Kennesaw State University

"If You Be Honest and Fair:"

How Shifts in Western Culture Precipitate Shifts in the Depiction of the Character Ophelia Across Varying Artistic Mediums

Rachel Watts

Honors Capstone

Dr. Keith Botelho

29 November 2021

Introduction

The scene: a young girl walks next to a river, its water swift-flowing and cold. Her face is mournful; her eyes are lost in thought and rove sightlessly across the path in front of her. Suddenly, her foot slips. She trips against a root and reaches out for the branches of that self-same tree, trying with all her might to keep from falling into the river. Her eyes have gone from apathy to panic—no longer dazed, she is alert. Her effort, however, is in vain. She falls into the river, and the current draws her beneath the icy waters.

Or maybe the scene is this: a girl floats down a river—palms facing up, hair splayed around her. Her face, though stilled by death, is peaceful. The water is calm, swallowing her as one might embrace a friend. It does not seek to subdue—its prey has come complacently. The girl is beautiful, quiet, and content to submit to a fate she has not fought.

By these descriptions alone, one would be hard-pressed to believe that the girl from the first scene is the same as the girl in the second. But difficult as that might be to reconcile, it is indeed the case. The first scene describes the painting *Ophelia's Death* by Mary Hoare. The painting evokes strong emotions of desperation and panic and gives a strong sense of agency to the titular figure. The second scene describes a painting much more famous: *Ophelia,* by Sir John Everett Millais[1]. Ophelia's primary trait here seems to be her beauty— the water is still, her palms are face up in what seems to be a gesture of submission, and even the expression on her face is subdued.

"Are you good?" asks Hamlet of Ophelia; "Are you fair?" (Shakespeare, 3.1) These two terms are some of the most direct and concrete descriptions we have of Ophelia in the text of the play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. And while these descriptions—and the character of

[1] See Appendix A for images of all paintings referenced hereafter

Ophelia herself—are lasting, the manner in which she is depicted is not. Though she began as a character in a theatrical script intended for performance, depictions of Ophelia have transcended the boundaries of artistic medium. She appears in visual art forms such as painting and watercolor, as a lyric or motif in musical compositions, as a character in novels, and of course in the numerous film adaptations and interpretations of the play itself. In each of these mediums, changes in her depiction are noticeable: the panicked Ophelia grabbing a branch to keep from falling to the swift-flowing river shown in Mary Hoare's watercolor *Ophelia's Death* is hardly recognizable as the same character shown laying peacefully in a river, complacent in her own death, in Sir John Everett Millais *Ophelia.*

So how did two artists arrive at such different conclusions about the nature of this character? For it is not only the setting and the scene that are different in these paintings—that difference could be excused as a difference in staging, understandable given the theatrical nature of the character's origin. Their depictions of Ophelia's very nature are drastically different, one ascribing agency while the other implying complacency. What reason for this is there?

Consider: what is the key difference between these two paintings? Is it medium? Does Hoare's use of watercolor paint somehow render Ophelia more active in her own fate than Millais' use of oil paint? Or consider other works: does Tchaikovsky's use of the oboe render Ophelia's motif lovelorn in the *Hamlet* overture-fantasia, Op. 67, while Berlioz's use of only piano and voice in *La mort d'Ophelie* results in a feeling of hopelessness? Could an oboe not evoke hopelessness just as effectively as a piano might render a motif lovelorn?

No, it is not the medium that drives the shift in the depiction and characterization of Ophelia. And in examining all the diverse depictions of Ophelia across various mediums, a common thread begins to emerge: those depictions from the same era tend to characterize

Ophelia in the same manner as their contemporaries. Millais is not the only painter of his era to choose Ophelia as subject, and in examining other contemporary paintings—such as both of John William Waterhouse's untitled representations of Ophelia—one begins to see similarities emerge in how the artists chose to depict her. Placid, demure, and romantic are all terms that come to mind when gazing upon these paintings of Hamlet's doomed lover. Contrast this with the filmic depictions of the character from the late 20th century—while the aesthetics of Kate Winslet's Ophelia in the 1996 adaptation of Hamlet might be once mistaken for a Waterhouse painting, her characterization is passionate and, eventually, crazed: a far cry from "demure." Other late 20th century adaptations tap into this passionate Ophelia—Helena Bonham Carter in the 1990 film could never be called passive or placid. And in the same way, we cannot blame the oil paint for the passivity of Millais's Ophelia; we cannot ascribe the passion Winslet shows to the acetate of the film.

With examination, it is clear that it is the era and not the medium that influences how Ophelia is portrayed across different types of art. And not era alone—the passing of years does not change in depiction necessitate. Rather, shifts in culture precipitate the shifts in the depiction of Ophelia across all of these mediums.

It is the goal of this paper to demonstrate how three cultural movements in particular have precipitated the change in how artists depict the character of Ophelia, originally from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet,* in their work. These cultural movements are: the Restoration in England, occurring from 1600 through the early 18th century; the Victorian period, occurring from the mid-19th through the late 19th century; and Second-Wave Feminism, occurring from the 1960s through the 1990s.

In examining the Ophelia-centric art produced during each of these periods and placing it in conversation with its cultural context, one can begin to draw common threads between each piece and to tie these commonalities to a shared cause.

But first, a question must be addressed: why Ophelia? Who is she, and why should we care about how she is shown?

Who is Ophelia?

