

Musings from Ophelia's Watery Voyage: Images of Female Submission in Shakespeare's and Millais' Drowning Maiden

José María MESA VILLAR
Universidad de Jaén

ABSTRACT

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Ophelia became a supranational art icon being dealt with by many European artists. From among the various visual renderings of Shakespeare's madwoman, Millais' has been critically acclaimed as the most accomplished one. But to which extent is it close to the textual Ophelia?: There is a time gap in between both representations and they also bear a different nature. Besides, the Pre-Raphaelite canvas also shows the influence of some particular Victorian discourses and views on female nature transforming the lady's portrait.

Our main aim in this essay is to contrast the textual Ophelia with one of her visual counterparts,¹ this is, Sir John Everett Millais' canvas:² in it, the artist attempted to apply the main tenets observed by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood at the time, which promoted the image of an ideal artist pure in soul, eager for the production of detailed depictions of the world and also bearing an unmistakably Christian, pious concern so that his art could get right into the heart of the public.

¹ Although the English Pre-Raphaelites were especially fond of Ophelia's story (which was portrayed by almost every single artist in the Brotherhood), this topic was also found in many German and French canvases at the time. Apart from Millais' masterpiece, we also have to mention other important renderings of her such as Eugène Delacroix' *La Mort d'Ophélie* (1844), Arthur Hughes' *Ophelia* (1852), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's watercolour *The First Madness of Ophelia* (1864), Ernest Hebert's *Ophelia* (circa 1893) and John William Waterhouse's series of canvases on this same topic between the 1880's and the 1910's.

² Millais' *Ophelia* was displayed for the first time in 1852 at the Royal Academy Exhibition (London).

While Shakespeare's play shows Ophelia's death in an indirect, realistic³ way, Millais' work foregrounds the lady's agony and makes the limitations of readers vanish at once: it partakes of a devastating sense of tragedy but also of such cleanness that mysticism and peaceful feelings assault us immediately.⁴ The artist combines his interest in the sole power of nature, detail and his masterful use of colour in order to bring us into a scene of almost magical fertility in which wild vegetation grows as a natural frame lodging the maiden, whose soaked clothes are about to drag her down into the stream. Her flowers float by her and only her face and hands are to be seen out of the water: the lady's white flesh, offering a clear contrast with the surrounding context, does not just reflect Victorian fashion but also stands as a clear indication of purity. Elaine Showalter defends that the Pre-Raphaelite Ophelia is "a sensuous siren appearing as one more visual object within the composition, which distils a light cruelly indifferent to her death" (1992:229).

Gert. Her clothes spread wide, and mermaid-like awhile they bore her up (...) like a creature native and indued unto that element. But long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with their drink, pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death'.
(IV, vii, 174-182)

The maiden's gesture seems to express her absent-mindedness or, perhaps at the same time, her inertia and passivism as if she had been turned into another plant in the scene. The dramatic perspective chosen by the artist harmonizes with a sanctifying mysticism similar to the one found in Bernini's marble *St. Therese*: a deep atmospheric tone permeates the setting—following the late romantic trend that other Pre-Raphaelites such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Edward Burne Jones would fervently cultivate in subsequent decades. However, this aura endows the canvas with some degree of theatricality working against Millais' pretensions of reality: he rescues Ophelia's end for the spectator but, up to a certain extent, this also disrupts the feelings of veracity that the whole event is imbued with in the play.

While the visual Ophelia is pretendedly orientated towards unequivocal virtue and spirituality, the textual Ophelia, despite her scarce

³ Despite its detachedness, Shakespeare's treatment of Ophelia's death is highly realistic in the sense that, in real life, we usually get to know about others in such a way, this is, through what others say about them. Millais' canvas bases itself upon Gertrude's words in act IV, vii.

