Facultade de Filoloxía

Traballo de
fin de grao

Ophelia: Representations of Death and Madness

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Directora: Dr. Manuela Palacios González

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Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

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Introduction

In “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsabilities of Feminist Criticism” –one of her best known works– Elaine Showalter concluded that “there is no ‘true’ Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must unambiguously speak, but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts” (85). This statement still stands, as the Shakespearean “gentle heroine” (Vanderlyn 92) has been repeatedly resurrected in the cultural tradition, her madness and subsequent death by drowning being especially recurrent in later literature and artistic reproductions. Among these, painting and cinema seem to be the most evident.

The ambiguity of her death in *Hamlet*, which the priest describes as “doubtful” (5.1, 1773 line 209) in the burial scene, and which relies on Gertrude's beautified description in act IV (4.7, lines 137-154, 1767-8) and on the clownish conversation of the gravediggers (5.1, lines 1-51, 1768), makes any kind of hypothesis about her death possible. Furthermore, of a death traditionally considered as suicide as opposed to an accident. This freedom of interpretation provided by the lack of truth, even importance, given to the episode in the original text could be the reason, on one hand, for what Showalter called an “invisibility [of Ophelia] in Shakespearean critical texts” and, on the other hand, for her renown in “cultural mythology” (“Representing Ophelia” 77).

In the summer of 2000, a text entitled “From the Desk of Ophelia” was published in *The*

Hamlet Issue by the University of Mississippi. The author, April Shelley, places the character Ophelia in a contemporary setting, that of the date of publication. Ophelia, who is also presented as the author of the text, assures “from her desk” that she decided, with full autonomy, to abandon her participation as the stereotypical Ophelia in the well-known Shakespearean tragedy. She announces that she is “outta here” in order to look for a more adventurous and exciting story in which she could star (Shelley 198-9). This rebellion against her own role in the play, and therefore against the Shakespearean idea of the world, as a theatre in which each character cannot escape from the conventions of his or her own stereotyped character's functions, makes us realise how the necessities of time, with its social, cultural or ideological features, can affect the reader's interpretation of the original text. As Shelley's Ophelia claims, each time is “time for a new Hamlet” (198).

If it is true that Ophelia came back to life in multiple occasions, not only in literature, but also as the protagonist of paintings, songs or cinema versions of the original Shakespeare's text, in each “reincarnation” Ophelia does not continue as the same character. Even if the contemporary Ophelia that Shelley describes in her composition desires her own name and image to be “expunged from the play and all adaptations in any written, electronic, artistic or cinematic medium” (198), each different Ophelia contributes to the “Cubist Ophelia” that Elaine Showalter had described as the truer one (“Representing Ophelia” 92).

The reason for the motif of Ophelia's death scene becoming so popular and so represented in the different arts arguably resides, as said above, in the fact that Shakespeare decided to set it off-stage; Gertrude's discourse and the conversation between the gravediggers being the only two moments in which the incident is referred to in the play (Kiefer, 11). This circumstance leads to the possibility of a large number of interpretations of the passage. Consequently, some different answers were provided for explaining Ophelia's madness and death, not only in literary criticism but also in later literary and artistic productions. Carol Solomon Kiefer states in her essay “The Myth and Madness of Ophelia” that in some of the most famous representations of Ophelia in painting, Ophelia's image does not challenge stereotypes, push any

boundaries or conventions (12), even if being set off-stage provides freedom for the artist's imagination. This lack of evolution also occurred on stage, as the first performances of Ophelia in Hamlet showed the expected timid and gentle girl who became mad after the loss of her father and her lover.

The femininity of Ophelia's insanity has always been emphasized, in contradiction to Hamlet's metaphysical anxieties (Showalter “Representing Ophelia” 79). Traditionally, madness had been thought to be a “female malady” (Showalter *The Female Malady* 4), as it had been related to “irrationality, silence, nature and body”, whereas male insanity has been the consequence of “reason, discourse, culture and mind” (Felman 2). For the Elizabethan audience, Ophelia would symbolize what has been called the *erotomania*, or the pain caused by love’s melancholy. Though this malady was not thought of as exclusively feminine, the repercussions were considered different for both men and women. While male *erotomania* was contemplated as a consequence of the intellectual or the “imaginative genius”, and was even seen as “fashionable”, the malady of female erotomaniacs would have “biological and emotional origins” (Showalter “Representing Ophelia” 80). As Elaine Showalter assures, this belief in madness as a female malady was further reinforced by the way in which the role of Ophelia was treated on stage. Susan Mountfort's 1720 performance of Ophelia is an example of this treatment of Ophelia as a victim of melancholy love, as Mountfort herself suffered a mental breakdown whose origin was a disappointed love. Mountfort was said to be “Ophelia herself” (Showalter “Representing Ophelia” 80), her own mental instability influencing her performance, thus becoming the expected traditional Ophelia.

While the cause of Ophelia's madness is open to different interpretations, sometimes in connection with the evolution of psychiatry (Showalter *The Female Malady* 10), her death is no less problematic. Barbara Smith starts her essay on Ophelia's death with a reference to Albert Camus' consideration of suicide as “a truly serious philosophical problem” (96). Christian doctrine concerning suicide states that it is a crime against oneself, in contrast with the personal consideration of death as salvation, solution or self-assertion. Smith claims that the play is

‘‘sympathetic to Ophelia's mental state”, rejecting “the simplistic rigidity of canon and civil law” and allowing “Ophelia’s salvation.” Despite the prevailing religious beliefs, “there would be no hope of salvation for a suicide” (Smith 96). According to Smith, *Hamlet* tries to present “a morality that transcends social and religious convention” (101), but in spite of this fact, some of the later artistic representations of Ophelia’s untimely death create a discourse between accidental and intentional death, subject to existing ideologies and philosophical dilemmas relating to suicide.

In this essay, I will aim to explore the representations of Ophelia as the protagonist of later literary reinterpretations of Shakespeare's play, as well as in other artistic expressions, and to define their relationship within the cultural and social framework in which they were born.

The first chapter will deal with the extensive use of Ophelia as a motif during the nineteenth century, focusing especially on Pre-Raphaelite representations of the heroine. I will focus on the complexity and the ambivalence encompassed by these works of art, both as a result of the mystery surrounding the madness and death of the character, already present in the original text, and of the influence of a controversial social background in which attitudes towards females play an important role in contemporary art.

The second chapter will focus on representations of Ophelia in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The climax of feminism and social transformation are essential in the drastic change in the depiction of *Hamlet*'s female character. In addition, the representations of Ophelia in performance will be discussed, in relation to the commercial drive that characterises the cinema industry.

Ophelia

Representations of Death and Madness

1. Ophelia as a Victorian Muse

The Nineteenth-Century and the Pre-Raphaelites

When considering a pictorial movement in connection with Ophelia, the Pre-Raphaelite is considered the most representative. John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) (*fig.1*), is arguably the most popular Ophelia painting of all time. Presenting her in an innovative manner, as traditionally Ophelia “appears before her fateful fall standing or sitting on the bank of the brook” (Kiefer 18), Millais' *Ophelia* seems to literally follow Gertrude's description of the incident (4.7, lines 137-154, 1767-8):

> There is a willow grews aslant a brook
> That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.
> Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
> Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples
> That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
> But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
> There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
> Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
> When down the weedy trophies and herself
> Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
> And mermaid-like a while 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.

Millais' painting shows Ophelia's "wide spreading" clothes floating in the water like a "mermaid" tail. The "fantastic garlands" of flowers now cover her corpse, achieving the harmony between the lady and the nature surrounding her. The golden flower forms of her brocade dress, which seems to swim with the green mud, are deeply connected with the colourful flowers of the landscape, producing a sense of harmony between nature and the human, akin to Bridget Geller Lyons' description of Ophelia's death (72). Gertrude presents Ophelia's death as being accidental, but Millais does not seem to agree with her description, as Eugène Delacroix (*fig.2*) had done before, presenting an Ophelia who holds a branch strongly in order not to be swept along by the wild river. In the same manner as Delacroix, Berlioz's opera version of Ophelia's death follows Gertrude's description of the incident as accidental, describing a *pauvre Ophelia* (poor Ophelia), whose madness is described as *douce folie* (sweet madness), and who drastically falls into the water after the branch breaks.

In Millais' painting, Ophelia's hands are floating in the water; this gesture could be an unconscious plea for help, or a controversial suggestion of conscious suicide. Such ambivalence is emphasised by her face, which provokes an ambiguous feeling of tranquility and surprise. In contrast to this, Alexandre Cabanel's (*fig.3*) and W. G. Simmonds' (*fig.4*) Ophelias, far from being ambiguous, only show the literal interpretation of Gertrude's words, and represent Ophelia as the victim of a fatal accident. Cabanel's Ophelia, whose position in the painting resembles Delacroix's version, with Ophelia falling after the "envious sliver broke", also seems to evoke Millais' version, where she seems unconscious of her fate; her face shows an expression of ecstasy that may remind one of Bernini's famous sculpture of Saint Teresa. Simmonds' Ophelia is also defenceless; she cannot fight for saving her life. The white spreading dress mimics an angel's wings, perhaps in reference to Laertes' claim in Ophelia's burial scene that a "minist'ring angel shall my sister be"

(5.1, p.1773, line 224).

Nonetheless, Millais' scene is less dramatic and, as such, the viewer could think, as Kiefer does, that “Ophelia does not resist the forces that act on her” (Kiefer 22). This possible duality at the time of interpreting Millais' painting, could be related to the ambiguity concerning Ophelia's death in the play, something “surely intended by Shakespeare” (Kiefer 11). The sense of mystery we feel as readers of the play, is now also felt when we observe Millais' work.

