomes a mouthpiece, echoing the voices of all the seduced and abandoned girls of the past. As Diane Berg has remarked:

> it sometimes seems that Clarke's Ophelia is consigned by Clarke herself to the fate of the Freudian subject: unconscious of her own drives and deliberately forgetting her traumas, Ophelia finds herself in the same situation time after time, in much the same way that Clarke seems driven to dwell compulsively on the dangers of sexuality without really addressing or examining them. (2014, 17)

In a way Cowden Clarke creates a narrative of terrifying and distressing situations for her heroine, which seems harder to bear that what she will have to undergo in the space of the play. Her retelling clearly reflects Victorian cultural attitudes toward gender, which engage in a dialogue with the Shakespearean text, though they are occasionally questioned – for instance, in the mother's remarks on seduction. Yet, despite the creative freedom Cowden Clarke exercises, her stories largely remain within the boundaries of Shakespeare's canon. Prequels, in particular, require a higher degree of consistency with the original text than sequels for example, as they must anticipate the emotional trajectory of the heroines' fates. Shakespeare held too central a place in Victorian and Edwardian education for young female readers to be allowed unchecked freedom in interpreting moral ambiguities. While Shakespeare was often treated as a kind of conduct manual for mothers and daughters, Cowden Clarke uses this framework to advance her own agenda – particularly her critique of the double standard in sexual morality.

The cautionary element, present on multiple levels, is further reinforced. Much like Shakespeare's Ophelia, who famously doesn't know what to think in her reply to Polonius, Cowden Clarke's Ophelia remains trapped in a cycle of trauma and compulsion, unable to escape the fate laid out for her. Similarly, the implied readers of these tales are carefully guided – if not subtly coerced – into adopting specific ways of thinking and being alert to particular dangers. These narratives suggest that while the seducers are unmistakably to blame, it is ultimately Ophelia's friends' lack of prudence that placed them in danger. As a result, a similar fate awaits her in the play. This reflects, once again, the adult desire to control how female teenagers encounter, interpret, and learn specific lessons from Shakespeare.

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Emanuele D'Angelo*

"Fatti monachella". Ophelia in Nineteenth-Century Opera: the Libretti for Franco Faccio and Ambroise Thomas

Abstract

Any operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could not help but assign the function of *prima donna* to the hapless Ophelia, a role which also offered a scene of madness destined to become one of opera's main numbers. This is also the case, of course, with the two most important rewritings of the tragedy in this field, namely Arrigo Boito's *Scapigliatura*-inspired *Amleto* for Franco Faccio (two versions: 1865 and 1871) and Michel Carré and Jules Barbier's romantic *Hamlet* for Ambroise Thomas (1868) – two different visions, in which the female protagonist, while retaining to a good extent the character found in Shakespeare's masterpiece, takes on different weight and nuances.

Keywords: Shakespeare; opera; Ophelia; Arrigo Boito; Ambroise Thomas; adaptation.

One could say that, without Ophelia, there should be no Hamlet – but that would be wrong, at least in the world of the opera. If the object of our enquiry is the portrayal of the unfortunate Danish young woman in opera, the number of adaptations making much of her is reduced to merely two. It is only in Franco Faccio's *Amleto* (libretto by Arrigo Boito), first performed at the Teatro Carlo Felice in Genova in 1865 (revised form: Milan, Teatro alla Scala, 1871) and in Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet* (libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier), which premiered in Paris at the Opéra in 1868, that Ophelia is dealt with as an important, central character. In the previous adaptations (all entitled *Amleto* – Saverio Mercadante's 1823 with a libretto by Felice Romani; Angelo Zanardini's 1854 the text of which he composed himself, and Giovanni Peruzzini's libretto which was used first by Antonio Buzzolla in 1848 and then, in 1860, by Luigi Moroni), she had been featured at the beginning to then fade away and die without leaving any trace of herself in the spectators' mind. Suffice it to mention that in the 1854 *Amleto* whose score and libretto were by Angelo Zanardini, which

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had been produced during the Spring Saison at the Teatro San Benedetto in Venice, Ophelia dies off-stage and we learn of her death, after having last seen her in the second act, at the beginning of the fourth and final act, set among the "tombe dei conti d'Elsinoro" (tombs of the counts of Elsinore)[1] where one is informed of the girl's "recent" burial (Zanardini 1854, 30). In that opera, Ophelia is allowed only one duet and one aria; except for those two moments, she is a surprisingly minor character. Zanardini cast the prima donna soprano, Marietta Spezia Aldighieri, as Adelia (the name of this Amleto's mother), while the overall secondary role of Ophelia was performed by a mezzosoprano, Luigia Morselli.

Ophelia's treatment was quite different in the text which the very young Boito, from Padua, wrote for the score of another very young man from Veneto, a close friend with whom he had attended the conservatoire in Milan, the Veronese Faccio. Here the part of Ophelia is that of a prima donna soprano; she is already on the stage when the initial curtain rises and returns in the first part of Act 2 in dialogue with Amleto (a tenor). She is present in the second part in the play-within-the-play scene, and then dies shortly after a long monologue on madness. Finally, the arrival of her funeral train in Act 4 has a huge impact: she's dead and one cannot see her, but she *is* there.

Ophélie's relevance is great in Carré and Barbier's libretto for Thomas, as well: also a prima donna soprano, she is beside Hamlet (a baritone) and then Laertes in the first act; she then appears in the second act in a sequence where she's alone onstage, then with Hamlet, then again on her own, then with the Reine, and later she is present at the *pantomime*. She reappears in the third act, with Hamlet and his mother, while the fourth act, after the ballet, is entirely hers, with her madness scene and her disappearance into the waters.

This essay will thus inevitably focus on these two important dramaturgic and singing incarnations of Ophelia, although only the French version was greatly successful and has had a long stage life.

When Faccio and Boito's *Amleto* was produced in Genoa it garnered a moderate success. A success which was in fact forcedly imposed by the so-called *consorteria delle effe* (the F-coterie led by the journalists Filippo Filippi and Leone Fortis) and by a sort of aristocratic *claque* in connection with certain innovative impulses perfectly embodied by Boito, a *Scapigliatura* intellectual, musician, journalist, and much more. Boito had a trailblazer's personality and was marked by an iconoclastic furor boosted by his youth (he was in his twenties, he had been born in 1842). Thus, *Amleto* received applause and good reviews but the opera ceased to exist there, without later performances. The opportunity of a revival occurred in 1871, at La Scala. Boito knew that he had to accommodate the opera to the tastes of an audience averse to radical innovations. He was very well aware of this situation, as he was reported to have stood grinning during the legendary Milanese fiasco of his *Mefistofele* in 1868. It had been a glorious failure which had been planned against common expectations, in the pursuit of an elitist "lotta del genio col pubblico [che] è la lotta del vero col forte" (Boito 2013, 35-49; struggle of the genius with the audience which is the struggle between truth and strength) which he had foreseen back in 1862. Thus, Boito and the composer set down to revise their Shakespearean opera and present it to the unsympathetic audience of La Scala. They rewrote the finale, deviating from their source text by having plausibly in mind Thomas' opera: they merged the last two parts of the 1865 version into one and, among other things, letting Amleto not die at the end. Boito cut a number of lines and stanzas, adjusted a few stage directions, and inserted more or less regular closed forms in order to reduce the *declamato* in favour of melodical singing, like in the case of Ofelia's song "Dubita pur che brillino" (Doubt thou that the stars shine), of Amleto's famous soliloquy, and of the all-too traditional *aria* of the Queen, which featured lines which were worthy of Salvadore Cammarano ("Ah, che alfine all'empio scherno"; Ha, that at last, to the ungodly jeer). Besides, Boito introduced rare but significant linguistic alterations which improved the linearity and comprehension of the action, reducing the precious and expressive sophistication of the original version. All good intentions aside, the opera was a flop: the revised *Amleto* was a failure at La Scala in spite of the alterations made specifically to cater to a more traditionalistic audience. On the one hand, much of the blame for this lack of success is to be attributed to the tenor protagonist, Mario Tiberini, who felt ill. On the other hand, the 'sacrifices' which had been offered, especially on the part of the librettist, at the altar of an adjustment to the expectations of the spectators, did not avoid a new *Scapigliato* fiasco – only that this time it had been neither predicted nor planned. Disappointed and incensed, Faccio withdrew the rights of his score and refused to have it performed again. He never yielded to his friends' encouragement and especially Boito's requests – Boito who prepared several variants of that libretto and who, for a very long period of time, declared himself ready to offer him even additional ones. A few years later, in an undated letter, Boito wrote to the maestro's partner, the soprano Romilda Pantaleoni, as follows:

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[1] All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

> Quel tema [i.e. *Amleto*] ha già, su qualunque altro soggetto, un vantaggio ed è quello d'aver sperimentato vittoriosamente con Thomas la fortuna di tutti i teatri del mondo. A un così gran vantaggio se ne aggiunge un altro, ed è che il libretto di Franco risente dell'influsso shakespeariano più di quello del Thomas, e la musica dell'amico nostro è di gran lunga più teatrale, più colorita, più calda e, in una parola, più potente e voglio dire incomparabilmente più caratteristica che non sia quella del diligente maestro francese . . . Se vi

> riuscirete, sarete più brava di noi tutti, che da molti anni lo tentiamo invano. Il lavoro ch'egli, per ora, deve compiere gli è ben designato: egli deve ritoccare l'*Amleto* valendosi di quelle varianti che gli diedi una volta, quando sperai che le nostre insistenze lo avrebbero vinto. Se quelle varianti non basteranno ancora ad infondere nuovo sangue in quell'opera, già così vivace e forte, io gli offrirò delle altre pagine ancora. (de Rensis 2016, 118)
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> [That topic, *Hamlet*, already has, over any other subject, one advantage and that is that of having victoriously experienced with Thomas the good reception in all the opera theatres of the world. To such a great advantage another must be added, and that is that Franco's libretto is more influenced by Shakespeare than Thomas', and our friend's music is by far more theatrical, more colourful, warmer and, in a word, more powerful, I want say incomparably more peculiar than that of the diligent French master . . . If you succeed, you will be better at it than all of us, who have been attempting it for many years in vain. The work that he, for now, must accomplish is quite clear to him: he must retouch *Amleto* making use of those variants that I once gave him, when I hoped that our insistence would win him over. If those variants are still not enough to infuse new blood into that work, already so lively and strong, I will offer him some other pages yet.]

Nonetheless, these attempts were in vain: Faccio's admirable work was unfairly condemned to oblivion by its own author. Only recently has *Amleto* been performed again and with success.

Boito thought that it was the librettists' duty to offer novelty in terms of writing and structure: their aim should have been to persuade the *operisti* to experiment new musical and dramaturgic forms. Instead, the poets kept on producing conventional texts which were tied to the customary dramatic schemes and faithful to the '*solita forma*' (the usual form), that is to say, the opera 'in numbers' (*aria*, duet, *terzetto*, *concertato*, and so on) which were articulated in alternating kinetic and static sections such as, for instance: scene, *cantabile*, *tempo di mezzo*, *cabaletta*. A rebellious member of the *Scapigliatura*, someone always in search of radical artistic palingenesis, Boito yearned for a profound reformation of Italian opera.

Amleto was the first libretto which Boito completed and published. It is an extremely experimental and innovative work which is based not only on Shakespeare's tragedy (which he knew in English as well as in several Italian and French translations, especially those by Carcano and François-Victor Hugo), but also on the 1847 rewriting by Alexandre Dumas and Paul Meurice (besides Goethe's *Meister*). Moreover, in order to simplify the process of the sources' compression, the poet made use of *Hamlet*'s Q1, which had been published in French by the same Hugo *fils*. To put it in a nutshell, Boito wanted to stay anchored as firmly as possible to Shakespeare, but, since he needed to cut the play, studied Q1 and Goethe's and Dumas' authoritative adaptations and made use of some of their expedients. The libretto is a calculated condensation of the English tragedy, an "efficient concentration of the original play" (as Giuseppe Rovani labelled it in an 1871 review, see Farinelli 1984, 457), and it is no coincidence that a few critics of the time accused it of being too faithful to the source.

The operatic adaptation of the tragedy of the Prince of Denmark can be seen as a broad field that the young Boito fertilised with multifaceted efforts: he was firmly convinced of the importance of overcoming the co-eval limitations of the genre and of giving a twist to the lazy conventions which were not allowing Italian opera to abandon its usual patterns. Hence, "by projecting onto the figure of the protagonist his own literary" and artistic "experience" (Gatti 1974, 323), the young dramatist fought on all possible fronts and unleashed every weapon which was at his disposal at the time, handling the Shakespearean material with modern and nonconformist insight. He preserved not only the contamination of serious and comic, complete with the macabre gravediggers' scene, but also the double action, that is, he knew how to exploit the parallel tragedy of Laertes. He abolished the canonical division into acts and scenes in favour of broader 'parts' associated with the scenarios (as he would do in *Mefistofele*, *Falstaff*, and *Nerone*). He put into place a set of metric mechanisms of considerable complexity which, at the same time, was perfectly cohesive. While not renouncing periodic textures, he urged a heterorhythmic, less melodical intonation, thanks in part to a varied and sophisticated *periodare* (phrase construction) and the extensive use of the hendecasyllable.

He applied markedly dualistic angles, typical of the *Scapigliatura* to the Bard's plot, and inserted, as noted above, polemical moments which made sure to attract the listeners' attention towards the topical necessity for a renewal of opera and highlighting the flaws of conservative audiences. Above all, he composed the text with tangible literary consciousness, preparing a highly accurate intertextual system which ranges from the classics to the moderns, and which flaunts a studied, various vocabulary, open to every experience old and new. One appreciates a daring mixture of registers and a conscious and balanced search for expressive colours, something which in the libretto genre was unprecedented. The Shakespearean setting and atmosphere were scrupulously preserved but somehow diverted by marked linguistic violence and literary amplification. In his first libretto, in short, Boito "put to good use the reverberations of his visionary, expressionistic, sometimes trivial realism, soliciting intense phenomena of linguistic estrangement" (Vittorini 2000, 295).

Furthermore, another aspect which deserves recognition is that, thanks to the reuse of national literature, one sees a vigorous Italianisation of the

English play, a 'Mediterraneanisation' of Shakespeare. By this latter term I mean a careful process of 'Latin' transformation and metabolisation which finds its basis in a Nietzschean quotation that Boito cites in a letter to Camille Bellaigue many years after *Hamlet*, in 1894: "Il faut méditerraniser l'esprit humain; le vrai progrès n'est que là" (We must Mediterraneanise the human spirit; true progress lies only there), derived from "Il faut méditerraniser la musique"(we must Mediterraneanise music), a phrase from *Der Fall Wagner* (Nietzsche 1969, 10). First and foremost, one should signal the massive recourse to Dante, which serves "to elevate the libretto to a plane of dignity equal – if possible – to that of the original" (Paolazzi 1974, 292). For example, the ghost of the Prince's father sings in *terzine incatenate*, which is the meter of the *Divine Comedy*. The speeches of this character, assimilated by Boito to the figures encountered by Dante on his path between hell and purgatory (and particularly to the purgatorial souls), are 'translated' by reusing expressions and vocabulary straight from Dante's masterpiece, right from the beginning of Old Hamlet's appearance: "Tu dêi saper ch'io son l'anima lesa" (You should know I'm the injured soul) comes from "Tu dei saper ch'i' fui conte Ugolino" (*Inferno*, 33.13; "First you should know I was Count Ugolino")[2], while "anima lesa" specifically can be found in *Inferno*, 13.47 ("wounded soul"). And Dante resounds, with "dismaga" (*Purgatorio*, 3.11, "che l'onestade ad ogn'atto dismaga" – "that mars the dignity of every action")[3], "s'impiglia" (*Purgatorio*, 5.10, "Perché l'animo tuo tanto s'impiglia" – "Why is thy mind so entangled"), "avvegnacché" (an obsolete expression meaning 'although': *Vita Nova*, 2.9; *Convivio*, 1:2.4; *Inferno*, 25.145, and throughout the *Commedia*), "cieco mondo" (*Inferno*, 4.13; "Or descendiam qua giù nel cieco mondo"; "Let us descend into the sightless world") etc. One notices these echoes from Dante even in Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "Essere o non essere! Codesta / la tesi ell'è – Morir? – Dormire - e poi?..." (d'Angelo 2018, 95-9; To be or not to be! That / Is the thesis. To die? To sleep – and then?), in which, moreover, also evident are both Boito's reliance on Giulio Carcano's Italian translation of Shakespeare's play and the fact that the omission of the first lines seems to derive from the use of the First Quarto translated by François-Victor Hugo.

That Boito wanted to remain as anchored as possible to Shakespeare is certain, but he could not avoid condensing the English tragedy into as few lines as possible: although he worshipped the Bard, he had, in writing for musical theatre, "to take into account the inevitable slowdowns that the encounter with music must entail, if one wants – as Boito wants – music to 'dig' into the meaning of the word" (Salvetti 1977, 587). He was therefore forced to cut many passages. He decided to study the First Quarto of *Hamlet* and the adaptations written by Goethe (in the *Wilhelm Meister*) and by Dumas and Meurice in 1847. He adopted some of their devices and the result, his libretto, can be considered an innovative drama for music of extraordinary subtlety and complexity. It is a thoughtful condensation of the tragedy, as long as one remembers that any adaptation, no matter how abundantly it makes use of a hypotext, cannot help but be unfaithful, since it is the outcome of interpretive and functional choices. As the poet himself would point out to Verdi in a letter dated May 10, 1886, regarding *Otello*:

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[2] All references to *Inferno* are from Dante 1995 and will appear parenthetically in the text.

[3] All references to *Purgatorio* are from Dante 1961 and will appear parenthetically in the text. In this regard, see also 19.20.

> la fedeltà d'un traduttore dev'essere assai scrupolosa, ma la fedeltà di chi illustra colla propria arte l'opera d'un arte diversa può, a parer mio, essere meno scrupolosa . . . chi traduce ha il dovere di non mutare la lettera, chi illustra ha la missione d'interpretare lo spirito, l'uno è schiavo, l'altro è libero. (Conati 2014, 138)
>
> [the fidelity of a translator must be very scrupulous, but the fidelity of one who illustrates with his own art the work of a different art can, in my opinion, be less scrupulous . . . the translator has the duty not to change the letter, the person who illustrates has the mission of interpreting the spirit. The former is a slave, the latter is free.]

In fact, *Amleto* is only superficially a faithful rewriting, and is quite similar to the coeval *Mefistofele*, especially as regards the autobiographical dimension. The *Scapigliatura* artist, by placing himself in the protagonist's shoes, inserted original elements on multiple levels (see d'Angelo 2016, 2017 and 2020), including those of the battle for the future of art and of the modern relevance of opera, so much so that the players are turned into singers and the play-within-the-play becomes a meta-operatic scene. Here, the spectators are split into two factions. On the one side, you have the old conservatives who extol the art of *les anciens*; on the other, you have the young rebels "più grulli e men devoti" (more witless and less devoted) who have got bored of the obsolete opera which is being staged at court and want instead "l'arte dei nepoti" (2.2; Boito 1865, 24; the art of their grandchildren) – who belong to the *Scapigliatura*, of course.

Boito, in short, mixes devout fidelity and subversive unscrupulousness, keeping his eyes fixed on the future. His compass is the progress of art, and his innovative *Amleto* is a refined rewriting which "does not respond at all to intentions of melodramatic adaptation", preserving "Shakespearean situations that only a heated intellectualism could consider operatic". *Amleto* absorbs "Boito's own literary research . . . without any mediation which could reveal a minimum of respect for the specificity of the operatic genre" (Salvetti 1977, 588-9). Revolutionising structure and form, the poet-musician provides Faccio with a libretto which would "undoubtedly [be] fruitful for a radical renewal of musical language, for new perspectives of musical drama, free from the repertoire of 'canonical' situations" (ibid., 595), an extremely experimental text of extraordinary workmanship, which constitutes Boito's most '*scapigliato*' drama for music.

