Empowered by Madness: Ophelia in the Films of Kozintsev, Zefferelli, and Branagh

Feminist intervention in theatre studies in recent years has initiated new ways of reading and interpreting Shakespeare’s plays by shifting the focus from conventional text-centered analysis to seeing the play as a sign-system and reading these signs within the context of performance. This shift of emphasis in interpretation has brought up a new concern with theories of representation, especially, in Elaine Aston’s terms, “on the construction of ‘woman’ as sign: an approach in which feminism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics [...] [is] being used to understand how women are represented in cinematic texts and other cultural contexts” (35). This new concern has foregrounded the female performer as a speaking subject on the stage or “as potential creator of an ‘alternative’ text” (32) and “opened up the possibilities of analysing the female performer as the author of a potentially subversive theatrical site/sight in mainstream historical stages” (32). Theoretical discourses of representation in Shakespeare Studies, as well, in recent years have been reshaped owing to the views of such theorists as Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva. They reject the values of the phallocentric system and react against the woman’s position as “Other” to Man, represented either as a nonspeaking subject in patriarchal discourse or as an object of the “male gaze,” emphasizing instead the significance of “writing the body” to constitute a language unique to the woman. In this essay, three different interpretations of Ophelia in three films shot between the years 1964 and 1996 will be discussed both in relation to one another and in relation to the feminist discourse of representation that opens up new ways of reading Ophelia.

Until the impact of feminist criticism on the reading of most canonical texts, mainstream critics of Shakespeare drew attention almost exclusively to the submissiveness and madness of Ophelia. In 1817, for example, William Hazlitt, spoke of Ophelia as “a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon” and called her “a flower too soon faded” (Camden 247). Thirty years later, Strachey claimed, “in the study of Ophelia’s character [...] there [was] more to be felt than to be said [...] because she [was] a creation of such perfectly feminine proportions and beauty” (Camden 247). Even Bradley at the beginning of the twentieth century wrote that in Ophelia’s story there is “an element, not of deep tragedy, but of pathetic beauty, which makes the analysis of her character seem almost a desecration” (160).

In other words, for years she was either “the fair Ophelia,” “chaste treasure,” or “minist’ring angel,” having all the qualities appropriate for an ideal, innocent, young virgin or, because of her madness, she was described as a physically, psychologically, and morally weak young woman that again classified her as typically “feminine.” In either case mainstream critics discussed her story only in association with that of Hamlet’s, as one complementing the story of the Prince, and contributing to the overall tragic pathos of the play. Ophelia’s plight was ignored as a tragic story in its own right.
When we turn to the history of the stage productions of the play we see that in the seventeenth century Ophelia’s madness is presented on the stage as the outcome of her melancholy, erotomania, or hysteria, all of which at the time were considered to be typical biological and emotional weaknesses of the female sex. Three recent studies examine the stage history in detail.¹ In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stage productions of Hamlet, Ophelia’s madness was sentimentalized. She was generally pictured as a young, beautiful, obedient, and pious girl in stereotypical white dress and with loose hair. Her madness was attributed to the extremity of her emotions, which in such a frail person led to melancholy and eventual breakdown. This picturesque madness provided an international mise en scène on the European stage for almost 150 years.

According to Elaine Showalter, the first challenge to the traditional representation of Ophelia was by the Victorian actress Ellen Terry, who stripped off Ophelia’s white dress and presented her “in feminist terms as a consistent psychological study in sexual intimidation, a girl terrified of her father, of her lover, and of life itself” (123). Twentieth-century stage and cinema productions of Hamlet prior to the 1960s are loaded with Freudian/Johnsonian interpretations of the character of Ophelia (Olivier’s 1937 stage production and 1948 film version), and full of implications of a somewhat incestuous relationship between Ophelia and Laertes (Tony Richardson’s 1969 film) or Ophelia and Polonius. However, even in these films Ophelia is denied personhood. Her character, madness, and death are exploited with the intention of creating a lyrical effect; she is not a speaking subject but an object “to-be-looked at” (Mulvey 272). In short, in spite of some innovations in the approach to Ophelia up to the ’60s, both on the stage and in cinema, the acting style and mise en scène still revealed in Ophelia only the lyricism of her beauty, madness, and death.

After the 1960s, however, first literary critics and then film directors attempted to transform her image and to problematize her significance in the play, most likely as a result of the growing influence of feminist discourse. Bridget Gellert Lyons, in an article published in 1977, for example, points out, “Of all the characters in Hamlet, Ophelia is most persistently presented in terms of symbolic meanings. […] She is a character who needs to be read by others and who often conveys riddling significances” (62). For David Leverenz, who writes about the same time as Lyons, Ophelia herself “is a play within a play, or a player trying to respond to several imperious directors at once” (302). In his article “The Woman in Hamlet,” Leverenz says, “it is disgust at the feminine passivity in himself” that causes Hamlet to turn with “violent revulsion against women,” and act with “brutal behaviour towards Ophelia” (302).