Ophelia is a female character in William Shakespeare's 1601 play *Hamlet*—one of his twelve tragedies. The story centers on the eponymous character Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, and his plot to avenge the death of his father at the hands of his uncle, Claudius. Claudius has assumed the throne in his brother's stead, and Hamlet—by means of manipulation, deception, and violence, seeks to both expose Claudius's treachery and reclaim the throne.

In the midst of these machinations sits Ophelia. The daughter of one of the dead king's trusted advisors, Polonius—now advisor to Claudius—Ophelia begins the story as a love interest for Hamlet. A previous relationship between the two is implied, and Polonius and Claudius seek to capitalize on this relationship, trying to use Ophelia to divine what Hamlet's purpose might be in returning to the court in Denmark. Hamlet, at this point in the plot, is feigning madness in order to disguise his true intentions and so spurns Ophelia's manipulated advances, famously telling her to "Get thee to a nunnery" no less than four times. A short time later, however, we see Hamlet toying with her affections: he lays his head on her lap, makes bawdy jokes at her expense, and is familiar with her in ways incongruent with his previous harsh words. Ophelia is either oblivious or plays along. In either case, she does not call him on his inconsistency.

The next time we meet Ophelia is after her father's accidental death. Believing him to be Claudius, Hamlet mistakenly stabs Polonius. This causes Ophelia to suffer some kind of mental

break, and for the remainder of the play, she is nearly incoherent, babbling on about flowers or mourning the death of her father. In the end, she falls to her death and drowns in a stream off-stage (Shakespeare).

There is a great deal to *Hamlet* aside from Ophelia. She is by no means the main character, and many major scenes and plot points occur without her presence. However, her role is key to the plot. Without her, we would have no foil for Hamlet's feigned madness: when he is falsely mad with grief, she is clear and rational in her objections. And when she herself goes mad, her genuine madness provides contrast for Hamlet's act. Without Ophelia, we would have no explanation of the play Hamlet has chosen to condemn Claudius with—she is the voice of the audience, asking questions so that we might understand the goings-on of Hamlet's plans better. And Ophelia herself plays a part in the machinations of the plot—her father and her king seek to use her as a pawn and turn her affection for Hamlet into a weapon. No, the plot of *Hamlet* would not function without the character Ophelia.

But one thing is consistent across all these points: Ophelia is a character meant to be used. She provides value in contrast and function, not in character, or so it would seem. She is a conduit for the audience, a pawn for the king, or a contrast to Hamlet. She is not an entity unto herself if evaluated by her function in the plot. So who is she truly? Why does she matter? Is she only relevant in relation to other characters or elements, or even in relation to the audience?

This question brings us to a key point in studying and understanding Shakespeare—both the original text and adaptations and interpretations thereof. This point is something unique to the theater of Shakespeare's time, and that is the understanding of an "open text." Saying that a particular work has an open text indicates that the script consists almost entirely of dialogue and contains very few acting notes or stage directions. For the contemporary players and directors of

Shakespeare's day, this meant that they had a degree of freedom both in staging and in characterization. And the situation of an open text set a precedent for the Shakespearean actors, directors, and auteurs to follow: the interpretation of the text is flexible. The words may be set, but what you do with them is up to you. This meant that it was perfectly reasonable to adjust character's portrayals, setting design choices, and even musical elements. This precedent is what allowed for the transition of the character Ophelia across different cultural shifts. Without this built-in flexibility, we might always see Ophelia as existing in relation to other characters, as a vehicle and not an individual.

But Ophelia is unique. Her portrayal is widespread, and her characterization is varied. Because we are told so little about her, there is much freedom in how she is portrayed. And because of this freedom, she is portrayed in many different ways by many different people across many different mediums.

It is this variability, this diversity, and this openness that drives the desire to dig deep into Ophelia as a character. The "why" behind this study of Ophelia is not who she is according to the text—it is who she could be according to those interpreting the text. And who she could be is fascinating indeed.

So, with this understanding of flexibility in interpretation, it is unsurprising that subsequent movements felt liberty, even subconsciously, to adapt Ophelia as they saw fit. In no context is it as remarkable as in the Restoration, the theatrical movement accompanying the restoration of the British monarchy at the start of the 17th century.

The Restoration: Historical Background

William Shakespeare is considered to be an "early modern" playwright; more frequently referred to as Elizabethan or Renaissance, his work spanned more than just the reign of Queen

Elizabeth I and is more expansive than the term Renaissance would indicate, thus the adoption of the term "early modern." This period spans the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries and "ceases to be a useful label to describe London theater" after the fall of the British monarchy in 1642, for, with the monarchy, British theater also fell (Wiles). Because London theater companies were directly sponsored by the monarchy or other members of the aristocracy, when the monarchy was displaced, the theater companies were also disbanded. Along with this, public outdoor theaters were also shuttered under the administration of the new British government. The combination of these factors resulted in almost a total theatrical drought until theaters officially reopened in 1660 under the new King Charles II, the restored king of England. The following period in British history, and more specifically in British theater, is referred to as the Restoration. In the western world at large, the period following the Restoration of the British monarchy would be considered the Enlightenment (Fretz).