In this complex adaptation, the treatment of the characters is anything but marginal. If Hamlet is a sort of incarnation of Boito himself, imbued with pessimistic dualism, Ophelia is constructed with equally great attention, even in the linguistic and metric detail that, among other things, tends to exalt her delicacy, at times childlike, and in the ensemble scenes places her in metric symbiosis with her beloved, diversifying her from the other characters (Vittorini 2000, 284-315). In the remake at La Scala, attributing to her a first lyrical oasis absent in the Genoese version, Ophelia even appropriates Hamlet's letter (2.2.115: "*Doubt thou the stars are fire*" etc.), transforming it into a *romanza* addressed precisely to the young man:

> Dubita pur che brillino
> degl'astri le carole,
> dubita pur che il sole
> fulga, e che sulla rorida
> zolla germogli il fior
> . . .
> ma credi nell'amor!
> (1.1; Boito 1870, 7)
>
> [Doubt thou that the stars shine / In their dances, / Doubt thou that the sun / Shines, and that on the dewy / Soil the flowers sprout / . . . / But believe in love!]

The mischievous freedom that the librettist reveals in these and other places by employing the materials of the hypotext clearly testifies that his devotion to the Bard does not translate into a punctual adherence, and moreover is not a contrasting action on the dramatic level: Ophelia projects herself into Hamlet and loses herself in him, and this insertion in the play's first *tableau*, far from being a forced stretch, clearly consists instead in the girl's quotation of the letter that her beloved has sent to her. In short, she is responding to the person who has just described himself as resembling "the ghost of Doubt" with his own words, which have evidently become etched in her memory and her heart. The mechanism is not made explicit, but it cannot but become evident when one knows the English text (and not only that, as I will show).

Ophelia's dialogue with Hamlet who feigns madness after his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy (2.1; Boito 1865, 16-17) is justifiably grotesque, in the highly refined play of polychromies set up by Boito and anything but in keeping with the typical courtly tone of serious 'librettese'. The metrical handling is quite interesting. Hamlet begins with double *quinari* ("Odi o gentil - quando la sera" – Hear, o you gentle, / When the evening) closed by a single *quinario*, "Prega per me" (Pray for me), but Ophelia, who wants to return to him the token of love now devoid of "incanto" (enchantment), changes tone and replies with more hammering double *senari* ("Signor, da gran tempo - tenevo nel cor", My lord, for a long time / Have I kept in my heart). Hamlet tries to bring her back on track, replying with the single *quinario* "Prega per me" (Pray for me), but Ophelia insists: "Prendetela o prence" (Take it, o prince). Then the young man yields and aligns himself with the young woman, adopting the more pulsating rhythm: "Che mormori mai, / vezzosa fanciulla – dai fulgidi rai?" (What do you murmur, / O charming maiden - of shining rays?), except to repeat once again the *quinario* "Prega per me". But by now the leading conduct is that of Ophelia, which Hamlet nevertheless appropriates by making it a cruel rhetorical weapon, continuing in double *senari* that are no longer a plaintive, almost sobbing supplication, but the lashing invitation, while posing as a madman, to enter a nunnery: the *quinario* of the request then gives way to a single *senario* repeated several times (far more than in Shakespeare), even in double metre or in hendecasyllables. That "Fatti monachella" (Get thee to a nunnery), and the following "Sì, fatti monachella. – E se marito", "far de' lor sposi – ti fa monachella", "Fatti monachella – fatti monachella" (Yes, get thee to a nunnery – and if a husband [you will marry, marry a fool]; Should you have to marry - get thee to a nunnery; get thee to a nunnery - get thee to a nunnery) interrupt even Ophelia's hopeless prayer:

> OFELIA . . . Ascolta la prece – di mesta donzella.
> AMLETO Fatti monachella.
>
> [OPHELIA . . . Listen to thy prayer – of a mournful maiden. / HAMLET Get thee to a nunnery.]

In the metatheatrical scene, which has been turned into a meta-operatic scene (2.2; Boito 1865, 19-25), Ophelia's lines are only minimally taken from Shakespeare. On the contrary, she lends herself to Boito's polemic against certain musical theatre customs of those days. When Hamlet complains about the antiquated music of the prelude opening the tragic opera which is performed in the castle, Ophelia rebukes him: "Prence, corrivo siete / al giudicar" (Prince, you are hasty / In your critique), but the Prince takes the opportunity to make a sour joke about the opera audience, who are impulsive and superficial: "Seguo l'usanza", (I follow custom). Ophelia reprimands him, inviting him to pay attention to what is being performed: "Or via / dare orecchio alla musica" (Come on / Listen to the music), but, he, mocking those who go to the theatre to spend the evening chatting happily without giving too much importance to the performance, replies: "Ciarlando / e celïando più l'arte s'apprezza" (Boito 1865, 20; By chattering / And cracking jokes art is appreciated more). Ophelia makes a further similar intervention during the singers' performance, when Hamlet comments aloud, "con violenta allegria" (with violent glee), and the young woman scolds him again: "Prence, silence, / la vostra celia, / la queta musica / conturba ognor" (Prince, silence, / Your jesting / Keeps disturbing / The soft music), shortly before (as already mentioned) the chorus divides between elderly conservatives enraptured by the antiquated opera and the bored young people, "più grulli e men devoti" (more witless and less devoted), who want "l'arte dei nepoti" (Boito 1865, 23-4; the art of their grandchildren). In short, we have an Ophelia who is an educated, smart, cultured spectator, a mirror-character for Hamlet-Boito's *Scapigliatura* criticism.

The madness scene is anxiogenic and suffocating. We are in the second part of act 3, the only one in which Hamlet does not appear, and the revolt ignited by Laertes becomes an insistent and structuring frame, a sort of spectacular pedal that, after the rebel's entrance, underlies the entire scene, with studied deep effects: "strepito di rivolta al di fuor", "grida lontane", "grida più vicine", "grida interne", "grida più vicine" (outcry of revolt outside, distant cries, nearer cries, cries within, nearer cries), up to the conclusion, assigned to the same clamouring people ("Si balzi il tiranno dal fracido seggio, / saccheggio! saccheggio!", 3.2; Boito 1865, 31-5; Dislodge the tyrant from that rotten seat, / Plunder! plunder!). In this spectacular blocking, Ophelia's madness is compressed into a single episode, in which the young woman sings songs only vaguely inspired by Shakespeare's text, recalling rather the rambling Margherita of act 3 of the first version of the *Mefistofele* ("Oggi la povera / canta per trivii, / ride… schiamazza… / Ofelia è pazza", Boito 1865, 33; Today the wretched / Is singing at the crossroads, / Laughing… Cackling… / Ophelia's run mad). The passage was revised and transformed for the 1871 revival at La Scala, but first we should dwell on the 1865 version.

Ophelia appears, inside the castle, singing vaguely folk-like *quinari* ("La bara involta / d'un drappo nero / move alla volta / del cimitero…", Boito 1865, 31; The coffin enshrouded / in a black drape / Is making its way / Towards the graveyard…), then a long series of hendecasyllables with rhyming couplets in which the characteristic flowers, herbs and plants are intertwined ("Ma quando sarem giunti al camposanto", Boito 1865, 32; But when we have come to the churchyard). When Laertes, distraught, asks about his sister's madness by asking where Hamlet is hiding, the young woman intervenes and says, in a very alienating nursery rhyme tone in *quinari*: "Amleto è un povero / figliuol del duolo, / sempre fantastico / e sempre solo" (Boito 1865, 33; Hamlet is a poor / Child of grief, / Always fantastic / And always alone…), a passage that is not lacking in operatic reminiscences, incredibly poignant, such as "Visse la vita / della camelia, / un giorno sol" (She lived the life / of the camellia, / But one day), an echo not only of Verdi's Lady of the Camellias (*La Traviata*, 1.3) and of her flower to be brought back withered, but also of Bellini's Amina (*La sonnambula*, 2.9) and her "sì presto estinto" (so soon wilted) flower "che un giorno sol durò" (that lasted but one day). In the simmering heat of the revolt against the king, Ophelia resumes her folk-like song ("La bara involta", The coffin enshrouded), but ends it in the utmost delirium, varying its conclusion by repeating a very festive decasyllable: "Su, ci canta all'allegra, all'allegra!" (Come on, sing to us with spirit, with spirit!), and then goes out "correndo e ridere forsennatamente" (Boito 1865, 34; running and laughing out of her mind). It will be the queen who shortly afterwards announces that "S'annega Ofelia!" (Ophelia has drowned!) and that "Laggiù fra un nembo / di scarsi fiori la travolve l'onda!" (Boito 1865, 35; Over there, within a cloud / of few flowers, see the wave engulf her!).

How much did Faccio, a refined and technically shrewd musician, benefit from his friend's creation? Despite his particular attention to orchestration, the depth of the symphonic pages (especially the funeral march in Act 4), the search for a plausible declamatory style for the long, scarcely lyrical sequences prepared by his friend, and the antique patina devised for the old-style *dramma in musica* staged at court, it is undeniable that the musician – compared to the poet – "took far fewer liberties with respect to the conventions of compositional practice in the 1860s". Even so, he was able to "find appealing and effective musical solutions" (Gerhard 2019, 55), which at times reflect the influence of contemporary French models and at other times that of Verdi's mature operas.

And let us come now to Carré and Barbier's *opéra* for Thomas. As Vittorini has pointed out, a comparison with Boito's libretto for Faccio exalts in the former, because of "a renewed tension at every scene between formal heterogeneity and depth of content", "a much more Shakespearean 'mood'" in contrast to the French *Hamlet*, "modelled in deference to the norms of the Parisian genre of the *tragédie lyrique*, therefore linear and rigorously monolingual" (Vittorini 2000, 313). In short, the Parisian adaptation is much more traditional, and above all flatter from a formal point of view, without any attempt at rich varieties of expression and vocabulary to differentiate situations and characters, indeed in the evident desire, while preserving the characteristic and distinctive grotesque scenes of the hypotext, to attenuate its charge and tone down its hues. The rewriting results so 'distorting' that very little remains of the Shakesperean stuff, so much so that Verdi, on 12

March 1868, wrote about it to Léon Escudier in the following terms: "I've read *Hamlet*'s libretto. Poor Shespeare [sic]! Whatever did they do to him! Only the scene between Hamlet and the Queen has been left intact. That has been rendered theatrical and musically playable. All the rest… amen" (Conati 2000, 250). Even Ophélie, therefore, slips into the mediocrity of a kind of glossy poetry, the same throughout the libretto. Even the dramatic situations have been tamed, as already in the soprano's first appearance, in the third scene of the first tableau of Act 1, in the duet with Hamlet who confirms his wish to leave the court, amidst clichéd protestations of love from lovers taking leave from each other, which end with the young man's surrender and are followed by the entrance of Laertes (1.1.4) who patriotically announces his imminent departure and entrusts his sister to his friend (Carré and Barbier 1868, 7-11).

At the beginning of act 2, however, another situation which is absent in Shakespeare gives the soprano the opportunity to sing a long solo scene (2.1.1-3). Ophélie complains that Hamlet is avoiding her, and reads on the book she is holding the poem "Adieu, dit-il, ayez foi!" (Carré and Barbier 1868, 20; Farewell, he says, have faith!). She then sees the young man cross the stage and, deluding herself for a moment that he is coming to her, she continues to read in order to attract him ("En vous, cruel, j'avais foi!"; In you, o cruel one, I had faith), but, when Hamlet comes out, she disconsolately sings an aria *à couplets* ("Les serments ont des ailes!", Carré and Barbier 1868, 21; The oaths are winged). When the queen arrives (2.1.4), Ophélie begs her to leave the court because Hamlet no longer loves her, but the woman begs her to stay and heal the prince's mind with her love. The girl's interventions are minimal in the metatheatrical scene at the end of 2.2, in which, however, she associates herself with the chorus and the queen, stigmatising the offence Hamlet has caused the king ("O mortelle offense!", Carré and Barbier 1868, 33; O mortal offense!).

Also quite conventional is the treatment of the confrontation between Hamlet pretending to be mad (and having discovered that Polonius is the king's accomplice) and Ophélie, who is invited to become a nun. This dramatic situation has been postponed after the metatheatrical scene and transformed into a trio with the queen (3.4; Carré and Barbier 1868, 38-41).

Of great effect, and the primary reason for the reputation of the opera, is the long madness scene in 4.2-3. Here the prima donna has the opportunity to sing a complex, albeit conventional, piece, which in dramatic variety and above all in singing virtuosity finds its winning mark, in the wake of the tradition of the great soprano madnesses from Donizetti and Bellini onwards, without the complexity devised by Boito for Faccio and without adhering much to the English text. In fact, nothing remains of it, except for the flowers and the drowning: there is no mention of the dead Polonius (also because he lives, although he no longer appears, not even at his daughter's funeral), and there is no character except the chorus of "jeunes paysans danois (young Danish peasants). They are in the mood to celebrate spring (4.1) and leave her alone, finally, after sadly noticing the poor girl's madness, suggestively making themselves heard from offstage. Ophélie's last words are from the letter written to her by Hamlet: "Ah! doute de la lumière, / doute du soleil et du jour… / Doute du ciel et de la terre, / mais ne doute jamais… jamais de mon amour!" (4.3; Carré and Barbier 1868, 51; Ah! Doubt thou the stars are fire / Doubt that the sun doth move… / Doubt of heaven and the earth, / But never ever doubt my love!).

In all likelihood, Boito included the aforementioned *romanza* of Ophelia in the new version of his *Amleto*, the one staged at La Scala in 1871, with this very quotation in mind. In any case, either because of the success of Thomas's opera, or because of the need for a less grotesque, sour and suffocating exit from the stage than originally conceived, the madness of the prima donna was modified. As in the French opera, the setting is now outside, in the castle park, by a stream, and at a certain point Ophelia is left alone on stage, while the insurgents' tumults "lontani svaniscono e si spande il silenzio del tramonto" (3.2; Boito 1870, 36-7; vanish far away and the silence of the sunset spreads itself"), coinciding with that of the woman. Faccio used only some of the hendecasyllables composed by the librettist, apparently *sciolti* and yet crossed by asymmetrical internal rhymes that make Ophelia's speech almost evanescent:

> Amleto! Amleto! chi parlò d'Amleto?
> Cala qüeto – vespero; la brezza
> è una carezza – un bacio, una favella;
> la brezza è quella – che cantò quel nome.
> O come, o come – tutto io mi rammento…!
> I miei pensieri tornan col vento – a frotte
> quando imbruna la notte – allora io sento
> quasi un concento – che si rinnovella!…
> Ei mi dicea: Va! fatti monachella!…
> Va, fatti monachella! va! le anella
> del tuo capo recidi… ed io non volli
> (me lassa!) udir la parola profonda!
> Ed or men vo' co' sospir tronchi e folli…
> per troppo amor della mia chioma bionda.

> [Hamlet! Hamlet! Who ever said Hamlet? / Sink softly – vesper. The breeze / Is a caress – a kiss, a word; / That's the breeze – it sang that name. / O how, how – I remember all!… / My memories return with the wind – they throng / Darkling at night – then I hear / A harmony, almost – that renews itself!.. / He said to me: "Get thee to a nunnery! / Get thee to a nunnery! Go and get / The curls on your head shorn"… And I, / Alas, would not hear the profound

> word! / And now on I go, my sighs are shorn and mad… / All due to excessive dotage on my blond hair.]

Ophelia turns, therefore, to the "salice piangente che bagna i suoi rami nell'onda" (weeping willow that bathes its branches in the wave) – the *saule* on whose branches Thomas' Ophélie supported herself; 4.3; Carré and Barbier 1868, 51; that is the "willow" mentioned by Gertrude in 4.7.162), the "Bello alberel dolente" (fair sorrowful sapling) which with its weeping "formò questo ruscel" (formed this brook) and whom she, "vergine piangente" (weeping maid), "chiamerà fratel" (will call her brother), because of the tears they have shared. A sublime passage, also in Faccio's dramaturgical-musical invention, who closes it by recalling even the conclusion of Wagner's *Tristan*, splendidly jolting the tragedy of Hamlet, together with his beloved, loving Ophelia, into the perturbing shipwrecks of Decadent movement, in full harmony with Boito who had finely imagined the scene, certainly recalling the masterpiece of the pre-Raphaelite artist John Everett Millais: "Poco dopo il suo corpo, circondato da fiori, galleggia sull'acque. Aurora lunare" (Shortly afterwards her body, surrounded by flowers, floats on the waters. A lunar aurora). This nocturnal dawn is precisely the same "mite alba di luna" (the mellow moon-dawn) that, at the end of one of Boito's poetical masterpieces, *A Giovanni Camerana*, "splende nell'orbita d'una / pupilla moribonda" (Boito 2023, 123-32; shimmers in the socket of a / dying pupil). It is a dawn of death, of profound quiet, of oblivion. This Ophelia, in short, exits the scene consumed by her *cupio dissolvi*, like a *Scapigliatura* heroine, one of the "pallida giostra / di poeti suicidi" (pale parade / of suicidal poets) sung by the young writer-musician-librettist Boito, thoroughly steeped in Baudelairean pessimism.

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Sandra Pietrini*

Bloodless, Attractive, and Silent: Ophelia's Death On- and Off-Stage in Nineteenth-Century France and Italy

Abstract

During the nineteenth century, Ophelia became one of the most frequently depicted characters in iconography symbolising virginal purity and self-sacrificial victimhood. In France and Italy, Ophelia's reception was connected to *Hamlet*'s adaptations for the stage in the respective countries, but Ophelia's iconography partly followed its own path, as evidenced by the large occurrence of pictures showing her off-scene death, with significant details such as Ophelia's clutching the branch before drowning, while keeping her eyes wide open. Highlighting the differences between French and English iconography in the gendered iconisation of the character, this article focuses on the mutual influence between the diffusion of a visual tradition and *Hamlet*'s stage re-elaborations, both in drama and opera. The reworking of the figurative theme in France took a turn during the Romantic period, following the success of Harriet Smithson's performances, which contributed to the transformation of Ophelia's character into a visual icon of romantic lovesickness. The death scene reached a climax of popularity with the 1868 operatic adaptation with music by Ambroise Thomas, in which the drowning was performed on stage, creating an osmotic intertextuality between iconography and theatre. Christine Nilsson's successful Ophelia contributed to popularise the *topos* of a melodramatic victim of love, an image which the visual arts transposed into the context of a disquieting Gothic atmosphere, triggering a morbid voyeuristic fascination towards the subject.

Keywords: Ophelia; *Hamlet*; visual arts; iconography; drama; opera

> . . . the sleeping, and the dead,
> Are but as pictures . . .
> (*Macbeth*, 2.2.52-3)[1]

The figure of Ophelia in nineteenth-century visual culture has been examined from multiple perspectives, inspiring a wide range of studies and critical interpretations. Compared to Shakespeare's other heroines, Ophelia

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[1] Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Shakespeare's plays refer to Shakespeare 1988.

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is arguably one of the most passive and constrained characters; yet in her afterlife, she has evolved into a complex and multifaceted figure. Numerous scholarly investigations have centred on Ophelia's madness scene and its implications, often linked to *fin-de-siècle* studies on hysteria and melancholy rooted in sexual repression. These interpretations have contributed to extending the character's life and constructing what Stanislavsky might term the 'subtext'. In the nineteenth century, Ophelia became also one of the most frequently depicted characters in iconography, as a symbol of virginal purity and a self-sacrificing victim, associated with the feminine virtues of passivity, fragility, and docility. The cult of Ophelia's figure in visual culture has been the object of an ever-increasing scholarly interest, starting from fundamental studies dating back to the 1950s (see Mander and Mitchenson 1952).

The proliferation of the iconography of Ophelia's demise also contributed to the late nineteenth-century obsession with death, as can be seen in Sarah Bernhardt's artistic production and quirks.[2] One of the reasons for Ophelia's popularity is that she became the focus of the pathos that Hamlet was unable to express, given that his melancholy is a reflection of thought rather than emotion. The reduction of Ophelia to an icon has created what can be termed its 'Victorian legacy' for later artists, not only in the figurative domain, but also in dramatic rewritings, fiction and cinema all around the world. Recent studies have also explored the artistical issues of Ophelia's melancholic longing and potential desire for death (Wildschut and Clevis 2009). The popularity of the subject, which reached its climax in the nineteenth century, gave birth to "the perpetuation of an Ophelia trope which privileges gendered voyeuristic modes of representation" (Barnden 2020, 150), which was later remediated through photography (Perni 2012, 193-211). Also the Victorian defence of Ophelia's chastity can be considered as part of this general conception (Rhodes 2008, 6). The objectification of the character has been remarked by feminist scholars, with new insights into Ophelia's forced submission to the patriarchal system and the 'feminisation' of madness, but also with re-inventions of her story (see Showalter 1985). Besides the transposition of Ophelia's iconised figure on other characters or lyrical images, such as in Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset (Vest 1989, 130-8), during the nineteenth century she underwent a process of reification as an object to be gazed at, such as in Charcot's shows on hysteria at La Salpêtrière, where women in white, with garlands of flowers, performed Ophelia's postures as portrayed in the visual arts (Didi-Huberman 2007). For example, the same morbid interaction between actual madness and Ophelia's myth is to be seen in photographs taken at the English Surrey Asylum, opened in 1841 (Rhodes 2008, 127-33).

