The Structure of Shakespearian Revolutions: Witnessing a Paradigm Shift in Pre-Raphaelite and Theatrical Portrayals of *Hamlet's* Ophelia[1]

Katie L. Steiner

"Who's there?" asks the night watchman Barnardo, in the opening line of William Shakespeare's 1601 tragedy *Hamlet.*[2] The presence of the unknown that marks the first moments of the drama establishes an atmosphere of uncertainty that pervades the remainder of the play's action. Throughout *Hamlet*, many questions arise, and few are decisively answered. Does the tragedy's title character, in fact, sink into insanity, or is his madness feigned? Is the ghost real, and can his very serious accusations against King Claudius be trusted? Over time, the many questions posed by the play have been open to an extraordinary range of interpretation. Often, the manner in which directors, actors, artists, and others have approached the play's uncertainties is representative of the cultural priorities and interests that characterise the period in which the interpretations emerge.[3] For instance, Sir Lawrence Olivier's 1948 film version of *Hamlet,* created in a post-Freudian age, interprets the ambiguous relationship between the Prince of Denmark and his mother along Oedipal lines.[4] While treatments of inter-character dynamics have been influenced by the particular preoccupations of an era, so too have the presentations of individual figures from the play. In the case of Hamlet's thwarted love interest Ophelia, the many ambiguities surrounding her character have provided fertile ground for interpretation. Commenting on the complexities of Shakespeare's tragic heroine, the literary critic Elaine Showalter has observed that "there is no 'true' Ophelia … but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of her parts."[5] During the Victorian period and the decades preceding it, however, the "true" Ophelia that emerged was most often a delicate, pure, and innocent one, who meshed with the era's vision of the ideal, virtuous female.[6] Though representations reflecting widespread societal values continued to circulate, nineteenth and early twentieth century depictions of Ophelia—both on canvas and on stage—also serve as a barometer of the shifting attitudes toward her character. In particular, as this paper will explore, the work of a key group of Pre-Raphaelite painters and innovative stage actors produced representations of Ophelia that emphasised her darker, unsavoury qualities, which in turn engendered a large-scale re-imagination and re-complication of Shakespeare's tragic heroine.

Before discussing the approaches of specific performers and artists to Ophelia, it is important to revisit the manner in which her character is constructed in Shakespeare's text. During her first appearance in the play (Act I, Scene 3), Ophelia is instructed by her brother Laertes and her father Polonius to resist any further advances from Hamlet. In response to her father's demands, she replies "I shall obey, my lord."[7] The line, though seemingly simple, offers a range of dramatic possibilities that would each serve to establish Ophelia's character in significantly different ways. When interpreted straightforwardly, the statement "I shall obey" conveys Ophelia's willing acceptance of and submission to male authority. However, depending on inflection and tone voice, the line can communicate an inner reluctance to follow her father's orders, or a thinly concealed disdain for them, which opens doors to a potentially rebellious facet of her personality.

In other key scenes from the play, Shakespeare provides further instances in which Ophelia's character is complicated beyond that of a uni-dimensional, ideal figure. During the so-called "Mad Scene" (Act IV, Scene 5) in which King Claudius and Queen Gertrude become witnesses to Ophelia's disturbed mental state, Hamlet's rejected lover sings fragments of songs that are of a particularly bawdy nature. She intones, for instance:

> By Gis and by Saint Charity,
> Alack, and fie for shame!
> Young men will do't if they come to't.
> By Cock, they are to blame.
> Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,
> You promised me to wed."[8]

Here, the expression "by Cock" contains a double entendre, as a common verbal corruption of the phrase "by God," and an obvious phallic reference.[9] Ophelia's mention in the final lines of her song of a woman who has lost her virtue to a man who has misled her also raises questions about the nature of her relationship with Hamlet. Shakespeare's text does not explicitly reveal the level of intimacy shared by Hamlet and Ophelia, though her deranged musings suggest that her purity has been tarnished by an untrustworthy character. References to sexuality continue to surround Ophelia in Gertrude's report of her "muddy death" by drowning in the seventh scene of act four.[10] In her description of the site in which the drowning occurred, Gertrude remarks on the presence of "long purples" or purple loosestrife, "that liberal shepherds give a grosser name, / but our cold maids do dead-men's-fingers call them."[11] Again, the unsavoury images of sexuality and death that accompany Ophelia complicate her sometime-status as a paragon of purity, though provide no concrete answers about her character.