Just as Shakespeare was a key part of pre-Restoration theater, he continued to hold this position in the post-Restoration theatrical climate. Shakespeare, however, had written for a different England than the one clamoring for theater in the wake of a devastated and unstable government. Cultural attitudes and priorities had shifted dramatically, and theatergoers sought different things from the medium. Playwrights, directors, and viewers alike held Shakespeare up as a kind of standard for good theater. They saw him as being in the same vein as the great Greek and Roman playwrights of antiquity. But for all of this reverence, they considered Shakespeare's plays deficient in three main ways: in language, in staging, and in diversity.

The first critique, language, does not refer so much to the skill of the writing or Shakespeare's command of the English tongue as it does to the naturalness of the dialogue. Restoration-era writer and critic John Dryden both esteemed Shakespeare and considered his

language profoundly unnatural. He, and other contemporaries, argued that "people in the midst of passion… did not speak in strings of metaphors or explain their feelings by means of elaborate puns." In fact, as examples of this quality, Dryden singles out some of the plays we now consider to be Shakespeare's best work—*Macbeth, Richard II,* and, of course, *Hamlet.*

The second critique, that of staging, is the result more of practical concerns and plot preferences. Many of Shakespeare's plays are sprawling; they have many characters, plot lines, and geographical settings. Restoration-era directors trimmed these plots down—removing secondary characters and storylines—and consolidated sets. In addition to this, they critiqued what they perceived to be the inconsistency of Shakespeare's moral decisions. Dryden again criticized Shakespeare for his failure to punish wicked characters and even more for his unfair punishment of righteous characters. The audience and culture expected a drama that was clearly moral, and Shakespeare's inconsistency was—even if consistent with the real world—incongruous with this expectation.

The last critique is that of diversity, and it is also the most easily resolved. This critique was not with the plays themselves but rather with the staging. When Shakespeare's own company was performing his plays, all roles were played by men—including those written as female characters. In the Restoration, theater became an acceptable (if improper) profession for a woman, and so female roles in Shakespeare's plays, like the role of Ophelia, were—for the first time—performed by actual women. Indeed, actresses became so popular that plays were altered to create more female roles, so much did audiences enjoy seeing and desire to see women on stage (Fretz).

All these changes, substantial and minimal, were made possible because of the inherent flexibility of the Shakespearean text. But these changes, while enabled by the text, were clearly

not the result of the text. Rather, these changes were the result of shifting cultural and artistic sensibilities in a new era. Cultural shifts, political shifts, and artistic shifts all changed the audiences' preferences and expectations, and theatrical companies adjusted their plays, their staging, and their cast to conform to the sensibilities of a new culture. Because of this, the way artists and laymen alike perceived Shakespeare's plays was distinct, and this can be seen in those artists' depictions of the character Ophelia.

Ophelia in Restoration Art

Consider again Mary Hoare's 1781 watercolor *Ophelia's Death.* In it, we see a distinctly feminine and distinctly engaged Ophelia (Hoare). Not only is she engaged, but she is also an active participant in the scene. This depiction is unique for a few reasons: first, the action-oriented nature of the scene; second, because this scene (Ophelia's death) is something that occurs off-stage in the original text of the play; third, because of her distinct and obvious femininity.

How are these qualities the result of the artistic sensibilities of the Restoration, especially in regards to Shakespeare? Consider the first point, the action-oriented nature of the scene. Not only is Ophelia not passively accepting the fate before her (namely, drowning), she is actively engaging with the world around her in an attempt to stay alive. Any person in such circumstances could easily be termed to be in the "throes of passion." And in these circumstances, what is the Restoration objection to Shakespeare's approach to character expression? They tend to (from the critic's perspective) devolve into overly wordy and metaphorical soliloquies instead of responding to the strong emotion. This Ophelia does not suffer from that paralysis of the body nor excessive looseness of the tongue. While, of course, this is a painting, and so a soliloquy would be challenging to depict, the immediacy of action is

not. This Ophelia is not a strictly early modern Ophelia—she is a woman of action, working to save herself and take a role in the scene. The artist's and viewer's knowledge of Ophelia's ultimate fate—expressed by the title of the work—does not hinder the attribution of activity to her character.

Moving to the second remarkable quality of Hoare's painting, consider second the nature of the scene being depicted. Specifically, consider that the scene shown in the watercolor is a scene that occurs off-stage in the original text. Previously, it was stated that Restoration-era theatrical companies trimmed Shakespeare's plays down, removing what they perceived to be extraneous plot lines and characters. What this statement omits is the reasoning behind these decisions. Directors removed these scenes not out of a frivolous desire to make these plays conform to their own standards but instead out of a desire to mold the plays to an Aristotelian standard of drama. One element of this is a "unity of action" in plot. While this unity of action would necessitate the removal of irrelevant subplots so that the main action might be carried out undistracted, it would also require the inclusion of scenes Shakespeare himself omitted so that the flow of the action in the plot would not be interrupted. By depicting this scene, Hoare provides a visual reference for something off-stage in the original staging, thereby maintaining the unity of action prized by Restoration-era dramatists.

The third quality to be remarked upon in this painting is Ophelia's distinct femininity. Ophelia is, of course, understood to be a woman from the first. Even when the play was staged in Shakespeare's time, it was clear that despite the gender of the player, the gender of the character was female. But Hoare's Ophelia is feminine in a way that a male player could not be. Her proportions are, while realistic, female. Her arms are rounded, as is her face. Her breasts, while not pronounced or sexualized, are present. This is a woman, portrayed as such. Hoare could see

Ophelia the character as a woman in truth because on the stage before her, Ophelia was played, in truth, by a woman.