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[2] See Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine's contribution in this issue of *Skenè.JTDS*.

The prominence acquired by Ophelia's death can be interpreted as a triumph of poetic imagination over dramatic action, since it is a scene that is merely reported and not an action conceived to be performed on the stage. Gertrude's description is a lyrical ekphrasis in which the poor girl is compared to a mermaid-like creature, with a sort of transfiguration of human nature that redeems her from the vulgar materiality of (staged) madness. Incidentally, it is interesting that the long description repeatedly refers to water without ever mentioning it by name, as if it were the implicit subject around which the speech revolves. After some bucolic images of the natural surroundings, and the maiden's falling "in the weeping brook" (*Hamlet*, 4.1.147), the Queen's description focuses on the image of Ophelia as dead, with poetic details but also with a certain verisimilitude:

> . . . Her clothes spread wide
> And mermaid-like, awhile they bore 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.
> (147-55)

Founded on the evocative power of words, this off-scene description could not be visually transposed on the stage (also for practical reasons). While the madness scene would later become an occasion for actresses to display their histrionic skills in later adaptations, Ophelia's 'original' drowning and the moments preceding this tragic event seemed to be destined to be excluded from the audience's gaze. From the nineteenth century onwards, Ophelia's drowning gradually acquired a centrality rarely accorded to off-stage scenes, as well as a symbolic preeminence exalted by a voyeuristic attitude that is paradoxical, as it is based solely on imagination.

While the reduction of Ophelia to a visual icon of romantic lovesickness was already established before the middle of the nineteenth century, the casting on the character of a morbidity linked to the male gaze reaches a climax in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the prominence and popularity of Ophelia on the operatic stage. In this article, I will analyse a number of aspects associated with the intertwining of the visual arts and stage practice. My analysis will take into account Ophelia's re-interpretation in the figurative arts in relation to the spreading of Shakespearean adaptations in France and Italy in the early nineteenth century, in both drama and operatic theatre (on the latter see Emanuele d'Angelo's article in this issue). A fundamental role in this process has been played by the numerous paintings and engravings devoted to the subject, with an osmotic relationship of intertextuality and mutual influence between iconography and theatre. I will attempt to demonstrate how figurative imagery was crucial in establishing a pathetic *topos*, which French theatre exploited and re-elaborated, subsequently returning it to the visual arts. Due to the circulation of pictorial works and mutual influences in the artistic domain, my analysis will not be restricted to a specific context, and I will take into consideration also some English paintings which played a fundamental role in the creation of the *topos*. The overwhelming number of figurative works inspired by the character of Ophelia means that a comprehensive survey would require more than one volume.[3] Therefore, I will limit my survey to a few cases relevant to the topic. For reasons of brevity, I will not discuss the cultural context from which they emerged or the critical evaluations they have undergone. While examining both French and English paintings, I will occasionally point out differences between the contexts to which they belong, particularly in how feminine attractiveness is portrayed, as it was often viewed implicitly through the lenses of gender and identity. Similarly, I will occasionally refer to some actresses on the English stage, aiming at a contextualisation and a comparison of a stage practice intertwined with reciprocal influences. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, the practice of *tournées* facilitated the circulation of shared acting styles across different countries, fostering an intertextuality that played a significant role in the stereotyping of the character.

Let me start with a simple fact. Out of all Shakespeare's characters, and in spite of the fact that her drowning occurs off-scene, Ophelia is the one who is most often depicted as dead in the visual arts. When she is not represented as a simple standing figure with flowers, as an icon of beauty and youth, she is more frequently shown in her mad state or at a moment close to her drowning. The frequent choice to depict Ophelia's death could be seen as evidence of the fact that the images evoked by the tragedy are based more on private reading than on stage representations. Most of eighteenth-century actresses, such as Sarah Siddons, Kitty Clive, and Peg Woffington, portrayed Ophelia in her pathetic innocence, but nothing that could directly evoke the drowning scene. In the nineteenth century, the beautiful, floating young corpse became the symbol of an involuntary martyrdom linked to virginal attraction. It is in this century that paintings and engravings devoted to her off-stage death reached a peak of pathos, together with the madness scene, with the recurrence of flowers and their symbolism. It has been remarked that "so abundant were the Ophelias, indeed, both as paintings and as engraved illustrations in books, that eventually, any girl accompanied by wildflowers was labelled an Ophelia" (Tuckrozett 2000, 186). Some elements taken from the Queen's account became essential to the characterisation of the figure, and Ophelia was shown wandering through the woods in the grip of madness, or drowning in the stream, her hair wantonly loose and flowers scattered around her. After distributing her flowers in the presence of the King and the Queen, she sensually reconnects with nature in a symbolic, innocent defloration of herself. But in fact, poor Ophelia has always found her reason for existing within death, as if the heroine did not have enough depth to assume a defined character beyond her tragic fate.

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[3] For an extensive iconographic repertoire see the meta-archive *Arianna/ Shakespeariana* (https://arianna.lett.unitn.it/welcome, accessed 12 June 2025), to which I refer for some of the images (quoting the ID file card number).

From the end of the eighteenth century and until the middle of the nineteenth, artists often chose to depict the moment immediately preceding the drowning, when the maiden endeavours to hang wreaths of flowers to a branch, which will break causing her to fall into the water. This detail can be found also in the famous 1843 painting by Eugène Delacroix, in which a bare-breasted Ophelia is half submerged in water and clutches a frail willow branch (ID 25). The painter produced more versions of the subject, starting from the 1838 painting housed at the Munich *Neue Pinakothek* (ID 10972), and then choosing some variations of the same maiden's attitude and similar details (Young 2002, 338-9; see ID 385, 18646, 11849). Delacroix's paintings show an insistence precisely on the moment preceding the tragedy. One reason could be the aesthetic pleasure derived from the moment anticipating the climax, a notion that was emphasised in Lessing's *Laokoön: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (Laocoon; or, On the Limits of Painting and Poetry) on the inefficacy of depicting the culmination of the action in order to achieve an intense emotional effect. However, a more plausible explanation for this choice could lie in the artists' desire to emphasise the unintentional nature of Ophelia's drowning, to dispel any lingering ambiguities surrounding her death, and to highlight the playful and childlike aspects of her wanderings and falling into the water.

Leaving aside the association with the studies on hysteria and female eroticism at the end of the nineteenth century, it must be remembered that Ophelia's death was seen as caused by a descent into madness, and was therefore considered involuntary. And yet, in French literary commentaries up to the eighteenth century, her drowning is often described as a deliberate act, probably more as a simplification due to a lack of knowledge of the text than as an intentional re-interpretation of the scene. Abbé Jean Bernard Le Blanc, for instance, defending the tragedy against its detractors, states that the young woman ends up drowning herself ("elle finit par se noyer"), probably as a reminiscence of Voltaire's equally lapidary summary: "et va se noyer" (Vest 1989, 66 and 73; and she goes and drowns herself).[4] In another passage of his comments, Voltaire even writes that Ophelia throws herself into the sea: "elle se jette dans la mer, et se noie" (Vest 1989, 74; she throws herself into the sea and drowns). As a matter of fact, aiming at criticising Shakespeare's dramatic choices, Voltaire ends up withdrawing from the reality of the play. This shift from a brook to the sea is noteworthy. The specificity of the place is eliminated to give way to a generic exterior, perhaps due to the influence of classical French drama, in which all bloody actions took place offstage. Like the evoked sea in Racine's *Phèdre*, which is almost an abstract entity associated to the mythological presence of Poseidon, in French re-elaborations of the scene Ophelia's drowning is set in a generic place, confusing the brook with the sea. Coming back to the unintentionality of her death, also in the first French version of the tragedy translated by La Place, from which Jean-François Ducis drew for his re-writing of the tragedy for the stage in 1769, the brief account of Ophelia's drowning refers to her suicide ("La Reine vient annoncer, en pleurant, qu'Ophélia s'est noyée, dans un accès de folie", La Place 1745, 378; The Queen comes to announce, weeping, that Ophelia has drowned herself in a fit of madness). It is perhaps to refuse this crude imagery that eighteenth century iconography emphasises the accidental nature of the tragic deed, showing Ophelia clinging to a branch. It is worth remembering early modern practices such as the "communal desecration and denigration of suicide, which was then regarded . . . as one of the most terrible sins a Christian could commit" (Stelzer 2016, 67-8) – practices which in part were still carried out in the eighteenth century. Banishing the ambiguous spectre of suicide and avoiding the crudeness of the theme, the artists redefined its contours through a process of implicit visual re-interpretation, framing Ophelia's character within the limits of a naivety perfectly in tune with her childlike purity.

A romantic fascination for the drowning of young women, certainly linked to Ophelia's popularity, emerges in European iconography during the nineteenth century. They belong to "the large category of prone female nudes, whether dead, dying, or otherwise, that seem to have played such an active role in nineteenth-century erotic fantasy as revealed through works of art" (Young 2002, 339). Since the first version of Ophelia's death painted by Delacroix was executed in 1838, his interest for the subject can be associated to his journey to England in 1824, during which he could have had the chance to see a staging of *Hamlet* (though there is no evidence of this in his diary). In 1822, with the first tour in Paris of an English company staging Shakesperean plays, the tragedy had begun to raise some interest also in France, at least among the intellectuals, and was often cited in the struggle between Romantics and Classicists. It is worth remembering that in that very year Stendhal wrote his *Racine et Shakespeare*, which played a decisive role in the defence of romantic creative imagination which became to be epitomised by Shakespeare's genius. The first version of his text was a reaction to the incident of the Porte Saint-Martin theatre hall, where traditionalists attacked the staging of some of Shakespeare's tragedies by the English company headed by Samson Penley, though they were performed in heavily cut versions (Raby 2016). *Hamlet* was staged in Rue Chantereine, where the company was forced to retreat and was not appreciated by the French audience, accustomed to more classical tragedies. But intellectuals were excited by the new 'romantic' wave, and Stendhal's interest was not incidental. Twenty years before, in November 1802, he had begun to draw up an outline for a rewriting of *Hamlet*, soon abandoned, in which Ophelia was doomed to kill herself after going mad (Vest 1989, 112).

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[4] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

When in 1827 another English company came to Paris, the audience was more prepared for Shakespeare's originality and the dissimilarities of his characters to classical models. The times were ripe to popularise the image of a pitiful female figure, destined for a sacrifice that would make her the perfect victim. Curiously enough, although more than half of the text was cut, Ophelia's part was left rather close to the original (Vest 1989, 123). The mad scene was a perfect virtuoso set piece for Romantic acting. When a young and unexperienced Irish actress, Harriet Smithson, appeared as Ophelia in the 1827 production of *Hamlet* at the Odéon theatre in Paris, she was able to capture the attention of the audience thanks to the romantic connotations of her performance. "[B]ecause of Smithson, Ophelia came to occupy a more central position in performances of *Hamlet*, at least in France" (Sen 2021, 48). Critics of the time spoke of irregularity and disjunction between gesture and words (Vest 1989, 59; Raby 1982), typical features of romantic acting. As a reviewer stated: "Miss Smithson a un abandon de manières, un désordre de mouvement, une irrégularité et pour ainsi dire un décousu de gestes et de paroles" (Anonymous 1827, 380; Miss Smithson has a neglect of manners, a disorder of movement, an irregularity and, so to speak, a disjointedness of gestures and words). But was her acting completely innovative and transgressive compared to the character's interpretation that had emerged in Britain? The traditional opposition between Harriet Smithson's vibrant and excessive gestures and the more statuesque and dignified performance by Sarah Siddons – who played Ophelia at Drury Lane in 1786 together with her brother John Philip Kemble – has rightly been questioned, arguing that "both performances, in different ways, drew on the notion of sensibility" (Britland 2013, 59).

But let us take a look back at the first French adaptations of the tragedy, which greatly contributed to Ophelia's burgeoning importance and renown.

In 1769 Ducis's rewriting for the stage, the focus had shifted to the star-crossed love of the two young lovers, echoing the neoclassical model of *Le Cid*. Moreover, just as in Corneille's tragedy, the impediment to the marriage was the contrast between filial affection and passionate love, since here Ophelia was Claudius's daughter. It is perhaps exaggerated to say that "Ophélie is elevated to the position of principal player in an eternal drama" (Vest 1989, 94), nevertheless, in Ducis's version, Ophelia is a strong and determined character in the Cornellian conflict between love and honour, not at all the timid and emotionally unstable maiden of later romantic reinterpretations. The affirmation of Ophelia's death and the madness scene as essential moments to the character was partly due to the new translation by Guizot and Barante, which appeared in 1821. As James Vest argues, "In Guizot's introductory essay and in Barante's 'Notice sur *Hamlet*' Ophelia's madness and death are seen not just as acceptable, but as essential attributes of a lyrical soul that has difficulty harmonizing with a world that is out of tune" (Vest 1989, 120).

The first French actresses who played the character, from Mlle Dubois to Mlle Fleury, contributed to the character's success, playing on sentimental chords of tenderness and sensitivity (Monaco 1974). The focus on the sentimental *affaire* as well as Hamlet's survival would become important features of the play's fortune in France until the middle of nineteenth century, as in Alexandre Dumas's and Paul Meurice's 1847 adaptation. This trend also had a considerable influence on the Italian adaptations, as is clearly shown in the 1850 version by the actor Alamanno Morelli who heavily altered Carlo Rusconi's translation. In these adaptations for the stage, clearly inspired by Ducis's rewritings, Ophelia's death was restored, and Hamlet was the only one to survive. In 1864, Meurice revised the text and reverted to the original ending for the celebrations of the tercentenary anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, but the production was stopped by royal decree and was finally performed only in December 1867.

For a long time, Ophelia remained a minor character in drama, defined primarily by her relationship to Hamlet. As a result, she was less appealing to actresses until the twentieth century, when her role began to gain greater importance. As has been noted, also "modern criticism has seen Ophelia as indissolubly linked to Hamlet, less a character herself than a vehicle through which the protagonist's figure is brought into focus" (Britland 2013, 53). For this reason, the influence of stage interpretations on the iconography was initially limited, and one can even assume the opposite direction, whereby actresses draw inspiration from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries' pictorial depictions for their portrayals of the character, at least as far as costume and basic postures are concerned.

In most of the depictions preceding the twentieth century, Ophelia wears a long white gown, a conventional symbol of purity, though there are also images in which she is dressed in black, such as in James Bertrand's *Mort d'Ophélie*, a painting that was exhibited at the 1872 Salon in Paris (and is now part of a private collection; ID 6641). In the madness scene, Harriet Smithson introduced a long black veil of mourning, which she spread on the ground in the shape of Polonius's bier – as can be seen in *Les Souvenirs du théâtre anglais à Paris* (1827), with drawings by Devéria and Boulanger (Fig. 1). It is worth noting that Ophelia's madness is the only scene to be accompanied by a quotation (with the lines of her song) in English instead of French. In the caption, Miss Smithson's performance is described in detail, emphasising the originality of the gestures she makes ("Passant tout-a-coup de la plus déchirante douleur à une espèce de joie stupide et convulsive qui ressemble au rire sardonique d'un mourant"; suddenly passing from the most heart-rending pain to a kind of stupid and convulsive joy which resembles the sardonic laughter of a dying man). The text also describes her offering flowers and spreading the black veil. Harriet Smithson's success was enhanced by the fact that people marvelled at how an almost inexperienced actress of twenty-five could prove herself so well, and this after only a few days of rehearsal (since she had to replace another actress at the last moment). Her lively acting, with romantic outbursts of emotion and excessive, enhanced gestures, established a new standard for the character. However, this vehemence associated with madness tends to be denied or neutralised in death iconography, where the magmatic nature of lunacy blends with the water element creating an icon of silent, restful and recomposed beauty.

Like Hamlet's inky cloak, Ophelia's long white dress became a sort of pictorial tradition during the Romantic period, even in the absence of any textual reference. And yet, at least in France, it was not immediately adopted on stage. As can be seen in a coloured engraving reproduced in *Costumes et annales des grands théâtres de Paris* (Fig. 2), Ducis's Ophelia played by Mlle Fleury appeared in a costume later described as a "robe bleue pâle rayée de bandes à fleurs roses ouvrant sur une jupe blanche rayée de passementerie jaune" (Vest 1989, 93; pale blue dress striped with pink floral bands opening onto a white skirt striped with yellow trimmings). Ophelia's white clothing can be seen as an obvious allusion to purity, but in figurative arts it is often tight enough to enticingly emphasise the shape of her body. This aspect emerges particularly in French iconography and is confirmed by nineteenth-century actresses, starting from Miss Smithson, whose alluring youth and charms made Hector Berlioz fall in love with her. In a drawing published in *Les Souvenirs du théâtre anglais à Paris*, depicting the madness scene, the position of her arms, suggesting a sinuous, undulating movement, gives her figure a grace that is only apparently dishevelled due to her mental disorder,

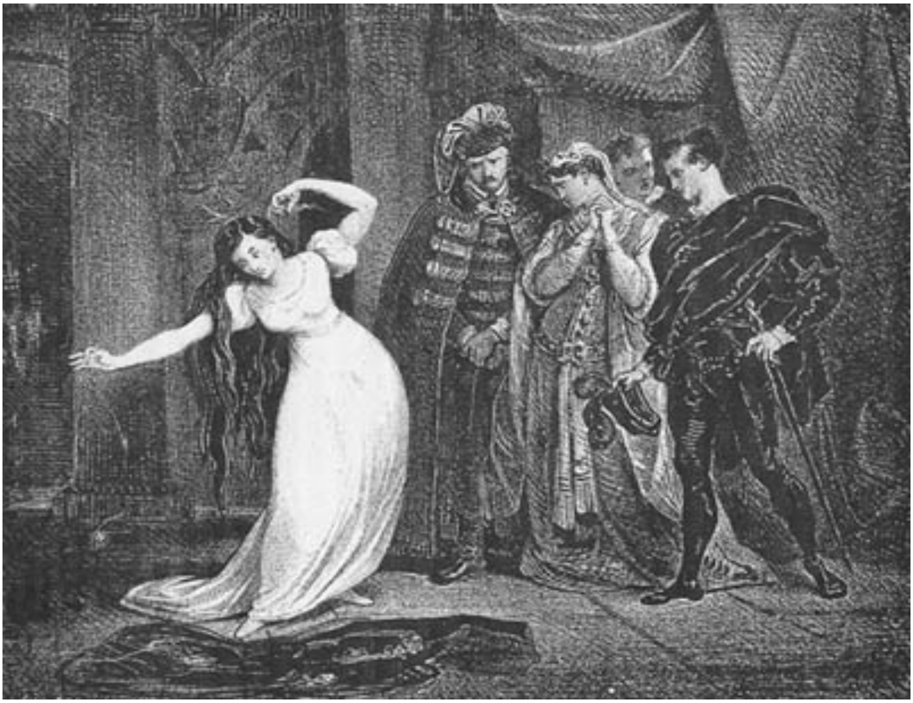

Fig. 1: *Les Souvenirs du théâtre anglais à Paris, dessinés par M.M. Devéria et Boulanger*, avec un texte par M. Moreau, Paris, Henry Gaugain, Lambert et Compagnie, 1827.

