

The Murder of Ophelia

HARLEY WONG



WRITER'S COMMENT: Before I read Shakespeare's Hamlet, my friend warned me that her least favorite character was Ophelia; this unknowingly strengthened my adherence to popular culture's characterization of Ophelia as aggravatingly submissive. However after analyzing the text, I deconstructed the commonly held idea that Ophelia was a passive female character driven hysterical by love, and I began to understand her madness as having the same ambiguous nature as Hamlet's. In Introduction to Women's Studies, I had learned that nineteenth-century medical professionals diagnosed middle- and upper-class women with madness and hysteria, portraying them as fragile beings dominated by their reproductive organs. For my British Art History course, I felt compelled to write about the characterizations of Ophelia in relation to her mental state in nineteenth-century art. I hope my research on this topic both helps deconstruct perceptions of Ophelia that are historically linked to a misogynistic medical field and simultaneously reveals the relationship between artistic representations and societal beliefs.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: When Harley talked with me about developing her research paper topic for my British Art and Culture course, she mentioned that she had been interested in interpretations of Shakespeare's Ophelia for quite some time. In her AP English class in high school, Harley read Hamlet and became fascinated with the notion that Ophelia could possibly be feigning madness, like the character of Hamlet himself, instead of succumbing helplessly to this condition, as many interpretations of the play would have it. Her

thoughts on Ophelia's plight developed further after she took a Women's Studies course at UC Davis, where she learned about how, in the nineteenth century, many people considered hysteria to be a particular type of madness unique to women. At that time, literary figures like Ophelia (who were also represented repeatedly in art) could be seen as reflections of this concept – yet again marking them as victims of their gender. Through careful visual analysis and historical contextualization – qualities of the best art historical scholarship – Harley's essay unites her interests in these concerns. She reveals that one painting (significantly, by a woman artist), supports her own perspective on Ophelia, and that this marginalized character could indeed be seen to use "madness" as a form of power, a way to speak back to those whose authority she challenges.

– Catherine Anderson, Art History Program

Ophelia, from William Shakespeare's early seventeenth-century play *Hamlet*, has evolved from an individual character to a representation of the entire female gender and its descent into madness. Ophelia holds a prominent role in nineteenth-century British art, especially in relation to the changes in her mental state. Late in the play, Ophelia approaches the royal court to hand floral gifts to Queen Gertrude and King Claudius, and her brother Laertes (4.5). Meanwhile, the recipients of her offerings suggest that she is grieving from the murder of her father at the hands of her lover, Hamlet. In 5.1, Gertrude narrates Ophelia's off-scene death, describing it as an accident. However, late eighteenth and nineteenth-century British artistic portrayals of Ophelia in these scenes often overstate mental and emotional fragility. While Sir John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* is arguably the most well-known portrayal of Ophelia, this paper will focus on lesser known artistic representations of the character. By failing to fully engage with signs of Ophelia's lucidity and feigned madness, and overemphasizing less heroic and more stereotypically feminine characteristics, male nineteenth-century British artists, such as Benjamin West, Arthur Hughes, and Joseph Severn, have stripped Ophelia of her personal agency. Their more dramatic divergences from the original Shakespearean text, in contrast to Henrietta Rae's work, have perpetuated the inaccurate narrative of an irrational woman who

faces her mental, and eventually physical, demise at the hands of men. However, these sexist depictions reveal more about the nineteenth-century conceptions of madness as a predominantly female affliction than of Ophelia herself.

Although Ophelia is commonly understood as a tragic figure who grows mad, her sanity is highly suggested in her floral offerings, which remain a key instrument in her act of madness. In 4.5, Ophelia enters the scene in perceived hysteria, and hands flowers to the court while explaining, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, / love, remember. And there is pansies, that's for thoughts."¹ While Laertes laments his sister's madness, Ophelia's selection and presentation of those specific flowers require significant contemplation and strategy, attributes unlikely in someone described by Claudius as "divided from herself and her fair judgment."² Although the play's staging is unknown, the significance of the flowers relies on the symbolism that would have been known to Elizabethan audiences. While the recipient of the rosemary is unclear, its presence reveals Ophelia's consideration of grief's relevance to the situation, which counters theories of a harmless Ophelia who carelessly throws flowers about without purpose.³ Ophelia continues to give flowers to her brother and the royal couple, but selects flowers with a more forceful significance:

There's fennel for you, and colum-
bines. There's rue for you, and here's
some for me; we may call it herb of grace a' Sundays. You
may wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I
would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when
my father died.⁴

Fennel, associated with flattery and infidelity, and columbine, an emblem of ingratitude, were likely given to Gertrude to reveal Ophelia's knowledge of the queen's possible unfaithfulness to the deceased King

1 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (New York: Penguin, 1980), 4.5.174-175.