All three of these qualities are the result of the Restoration-era dramatic sensibilities and preferences. Not only are they the result of cultural and artistic trends, but they are also the result of cultural and artistic *changes.* Had the culture not shifted so dramatically and theater taken such a sudden and dramatic hiatus, there may not have been such a dramatic shift in the desires and preferences of performers and audiences alike. And had the theatrical stagings and performances not changed in the ways they did, the art inspired by Shakespeare's works—in this case, specifically by *Hamlet* and the character Ophelia—might not have the specific qualities that the Restoration imparted to it.

While it is clear that the shift in culture between the early modern period and the Restoration impacted the depiction of Ophelia in Hoare's art, this is not an isolated incident. No, as culture continues to shift, the depiction of Ophelia shifts with it and in response to it. Not only this, but the depiction of Ophelia shifts not only on stage and in paintings, as shown in the Restoration era, but across various artistic mediums. In no era is this clearer than the Victorian era.

The Victorian Era: Historical Background

Just as the Restoration began with a dramatic change in the British monarchy, so did the Victorian. With the death of King William IV, an 18-year-old Victoria ascended to the throne of the British empire. The period from her ascension in 1836 through her death in 1901 is known as the Victorian period and is characterized by a number of cultural qualities and artistic movements distinct from the Restoration. In particular, the Victorian period saw a strong sense

of morality, the start of the Industrial Revolution, and the resultant rise of a middle class ("An Introduction to Victorian England").

The middle class—a socio-economic class situated between the wealthy aristocracy and the impoverished working class—had not existed prior to the Victorian era, and its emergence brought with it several distinct cultural changes. Unique to the Victorian middle class was a strong emphasis on "manners and morality" as a way of life—a way of life that began to permeate the rest of society as well (Himmelfarb).

In imitation of their monarch, who "brought to the throne a high standard of domestic purity and public rectitude," middle-class families began to pursue values of hard work, temperance, self-control, and self-reliance. Their lives, and their work, were their own. Not only this, but roles within the family were more defined as well (Himmelfarb). Again, in imitation of Queen Victoria, the man was head of the family and of the household. For Victoria, this meant embracing the "popular, submissive role for a wife" and relying on her husband for guidance in both matters of home and state—despite being sovereign as queen. For the regular woman, this might not be so dramatic, but the pattern was the same ("An Introduction to Victorian England").

But the middle class did not only influence the moral character of the culture. The increased affluence of such a large portion of the population allowed more time for leisure, and many middle-class Victorians wanted to use this opportunity to participate in cultural activities—such as the theater.

At this point in British history, theater was strictly regulated. Only two theaters in London were permitted to present "straight plays," which are plays consisting only of speech and performance, not including embellishments such as musical numbers and acrobatic acts. The Convent Garden Theater and Drury Lane Theater, however, were hardly large enough to

accommodate the growing population of London generally, much less to cope with an increased desire for "straight plays," such as Shakespeare's works, among a broader audience. Indeed, Shakespeare was in great demand during the Victorian era. His works were revered by laypeople and scholars alike and were given such reverence that his texts were very nearly conflated with Christian scripture. Poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, demanded Shakespeare be read to him as he lay on his death bed, right alongside the Book of Job and the Gospel of Matthew (Laporte). All of England, it seemed, was enamored with Shakespeare as the pinnacle of British literary and theatrical achievement. Two theaters could not be enough to sate the public's desire for him, and in 1843, "straight plays" were licensed for all theaters to stage and perform (Bratton).

Victorian Artistic Movements: the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

Shortly following this was the emergence of another distinct movement in the Victorian era. But while the emergence of the middle class was a primarily social change, this was artistic. In 1848, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded. Primarily focused on visual art, such as paintings, these artists bucked against the trend of revivalism and reverence for the "Old Masters" of the Renaissance. Instead, they took inspiration from pre-Renaissance (and this, pre-Renaissance artist Raphael) art and also from nature. Their work was characterized by brilliant colors and naturalistic details and was greatly inspired by literature (Clarke). One such source of inspiration was none other than William Shakespeare, whose works had just become significantly more accessible to a broader audience with the theater licensing reforms of 1843. Indeed, pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti—brother of poet Christina Rosetti—ranked Shakespeare after only the biblical Jesus and equal to the author of the biblical Book of Job. In examining the works of the pre-Raphaelites, one sees this esteem played out. Scenes from

Shakespeare's plays are frequently depicted, and no character is seen more often than that of Ophelia (Armstrong).

The pre-Raphaelite Ophelia

Perhaps the best-known of these depictions of Ophelia is Sir John Everett Millais's 1852 painting *Ophelia*. In this painting, described previously in brief, Ophelia is seen lying in a body of water, dead. Her palms are raised up, and her lips are gently parted as if she is about to spring to life at any moment (Millais). The scene around her does not speak to death. Rather, it is consistent with the pre-Raphaelite style of depicting the world: lush colors, verdant greenery, and extensive attention to detail. She surrenders to death rather than fighting it. The scene is not one of turmoil but peace. Her death was inevitable, and nature bends to incorporate her rather than destroy her. She is, in a word, passive (Stewart). And when you consider the culture the painting was created in, how could she not be? She was a woman in a world where a woman's role was to be submissive and deferential. The pre-Raphaelites may have revered Shakespeare, but they were still a product of their time—which meant Ophelia was not a woman with agency. Instead, things happened to her. She did not fight her death—she simply died. She was not alarmed; she was merely beautiful, just as the nature around her was beautiful.