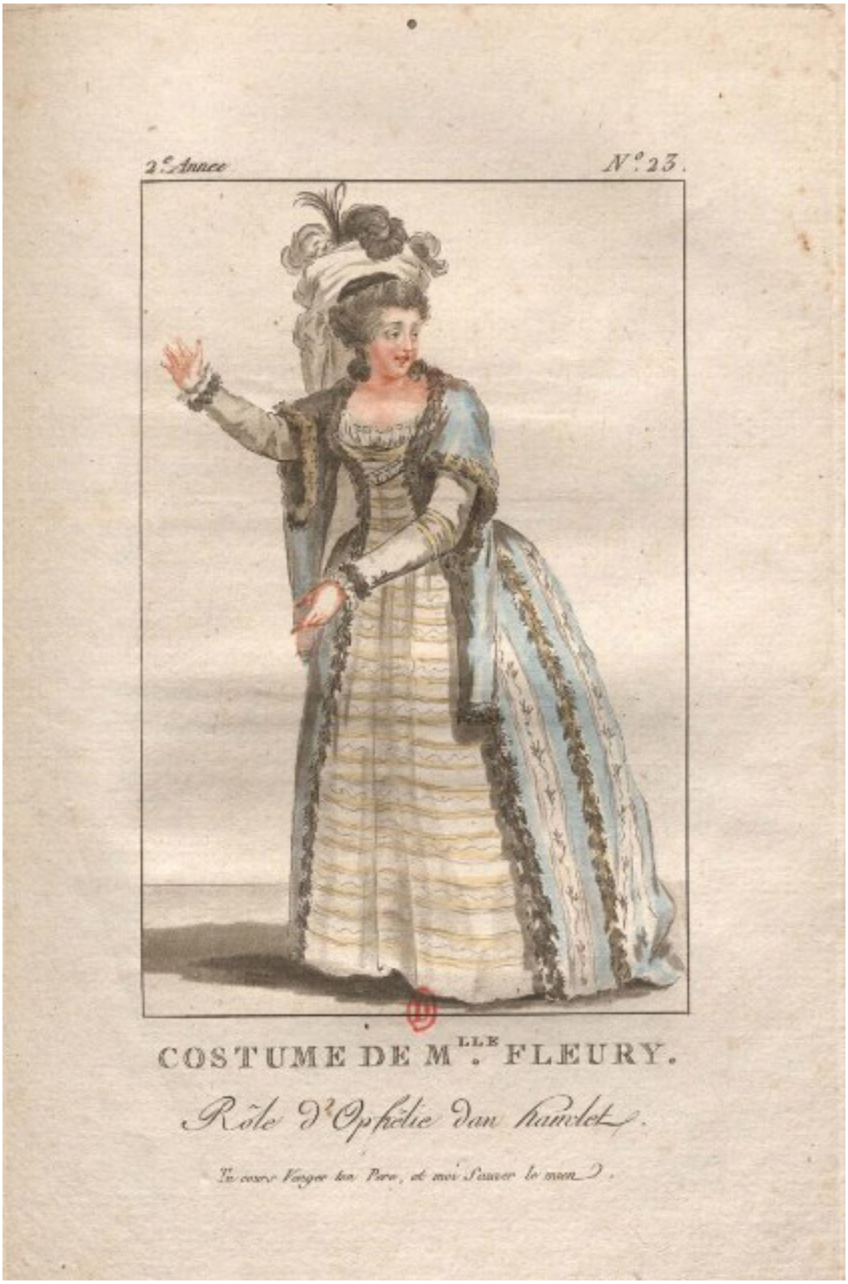
2e Année
N°. 23.
COSTUME DE Mlle. FLEURY.
Rôle d'Ophélie dan hamlet.
Tu cours Venger ton Pere, et moi Sauver le mien.

Fig. 2: Michel-René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Costumes et annales des grands théâtres de Paris*, Paris, De l'Imprimerie de Couturier, II (avril 1787-avril 1788), planche 23.

while her white dress does not hinder but enhances the perception of a sweet feminine sensuality (ID 16699). In a coloured lithograph by August De Valmont, Harriet Smithson wears a long black veil making a vivid contrast with her white dress and is staring aghast, bringing one hand to her heart (fig. 3). The lines in the caption clearly refer to her father's death, but nevertheless the sentimental connotation of her figure also evokes the suffering of rejected love. The actor's typical gesture to express love, as the acting treatises of those years reveal, is one hand held to the heart, a posture that will be emphasised by opera singers.

The more or less explicit eroticism of the character would remain a constant in French figurative arts, reaching its climax in an 1880 photogravure by Madeleine Lemaire, where Ophelia's virginal attractiveness in intertwined with a malicious sensuality (Fig. 4) and in the marble relief created by Sarah Bernhardt, where she is depicted bare-breasted (Young 2013, 3-5; ID 14413). Madeleine Lemaire's Ophelia has been termed as "a Dionysian spirit of natural and sexual renewal, invading enfeebled civilizations to transform them" (Auerbach 1997, 241). But in fact, it shares the same male voyeuristic attitude, just as the images centred on the appealing figure of her dead body do in quite a different way. In a painting by Léopold Burthe from 1852, for example, the detail of the uncovered breast – which is to be seen in Delacroix's paintings too – is accompanied by the softness of the gesture with which she stretches out her arm to cling to the branch: an attitude between modesty and the revelation of a femininity at the culminating point of youth, as revealed by the rounded shapes of her hips and breast (ID 18639).

As far as sensuality is concerned, there is a considerable gap between English and French iconography. In British iconography, explicit references to the sexual attraction exerted by the young woman's body are very unusual. It can be seen exceptionally in an 1823 engraving by Samuel Noble, based on a design by Thomas Unwins, where a sitting Ophelia is hanging up garlands of flowers with a twisting of her body, so that she turns her back to the viewer (ID 10349). Alan Young observes that no other (British) Ophelia "exploits her erotic potential in quite this way" and wonders "whether Unwins had been looking at works by Titian, Rubens, Watteau, or Jordaens" (Young 2002, 329). In Victorian figurative arts, Ophelia will be more often transformed into an icon whose appeal is paradoxically enhanced by a subtraction of the flow of life and the elimination of movement, leading to a stillness in which beauty and purity are reconciled. Moreover, common aesthetic taste dictated that her innocent and pure aspect should enhance her sexual appeal, as evidenced by many Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Pale, bloodless and immobile, Ophelia becomes the nymph of sublime and ethereal beauty celebrated by Millais, Rossetti, and Waterhouse. In the well-known oil on canvas by John Everett Millais, dating 1851-1852, she is depicted peacefully lying in the water of the brook (London, Tate Gallery; ID 6356). Although conveying a remarkable emotional intensity, the painting was criticised for, among other things, its excessive adherence to the Queen's realistic description (Rhodes 2008, 87-90).

Thus, Ophelia reached her fullness and fulfilment only through death, which seemed to serve as the symbolic culmination of a sublimated femininity. In fact, in Victorian imagery, the idea of women undergoing a process of evolution or change of identity is perceived as a potentially unsettling phenomenon, diabolically charming and dangerous (Dijkstra 1988). Only marriage or death can save women from the risk of a constant metamorphosis of the self. Not only in the figurative arts but also in English fiction, a state of weakness could even enhance a woman's attractiveness, leading to what has been a "cult of feminine invalidism"; even illness is conceived as form of spiritual purification, leading to the 'consumptive sublime' (Dijkstra 1988, 29-30). Ophelia perfectly represents the equivalence between helpless debility and spiritual purity. One of the most remarkable exceptions to this removal of erotic energy in British visual arts is the *Ophelia* by Henrietta Rae, an oil on canvas painted in 1890, representing the scene of madness with the young woman shown in a provocative attitude, her body sensually wrapped in a tight-fitting dress, while the King and the Queen are set apart in a darker area (Rhodes 2008, 171-2; ID 6603).

From the eighteenth century onwards, the usual way to unsex Ophelia's figure is to reduce her to a sort of icon. The image of the mermaid, for example, with its allusion to the aquatic realm, hints at the allure of female seduction but at the same time neutralises it through symbolic abstraction. In fact, this tendency can also be seen in the highly stylised, very original watercolour by Johann Heinrich Fuseli, that does not seem to belong to its age but foreshadows a visionary conception encompassing an entire century (Fig. 5). The wave-like lines evoke the element of water, further emphasising the symbolism of the figure, but on the other hand the allusion to the sinuous forms of the body convey a certain sensuality. It is worth recalling how Laertes, mourning his sister's death, evokes a clear contrast between the feminine (tears and liquid elements) and the masculine (represented by fire):

> Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
> And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet
> It is our trick; nature her custom holds
> Let shame say what it will.
> *He weeps* When these are gone
> The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord.
> I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,
> But that this folly douts it.
> (*Hamlet*, 4.7.158-64)

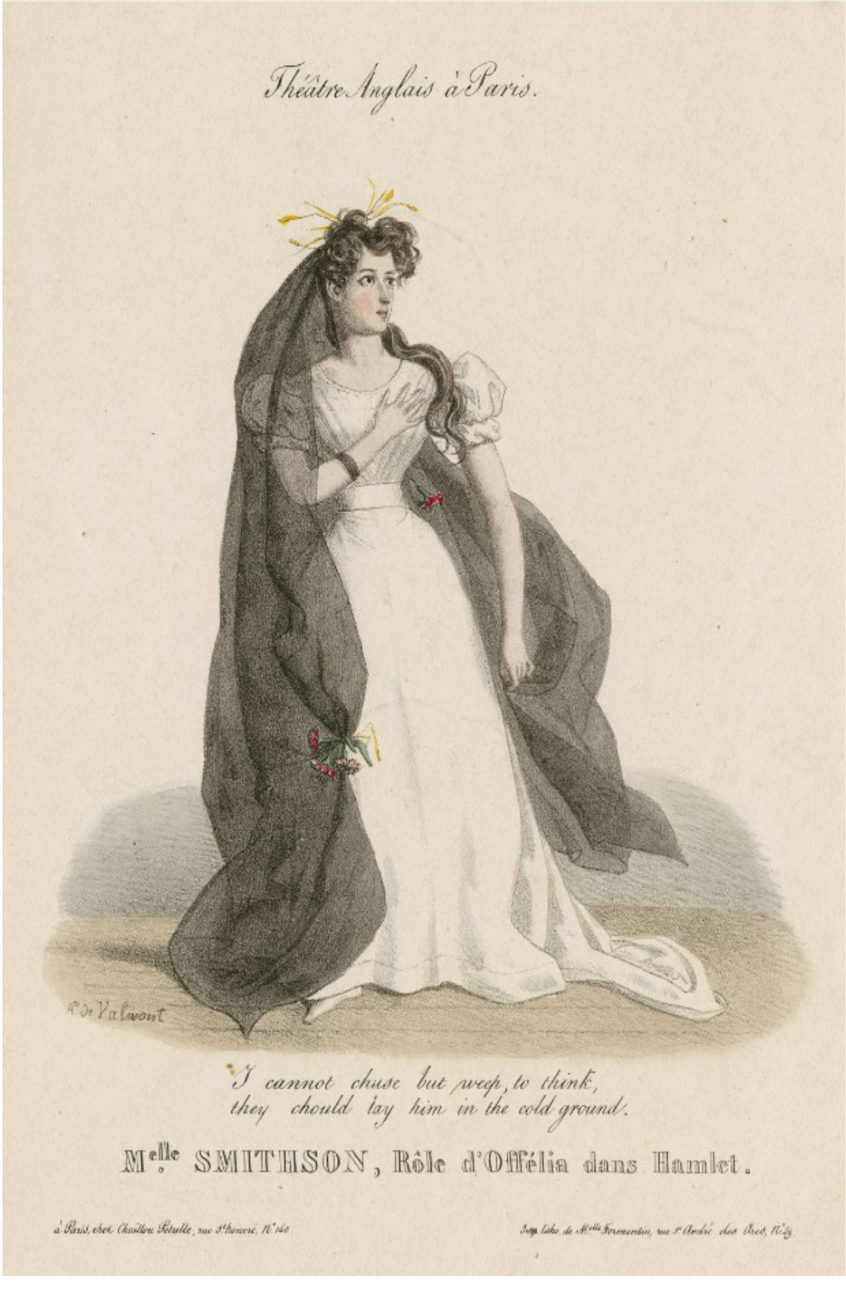
Théâtre Anglais à Paris.
Ae De Valmont
I cannot chuse but weep, to think,
they chould lay him in the cold ground.
Melle SMITHSON, Rôle d'Offélia dans Hamlet.
à Paris, chez Chaillou Potrelle, rue St Honoré, N.º 140
Imp. litho. de Melle Formentin, rue St André des Arcs, N.º 29

Fig. 3: August De Valmont, *Mlle Smithson, rôle d'Offélia dans Hamlet*, Paris, chez Chaillou Potrelle, 1827.

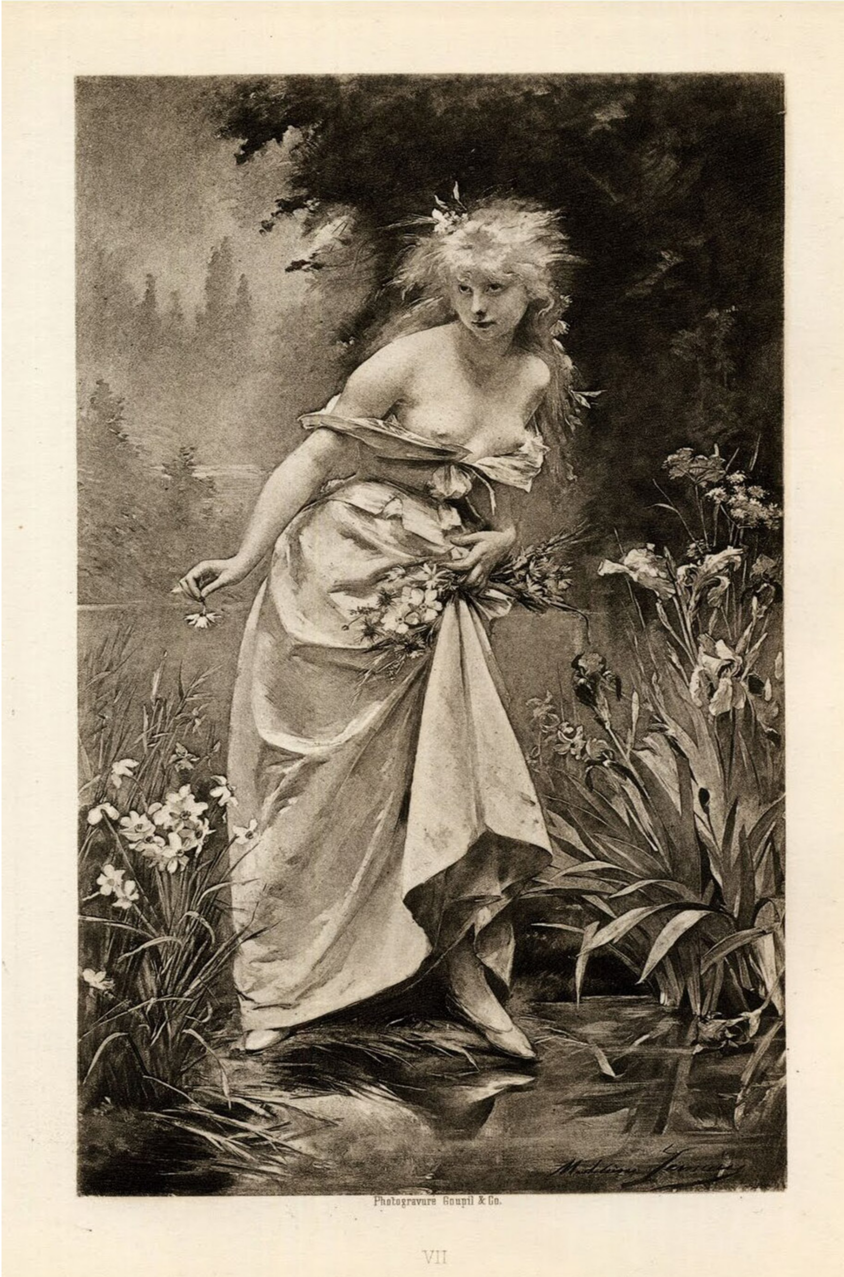
Photogravure Goupil & Co.
VII

Fig. 4: Madeleine Lemaire, *Ophélie*. Photogravure, 1890-1899.

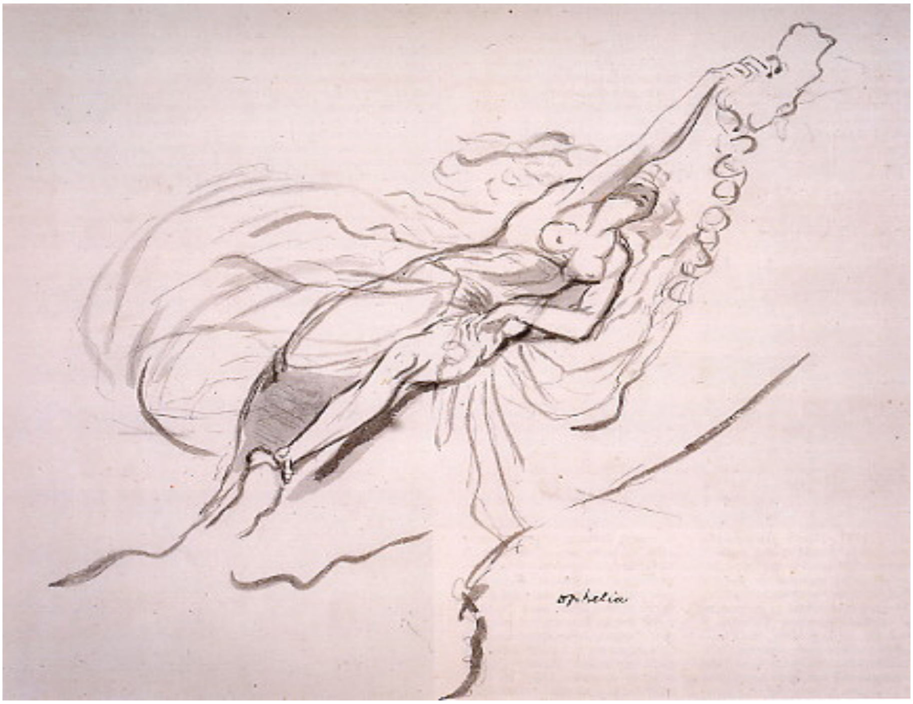

Fig. 5: Johann Heinrich Fuseli, *The Death of Ophelia,* 1770-1778.
London, British Library.

The sorrowful farewell to his sister is also a parting from the feminine side of himself, expelled together with his tears to make way for the masculine principle of fire and action. By floating on the brook Ophelia surrenders to nature, returning to the liquid element, a sphere where women are supposed to belong.

The contrast of genders, male and female, is the keynote of several interpretations characterising Ophelia's reception in the Victorian age. In 1892, as a comment to a painting by the French artist Hugues Merle, the academic David Hilton Wheeler underlined the difference between Hamlet's and Ophelia's sadness, attributing to the "solemn calm shining in the face of Ophelia" the outcome of a passive and resigned nature, voted to submission (Zalewski 2022, 66-8). He contrasts the "energy of action" embedded in Hamlet's sadness, deriving from a deep emotion concerning his whole life to Ophelia's "touching and most pitiful submission to a wholly uncomprehended fate", due to her unawareness of what is haunting her lover's mind. Though specifying the reason for this difference in mental attitude, Wheeler was conditioned by gender stereotypes that find a perfect echo in the widely shared Victorian conception of the two characters. As has been stated referring to a more general view, "Hamlet can be affected by sensibility and retain his faculties; Ophelia's sensibility strips her of her mind" (Britland 2013, 63). This difference has remarkable implications: while Hamlet moves in the realm of thinking and mental distress, Ophelia remains confined to the less noble sphere of (deranged) physicality.

It is noteworthy that in many depictions of Ophelia's death – including Millais's painting – her lips appear slightly parted, as if in song, and her eyes remain open. Ophelia's eyes stare into a vacuum beyond the prosaic reality of the external world, but they also create the illusion that the observer can enter the intimate sphere of her harmless femininity. Romantically defined as the mirror of the soul, the eyes are also the noblest door of perception. Indeed, while Ophelia's freedom of action and speech appear to be very restricted, sight is the only sense totally left to her as a means of perceiving the world. As befits an innocent young woman, she interacts with the world mainly through her eyes: "T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (3.1.164), she exclaims lamenting Hamlet's supposed alienation. Additionally, she tells her father *to have seen* Hamlet in great disorder of attire, as she was sewing in her closet, and she is the first to notice Claudius's rising from his seat during the pantomime. "The King rises" (3.2.253), she exclaims: a sort of childish remark that breaks the spell and exceptionally entitles her to speak. When Ophelia talks again, after some scenes, the time for rational discourse has elapsed: she sings her lullabies and rambles words full of double meanings.