What is made clear by the eighteenth century, however, is a public preference for a more innocent version of Ophelia, achieved by manipulations of Shakespeare's text. Beginning in the 1740s, interest in the playwright experienced a dramatic resurgence, resulting in the heightening of his status to that of an English national hero.[12] Although eighteenth century audiences came to revere Shakespeare and his plays, editors and theatre companies often altered his original texts to suit contemporary needs. During this period, the more salacious portrayals of women in Renaissance literature conflicted with notions of females as inherently pure figures, which promoted a level of discomfort with certain layers of Ophelia's character.[13] For example, in reaction to Ophelia's Mad Scene and the suggestive lines of her songs, the critic George Stubbes commented that "[t]he Scenes of *Ophelia*'s Madness are to me very shocking … I am not against her having been represented as mad; but surely, it might have been done with less Levity and More Decency."[14] Because of the uneasiness provoked by Shakespeare's sexually aware Ophelia (who would have been deemed inappropriate for the period's growing female readership), the text of *Hamlet* was regularly cut in order to sanitise her image into one of innocence and purity.[15] In particular, deletions were made to the bawdy discourse between Hamlet and Ophelia in the Play Scene (Act III, Scene 2) and to the indecent lines in Ophelia's Mad Scene songs. Editors even went so far as to truncate Gertrude's report of Ophelia's drowning, presumably because the image of her "muddy death" presented too great a contrast to her purified status. Furthermore, Gertrude's description of the "long purples" was eliminated due to its phallic connotations. In this way, virtually all unflattering images of death and sexuality surrounding Ophelia were censored in the eighteenth century in order to mould her into an idealised, one-dimensional figure.[16]

The existence of sanitised editions of *Hamlet* and the subsequent perception of Ophelia as an innocent figure continued into the nineteenth century.[17] During the Victorian period, readers often fixated on the morality of Shakespeare's characters and envisioned his works as tools for instructing moral principles to the youth. Consequently, censored (or "family") versions of Shakespeare's plays abounded, which, in the case of *Hamlet*, moulded Ophelia's character into a youth-appropriate model of feminine virtue.[18] Moreover, the popularity of juvenile drama, or toy theatre, led to the proliferation of child-friendly, "clean" texts and sanitised renderings of Shakespeare's characters.[19]

In addition to the "family appropriate" versions of the play that emerged in the nineteenth century, a growing number of fictional accounts of Shakespearian characters' lives served as aids for teaching virtuous behaviour. For example, Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines in a Series of Tales* (first published from 1850-1852) sketches the early experiences of select female characters, including Ophelia.[20] Clarke's imagined "back story" for Ophelia fails to add new dimensions to her character, and instead reinforces her role as an innocent and pure figure. In her tale, Clarke explains that, as a child, Ophelia naively learned the bawdy verse sung in the Mad Scene from an unrefined wet-nurse. The story implies, then, that Ophelia's later recital of the song arises from a corrupted source outside, rather than within herself, and further, that she merely repeats what she absorbed without understanding the crude implications of her actions.

Thus, through Clarke's work and the widening variety of other texts concerning Shakespeare's plays, Victorian society continued to divert Ophelia's character from the original, complex, and sexually aware construction of her figure to an ideal model of feminine virtue.[21]

Despite the many cultural forces that produced the flattened representations of Hamlet's one-time "leading lady," the onset of a revolutionary spirit in mid-nineteenth century Britain began to inspire a roughly concurrent shift in conceptions of Ophelia, both on stage and in painting.[22] At the forefront of this movement is the art of the Pre-Raphaelites, which illustrates a new tendency toward creating representations of Ophelia based more directly on Shakespeare's original text. Though the Pre-Raphaelites admired the antiquated, flat, linear styles of the medieval masters, the group maintained a converse, forwardly-directed interest in sparking artistic revolution, seeking to rescue and reinvigorate art by rebelling against the Royal Academy and its traditional adulation of the Renaissance painter Raphael.[23] Soon after their official formation in 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood drafted a "List of Immortals," which contained the names of the group's most admired heroes. At the top of the list was Jesus Christ, followed directly by none other than William Shakespeare.[24] Due to the Brotherhood's strong admiration for the Bard, the adaptation of Shakespearian characters became a vital part of their artistic rebellion.