This trend of depicting Ophelia as fitting into the Victorian role for women continues in other pre-Raphaelite works. John William Waterhouse painted Ophelia twice in the Victorian era (and once more in the following years), and in both paintings, she wears while—implying a virginal innocence (Waterhouse). Not only this but her agency is removed even more in these paintings. She is not actively participating in any sort of event—she merely sits, a beautiful woman for the viewer to enjoy. In fact, she looks directly at the viewer in one of these paintings

as if aware of their inspection. Both Millais and Waterhouse's paintings show the pre-Raphaelite Ophelia as a Victorian woman through and through: innocent, passive, and beautiful.

But this view of Ophelia did not stop with the pre-Raphaelites. One goal of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was to "unite English literary tradition with a continental tradition" (Graham). And so, while they took inspiration from both Shakespeare and continental literary figures such as Dante, continental European artists did the inverse and began taking inspiration from Shakespeare. Aside from actual theatrical productions, the influence of Shakespeare's works can be seen most often in continental musical pieces from this period. But, while the medium and origin may have changed, the Ophelia these artists depicted was consistent with the period.

The Romantic Ophelia

Consider first Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet Fantasy Overture, Op. 67, TH 53.* Tchaikovsky was part of a different, although contemporary, artistic movement: the Romantic period of classical music. This, like other artistic movements, arose in part due to the emergence of the middle class (detailed above). Music was no longer created for a single patron or donor who funded the composer. Instead, audiences who were newly financially independent began to pay for admittance to concerts. This became the main source of income for artists, and so artists began to look for ways to draw audiences to their concerts rather than the concerts of their competitors. This meant a period of great innovation in music, with composers relying on emotional expression and flamboyance rather than a focus on theory and technical composition. This innovation also meant that music alone—unaccompanied by voice—was much better suited for storytelling ("Romantic Music History Review"). Tchaikovsky, with all of these innovations and changes, had the perfect opportunity to compose an overture telling the

story of Hamlet. The overture itself is dramatic, with great changes in theme and dynamic throughout. There are militaristic drums in parts, building strings and crashing cymbals, and nestled in the middle, a love theme. Woven throughout the love theme are the plaintive strains of a single oboe—our Ophelia (Macdonald).

Ophelia here is again not a player. Rather, she exists in relation to Hamlet's strident and stern theme. The piece itself is fully built around his character. Ophelia's oboe is rendered plaintive and lovelorn because it is shown only in contrast to Hamlet's passion and determination. We have no opportunity to see Ophelia as she might really be because in the artist's depiction of her, she exists only as the object of Hamlet's affections (however brief those might be). Because of this, the oboe's melody is a tragic one, showing a lover denied fulfillment and not a woman active in her own story. This depiction is entirely consistent with the pre-Raphaelite view, despite arising from a different artistic tradition. It shows a submissive, passive Ophelia who is the ideal Victorian woman. This is because both traditions were spurred on by the same great cultural shift: the rise of the middle class.

Another contemporary musical piece that depicts Ophelia is Hector Berlioz's *La mort d'Ophelie*, composed in 1842. Berlioz was another Romantic composer, and although he was French, he too was greatly influenced by the works of William Shakespeare. Prior to composing *La mort d'Ophelie,* Berlioz wrote a symphony based on the play *Romeo and Juliet.* Unlike Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet Fantasy Overture, La mort d'Ophelie* focuses entirely on the character Ophelia (Magnum). Also, unlike Tchaikovsky's piece, Berlioz chooses to include the voice—and thus lyrics[2]—in his composition. And while this means that the music exists in conjunction with the word and not in contrast to it, it also allows us a more direct understanding of Berlioz's view

[2] See Appendix B for transcription and translation of lyrics

of Ophelia. What these lyrics express is an Ophelia consistent with the others shown throughout the Victorian era.

We are introduced to an Ophelia entrenched in her "sweet and gentle madness" as she gathers flowers beside a brook. The music corroborates this, a piano gently tripping along like a soft stream. But "poor Ophelia" does nothing as the branch she holds onto breaks. No, she merely falls—and here, Berlioz creates even more passivity for her than previously seen, for as she falls, she neither fights nor screams but instead simply continues to sing as she slowly sinks. She is even described later as "distracted" (Legouvé et. al.)

Do not be mistaken: the picture the lyrics paint is beautiful, as is the piano accompanying the singer. In fact, were one to paint out exactly the image described by the lyrics, one would likely arrive at something similar to Millais's painting. However, just as in Millais's painting, the picture the lyrics paint is also one of submission and passivity. It is of things happening to Ophelia and her choosing to do nothing in response. Yet again, we see Ophelia as the Victorian woman, the result not of a change in medium or style but rather of the influence of the culture.

Because the culture shifted, the depiction of Ophelia shifted. The culture of the Restoration valued different things than the Victorian culture. As a result, the way each culture interacted with and depicted Ophelia was different.

Thus far, the major shifts in culture that have been examined have all been well into the past. The early modern period, Restoration, and Victorian era all seem distant and removed from our present. But shifts in the depiction of Ophelia did not end with the Victorians. Because culture has continued to change, so has the depiction of Ophelia. And while there have been many artistic and cultural movements since the Victorian period, the one which had the greatest

impact on the depiction of Ophelia was the rise of Second Wave Feminism in the mid-20th century.