We could even say that the chaste idealisation in death counterbalances her embarrassing transgression of verbal decency. Only her gaze remains. Lovesick and mute, she finally finds her peace in the stillness of death, while her eyes bear witness to the purity of an astonished look at the cruelty of the world. This interpretation of her suffering is prevalent in figurative arts from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards and later became a stylistic trait that was also adopted in theatre. In an 1881 photograph by José María Mora of the British actress Maude Branscombe (Fig. 6), who was celebrated more for her beauty than for her acting ability, Ophelia's eyes are well open and have been described by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, quoting Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (section 32), as "homes as silent prayer". The choice of posture reveals an underlying gendered voyeurism, conveyed through the character's iconisation. Pale and silent, the maiden can be celebrated as an icon of extreme purification and idealisation of the feminine through death.

Within the romantic and post-romantic redefinition of her figure, Ophelia represented a significant challenge for young actresses. Nevertheless, despite the numerous interpretations by prominent actresses of the nineteenth century, after the Romantic period the character did not enjoy a particularly high level of popularity among them. Even Sarah Bernhardt preferred to play Hamlet rather than the 'poor Ophelia', though in 1886 she contributed to the transformation of the virgin into an icon of distress, when she appeared herself as the dead Ophelia in the graveyard scene (in the same coffin where she slept to rehearse the role, according to a legend that was spread for sensational publicity). In fact, the carrying on stage of Ophelia's body on a bier was not an original innovation made by Bernhardt, since Edwin Booth is credited to have done it a few years before, in 1882 (Young 2000, 265). According to some critics, this stage exhibition launched the modern necrosexual aesthetic in the visual arts (Romanska 2005). Indeed, the scene was reproposed by various artists. In most cases, however, it became a high point for the protagonist's histrionic performance. In the 1915 adaptation staged by the Italian actor Ruggero Ruggeri, for instance, Hamlet appeared alone on stage, without saying a line, accompanied however by a musical theme, sobbing and scattering flowers on Ophelia's grave. The scene, for which he took inspiration from a similar though less extended performance by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, was criticised by some reviewers for excessive sentimentalism (Petrini 2018, 51).

While Ophelia's success on the French stage was secured by decades of popular adaptations – including those in musical theatre, which I will examine later – she generally remained a secondary character in most Italian productions. It is no coincidence that critics devote many pages to analysing and comparing the performances of the great Italian actors, starting with Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi, but deal only cursorily with the

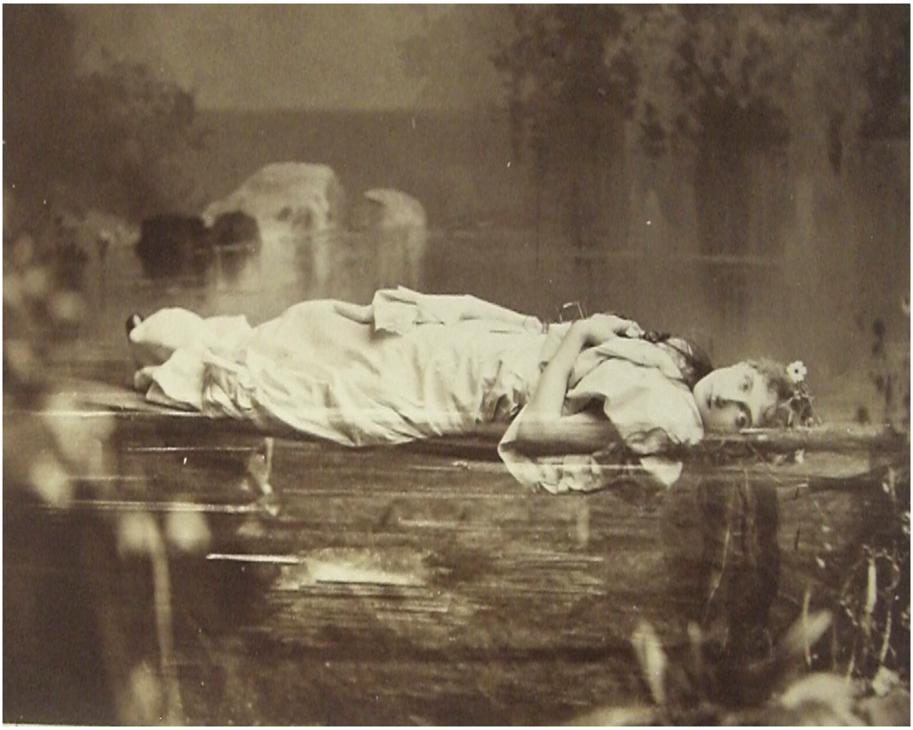

Fig. 6: *Maude Branscombe as Ophelia.* Photograph by José María Mora, 1818.
Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard Theater Collection.

actresses' performances as Ophelia. In the scripts of the late nineteenth-century Italian companies, Ophelia's lines were frequently cut or reduced, sometimes by more than half. Of course, all the lines containing licentious allusions, words offensive or inappropriate to the maiden's pure and delicate nature were eliminated from stage scripts. But the cuts were not only aimed at this purpose. An example of this process, probably involving the audience's reactions, is to be seen in a manuscript that belonged to the company of Cesare Rossi, who recruited among its actors the young Eleonora Duse. The script was presented by an ambitious actor of the company, Andrea Maggi, who had been inspired by the successful adaptation of *Hamlet* made about twenty years before for Tommaso Salvini. The version was performed at the Carignano Theatre, in Turin, in January 1878, achieving only modest success. This script cuts numerous lines also in Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death, including the description of her garments (Pietrini ed. 2013-2014, 221). Probably the audience had not appreciated the long description with all its details (either due to the actress's inability to evoke the scene through her words or, more probably, because it caused a slowing down of the action's pace). Ophelia was portrayed by 24-year-old Teresa Leigheb, whose performance is best remembered for the madness scene. In this scene, despite the purging of the text, the image of the seduced and abandoned girl is accentuated, with a strong emphasis on the sentimental theme. Other actresses would portray the role with greater success, yet the character never achieved widespread popularity. And yet, less than two years before, in February 1876, the opera adaptation with music composed by Ambroise Thomas had been staged in Italy after its successful première in Paris in 1868. But I will discuss further some aspects of this relevant staging, which is exemplary in revealing the intertextuality between the figurative arts and theatre.

As it has been remarked, "Gertrude 'frames' Ophelia's story by making it as 'pretty as a picture" (Peterson 1998, 20), implicitly encouraging visual re-enactings of the scene. The moment of her death was a perfect cameo for sentimental overflow. In 1842, Berlioz composed *La Mort d'Ophélie* (Ophelia's death) for voice and piano, with a text written by Ernest Legouvé, and he revised it in 1848 for female choir and orchestra with the title *La marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d'Hamlet* (Funeral march for the last scene of *Hamlet*). Legouvé's lyrics describe Ophelia picking flowers to hang them on branches and relates her accidental drowning in poetic terms. It is inspired by the Queen's account, embellishing it with a reference to a Naiad ("elle flottait toujours chantant, / chantant quelque vieille ballade, / chantant ainsi qu'une naïade / née au milieu de ce torrent", Johnson and Stokes 2000, 19; she floated on, singing, singing some old ballad, singing like a Naiad born in the middle of the brook). The *mermaid-like* figure mentioned in the Queen's description acquires a halo of fascinating vagueness, whereby Ophelia is compared to mythological figures or animals with symbolic significance.

In English visual arts, representations of a sexless Ophelia prevail, with her appeal shifting into the realm of idealised beauty. This tendency is to be seen even in actresses' observations on the character. Helen Faucit, in a letter dated 10 August 1880 addressed to her friend, the novelist Geraldine Jewsbury, concludes her long description of Ophelia's nature with an allusion to the "accidental watery death of this fragile bud" and mentions a symbolic death-song, the only melodious sound allowed to her: "She sings her own requiem, and carries the flowers of her innocence along with her to the end. Like the fabled swan, with her death-song on her lips, she floats unconsciously among the water-lilies, till the kindly stream embraces and takes her to itself" (Faucit 1885, 26)[5]. Alongside this melancholy view, a more vitalistic conception of the character emerged in the same years, with actresses such as Ellen Terry evoking the magic power of the mermaid Undine (Auerbach 1997, 241-4). Fragile swan or courageous siren, Ophelia is seen as destined to return to a fluid element opposed to the harsh reality of the earth, that is of a world in which she is rejected, and finally condemned to immobility and silence. In any case, the morbid attraction to the liquid element is a *topos* that goes beyond Ophelia's sexualisation, as an archetype repurposed with different connotations of meaning. As an example, in a comment on *Vanity Fair* (January 18, 1879), the critic "Zophar" defines the sexuality of Ellen Terry's Ophelia "as chaste, as boundless, and as deep as the sea" (32). The sentence implicitly echoes Juliet's espression of her love to Romeo ("My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite", 2.2.133-5), confirming the prominence henceforth assumed by the sentimental sphere.

Ophelia's death is the ultimate expression of her vulnerability: not an unjust murder by a man, as in Desdemona's case, nor a conscious and wilful act. While in more modern interpretations Ophelia is seen as the victim of a patriarchal context and corrupted world, in the nineteenth century she was mainly considered the perfect icon of a special illness, deriving from sentimental suffering, and thus reaching the noblest and spiritualised sublimation of grief. The water element becomes increasingly relevant in iconography as a symbolic dimension is introduced, representing the connection between the natural world and the spiritual realm. Among the most powerful and fascinating renderings of the subject is a painting by Paul Steck, dated 1895 (ID 6645). Here the poor girl is completely submerged in water like in the depths of the sea, in an upright position, with her white robe and her hair swaying fluidly like waves. Realistic details such as the air bubbles emerging from her lips are combined with a remarkable evocative power, introducing a symbolic dimension. But in nineteenth century visual re-elaborations, the pure water flowing of the Shakespeare's brook are not only transposed into something evoking the deep seabed, but also into still and stagnant waters. To enhance this effect, the drowning is sometimes set in a moonlit landscape, introducing a touch of Gothic atmosphere to the scene, such as in a 1852 painting by Arthur Hughes, where the pale, suffering and dishevelled Ophelia – described as emaciated and tubercular (Dijkstra 1988, 43) – is sitting on a large trunk at the brink of the stream (ID 6634). The ghost of consumption looms over nineteenth-century literature and imagery, reappearing at times with symbolic significance, as seen in the death of Elizabeth Siddal, who had posed for Millais's painting and "seems to have taken on part of Ophelia's identity, at least in her poetry" (Rhodes 2008, 100).

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[5] The volume is a collection of private letters concerning seven Shakespearean heroines and Ophelia is the first character analysed.

These connotations associated with the water element had been capitalised upon in the above-mentioned *Hamlet*'s famous opera version with music composed by Ambroise Thomas and libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, staged in Paris on 9 March 1868 at the Paris Opéra. The libretto drew inspiration from the adaptation by Alexandre Dumas and Paul Meurice. Hamlet was interpreted by Jean-Baptiste Faure and Ophelia by the Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson (Björklund 2022), both largely appreciated for their singing talents. But the prejudices towards Shakespearean plays were not completely over: a critic of the *Public Opinion*, on March 21, 1868, after admitting that Monsieur Faure and Madamoiselle Nillson "acquit themselves well", stated that "the task of assimilating to the French taste the works of Shakespeare . . . is not only an immense undertaking, but an impossibility" (308). In fact, there was not much Shakespearean stuff left in the performance. In the adaptation by Barbier and Carré, Hamlet does not die after killing Claudius; Claudius is the only character who dies besides Ophelia – though the adaptation restored Hamlet's tragic ending for performances in England (Sen 2021, 38). Ophelia's death was ideal to elicit a surge of emotion, shifting the focus on romantic passion. Like Juliet, Ophelia had by then become a symbol of the young woman sacrificed on the altar of love – love that, moreover, remained unconsummated.

In this adaptation, act 4 centres on heightened pathos, with Ophelia's death dramatically staged on a specially flooded set. Notably, in this operatic adaptation, her sorrow stems not from her father's death (since he does not die) but solely from her unfulfilled love for Hamlet, which is expressed in the most classical terms, as if it were the moaning of a Racinian heroine; "Ah! cruel, tu vois mes pleurs! Ah! / Pour toi je meurs!" (Barbier and Carré 1993, 105; Ha, you cruel man, you see my cries! Ha! I die for you). This adaptation was an important landmark for *Hamlet*'s legacy and reception, as well as for the refocusing of drama on Ophelia's figure, which became so central that it even overshadowed the leading character. "*Ophelia*, in fact, would have been a far more appropriate title", states provocatively a critic in an anonymous review of the *Echo* (3 July 1869), appreciating Nilsson's marvellous vocal qualities but lamenting the subordination of all characters "to the one aim and end of creating a blazing halo round the fair locks of the disconsolate Ophelia" (312).

The success of the 1868 representation contributed to the popularisation of the subject. It emerged from decades of reworking the theme in the visual arts, which would later, in turn, be influenced by musical interpretations, forming a continuous cycle of intertextual exchange. Nilsson's interpretation led to the production of several engravings and paintings by the artists of the time, from Alexandre Lamy and Alphonse de Neuville to Alexandre Cabanel (Gervais de Lafond 2012, 176-7). Ophelia became a visual Leitmotiv, relaunched by artists in different contexts, such as the successful productions of Thomas's *Hamlet* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York from 1884 to 1895, with the sopranos Marcella Sembrich, Nellie Melba, and Emma Calvé. The postures shown in photographs are clearly inspired by the most famous paintings. In particular, the similarity between Emma Calvé's portrayal by the photographer Aimé Du Pont and the Cabanel's 1883 *Ophelia* (Gerber 2018, 50) is remarkable. In this photo, the singer is shown lying in the water with one arm raised (ID 8193). Although the pose is less sensual than in the painting (ID 6643)—with the actress using one arm to support her head instead of reclining languidly against the broken branch—the altered posture, driven by practical considerations, still conveys a comparable emotional atmosphere.[6]

Coming back to the 1868 operatic performance, it could be argued that Ophelia's singing before her drowning represents a strong link with the madness scene, and moreover that *Hamlet*'s First Quarto features the stage direction "Enter Ophelia, playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing" (Williams 2012). This performative quality has been linked to the Italian tradition, inferring Ophelia's vocation for the sentimental part of the *innamorata* (Nicholson 2008). While it is debatable whether this association is essential in the original text, the historical evolution of Ophelia's character clearly moves in that direction, beginning with the earliest revivals of *Hamlet* – from David Garrick's celebration of the Shakespearean cult during the Stratford Jubilee to the French reworkings of the tragedy. Notably, in the adaptation by Dumas and Paul Meurice, as well as in the 1874 edition of

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[6] It is useful to remember that such photos were mostly taken during rehearsals or in special sessions, as part of the promotional strategy related to the artists' public image as well as their choices of interpretation.

Barbier and Carré's operatic version, Ophelia is reassured and encouraged by the Queen regarding Hamlet's love, a scene likely inspired by one of Ducis's versions, which ends with a virtual triumph of love, with Gertrude dying while blessing Hamlet and Ophelia's marriage. Furthermore, Hamlet does not kill Polonius (who is restored as Ophelia's father), although he believes him to be complicit in the crime. In the conclusion, Hamlet, spurred on by the ghost, kills the King and ascends to the throne of Denmark.

A lithograph by Émile Vernier, based on a drawing by Alphonse de Neuville, refers to the 1868 operatic adaptation and shows the scene of the ghost's apparition to Hamlet, while below and less visible there lies Ophelia in the stream, in a sensual pose and with flowers scattered on her dress and in her hair (Fig. 7). The main scene can be seen as a pretext for setting her drowning in a nocturnal and even haunting context, enveloped in mystery. The French operatic adaptation was particularly favored by celebrated singers and, as previously mentioned, was performed in Italy within a decade. In the Italian libretto published in 1881 by Sonzogno, with Achille de Lauzières's translation, the frontispiece image shows the meeting between Hamlet and his father's ghost in the context of a snowy landscape with a medieval castle in the background (Fig. 8). Although Hamlet has his sword drawn, the engraving does not convey the same sense of mystery and suspense of the French edition. However, importantly, Ophelia's drowning is not illustrated. The edition refers to the 1880-1881 season staged at Turin's Teatro Regio, in which Ophelia was played by the French soprano Bianca Donadio, who at the time was 31 years old. As in the French version, the scene of Ophelia's death is described in a caption and performed with the same music as her love duet with Hamlet ("Negar tu puoi la luce!", 10; Doubt thou the light exists).

Due to the diffusion of this melodramatic imagery, Ophelia became a figure who could better communicate the pathetic dimension of her state. Indeed, there was a shift in the interpretation of the tragedy, from Hamlet's existential unease to the pathos of the sentimental matter. This change of interpretation is evidenced by the 1874 Italian edition of Shakespeare's plays, translated by Carlo Rusconi, which contains only one illustration: a childlike Ophelia dressed in white on a riverbank. Also in the edition of Giulio Carcano's translations published the following year, the sole illustration featured is of Ophelia. The figurative choice is thus in stark contrast with the stage practice and the role attributed to Ophelia in the co-eval theatre companies. Carcano's version was brought to success by the actor Tommaso Salvini who, since 1856, starred as Hamlet in open competition with Ernesto Rossi, and there are pages and pages of reviews and comments on their acting while almost nobody recalls the actress playing Ophelia. Nevertheless, the choice of the most representative illustration for the edition goes in a different direction:

the evocative power of the death scene ultimately prevails in visual imagery, imprinting an interpretative turn through the power of melodrama.

The singer Christine Nilsson acquired a huge popularity in the role and was portrayed as Ophelia in various engravings, with the ever-present flowers which had become a Leitmotiv (Fig. 9). In a lithograph by Hippolyte Mailly, her face is pictured in a medallion wit a nocturnal lake and a Gothic castle in the background (Fig. 10). The aquatic element does not allude to renewal and purification but evokes a stagnant morbidity, a quality that is both disquieting and obscure. Much more than the usual stream, the misty waters of a lake are perceived as more appropriate to the ghostly atmosphere required. As we have seen, this shift towards an unsettling context can be seen also in some paintings, such as the 1852 oil on canvas by Arthur Hughes. Love and mystery: the pathos and suspense perceived on stage are figuratively transposed by resorting to the picturesque, as part of a popularising strategy of the subject. This trend must have been taken to the extreme, inspiring the ironic vein of an artist like André Gill. In one of his caricatures, the actress is submerged in a large ampoule while undergoing a transformation into a frog-like creature, observed by a multitude of spectators represented in the form of frogs holding theatre binoculars (Fig. 11). It perfectly exemplifies the morbid fascination and voyeurism of the male audience towards the disquieting figure of the sacrificial virgin.

The tragedy of Ophelia, helpless and silent victim of a male-dominated world, innocent martyr of a sexophobic, patriarchal and discriminatory upbringing, is reduced to a more traditional tragedy of love, with a touch of mystery and of Gothic fascination. The culmination of this trend is to be seen in performance strategies which, in their turn, inspired the visual arts. But even before the Romantic era, figurative artists transformed Ophelia into an icon of pure lovesickness, a foil to Hamlet's more intellectual distress. Clearly, the character cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender difference; however, to ignore this underlying bias – often subtle or obscured, as seen in the earliest French adaptations – is to misinterpret Ophelia's role. Her identity fully emerges only in death, even more so than in the case of other tragic heroines. The portrayal of her off-stage drowning as a central visual element in stage productions marks a pivotal shift in this reading. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that reinterpretations began to challenge this perspective, offering a more nuanced and less reductive portrayal of the tragic figure of Ophelia.