The complexity of the painting can also be noted in the attention given to every plant and flower, which is sometimes criticised as excessive. What some art critics considered “an inappropriate and incongruous juxtaposition of nature's richness and the tragic end of a human life” (Kiefer 22), could also be conceived as an “eloquent response to Ruskin's call to artists to ‘go to Nature in all singleness of heart... rejecting nothing, and scorning nothing’”(Millais 32) or “one of the most marvellously and completely accurate and elaborate studies of nature, ever made by the hand of man” (Spielmann 76). Furthermore, it could be seen as the painter's way of expressing his own interpretation of the incident in the play. In Millais, even if at first sight Ophelia's whiteness of skin reflects the purity and the chastity with which Renaissance women were supposed to be characterized (Rackin 8), the fact that Millais decided to represent the “long purples” in his version of Ophelia can be a clue for his own interpretation of Ophelia's supposed insanity in the play. Gertrude tries to transform the terrible incident into something beautiful, presenting Ophelia as an innocent girl whose loss of life is the fatal consequence of an accident. This is achieved by the emphasis of the beauty of the natural landscape “rather than the horror of the scene” (Lyons 71). However, her pastoral-like description “fails to dispel entirely the disharmonies that Ophelia has represented”, and her speech “cannot sustain the force of these mythological suggestions” (Lyons 71-2). The sexual connotations of the “long purples” seem to be out of place. On one hand, the “liberal shepherds” give them a “grosser name”, and on the other, the maids are described as “cold”, the latter associating the phallic flowers with death (Lyons 72). In Lyons' words:

> Even the Queen's pastoral beautification still alludes to a contamined world in which “grossness” on the one hand and deathly coldness or seclusion (“Be thou as chaste as

> ice..."/ “Get thee to a nunnery”) on the other, are presented to a young girl as the only sexual alternatives. (Lyons 72)

Indeed, both Delacroix and Berlioz omit the ambivalence created by the “long purples” in their versions, thus emphasising Ophelia's innocence. Furthermore, Berlioz emphasises the second meaning Gertrude gives to the flowers: “ces fleurs d'un rose pâle / Qu'on appelle des doigts de mort.” (These pale pink flowers / that are called dead's fingers). This fact reveals Berlioz's desire to present a clearly chaste and pure Ophelia in his version, a poor girl who is not able to commit sin, and whose death is therefore undoubtedly accidental.

Millais' distribution of the vegetation in the painting creates a clear contrast, as the dry and dead plants seem to rest on the left, while the right side is characterized by a contrasting fertile green colour. The long purples, whose bright colour emphasizes them among the green, were sometimes associated with fertility (Greenblatt 1767) and, consequently, they could have been the symbol of the motherhood that was denied to Ophelia. Nevertheless, the obscenity of the connotations could be related to the Freudian idea of madness rooted in the sexual frustration of women. The flowers which Gertrude describes as “long purples” are probably the *orchis mascula* or one type of *arum maculatum*, whose common name alludes to its phallic form (Morris 602). The terms “wake-robyn” and “Robin” were among the most common names given to it, probably as a reference to Robin Hood, whose ballads were thought to be bawdy, and Robin was one of the terms for the male sexual organ in the sixteenth century (Morris 601). Harry Morris highlights the possible connection between Ophelia's song and the flower’s name. When Ophelia assures in her song that “for bonny sweet Robbin is all my joy”, it is arguable that she is unconsciously assuring her sexual frustration, and therefore the cause for her insanity, for the belief in love as the cause of madness was not uncommon in the Elizabethan period (Morris 601).

Lyons's idea that “grossness” and “deathly coldness” could represent the only two possibilities for a young woman in the sixteenth century could be related to the duality in Hamlet's language during the encounter with Ophelia in the Act III. When Hamlet advises Ophelia to “get thee to a nunnery” (3.1, line 137, 1735), the duality is highlighted through the different connotations

in Shakespeare's usage of words linked with chastity: "nunnery" was ironically a synonym of "brothel" (Greenblatt 1735). Millais' contrast between the two sides of female nature could also be related to the aforementioned opposition between "grossness" and "coldness". In that case, Ophelia's body lies in between the two faces of nature, perhaps as a rejection of both options.

The long purples are not the only clue for understanding the hidden significance of Millais' work. The representation of rue near the long purples is also an interesting point. In her second madness scene, Shakespeare presents insanity through floral themes as Ophelia distributes different flowers to Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius, recalling the flowers' symbolic significance:

> OPHELIA: There's rosemary, that's for remembrance Pray, love, remember. And there is pansies; that's for thoughts.
> LAERTES: A document in madness- thoughts and remembrance fitted.
> OPHELIA: There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb-grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say a made gode end.
> (4.5, lines 173-181, 1762)

Greenblatt associates the rue with repentance, as Ophelia identifies it as the "herb of grace", as penitence depends on God's blessing (1762). Soranus of Ephesus's study of *Gynecology* explores the fact that the rue was also classically thought to have abortive properties (Soranus of Ephesus I, 20, 61). Ophelia says to Laertes that he "must wear [his] rue with a difference", meaning that he must use it "for a different reason" (Greenblatt 1762). We do not know the symbology that Millais wanted to give to the rue in the painting, but in an open interpretation of the scene, Ophelia could be implying that she needs the rue for abortion and, at the same time, that she needs it to be pardoned for sin. During the Elizabethan period, sexual double standards regarding males and females could be considered as a "significant contributive factor in women's social and psychological vulnerability" (Smith 99). This standard assumed that pre-marital (or extra-marital) sexual intercourse was a pardonable offense in the case of men, as Polonius shows in the play when talking about Laertes:

> POLONIUS: "And in part him, but", you may say, "not well,

> But if't be he I mean, he's very wild,
> Addicted to so and so"; and there put on him
> What forgeries you please- marry, none so rank
> As may dishonour him, take heed of that-
> But, sir, such wanton, wild, and usual slips
> As are companions noted and most known
> To youth and liberty.
> REYNALDO: As gaming, my lord?
> POLONIUS: Ay, or drinking, fencing, swearing,
> Quarreling, drabbing[1]- you may go so far.
>
> (2.1, lines 17-27, 1716-7)

Despite this, premarital sex would be "ruinous" for women (Smith 100) whose value as commodities (as considered the property of men) "decreases enormously if they are thought to be unchaste" (Smith 100). Laertes and Polonius's continuous warnings to Ophelia about keeping her purity and chastity are related to this vision of women in the Elizabethan period. Furthermore, both her father and her brother suggest that "her virginity, or her 'chaste treasure' has a commercial as well as a moral value, and therefore that thrift is a prudent virtue in the area of sexuality as well as in others" (Lyons 69).

Although we cannot be sure of Ophelia's pregnancy, the symbolism of rue permits us to consider it as a possible reason for her insanity and thus, her suicide. Nineteenth-century psychiatry used to establish a connection between the brain and the uterus in the case of female madness (Showalter *The Female Malady* 56). Furthermore, Ophelia's condition as an adolescent would make her predisposed to insanity from this point of view, as puberty was considered a "potentially traumatic transition" (Showalter *The Female Malady* 56). This idea of mental breakdown as a consequence of biological changes was also considered to appear in pregnancy, being what was called the "puerperal insanity", that lead some women to commit what was considered as "infanticide", more likely to occur in conjunction with illegitimacy (Showalter *The Female Malady* 59). In addition, convents were thought to be a salvation for these unmarried women who were regarded as more vulnerable to suffer from mental disorders, in line with

[1]Whoring, associated with harlots (Shakespeare's Glossary)

Hamlet's statement "get thee to a nunnery" (Showalter *The Female Malady* 59).

However, John Everett Millais was not the only Pre-Raphaelite painter who decided to capture the death of Ophelia. In 1895, Paul Steck painted a "mermaid-like" Ophelia, apparently praying into the water (*fig.5*). The verticality of the painting contrasts with Millais' horizontal version, which creates a sense of repose related to the peace of death. Steck's Ophelia represents the immediacy of the moment after the fall, the bubbles emerging from Ophelia's mouth suggesting that she is still alive. Her arms, far from fighting against her fatality, are placed on her breast in gesture of praying, and her face is transmitting a sense of tranquility and resignation. The whiteness of her dress, which is spread out as if it were a "mermaid" tail, is almost indistinguishable from the whiteness of her skin, which highlights the a sense of purity and innocence that makes it almost impossible to condemn her for her decision to commit suicide. However, Paul Steck's decision to almost literally concur with Gertrude's description of Ophelia as a mermaid could signify a hidden complexity of the painting, for "mermaid" was a used by Victorians as a euphemism for "prostitute" (Wageman 56).

Patty Wageman assures in her essay "Dream or Reality? Waterhouse's Women and Symbolism" that "it is highly relevant that Shakespeare compared the drowning of Ophelia to a mermaid" (57). John William Waterhouse presented in 1894 a painting of Ophelia in which the Shakespearean heroine is sitting on a trunk that seems to horizontally fall to the brook (*fig.6*). With some daisies resting on her legs, Ophelia calmly arranges her hair, making the "fantastic garlands" Gertrude mentions in her description of the incident. In 1900, Waterhouse presented *A Mermaid* (*fig.7*), which is "similar in composition" to *Ophelia*, as if the painter wanted to establish a close relationship between both figures (Wageman 57). Peter Trippi explains that:

> In recent scholarship, when Waterhouse's work has been discussed at all, it has usually been to castigate him for his misogyny in representing the female figure as evil in her very beauty. Certainly the *femme fatale* is a constant presence: as a mermaid, she lures men with her singing; water-nymphs entice Hylas, *Lamia* and *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* stray from Keats's poems into Waterhouse's magic woods, there to entrap hopeless knights. (…) Often they are rebels who refuse to obey the men (or male gods) in authority, for example,

> Waterhouse painted two parallel myths of women who open forbidden boxes, Pandora in 1896 and Psyche Opening the Golden Box in 1903. These women defy the gods, yet their deadpan faces give no clue to their motives and no guide to the spectator's moral response: should we admire their resistance to patriarchal authority or fear their irresponsible power over men? (31)

The similarity of both paintings could reveal something about the way Ophelia's figure was seen by Pre-Raphaelite artists, as “when the paintings are seen in their complex and interlocking relationships they reveal secrets more various and more intriguing in that they cannot be reduced to mere occult symbols” (Trippi 34). Robert Upstone points out in his analysis of Waterhouse's *A Mermaid* that:

> There are similarities [too] in the strategy of using traditional mythology as a way of articulating new concerns and anxieties. With the questioning of gender roles and calls for women to be socially and politically independent, alongside a demand for proper sexual fulfillment, the 1890s saw throughout Europe and almost millennial male anxiety about their status and appropriate role (144).