The earliest movement of the Pre-Raphaelites away from traditional interpretations of Ophelia's character occurred at the 1852 Royal Academy exhibition. By coincidence at this show, both John Everett Millais and Arthur Hughes displayed paintings depicting Hamlet's scorned lover.[25] In many respects, Hughes's *Ophelia* represents a continuation of the conventional view of the character as an innocent victim, drained of virtually all psychological complexities and ambiguities [Pl.1]. As indicated by the inscription on the painting's frame, which reproduces Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death, the artist worked from a sanitised version of Shakespeare's play, since the "liberal shepherds" who bestow bawdy names on the riverbank plants remain unmentioned [Pl.2]. In addition, Hughes perpetuates established traditions by depicting Ophelia as a pre-pubescent, waif-like figure, whose suffering—placid though it may be—is communicated by the weeds encircling her head, suggesting the crown of thorns worn by Christ. Yet, in spite of its conventional features, Hughes's painting begins to introduce a series of darker elements into the representation of Ophelia, such as in the case of the yellow slime floating on the stagnant pond, the eerily violet sunset, and the bat swooping over the water in the lower left corner.[26] Furthermore, Ophelia's long, dishevelled hair, a general signifier of female sexuality, contributes to the suggestion of impure conduct on the part of the formerly idealised character.[27]

In conjunction with Hughes's work, Millais's *Ophelia* represents an early instance of the gradual shift in the paradigm that governed understandings of Hamlet's former love interest [Pl.3]. For Millais, the old, traditional view of Ophelia's innocence begins to yield to new and increasingly complex considerations. While Millais's work is often cited for the exactness of its attention to natural details, the painting also conveys a more complex rendering of Ophelia based (most likely) on an unadulterated version of Shakespeare's text. In order to emphasise the possibility of Ophelia's transgression over her virtue, Millais employs a number of strategies. For example, he chooses to portray Ophelia at an unconventional instant, that is to say, moments before her death in the river, which takes place offstage. By illustrating her in the water instead of innocently perched on the river bank, Millais confronts the viewer with an event—the actual drowning of Ophelia—that had for so long been edited out of Gertrude's lines.[28] In so doing, the artist reveals a preference for depicting Ophelia in a mode that stands apart from traditional representations of her unsullied purity and innocence.

Millais also emphasises the unsavoury aspects of Ophelia's character by connecting her figure in the painting with nineteenth century images of "fallen women". During the mid-Victorian era, illustrations of fallen women, or females who transgressed sexually and committed suicide, most often by drowning, became widely prevalent. For example, in *Found Drowned* (1848-1850), George Frederick Watts depicts the dead body of a woman that has washed ashore [Pl.4]. Like Millais's Ophelia, the drowned woman in Watts's painting wears a

garment heavy with water and is positioned on her back with an upturned face and hands. Because Ophelia's pose closely resembles Watts's figure and other nineteenth century depictions of unchaste women, Millais implicitly links Shakespeare's character with ideas of sexual transgression.[29] Furthermore, Millais may also have been toying with the close association between Ophelia and "fallen women" in Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines.* In the fictional account of her youth, Ophelia shares a close companionship with two friends, named Jutha and Thyra. Jutha falls in love with a man above her station, conceives a child out of wedlock, and descends into madness. Ultimately, Ophelia witnesses her friend die in childbirth. As the plot continues, Thyra is seduced and abandoned by the same man as Jutha and consequently hangs herself. Once again, her dead body is discovered by Ophelia. Although Clarke's tales were intended to illustrate the development of Ophelia's virtue and moral fortitude against the contrasting examples of her companions, Millais's painting exploits her connection with impure figures in order to suggest her own status as a "fallen woman" rejected by Hamlet.[30]