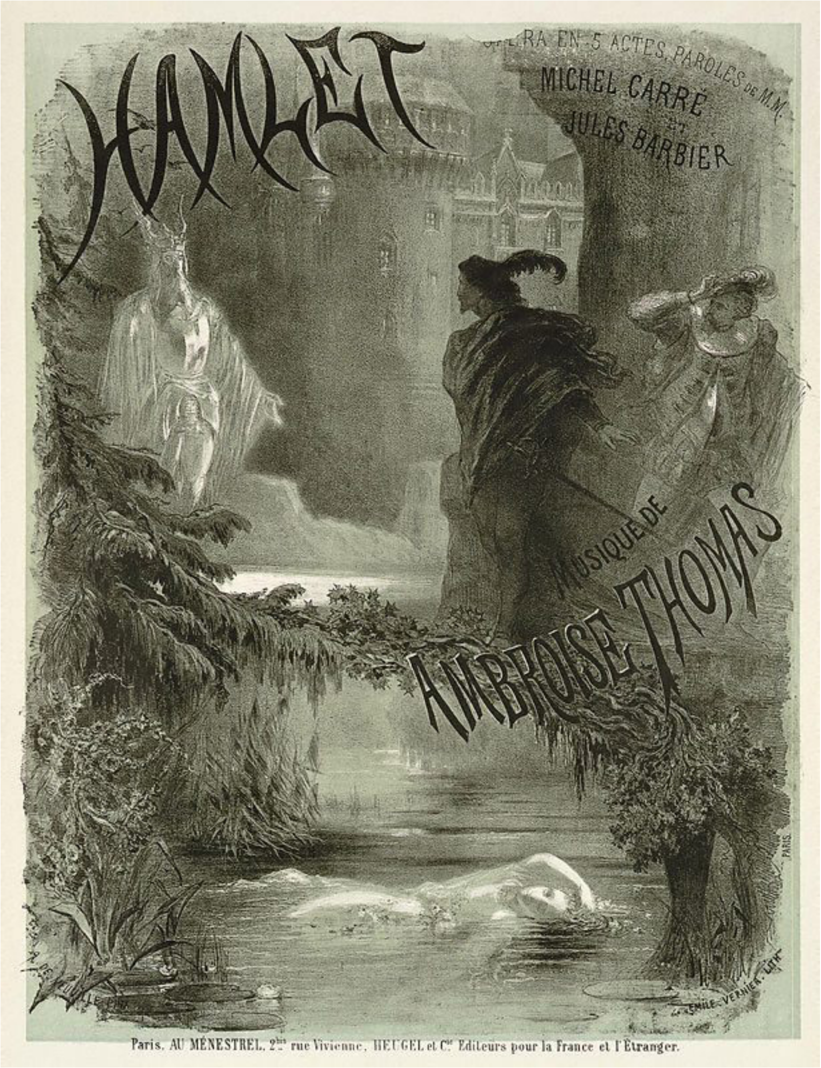
HAMLET
OPÉRA EN 5 ACTES, PAROLES DE M.M.
MICHEL CARRÉ
ET
JULES BARBIER
MUSIQUE DE
AMBROISE THOMAS
A. DE NEUVILLE
ÉMILE VERNIER LITH.
PARIS
Paris. AU MÉNESTREL, 2bis rue Vivienne, HEUGEL et Cie Editeurs pour la France et l'Étranger.

Fig. 7: Émile Vernier, *Hamlet, opéra en 5 actes, paroles de M.M. Michel Carré et Jules Barbier, musique de Ambroise Thomas*, 1868. Lithograph from a drawing by Alphonse de Neuville.

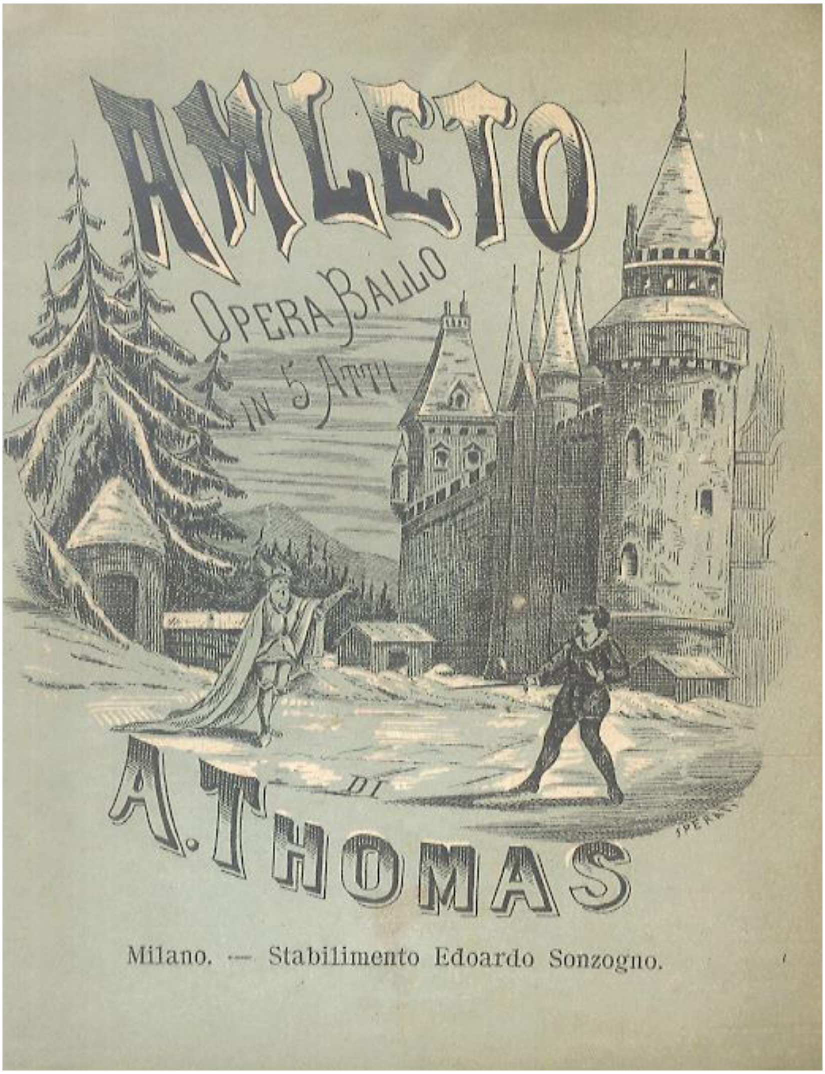
AMLETO
OPERA BALLO
IN 5 ATTI
DI
A. THOMAS
Milano. — Stabilimento Edoardo Sonzogno.
SPERA

Fig. 8: *Amleto, opera ballo in 5 atti di A. Thomas*, Milano, Sonzogno, 1881.

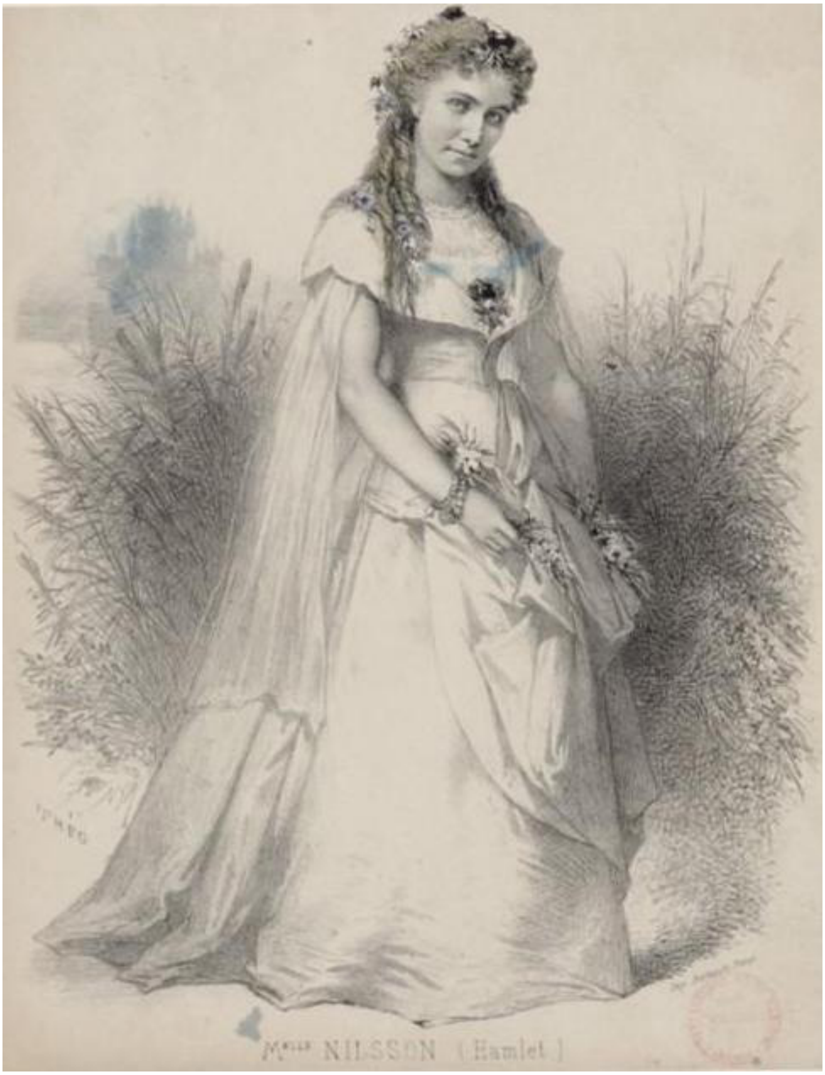
THÉO
Mlle NILSSON (Hamlet)

Fig. 9: Théo, *Christine Nilsson as Ophélie in Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas. Engraving, 1868.

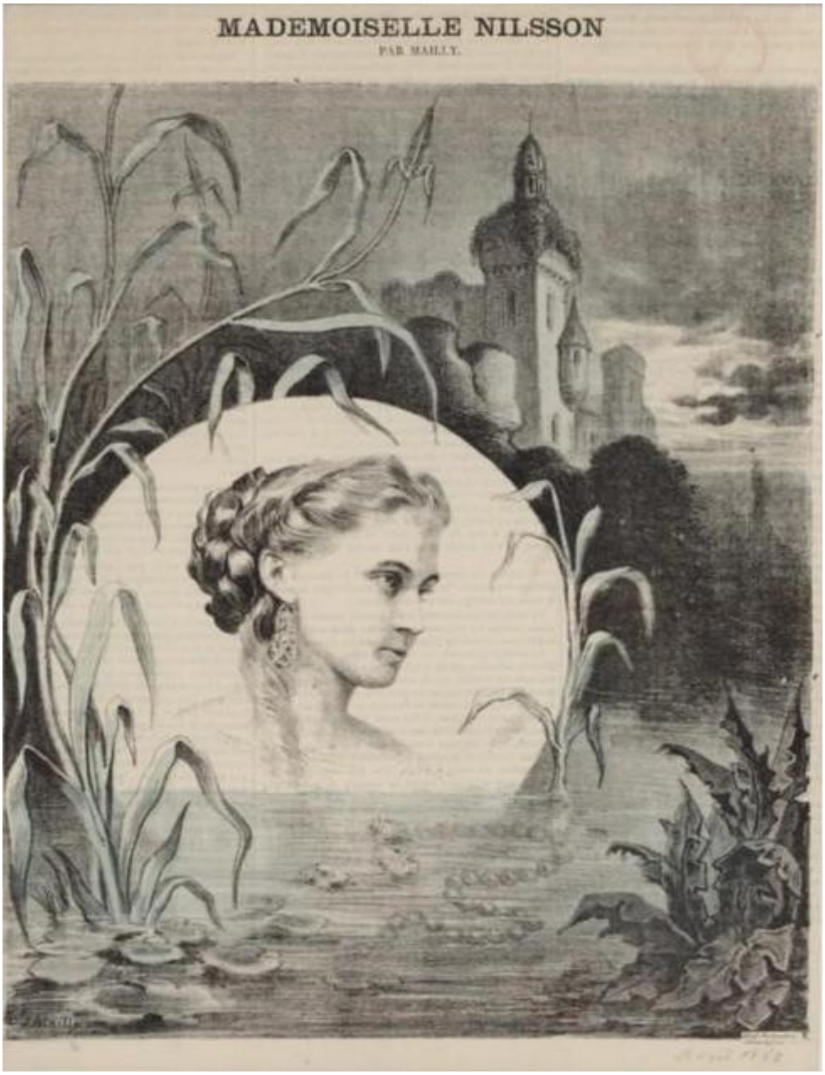
MADEMOISELLE NILSSON
PAR MAILLY.

Fig. 10: Hippolyte Mailly, *Christine Nilsson as Ophélie in Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas, Lithograph, 1868.

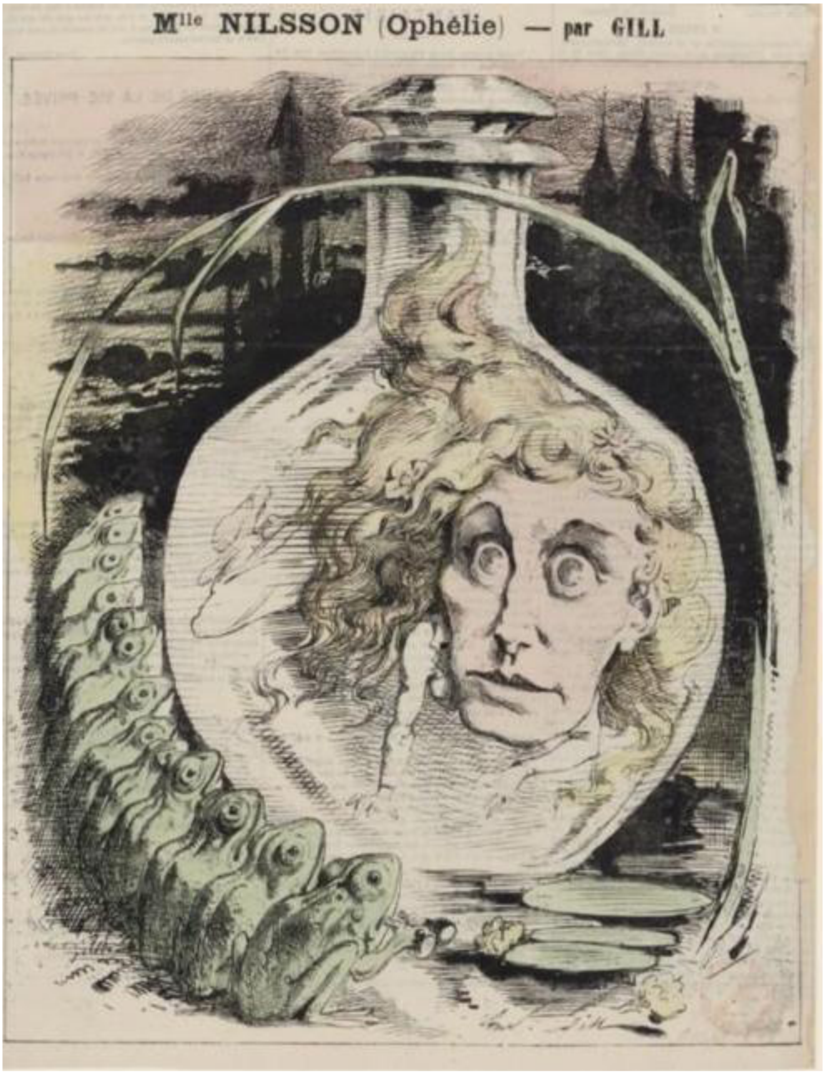
Mlle NILSSON (Ophélie) — par GILL
Gill

Fig. 11: André Gill, *Christine Nilsson as Ophélie in Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas. Engraving, 1868.

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Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine*

Sarah Bernhardt in Her White Coffin, 1886

Abstract

Although she had been acclaimed in male parts from the start of her career, for her third Shakespeare venture, after Cordelia (1869) and Lady Macbeth (1884), Sarah Bernhardt chose to play Ophelia in 1886 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin with Philippe Garnier as the eponymous hero. The part of Ophelia echoed the necrophiliac trend of the nineteenth century, her personal attraction for death when she staged her death in her white-upholstered coffin, and her famous performances of death on stage. However, her portrayal did not meet the expectation of her admirers. The curtain fell after only twenty-three performances, leaving no time for taking the iconic photos in the Nadars' studio. Exactly at the same time, the Comédie-Française was preparing another production of *Hamlet* with Mounet-Sully in the title-part, which impressed the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé so much that he coined the term "Hamletism" as the emblem of the time. In her wish to challenge Mounet-Sully, her former partner and lover, with her version of the same play, Sarah Bernhardt made some wrong choices: the text she commissioned did not meet with approval; Phillipe Garnier as Hamlet did not convince; her role as Ophelia disappointed her admirers. However, the tragedy of *Hamlet* became one of her long-standing successes at the turn of the century when she played the part of the eponymous hero, adding Hamlet to her many cross-dressed roles. There were no qualms concerning age, gender, mannerisms; she was Hamlet, on stage and in the animated film shown at the 1900 International Exhibition in Paris.

Keywords: William Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Ophelia; Sarah Bernhardt; Mounet-Sully; coffin

In 2023, for the centenary of Sarah Bernhardt's death, a number of official commemorations were organised to honour the memory of the Diva, including a major exhibition at the Petit Palais in Paris, *Rétrospective d'une carrière exceptionnelle d'une artiste aux multiples talents* (Retrospective of the exceptional career of a multi-talented artist).[1] This exhibition was not

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[1] Annick Lemoine, Stéphanie Catarutti, Cécile Champy-Vinas (curators), Petit Palais, avenue Winston Churchill, 75008, Paris (14 April - 27 August 2023). All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

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centred only on her theatre fame because an exhibition had been organised much earlier at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (Guibert 2000), but also on her life, which had its ups and downs, and on her not so well-documented success as a painter and sculptor. This anniversary inspired a new play, *L'extraordinaire destinée de Sarah Bernhardt* (Sarah Bernhardt's extraordinary fate), written and directed by Géraldine Martineau, a former actress of the Comédie-Française, performed in an appropriate, old-fashioned venue, now co-owned by a great-grandson of the Diva herself.[2] The play proved so successful that the programming was extended for a few more months, indicating that Sarah Bernhardt still exerts a fascination on present-day audiences. She is seen as a formidable, independent woman who was the mistress of her fate, reigning over her circles of friends, admirers, lovers, and enemies alike. Subsequently, a film was released, *Sarah Bernhardt la divine*, starring Sandrine Kiberlain in the title role, centred on her tumultuous love affair with the famous actor and partner Lucien Guitry, as well as her relationship with Lucien's equally famous son, Sacha Guitry[3]. These two modern renderings focus on the iconic woman rather than on the emblematic actress, and none of her Shakespearean roles are even mentioned.

The 2023 exhibition began with the earlier days of Sara Marie Henriette, born sometime in October 1844 in Paris, the daughter of Judie-Judith Bernhardt, nicknamed "Youle", a Dutch courtesan of Jewish origins and one of her clients, whose identity, a long-kept secret, was now revealed.[4] The exhibition showed her lonely childhood, estranged from her mother and sisters until, under the patronage of the Duke of Morny, the Emperor's half-brother and one of her mother's friends, she was accepted at the Conservatoire (the School of Music and Drama) in 1860 and later at the Comédie-Française from which she was quickly dismissed for her failure in *Iphigénie* in 1862.[5] Four years later, she was accepted at the Théâtre de l'Odéon thanks to the support of Camille Doucet (1812-1895), a vaudeville playwright and future member of the Académie Française. There, George Sand liked her interpretation of Mariette in *François le Champi* (1866); she triumphed in her first cross-dressed part, Zannetto (in François Coppée's

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[2] The Théâtre du Palais Royal, 38 rue de Montpensier, Paris, was established in 1783, is co-owned by Sébastien Azzopardi, the son of Simone, one of Sarah Bernhardt's two granddaughters.

[3] Director: Guillaume Nicloux; script: Guillaume Nicloux and Nathalie Leuthreau; music: Reynaldo Hahn, 2004.

[4] "Edouard Viel, a lawyer on a Paris spree who ended his life in prison for financial embezzlement" (Fuligni 2023, 13).

[5] In the play *L'extraordinaire destinée de Sarah Bernhardt*, this fiasco is shown to have been caused by her distress over the noise of some people leaving the auditorium and it turns out that it has been her mother.