In 1981 Carol Thomas Neely analyzes the feminist modes in Shakespearean criticism and points to the success of the feminist intervention in examining “the place of all women—heroines and especially victims—in the male-defined and male-dominated world of the plays, showing how their roles are circumscribed by political, economic, familial, and psychological structures” (8). She says that feminists explain Ophelia’s madness as protest and rebellion, a way of getting out of the patriarchal order, and refer to her submissiveness “as a function of her role as an object of male admonition, manipulation, and brutal control” (8). According to Neely, through madness Ophelia is able to strip off her object position, communicate her anger, frustration, and everything she is
forced to deny, and become a subject. Neely explains that the feminist intervention in Shakespearean studies forces the audience of the plays to interrogate “the relations between male idealization and degradation of women, between women as heroines and women as victims, between the patriarchal text and the patriarchal subtext” (9). Eleven years after the publication of Neely’s essay, Elaine Showalter indeed refers to Ophelia’s story “as the female subtext of the tragedy, the repressed story of Hamlet” (115). According to Showalter, the femininity in Hamlet manifests itself in Ophelia’s body and soul—an observation somewhat reminiscent of Leverenz’s comments on Hamlet’s “feminine passivity.”

Moving to films shot in light of feminist discourse, Kozintsev’s 1964 version of Hamlet depicts Ophelia not as a feminist prophet but as a paradoxical character who is timid but precociously seductive, innocent but a shrew, and inexperienced but mature. Her transformation from an innocent, loving young lady to an object of the lover’s hatred, from a courtier of Gertrude to a prisoner of the court, and from the symbol of living energy to an “emblem of death” (Jorgens 221) signifies the repeatedly underlined motif of the film, which is a pervasive sense of loss and decay in one’s being and in all human relations. Kozintsev writes in his book Shakespeare: Time and Conscience:

[... ] The society portrayed in Hamlet is frightening neither by its resemblance to the savage existence of beasts of prey nor by the particular cruelty of bloodthirsty fiends, but by its callous emptiness. The noble and spiritual have vanished from life. It is not bestial crimes that arouse horror; it is normal human relations which have lost their humanity. (140, 232)

These opinions of Kozintsev are revealed in the film with a strong emphasis on the dynamics of internal (family) as well as external (political) power and the victimizing effect of that power on individuals. In this context, Ophelia, like Hamlet, appears as a victim of the collision of different forces, and her fate shows the spectators how individual worlds and intimacies are shattered by wider ruthless powers.

The spectator’s first encounter with Ophelia, at the beginning of the film, is in the scene where she is taking a dancing lesson. Here she is presented as a “mechanical doll,” trying to imitate her dancing teacher to the accompaniment of a music that is “out of joint” (Jorgens 221). A close-up of her stone-like, lifeless face leaves the spectator with the impression that she is not enjoying dancing, a courtly activity imposed on her as a social rule. The whole frame is grotesquely dominated by the furniture of the room and the figure of the dancing teacher. Ophelia is presented as a tiny dancing figure who is squeezed by this distorted decor and who is trying to find a way to get out of the frame. Lorne M. Buchman draws a parallel between the tapestries on the walls in which distorted and lifeless figures are depicted in acts of hunting and war, and Ophelia who is equally lifeless as she leans against the wall, after her dancing lesson, to listen to Laertes’s advice on her relationship with Hamlet (46).

Elsewhere in the “nunnery scene,” we observe Ophelia’s deep love for Hamlet and Hamlet’s affection for Ophelia. Kozintsev presents this scene as divided in two by a railing. Ophelia stands on one side of it and Hamlet on the other. They look at each other through the bars of the railing, “each seeing the other as a prisoner” (Jorgens 232). Ophelia comes across and tries to enact her script, written by her father and Claudius, trying to hide her love for Hamlet. Hamlet is also trying to act rather than display his emotions. He is torn between love and hatred. At one point he almost kisses her as he whispers in her ear, “I did love you once” (3.2.115). Every gesture of the pair in this
scene—Ophelia’s conscious submissiveness and Hamlet’s calculated violence—underlines the renunciation of tenderness. They both seem to be aware of the powers that give them a higher mission and they both sacrifice their private worlds to the politics of the court.