⁴ The 19th century critic John Ruskin termed it 'the most beautiful landscape ever assayed by grief'.

interventions on stage, emerges before us as a great complex of meanings: she is described not only through her words and actions but also by means of silence, absence, madness or what other characters say about her, together with a carefully devised use of ambiguity on part of the author.⁵ Interpretation has also contributed to frame a contradictory picture of Shakespeare's character, who seems condemned to eternal indeterminacy: she lives without the play as the object of our interests and also within it in order to be manipulated by those around her:

Pol. You do not understand yourself so clearly as it behoves my daughter and your honour (...) think yourself a baby that you have taken these tenders for true pay which are not sterling (...) Ay, springs to catch woodcocks (...) Ophelia, do not believe his vows'
(I, iii, 96-127)

Polonius and Laertes, as the male referents in Ophelia's life, are called to guide and protect her and also to interpret her behaviour and reactions towards "the world outside the household". They conceive her as a subordinate being so much gullible to be left on her own: as a woman, she is understood as a creature that would leave herself go without foreseeing any consequences. Thus, female identity is seen as a void to be filled by male experience. Following David Leverenz (1968:134) we could add an extra element contributing to Ophelia's repression, which would be that "the body is circumscribed to the state, to the role, and it is by means of this that the *invalidation of feelings through circumstances* takes place", this is, Ophelia is not called to be Hamlet's bride because his position is very far from hers: even if she loves him, she must forget him, for this is what her position and duties force her to do. Despite his verbiage, Polonius will find no moral objections to employ his daughter as "bait for fishing Hamlet", as a mask of honesty put before his interests and Claudius' court intrigues.

Pol. (to Claudius) I'll loose my daughter to him. Be you and I behind an arras then, mark the encounter.
(II, ii, 162-4)

⁵ We can find examples of this in the 'nunnery scene' (III, i), the "mousetrap scene" (III, ii) or Ophelia's songs ("for bonny sweet robin is all my joy", IV, v,184) among others.

Although daring enough as to answer Laertes back,⁶ Ophelia (as a dutiful daughter) will follow her father's commands to the root: obedience and the social emphasis put over the performance of the role is what ruins her, since obeying in itself implies repressing her own feelings to let the rest work upon her. As this abrasive process repeats, the lady is gradually turned into a creature of nothingness without the key to her own self: she becomes a void dependent on male opinion, so that she is not allowed to develop her own personality and evolve into maturity. As soon as neither her father nor her brother are near to guide or interpret her ways, her inner struggle grows so strong, so demanding, that she cannot stand it and so suffers a severe mental breakdown.

We should not think that this happens necessarily because Shakespeare might be a recalcitrant misogynist, but rather because Ophelia has been brought up as an eternal infant. Hamlet's brutish behaviour towards her and his rejection of love obviously favour Ophelia's inner instability but, anyway, Polonius' death seems to be the main cause triggering her descent into madness, for he was the corner stone upon which her existence was holding.⁷

She is now confronted with an incongruous chain of events, one for which her code provides no explanation (...). Once Polonius is dead (...) a painful epiphany takes place and Ophelia realises that the code up to which she was living has ruined her life (...) She reaches maturity and, for the first time, she uses her own reasoning just to abandon it forever. (Olivares Merino 2000:222-223)

To Elaine Showalter, Hamlet's madness bears a more metaphysical hue while Ophelia's is a product of female body and culture: her madness is real and even in it, she has no voice of her own. Her inward forces would be primarily sexual, and this would lead us to think in Elizabethan terms of malady about erotomania⁸ —madness being its predictable outcome.

⁶ *Laert.* Perhaps he loves you now (...) but you must fear (...) his will is not his own. For he himself is subject to his birth (...) then weight what loss your honour may sustain if with too credent ear you list his songs or lose your heart or your chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity (...). Be wary then, best safety lies in fear. (I, iii, 14-43)

Oph. I shall the effect of this good lesson keep as watchman to my heart. But good my brother, do not as some ungracious pastors do, show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, whiles like a puff'd and reckless libertine himself the primrose path of dalliance treads, and reckes not his own rede. (I,iii, 45-51)

⁷ *Oph.* He is dead and gone, lady, he is dead and gone, at his head a grass-green turf, at his heels a stone (...). White his shroud as the mountain snow. (IV, v, 29-36)

⁸ "Exageración patológica de las sensaciones, emociones y reacciones sexuales". (See Braier, 1988:320)

It is in madness that Shakespeare seems to endow Ophelia with new meanings: in a veiled way, some of the expressions in her songs apparently mirror some of the characters and situations of the play as if she had been turned into an inconsistent chronicler.⁹ David Leverenz (1968:134) terms Ophelia's speech "textual schizophrenia" and argues that her voice "like that of schizophrenics, is the amalgam of other people's voices (...) with caustic self-observation or a still more terrifying vacuum as their incessant inward reality (...). There are many voices in Ophelia's madness (...) all making sense and none of her own".