Second Wave Feminism: Historical Background

Like the rise of the middle class in the Victorian era, Second Wave Feminism was a primarily socio-cultural movement. Distinct from the first wave of feminism, which occurred over the late 19th and early 20th centuries and focused on opportunities for women—such as voting and workers' rights—Second Wave Feminism focused more on achieving social equality for the sexes and reforming social attitudes towards women. This movement began in the 1960s and continued through the 1990s. While earlier feminist movements were more focused on solving concrete issues, like securing for women the right to vote, the second wave of feminism was "increasingly theoretical" ("Bloomington Women's Liberation Newsletter"). Its focus was not so much on specific political or legislative issues but on culture at large. Second Wave Feminism saw western culture as inherently problematic and oppressive, and so its critiques and criticisms encompassed "patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as a wife and a mother" (Rampton). The perspective of Second Wave Feminism was that oppression of women was systematic, and so there had to be a palpable cultural shift in many areas in order for that systematic oppression to be overcome—not just some degree of legislative reform. Issues like bodily autonomy and personal agency were paramount, and a major concern for feminists was female sexuality and reproductive rights.

Just as in the previous movements examined, the shifts taking place in the culture at large (in this case, the emergence of Second Wave Feminism and the prioritization of female autonomy) impacted the contemporary view of Shakespeare. But in the case of Second Wave Feminism, this impact was seen first in academic scholarship, not in art. Fields like "Women's

Studies" and "Gender Studies" became commonplace at colleges and universities, and feminist criticism arose as a valid interpretive theory of literary analysis. And, as he is a core member of the western literary canon, this method of criticism was, of course, applied to the works of William Shakespeare. Specifically, feminist analysis reacted against the male-centric interpretations of previous eras and sought to interpret female characters as individual and independent (McKewin). No longer did female characters exist in relation to their male counterparts in the academic mindset. Rather, they sought to divine how the portrayal of the female characters might be, indeed, uniquely feminine.

No character was this seen in more than, again, our Ophelia. Because she had been such a prominent example of the "submissive" qualities of women in past academic and artistic eras (see the Victorian Ophelia previously discussed), she was a prime specimen for re-examination. Academia began to re-examine Ophelia and ascribe to her more agency and individuality. And, just as scholarly interpretation influenced the artistic representation of Ophelia in the Restoration, it also influenced the artistic interpretation of Ophelia in the mid-20th century. The mid-20th century, however, had a medium of art that the Restoration and the Victoria era did not have: film.

With the emergence of film, and especially film as a respectable (not just popular) art form, the works of Shakespeare took on a whole new life. Now, interpretations, adaptations, and depictions of his seminal works were accessible to more people, and the same play could be "staged" over and over by different directors. Hamlet was interpreted and re-interpreted as the period went on, preserved forever on acetate, and Ophelia was given life as never before.

The Feminist Ophelia

In Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film *Hamlet* we arrive for the first time in this examination at a depiction involving more than two parties. While Hoare's watercolor, Millais's painting, and Berlioz's composition all are a conversation between the interpreting artist and the work itself, Branagh's *Hamlet* brings with it not only a director who has input into the interpretation but also an actress. And key to understanding this interpretation is the presence of said actress. For now, in an era when women are reclaiming their agency and femininity, a woman is involved in the interpretation of Ophelia.

Visually, actress Kate Winslet's Ophelia is very similar to the pre-Raphaelite Ophelia's of the preceding century. However, film allows for a new and specific degree of interpretation and expression that other formats do not. Winslet and Branagh together take advantage of this and choose to depict Ophelia in a new and exciting way. Instead of being passive, Ophelia is an active participant in her own life. We return, as in the Restoration, to an Ophelia who fights back. And when Ophelia is finally driven mad, she is no longer the demure and submissive woman who merely trips and allows herself to drown. No, Winslet is magnificently insane. She is chaotic, raging, weeping, and by no means passive (Branagh et. al.). Hers is a madness driven by grief and confusion, not a quiet and gentle madness as was seen in the Victorian Ophelia.

This Ophelia, conceptualized by Branagh and delivered by Winslet, is a feminist Ophelia. She is active in her own life, experiencing things as herself and responding to them as herself. Her madness is driven by grief because she herself has reason to be grieved—her father has been killed! She does not exist in relation to other characters, nor is she passive and submissive (Teker). This representation of the character represents a distinct shift from the representation seen in the Victorian era, and this shift is clearly the result of the shifts in the broader culture. Without the emergence of Second Wave Feminism and the resultant attribution of individuality

and agency to Ophelia by academic scholarship, it is very likely that Ophelia would have continued in her Victorian passivity until some other shift in the culture occurred and spurred on change.

The Shifting Ophelia

Looking back at each of the pieces examined, it is clear that the depiction of Ophelia has never been consistent. Ever since Shakespeare first penned *Hamlet,* the way in which Ophelia has been shown in various works of art has been shifting and changing. In the Restoration era, Mary Hoare saw Ophelia as an active participant in her own life and saw the scene of her death as a necessary depiction in order to maintain narrative unity in the play. Move into the Victorian era, and the middle-class moral values meant that artists such as John William Waterhouse and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky saw Ophelia only in relation to her male counterparts, and when they did examine her individually, saw her as passive and submissive—a far cry from the active Ophelia Hoare saw. And in contrast to both of these is the feminist Ophelia of the mid-20th century. Kenneth Branagh and Kate Winslet portrayed Ophelia as gloriously emotional—feeling things because she had a right to feel them. She participated in her life, like Hoare's Ophelia, and took it even further, existing as her own woman and not at all in relation to the men around her.