Le Passant) in 1869, and the same year, in her first Shakespearean part, Cordelia, in a verse adaptation of *King Lear* by Jules Lacroix who mentioned her interpretation favourably in his introduction to the play. The novelist Alexandre Dumas, who knew Sarah Bernhardt through the Duke of Morny, wrote a favourable review of the production in his journal, entitled *The Dartagnan*, an extract of which, quoted in the Odéon programme, concerned the role of Cordelia. Very much at the beginning of Sarah's career, Cordelia is not remembered as a memorable role; however, this part is relevant for our present purpose as Cordelia was seen as a young, dutiful daughter who sacrificed herself for her beloved father. Beauvallet, the celebrated actor, took on the part of Lear. He had been Sarah's teacher and was particularly impressed by the way she performed Cordelia's dying scene. According to a popular anecdote, on the opening night, as Beauvallet was delivering his last speech alternatively holding her tight in his arms and letting her fall onto the rocks which formed the scenery, she swooned. He rushed to the wings with her and saw her white gown covered in blood: a pin had got into her flesh, and each of his movements was renewed torture for her. But she never complained or moved, as she was supposed to be dead (Bernhardt Archives, MS 27).[6] It was indeed the actress's first theatrical death; it was to be followed by many others.

After the 1870-1871 War during which she had gained enough authority to be able to transform the Odéon Theatre into a military hospital, she triumphed in *Ruy Blas* (1872); the author, Victor Hugo, fell in love with the actress and her "voix d'or" (golden voice), a compliment that contributed to her fame throughout her career. However, despite these early successes on major theatrical stages, she nevertheless had to resort to the same trade as her mother to survive, and the 2023 exhibition mentioned her début as a recorded courtesan in the 1873 Police Register (Fuligni 2023, 15).

Her situation was soon to change: in 1872, she was accepted at the Comédie-Française for the second time and triumphed in Racine's *Phèdre* in 1874, a triumph which lasted until 1913, two years before her right leg was amputated. In the final tableau, she impressed the audiences as she died seated in a majestic chair of state. In 1878, she left the Comédie-Française after the failure of *L'Aventurière* and embarked on tours abroad with her own company: America in 1880-1881, Central Europe in 1882, London and Scotland in 1884. She met with tremendous success wherever she played, and in 1883, in between tours, she moved to the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin just before Félix Duquesnel became the director.[7] There she performed Lady

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[6] The Sarah Bernhardt Archives are at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris.

[7] Félix Duquesnel (1832-1915) a famous journalist and playwright in his time. After the Théâtre de l'Odéon, and the Théâtre du Châtelet, he directed the Théâtre de la

Macbeth in a prose adaptation the poet Jean Richepin[8] had written for her; she then played the title role of *Théodora*, also written for her, by Victorien Sardou[9], and two years later Ophelia, the role we are concerned with.

We will first consider the various components that Sarah Bernhardt chose for her production, then we will turn to the acting of Philippe Garnier, the young actor who played Hamlet, and lastly we will discuss the role of Ophelia that Sarah Bernhardt decided to play, a choice which was received with criticism on the part of her contemporaries.

1. The Components of the Production

1.1 The Text

As was her custom, Sarah Bernhardt commissioned a special text for her production from two young aspiring male artists. In the course of their joint venture with the Diva, some of the young men she had chosen became very famous, and continued to be popular in their own right after their collaborative work with her (Victorien Sardou, Jean Richepin, for the texts of plays; Alphons Mucha for the posters and visuals; René Lalique for the jewels and ornaments; Georges Clairin for the paintings, among many others), whereas some other artists never achieved great success in spite of her determination and fame. This is unfortunately what happened to her two young authors, Lucien Cressonnois et Charles Samson.

Sarah Bernhardt met the Cressonnois family because Jules Cressonnois (1823-1883), Lucien's father, was a composer and former music director for the Republican Guard, and from 1878 until his death in 1883, he had organised the Sunday morning concert at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, just before Sarah Bernhardt settled there. The music of *Hamlet* was composed by his other son, Paul, and his fellow composer Joanni Perronet (1855-1900). Charles Samson (1859-1913) and Lucien Cressonnois (1860-1909) were both in their mid-twenties, both had studied at the Paris Conservatoire and had already written a vaudeville together, *Divorcés!* (Divorced!) in 1883. They wrote two other plays together afterwards, *Le Crime de Jean Morel* (*The crime of Jean Morel*, 1893), and *Marie Stuart*, which Sarah Bernhardt asked

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Porte-Saint-Martin from 1884 to 1893.

[8] Jean Richepin (1849-1926), poet and academician who, in 1876, faced a trial for 'affront to public decency' for *La Chanson des Gueux*. He played the title role of his drama, Nana-Sahib, with Sarah Bernhardt, which was badly received.

[9] That is, following the great popular success of *Fédora*, the first play written for her by Victorien Sardou in 1882 and performed at the Vaudeville Theatre.

to be completely re-written,[10] but ultimately rejected it in the end. It was eventually performed at another venue with another cast.[11]

Lucien Cressonnois was a member of Sarah Bernhardt's company and had been noticed in Sardou's *Theodora* in 1884, a production featuring the Emperess of Byzantium which received unanimous praise[12], and the following year he played Gracieux in a revival of *Marion Delorme* by Victor Hugo[13], the year of the author's death, and which turned out to be a complete fiasco. Charles Samson was rumoured to be the relative of a prominent actor (An. 1886a) who had encouraged Sarah Bernhardt in her young days (Bernhardt 2000, 126-7).

Their text, composed of 131 pages, was printed in the high-profile drama collection directed by Paul Ollendorff who owned a printing company-*cum*-bookshop situated close to the Comédie-Française, which means that it was considered a version worth publishing. The cover reads "d'après" (after) William Shakespeare: it is thus clearly defined as an adaptation. The name of the original author was mentioned, an unusual detail for French nineteenth-century books. The French tradition is to list the authors in alphabetical order, so Cressonnois comes naturally before Samson, without implying an order of merit or importance.[14]

Instead of translating the play into prose like François-Victor Hugo, the herald of Romanticism, the two authors chose to employ alexandrines for the whole text, with a heroic rhyming pattern, according to the tradition of French classical drama. The play is divided into five acts and eleven "tableaux" to suit the prevailing custom, with a different set for each tableau.

Sarah Bernhardt was well-known for following the creative process with great care, even being considered as France's "première metteuse en scene" (first female stage-director) in France (see Huthwohl 2024, 69), and she always started with the text. The only manuscript letter to Lucien Cressonnois

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[10] Manuscript letter of Sarah Bernhardt to Lucien Cressonnois, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Arts du Spectacle, MS 610.

[11] *Marie Stuart*, historical drama in five acts and eight tableaux by MM. Lucien Cressonnois et Charles Samson, music by Paul Cressonnois. Théâtre Moderne, 1 November 1892. Reviews: *La Cocarde* (7 November 1892), *La France* (2 November 1892), *Le Journal* (2 November 1892).

[12] *Le Journal des Débats* (28 February 1886, n.n.) referred to him favourably in this part: "C'était lui qui, dans *Théodora,* jouait le jeune dandy byzantin chargé de promener le Parisien Charibert au milieu des splendeurs de la capitale de Justinien" (In *Theodora* he played the young Byzantine dandy who had the task to accompany the Parisian Charibert amidst the splendours of Justinian's capital city).

[13] Premiered in 1831 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin.

[14] To be compared to *Cléopâtre* (1890), a prose adaptation by Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau. The name of Sardou comes first as he was a famous playwright, backing the name of Moreau, a young author at the time.

(and not to both authors) which is at the Bibliothèque Nationale concerns the later play, *Mary Stuart*. It is addressed to "Mon cher Lucien" (my dear Lucien) and starts with some compliments, but soon goes into very sharp, critical comments: the speeches are far too long, the developments should be more attractive, some details are unnecessary, etc. (Bernhardt Archives, MS 610). We may wonder whether her tone was similar in her approach to the text of *Hamlet*.

The text was amply commented upon in numerous reviews of the production, prompting much wider debates concerning translations of foreign plays, which obviously were in the air at the time. Was it a translation or an adaptation? Both terms are used in the reviews, sometimes indiscriminately, showing that the difference was not clear-cut. Which form was best, verse or prose? Should it be in keeping with the 'linearity'[15] of the original, or adapted to the taste and manner of the French stage?

The qualities of the play itself were questioned: even before considering the text, one rearguard journalist, Henri Fouquier, dismissed *Hamlet* as a "drame mal composé" (a badly composed drama), critiquing Shakespeare's work: "ce n'est ni son chef d'oeuvre ni un chef d'oeuvre absolu" (it is neither his masterpiece nor an absolute masterpiece) (Fouquier 1886, n.p.). The more senior (and no doubt conservative) reviewers doubted whether a new translation or adaptation was necessary after the numerous attempts of the past, all consigned to oblivion, except, they argued, the one by Alexandre Dumas which was "si applaudi autrefois au Théâtre Historique" (praised so much in the past at the Théâtre Historique) in 1847 with Rouvière in the title-role (Denis 1886, 2). They hoped that Dumas' piece could have "une brillante reprise" (a successful revival) at the Comédie-Française later in the year in a revised version by Paul Meurice. In his long article in the *Gil Blas*, Léon Bernard-Derosne (1839-1910), the "Président du Cercle de la Critique" (president of theatrical journalists), developed the argument that there was absolutely no necessity for new translations, the subject having been fully explored already by former generations of writers, Dumas and Meurice having reached perfection, so to speak (1986, 2-3). Auguste Vitu (1886, 8) was among those who appreciated the alexandrine as the form best suited to the tragic mode and even indicated that some lines were received with enthusiastic applause from the audience,[16] for instance, in the "great scene with his mother" (the closet scene), when Hamlet compares the portraits of the two kings; "Accepter tant de nuit après tant de soleil!" (Accepting so much night after so much sun). On the other hand, Gramont, for instance, supported the idea that it was useful to translate the masterpieces of foreign literature again in order to conform to the spirit of the age, as people and ideas changed (1886, 2). He was among those who criticised this classical rendering, arguing that verse was not in keeping with Shakespeare: "elle ronronne comme une tragédie au lieu de rugir comme un drame" (it purrs like a tragedy instead of roaring like a drama), he wrote with Hugolian emphasis (ibid.). The youth of the authors was often mentioned as a challenge for the task they had undertaken and achieved, or as a polite excuse for their shortcomings.

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[15] Even if, in the nineteenth century, some still critiqued Shakespeare's tragedy, most reviewers were apt to acclaim a closer attention to the original plot after the many Neoclassical rewritings of the play such as those by Jean-François Ducis (in 1769 Hamlet and Ophélie marry at the end), and also the much-praised version of Alexandre Dumas in 1847 in which the ghost of Old Hamlet comes back instead of Fortinbras. Shakespeare's ending with the royals dying or being overthrown was a capital offense on a French stage.

Certainly, the novelty of this text is that it was the first one to follow the linearity of Shakespeare's original, a feature which is criticised by those attached to French theatrical tradition, but much appreciated by others (An. 1886a). The authors "ont suivi le poète pas-à-pas" (have followed the poet step by step) and "n'ont pas reculé devant certaines crudités de langage, tout en restant dans une juste limite" (did not shy away from certain crude language, staying within a fair limit; An. 1886b, 2). However, some did not fail to notice that Ophelia's original songs loaded with sexual undertones had been replaced by charming, innocent romances (Gramont 1886, 2).

The English circles based in Paris had their prejudices against yet another translation of Shakespeare "done into French", always "an insipid literary dish" to English native speakers familiar "with the language of Shakespeare from their infancy", especially in a constrained verse form (An. 1886c, 6). However, the same source admitted that the text was "very creditable", even if it gave some examples of "liberties with the text that c[ould] not be excused". As to *The Galignani's Messenger*, this "version approach[ed] nearer to the letter of the original". They had "looked forward to" this rendering "with much curiosity" and they showed their enthusiasm: "both from a literary and histrionic point of view it proved a far greater success than was generally expected among 'those who knew'" (An. 1886d, n.p.). They praised "the adapters" for having "followed the original with admirable fidelity", in sharp contrast with the Dumas-Meurice version inasmuch as "it absolutely respects Shakespeare's work, following it scene by scene and almost line by line". They referred to a return to the original version of the play on the contemporary English stage with the success of Henry Irving's production at the Lyceum Theatre in 1874 and still performed to that day. In her desire to challenge the Comédie-Française and her former partner and lover Mounet-Sully, Sarah Bernhardt may have asked her young authors to follow the original, having herself seen with her own eyes the tremendous success of this new trend when she was in London with the Comédie-Française for the summer season of 1879 (Joannis 2023, 50).

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[16] The intensity of the clapping is often mentioned as a measure of enthusiasm; however we must take into account that the system of 'la claque' (paid clappers) was still operative.

'Those who knew' were relieved to realise that the original final scene with Fortinbras bursting in with his army while Hamlet was agonising had replaced the reappearance of the Ghost of Old Hamlet in the Romantic version by Dumas. The text ends with a heroic quatrain with a Christian undertone delivered by Hamlet before he dies; the last distich is centred on himself and his late father whom he will join in death: "Ah! Mon père!… vers lui tout mon être s'élance… / Je pars, adieu!… Mon âme entre dans le silence" (Cressonnois and Samson 1886, 131; Ha, my father! My whole being rushes towards him. / I am dying! Adieu! My soul enters into silence]). This last cue is followed by the following stage direction: "*Il meurt. Paraît Fortinbras au son de la fanfare guerrière. Il est suivi d'officiers et de soldats norwégiens. Il met un pied sur les marches du trône, comme pour en prendre possession*" (He dies. Fortinbras appears to the sound of martial music. He is followed by Norwegian officers and soldiers. He places his foot on the steps of the throne as if to assert possession). Even if Fortinbras is not given the chance to deliver his encomium to Hamlet (5.2.379-87),[17] his presence is dramatised (the name of the actor, Cartereau, appears in the original cast list provided in the book),[18] and his triumph brings the performance to a close on a grand, spectacular scene – just the kind Sarah Bernhardt knew how to stage.

However, many critics shared Auguste Vitu's disappointment at the lack of the opening scene on the battlements of the castle of Elsinore (the text opens in the banqueting hall, 1.2) which enabled the audience to witness the spectre of the late king before Hamlet (1886, 2-3).

The catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France exhibition dismissed the text as a "piètre adaptation" (Guibert 2000, 16; poor adaptation). This does not take into consideration all the contemporary comments concerning the nature of the text, its position within the drama of the day, and the debates raging at the time on both sides of the Channel as to the faithfulness to the original text. Quite naturally, like so many translations or adaptations, this one was only used for this production and never revived ever after; the same fate was reserved for the much-praised version by Dumas and Meurice.

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[17] All quotations from Hamlet refer to Shakespeare 2006.

[18] *L'entr'acte* (1 March 1886) gives a different cast, showing possible last-minute reshuffling, Cartereau being cast as Voltemand, Fortinbras taken on by Ledien.

1.2 Stage Sets and Costumes

There was some hesitation as to the historical period to be chosen for the décor and costumes. The reactions to Sarah Bernhardt's choices oscillated between surprise, curiosity, and appreciation. Some were expecting a Renaissance setting with sixteenth-century costumes according to a theatrical tradition going back to "les admirables lithographies d'Eugène Delacroix" (the admirable lithographies by Eugène Delacroix) based on the staging of his time influenced by John Kemble (Marsy 1886, n.p.). These references to the past were all the more in discussion as the Comédie-Française had chosen to keep a Renaissance setting for their autumn revival, in keeping with the original 1847 staging of the text. Sarah Bernhardt's venture at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin, supported by Monsieur Duquesnel, had to challenge that of the Comédie-Française, a challenge that excited the press commentators like Philidor (1886, 4).

On the other hand, some reviewers, like Auguste Vitu in *Le Figaro*, or *The Galignani's Messenger* referred to another theatrical tradition which had opted for a fourteenth-century setting, naming Talma first, then Fichter, and of course, the more recent staging starring Henry Irving at the Lyceum in London. Their theatrical references encompassed wider territories, with cross influences from one country to another. However, it is noticeable that no reviewer referred to the historical or literary sources used by Shakespeare for his play, apart, perhaps obliquely, "Un Monsieur de l'Orchestre" (1886, 8) who, humorously, mentioned "un curieux style saxon du onzième siècle" (a strange Saxon style of the eleventh century).

Monsieur Duquesnel opted for fourteenth-century costumes and décors, considering that century a period which many found "curious and interesting" (An. 1886c.), and unusual, which might imply that their knowledge of stage history was somewhat limited. In *The National*, Edmond Stoullig (1886, 2) concludes his review with a brief remark, appreciative, but not descriptive, or informative: "Les costumes du 14è siècle et les décors sont très beaux; la mise en scène est fort soignée" (the fourteenth-century sets and costumes are very beautiful; the staging is most refined), proving that the period chosen was well received by the audience and suited the taste of its time.

Un Monsieur de l'Orchestre (1886, 8) found some justification for the choice of a mediaeval setting: "si l'on considère le sujet lui-même, le cadre Moyen Âge s'assortit mieux que le cadre renaissance à cette action héroïco-fantastique, toute peuplée d'apparitions et de spectres" (when one considers the subject itself, the mediaeval framework is better suited than the Renaissance period for this heroic-fantasy plot, full of apparitions and ghosts). According to this reviewer, ghosts and apparitions from above or from the underworld were supposedly still believable in the far-away medieval times but were dismissed at the Renaissance.

To end this section on an ironic note, a recurrent feature of nineteenth-century reviews, let us include Emile Marsy's comment (1886, n.p.): "M. Duquesnel, qui est à la fois un metteur en scène habile et un administrateur entendu, a trouvé dans la représentation d'*Hamlet* une heureuse occasion d'utiliser les costumes de *Macbeth*" (M. Duquesnel who is both a skilful artistic director and a wise financial administrator, found a fortunate opportunity to reuse the costumes from *Macbeth* in this production of *Hamlet*). Recycling, when it was proved, only showed bad taste and skimping on costs.

2. The Acting

2.1 Hamlet: Phillipe Garnier

In keeping with nineteenth-century reviewing practice, the commentaries did not analyse the movements of the stage action but focused on the static description of the main actors, a feature amplified by the status of Sarah Bernhardt as an international Diva within the framework of the emergent star system. However, in this particular production, it was impossible to bypass the role of Hamlet, the eponymous hero, and only account for the less prominent role of Ophelia. So, instead of dealing solely with the part performed by Sarah Bernhardt and briefly alluding to the other parts, as was usually the case for the productions in which she took the main role, the reviews had necessarily to dwell on Hamlet's role as played by Philippe Garnier (1861-1925). He had trained at the Conservatoire where he had received the first prize for tragedy, and he had been noticed for his portrayal of Néron in Racine's *Britannicus* during his three years at the Comédie-Française as a professional actor (from 1881 to 1884). This means that he was embarking on a brilliant career when Sarah Bernhardt chose him to join her company to play opposite her in Sardou's *Théodora* in 1884, in the revival of *Marion de Lorme* in 1885, and in *Hamlet*. He then followed Sarah Bernhardt to America and continued to be her lead actor: after a revival of *Théodora* in 1889, he premiered as Mark Antony in *Cléopâtre* in 1890, and Napoléon in Edmond Rostand's *L'Aiglon* in 1893. After that, he pursued his long, successful career elsewhere with modern theatre directors such as André Antoine or Aurélien Lugné-Poe and also worked for the cinema ('le Film d'Art').