Due to their symbolism, the flowers handed out to the members of the court¹⁰ either reflect a part of their selves or seem to provide them with a piece of advice; for example, Gertrude is given rue (for sorrow) and daisies¹¹ while Laertes receives rosemary.¹² Curiously enough, Ophelia keeps violets,¹³ a symbol of faithfulness with which she will be fully identified as well in her burial: this would describe her in a very positive way, but it would also point at the fact that there really is nobody in Elsinore in whom she can trust (thus stressing her helplessness and solitude).¹⁴ While Shakespeare ties flower language to different aspects within the tragedy, Millais uses it in a more peripheral (but not insubstantial) way and connects it directly to the features that he sees in her: his canvas represents down to the last detail a river stream in Ewell to which he would add the figure of

⁹ *Oph.* How should I your true love know from another one?

By his cockle hat and staff and his sandal shoon. (IV, v, 23-25)

(maybe reflecting Hamlet as a pilgrim walking towards the obtention of love or revenge).

Oph. Young men will do't if they come to't

By Cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, Before you tumbled me, You promised me to wed.

He answers, So would I a done, by yonder sun,

And thou hadst not come to my bed. (IV, v, 60-66)

(maybe a reversal of Hamlet's "frailty thy name is woman" being applied to men.

¹⁰ See Act IV, scene v.

¹¹ These may imply either innocence or the fact that somebody is easily persuaded in relation to love matters.

¹² This is a symbol of fidelity (also loyalty) usually found in weddings and funerals.

¹³ Violets also stand as a symbol for the proximity of death.

¹⁴ "I have always found meaningful the almost absolute dearth of female characters in the play (...). Even more, Shakespeare's silence concerning Ophelia's mother is tragic for her (...). Ophelia's incompleteness owes much to the absence of a mother. (...) Queen Gertrude is far from acting as a maternal presence or even just as a friend or guide: the relationship between both simply does not exist" (Olivares Merino, 1999:233).

the lady¹⁵ later on: he did so with such perfection that every single plant and flower in his composition can be identified; they obviously point at the features that the artist endowed the visual Ophelia with: Daisies (for innocence), lilacs (related to ‘first love’ feelings), poppies (implying dreaminess or the proximity of death), forget-me-nots, violets (for modesty and faithfulness) and white lilies (for purity) among others.

Ophelia’s retirement into nature allows us to focus on nature and water as the main defining elements of womanhood and the idea of the lady as a female flower: the stream becomes the ultimate refuge for her tormented self. However, unlike Shakespeare’s play, Millais does not link the river or the woods to ‘wilderness’, but ‘fertility’, and turns Ophelia into a virginal anchorite of exquisite sensibilities in close communion with the surrounding landscape; she reflects her own essence delightfully encloistered for Victorian audiences: neither ‘madness’ nor ‘love’ drives the artist into excess, so that the whole scene get imbued with a clear sense of decorum. Millais is much more calmed and less ambiguous than Shakespeare when picturing the lady. While the textual Ophelia basically falls prey to her role and upbringing, the visual one is shown as a timid virgin deeply in love. Rather than a violent unconscious mental storm, her madness is an almost conscious way of expressing her grief for the loss of love.

Oph. My lord, I have remembrances of yours that I have longed long to redeliver. I pray you now receive them.

Ham. No, not I, I never gave you aught.
(III, i, 93-96)

Despite Hamlet’s words at the burial scene¹⁶ and some other indications such as his letters to Ophelia, the play does not state clear that there actually is a strong love relationship going on between the prince and Polonius’ daughter but rather leaves it as a sketchy affair. Nevertheless, Millais seems to take the aforementioned idea of romance for granted. Bram Dijkstra (1988:39) explains this on the basis of Pre-Raphaelite adoration towards Tennyson’s heroines:¹⁷ in a similar way to the Lady of Shalott, Ophelia dies in the aspiration of love while floating downstream.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Siddal, the Pre-Raphaelite muse par excellence, posed for hours almost completely immersed in a bathtub. Although the water was sometimes warmed up regularly, she finally caught a severe cold.

¹⁶ *Ham.* ‘I lov’d Ophelia. Forty thousand lover could not with all their quantity of love make up my sum’. (V, i, 264-267)

¹⁷ Millais and Tennyson were close friends, especially during the early 1850’s.