All of these changes were decisions. Each artist chose to depict Ophelia the way he or she did. But these decisions were shaped and influenced by the culture that each artist existed in. Mary Hoare lived in a time of theatrical turbulence when changing the nature of plays to suit the audience and artist was common. When editing the events of the script to "improve" the flow was not only common but expected. When women were finally allowed on stage, and characters written as women could be women in truth. It is no wonder, then, that she depicted Ophelia the way she did.

Tchaikovsky, Waterhouse, Berlioz, and Millais all lived in a time when Shakespeare's work was very nearly equal to Christian scripture, and so it stands to reason that they would choose to depict his characters with some degree of frequency. But their depictions also show the strong influence of middle-class values of morality and gender roles, and thus their Ophelia's are submissive, passive, and peripheral.

Branagh and Winslet were creating in the midst of a revolution in terms of academic interpretation of Shakespeare and in terms of the lives and rights of women in culture. Thus the dramatic turn from the passive Victorian Ophelia to the emotional, individual, feminist Ophelia is not only natural but expected.

Concluding Thoughts

Each of these artists was inescapably influenced by the culture around them. And so, too, were their depictions of Ophelia. It was not the medium of each interpretation that caused this shift in depiction. Nor was it simply the passage of time. No, it was the shift in culture that precipitated each shift in artistic depiction. In each instance, the cultural shift influenced either the artistic or academic sensibilities of the time. These sensibilities did not develop in a vacuum. In the Restoration, the political climate influenced academic and artistic views of Shakespeare, and so it followed that depictions of Shakespeare's works would be influenced by those views. In the Victorian era, the emergence of the middle class influenced cultural sensibilities, and these sensibilities influenced an already inflated view of Shakespeare—which in turn influenced the art inspired by his works. In the mid-20th century, Second Wave Feminism influenced not only culture but academia, and this academic shift in understanding Shakespeare caused an artistic shift in presenting Shakespeare's work. Examining this shift across depictions of Ophelia is only

one example of how cultural changes impact art, but as Ophelia is a nearly ubiquitous figure in popular Shakespearean art, she is a poignant one.

The Ophelia of the Future

The depiction of Ophelia as a character has shifted materially across the course of history. But this shift has not ceased in modern interpretations of the character. Films such as the 2018 *Ophelia* continue the tradition of ascribing agency to her by making her the main character and allowing her active decisions about her fate. Songs such as *Ophelia* by the Lumineers reclaim the romance that the character lost over the course of 20th-century efforts to modernize and ascribe agency to the character. Even adaptations such as Disney's *The Lion King*—an animated film loosely based on the plot of Hamlet—show a shift in Ophelia. This can be seen in both the characterization of the Ophelia-character Nala— specifically her active role in the Hamlet-character Simba's reclamation of his throne— and the subsequent portrayal of Nala by pop-culture princess and pseudo-feminist icon Beyoncé in the 2018 remake of the original film. In the original, Nala does not die and instead is instrumental in Simba's (the Hamlet character) return to the "throne" (or rock, as the case may be). In the remake, the choice to have Beyoncé voice the character is even more of an attribution of power and activity to the character. By having an individual renowned for her individuality and feminine strength voice the character, the audience is already subconsciously queued into perceiving the character as a strong, independent woman.

Just as the depiction of Ophelia has shifted throughout the past as the culture shifted, so will it continue to shift as culture continues to shift. By examining the various art forms through which artists choose to show Ophelia—and her character and nature—we can see the sensibilities of the culture and appreciate the gift William Shakespeare gave us in the open text.

Because of the flexibility built into the original play, Ophelia can continue to grow and change as the culture does. And while the shifts in culture may continue to precipitate shifts in her depiction, we can rest assured that this is nothing new and look forward to where the future changes might take us.

Appendix A: Visual Art Referenced

Figure 1:

Mary Hoare, 1744–1820, British, Ophelia's Death, ca. 1781, Watercolor with gouache, black ink, and scraping over graphite on moderately thick, slightly textured, cream laid paper mounted on moderately thick, slightly textured, beige laid paper with remnants of contemporary drawn border, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1975.4.1975

Figure 2:

John Everett Millais. *Ophelia.* 1851 – 1852. Oil on canvas. Tate Gallery. London.

Figure 3:

John William Waterhouse. *Ophelia.* 1889. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Figure 4:

John William Waterhouse. *Ophelia.* 1894. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

All images public domain. Mary Hoare's *Ophelia's Death* courtesy of Yale Center for British Art.

