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Signifying Nothing: Representations of Ophelia

In his autobiography, Laurence Olivier recounts when an actor who played Hamlet was asked, “Did Hamlet sleep with Ophelia?” The actor replied, “In my company, always.”¹ This seemingly trivial exchange reveals a key element in our cultural obsession with Ophelia: we place a notable significance on the ambiguous status of her sexuality in the play. Since the narrative necessitates coding Ophelia as simultaneously virginal and sexualized, this ambiguity characterizes her semiotic role in *Hamlet* as well. Continuously described in terms of lack and nothingness, she is a character who quite literally fades from the text before Act V but whose absence haunts the remainder of the play. As a result, Ophelia fascinates us with her air of ambiguity and uncertainty, and the myriad images of her that inundate our culture attest to this fascination.

Though she is on stage for just five scenes in *Hamlet* – a minor character by any definition – Ophelia is the most frequently painted of all of Shakespeare’s heroines.² What is it about Ophelia – a character so often associated with absence in the text – that incites our desire to see her? A glance through the history of Ophelia’s representation provokes this question, though it is not a question that many critics want to take up. The critical discourse about Ophelia has been divided between two extremes. Many critics dismiss her as a “pretty, pathetic,”³ “submissive”⁴ woman – a heroine who fails to assert herself in the play and whose suicide is an act of passive relinquishment. In recent years,

other critics have provided new readings of Ophelia in an attempt to “reclaim” her as a kind of feminist icon.⁵ However, neither of these strategies for interpreting Ophelia allow us to analyze fully the complex paradox that she suggests. The disparity between Ophelia’s slight textual presence and her ubiquity as an artistic muse illustrate a fascinating problem that extends well beyond the realm of Shakespearean tragedy and into current discourse about women and representation.

Ophelia’s importance to contemporary criticism is greater and more nuanced than either of the two critical camps recognize; I argue that she suggests the defining contradiction of current feminist discourse. Teresa De Lauretis dubs this contradiction as the necessity of being “at once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it.”⁶ As a result, “the feminist critique is a critique of culture at once from within and from without.”⁷ Ophelia’s language in the play illustrates this interplay between containment and excess – echoing the feminist’s simultaneous necessity to contain herself within language in order to communicate and to use suggestions of excess to gesture towards that which language cannot represent.

Through an analysis of the narrative function of the proto-Ophelia figures Saxo Grammaticus and Francois de Belleforest’s source stories for *Hamlet*, we can see how Ophelia’s sexual ambiguity is linked directly to her semiotic ambiguity in the narrative. In the plot of the source stories, these women are identified by their sexuality and act as tests for the hero’s sanity. In Shakespeare’s version, Ophelia still functions as a test (albeit a more rational one) but she is transformed from the sexually brazen maid into an ostensibly innocent young girl. Ophelia’s duplicitous sexuality is the crux of the overwhelming atmosphere of doubt that permeates the whole play; she must be

simultaneously innocent and sexualized in order for us to question whether or not Hamlet is mad or simply in love with her. This inherent tension in her sexuality – and thus, her language in the play – illustrates the uncertainty that makes her so fascinating both to the men in Olivier’s anecdote and the countless artists who have created representations of her. With one foot planted firmly in patriarchal language and one foot hovering elsewhere, Ophelia uses the disruptive act of questioning and deviously charged words like *nothing* to challenge the dominant semiotic ideas of many of the play’s male characters. In the first part of this essay, I will analyze both the aforementioned source stories and Ophelia’s language in the play through the lens of feminist theorists like De Lauretis and Luce Irigaray, arguing that Ophelia’s association with excess critiques patriarchal discourse and the univalent meanings it creates.

Although her expression of excess and ambiguity make Ophelia such a fascinating subject for artists, many of their representations undermine the very thing that draws them to her in the first place by attempting to confine her in fixed, reductive clichés of femininity. In the second section of this essay, I will analyze the function of failed containment in four representations of Ophelia: two images from the popular Victorian annual *The Keepsake*, John Everett Millais’s famous 1852 painting, and Hugh Diamond’s mid-nineteenth photograph of a designated Ophelia figure in his asylum. These attempts at containing the semiotic uncertainty that arises from Ophelia are all ultimately unsuccessful; in each case, the image reveals something that seeps beyond the boundaries of what it attempts to contain. As a result, the intrigue of Ophelia suggests an excess that undermines any attempt to keep it within certain bounds.

Ophelia imagery is most potent when it is used in ways that are not at odds with its ambiguity and excess; artists use this imagery to greatest effect when excess is acknowledged and used as a method of destabilization. In the final section of the essay, I will identify two alternative Ophelia figures: Therese from Agnes Varda's 1965 film *Le Bonheur* and the titular heroine of Robert Bresson's 1967 film *Mouchette*. Just as Shakespeare characterizes Ophelia in the text, these filmmakers emphasize absence and excess in their representations of drowning women. Unlike the representations discussed in the second section, these images acknowledge the destabilizing function of Ophelia imagery and use it in a way that challenges the history of reductive images of her. I argue that these are Ophelia figures not because their narratives align precisely with hers, but because they use Ophelia imagery to suggest excess and the failures of representation.

By exploring what it is about Ophelia that creates such rampant intrigue and the ways in which artists and critics have attempted to contain and police their own fascination with her, we can finally come to see how Ophelia's cultural history speaks of a woman more complex than a uni-dimensionally "submissive" icon of feminine purity. At the same time, an attempt to simply "reclaim" Ophelia as a feminist icon would be a reductive task as well, since – although it might disguise itself as something more complex – it would amount to yet another method of containment. Instead of identifying Ophelia as an icon of *anything*, a more productive method of dealing with her is to analyze the ways in which she resists the containment of iconicity and to question the reasons why she poses a threat to the people who feel the need to place her within certain bounds. This methodology of analysis and questioning ultimately serves a purpose beyond even Ophelia herself. Critics have identified Ophelia as embodying something

innately feminine – one Victorian wrote of her possessing the “artless and childlike simplicity so essentially characteristic of the true woman.”⁸ When we look at the discourse about Ophelia and the way it echoes the reductive representations of her, we see the ways in which excess and containment resonate in general discourse about women.

I.

Saxo and Belleforest’s Proto-Ophelias

Before analyzing Ophelia’s language in the text of *Hamlet*, it is necessary to glance back to *Hamlet*’s source stories, which reveal a great deal about the link between ambiguity and Ophelia’s sexuality. Shakespeare’s most direct source for Hamlet is the tale of Amleth the Dane, as chronicled by Francois de Belleforest’s multivolume *Histoires tragiques*, published in 1570. Belleforest’s antecedent, as acknowledged in the subtitle of his work, is Saxo Grammaticus’s *Histoires danica*, which was written around 1208 but not published in French until 1514.⁹ Though both of these stories contain elements that differ wildly from the plot of Shakespeare’s text, each portrays figures that bear intriguing resemblances to Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Ophelia.

The story of Amleth the Dane had been passed down orally for centuries, but Saxo was the first author to write it down. The plot’s skeletal outline should sound familiar to readers of *Hamlet*: our hero Amlethus begins to act mad after his murderous uncle Fengo marries Gerutha, the hero’s recently widowed mother. Also among the cast of characters is an unnamed maid who is clearly a proto-Ophelia figure. Like Ophelia, the

maid has a relatively small role in the overall narrative arc, but her scenes in the story are both pivotal and captivating. In a scene whose plot function resembles *Hamlet*'s Nunnery scene, Fengo devises a plan that he believes will expose whether or not Amlethus is truly mad. He secretly plants this alluring maid in a spot where Amlethus is known to pass, believing that Amlethus will not be able to resist having sex with her. If Amlethus acts upon his sexual desire, Fengo believes that this will unequivocally prove that Amlethus is not mad. As Fengo predicts, Amlethus does indeed have sex with the willing maid, after which they realize that they are long-lost foster-siblings who have not seen each other since childhood. Amlethus asks the maid not to tell anyone about the incident, and she agrees to comply. In the end of this episode, Amlethus returns and, in a public space, tells everyone that he did have sex with the maid; his proclamation is met with cheers and adulation from the townsfolk. The maid, on the other hand, keeps her promise to Amlethus and says they did *not* sleep together.¹⁰ The scene ends in a rather paradoxical win-win situation. Since the listeners choose to "believe" both the parties involved, Amlethus is no longer condemned as mad, and the maid is able to maintain a public image as a virgin, paradoxically remaining "both sullied and remarkably pure."¹¹

The epistemology at work in this tale is fascinating: though Amlethus has been doing things deemed "mad" (such as riding a horse backwards), the exhibition of unbridled heterosexual male desire is enough to proclaim him sane, once and for all. The relationship between sanity and public expression of male sexuality is strikingly direct. Things are more complicated for the maid. As far as the plot is concerned, she is merely a sexual object. In using her the way he does – as a simple barometer for Amlethus's sexuality and sanity – Fengo marks her as a whore. In the end, though she remains

resolutely unreadable. The maid's (false) assertion of her purity allows Amlethus's façade of madness to subsist, although Amlethus's public declaration that they did sleep together serves to code doubly the maid's sexuality in the eyes of the townsfolk. She is not quite so ambiguous to the reader. Because we know that they did have sex and this public ambiguity is just a ploy to uphold Amlethus's mad façade, the semiotics of the maid are rather straightforward.