The scene of Ophelia’s madness in Kozintsev’s film is one in which images of imprisonment are most powerfully drawn. It is presented neither as erotomania nor hysteria but as the bankruptcy of human resistance against incredible internal and external oppression. Dominated by huge crowds of people, attendants, and Claudius’s armored guards, the scene of madness reveals the horrific role of the ruling power/system in the collapse of the private world. After her father’s death, ritualistically caged by attendants in an iron corset and a metal hoop, wearing a black dress of mourning and a black veil, Ophelia, small and wraithlike, is depicted as one completely cut off from reality. She repeats the gestures of the mechanical doll she portrayed earlier and the image of absolute imprisonment is completed. Just as she leaves the room, she strips her dress off her shoulders, suggesting to the audience that her sexual frustrations also contributed to her madness.

Finally, through the use of cinematographic technique, Kozintsev is able to depict Ophelia’s death both as a very lyrical event and as a feminist form of attaining selfhood. In her fetus-like death in the still water, we can claim with Hélène Cixous that Ophelia is freed from the Lacanian Symbolic Order/the Law of the Father, and goes back to the Pre-Oedipal/Imaginary stage where she reconnects with the mother in the womb. As Toril Moi explains, for Cixous “water is the feminine element par excellence: the closure of the mythical world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother’s womb. It is within this space that Cixous’s speaking subject is free to move from one subject position to another, or to merge oceanically within the world” (115). In Kozintsev’s film, it is within this space that Ophelia will attain selfhood and will become a speaking subject.

In his 1990 film Zeffirelli constructs a story of Hamlet in which corruption originates in the individual and spreads to engulf the entire system. Claudius’s court is a place in which spying, eavesdropping, whispering, and voyeurism are commonplace, and people live in fear, restlessness, and suspicion. Ambiguity throughout the film is Zeffirelli’s key concept: truth is always ambiguous; characters are ambivalent and their motives are dubious. Ophelia is presented both as a very young girl of 14 years, and as one who is divorced from youthful timidity. Her innocence is mixed with intelligence, keen perception, and erotic awareness. However, Zeffirelli’s Ophelia, both cinematically and in terms of the rather “romantic” style of acting of Helena Bonham-Carter, is reminiscent of Olivier’s 1948 Ophelia.

Unlike Kozintsev’s film, in Zeffirelli’s film, there is not an exchange of mutual tenderness between Ophelia and Hamlet. Hamlet loses faith in Ophelia when he secretly listens to the conversation between Ophelia and Polonius at the beginning of the film and witnesses Ophelia’s submissiveness. This eavesdropping scene functions, on the one hand, to fill a possible gap in the original text by explaining the reason for Hamlet’s harshness toward Ophelia; on the other, it helps to depict Ophelia as a victim of both a distrustful lover and an authoritative father. In the scenes where Ophelia appears as mad, wearing a white costume with her hair down and singing bawdy ballads, Zeffirelli follows the Elizabethan fashion of emphasizing the lyrical dimensions of her tragedy. As Maurice and Hanna Charney point out in their 1977 article, Ophelia’s madness:
[...] opens up her role, and she is suddenly lyric, poignant, pathetic, tragic. Madness enables her to assert her being; she is no longer enforced to keep silent and play the dutiful daughter [...] The lyric form and broken syntax and unbridled imagination all show ways of breaking through unbearable social restraints. (456, 459)

In Zefferelli’s film, mad Ophelia’s words and manners threaten the King and hurt the Queen. She openly challenges Claudius when she says, “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be” (4.5.43-44). We see that the silenced “subaltern” has begun to speak and demands to be heard. Moreover, Zefferelli inserts a scene full of sexual overtones. At one point in her mad state Ophelia approaches a soldier and unties his belt in a highly seductive manner. This prolonged scene of seduction pictures Ophelia as liberated from her conventional female roles, namely that of an innocent and obedient daughter, a faithful lover, and a good sister. At that point in the film Zefferelli seems to be saying that sexual frustrations and oppressions were among the reasons for her madness, a point that he seems to share with Kozintsev.

As discussed earlier, Ophelia’s death by drowning in the brook is a scene in which Zefferelli is able to create the kind of poetic effect that Shakespeare was able to convey verbally. Her dead body, failing to reach the ocean/freedom/mother’s womb, is stuck in the lagoon. In other words, Zefferelli seems to be saying that her confinement, her banishment from this male-centered world continues even after death. The last scene of Ophelia’s death universalizes this event by depicting her dead body as a part of nature. This scene brings to mind once more an interpretation put forth by Leverenz: “Ophelia’s suicide [is] a little microcosm of the male world’s banishment of the female, because ‘woman’ represents everything denied by reasonable men” (303).