Appendix B: Lyrics to Berlioz's *La mort d'Ophelie*

French Lyrics	English Translation
Après d'un torrent, Ophélie Cueillait, tout en suivant le bord, Dans sa douce et tendre folie, Des pervenches, des boutons d'or, Des iris aux couleurs d'opale, Et de ces fleurs d'un rose pâle, Qu'on appelle des doigts de mort.	Beside a brook, Ophelia Gathered along the water's bank, In her sweet and gentle madness, Periwinkles, crow-flowers, Opal-tinted irises, And those pale purples Called dead men's fingers.
Puis élevant sur ses mains blanches Les riants trésors du matin, Elle les suspendait aux branches, Aux branches d'un saule voisin. Mais, trop faible, le rameau plie, Se brise, et la pauvre Ophélie Tombe, sa guirlande à la main.	Then, raising up in her white hands The morning's laughing trophies, She hung them on the branches, The branches of a nearby willow. But the bough, too fragile, bends, Breaks, and poor Ophelia Falls, the garland in her hand.
Quelques instants sa robe enflée La tint encor sur le courant, Et comme une voile gonflée, Elle flottait toujours chantant, Chantant quelque vieille ballade, Chantant ainsi qu'une naïade Née au milieu de ce torrent.	Her dress, spread wide, Bore her on the water awhile, And like an outstretched sail She floated, still singing, Singing some ancient lay, Singing like a water-sprite Born amidst the waves.
Mais cette étrange mélodie Passa, rapide comme un son. Par les flots la robe alourdie Bientôt dans l'abîme profond; Entraîna la pauvre insensée, Laissant à peine commencée Sa mélodieuse chanson.	But this strange melody died, Fleeting as a snatch of sound. Her garment, heavy with water, Soon into the depths Dragged the poor distracted girl, Leaving her melodious lay Hardly yet begun.
- William Shakespeare, translated by Ernest Legouvé	- Translation © Richard Stokes, author of The Book of Lieder, published by Faber, provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk)

Text and translation provided courtesy of Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk)

Works Cited

Armstrong, Isobel. “The Pre-Raphaelites and Literature.” The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites, edited by Elizabeth Prettejohn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 13–31. Cambridge Companions to Literature.

"Bloomington Women's Liberation Newsletter October 13, 1970." Bloomington Women's Liberation Newsletter, 13 Oct. 1970, p. [1]+. Women's Studies Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/XHCURD411864759/WMNS?u=webdemo&sid=WMNS&xid=3f289f68.

Branagh, Kenneth, et al. Hamlet. Columbia Pictures, 1996.

Bratton, Jacky. “Theater in the 19th Century.” British Library, 15 Mar. 2014, https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/19th-century-theatre.

Clarke, Michael. "Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood." The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms. : Oxford University Press, . Oxford Reference. Date Accessed 30 Nov. 2021 <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199569922.001.0001/acref-9780199569922-e-1373>.

Fretz, Claude. “How Restoration Playwrights Reshaped Shakespeare's Plays.” Shakespeare & Beyond, Folger Shakespeare Library, 6 June 2018, https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2018/06/05/how-restoration-playwrights-reshaped-shakespeare-plays/.

Graham, Jenny. “Artistic Inspirations.” The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites, edited by Elizabeth Prettejohn, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 32–46. Cambridge Companions to Literature.

Himmelfarb, Gertrude. “In Defense of the Victorians.” The Wilson Quarterly (1976-), vol. 12, no. 3, [Wilson Quarterly, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars], 1988, pp. 90–99, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40257341.

Hoare, Mary. 1744–1820. British. *Ophelia's Death*. ca. 1781. Watercolor with gouache, black ink, and scraping over graphite on moderately thick, slightly textured, cream laid paper mounted on moderately thick, slightly textured, beige laid paper with remnants of contemporary drawn border. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. B1975.4.1975

“An Introduction to Victorian England.” English Heritage, English Heritage, https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/victorian/.

Laporte, Charles. “The Bard, the Bible, and the Victorian Shakespeare Question.” ELH, vol. 74, no. 3, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007, pp. 609–28, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029574.

Legouvé, Ernest Legouvé, et al. “La Mort D'Ophélie: Song Texts, Lyrics & Translations.” Oxford Lieder, https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/233.

Macdonald, Hugh. “Hamlet Fantasy Overture (Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky).” Hollywood Bowl, https://www.hollywoodbowl.com/musicdb/pieces/381/hamlet-fantasy-overture.

McKewin, Carole. “Shakespeare Liberata: Shakespeare, the Nature of Women, and the New Feminist Criticism.” Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature, vol. 10, no. 3, University of Manitoba, 1977, pp. 157–64, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24778870.

Magnum, John. “La Mort D'Ophelie (Hector Berlioz).” LA Phil, https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/2182/la-mort-dophelie.

Millais, John Everett. *Ophelia.* 1851 – 1852. Oil on canvas. Tate Gallery. London

Rampton, Martha. "Four Waves of Feminism." Pacific University, 13 July 2020, https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism.

"Romantic Music History Review." Western Michigan University, https://wmich.edu/musicgradexamprep/RomanticIndex.html.

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. Edited by A. R. Braunmuller, Penguin Books, 2001.

Stewart, Rachel. "Ophelia in Nineteenth-Century English Art, Inspired by John Everett Millais." Shakespeare & Beyond, Folger Shakespeare Library, 18 Jan. 2018, https://shakespeareandbeyond.folger.edu/2018/01/30/ophelia-nineteenth-century-english-art/.

Teker, Gulsen Sayin. "Empowered by Madness: Ophelia in the Films of Kozintsev, Zeffirelli, and Branagh." Literature/Film Quarterly, vol. 34, no. 2, Salisbury University, 2006, pp. 113–19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/43797266.

Waterhouse, John William. *Ophelia*. 1889. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Waterhouse, John William. *Ophelia.* 1894. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

Wiles, David. "Medieval, Renaissance and Early Modern Theatre." The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History, edited by David Wiles and Christine Dymkowski, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 55–72. Cambridge Companions to Literature.