Belleforest's *Hystorie of Hamblet* leaves many of Saxo's plot points intact, but it adds complexity to Amleth's encounter with the maid. Unlike Saxo's maid, Belleforest's informs the hero of the plot his uncle has staged against him. This detail adds to their relationship "an emotional attachment transcending, but not excluding, sexual arousal." The two authors further differ in the extent to which they identify the maid as having consummated her relationship with Amleth. Saxo makes it explicit that the two have sex, but Belleforest leaves this detail tantalizingly unclear. As James Vest notes in his analysis of the tale, "The question of whether the couple actually make love remains as discreetly ambiguous for readers as for the courtiers in the tale."¹² As a result, the previously straightforward plot now dodges the reader's questions about both the maid's sexuality and, consequently, the hero's sanity.

Analyzing Ophelia through the lens of these antecedents shows not only that paradox and sexual ambiguity are built into her character, but also that the plot *relies* on our inability to read Ophelia's sexuality in a straightforward, decipherable fashion. Though Shakespeare's Ophelia differs from these maids in a number of significant ways, he still uses her as a test of Hamlet's sanity in the Nunnery scene. The test in Hamlet is whether the hero's strange actions can be explained by madness or by love (not pure

sexual desire, as it was in the source stories). Shakespeare's ambiguous semiotic characterization of Ophelia as both innocent and sexualized allows him to skirt the question that this test means to answer and leave the plot point of Hamlet's madness veiled. The result, though, is a heroine whose ambiguous language and ambiguous sexuality exemplify a resistance to containment and an inability to fit snugly within a one-dimensional role of feminine sexuality. Since so many characters in the play consider language to be a linear, univalent means of explanation, Ophelia's semiotic ambiguity is troubling in the realm of the court.

Sexuality and Silence

In Elsinore, silence works everyone into a frenzy. The presence of the ghost in the first scene disturbs Horatio not so much because of its phantasmal appearance but because it is mute; he repeats the command *speak* nine times in a little over a hundred lines, as though he cannot accept this vision as something real until it exhibits the power of utterance, until it is able to unite image and sound. This early incident sets the tone for the function of language throughout the play. Its presence is always privileged, while its absence is framed as tumultuous and evokes an almost universal anxiety. This pattern ripples throughout subsequent scenes: Hamlet's intrusion into Ophelia's closet evokes "fear" (2.1.86) because he does not speak; Ophelia subsequently punishes Hamlet by refusing to speak to him, believing that her silence will "den[y] his access to [her]" (2.1.108-9).

Indeed, many of the male characters in the play put tremendous stock in the presence of language as a linear means of explanation, a semiotic be-all and end-all.

Polonius, Claudius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all seek to pry out of Hamlet “a confession of his true state” (3.1.8-9), believing that his language will reveal a simple, lucid truth about the troubling state of his mind. Perhaps this is why Polonius is so thoroughly perturbed by Hamlet’s silent scene in Ophelia’s closet: if he refuses to express himself in language, how can he be interpreted? Is he any more real than the mute ghost? Based upon the faith they have in language’s ability to communicate certain, lucid meaning, Polonius and Claudius are the two characters in the play most closely associated with linear, patriarchal language. It is true that Shakespeare colors them as the play’s fool and villain, respectively. The eponymous hero – and most obvious point of identification in the play – exhibits a more complex understanding of how language works; we see this understanding in his constant use of puns and lines whose multivalence teasingly elude characters like Polonius. Still, the court is a space in which linear, masculine discourse is privileged and silence evokes an almost universal terror.

Identifying this attitude towards silence is crucial to an analysis of how feminine language is simply not represented in the court. Feminist theorists have written voluminously on the importance of silence and absence in patriarchal discourse. De Lauretis articulates this frustration: “The position of woman in language...is one of non-coherence; she finds herself only in a void of meaning, the empty space between the signs.”¹³ Luce Irigaray, in her pivotal work *This Sex Which Is Not One*, also writes of the feminine relationship to language as one of silence. She articulates the threat that sexual difference – as expressed by this feminine silence – poses for masculine discourse: “[Female] desire is often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole. Whereas it really involves a different economy more than

anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse.”¹⁴ The feminine relation to language, then, is characterized by a spillover out of a singular, linear system of meaning; it is a relation whose emphasis on excess suggests the inability for the system of language to communicate everything.

Irigaray and De Lauretis’s claims are strikingly relevant to the way both the male and female characters in *Hamlet* use language. Many of the male characters in the play put tremendous stock in words exhibiting fixed, universal meanings – meanings that create a tidy logic of cause-and-effect and eradicate, once and for all, the unpleasantness of uncertainty. When Polonius declares to Claudius, “I have found the very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (2.2.48-9), he shows the King Hamlet’s love letters to Ophelia. The faith that Polonius places on analysis, interpretation and simplistic causality also arises when he speaks with his daughter Ophelia, but he speaks differently to her. Polonius treats Ophelia as though she resides entirely outside the realm of “rational” interpretation. In a conversation with her about her potential desire for Hamlet, he tells Ophelia, “I must tell you/You do not understand yourself so clearly” (1.3.96-6). By Polonius’s logic, Ophelia’s self is something that an outside agent (such as her father or brother) can potentially understand and interpret more accurately than she can. Already, we see Ophelia associated with lack and excess: she is told she is on the outside of this world of masculine epistemology and self-knowledge. Ophelia responds with a line that bespeaks a rather distressing air of uncertainty: “I do not know my lord, what I should think” (1.3.104). Polonius is happy to oblige: “Marry, I will teach you” (1.3.105). This

education, of course, is an invitation for Polonius to do her “thinking” for her and thus forcibly contain her within the system of what he thinks is true.

This closed system of masculine interpretation not only forces Ophelia into a position of silence and self-confusion, but it also constantly links any articulation of her desire with danger and fear. Warning her against having a relationship with Hamlet, Laertes advises her, “Fear it, Ophelia...and keep you in the rear of your affection” (1.3.33-4). Echoing Polonius’s desire to “teach” her, Laertes’s assertion here advocates containment in the form of a kind of self-policing. In order to enter into the realm of patriarchal discourse, Ophelia must learn that self-knowledge – especially when it deals with her sexuality – is equated with fear. Further, it advocates policing the borders of oneself. The assertion “keep you in the rear of your affection” involves holding the rational part of the self (*you*) responsible for containing the “dangerous” parts of the self (*your affection*) within tight bounds.

Ophelia rejects the entrance into this system of meaning, but hers is a subtle and often overlooked rejection since it occurs at the level of language. Ophelia finds subtle ways to use the tools given to her through patriarchal discourse and unravel its closed system of meaning. De Lauretis articulates one of modern feminist criticism’s trickiest paradoxes – one that characterizes Ophelia’s situation remarkably well: “The only way to position oneself outside of [established] discourse is to displace oneself within it – to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (though in its words).”¹⁵ Ophelia’s language is characterized by an emphasis on questions and a penchant for “devious” answers. Both of these techniques allow her to complicate and destabilize the

meanings made by the system that threatens to contain her and render her desires inexpressible.

The Inquisitive Ophelia

We are introduced to Ophelia as Laertes converses with her before embarking on his voyage; he urges her, “do not sleep. But let me hear from you” (1.3.3-4). This line echoes Horatio’s petitions to the silent ghost; Ophelia cannot validate her identity or her role in this discourse until she uses language to express herself. Ophelia’s response – her first line in the play – is a terse question: “Do you doubt that?” (1.3.4). Laertes counters with a few lines critiquing his sister’s perceived passion for Hamlet, declaring it “not permanent, sweet, not lasting, The perfume and suppliance of a minute, No more” (1.3.8-9), to which Ophelia responds with another four-word question: “No more but so?” (1.3.9). Though they are similar in form, these two questions each serve a different function in the text. The first question is purely rhetorical; when asked if she will agree to stay up and converse with her brother, we take Ophelia’s replied query to mean, *Of course* or *Do not doubt that*. This introductory line paints Ophelia as loyal and close to her brother. In posing the next question, however, she seizes her brother’s freshly uttered words and transforms them into a question, challenging the veracity of his words. The closing phrase of Laertes’s lines, *No more*, is spoken with an ostensibly commanding tone of finality, but Ophelia deflates this with her response, *No more but so?* Though her words are similar to her brother’s, the act of reposing them as questions destabilizes the mastery that he believes they assert.