The Ophelia of Kenneth Branagh (1996) is emotionally more mature and physically stronger compared with her predecessors. Branagh’s Ophelia is also sexually experienced and passionately in love with Hamlet. Her deterioration and madness are the outcome of her frustrated romance with the Prince as well as her status as a pawn of all the men in her life. Although Branagh sets his film in the nineteenth century, he seems to underline those problems that also apply to the present day British monarchy. Consequently, power, love, incest, madness, and family scandals are in the forefront. Julie Sanders finds Ophelia’s victimization in the film to be reminiscent of the victimization of Lady Diana, the Princess of Wales. (153). Sanders points out that throughout the film Ophelia is subject to “a series of voyeuristic intrusions.” She is not only forced to read aloud to the court Hamlet’s love letter to herself, even in her madness there is someone who continuously watches her (153). Ironically, in the film the spectators also become “voyeurs”—they are made to view the flashback images of her making love with Hamlet.

At the outset Branagh seems to attribute Ophelia’s madness to erotomania and he treats her with nineteenth-century methods: straitjackets, padded cells, and cold showers. Studied more carefully, however, we realize that Branagh associates woman’s madness with her confinement within the patriarchal order. The straitjacket into which her body is forced is the visual manifestation of the woman’s imprisonment by the patriarchal/phallic/symbolic order. In terms of cinematographic representation, Branagh’s mad Ophelia, in Kate Winslet’s performance, takes on a feminist slant; her acting style is divorced from lyricism and to-be-lookedatness. Her bawdy songs are out of tune, her voice is cracked and shrew-like, her body movements are in the form of sudden jerks, and they are analogous to the movements of a caged animal. All these are indicative of modern Ophelia’s
reaction to oppression and imprisonment, her bodily response to being denied, used, abused, misunderstood, and forbidden from love and pleasure. The mental shifts, ruptures, flashbacks, and interjections in her speech can be said to be characteristic of “feminine discourse” in which “contiguity” is the underlying feature. Irigaray describes this form of speech as one that is “constantly in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them” (29).

In most of her mad scenes, as well as in those in which she simulates sexual intercourse, and as she sings the song “Young men will do’t if they come to’t. By Cock, they are to blame” (4.5.60-61), she speaks with her body. We can say with Hélène Cixous that in those scenes Ophelia writes her self, her new multiple text, grounded in her denied love, experience, and sexuality. Cixous’s description of the woman in “The Laugh of the Medusa” reads:

She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she’s thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way she inscribes what she is saying. (396)

In the representation of Ophelia’s death scene, Branagh does not resort to cinematographic effects as did his predecessors Kozintsev and Zeffirelli, but remains faithful to Shakespeare’s original text: Ophelia’s death is not shown—it is merely reported by Gertrude. Branagh’s feminist reading of Ophelia’s fate at this point in the film is more powerful than those of Kozintsev and Zeffirelli. By refusing to show her dead body on the screen, Branagh seems to be undermining those interpretations that read her suicide and death as signs of her defeat, her giving in to the overpowering patriarchal order or her acceptance of ultimate passivity and silence. Branagh’s Ophelia is only reportedly dead.

In brief, the three film versions of Hamlet interpret the character of Ophelia in the light of twentieth-century feminist criticism. They attribute Ophelia’s predicament to the denial of her deepest human desires and her dividedness caused by social oppression. Despite her growing self-awareness and her realization of the demands of her sexuality particularly in Branagh’s film, Ophelia cannot break away from her chains, she is not emancipated. Being deprived of language, love, and sexuality, Ophelia is first driven to madness, then forced to commit suicide. In other words, in all three films she submits to the patriarchal text. But while in Zeffirelli’s film Ophelia’s dead body fails to reach the ocean/freedom/mother’s womb and is stuck in the lagoon that is her confinement, her banishment from this male-centered world continues even after death; in Branagh’s film her death and defeat are confined to the verbal realm and, like any verbal reality, can be rewritten.

Gulsen Sayin Teker
Dogus University, Istanbul, Turkey

Note

1 Maurice and Hanna Charney, in their article “The Language of Madwomen in Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists” (451-60), explore the theatrical conventions and representation of female madness in Elizabethan drama.

Carol Thomas Neely, in her article titled “Documents in Madness: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture” (315-38), explores how madness was read, represented, and interpreted in English culture and on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage from 1580 to 1640.

Elaine Showalter, in her article “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism” (280-95), explores the history of the representations of Ophelia.
Ophelia in the Films of Kozintsev, Zefferelli, and Branagh/119

Works Cited


Filography