The debates over women's roles in society “may have made an impact on Waterhouse's work” (Upstone 52). Therefore, Waterhouse could be establishing a deep relation between Ophelia and the figure of the mermaid as wanting to express the hidden duality that also appears in *Hamlet*, not only in the “get thee to a nunnery” scene, but also in Gertrudes' description, or in the ambiguity created by the gravediggers dialogue. The emphasis made on hair, as both figures are arranging their long loose hair in front of the mirror of water, could be revealing, for:

> The paradoxical nature of the femme fatale -woman in possession of both virginal and demonical powers- is captured by Pre-Raphaelite painters in their representation of hair. The unbounded, long hair in their depictions of Eve, Venus, or Mary Magdalene commonly symbolizes the power of evil, while braiding, removal or growth of hair attests to the chaste qualities of an individual -Virgin Mary, Minerva, St. Agnes, for example. (Cheney “Locks, Tresses and Manes” 159)

Waterhouse employed a recurrent leitmotif: the “doomed, punished woman who meets a violent end” (Upstone 38) –as it appears not only in his representations of Ophelia (*figs.6, 13*), but also in

“St. Eulalia” (1885), “Marianne” (1887), or the well-known “The Lady of Shalott” (1888). The last painting shows the “widespread Victorian inter-association of water, women and drowning” and thus “demonstrates an evident influence of Millais' *Ophelia*” (Trippi 17). However, woman could also represent a great danger for men, disguised as innocent and harmless beauty, in connection with the “shifting position of women in British society and, in particular, with male concern about the growing economic and social dynamics of the ‘New Woman’” (Upstone 112). Nevertheless, Waterhouse's understanding of mermaids could be influenced by Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, or simultaneously by Tennyson's poem “The Mermaid”. The Victorians used to fantasise about the mermaid who “wanted to enjoy human love and thus gain a soul” (Upstone 57). Indeed, it has been stated that it is not only hair that is revealing in Pre-Raphaelite depictions of women, the motif of the mirror being another pertinent clue (Cheney “Locks, Tresses and Manes” 164). Cheney points out the duality of meaning that the mirror implies. If the Pre-Raphaelites' mirroring water can be a symbol of “purity and chastity”, it can also be a symbol of *vanitas*, strongly fused to the “moralizing implications” of the “*femme fatale* and the fallen woman” (Cheney “Locks, Tresses and Manes” 164). However, Cheney associates the mirror motif in *A Mermaid* with the first meaning, as the mirror is “spotless and the water of the pond or sea is clean, transparent.” (“Locks, Tresses and Manes” 164). Tragically, the mermaid was never able to “live on dry land among humans or experience true love, because this would mean her death” (Upstone 57). From this point of view, the similarity between *A Mermaid* and *Ophelia* could be interpreted as the victimisation of Shakespeare's heroine, who is abandoned by her beloved Hamlet – like the Little Mermaid in Andersen's tale – and feeling alone in a world without love, where her only option would be the “nunnery”, decides to get back to her element: water, in which society could not hurt her anymore.

As in the case of Millais' version, the symbolism of flowers could be a clue for determining how we should interpret Waterhouse's version. Whilst the whiteness of the daisies could symbolise Ophelia's innocence and virginity, the intense redness of the other flowers in her hair could be understood as fire or blood, anticipating her imminent death; alternatively, as symbols of sexual desire. Roses are a recurrent motif in Waterhouse's paintings, and they have a huge

number of associations: “they are flowers of love, symbols of pure beauty, attributes of the Virgin Mary and of the goddess Venus” (Trippi 33). The multiple and even opposite connotations of roses could be also related to this possibility of multiple interpretation of Waterhouse's painting. The purity and chastity of the Virgin Mary is highly contrasted to Venus' sexual connotations. This opposition between two very different models of women was also a recurrent theme in Pre-Raphaelite works. As said above, during the nineteenth century, the continuously changing society had a great impact in Art, and the new social concerns and ideologies were clearly mirrored in the different artistic expressions. Pre-Raphaelite painting was an example of the nineteenth century perception of the woman, normally depicted in two very opposite ways: as the ideal image of the mother-spouse, symbolically represented by the Virgin Mary; or as what was called the “fallen woman”, sometimes represented by Mary Magdalene, condemned due to a sinful life that was far from considered as the ideal role of the woman in society. Liana de Girolami Cheney explains in “Fair Lady and the Virgin in Pre-Raphaelite Art: The Evolution of a Societal Myth” that

> The Virgin performs tasks which represent the fruition of her education and, at the same time presents an exemplary model for the ideal of womanhood. According to nineteenth century standards for virginal, domestic, and most important, submissive behavior, the Virgin so projected becomes the model for proper conduct for young women of the Pre-Raphaelite period to emulate (252).

The ambiguity that we find in the interpretation of Ophelia could be related with this artistic concern about the idea of ideal womanhood. Although the most traditionally chosen scenes for representing Ophelia are either madness or the very previous moments to her fatal death, the “nunnery scene” appears in some of the previous representations of the character. Especially interesting, among these representations of the “nunnery scene”, is the one by Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *Ophelia Returning the Gift to Hamlet* (1858) (*fig.8*), a painting charged with religious imagery, and thought to be a possible parody of the Annunciation (Ziegler 45). The figure of a monk-like Hamlet clearly dominates the painting, while Ophelia is reduced to a second level, even if she is sitting closer to the observer in the foreground. Sitting in a bench with an open book in her lap, Ophelia extends

her arm to Hamlet, holding some letters and what seems to be a necklace. Ophelia's body is turned towards the viewers, but her glance looks back at Hamlet “almost fearfully, as the Virgin sometimes reacts to Gabriel” (Ziegler 45), as in *Annunciation,* also by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (*fig.9*). Here, Mary “huddles against the wall in surprise, fear and anticipation” (Cheney “Fair Lady and the Virgin in Pre-Raphaelite Art” 255). In *Ophelia Returning the Gift to Hamlet*, she is kneeling on a bench behind her and with a gesture of disappointment, Hamlet looks at her with both arms outstretched “suggesting the crucified Christ”, as the crucifix which rests in an alcove next to Ophelia (Ziegler 45). Hamlet's left hand is extended over Ophelia, suggesting his surprise and disappointment, while the right hand is crushing one of the white roses of the bush that is placed in the right part of the painting. Ophelia, who is dressed in pure white, will be “the innocent victim of Hamlet's world”, perhaps represented by the black colour of his clothes, “as he symbolically crushes her in the white rose” (Ziegler 45). As in the story of Uzzah from the Old Testament, that is represented in the painting carved in the right bench, Ophelia will be punished as she is wrong in believing that “she is doing a good deed by obeying her father and trying to find out what is wrong with Hamlet” (Ziegler 45). Uzzah dies when he touches the Ark of the Covenant to keep it from falling, and this story was thought to represent the idea that it is dangerous “to do anything in God's service without his express word” (Rusche, Web Commentary).

In her essay “The Iconography of Ophelia”, Bridget Gellert Lyons considers the symbolical significance of the woman with a book as a representation of religious devotion. The image of a solitary woman with a book was conventionally conceived as “representing an attitude of prayer and devoutness”, in connection with the traditional image of the Virgin, reading when she receives the Angel of the Annunciation (Lyons 61). The moments preceding the “nunnery scene”, when Ophelia stands, waiting for Hamlet, holding a book in her hands also appeared represented in painting, with the French painter Pierre Auguste Cot's version of 1870 being probably the most representative (*fig.10*). However, Lyons points out the “falseness of the image”, as the fact that it was arranged by Polonius and Claudius is “openly revealed to the audience” (Lyons 61). Therefore, the scene's iconographic message of piety is contrasted to a “courtly calculation that manipulates

that image for its own political purposes" (Lyons 61). It is interesting that, in arranging Ophelia's meeting with Hamlet, Polonius is solely concerned by her gestures and her appearance, as opposed to her speech. Cot's painting seems to follow Lyons's interpretation of the scene, as Ophelia, holding a book in her hands, is not reading, but looking at the viewer with an even promiscuous glance that recalls the recurrent figure of the *femme fatale* more than the chaste innocence of the Virgin.

Arthur Hughes' Ophelia (*fig.11*), which Showalter defined as the "juxtaposition of childlike femininity and Christian martyrdom" (*The Female Malady* 90) shows a young girl who, crowned with some plants, a remembrance of Jesus' thorns crown, looks at the water while sitting on a branch of a tree. Some words seem to be emerging from her mouth: maybe the "snatches of old tunes" Gertrude mentions when describing the accident. This version of Ophelia is revealing as Hughes' decided not to paint the moment of death, but instead to paint the previous scene. The ambiguity is also present in Hughes' painting, as the innocence and victimisation of Ophelia appears together with an almost gothic environment, emphasized by the bat that flies in the left part of the painting. Furthermore, in spite of this evident victimisation, the suicide is made clear, as Ophelia is throwing the flowers into the water. This fact, as a metaphoric antecedent of her suicide, accentuates the tragic nature of the scene. Dan Albergotti's 2001 poem "Ophelia at the Brook" seems to be based on Hughes's interpretation of the motif. He presents a mournful Ophelia who is desperately looking for "the reflection of smiles" in the brook's mirror (Albergotti 110). In her searching, she sees her smile "no more" but rather her young man's smile as described in her song. Her "poor foolish brother's" smile is ignorant of the defeat to "keep[ing] her legs closed tight." Hamlet, her "dear", smiles when realizing that Polonius is lying under the cloth. The queen's hypocritical smile seems to say "I'm too good for you", while the false words emanate from her mouth: "I wish you to be my daughter". Even his dead father seems to smile at her from the brook. Similar to Hughes' version, the scene presented by Richard Redgrave (*fig.12*) shows a pensive Ophelia who seems to look beyond reality, at the same time that she prepares her "fantastic garlands" as if she were preparing her attire for what is going to follow: her suicide.

John William Waterhouse's obsession with the motif of Ophelia's insanity in his paintings resulted in the huge number of paintings of the Shakespearean heroine. His painting on the madness of Ophelia presents her as she who collects flowers in her dress and wears them in her loose hair, walking in the middle of the forest (*fig.13*). Her blank gaze evokes a feeling of unease, as it successfully transmits the sad insanity of the protagonist. Two little girls, shocked by the scene, witness Ophelia's delirium, who seems unaware of her company, as if she were in another world. Arthur Hughes's second version presents a similar scene. Ophelia preserves the Christian thorn crown, suggesting a sense of victimisation (*fig.14*). However, if Waterhouse could perfectly show the madness in Ophelia's eyes, the expression of Hughes' Ophelia does not express sadness or desperation, but a soft calm and sense of tranquility. The clues for her insanity are, in this case, the presence of the “long purples” in the bottom part of the image, as well as her long loose hair. The flowers in both paintings could symbolize female sexuality, following the traditional Renaissance iconography. Elaine Showalter establishes a clear relation between this iconography and Ophelia's scenes in the play, both when she gives the flowers away in the fourth scene (4.5, lines 173-181, 1762) when she picks them up; Ophelia could be symbolically “deflowering” herself (“Representing Ophelia” 79).

Indeed, this use of ambiguous language attributed to flowers is not only used by Shakespeare, in Ophelia's second “mad” scene. In later visual representations of the character, it is used for a purpose: in order to oppose and, paradoxically, link the purity and innocence traditionally associated to flowers and the sexual connotations of them. In fact, the symbolic meanings of the flowers, and the plethora of interpretations they embody, are remarked upon in the Shakespeare text itself, for:

> Ophelia's efforts to suggest with her flowers that nature expresses truths that are in harmony with human experience puzzle her audience, and reveal the possibilities for obscurity and confusion that were latent in the language of flower symbolism itself (Lyons 66-7).