The destabilizing function of *No more but so?* asks us to revisit Ophelia's first question and rethink its role as purely rhetorical. Without any metrical disruption, Shakespeare could have easily written Ophelia's introductory line as a declarative sentence (such as *Do not doubt that*) that signified an almost identical meaning, but the grammatical parallel of her next line prompts us to consider the function of posing this first line as a question. The fact that Ophelia's first two lines are both four-syllable questions sets up a pattern in her speech: a tone of subtle destabilization that will resonate in her language throughout the rest of the play. Ophelia's act of forming a simple question from this declaration throws a wrench into the meaning and authority of her brother's lines: it not only undermines the veracity of what he says, but it invites the reader to listen to and read Laertes's commanding tone with a critical eye. The early pattern of Ophelia's questions-as-answers exposes the failure of Laertes's masculine language to account for everything and to abolish all uncertainty. Something else is always undermining his attempts to make every inquiry an open-and-shut case; even what he believes to be his final answers evoke a string of questions.

The question *Do you doubt that?* also extends beyond the bounds of one-dimensional rhetoric in its use of the word *doubt*, which prefigures the language of Hamlet's love letter that will appear later in the play:

“Doubt thou the stars are fire,
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar,
But never doubt I love” (2.2.116-9).

Though these lines do not appear in the text until later, when Polonius reads the letter aloud to Claudius, we can infer that Ophelia has already read the letter before her conversation with Laertes. The word *doubt* is extremely significant to Ophelia's

connection to Hamlet since, as the aforementioned link between Ophelia's sexual and semiotic ambiguity illustrates, it emblemizes the reader's understanding of their relationship. Hamlet's line *never doubt I love* is so fascinating because the reader is in a constant state of doubt about his love for Ophelia. Her immediate connection with the word *doubt* – the third word she utters in the play – shows Ophelia seizing the declarative language of the men around her and using the tool of inquiry to color it with an air of instability and ambiguity.

As in Ophelia's speech, the act of questioning is a prominent pattern in Luce Irigaray's writing, to the extent that she titles a chapter in *This Sex Which Is Not One* "Questions" and structures it around the answering of a number of queries she has been asked about her work. In the preface to this chapter, she writes, "The present book is, in a way, a collection of questions. It does not deal with all of them...Nor does it 'really' answer them. It pursues their questioning. It continues to interrogate."¹⁶ For Irigaray, questions are not means that masquerade as ends; they do not proclaim to be the gatekeepers of absolute truth in the way that Polonius's and Laertes's words do. Questions – especially when used, as Ophelia does in this exchange with her brother, to challenge the veracity of statements that are presented as fact – can point to an absence of truth, and for this reason can be quite unsettling to systems of meaning. In this way, questions can be more valuable than answers. When asked if it is possible for her to "answer' about 'woman,'" Irigaray responds: "I can answer neither about nor for 'woman.' If in some way I were to claim to be doing this – acceding to it, or demanding to do it – I would only have once again allowed the question of the feminine to comply with the discourse that keeps it repressed, censured, misunderstood at best."¹⁷ Questions

lend themselves to Ophelia's speech, then, because they allow her to simultaneously speak within patriarchal discourse while simultaneously destabilize its systematicity: to watch its spatial boundaries be defined (No more) but question what lies beyond the boundaries that contain it (No more but so?).

“Her speech is nothing.”

Questions also play a vital part in Ophelia's notorious exchange with Hamlet in 3.2, though this time she answers deviously. Fresh from the stinging “Nunnery scene,” Hamlet approaches Ophelia as the players prepare to perform their accusatory play. A ribald exchange ensues:

Hamlet: Lady, shall I lie in your lap? [*He lies at Ophelia's feet.*]

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 (3.2.115-24).

I am most interested in this dialogue because of its use of the word *nothing* – a neutral signifier of absence and passivity on the surface but charged by subterranean implications of physicality and eroticism, *nothing* is undoubtedly the single word that best sums up Ophelia's role in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare's readers would have been well aware that *nothing* was a common slang term for female genitalia. Its simultaneous declaration of female sexuality and absence expresses a horror intimately familiar to phallogentric discourse: the identification of the feminine as the bearer of the male lack.¹⁸ Even in its more traditional usage, *nothing* is usually a cause for anxiety. Ostensibly, it signifies an

absence of meaning, a sense of formlessness, a lack of structure. These elements recall Ophelia's language in the play. Elaine Showalter notes, "Ophelia's speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court."¹⁹

The lines of the "country matters" exchange between Hamlet and Ophelia vex readers who cling to the notion of an unequivocally virginal Ophelia. Read as though Ophelia were unequivocally innocent, the exchange depicts Hamlet speaking in sexually explicit language to a naive, young girl who is not offended because she does not understand him. However, these lines invite a more complex reading since they shroud Ophelia's understanding of Hamlet's sexual innuendos in characteristic ambiguity. In her first two lines, the transformation from *No* to *Ay* indicates that she did not at first think that Hamlet was proposing a more literal meaning of the question (*shall I lie my head upon your lap?*); if she did, she would have answered in the affirmative the first time. Her initial *No* suggests that she may be cognizant of the sexual double meaning of Hamlet's language from the start, and that she read this connotation in the line before the more literal meaning. It is significant that, after this transformation from *No* to *Ay*, Ophelia is the one who introduces the word *nothing* into the conversation. As a response to his question, "Do you think I meant country matters?", the language of Ophelia's declaration, "I think nothing, my lord" allows her to remain simultaneously inside and outside the structure of Hamlet's verbal game. This is why *nothing* is the perfect weapon for Ophelia: as De Lauretis points out, "the feminist critique is a critique of culture at once from within and from without."²⁰ Her dexterously ambiguous use of this word allows Ophelia again to remain exactly what the narrative necessitates: unreadable.

Madness and Sexuality

More than any other moment in the play, Ophelia's language contrasts most dramatically with the language men of the court in her mad scene. Prompted in the text by a stage direction that reads, "*Enter Ophelia [distracted]*" (4.5.20) (or, in the First Quarto, "Enter Ophelia playing on a lute, and her hair down, singing"), Ophelia comes before Claudius, Gertrude and Horatio and sings bawdy songs, the language of which are more explicitly and unequivocally sexualized than the language she has used up to this point. She sings,

"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.
An thou hadst not come to my bed" (4.5.60-6)

This song in particulate incites speculation about its parallel to Ophelia's situation with Hamlet. Its lyrics depict a young woman in a sexual catch-22: a man lures her into bed by promising subsequent marriage, and after they've had sex he refuses to marry her because she consented to sleep with him. Does this song parallel a similar sexual encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia that took place off stage? Or even if this encounter has not occurred, does it perhaps articulate Ophelia's nascent fears about the outcome of such an encounter for a young woman? The play certainly provokes us to ponder these questions, but in upholding the narrative necessity of keeping Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship tantalizingly ambiguous, it gives us no evidence with which we can assuredly answer either of them.

Before the “distracted” Ophelia enters the scene, a courtly Gentleman prepares Gertrude, Horatio and the audience for her jarring appearance with a few introductory lines:

Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily (4.5.7-13).