As in the case of his choice of pose, Millais's original intention to depict a rat swimming alongside Ophelia indicates his interest in exploring the character's imperfections. Although Millais's diaries describe several attempts to include the rat, the difficulty of painting a convincingly realistic rendering of the animal in motion caused the artist to remove it from the composition.[31] Though the original location of the rat in the composition is unknown, the right spandrel of the painting, usually covered by the frame, contains a light sketch of a rat-like animal, which lends support to the artist's own account of the painting process[32] [Pl.5]. In light of the intent to include the rat, Millais once again illustrates a desire to remove Ophelia from the realm of the ideal, chaste woman by associating her with a dirty, disease-carrying rodent.

In the wake of the shifting interpretations of Ophelia witnessed in Pre-Raphaelite paintings, theatrical depictions of her character also began to complicate nineteenth century conventions for staged versions of *Hamlet,* which tended to promote an image of her character as an innocent victim.[33] The 1878 London production of the play, starring Henry Irving as Hamlet and Ellen Terry as Ophelia, provides a particularly important (though not entirely successful) attempt to re-conceptualise the drama's tragic female figure. Though the company still used a "clean" version of Shakespeare's text, Terry nevertheless endeavoured to take a more avant-garde approach to her role by declaring her intent to wear a black costume on stage.[34] At this, Irving replied that actresses playing Ophelia "… generally wear *white*, don't they?".[35] Irving's Shakespearian adviser, Walter Lacy, finally nixed Terry's plan to wear black by famously stating that "… there must be only one black figure in this play, and that's Hamlet!".[36] While Terry's attempt to craft a more complex, less idealised version of Ophelia through costume was thwarted, she nevertheless introduced darker elements into her construction of the character through her style of acting. In preparation for the role, Terry studied mentally ill female patients in an asylum. Because the medical literature of the period purported a link between female sexuality and madness, Terry's exercise of observing the movements of hysteric patients would have endowed her version of Ophelia with a decidedly sexual quality.[37]

Despite the introduction of changes by Terry and the Pre-Raphaelite painters, reappraisals of Ophelia and her multi-dimensional dramatic possibilities would not become fully fledged until the 1900s. Within the performing arts, the turn of the twentieth century witnessed a widespread return to the original versions of Shakespeare's plays.[38] In addition, actresses playing Ophelia finally won the right to construct complex and dark representations of her character through both on-stage behaviour and costume, as exemplified by Gertrude Elliott and Nina de Silva, who, in 1902 and 1905, respectively, donned the black dress that Ellen Terry was denied a few decades earlier.[39] In painting, the art of John William Waterhouse (an inheritor of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition) offers a more fully-formed departure from the conventions that dominated nineteenth century illustrations of Hamlet's thwarted lover. Although Waterhouse painted Ophelia on three separate occasions, the final version is the artist's most well-know and unconventional interpretation of her character.[40] Unlike the formerly traditional portrayals of Ophelia as a frail young girl, Waterhouse's 1910 *Ophelia*

depicts a beautiful but mature woman [Pl.6]. The serene countenance of even Hughes's figure has been replaced with a troubled expression, endowing Ophelia with a psychological complexity that had been largely absent in earlier visual representations. Waterhouse's painting incorporates still other strategies for conveying the character's ambiguities, especially through the carefully chosen use of colours, as the pale blue of Ophelia's dress suggests innocence and purity, while the red undergarment indicates an earthly sensuality bubbling beneath the surface.[41] Thus, the clashing imagery employed by Waterhouse conveys both his understanding and the growing twentieth century view of Ophelia as a multi-dimensional character, possessing innocent and sexually-charged qualities simultaneously and allowing for a wide variety of dramatic and pictorial portrayals.

Though the representations of Ophelia produced by first- and second-generation Pre-Raphaelite painters and nineteenth and twentieth century stage actors emerge in different creative spheres, the interpretations nevertheless offer a window onto the same cultural trend. While each of the paintings and on-stage characterizations broke new ground, the works and performances, when considered together, become meaningful components of a larger-scale revolution – one which produced a re-imagination of Shakespeare's Ophelia that was felt across the arts.