Lyons profoundly associates the mad Ophelia with the “ambiguous figure of the flower-dispensing nymph Flora” (63), and this connection stresses the ambivalence in interpretations of the character.

As in the case of Ophelia, Flora embodies a complexity in meaning that metamorphosed into different and contradictory representations of the goddess. During the Renaissance, two opposite versions of Flora's story were very familiar, with Shakespeare probably being aware of both conceptions of the figure (Lyons 63). The Ovidian myth recounts how the nymph Chloris was raped by the west wind, Zephyrus, and then married to him. She was given dominion over all the world's flowers and therefore turned into Flora. On the other hand, Plutarch, and lately Boccaccio, claimed Flora's human origins. Flora was, according to them, “a Roman prostitute whom Hercules won for a night in a wager with the keeper of his temple” (Lyons 64). Hercules promised Flora that the first man she met on leaving the temple would be her husband. Flora met a rich man, whose death, and her subsequent inheritance, turned her into a wealthy and socially important woman. The story states that she used the money for creating public games on the date of her birthday. Scandalized by the embarrassing origins of those celebrations, the Roman Senate invented the myth of Flora in order to explain the holiday and, with this transformation of the prostitute into the goddess of flowers, “the yearly income of invested capital became the annual rejuvenation of nature in springtime” (Lyons 64). As well as in the case of Ophelia's later representations in art, the ambiguity of interpretations of Flora was noticeable in Renaissance painting, in which both versions: the innocent deity from nature, and the urban courtesan, were often represented, both “separately and in conjunction” (Lyons 64). While Botticelli chooses the Ovidian version for his *Primavera* (*fig.15*), Tiziano (*fig.16*) and Palma Vecchio's (*fig.17*) versions show Flora as a prostitute, with the flowers to be interpreted as “the sexual favours she is dispensing”, for offering flowers is an euphemistic symbol of “offering herself” (Lyons 64). Later representations of Flora, among them Jan Massys' (*fig.18*) and Guido Reni's (*fig.19*), present a more ambiguous depiction of the figure. While Massys' Flora is “incongruously naked holding out flowers” as though offering her sexual services (Lyons 65), in Reni, Flora's dress barely covers her breast, and her gesture while holding up a rose (the ambiguous meanings of which were discussed above) is not indisputably innocent, as it seems to indicate that “she's ready to be plucked” (Lyons 65).

Shakespeare's knowledge of Flora's different incarnations could be also discussed in

connection to the character of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, described by Lyons as the sane representation of Flora, since her language clearly “shows that nature and the social life of men are in harmony with each other” (Lyons 66). Ophelia, in contrast, as the insane version of the goddess, is not able to establish a clear connection between flowers and their meanings, as she is “in fact drawing attention to the confusion that such linkings can create” (Lyons 66). Ophelia is unable to sustain “the harmonies between natural and social experience” embodied by Perdita (Lyons 67). In other words, while Perdita clearly succeeds in her depiction as a goddess-like heroine, Ophelia's mad scene is “grotesque”, as well as “particularly inappropriate after her father's death” (Lyons 67). The pastoral-like figure Ophelia plays in her performance with the flowers ironically contrasts with the tragic nature of the play. Far from being presented as a goddess, her madness reduces her to the “unintelligent world of animals and objects” (Lyons 67) for, as Claudius points out, she is “divided from herself and her fair judgement / without the which we are pictures, or mere beasts” (4.5, lines 80-2, 1759). Indeed, Ophelia's mad language seems to suggest the difference between the innocent mythical Flora and the urban courtesan, or the “city nymph”, as Hans Tietze has called her (Held 211).

In brief, the Pre-Raphaelite depictions of women in general and Ophelia in particular are to be seen behind the presence of an ideological controversy towards the female in the nineteenth century that is reflected in the works of art. Indeed:

> Paradoxically, Pre-Raphaelite artists are seduced by both types of women: they respect the virgin but condemn the prostitute. Their paintings imply a moral judgment. (Cheney, “Locks, Tresses and Manes” 166).

This morality is represented through both the depiction of the ideal womanhood, related to the Christian figure of the Virgin and the figure of the *femme fatale*. Nina Averbach states that:

> Their painted heroines -Eve, Venus, Rosamund, Vivien, Isabel, Lady Shalott, and Mary Magdalene- are manifestations of the Pre-Raphaelite artists' ambivalence toward the female. These artists portray an attraction to virginal feminine beauty as well as a fascination for the fallen woman. (150-84).

This complexity is made clear through a large use of symbolism, which is generally ambiguous and therefore accepts a wide range of interpretations. Ophelia's ambiguity in *Hamlet* hence transforms her into a perfect figure to be represented by the Pre-Raphaelite painters. The possible interpretation of the heroine as a virginal innocent child or as a sinful woman make Ophelia a character to be taken advantage of. Ophelia becomes, in Pre-Raphaelite painting, a mysterious symbol of both innocence and sin and this controversy, embodied by just one figure, successfully describes an ambivalent feeling towards women at that time. The Shakespearean heroine is then a Victorian muse, but also a moralizing tool, a nineteenth-century advertisement of the political and social environment in which she is resurrected.

2. Ophelia as Adapted to the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

Despite the fact that, for many, the most famous representations of Ophelia in painting are the Pre-Raphaelites, Ophelia continues to be present in later pictorial currents, becoming an iconic and recurrent motif in avant-garde paintings. The most popular example is the symbolism of the French painter Odilon Redon, whose paintings, in opposition to the realism that had controlled classical art, attempted to represent the world in a subjective manner, open to different interpretations and reactions. His multiple representations of the drowning of Ophelia are characterized by the unusual use of different colours and forms, transforming the world into a kind of reverie in which non-physical objects appear to be materialized (*figs.20,21,22,23,24,25*). Furthermore, in all these literary paintings with Ophelia as subject, Redon fuses the figure of Ophelia with the space which surrounds her, succesfully creating a harmony between the human and her landscape. In other words, Ophelia becomes part of nature, and nature becomes part of

Ophelia herself. The same occurs with Margaret Macdonald's painting (*fig.26*): Ophelia's body seems to be an extension of the water surrounding and covering her. In both Redon's and Macdonald's Ophelias, her girl face evokes a tranquil sleeper who abandons the objectivity of the real landscape in order to establish a subjective oneiric environment, which could be directly related to Ophelia's own madness, or to the Shakespearean ecstasy: “a sudden fit in which the soul is imagined to be separated from the body” (M. Charney, H. Charney 452). Or, as a way to escape from the unknown world of death, “from whose bourn no traveller returns.” (3.1 lines 81-2, 1734).

However, the evolution of the interpretations, and therefore the representations, of Ophelia did not end with the avant-garde period. Instead, the heroine continued to be present in the next centuries' art. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries' Ophelias were marked by an ideological and social evolution that lead not only to a different vision of madness, but also to a different conception of the female.

The Victorians had defined Ophelia as a victim of what they called hysteria, an almost exclusively female (even the word “hysteria” has its origin in the Greek word for “uterus”) disease characterized by emotional excesses that were not considered appropriate for women. Some feminist critics reacted to this term by denying its existence; others talked about the nineteenth-century political interest on women's silence, and the intentional construction of the false idea of madness and hysteria as a weapon against female rebellion (Tiburi, Web). As could be observed in the previous chapter, the artistic representations of Ophelia in Pre-Raphaelite art chose almost exclusively the depiction of the character as mad or dead. As observed above, the avant-garde seems not to change this habit. Both Redon and Macdonalds chose to represent a dead Ophelia, suggesting a close relationship between the act of sleep and the death, as Hamlet himself does in the play when he considers the idea of suicide in the “To be or not to be” soliloquy: “to die, to sleep / to sleep, perchance to dream” (3.1 lines 66-7, 1733). This fact suggests the existence of an ideology that was defined as “cultural necrophilia”, or the male artist's tendency of representing women through death, as the political interest appears deeply linked to an aesthetic concern

(Tiburi, Web). This “cult of the female corpse” (Tiburi, Web), seems to recall Edgar Allan Poe's affirmation that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetic topic in the world” (Poe 51). Indeed, it is known that Redon's life as an artist was influenced by his knowledge of the American writer (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Web).

Ophelia was considered the most fundamental instance of what Tiburi calls the “killer impulse”, the characteristic patriarchal Romantic and Victorian necrophilic ideology that depicted women as silenced corpses. Ophelia, in her depiction as a madwoman and as a dead creature, both in the Shakespearean text and in later artistic representations, is denied as being human, and reduced to the simplicity and the irrelevance of, as Claudius remarks, the way in which animals and objects are characterized. From this point of view, madness and the subsequent death eliminates Ophelia's humanity, and she is reduced to an image, as the loss of her “fair judgement” transforms her into a mere “picture” (4.5 lines 81-2, 1759). In other words, the demotion of the woman to an image denies any possibility of social and political relevance, and this transformation of the human into an image is further pertinent since it is represented through madness or death. Therefore, Ophelia, as the metonym of the image, would be no more than the representation of the ideal model of the woman in the patriarchal nineteenth century: silenced in life by society, and finally by death. (Tiburi, Web)

However, if the nineteenth century was “the great age of women haters” it was also an age for fighting against sexual oppression, as the struggle for achieving gender equality begins when:

> Feeling the contradiction between the essentially creative and self-actualizing human being within her, and the cruel and degrading less-than-human role she is compelled to play, a woman begins to perceive the falseness of what her society has forced her to be. And once she perceives this, she knows that she must fight (Dixon 200).

Nevertheless, the twentieth century saw the birth of new feminism, and therefore the birth of a new reading of Ophelia. From 1970, as feminist criticism started to be concerned with the topic of female madness, some feminist critics, among them Hélène Cixous or Xaviere Gauthier, claimed

the function of madness to be “a rebellion, a female protest and revolution” (Showalter *The Female Malady* 5). Madness was, in other words, a way of self-assertion, a denial of a patriarchal world.

Hélène Cixous considered the term “hysteria” as “a kind of female language that opposes the rigid structures of male discourse and thought” (Showalter *The Female Malady* 160). The “hysterical” Ophelia would be, in consequence, “a heroine, a powerful figure who rebels against the family and the social order” and her madness and her bawdy songs could be the refusal “to speak the language of the patriarchal order” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 161). From this perspective, Ophelia's drowning could be interpreted as the conscious rebellion against the patriarchal rules that ruined her life, inevitably echoed in later literary female characters such as Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys's postcolonial 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* or even in Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's 1899 American novel *The Awakening,* in which the suicide by drowning seems to parallel Ophelia. The case of Edna Pontellier might be also interpreted as the belief of madness as the consequence of women defying their “nature”, attempting to “compete with men instead of serving them, seeking alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions” (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 123).