Ham. I did love you once.

Oph. Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Ham. You should not have believed me (...) I loved you not.

Oph. I was the more deceived.

(III, i, 115-120)

The visual Ophelia's longing for man and the aesthetics found in Millais' canvas are intimately linked to the so called *culte des invalids* which, basically, consists on the Victorian association between consumptive female looks and notions such as "purity" and "social distinction". This goes hand in hand with the exaltation of a passive, languid woman as a sensuous icon. Besides, it was thought while men need their women as purifying balms, women needed to be protected and completed by their cavaliers: many high class and high middle class Victorian women fell prey to this fashion, which was reflected —and promoted so— in many works of art at the time.

To hang such a picture was to acknowledge one's conscience of virtue (...). Such images were attractive because, in an environment that valued self-negation as the principal evidence of a woman's moral value (...) women undergo self-sacrifice to demonstrate their virtue through self-obliteration. (Dijkstra 1988:28)

Since marriage was understood as the proper goal towards which every respectable Victorian lady should lead herself, the audience saw Ophelia's being on the verge of death as an undeniable proof of delightful love-melancholy and an ultimate tribute of devotion to the unreachable figure of the lover: she seems almost weightless, as if reaching the absolute. The maiden fades into death without a male complement fulfilling her existence. Ophelia's gesture is twisted into a purifying visage concealing the fact that she is actually dying. Rather than sorrow, the canvas partakes of an overcoming sense of spiritual communion with nature and the Victorian conception of femininity, a principle of purity and fertility that cannot exist without being gardened by man: "Once rejected, the woman remains a flower open, a warm receiving womb waiting patiently for man (...). The very spirit of the rose" (Dijkstra 1988:87).

Although Millais attempted to portray Shakespeare's drowning maiden as an unfortunate timid virgin of delicate tastes, the connotations that 20th century feminist critics have glimpsed in his work would not really consecrate it, from their viewpoint, as a stainless icon. *In Over her Dead Body*, Elizabeth Bronfen analyses suicidal tendencies in many literary heroines (and, by extension, in cultural manifestations such as pictures) as:

1. A pharmakon offering relief from the unbearable conflicts of life: Applying this to the textual Ophelia would imply a conscious act of suicide on her part, which we cannot accept since ‘madness’ is an unconscious state.¹⁸ We will consider her death in the play as the result of fatality. Meanwhile, Millais’ Ophelia cannot be considered to have committed suicide because this notion would deprive her of the sense of virtue that the artist wanted to provide her with.¹⁹

2. An attempt on part of the lady to reach a certain degree of protagonism: Suicide would satisfy the lady’s narcissistic impulse by shocking witnesses and by remaining in their memory. We would not apply this concept either to the visual or the textual Ophelia because of the implicit paradox it carries within: the subject pays a high price for fleeting protagonism and this does not even provide her with a voice of her own, since she would still remain a dead object to be interpreted by the audience.

3. An account of morbidity on part of a male author. Millais’ work would distil a morbid, macabre vein based on the obtention of aesthetic pleasure through the destruction of the lady. It is the type of poetry that Poe revealed in *The Philosophy of Composition*, the one found in the death of a young maiden.

Laert. Lay her i’th’ earth,
And from her fair unpolluted flesh
May violets spring. I tell thee, churlish priest,
A ministering angel shall my sister be
When thou liest howling.
(V, i, 231-3)

Although Ophelia’s death is one of the most controversial issues in *Hamlet* and, despite the misogynist traces that some feminist approaches have pointed out in respect to the play, we consider that Shakespeare would be in a way saving Ophelia by offering her a way out through a return to water²⁰

¹⁸ Ophelia herself is not responsible of her actions or her fall into the river.

¹⁹ Millais bears an important Christian Background and is too keen about foundational Pre-Raphaelite tenets as to willingly suggest the idea of suicide: Saint Augustine pointed out that even when trying to avoid a greater harm such as the loss of virginity or some unbearable pains in life, self murder could not be taken as a viable option, for it implies an outrageous offence against one’s own life, which is a priceless gift from God.

²⁰ Nature and water are identified as the main defining elements of womanhood as opposed to the male, arid world.

suggesting a journey back to the motherly womb, her drama being that of a blooming maiden cut off in her prime. Following Laertes' words at Ophelia's funeral, we could say that, out of her wintry death, she would be bound to return through some sort of 'natural metamorphosis', almost a slow type of *metempsychosis*: once in her tomb, the Rose of May will feed the soil and become a true flower.