Given the previous emphasis on Ophelia’s use of the word *nothing*, the Gentleman’s first line is quite revealing. The sexual connotations of *Her speech is nothing* not only ascribes her language to the realm of the feminine, but it expresses an anxiety at the fact that this language exists freely beyond the bounds of patriarchal discourse and therefore it is not obliged to follow its rules. This is not the first time in the play these characters have heard the language of (supposed) madness, but they interpret and react to Ophelia’s mad language quite differently from Hamlet’s. Upon hearing Hamlet’s mad speech, Polonius remarks, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in’t” (2.2.207-8). He recognizes that even though there is something odd about the meaning of his words, their form remains familiar. Unlike the *method* that Polonius sees in Hamlet’s mad speech, Ophelia’s language is *unshaped* – beyond the strictures of form and frighteningly unfamiliar. But perhaps the Gentleman’s greatest fear is the semiotic anarchy this speech wreaks on the listener; each person who hears Ophelia’s speech seems to have their own individualized interpretation of it, as they “both the words up to fit their own thoughts.” This effect is a huge threat to the systematicity of patriarchal language – for a closed system of meaning must rely on each signifier signifying the same concept to each person

at all times. Ophelia's language unravels this structure and replaces it with a system of meaning that champions duplicity and deviousness: words that disguise themselves as "thought" but are really "nothing." Her language then esteems both multiplicity and individuality. Adriana Cavarero notes that as loosely as we try to interpret the meanings and trace the allusions of Ophelia's mad language, "there is also another decoding that seems to be understood only by Ophelia herself in the undecipherable world of madness."²¹

Ophelia's mad language finally allows her to wriggle free from a system that believes it can fully enclose her in interpretation. Bridget Lyons writes, "Those who meet her in her madness try to extract some meaning out of her gestures, as well as her words... Since she is a character who needs to be read by others and who often conveys riddling significances, she expresses the difficulty of straightforward iconographic interpretation in the play."²² Like her transformations of declarations into questions and her dexterous use of the word *nothing*, the language of Ophelia's madness keeps one foot within patriarchal discourse and one foot hovering elsewhere. She appropriates the bawdy language of shepherds' songs and recites them to the shocked characters in the play. Additionally, the fact that Ophelia expresses herself almost exclusively in song characterizes her movement through the scene as exhibiting a musical structure rather than a singular, linear narrative structure. We see in her madness the most explicit suggestions of excess and a noticeable inability to be contained within the language and logic of the court.

In her second mad scene, Ophelia continues her song but also distributes flowers to the people around her, identifying the different types as she goes: "There's fennel for

you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me...There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died" (4.5.179-84). Ophelia's relation to the iconography of flowers in this scene further characterizes the play's semiotic confusion concerning her sexuality. Flowers carry a connotation associated with feminine delicacy and purity. This association keeps with the benign and uni-dimensional innocence with which the play's characters want to identify her; earlier in the play Laertes dubs her the "rose of May." However, this mad scene uses the iconography that has hitherto signified her innocence and complicates it with bawdy connotations. Ophelia's dissemination of flowers to the men of the court can be read as an explicit and very public act of "deflowering."²³ Lyons further explores the sexual duplicity at work in this scene by tracing Shakespeare's allusion to Flora. Elizabethan audiences would have recognized the double coding present in the iconography of Flora: in Ovid, she is associated with pastoral purity, but in the Roman myths of Plutarch and Boccaccio she is a prostitute. By embracing the iconography of a figure who is at once virgin and whore, Ophelia shrouds her madness in sexual duplicity and ambiguity. The complex association with flowers in this scene shows the ways in which Ophelia resists the univalent machinery of iconography, as well as the way in which the language and actions of her madness keep her ambiguous sexual status both intriguing and ultimately veiled.

To Muddy Death

Duplicity, absence, sexual double meaning and all of the other textual elements that characterize Ophelia reach their height in the description of her death. The drowning

takes place off stage, far removed from the eyes of the court. Gertrude provides the only details we receive in a long, lyrical passage at the close of Act 4:

There is a willow grows askant the brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream:
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowsfeet, 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 crown'd weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
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 (4.7.166-83).

This description is both fascinating and puzzling because it eludes very basic narrative explanations. How does Gertrude know this happened? Did she see this take place? The passage exhibits an air of voyeurism – from the painstaking details about the brook's vegetation to the strikingly visual description of the drowning itself – but it is unclear who, if anyone, actually saw this incident happen. Gertrude does not specify if she was at the brook, if she received this information from a messenger who was, or if she puts this information together from a composite of speculations; regardless, the epistemological validity of this passage is ambiguous from the outset.

Ambiguity further permeates this scene because it blends images of chastity and sexuality. Although these lines characterize Ophelia as a passive innocent, “one incapable of her own distress,” their sexual imagery sets this innocence off balance. Gertrude identifies the phallic “long purples,” and then expounds upon their vulgar associations by

noting that “liberal shepherds give a grosser name” to these flowers “[b]ut our cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.” It seems strange that in the description of Ophelia’s death Gertrude spends two whole lines not only identifying these phallic images but also discussing their connotations of vulgarity. These lines reveal an element of eroticism surfacing in the midst of a florid, pastoral description, again creating a tension between Ophelia’s innocence and sexuality.

Perhaps the most striking element of this scene is the absence of the female body on stage. In contrast to the spectacular theatrics of most of the male deaths in the play (as well as the performative death speech such as Hamlet’s “O, I die, Horatio!” (5.2.333), Ophelia is not present on stage for the audience to view her in the moment of her death. Paradoxically, we must use language – rather than the visuals on stage – to “see” Ophelia in this moment. She has resisted the containment of patriarchal language throughout the play, and the description of her death is the first in the text to truly embrace her excess and ambiguity. At a moment of rapidly increasing velocity in the plot’s forward thrust, these lines represent a prolonged, lyrical pause. In terms of the narrative, they provide an excess of information – lingering upon miniscule atmospheric details more than perhaps any other passage in the text. Despite its considerable length and the minutiae of its imagery, however, this passage fails to fully communicate what happened to Ophelia. It evades a rather basic plot point – whether she committed suicide or accidentally fell in – by ascribing agency not to Ophelia herself but to her clothing. For all that these lines tell us, they are most jarring for what they fail to communicate. In this way, Gertrude’s speech is a strangely fitting exit for Ophelia. Since language failed to fully embody her in

the play, her “last word” is not a word at all – but a lingering air of unsettling ambiguity and a gesture towards representation’s inability to represent her completely.

II.

Perhaps the key to understanding the striking disparity between Ophelia’s relatively small role in the play and her overwhelming presence as an artistic muse lies in this discussion of ambiguity. Within the play, Ophelia is a lingering loose end whose motives remain ultimately unexplained. She retains her sexual and semiotic ambiguity even in her death; Olivier’s question goes unanswered even in the conclusion of the play. Ophelia – and all of the unanswered questions she provokes – haunts the atmosphere of Act V after her death. This haunting absence is further augmented by the fact that, in the veritable bloodbath that ends the play, we see – and thus conclusively experience – the death of nearly every other character in the play. We can only assume that the artistic and cultural fascination with Ophelia arises from this tantalizing air of ambiguity that lingers beyond *Hamlet*’s conclusion.

This ambiguity with which Ophelia speaks and ultimately exits the play is unsettling and causes anxiety for the characters around her. When all of the onlookers in the mad scene express their horror at Ophelia’s coarse and unintelligible language, Claudius simply cries, “Pretty Ophelia” (4.5.56). In this utterance, he exposes the tension between the image of a beautiful, “chaste” girl and the coarse language she speaks. As I have shown, the textual Ophelia is not the one-dimensionally “Pretty Ophelia,” but Claudius’s articulation of this epithet illustrates his desire to contain her within this role.

Ophelia's sexual and semiotic ambiguity evokes anxiety not only in characters in the play but also in readers as well as many of the directors, painters, filmmakers who have created representations of her.²⁵ The bold, sexual language of Ophelia's mad scenes and her bawdy exchanges with Hamlet have always been particular points of anxiety. Writing in 1736, George Stubbs remarked, "The Scenes of Ophelia's Madness are to me very shocking, in so noble a piece as this, I am not against her having been represented mad; but surely, it might have been done with less Levity and More Decency."²⁶ In attempts to impose this kind of "Decency" on the play text, directors began censoring Ophelia's lines around the beginning of the 18th century. Not surprisingly, Ophelia's mad songs and her dialogues with Hamlet were the most frequently cut. These attempts to "sanitize" Ophelia – which were quite commonplace — prefigure the problem I will identify in many representations of her: through the containment of censorship they deny her ambiguity, which is the very thing about her that fascinates them in the first place. This sanitization then exposes not only a tension inherent in Ophelia's character but also a tension within many readers of *Hamlet*. Although they respond to the uncertainty evoked by Ophelia, their attempts to reduce her to the benign "Pretty Ophelia" expose a denial of their own fascination with excess and show them at war with their personal desires.

These attempt to "sanitize" Ophelia brought about the traditional effect of sexual repression: Alan R. Young notes the irony that "such strategies charged the part [of Ophelia] with a hidden layer of eroticism."²⁷ Editing Ophelia to fit her into the role of the one-dimensionally pure maiden only was clearly a reductive strategy that only made audiences fixate further on her sexuality.