Some other critics have also defended the idea of madness and/or suicide functions, in the case of Ophelia, as a rebellion against the patriarchal society that surrounds her. Barbara Smith considered Ophelia's bawdy songs as a way for giving “voice to her own thoughts”, as her madness resulted in “social restraints no longer hav[ing] inhibiting power” on her (98). Carroll Candem also assured that Ophelia's madness “opens up her role”, enabling her “to assert her being; she is no longer enforced to keep silent and play the dutiful daughter” (456).

Nevertheless, Elaine Showalter reacted against the belief that insanity, and thus suicide, stemmed from an inner rebellion against the patriarchy. She considers this idea a manner of “romanticizing or endorsing madness as a desirable form of rebellion rather than seeing it as the desperate communication of the powerless” (*The Female Malady* 5). Shoshana Felman presents the idea of madness as “quite the opposite of rebellion (…) the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation” (2).

Earlier interpretations of her suicide defended Ophelia's feeling of helplessness in a world where her father's protection would not serve her, and without the possibility of marriage to Hamlet, these were the primary reasons for her madness and her consequential suicide. Contemporary theories claim completely the opposite. In the Renaissance, women were supposed to be wives and mothers and to always be under the protection of a male figure. Elaine Showalter explains this facet of traditional thought:

> By nature, the woman was constituted to be "the helpmate and companion of man". Her innate qualities of mind were formed to make her man's complement rather than his equal. Furthermore, women were mentally constituted to take care of children, as well as physically constituted to give birth. (…) The sexual divisions of labor advocated by psychiatrists followed on those beliefs. Woman's work was clearly motherhood, which fulfilled and exercised her nature as it also served the needs of society and the race
>
> (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 123).

A woman who decided to escape from this role in society had the double option that Lyons had described: therefore the "nunnery" in its double sense. However, as explained above, with the beginnings of the new feminism of the twentieth century, the issues of marriage, labour and gender roles in general were reexamined, and the plea for the disappearance of oppressive stereotypes to a "new, authentic conception of humanity, both male and female" was reinforced (Roszak & Roszak 186). It was necessary to "destroy the ideology of male supremacy which asserts the biological and social inferiority of women in order to justify massive institutionalised oppression" for "the liberation of women to become a reality" (Dixon 190). Influenced by this new perception, concerned with the unfair vision of women's nature "as that of slaves", depicted as "dependent, incapable of reasoned thought, childlike in its simplicity and warmth, martyred in the role of mother and mystical in the role of sexual partner" (Dixon 191); Ophelia's madness and suicide would have the function of rebelling against this sexist social convention.

It is worth pointing out that already in the nineteenth century, against English psychiatrists' belief that the "rebellion against domesticity was itself pathological", Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer had seen the traditional confinement of women in society as causes of hysteria

(Showalter *The Female Malady* 158). Bertha Pappenheim, better known as Anna O, was an interesting figure, as she was considered the “inventor of the ‘talking cure’ of psychoanalysis” (Showalter *The Female Malady* 155). After a routine life reduced to housework and the necessities of her ill father, Bertha started suffering a mental disease, becoming “almost completely deprived of words” (Showalter *The Female Malady* 155-6). Josef Breuer concluded that “repressed emotion could cause hysteria” after the successful results of the treatment, in which the patient “brought numerous repressed memories to the surface” under hypnosis (Showalter *The Female Malady* 156). The case of Anna O's insanity, whose pseudonym was thought to come from the mad Ophelia, was described by Breuer as the rejection of the patriarchal sphere she inhabited, the discovery of “male dominance in the social world” and the consequential hysteria as a “discourse of femininity addressed to patriarchal thought” (Hunter 474).

Some contemporary paintings seem to follow this parallel between suicide and rebellion. Therefore, Ophelia's evolution is as the contemporary housewife, whose self is reduced to the function of wife and mother with lack of autonomy beyond her domestic sphere, and whose limited education restricts her. As Marlene Dixon pointed out in her 1969 essay “The Rise of Women's Liberation”:

> The institution of marriage is the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of the oppression of women; it is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained (Dixon 193).

She emphasizes the idea of the housewife as a socially “absolutely essential” role which is, at the same time, considered as “valueless” in a society “in which money determines value” (Dixon 194). In other words, women are socially compelled to function as housewives, due to the “biological duty of a woman to reproduce their “innate” suitability for a nurturing and companionship role”, but this role is thought to be “not even a real work” and women “who do this valueless work, can hardly be expected to be worth as much as men, who work for money” (Dixon 194).

Suicide is thus the destruction of this oppressive role in the world, a self-assertion in a patriarchal world which denies these contemporary Ophelias' identity. Franco Damiano's (*fig.27*) or F. di

Carlo's (*fig.28*) pictorial versions of Ophelia's drowning in a bathtub are relevant instances of that. In both paintings, the traditional depiction of Ophelia wearing a voluptuous white dress is turned into the representation of a more sensual figure. F. di Carlo's Ophelia maintains the white dress in a more contemporary version, but the wet material reveals Ophelia's skin, as well as the underwear, which hides her sexual regions. Franco Damiano chose to paint a naked Ophelia, her sensuality emphasized by her head's position, her legs that remain open, and her breast, that is almost trying to emerge. The motif of the bathtub has been also used by Julieta Anaut for her 2009 short film “Ofelia en el Cristalino Arroyo” (Ophelia in the Crystalline Brook). From a universal detail shot of the water, the camera drives us to an urban environment. In contrast to what the title promises, the short shows the detail of the water tap, the bathtub and the blue tiled wall. A woman immerses herself into the “crystalline” water and, with a relaxed expression in her face, she even seems to sleep. Suddenly, the water is dyed in green and some water lilies appear floating on the surface. The anonymous woman is now Ophelia. The Shakespearean character is reborn in a contemporary environment: the contemporary woman and the modern bathroom are fused with Ophelia and the brook where she commits suicide. However, if they are intimately connected, the contemporary Ophelia is, as in Franco Damiano's version, naked. The Victorian repression of feminine eroticism, as “the total repression of woman's sexuality was crucial to ensure her subjugation” (Lydon 205) is now turned into a sexual assertion. The new Ophelia goes against the assumption that “women were asexual creatures” in a society in which only “that aspect of sexuality which was necessary to the survival of the species” was honoured in female sexuality, making “women submissive to sex by creating a mystique of the sanctity of motherhood” (Lydon 205).

Related to the contemporary depiction of Ophelia as a housewife, a more pertinent example is the 2001 photograph by Gregory Crewdson: *Untitled-Ophelia From Twilight* (*fig.29*). It shows a housewife lying on the floor of her own dining room, which is totally flooded. The dressing gown and the slippers remain on the stairs, making it possible for the viewer to imagine the previous moments of the woman's life, watching the water as Ophelia watched the river in Hughes',

Redgrave's or Waterhouse's versions, preparing herself for her imminent death in the liquid element. The house, almost perfectly tidy, shows details that subtly present information about the unknown woman we are observing in the photography, such as the wedding photography on the bookcase. Crewdson's photography is more than a mere work of art, as it calls for social change, suggesting that art is deeply connected to politics. Indeed, some artists (especially women) used art in advertisements against the lack of value attributed to the role of the housewife in modern society. Barbara Kruger's 1990 photography *Untitled (It's a Small World, but Not if You Have to Clean It)* (*fig.30*) being a pertinent instance of this, seems to suggest that "the traditional role of women as housekeepers imprisons them into largely invisible labor for others' sense of private space" (Mesch 119).

In his postmodern German play of 1977, *Hamletmachine* (German: *Die Hamletmaschine*), Heiner Müller presents a revision of the Shakespearean play that therefore presents a new Ophelia, who is related to this idea of rebellion. Act I of this play is centered in the character of Hamlet, who assures his lack of existence and denies his identity. Act II contrasts with this idea due to the introduction of the character of Ophelia. Ophelia is now aware of her past as a victim of society, and recognizes this oppression as the cause for her suicide in the original text.

> I am Ophelia. She who the river could not hold. The woman on the gallows The woman with the slashed arteries The woman with the overdose ON THE LIPS SNOW The woman with the head in the gas-oven. Yesterday I stopped killing myself. I am alone with my breasts my thighs my lap. I rip apart the instruments of my imprisonment the Stool the Table the Bed. I destroy the battlefield that was my Home. I tear the doors off their hinges to let the wind and the cry of the World inside. I smash the Window. With my bleeding hands I tear the photographs of the men who I loved and who used me on the Bed on the Table on the Chair on the Floor. I set fire to my prison. I throw my clothes into the fire. I dig the clock which was my heart out of my breast. I go onto the street, clothed in my blood (Müller, Web 3).

Ophelia starts to be "Ophelia" in Müller's text. She is no more the "predestined child" (Redon *The Predestined Child, fig.23*) with a "clock" as a heart. She is no longer condemned to die, since she

destroys the “instruments of her imprisonment”, at the same time by “tear[ing] their photographs”, she physically and emotionally destroys the memory of the men who used her. Neither madness nor suicide are the only ways to escape or rebel for this Ophelia. Nevertheless, the final image of the play sadly shows an Ophelia in wheelchair, being covered with bandages. She is again the symbol of the victim and destruction, as a consequence of a corrupt world that remains in conflict.

In 2001, the *Mississippi Review* published a poem by Robert Archambeau which presents once again a renovated version of Ophelia. Her protagonist rejects the “pre-feminist reading” of her that permits her fatal end in the play (Archambeau 113). In this poem, Ophelia is not in love with Hamlet, who is now “howling” in the graveyard, as he is not able to rest in peace. On the contrary, she is alive, and now the “act” seems to belong to her. She is now living the “love, sweet love”, which had been denied before, with Fortimbras, her lover, assuring her sexuality and therefore casting off the shackles of being a stereotypically chaste woman.

If those authors removed the final suicide in their versions but kept the feminist rebellion against the patriarchal rules of society– as happened with the lesbian Ophelia of the “Hormone Imbalance” group (Showalter, “Representing Ophelia” 92)– some other changes to the play would also try to save Ophelia from her fatal fate, but not necessarily from a feminist point of view. William Greenway presented an alternative happy ending for his poem “Ophelia writes home”. Horatio helps Hamlet and Ophelia to reach freedom to be together: they both fake their deaths, and with the collaboration of the bribed graveyard clowns, they escape “onboard a pirate ship dubbed The Nunnery”, a joke they invented while they were “in one another's arms.” They finally arrive to the “Eden Danish”, where they rear their children (Greenway 136).