Despite the inconvenient cracks that twentieth century feminist perspectives have hinted at, we still stick up for Millais' innocence when portraying Shakespeare's character. We reach at this conclusion by basing ourselves in his life, background and his canvas itself. When contrasting the textual with the visual Ophelia, we experience not only a shift of interests when picturing her madness or finding key points explaining it but also a clear transition from 'textual marginality' to 'pictorial centrality'. Like the rest of characters in *Hamlet*, Polonius' daughter is undoubtedly eclipsed by the figure of the prince.

By focusing himself on Ophelia, Millais is doing justice to a character for whom he feels himself deeply moved: his work is better understood as a compassionate tribute to her than as a twisted expression of the male pleasure derived from her suffering. Death cannot be exclusively or pathologically understood as a morbid motif calling up the attention of public and potential purchasers alike; the artist deals with Ophelia's watery voyage from a revealing viewpoint: he portrays it decorously, without stressing her agony at all. Instead, he opens a way into her most intimate scene, into her own essence, which is conveniently equated to the surrounding setting.

We could obviously disapprove of Millais' affected theatricality and excessive sentimentality but we cannot question his sincerity: he was a deeply Christian artist well-known for his pictorial representations of innocence and human incertitude (in works such as *A Dream of the Past* (1857), *Asleep* (1867) and his popular portraits of children). Millais finds in Ophelia's helplessness a reason to exalt her, not to sully her image.

Likewise, despite the behaviour of some members of the brotherhood (such as Rossetti) could point at the contrary, Pre-Raphaelites initially²¹ bore a clear moralist hue. They felt themselves especially interested in portraying scenes of sublime dignity such as those found in religious

²¹ Please note that the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded in 1850; thus, Millais' *Ophelia* is one of their early works and is necessarily linked to their foundational tenets, which have already been pointed out in this article.

topics:²² this feeling is outstandingly spread into Millais' treatment of Ophelia: the setting shelters the maiden, who does not really seem to be sinking beneath the river's surface but rather raising her hands out of it and intoning a pious prayer. The scene is filled with elements reflecting Ophelia's story (water, her flowers, the robin, the willow's broken branch...) and proving that Millais is offering us a condensation of the features that he appreciates in the Shakespearean character. Following a clearly romantic concept of nature,²³ Ophelia is enclôstered in what appears to be her own secret refuge, a place where she can find her own essence far from the torments of life: her calmed expression and the canvas' luminosity distil a clear feeling of peace: neither death nor desperation have access to the lady in Millais' rendition.

Although seduced by a platitudinous topic (that of a young virgin falling into disgrace), Millais is more of an admirer than of an executioner and he himself can be considered a victim of connotation, as we have already seen. Taking his intentions as a reference, we cannot be uncertain about his sensibility when picturing Ophelia, that of an artist who feels sincerely moved by her tragedy and by the idea of a forbidden, lost affection for which she sighs: this is the type of amorous feeling that the artist praises in his canvas as a blessed icon of female melancholy and devotion not just towards man himself, but towards a glorified love ideal making the emotion laid in the canvas much more universal.

The water is wide, I cannot cross o'er
 And neither have I wings to fly
 Give me a boat that will carry two
 And both shall row, my love and I
 I leaned my back against an oak
 Thinking it was a mighty tree
 But first it bent and then it broke
 Just as my love proved false to me
 (Traditional)²⁴

²² Let us note, as clear examples of this trend, both Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Ecce Ancilla Domini – The Annunciation* (1850) and Sir John Everett Millais' *Christ in the House of his Parents* (1850).

²³ “Los Prerrafaelitas veían en la naturaleza presencias arcanas y misteriosas dispuestas a un coloquio interior” (Crepaldi, 2000:60).

²⁴ This traditional song was included in Ramsay's *Teatable Miscellany* (1727): Although it became very popular in the North America, it bears a Scottish origin. Besides, it is supposed to be a very popular 17th century song, since different Scottish ballads appearing towards the 1670's are considered to be almost direct adaptations of it.

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Author's address:

Universidad de Jaén

Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias de la Educación

Departamento de Filología Inglesa

Campus Las Lagunillas, s/n. Edificio D2

23071 Jaén, Spain

slarys@msn.com