However, these methods of censorship did shine a spotlight on Ophelia's most passive qualities, and critics at the time applauded this. Writing in 1866, American psychiatrist A.O. Kellogg remarked

“Of all Shakespeare's female characters, Ophelia is, par excellence, the most feminine; and in her, it strikes us, we perceive a closer approximation to the “divine perfection of a woman,” than is to be found in any other of the poet's delineations...she escapes all contamination by the innate purity of her natural character, and to the end maintains that artless and childlike simplicity so essentially characteristic of the true woman.”²⁸

Another said of Ophelia,

I know nothing beyond it for love, for tenderness, for constancy, and feminine sweetness...Gentleness seems to be the predominant quality of this interesting heroine...and I know scarcely anything in a young female...more attractive or pleasing than a gentle demeanour.²⁹

These comments are troubling for two reasons. First, they are rather selective views of her; for one to understand Ophelia's predominant quality as *gentleness*, one must deny the sexual implications of her language in the “country matters” exchange and plug one's ears for the duration of her mad scenes. To ascribe her the virtue of constancy, one must fly in the face of the ambiguity that is so thoroughly a part of Ophelia's nature. But beyond that, the second reason these remarks are unsettling is that they characterize a dangerous but frustratingly common tendency: that of linking this pure, sanitized Ophelia with ideal femininity or the “essential characteristic[s] of the true woman.” These critics show all that is at stake when we selectively represent Ophelia – when we choose to see in her only the qualities we deem agreeable, unchallenging and pleasant to look at. We risk not only muzzling Ophelia, but muzzling all that is encompassed by the feminine. As

I've pointed out, though, these strategies of interpretation suggest a tension in and policing of the viewer's desire just as much as they suggest the multivalent excess of the object being viewed. Because the afore-cited critical viewpoints were so commonly echoed, they provide an accurate sketch of the Ophelia depicted in representations at that time. In the four images I discuss in this section, there is an internal battle between Shakespeare's Ophelia (as discussed in section I) and the critics' Ophelia (discussed above).

Bostock and Hayter's Keepsake Ophelias

Images from mid-nineteenth century annuals reveal a good deal of information about early representations of Ophelia. Annuals were a Victorian middle-class phenomenon; they included portraits, poems and engravings concerning subjects that posed "but little burthen to the mind, and nothing to oppress it."³⁰ Marketed as gifts for men to buy for women; their images had to be desirous enough for men to want to purchase them, but they also had to be "delicate" enough to appeal to stereotypical feminine sensibility. Kimberly Rhodes notes, "Each of these volumes contrived to present and market images of women as beautiful, delicate, young and innocent objects to a middle-class market."³¹ They therefore illustrated politics of gender representation intersecting with economics.

The most popular annual was *The Keepsake*, which was headed by engraver Charles Heath. Capitalizing on his success, Heath published a number of special edition volumes in addition to his annual Keepsakes; these volumes included two editions featuring portraits of Shakespearean characters, *The Shakespeare Gallery; Containing the*

Principal Female Characters in the Plays of the Great Poet (1836-7) and *The Heroines of Shakespeare* (1848). The former edition includes an engraving of Ophelia based on a design by John Bostock, while the latter edition's portrait of Ophelia was designed by John Hayter.³²



Figure 1: John Bostock's Ophelia, 1836.

Bostock's Ophelia is a beautiful, idealized young maiden with a serene facial expression. She gazes almost directly at the viewer with pure, limpid eyes. It is clear that this is a depiction of Ophelia after her mad scene, for all the text's signifiers of madness are present. Her tresses are loose, delicately mussed and interwoven with garlands of

flowers. The outdoor setting and the plants surrounding her subtly suggest the setting of the brook – the place where Ophelia will soon drown herself. However, the unpleasantness associated with suicide and insanity is entirely absent from this image, and that is because none of the inanimate signifiers of madness in the picture have any bearing on the physicality of Ophelia’s body. Her placid face does not hint at madness in the slightest; her pose – two hands delicately clutching loose flowers against her bosom – suggests tender longing and pathos in its most winsome form. In short, Bostock’s Ophelia poses no challenge to the Keepsake motto, “but little burthen to the mind, and nothing to oppress it.”



Figure 2: John Hayter’s Ophelia, 1848.

The chief characteristics of Hayter’s Ophelia, which appeared a little over a decade later, are also delicacy and inoffensiveness. Again, the sartorial signifiers of madness are present (draped clothing; floral garlands), while the physiognomy suggests nothing more than lovelorn yearning (the accompanying text describes Ophelia as a “young and loving

maiden”). Unlike Bostock, Hayter depicts Ophelia in profile, gazing down at an oblique angle. Though this denial of eye contact with the viewer suggests an Ophelia that is more withdrawn into her own interiority, it is actually even less disruptive than Bostock’s Ophelia, whose direct and penetrative gaze at the viewer is the sole jarring element in an otherwise emotionally benumbed image. Hayter’s drawing also spatially decontextualizes the heroine; by placing her in the void of a blank background, he erases even the indirect connotation of impending doom associated with the imagery of the brook. Cleansed of anything that might “oppress the mind” of the viewer, this is an Ophelia who exists outside of her setting, her madness, her suffering – essentially outside of her own self.

Though both of these images feebly attempt to suggest that Ophelia is mad because of the textual associations with flowers and unkempt hair, neither of them makes any effort to depict Ophelia’s madness as an actual disease. Further, this conception of “madness” actually becomes linked with sexual availability. Alan R. Young suggests that Bostock and Hayter’s Ophelias

were clearly intended to show innocent ‘beauties,’ but one can see submerged in each quite different elements. The signs of her madness remain present, but her disarray is transmuted into something erotically-charged that presents the vulnerable female to the male gaze, masked in the guise of innocence and idealized beauty. Both pictures, for example, exploit the erotic potential of Ophelia’s long loose hair, and, while Bostock exposes her lower arms, Hayter exposes the whole of Ophelia’s left shoulder, which is provocatively turned toward the viewer.³³

Again, these images appear to be “sanitized” representations of a chaste, innocent Ophelia, but they are also charged with the erotic connotations of mussed hair and exposed flesh. This eroticism, however, is distinctly different from the ambiguous sexuality that characterizes Ophelia in the text. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia’s double-coding as

innocent and sexualized renders her unavailable – somehow impenetrable to interpretation because she is essentially unreadable. Bostock and Hayter, however, attempt to depict an Ophelia who is available to the viewer's gaze and able to be contained within reductive iconography of feminine purity. When considered alongside the play, these attempts at containment prove unsuccessful. The very iconography these artists use to suggest feminine innocence and latent sexual availability – flowers, tussled hair – suggest madness. Further, their sexual connotations in the play suggest not a passive, penetrable eroticism but an ambiguous sexuality that is distant and unavailable because it is unreadable. These images' adherence to the univocal meaning of iconography fail to acknowledge the fact that Shakespeare's Ophelia consistently resists containment and uni-dimensionality.

To save from cataloguing every image of Ophelia from this era, I suggest that these two images characterize the images' most prevalent trend: failed attempts to edit out the elements of Ophelia that are unsettling and instead augmenting that in her which can be deemed "pleasurable." As a result of this censorship, the Ophelia that begins to proliferate in popular culture is not the Ophelia of the text – the inquisitive, double-speaking Ophelia – but this sanitized version of Ophelia exemplified by the representations that attempted to contain her within the iconography of one-dimensional feminine purity.

Millais's *Ophelia*

We cannot speak of representations of Ophelia and without mentioning John Everett Millais. His 1852 painting *Ophelia* is undoubtedly the most widely recognized

and emblematic image of her in cultural consciousness, and the strange reception it received upon its exhibition tells a great deal about popular perceptions of Ophelia as well as restrictive ideals of feminine beauty. Pre-Raphaelite artists like Millais had a particular fascination with Ophelia. A number of other artists – including Arthur Hughes and Dante Gabriel Rossetti – associated with the movement painted their own Ophelias, but Millais's representation is most fitting to discuss here because of its unrivaled role as the defining image of Ophelia in our cultural consciousness.



Figure 3: John Everett Millais, Ophelia, 1852.

What set this painting apart at the time of its exhibition – and what made many critics uneasy about it – was the fact that Millais chose to depict a moment not often seen in representations of Ophelia: the exact moment of her death. Previously, most images of Ophelia by the brook had shown her idyllically languishing around the water, perhaps

weaving a strand of garlands. To actually show her *in* the water – hovering disturbingly between life and death – was something of a revolution. Predictably, this bold depiction ruffled some critical feathers. A few reviewers were so distressed by this image that they went beyond critiquing the painting and attacked Millais himself. One critic remarked, “There must be something strangely perverse in an imagination which souses Ophelia in a weedy ditch, and robs the drowning struggle of that love-lorn maiden of all pathos and beauty, while it studies every petal of the darnel and anemone floating on the eddy.”³⁴ This comment articulates another marked difference about Millais’s painting; in contrast with the decontextualized backgrounds of the *Keepsake* images, it painstakingly focuses on the minutiae of the setting; finely nuanced bushes, flowers and moss surround Ophelia’s ornately clothed, floating body. Some critics believed that this blunted the emotional impact of Ophelia’s “pathos,” rendering her as much feeling as the insentient clumps of moss that float beside her.