Cinema was also the home of different reinterpretations of Ophelia, as the commerciality of Shakespeare's adaptations to the cinema, as well as the popularity of the Bard's *Hamlet,* was taken advantage of by many directors. H.R Coursen assured that the representations of Ophelia in a performance in the twentieth century make clear that “the role of Ophelia is central to *Hamlet”* (Coursen 53) for

> Directors can cut Rosencrantz and Gildenstern, as Olivier does in his film, and can eliminate

> Fortimbras, as Zeffirelli does in his film. Who, after all, is going to take over for Mel Gibson? They can cut the Graveyard scene, as did F. Curtis Canfield at Amherst in 1951 and Luivi Ciulei at Arena Stage in 1978. But if Ophelia is, as the early twentieth-century critic Levin Schuking claims “a beautiful dramatic luxury... superfluous” to Shakespeare's design, try editing her out of the play. Schucking had never edited the script for performance (Coursen 53).

Indeed, as cinema needs to be considered not only as an art but also an industry, the directors' first concern is the commercial worth of the film. The majority of cinematic versions of Hamlet were thought to be “resolutely masculinist” (Rutter 299). Carol Chillington Rutter stated that directors

> locate the essential story of Shakespeare's tragedy in the narrative of the prince, and they direct the narrative toward a celebration of heroic masculinity by privileging moments that spectacularly define his masculinity (299).

However, the mystery surrounding the character, and the tragic fate she suffers, makes Ophelia an essential piece of the *Hamlet* puzzle. The previous importance given to her in artistic manifestations is also decisive, and the lack of an Ophelia in a film version of *Hamlet* would signify a disappointment for the audience.

Nonetheless, if Ophelia's being in a film is necessary, her role in the different versions has not been static, and the different interpretations of her character were created by the different actresses that played her role. The idea of the erotomaniac Ophelia is resurrected in some of the versions. Laurence Olivier, in his 1948 version of the play, transformed Jean Simmons (*fig.31*) into a naughty and even childish Ophelia, whose disobedience to her father is perceived by the audience as an innocent rebellion in favour of love. The music emphasizes this sense of innocence, and the change in music in the mad scenes reveal a tragically corrupted girl, whose innocence was violated by the terrible reality surrounding her. The victimization of Ophelia in Olivier's version arguably recalls the first depictions of the heroine in painting. However, the pious Ophelia who, holding the book while kneeling at the altar before the “nunnery scene”, reminds the viewer of a Saint or the Virgin Mary herself, is, to some extent, interpreted as rebellious by Olivier, for she is “in some lights sweet and artless, oblivious to her erotic appeal; in others, almost lascivious” (Rutter

303). Unfortunately, Ophelia's rebellion is not enough for their love story to be successful. Olivier creates an alternative sequence for the film, in which Hamlet wrongly feels rejected and therefore betrayed by Ophelia. While Polonius forbids his daughter to see the Prince, Hamlet is watching Ophelia from the end of the corridor which leads to her room. Hamlet is not aware of the presence of Polonius, and he looks at Ophelia who, after looking at him, stays sitting in her chair. Hamlet unfairly “registers her refusal to come to him as a rejection” (Donaldson 33), and this sense of betrayal is then reinforced by the “nunnery scene.” Ophelia, strongly determined by her father, is unable to help this situation of continuous misunderstandings, for which the audience resigns to the sad ending that is going to come for Ophelia and for her love story with Hamlet. The controversy towards her death is also present in Olivier's film, emphasized by clear antecedents of her fatal destiny. After the “nunnery scene”, Ophelia appears lying on the stairs and, with a desperate glance, spreads her arm out, as though wanting to reach Hamlet. The music drastically changes, as suggesting her madness, and the camera suddenly goes up and shows the sky, before going down again showing the water of the sea, and the sound of the waves seems to precede the final drowning of the heroine. It is now when the “to be or not to be” soliloquy takes place, as Hamlet is looking at the water while holding a dagger. The minds of both lovers are symbolically together but, after considering suicide, Hamlet refuses the idea, and throws the dagger to the water. Ophelia, in contrast, chooses the other option, though perhaps in the climax of her insanity. Ophelia herself is terrified of the idea of death, and this is presented through a revealing scene in which, walking in the gardens, she finds a withered flower floating in the water. When she bends down in order to “save” it, she suddenly finds her own reflection in the water and, scared, she screams. Like the dead flower which was floating on the water, Ophelia cannot be saved from her inevitable “muddy death” (4.7, line 154, 1768).

Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 version of *Hamlet* also presents an erotomaniac Ophelia through a young Helena Bonham-Carter (*fig.32*). Zeffirelli changes the position of the “get thee to a nunnery” scene, and he places it in the “play's scene”. This combination of scenes explains the meaning given by Zeffirelli to Hamlet's ambivalent statement in the play. Played by Mel Gibson,

Hamlet's sad face reveals that he is worried about the innocent girl in the middle of the corrupted environment. It would be this desire of protecting her from the cruel world that leads him to warn her: “Don't you believe none of us (…) Get thee to a nunnery. Don't you believe us.” After that, he kisses her in signal of goodbye. Ophelia's mad scene in this version emphasizes her *erotomania*, even turning into nymphomaniac impulses, as Ophelia, wearing dirty clothes and untidy hair starts wooing an astonished soldier, who finds himself defenceless while she sensually touches him.

The death of the heroine is, in Zeffirelli's version, undoubtedly presented as a suicide. In contrast with the beautified description of the incident by Gertrude, that accompanies the scene as a voiceover, Ophelia runs to the forest and then sits down, looking at the river. Her glance not only evokes madness, but also sadness and self-resignation. An intermission then occurs in the film, and the next image that we see is that of a corpse floating on the water from a high angle.

If Laurence Olivier's film arguably suggests that Hamlet and Ophelia are lovers, in Kenneth Branagh's 1996 version it becomes clear, as some flashbacks show Hamlet (Branagh) and Ophelia (Kate Winslet) (*fig.33*) embraced in coitus. However, Branagh's version seems to suggest that Polonius' death is the immediate cause for Ophelia's madness, as when we see some men carrying his corpse out of the palace, she desperately shouts from behind the metal trellis. Conversely, the mad scene creates an ambivalence toward the interpretation of her madness. Wearing clothes that emphasize her condition as insane (*fig.34*), Ophelia's bawdy songs are accompanied by obscene gestures that reveal the erotomaniac essence of her derangement. The moment of the fatal incident is omitted in the film, but the lead up seems to suggest the intention of the death. Furthermore, when Hamlet compares death with sleeping and dreaming, Ophelia is listening to him; the film suggests that she sees death as a salvation or as a way to achieve peace.

In 2000, Michael Almereyda presented a modernised version of *Hamlet,* placing the action in New York, and changing the royal Danish family for an influent family owner of the Hotel Elsinore. Even if Almereyda decided to keep the original text, provoking a high contrast between the image and the dialogues, he also tried to adapt some aspects of the story to the twenty-first century. Ophelia (Julia Stiles) (*fig.35*) is a young amateur photographer living in a house in which

her father and brother's ideas about chastity seem anachronistic. However, even if she seems unable to escape from her reality, sometimes she does try to rebel against this submissive state. When Laertes warns her about her honour, Ophelia, far from agreeing, cleverly answers to him, advising him not to “forget [his] own doctrine.” The final suicide occurs in a fountain in front of the Hotel, and even if the fact that her corpse is surrounded by mementos of her relationship with Hamlet, suggesting that *erotomania* was the main cause of her mental disorder, the previous scenes suggest a close relationship between suicide and rebellion. Indeed, when Polonius shows the letter to Gertrude and Claudius, thus confirming the impossibility of her love with Hamlet, Ophelia imagines throwing herself into the pool, her hands on her ears, wanting to stop listening.

More innovative was Jürgen Vsych’s version of Ophelia: *Ophelia Learns to Swim* (2000). After her mother drowns, Ophelia (Julia Lee) (*fig.36*) develops a pathological fear of water. Her father wants her to clean the house, and her boyfriend Hamilton, instead of helping her, seems to compound her fears. One day her brother Larry steals a magic broomstick from a witch. Ophelia accidentally breaks it, and when the witch comes demanding the broomstick, she offers the father the chance to choose between giving her his truck or his daughter. Without a second thought, the father chooses to give Ophelia to the witch, and the girl is forced to go with her and become her apprentice. Ophelia finds herself living with three feminist witches that collectively form the Council of Superheroines. Their mission is to fight against the antifeminist, villainous counterpart of witches that plan to ruin the women's movement. Ophelia has to be willing to change herself from a fearful, stupid girl into a brave Superheroine: “Estrogen Woman” and, therefore, learn to swim. As in the case of the depictions of Ophelia as a housewife that we observed above, Vsych comically transforms the Shakespearean heroine into a modern Cinderella: trapped in a patriarchal and materialistic world in which women need to fight, denying Hamlet's misogyny statement that “frailty, thy name is woman” (1, 2 line 146 p.1704).

In one way or another, the representations of Shakespeare's Ophelia have evolved through history, adapting her to time; from the erotomaniac and the hysteric to today's depressed housewives or rebellious feminists. Later literary versions and pictorial representations of the play

are part of the construction of the “Cubist Ophelia” Elaine Showalter had presented (“Representing Ophelia” 85). Showalter assured that “this defiant gesture is not all that feminist criticism desires, or to which it should aspire”, as the “attitudes towards the feminine should be analyzed in their fullest cultural and historical frame” (“Representing Ophelia” 92). Maurice Charney and Hannah Charney state that “Shakespeare's madwomen need to be understood in their contemporary context” (451). In spite of that, as each time period has its demands and conventions, “the representation of Ophelia changes, independently of theories of the meaning of the play or the Prince, for it depends on attitudes towards women and madness” (Showalter “Representing Ophelia” 92).

Conclusion

It has often been discussed that, paradoxically to the contrast with the enormous recurrence of Ophelia in later social culture and art, Shakespeare did not intend to give Ophelia a major role in *Hamlet.* L. W. Wagner stated that

> Ophelia grew to assume greater importance to the audience of *Hamlet* that she had ever held for Hamlet himself, or for Shakespeare (Wagner 94).