---

[1] I would like to thank William Rough for inviting me to deliver this paper at the St Andrews University conference on *Theatricality and European Painting, c. 1700-c. 2000*, as well as my fellow presenters for their questions and comments. Special thanks also to Tom Bishop, Kimberly Rhodes, Marc Simpson, and my classmates in the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art.

[2] W. Shakespeare, *The Tragical History of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, A. R. Braunmuller (ed.), New York 2001, I.1.1.

[3] K. Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail: John Everett Millais and Ophelia's 'Muddy Death,' " in D. Mancoff (ed.), *John Everett Millais: Beyond the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, New Haven 2001, 43.

[4] A. Dawson, *Hamlet, Shakespeare in Performance*, New York 1995, 9-10, 180.

[5] E. Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism," in P. Parker and G. Hartman (eds.), *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, London 1985, 92. See also Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail", 43-4.

[6] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail", 45.

[7] Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I.3.135.

[8] Ibid., IV.5.58-63

[9] Ibid., note for line 61.

[10] Ibid., IV.7.181.

[11] Ibid., IV.7.167-69.

[12] A. Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts, 1709-1900,* Newark 2002, 42.

[13] Ibid., 280.

[14] G. Stubbes, *Some Remarks on the Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, London 1736. Reprinted in Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*, 219.

[15] Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*, 78, 279.

[16] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail", 44-5.

[17] Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*, 279.

[18] Ibid., 78-9.

[19] Ibid., 85.

[20] Clarke's fictional account of Ophelia's childhood can be found in a number of reprinted editions. For instance, see Mary Cowden Clarke, "Ophelia: The Rose of Elsinore," *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Characters in a Series of Tales*, New York 1891, Vol. 3, 111-199.

[21] Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*, 80-1.

[22] T. Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, New Haven 1998, 14-5.

[23] R. Barnes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and their World*, London 1998, 10-12.

[24] G. H. Fleming, *John Everett Millais: A Biography*, London 1998, 46.

[25] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail", 50.

[26] Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*, 332.

[27] J. Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women: Images of Femininity*, New York 1987, 23.

[28] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail", 52-3.

[29] Ibid., 56.

[30] Ibid., 57-8.

[31] Ibid., 58-9. See also J. G. Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*, New York 1899, Vol.1, 129-31.

[32] The Tate has identified the rodent in the right spandrel of the painting as a water vole, rather than a rat, see http://www.tate.org.uk/ophelia/working_underdrawing.htm. Nevertheless, in his writings, Millais describes his thwarted attempt to include a "rat" alongside the drowning Ophelia, suggesting his interest in adopting the animal's negative connotations in order to complicate the painting's central figure. See Millais, *Life and Letters*, 129-31.

[33] A. Dawson, *Hamlet*, 63.

[34] Ibid., 65.

[35] Ibid., 64.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 65.

[38] Rhodes, "Degenerate Detail", 63.

[39] For images of both actresses dressed as Ophelia in black costumes, see the site of Professor Harry Rusche of Emory University at http://shakespeare.emory.edu/characterdisplay.cfm?charid=10.

[40] Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Women*, 140.

[41] Young, *Hamlet and the Visual Arts*, 336.

The following images have been removed from the online version of this article for copyright reasons:

Pl. 1. Arthur Hughes, *Ophelia*, 1852, oil on canvas, 68.7 x 123.8 cm, Manchester Art Gallery.

Pl. 2. Arthur Hughes, *Ophelia* (detail), 1852, oil on canvas, 68.7 x 123.8 cm, Manchester Art Gallery.

Pl. 3. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 111.8 cm, Tate, London.

Pl. 4. George Frederic Watts, *Found Drowned*, 1848-50, oil on canvas, 144.8 x 213.4 cm, Trustees of the Watts Gallery, Compton.

Pl. 5. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (detail), 1851-52, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 111.8 cm, Tate, London.

Pl. 6. John William Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1910, oil on canvas, 101.5 x 63.5 cm, Collection Lord Lloyd-Webber.