Millais also challenged critical notions of Ophelia’s physical appearance. Critic David Masson remarked of the painting, “The face of Ophelia, however admirable the expression depicted in such a face, is not the face of the real Ophelia from *Hamlet*, but a shade too fair in colour, and decidedly too marked and mature in form.”³⁵ Masson asserts the problematic notion that “the real Ophelia from *Hamlet*” actually has a face – one with such strict definition that a depiction that is just one “shade” off betrays it. This remark, along with much of the critical discourse about Ophelia at the time, shows a troubling intersection between feminine representations and feminine ideals. Viewers bring to these representations preconceived and rather restrictive ideas about Ophelia’s physiognomy. In the wake of images like those in *The Keepsake* and of the tendency to censor Ophelia’s

unpleasant lines, these preconceived images often represent a benign, censored ideal of feminine beauty. Readers and viewers began to conceive of Ophelia not as the ambiguous, unsettling force that she is in *Hamlet*, but rather as a fully present icon of ideal feminine beauty.

By depicting an Ophelia with an unconventional appearance in an underrepresented moment, Millais's painting differed from traditional images of Ophelia and challenged discourses of the feminine ideal. Although it was controversial in its first years of exhibition, this painting has become thoroughly indoctrinated in our cultural consciousness. Alan R. Young describes the image's ubiquity: "Millais's image of Ophelia in the brook has become the received image of Ophelia's fate, almost as recognizable as Hamlet, the man with the skull, even to those who may never have seen or read *Hamlet*."³⁶ The influence of this image has also manifested in many other prominent representations of Ophelia, such as the drowning scenes in Laurence Oliver's and Franco Zeffirelli's film adaptations. As familiar as we are with this image, it remains fascinating and unsettling – from the chilling, vacant stare on Ophelia's face to the way the bottom her ornate garment almost seems to dissolve into the water. Because of these and many more haunting details, Millais captures the unsettling nature of Shakespeare's Ophelia. Still, much of this painting is at odds with the text of *Hamlet*, even though it ostensibly pays close attention to this text.

Millais's Ophelia embodies a representational irony: it attempts to depict every minute detail of the text in a moment when the text challenges the very notion of representation. As previously discussed, absence of the female body, muddled semiotics, and epistemological uncertainty are all heightened in Gertrude's description of Ophelia's

death. These elements combine to describe Ophelia's resistance to containment –within Gertrude's words, within the narrative of the play, or within representation as a whole. This resistance to containment is absent from Millais's image. Ostensibly, he is painstakingly "faithful" to the text, cataloguing the minutiae of the vegetation that Gertrude describes in this passage. However his near-sighted attention to the imagery of the passage fails to recognize that this is not a passage about imagery at all; within the context of the play it communicates complex ideas about absence and the failures of representation. Millais's image asserts, contradictorily, the ability for Ophelia to be contained within representation – to be lucidly visible in a moment when the text decrees her invisible. Unlike the textual representation of her death, Millais's painting renders Ophelia's absent body fully present as an object of the viewer's voyeuristic gaze. Although Millais's painting appears subversive and unsettling on the surface, it is yet another image that goes against Shakespeare's text by attempting to contain her. In contrast with Shakespeare, Millais proclaims that even in a moment of heightened semiotic ambiguity, Ophelia can be fully contained within representation.

Diamond's "Diagnostic" Photography

The development of photography in the mid-nineteenth century marks another important signpost in the history of Ophelia's representation, and Hugh Diamond's photographs of mental patients are perhaps the most noteworthy example from this medium. Diamond was the superintendent of the Surrey County Lunatic Asylum from 1848 to 1858; he was also an avid and well-respected photographer. He was interested not only in taking artistic photographs of inanimate objects but also diagnostic

photographs that attempted to capture and depict his patients' mental illnesses. Diamond was fascinated with the intersection of art and diagnosis, and this element comes through strongly in the pictures he took of his female inmates. Though these pictures were identified as "diagnostic," Diamond had a penchant for dressing his patients up in costumes laden with iconographical meaning. In one of his photographs, for example, "he provided a patient with a straw hat, handkerchief knotted around her neck, and a chicken as props to suggest her rustic origins."³⁷ Similarly, in one of his most famous and haunting pictures, Diamond adorned a female patient with the iconography of Ophelia (draped clothing, a laurel wreath upon her head) and "diagnostically" linked the living, breathing madwoman with the literary heroine.



Figure 4: Hugh Diamond's Ophelia.

In this photograph, Diamond attempts to produce a diagnostic rendering of female madness. Since the process of diagnosis relies on consistently identifiable traits, a diagnostic image must represent traits that are not only visibly and uniformly readable but also semiotically stable. The diagnostic image then creates a system of codes by which the processes of examination, identification and categorization can take place. With this diagnostic photograph, Diamond attempts to establish a system of fixed, visual signs. This image thus attempts to contain feminine madness within a system of representation – a system through which women will then be able to express and communicate their madness, and male doctors will be able to identify signs and diagnose their condition. The fixity of this system, as well as its defining gender dynamic, reveals problematic power relations between doctor/photographer and patient/subject. As Kimberly Rhodes points out, “When Diamond asserted medical and photographic control over his female patients, especially the one dressed like Ophelia, he was underscoring the power relationships between doctor and patient as well as man and woman: men diagnosed and therefore ideologically controlled – visually and scientifically – female madness.”³⁸ The male doctor/photographer creates and polices the iconography through which women communicate their madness. If the visible symptoms of their condition are not contained within this fixed system, their madness is incommunicable and runs the risk of remaining undiagnosed and untreated.

Diamond's photographs were not purely diagnostic, even though he identifies them as such. He does not simply photograph madwomen in their natural state, but rather

he costumes, directs and poses the inmates to adhere to his own conception of female madness. By calling scrupulously staged photographs “diagnostic,” Diamond attempts to downplay the fact that he has meddled with the visual signs of these women’s conditions. However, this meddling – along with his invocation of Ophelia – serves to disrupt the fixity and effectiveness of his representational system.

The image further fails to contain its subject based upon its allusion to Ophelia. Although Diamond does not title the above photograph “Ophelia,” literary scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Lisa Nicoletti and Kimberly Rhodes all identify this woman as an Ophelia figure.³⁹ They also agree that the photograph depicts visual signs that make clear enough connections with Shakespeare’s heroine that most nineteenth century viewers would be able to make this link as well. Its allusion to Ophelia represents not only the staged nature of this photograph but also its attempted link between representing living madwomen and representing a fictional character. Ophelia’s presence in this image, however, does not help Diamond maintain the fixity of a representational system of female madness. As we have seen, Ophelia represents a challenge to semiotic fixity. Diamond attempts to use Ophelia imagery as a tool to police and stabilize the signs of feminine madness, but her presence in this image has just the opposite effect. Since her ambiguous role in the text creates a resistance to containment, Ophelia is not a steady icon of anything. Even her madness resists containment within a patriarchal system of interpretation, as we’ve seen in dismissals of her speech as “nothing” and “unshaped.” Ophelia’s madness exists in excess of a stable and certain system of iconicity and representation; she is fascinating because she represents, to use Roland Barthes’ terminology, “the terror of the uncertain sign.”⁴⁰ Diamond’s attempt to use her as a stable

sign that identifies and communicates a code of feminine madness is unsuccessful, for she resists containment in a system that can be interpreted, diagnosed and controlled by men. Ophelia's fascinating ambiguity – and the terror of semiotic destabilization – ultimately undermines the restrictive function of Diamond's diagnostic image.

III.

Although a number of scholars have agreed that the iconography in Hugh Diamond's photograph does indeed signify an allusion Ophelia, we must recognize the inherent precariousness of identifying a woman an "Ophelia figure." With systems of both lingual and visual representation, we have seen the ways in which Ophelia resists containment. The identification of an Ophelia figure, then, might seem like just another form of containment – and I agree that this task is never far from the potential danger of containment. Kimberly Rhodes articulates the problem inherent in this task:

By labeling untitled images of women who appear to be mad 'Ophelia,' one inscribes an easy narrative on the image deflecting some of the unease one feels in observing the image. The cause of the woman's distress is reduced to specific disappointments and tragedies – the death of a father, the loss of a lover – rather than suggestive of a more foreboding and malignant social malaise. We comfort ourselves by placing the woman in a symbolic, iconic realm.⁴¹

I agree that this act of "labeling" can reveal a desire to placate the anxiety that some of these images evoke; it speaks to the anxiety surrounding "uncertain signs" and cultural inclinations towards reducing them and outlining sharply defined edges. However, Rhodes fails to propose any alternative to viewing Ophelia's motivation as easily

intelligible and readable – as viewing her as the sum of her narrative parts. We know that Ophelia is not this sum at all; she is that which spills over in excess of the narrative. To suggest that defining a woman an Ophelia figure is simply imposing a narrative upon her – “the death of a father, the loss of a lover” – is to suggest that Ophelia herself can be contained within an understanding of these plot points.