Instead, the “gentle heroine” could just be the result of the almost necessary presence of a female lover figure in traditional tragedy. The role of Ophelia was sometimes thought to be “the least complex of the principal characters of *Hamlet”*, and the majority of critics “have viewed Ophelia as a weak character in both form and function” (Resetarits 215). Wagner describes her as “not an interestingly complex figure” but rather as a “useful device”, used by “Hamlet, Polonius and Shakespeare himself” (94). Indeed, Hamlet calculatingly uses her as a way to make his madness more realistic, as she embodies “a perfect explanation for his madness” (Wagner 95). The “play's scene” (Act III, scenes 12 & 13) –the last time in the play Hamlet and Ophelia appear together–, is considered as crucial in determining Ophelia's role in the play as it could be a “key to Hamlet's true attitude toward [her]” (Wagner 95). Claudius' reaction being the focus of his attention, Hamlet uses Ophelia as a mere distraction, while he is actually thinking about what is truly important for him: the revenge of his father. After the play has begun, Hamlet rudely tries to end the conversation with

Ophelia “by using abruptly crude remarks”, as for Hamlet “the play's the thing” (Wagner 95). Ophelia is used by Polonius as well, as he controls her for his own profit, without considering her feelings. He wants to forbid the love between his daughter and the Prince, as if he allows it, he will “loose his favor for the royal family” (Wagner 95).

C. R. Resetarits also assures that

> Most studies have quickly turned to Ophelia's flowers, madness, death, or nymphomaniac tendencies rather than trying to understand her unique character and how it might function in the play (Resetarits 215).

Resertarits defined Ophelia as a kind of mediator between the fictional environment of the play and the audience, a “portal of sorts through which Shakespeare works to hook or intensify the audience's emotional response” (215). In other words, Shakespeare would be using her as a mere observer that establishes a link between the characters and the audience, at the same time that he would “exploit [her] during her mad scenes to heighten the audience's own emphatic involvement” (Resetarits 216).

Ophelia appears, paraphrasing Showalter, “in just five of the play's twenty scenes” (“Representing Ophelia” 78), and she very often functions as–excluding her short monologue in Act III scene 5 and the two mad scenes (respectively in Act IV scenes 12, 13 and 17)–a “receiver of seemingly unending verbiage: sometimes advice, sometimes instruction, sometimes abuse’ (Resetarits 216). This role as listener and receiver is then “closely linked with the audience” and arguably helps them to understand the play in a more deeply manner (Resetarits 216). Indeed, Ophelia was sometimes seen as Hamlet's female double, and at the same time opposite. Resetarits defines her as “Hamlet's emotional antithesis” (Resetarits 216). In contrast to him, Ophelia is “not overthinking but overfeeling” (Resetarits 216). In other words, if Hamlet is defined by an excess of intellectuality, Ophelia will be defined, and therefore ruined, by her excess of emotions. Louise Bourgeois' 1997 lithograph, *Hamlet and Ophelia,* shows both characters as constituting just one body. However, if together in a coital embrace, they are also separated by a black line which divides the world of life and the world of death, to which Ophelia tragically belongs.

Kiefer describes the scene in the painting as “a fairy-tale ending” as Ophelia “with long flowing hair and high-heeled shoes, is submerged, not in the muddy waters of a brook, but in a sea of undulating bright blue water” (36). Nonetheless, Kiefer herself also admits that “all is not well in Denmark” as “Hamlet is above the water line, Ophelia beneath” (36).

The “loose” connotations of the word “nothing” were also discussed in relation to Ophelia's function in the play. If the first “O” of the name “Ophelia” could in itself suggest the idea of a lack, perhaps of importance, by which the Shakespearean heroine is defined, the symbol used to make reference to the vagina (Pyles 322). This idea is reinforced by the use of the word “nothing” in the “play's scene” (Pyles 322). The bawdy symbolism of “nothing”, used to define the “anatomical localization of [female] sexuality” (Pyles 323). Shakespeare was aware of that, and he played with the obscene connotations of the word in the dialogue Ophelia and Hamlet maintain in the “play's scene”:

> HAMLET: Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
>
> OPHELIA: No, my lord.
>
> HAMLET: I mean, my head upon your lap?
>
> OPHELIA: Ay, my lord.
>
> HAMLET: Do you think I meant country matters?
>
> OPHELIA: I think nothing, my lord.
>
> HAMLET: That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
>
> OPHELIA: What is, my lord?
>
> HAMLET: Nothing.

It was suggested that, when Ophelia answers that she thinks “nothing”, she means she is really thinking about sex, and this would be related with the idea of her madness as *erotomania,* for the love and the sexual frustration would be the actual reasons for her insanity. However, when Ophelia assures that she “think[s] nothing” she is also reinforcing the idea of her condition in the play as a simple and uninteresting character. Ophelia thinks nothing, says nothing and so she is nothing.

Shakespeare arguably “intended [Ophelia] to be a minor character” in the play, and he

“artfully controls her thinking” (Wagner 94, 96). *Hamlet* was just “Hamlet's play” and Ophelia cannot compete with that (Wagner 96). Even Lacan, who had promised in his essay “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet”* that “I announced that I would speak today about that piece of bait named Ophelia, and I'll be as good as my word” (Lacan 11), stated that: “What is the point of the character Ophelia? Ophelia is obviously essential. She is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure of Hamlet” (Lacan 20). In other words, Lacan negates the importance of Ophelia as an individual. Instead, her importance resides in her relationship with the male figure. Elaine Showalter overtly critisised Lacan's statement about Ophelia as “cynical but not unusual instance of her deployment in psychiatric and critical texts”, for:

> For most critics of Shakespeare, Ophelia has been an insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weakness and madness but chiefly interesting, of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet (Showalter, “Representing Ophelia, 77).

On the other hand, the reception of *Hamlet* in the next centuries revealed a passionate response in favour of the heroine. Ophelia was much more represented in social culture than Hamlet, and, as explained above, her role suffered an evolution through time. If she thought and said “nothing” in the original text, Ophelia was given a voice in later artistic representations of her. As it was “time for a new *Hamlet”* (Shelley 198), it was also time for a new Ophelia.

With the study of the representations of Ophelia, the social and ideological changes towards the female, the madness and the suicide are revealed. Ophelia became, definitely, that “Cubist Ophelia” Showalter discussed (“Representing Ophelia” 85). Ophelia is, then, the result of the sum of each new interpretation made of her. She stopped serving Hamlet, Polonius or Shakespeare. As a social myth, now she only serves the necessities of each era: its ideologies, its political principles and its commercial and economical interests. Therefore, this is not the end of Ophelia as a “useful device”, as can be noticed in the different representations of Ophelia through time. The artists took advantage of the freedom provided by the play for interpretations of the character, and they transformed Ophelia into no more than an embodiment of their own political, social or commercial concerns. The heroine becomes the protagonist of ideological advertisements,

the symbol of social protests and the commercial image of the girl who is dead in mysterious circumstances. The story of Ophelia is turned into the story of a Victorian hysteric and nymphomaniac, a suffragist who finds death in her rebellion, a housewife who decides to change her fate, or an innocent anonymous girl who is misled and murdered on the bank of the river by a psychopathic boyfriend, as in the reinterpretation of the topic by Nick Cave and Kylie Minogue in the music video of *Where the Wild Roses Grow.* Ophelia is not able to escape her role as a useful tool and, as if she were drastically determined to be a “picture” or a “mere beast”, she is a figure without self, always used to meet the ends of others. And, as she is not able to escape, she will be, as Linda Stark suggests in her highly erotic painting (*fig.38*), trapped and condemned to be a slave of society “forever”.

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Appendix

Fig.1 *John Everett Millais, Ophelia, 1852.*

Fig.2 *Eugène Delacroix, La Mort d'Ophélie, 1843.*

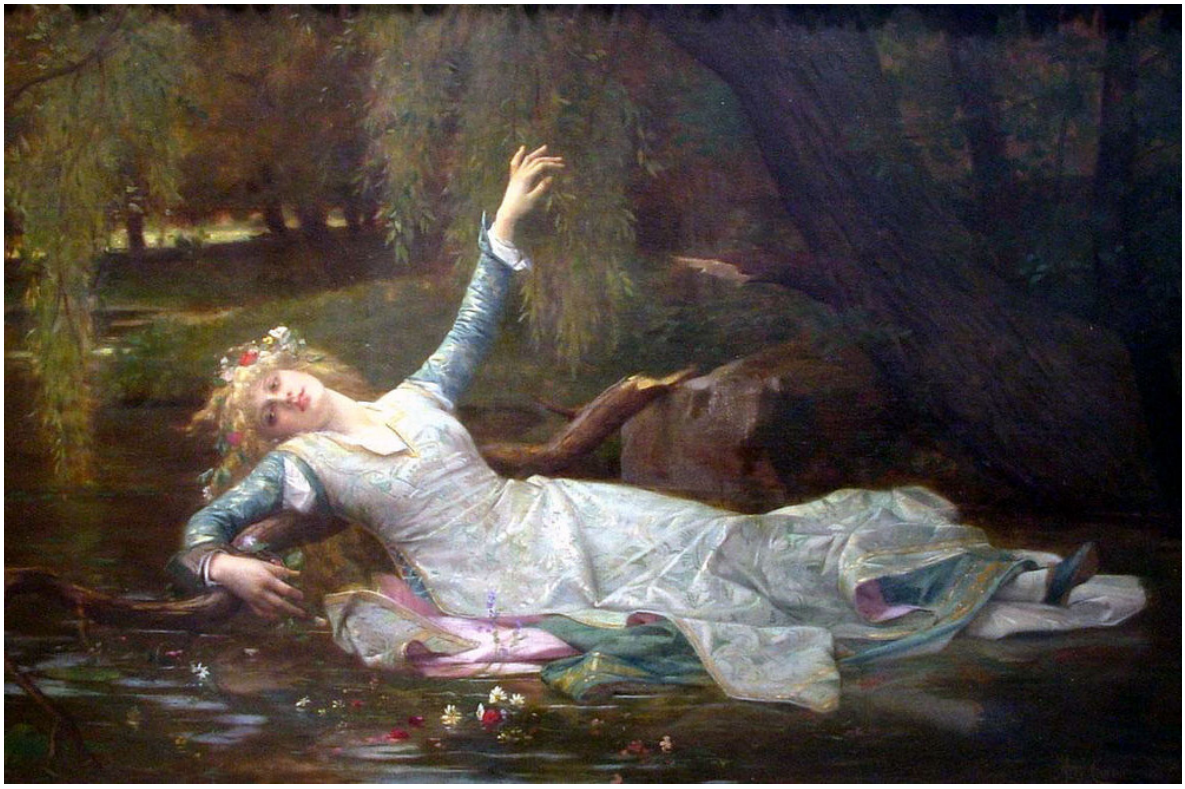

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Fig.15 *Sandro Botticelli, Primavera, ca. 1482.*