With Sarah Bernhardt he was remembered as the "excellent" Justinien in Sardou's *Théodora* two years before Hamlet (Maret 1886, n.p.), but that was as a supporting role, and not as the main protagonist. At the time of *Hamlet*, he was only 25, and some considered him as being too young and not experienced enough for the role of Hamlet; however, some praised him for daring to undertake this challenge especially because all the reviewers had such a personal notion of how the hero should be portrayed. His long, blond hair reminded Edmond Stoullig of Burbage, who had originated the role (1886, 2); for others, too heavy and bulky, Garnier did not correspond to the delicate figure of the romantic prince of their imagination. The only review conveying an idea of the movements of the actor on stage, *The Galignani's Messenger* mentioned "his fine figure, stern, clear-cut features", praising his "remarkable impersonation" modelled directly on Irving, and admiring "a decided innovation" in the players' scene (An. 1886d), although no description of his innovation is provided here. *The Messenger* was the only magazine to have enjoyed his swiftness of the delivery of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, Garnier "standing almost motionless facing the audience with eyes uplifted and subdued but telling action", which, they were sure, was modelled on the much older "Macready method" (ibid.). Most French reviewers criticised his diction "sans nuance presque, monotone et fatiguante à la longue" (Moncelet 1886, n.p.; almost without any nuance, monotonous and tiring in the long run). Some complained the cues could not be heard properly due to his voice being too low and too husky when he spoke louder. It can be argued that having been trained to produce a more natural, active flow of speech, Garnier could not please the admirers of a more emphatic delivery modelled on that of Sarah Bernhardt. Edmond Got, from the Comédie-Française, criticised Garnier's acting as "un peu troisième rôle" (slightly third role) but nonetheless mentioned that "avec la ligne générale du personage, a eu deux ou trois coups de force applaudis" (within the general line of the character, he had two or three acclaimed forceful moments), possibly referring to his acting in the closet scene (qtd in Penesco 2005, 219-20). Even the reviewers who made extremely virulent comments were all unanimous in their praise of that scene. Speaking to his mother with the ghost in between them, "il a mérité l'accueil favorable qui lui a été fait par le public" [he deserved the favourable reception which greeted him"] (Bernard-Derosne 1886, 3); and again, "il a mérité d'être rappelé deux fois avec sa partenaire Melle Antonia Laurent, fort belle dans le role de la reine" (Stoullig 1886, 2; he deserved the two curtain calls he received with his fellow actress, Melle Antonia Laurent, so beautiful in the part of the Queen).

We could infer that he could act at his best when he was on stage with theatrical partners other than Sarah Bernhardt: then he could show his capacities, be admired for himself and his art as the renowned tragedian that he proved to be later on. Philippe Garnier had been complimented for his acting in his previous roles beside the Diva, but he was then playing secondary characters: he was praised again as "the handsome Mark Antony" in *Cleopatra* adapted by Victorien Sardou and Emile Moreau in 1890 (Joannis

2023, 141-2). He might have been “unsuited” for the part, as Alan R. Young concludes (2013), but playing the lead role of a play beside Sarah Bernhardt in a minor part must have been a great challenge for an actor, and in fact it only occurred once, for this play.

2.2 Ophélie: Sarah Bernhardt. “Princesse du geste”

Sarah Bernhardt was not really used to sharing the limelight during her performances, nor did she relish reviews; but for this production, not only did she have to share the stage with the actor playing the title role, but she also often had to acknowledge that the comments concerning her portrayal of Ophelia came second in the reviews. All the more so as the comments were far from unanimous, many expressing politely their disappointment, “elle n’a pas été l’Ophélie que nous espérions” (An. 1886, 295; she was not the Ophelia we were expecting), whereas others like Léon Bernard-Derosne (1886, 2) vented their annoyance quite frankly: “c’est un échec et cet échec a été aussi complet que possible” (it is a failure and this failure was as complete as possible).

The subdued role of Ophelia could not allow for the powerful modulations of her much admired “golden voice” that produced such vibrant effects on her admirers. And again, some joined Bernard-Derosne in his open criticism of the Diva, critiquing in particular her delivery which lacked a natural tone. Léon Kerst, a musician himself, complained that she sang her part or rather that she had made it a new fashion “de tout psalmodier” (1886, n.n.; to chant it all). To make things worse, she had only partly recovered from a bad cold (possibly the reason why the première was delayed for a day or two), so instead of singing the “Saint Valentine” and “le petit oiseau du bon Dieu” (God’s little bird), the new *romance*, she could only speak these lines accompanied by an almost inaudible tune by Joanni Perronet (Vitu 1886, 2).

As a very elegant lady who owed her fame on stage (and in town) to her magnificent costumes and outfits, Sarah Bernhardt took great care in choosing her costumes for the play, especially because she knew that her admirers would scrutinise her. Her three dresses had been amply described in the papers before the production, and were generally well received (1886d, n.n.), with a preference for the blue outfit she wore in Act 2. She looked like a medieval princess, with a diadem on her long hair, in a light blue full skirt, a white top embroidered with gold, a row of pearls to underline the modest neckline, light blue puff sleeves made of silk over tight sleeves covering the arms, and a medallion enhanced by precious stones. On the sketch published in *L’Art de la Mode*, she is depicted carrying a little box in her left hand, possibly containing the letters and tokens given her by Hamlet (An. 1886f, 186). In the madness scene, she had no jewels, wore a finely pleated corsage, a long gown made of mother-of-pearl coloured silk crepe trimmed with gold and silver lace, a pink chiffon scarf round her slender waist ending in an elegant knot in the front. The reviewers, all male, had to admit, even reluctantly, that she looked charming.

As there are no studio photographs to immortalise her performance of this part, we can only rely on these two sketches to have an idea of her acting style during these two moments of the play. She was dignified and obedient in Act 2; subsequently, she composed a romantic tableau in the madness scene, with her extended arms curling around her head as she scattered some petals over herself which remained in her long, curly hair and eventually spread all over her clothes and onto the stage floor. Indeed, she elaborated set movements, sometimes transposing them from one play to the next, prompting Edmond Rostand to call her “reine de l’attitude et princesse du geste” (queen of attitude and princess of gesture) in the sonnet he wrote to honour her at the Journée Sarah Bernhardt on 9 December 1896. Auguste Vitu praised one gesture in particular, at the end of the madness scene, in her “last, heartbreaking recitation”:

> Elle va comme un spectre sombre
> Et son pied trébuche incertain.
> Cloches, que sonnez-vous dans l’ombre?
> La mort ou la Saint Valentin?
> (1886, 3)
>
> [She goes like a dark ghost / And her foot stumbles, uncertain. / Bells, what are you ringing in the shadows? / Death or Valentine’s Day?]

While delivering the last line, she smiled like a child as she softly stroked her hair with a gesture which reminded the reviewer of the Romantic actress Marie Dorval, a gesture that he qualified as “une création d’artiste” (the creation of an artist). Edmond Got, from the Comédie-Française, noted that Sarah Bernhardt was “remarquable” in this “scène des fleurs” (flower scene), thus conferring “un succès de première” (an opening night success) to the production (Penesco 2005, 220).

2.3 Necrophilia

In the death scene she could not disappoint her admirers. Starting with her first Shakespearean role, Cordelia (1868, Théâtre de Odéon) at the very beginning of her career in which her former teacher Beauvallet as Lear praised her total engagement in her acting, she impressed her audiences with her rendition of death on stage. She performed death so convincingly that it became her personal theatrical gesture for over forty years: the French classics (Racine's Atalie and of course Phèdre, her long-life triumph from 1874 to 1913), the Romantics (Dona Sol in Victor Hugo's *Hernani*, 1877; Dumas-fils's *La Dame aux Camélias* renamed *Camille*, during her first transatlantic tour in 1880; Musset's *Lorenzaccio*, 1896), the popular plays written especially for her by Victorien Sardou (*Fedora*, 1882; *Théodora*, 1884; *La Tosca*, 1887; *Gismonda*, 1894 with the first playbills designed by Alphons Mucha), *Hamlet* (1899) and Edmond Rostand's *L'Aiglon* (1900).

Apart from Phèdre who died sitting in an armchair, in most of her final scenes the character she interpreted remained standing, surrounded by other members of the cast and extras who would support her from behind to prevent her from collapsing. She stood in the centre of a poignant crowd tableau, facing the spectators who were mesmerised by her acting. *Le Figaro* gave a vivid account of Sarah Bernhardt's death agony at the end of *La Dame aux Camélias* (10 June 1881): "Sur scène, son corps se cabre, sa voix chevrote, ses mains se contractent, ses yeux se révulsent jusqu'à ne plus faire paraître que le blanc" (On stage, her body stiffens, her voice trembles, her hands shrink, her eyes turn back showing only the white). This stage business was so well received that she reproduced it in many other plays.

However, for the part of Ophelia, Sarah Bernhardt could not reproduce her much- admired death scene: in the play, the character's death occurs off-stage, and Gertrude's narration of Ophelia's death (4.7) was cut from the text. Nevertheless, Sarah Bernhardt managed to stage her character's funeral with great care. She departed from the Anglo-American tradition as there was no stage grave for the gravediggers' witty exchange and Laertes and Hamlet's encounter. As Alan R. Young points out, she introduced an "unexpected innovation" in "creat[ing] yet one more opportunity to display herself as dead" (2013). Instead of the usual coffin carried to the grave, she reappeared lying on a mere stretcher, her face like a death mask showing through a light veil made of flowers. Then, she was slowly carried away to the amazement of the audience. "Elle est admirable dans la mort; elle en exprime la beauté terrifiante avec un tel réalisme qu'elle a donné le frisson aux peintres et sculpteurs très nombreux dans la salle" (Un Monsieur de l'Orchestre 1886, 8; She is admirable in death; she expressed its terrifying beauty with such a realistic touch that it sent shivers down the spine of the numerous painters and sculptors in the audience).

Unlike her usual grand staging of death, this scene struck the audience as the sad death of an innocent maid, favouring emotion over decorum, recalling the many paintings of Ophelia, especially the one by John Everett Millais (that she spells "Millet" in her autobiography, Bernhardt 2000, 345) which she must have seen during her annual visits to London after the 1879 Comédie-Française tour (Joannis 2023, 77).

If the death of a young maid was a *topos* of the time, after Edgar Allan Poe's poems translated by Charles Beaudelaire, it also represented a tragedy within her own family circle. As a child she was lucky to recover from pleurisy (Bernhardt 2000, 61), but it left some marks in her health and psyche. Her two half-sisters died very young, Regina of consumption in 1873 (she was 25) and Jeanne of drug addiction three years later (she was 19), the same year as their mother. As an artist, she had made a bust of Regina before she died (Bernhardt 2000, 302), and in 1878 she presented a painting entitled *La Jeune Fille et la Mort* (*The Girl and Death*) at the Salon, illustrated by this distich " La mort glisse en son rêve et tout bas: Viens, dit-elle / La mort c'est l'éphémère et je suis immortelle" (Death visits her dream and whispers, softly: Come, / Death is ephemeral and I am immortal; see Joannis 2023, 155-6). In 1881, she gratified the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen with her statue entitled *Ophélie* (see Young 2013).

She always had an attraction for the morbid. She attended funeral services, visited the morgue (Joannis 2023, 37), saw a great deal of wounded and dead people when she converted the Théâtre de l'Odéon into a hospital during the 1870 war, and kept a white upholstered coffin at home. Had she asked her mother for it, as Young suggests, or was it the gift of an unknown admirer as a cumbersome *memento mori* (173)? She kept it near the window of her bedroom and enjoyed lying in it to learn her parts (Bernhardt 2000, 302-3). She found it natural to sleep in it and leave her big bamboo bed to her sister Regina who was terminally ill. It was the cause of many anecdotes and gossips (for instance, she frightened her manicurist, and, after Regina's death, finding two coffins, the funeral directors rushed to get a second carriage, ibid.). She even organised macabre ceremonies with the decadent poet Robert de Montesquiou who set candles around it while a friend played Chopin's *Marche Funèbre* on the piano (Joannis 2023, 173). She brought it in all her travels, and was eventually buried in it (Nivet 1996, 89). She had many pictures of her taken in it wearing a white robe (her favourite colour), with her long curly hair spread around her, as a virgin holding a white lily or with flowers scattered on her. These pictures were replicated and circulated widely in Europe and America as proof of yet another of her eccentricities. Given these tendencies, it is no wonder that she chose to embody the character of Ophelia.

2.4 The Wrong Choice?

Reviewers wondered whether Sarah Bernhardt was suited to play this part. Even her most fervent admirers were quite aware that in 1886 their Diva, who was forty-two, was not exactly the age suited to playing Polonius' daughter. Some (very few) paid homage to her in an unmistakably ironic mode: she is described as having "bu sans doute au même flacon de jouvence" (possibly drunk at the very Fountain of Youth); "dans ce costume bleu tendre et blanc, qui lui donne l'air poétique d'une châtelaine en balade, elle éveille l'illusion de la seizième année" (Vitu 1886, 2; in her white and soft blue costume which bestows upon her the poetical aura of a medieval lady-of-the-manor, she gives the illusion of being sixteen). However, most reviewers and spectators felt that it definitely was not a part for her at her age. "Madame Sarah Bernhardt aurait dû jouer ce role d'Ophélie il y a quelques années, à l'époque où sa fameuse voix d'or et sa grâce étaient dans tout leur éclat" (Desbeaux 1886, n.p., Mme Sarah Bernhardt should have played the part of Ophelia a few years ago, at a time when her famous 'golden voice' and her grace were in their prime"). It was excused as "le caprice d'une grande actrice au talent si original et si vivant" (Denis 1886, 21; the whim of a great actress whose talent is so original and so vibrant), but condemned bluntly by others: "Madame Sarah Bernhardt voulait jouer Ophélie, elle a joué Ophélie. Voilà tout." (Bernard-Derosne 1886, 3; Madame Sarah Bernhardt wanted to play Ophelia. So, she played Ophelia. This is it). Bernard-Derosne further complained that she was completely wrong in her interpretation of the part, mistaking "nature" for "a caricature of nature": "Là où il faut de l'aisance et de l'abandon, elle ne nous montre que la plus prétentieuse affectation" (Where ease and abandon are needed, she only exhibits the most pretentious affectation). He listed some of the attitudes (or theatrical gestures) that she was famous for but that he despised the most: "Et ce sont des mines et des poses, et des regards en coulisse, et des yeux de carpe, et de tout un appareil de choses compliquées et obscures dont le spectacle est exaspérant" (And facial expressions and attitudes, and glances towards the wings, and languorous looks, and the whole paraphernalia of obscure, complicated things which are exasperating). He added a brutal fact that could not leave any doubt: "les deux rappels grêles et mous dont un public trop indulgent a salué Madame Sarah Bernhardt après les deux scenes de la folie, ne peuvent, à cet égard, lui laisser la moindre illusion" (the two curtain calls with which an over-indulgent audience greeted her after the two madness scenes were so scanty and unenthusiastic that she cannot nourish the slightest illusion). Bernard-Derosne ended his article in more general terms criticising her acting choices: because of her acting mannerisms, her fame, and her age, she could not sustain the roles of the repertoire anymore; she was successful only in plays and parts written solely for her.

Sarah Bernhardt felt hurt and sent Bernard-Derosme an insulting message, which, of course, spread overnight, fuelling gossips and comments all over France: "Monsieur, votre critique est de mauvaise foi. Donc, vous êtes un malhonnête homme, doublé d'un imbécile" (qtd in Ego 1886, 359; Sir, your criticism is in bad faith. So, you are a dishonest man, and a stupid one to boot). However, this comment coming from such a respected figure of authority in the theatre world should have been taken more as a piece of advice than a condemnation.

3. Conclusion

The Paris elite attended the première, including even most of the actors of the Comédie-Française. A compliant reviewer had suggested the two productions could share the season, this one as a winter version, and that of the Comédie-Française as the autumn replica. However, the Comédiens-Français felt relieved. Edmond Got wrote at the end of his account on the opening night: "je crois nous sentir ici, dès à present, beaucoup plus solides sous presque tous les rapports" (Penesco 2005, 220; I think we can now feel much stronger on almost all respects). Indeed, this *Hamlet* was even more of a failure than *Macbeth* two years earlier; only a few weeks after the première, the auditorium was half empty and the revenue much lower than for other shows the same night.[19] The curtain fell after only twenty-three performances (Noël and Stoullig 1886, 269), the *American Register* going as far as to assert that "she ha[d] dropped into comparative obscurity" and that "Sarahmania [was] a phenomenon of the past" (3 April).

The press was only too pleased to disclose this fall from grace. Sarah Bernhardt was concerned to avoid unfavourable rumours spreading to America before her second tour which was due to start the following April (her journey was delayed until May 8), and instead of giving up, in keeping with her childhood motto "Quand même", a phrase which puzzled translators ("Nevertheless", "Even so, "no matter what", "all the same", "despite everything, "against all odds", "Anyway"), she promptly staged Sardou's *Fedora* again. Audiences and reviewers were delighted, success was back overnight, even in London where she performed at Her Majesty's Theatre (An.1886g) before embarking for America.

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[19] *Le Progrès Artistique* (20 March 1886): "Constatons seulement que le 10 mars (mercredi des Cendres), tandis que *Hamlet*, avec Mme Sarah Bernhardt faisait 1729 fr., le Palais-Royal, avec *Bigame*, encaissait 3577 fr., l'Ambigu, avec *Martyre*, 3009 fr." (Let us simply take note that on March 10th (Ash Wednesday), while *Hamlet*, with Mrs Sarah Bernhardt, was taking in 1,729 French Francs, the Palais-Royal Theatre took in 3,500 FF with *Bigame*, and l'Ambigu 3009 FF with *Martyre*).

It can be argued that in her wish to challenge her former theatre partner and lover, Sarah Bernhardt chose the wrong play. Mounet-Sully's impersonation of the title-part at the Comédie-Française (and a personal success until 1916) was admired by the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé who coined the word "Hamletism" as the emblem of his time. Mounet-Sully's Ophelia, Suzanne Reichenberg (1853-1924), a famous actress admired by Marcel Proust who nicknamed her "reine des ingénues" (queen of ingénues), "toute gracieuse et habillée de rose pâle" (so charming in her delicate pink outfit – Proust 1894, 1362-3), was portrayed as a strong-minded, ambitious character, possibly "complice de l'espionnage du roi et de Polonius" (Mounet-Sully qtd in Penesco 2005, 225, an accomplice of the king and Polonius in the spying scene).

Cast as Ophelia, Sarah Bernhardt was not the focus of attention, she could not display the wide spectrum of the "golden voice" she was admired for; she did not wear the sumptuous costumes (and jewels) she wore in her grand-scale, popular productions. This small role could only disappoint her audiences as they did not recognise the star they admired. Philippe Garnier had made a name for himself as her supportive actor; however, the part of the eponymous hero must have been above his capacities, especially against her: sharing the stage with the Diva was impossible.

For the spectators who knew the plot, her staging of Ophelia dead was a great departure from the Anglo-American tradition and a noteworthy innovation; all were impressed by yet another variation of her successful deaths on stage which recalled her fake staging of death in her coffin that circulated widely on photographs. The reviewers had in their mind her whole acting career and also her private life since she had made it public so openly. So, the comments including comparisons with her former roles, and ironic hints as to her age and gender were to be expected. Some even suggested that it was Shakespeare who did not suit the art of Sarah Bernhardt.

However, towards the turn of the century, thanks to her androgynous silhouette, three cross-dressed parts further contributed to her fame, enhanced by the beautiful billboards designed by Alphons Mucha visible all over Paris on the Morris Columns: the eponymous part of *Lorenzaccio*, in the play by Alfred de Musset adapted by Armand d'Artois, premiered in London in 1896, *L'Aiglon*, a play written especially for her by Edmond Rostand in 1900, and the year before, in 1899, *Hamlet*, in a version adapted especially for her by Eugène Morand and Marcel Schwob.[20] She now mastered *Hamlet*, not in the part she had wanted to play at the wrong moment, but in the title-role, which she took as far as Elsinore, and of which a two-minute film, *Le Duel d'Hamlet* (Hamlet's duel) was shown at the Paris International Exhibition.[21] It proved a tremendous success, at the age of fifty-five, with yet again a finale in which she performed her unique death while standing most admirably. She was still the absolute "queen of attitude, princess of gesture", sharing the limelight with Mounet-Sully but on different stages in Paris, and on a very different register. Then she was Sarah Bernhardt at her best.

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[20] Sarah Bernhardt, *L'Art du Théâtre*: "Je puis dire que j'ai eu la chance rare, et je crois, unique, de jouer trois Hamlet, le noir de Shakespeare, l'Hamlet blanc de Rostand, l'Aiglon, et l'Hamlet florentin d'Alfred de Musset, Lorenzaccio", quoted in *Portraits of Sarah Bernhardt*, edited by Noëlle Guibert, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 2000, p. 49 (I can say I had the rare and unique luck to play three Hamlets: the black one by Shakespeare, the white one by Rostand, l'Aiglon, and the Florentine one by

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[21] *Le Duel d'Hamlet*, Société Photo-Cinéma-Théâtre, Pont des Invalides, rue de Paris, porte 43, film by Clément Maurice, screening and audio recording on cylinder (lost), with Sarah Bernhardt (Hamlet), Pierre Magnier (Laertes), Suzanne Seylor (a Page).

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