In this section, I will show the ways in which an imposition of figuredness does not necessarily have to be an imposition of linear narrative. I will identify two Ophelia figures: Therese, a character from Agnes Varda’s 1965 film *Le Bonheur*; and the titular character from Robert Bresson’s 1967 film *Mouchette*. They are Ophelia figures not because their biographies align so precisely with hers, but because they use Ophelia imagery to suggest a resistance to containment within representation. Rather than feebly attempting to undermine their own fascination with Ophelia’s ambiguity, these representations embrace the terror of the uncertain sign by using Ophelia’s presence to suggest the failure of representation. Varda and Bresson use Ophelia imagery not to placate the viewer with pleasant stereotypes of feminine delicacy but to suggest narrative ambiguity and emotional confusion.

Le Bonheur

Made directly after *Cleo From 5 to 7* (her only bona fide contribution to the French New Wave), *Le Bonheur* is Agnes Varda’s exploration of marital happiness in a world where modernization and alienation are inextricable bedfellows. The film follows Francois and Therese – an achingly clichéd portrait of the perfect couple – and their two young children. Their relationship goes awry when Francois begins a clandestine affair

with Emilie, a young postal clerk. He does not believe that the affair makes him love his wife any less; and when he finally confesses it to her on an idyllic day trip to the lake, he tells her “It’s like if I had ten arms to hug you. And you ten arms for me. We’re all mixed together. But I found myself with extra arms. I’m taking nothing from you, see?” Therese does not appear affected by the news; she and Francois make love and then fall asleep. But when Francois wakes up, he finds that Therese is gone. After a frenzied search with his two children by his side, Francois comes to a crowd of onlookers huddled around Therese’s limp body; she has drowned in the lake. Francois mourns her loss and thinks of calling it off with Emilie, but in the end she decides to take over Therese’s role and raise the children. The film closes with an unsettling montage – almost identical to one towards the beginning of the film – in which the wife/mother does a number of familiar household chores and puts the children to bed.



Figure 5: Francois takes Therese’s body in his arms.



Figure 6: Therese clings to a branch.

Varda depicts Therese's drowning scene in a haunting and unconventional way; its meditative style is such a departure from the rest of the film that it stands out as an obvious climax. We do not see Therese disappear; Varda cuts from a shot of the couple falling asleep to Francois waking up without her. His subsequent search is cut according to the usual rules of continuity editing. Once Francois sees Therese's body, however, these rules go out the window. As Francois takes his wife in his arms, Varda depicts his emotion through a series of subjective cuts that disrupt the hitherto conventional temporality of the scene. We see Francois, facing the camera, sink to the ground and cradle his wife's head – the top of which is towards us, so we can't get a good view of her face or her body, only her hair and her dress (Figure 5). Silent and nearly motionless, this plaintive shot continues for a few seconds and then is interrupted by a jump cut that repeats the shot's initial action – Francois sinking to the ground and cradling his wife's head – again, as though this moment were jammed in the projector of Francois's subjectivity, sputtering with repetition. Varda repeats this cut eight times. Then, just

when the pattern of these jump cuts becomes familiar, Varda interrupts this meditative repetition by briefly intercutting it with a shot of Therese splashing in the water, desperately trying to cling to a tree branch (Figure 6). The image is inherently powerful, but punctuated by this pattern of editing the effect on the viewer is downright disturbing. Varda cuts to this image of Therese once more before cutting back to the image shot of Francois and his wife's body on which the scene concludes. This scene is a disruption of the linear structure of the film. It indicates not only a temporary shift from objective to subjective temporality but a shift to a doubled perspective.

The composition of the shot that shows Therese grabbing for the branch looks strikingly like Millais's painting. Therese is such a small element in the frame – dwarfed by the surrounding flora even more dramatically than Millais's Ophelia is – but the frenzied motion of her head and arms splashing on the surface of the water makes her the clear focal point of the image. Though its visual elements are reminiscent of this iconic painting, Varda's image differs from Millais's in two crucial ways. First, Varda does not shy away from depicting female suffering. We cannot see Therese's facial expression in detail, but the movements of her floundering body communicate her desperation with unsettling clarity. If Therese chose to commit suicide, which is a conclusion that the film's narrative beckons us to make, this shot shows us her pathetically second guessing her action in the last moments of her life. Varda cuts away the moment Therese's head sinks below the water, showing us the final and most pronounced instant of her suffering. Millais, not to mention any of the other painters who depicted even more “sanitized” versions of Ophelia, were certainly not so unflinching as to show us what Varda does. The second way in which Varda's representation differs from Millais's is that she denies

us any visual mastery of the image. Unlike Millais's painting, which attempts to contain Ophelia fully within the image, Varda's Ophelia imagery evades containment because it vanishes before we can fully interpret it. The images of Therese come to us in brief spurts of only 20 frames – less than a second. The effect is akin to standing atop a wobbly chair to see over a wall, only to have the chair fall from under you the instant you've seen what's on the other side. Therese cannot become, as Showalter calls Millais's Ophelia a "reduc[tion] to one more visual object,"⁴² for the lake, the flora and the woman are all gone before we can blink. Varda uses the brevity of this image to subvert the mastery of the spectator – to kick the chair out from under the male gaze and the scopophilia and voyeurism inherent in representations of Ophelia's death.

Therese's drowning scene is both different from the representations I discussed in section II and closer to the representation of Ophelia in Shakespeare's text because it functions on a simultaneous sense of excess and absence. As it is presented to us, Therese's death is doubled. We get two perspectives of this event: the one given by the image of Francois holding her and the one given by the image of Therese drowning. In a film that has, up until that point, been contained within the structure of a linear form, this scene is quite literally in excess of the narrative. We do not need to see both of these images to know what happened. And yet, paradoxically, seeing both of these images cannot communicate what happened at all. We never get a premortem glimpse into Therese's interiority, and -- much like Ophelia -- her language in the film never seems to reveal to us exactly what she is thinking. Further, the plot leads us to believe that Therese committed suicide, but without seeing the action firsthand can we even be certain about

this conclusion? Could she have fallen in? With their emphasis on absence, the doubled images of Therese's drowning tantalize us with what we cannot possibly know.

On what evidence can we make the claim that Therese is an Ophelia figure? Though there are a few other moments in the film that subtly nudge us in this direction (a man on television makes an allusion to *Hamlet*; Therese wears floral dresses in nearly every scene; a woman at the lake tells us that when she was last seen alive, Therese was "holding flowers") the visual elements of the drowning scene are the most persuasive indicators. But if we object to this, if we believe that this ground is too flimsy on which to erect something as monumental as figuredom, if we desire more conclusive narrative evidence – "the death of a father, the loss of a lover" – we risk falling into the trap that Rhodes does in the quote that began this section: we risk reducing Ophelia to the elements of her narrative. Varda's use of Ophelia imagery in *Le Bonheur* produces a similar effect to the one Shakespeare achieves in Gertrude's description of the drowning. Instead of highlighting that which can be expressed in representation, these scenes draw attention to moments in which representation fails to communicate everything.

Mouchette

Mouchette's eponymous protagonist is a poor, early adolescent girl plagued by a harsh family life and the intense scrutiny of her provincial community. Her mother is sick, – leaving Mouchette to care for her infant sister – her father is a drunk, her classmates spurn her because she is poor, and everyone else in town is too busy condemning her insubordinate behavior to offer her help. One evening, when walking through the woods (Mouchette's one place of escape), a fierce storm hits and she must

take shelter in the house of Arsene, a local gamekeeper. After Arsene has a seizure, Mouchette tenderly cares for him; Arsene takes advantage of this gesture of goodwill and rapes the defenseless Mouchette. The next morning, she returns home to the scorn of her family members, who believe that she is to blame for her disappearance. Mouchette's mother has taken a turn for the worse during the night, and she passes away before Mouchette can communicate her story. Mouchette goes into town to prepare for the burial, but the townswomen immediately notice scratches on Mouchette's breast and condemn her a "little slut." An old woman beckons her into her house, communicates her grief over her mother's death and gives Mouchette funeral dress for her mother. Mouchette goes back to the woods, her place of escape, and, wrapping herself in the white dress, tumbles down a hill into the water, drowning herself.