Fig.16 *Tiziano, Flora, ca. 1515.*

Fig.17 *Palma Vecchio, Flora, 1520.*

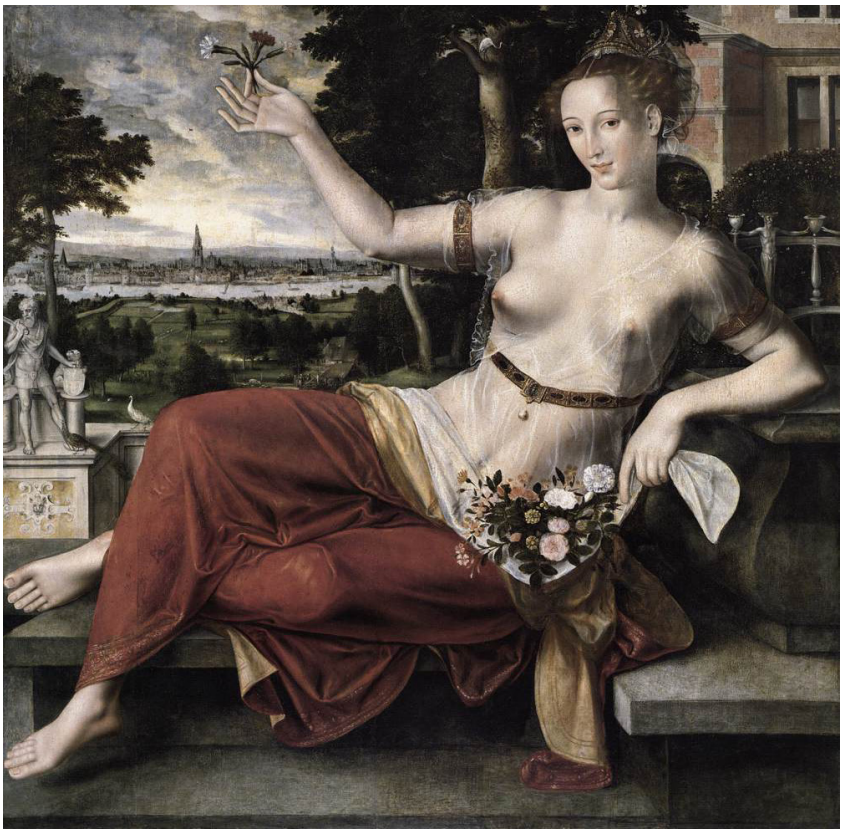

Fig.18 *Jan Massys, Gemälde "Flora", 1559.*

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Fig.20 *Odilon Redon, La Mort d'Ophélie, ca. 1900.*

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Fig.23 *Odilon Redon, The Predestined Child (Ophélie), ca. 1904-1905.*

Fig.24 *Odilon Redon, Ophelia Among the Flowers, ca. 1905-1908.*

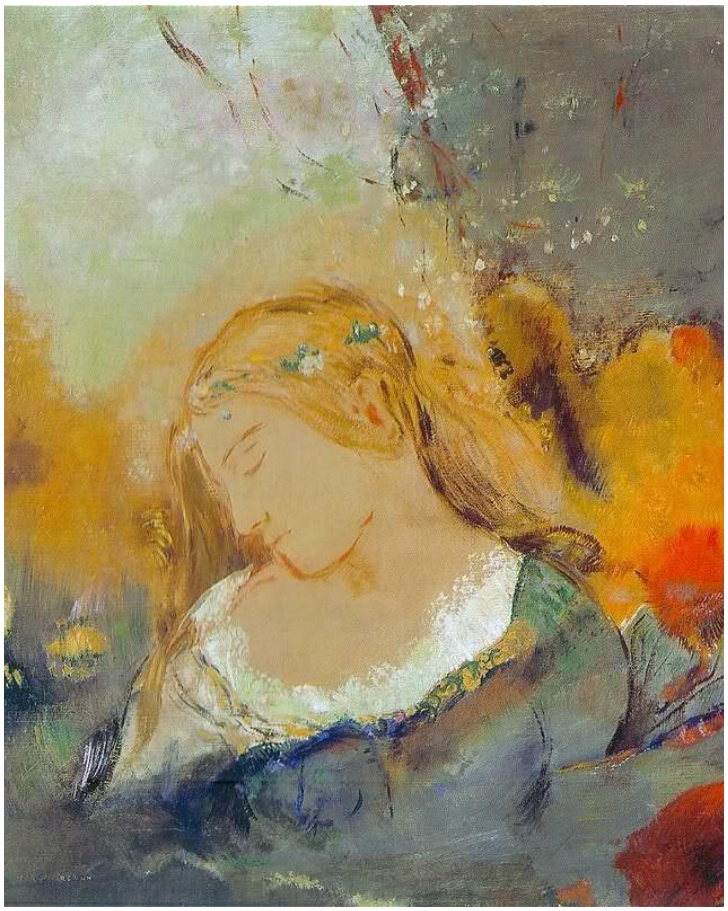

Fig.25 *Odilon Redon, Ophélie, ca. 1905-1908.*

Fig.26 *Margaret Macdonald, Ophelia, 1908.*

Fig.27 *Franco Damiano, Ofelia è Morta, 2011.*

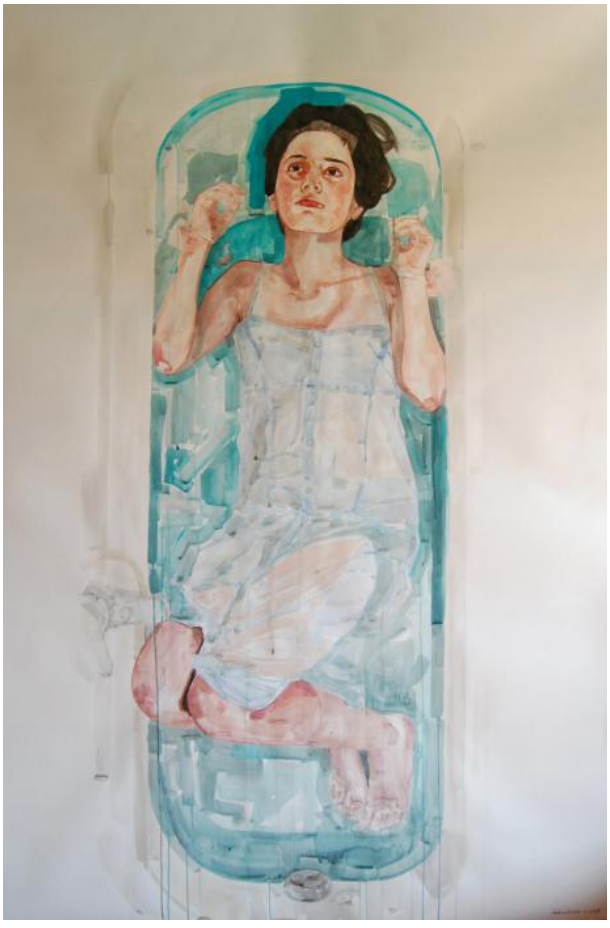

Fig.28 *F. di Carlo, Ofelia, 2008.*

Fig.29 *Gregory Crewdson, Untitled: Ophelia From Twilight, 2001.*

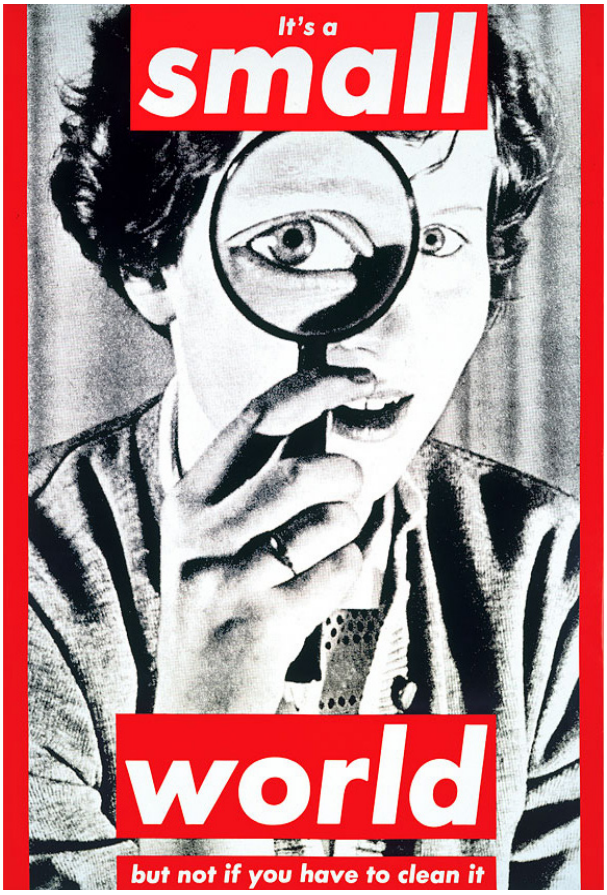

Fig.30 *Barbara Kruger, Untitled (It's a Small World but Not if You Have to Clean It), 1990.*

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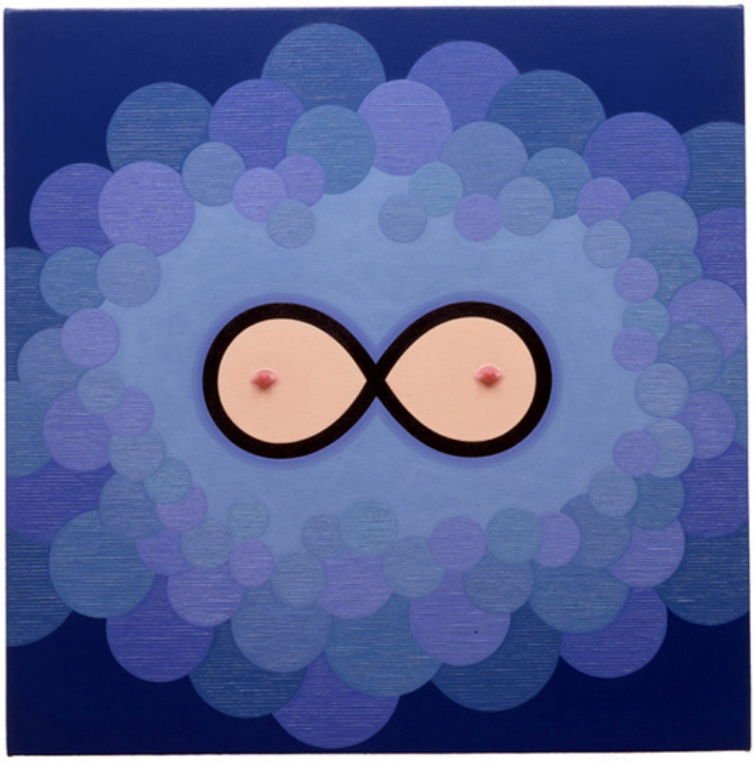

Fig.38 *Linda Stark, Ophelia Forever, 1999.*

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