Bresson is a renegade in the tradition of cinema; no one before or after him has made a film that looks or feels quite like one of his. Though Varda and the other New Wave filmmakers saw Bresson as an inspiration, – a figure of individualism and nonconformity in the overwhelming sea of convention that was pre-1960s French cinema – the style of his films is quite different from the fast-paced spontaneity of the Nouvelle Vague. Bresson's style favors stillness, restraint, silence, and a release from "culturally-determined modes of seeing."⁴³ Bresson's cinema seeks to rewire our knee-jerk interpretations of familiar images; he wants us to analyze our very method of seeing and consider what cannot be captured within its boundaries, what lingers outside the margins of the visible. Lucy Stone McNeece sums up this function of Bresson's unconventional style:

Bresson has tried to lead his viewers toward insights that violate 'reasonable,' or conventional interpretations. For

Bresson, such interpretations are grounded in ideological concepts that obscure concrete and heterogeneous truths. Bresson's 'analytical' approach to filmmaking is aimed at dismembering the cultural discourse about the world imbedded in familiar words and images that keeps us at a distance from the real...Bresson uses techniques of defamiliarization, obliging us to attend to a variety of signs other than the purely visual.⁴⁴

One of Bresson's favorite "techniques of defamiliarization" is his renunciation of the establishing shot. According to the rules of continuity editing, each sequence should open with a wide shot of the scene's setting, firmly rooting the viewer in recognizable space and time. Bresson virtually never uses establishing shots. Instead, he often opens his scenes with fragmented close-ups of characters' body parts (he has a particular affinity for disorienting close-ups of hands). The effect is an immediate immersion into the narrative's human conflict, rather than the particulars of the scene's context. Further confusing the rules of continuity editing, "Bresson rarely uses the [facial] close-up as a means of emphasis or psychological focus as many filmmakers do; instead he employs it as an instrument of dissociation, to break up false images of totality and univocal meaning."⁴⁵ The viewer who attempts to assemble Bresson's metonymic puzzle pieces and expects to be rewarded with a unified whole will be quite unsettled by a film like *Mouchette*. Much like the language of Ophelia, Bresson's filmic language leaves us in a place where any attempt to make meaning "univocal" is an inherent reduction.

Bresson films *Mouchette*'s drowning scene in a way that highlights absence and uses fragmentation to complicate unequivocal meaning. Throughout the scene, traditional signifiers of pathos are nowhere to be found. *Mouchette* does not cry; her face is – as it has been throughout most of the film – virtually expressionless. The traditional visual association of her body as she tumbles down the hill would, out of context, indicate

playfulness. The viewer's discomfiture in this scene arises from the misalignment between the signifiers we expect from a protagonist's death scene and the signifiers that Bresson gives us.



Figure 5: Mouchette tumbles toward the water.

After she leaves the old woman's house, Mouchette comes to a wooded hill overlooking a brook. She holds the crisp, white funeral dress up to her body, but it catches on a thorny bush and rips. Bresson then cuts to a rather idyllic shot of the vegetation surrounding the brook. Mouchette wraps her body in the torn, white dress, lies on the ground and tumbles down the hill towards the water, but her momentum slows and she stops in the grass. She climbs back up the hill and rolls herself down again. Bresson shows this in a series of static, overhead shots; Mouchette tumbles through the shot, and the camera lingers on the empty frame for a few moments longer than would be usual, emphasizing her absence from the composition. Again, she stops short of the water. This time she is impeded by a shrub right next to the water; as she lies tangled in the brookside vegetation for a moment, the composition is strikingly reminiscent of a Pre-Raphaelite

representation of Ophelia. Bresson films Mouchette's third roll down the hill much in the same way (her body moves in and out of empty frames), until finally she rolls out of frame and, as Bresson holds his shot on the grass, we hear an off-camera splash. Bresson cuts to the brook and shows us the aftermath of the splash – choppy waves and subsequent ripples – but we do not see Mouchette's body. She is gone.



Figure 6: The final image of Mouchette: the terror of the empty frame.

In considering Mouchette as an Ophelia figure, the most important aspect of this scene is the fact that Bresson chooses not to show Mouchette's body entering, or in, the water. Though he visually alludes to the representations of Ophelia discussed in section II (see Figure 5 and its similarity to the composition of Millais's painting), Bresson also thwarts the voyeuristic pleasure these images provide the viewer by displacing the female body. If we accept De Lauretis's definition of the male gaze – the “representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure”⁴⁶ – then we can say that Bresson depicts Mouchette's drowning in a way that subverts the gaze by dislodging the point

upon which it has been taught to focus. Recalling Barthes's "terror of the uncertain sign," the final image of *Mouchette* forces us to view something even more distressing to the male gaze: nothing. Again, this representation echoes the tone of Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death. *Mouchette* cannot be contained within the frame – or even the diegesis of the film – just as Ophelia ultimately cannot be contained within the text.

Therese and *Mouchette* are what I would call alternative Ophelia figures, since their identities are not aligned with hers in every way. Neither of them is identified as mad – and I am not suggesting that we should define them as such. If we continue to look for one-to-one correlates between Ophelia's story and the stories of the women with which we connect her, we run the risk of suggesting that Ophelia can be contained within a simple summary of her narrative. We should define Ophelia not by plot-based bullet-points – the death of a father, the loss of a lover – but we should instead analyze the way in which she challenges the systematicity of narrative and iconicity. We can define Ophelia as the struggle to express herself in patriarchal discourse, a signifier that wriggles free from the system of semiotics, an uncertain sign that beckons elsewhere.

In terms of feminist discourse, Ophelia is a polarizing figure. Some feminists are quick to dismiss her because --glancing too quickly through the history of her representation -- she may seem to embody a type of passive femininity that contradicts the very spirit of modern feminine empowerment. Elaine Showalter expresses this dismissal when she writes of the certain "embarrassment"⁴⁷ feminist critics sometimes feel towards Ophelia. On the other hand, some critics push towards the other extreme, claiming that as feminist writers we have a responsibility to "speak for Ophelia"⁴⁸ -- to

reclaim her and redefine her as an emblem of contemporary feminism. While these two methodologies assert an almost polar relationship, they are similar in that they both make the same mistake. They believe that the most productive way of dealing with Ophelia is to define her --comprehensively and unambiguously -- as an icon of something. It doesn't matter that these "somethings" appear to be opposites; the failure of this methodology lies in the assumption that Ophelia can be contained wholly and unequivocally within the linear, fixed system of iconicity. Ophelia and her resistance to containment are valuable to contemporary feminist discourse because she points us away from the discourse of binaries -- good representations vs. bad representations; feminine language vs. masculine language; empowerment vs. passivity -- and asks us to consider a more interesting place: the middle ground.

Perhaps Ophelia repels certain feminist critics because she does not represent unequivocally the first term in any of the above-mentioned pairs of binaries. She does not articulate successfully an alternative to patriarchal language like the hazily utopian one about which Irigaray waxes theoretical at the end of the titular essay in *This Sex Which Is Not One*. The reality of current feminist discourse is that we have not yet theorized a system of representation in which the feminine can be fully articulated; we have not yet reached that hazy "elsewhere". At the close of *Alice Doesn't*, De Lauretis reminds us that this destination only sounds hazy and utopian because we are still frustratingly far from it:

This is where the specificity of a feminist theory may be sought: ...not in the chinks and cracks of masculinity, the fissures of male identity or the repressed phallic discourse; but rather in that political, theoretical, self-analyzing practice by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women. Much,

very much, is still to be done, therefore.⁴⁹

Ophelia's oscillation between representational containment and excess echoes the paradox that defines the contemporary feminist critique: the necessity to be simultaneously inside and outside of discourse. The fact that Ophelia's struggle is still so relevant serves as a rather frustrating reminder that, as De Lauretis says, much work still remains to be done. But by pointing us towards this middle space between excess and containment; between extremes of iconicity -- she gestures towards what we can do actively. By looking at the ways in which she resists containment and redefining what it means to be an Ophelia figure, we can challenge the discourse that seeks to flatten representations of women into univalent icons. Early in her book, De Lauretis notes something we should never lose sight of: "Strategies of writing *and* reading are forms of cultural resistance."⁵⁰ We can allow Ophelia's speech to move us "hearers to collection" and resist the ways in which iconicity and representation ultimately fail to contain the feminine. Through these collective strategies of reading, questioning and analyzing that which extends beyond the bounds of representation, Ophelia can help us articulate productive cultural critiques and look to the places towards which her excess gestures.

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