2 *Ibid.*, 4.5.84.

3 Claire Powell, *The Meaning of Flowers: A Garland of Plant Lore and Symbolism from Popular Custom & Literature*, (London: Jupiter, 1977), 121. Rosemary was believed to strengthen memory but was also presented to mourners at funerals, and was occasionally referred to as the Funeral Flower.

4 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 4.5.178-183.

Hamlet.⁵ Rue, a symbol of repentance and sorrow that could be used to harm or bless the recipient, is crucial to understanding the intellect Ophelia employs in choosing the flowers in relation to the recipient.⁶ While Ophelia likely gave Laertes and herself rue to grieve for their father's recent death, she extends her offering to Claudius as well, with the advice to engage with the other purpose of the flower – repentance. Ophelia displays an awareness of the events around her that greatly opposes conceptions of her as a passive and naive character. Her accusation of the King is masked by the pretense of an innocent gift of flowers, and this feigned madness also protects her from retaliation. Ophelia acknowledges the daisies, which represent innocence, differently and simply identifies them as within her possession without necessarily offering them.⁷ She likely kept the daisies for herself, because she is the most innocent of those in the room. While suggesting that Laertes and the royal couple are guilty of specific crimes, she also hints at their lack of loyalty, as illustrated by the violets that died with her father.⁸ Ophelia cleverly uses the amicable nature of gift-giving to insult and essentially threaten powerful figures, while protecting herself under the pretense of madness.

Although the flowers reveal Ophelia's calculatedness, they have contrasting levels of importance in Rae's and West's paintings, despite their nearly identical placement within the composition. Both Rae's *Ophelia* (fig. 1) and West's *Ophelia and Laertes* (fig. 2) illustrate the scene in which Ophelia gifts flowers to the royal court. While West partially acknowledges the vital role of Ophelia's flowers by placing them in the center of the foreground, the minimized forms of the falling flowers become secondary to the dramatic poses of the surrounding figures. Instead of depicting Ophelia in the act of offering the flowers, West disempowers her as she becomes overshadowed by her brother's grand gesture to avenge her. As Ophelia's flowers drop to the ground, she loses her main instruments of resistance and authority.

⁵ Jessica Kerr and Anne Ophelia Dowden, *Shakespeare's Flowers*, (New York: Crowell, 1969), 49.

⁶ Roy Vickery, *A Dictionary of Plant-lore*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 322.

⁷ Tate, "Ophelia's Symbolism" (Tate: Tate, 2003).

⁸ Tate, "Ophelia's Symbolism" (Tate: Tate, 2003).

Even though Rae similarly places Ophelia's flowers in the center of her composition, Rae's rendition of the scene has an opposite effect. While Rae further minimizes the form of the flowers by having a single offering of fennel at the center, the gesture ultimately emphasizes Ophelia's dominance. Instead of passively allowing Laertes to guide her arm as her flowers fall to the ground, as in West's painting, Ophelia authoritatively extends her arm outward and unflinchingly stares at the king and queen as if challenging them to confront her. Ophelia is no longer overpowered by another force, such as Laertes, but stands independently and in control of the situation. Although the composition centers around Ophelia's flowers in both Rae's and West's paintings, they lose their significance in West's work, because Ophelia is stripped of her role as the protagonist and demoted to a device for Laertes' storyline of revenge.

Furthermore, West and Rae use similar stylistic methods to emphasize the presence of Gertrude and Claudius, but West continues the characterization of Ophelia as incoherent and non-threatening, which Rae seeks to subvert. Both artists use a repetition of the color red across the canvas to direct the viewer's eye to the royal couple. In West's piece, the red on Laertes' cloak and tights, coupled with his and Ophelia's hand gestures, lead the viewer's gaze to Gertrude and Claudius. The king, clothed in red, appears annoyed at the disruptive scene as he clenches his fists and furrows his brows. Gertrude, sitting in between Claudius and Ophelia, wears a red crown in unification with the composition and looks away from the scene as she rests her head on her hand in boredom. West uses color and motion to guide the viewer's attention to the disengaged expressions of the royal couple. His emphasis on the reactions to Ophelia as a nuisance, rather than a threat, discredits Ophelia's remarks by showing the king and queen's disregard for Ophelia and the allegories exemplified by the flowers. Their reactions ultimately shape the viewer's understanding of Ophelia and her mental state, and West allows the audience's conceptions of Ophelia's words to parallel the disinterest of the recipients of the symbolic flowers. West undermines Ophelia's authority by emphasizing the royal couple's dismissal of her claims as unworthy of their time and consideration, underlining the inaccurate presentation of Ophelia as incomprehensible and hysterical.

Although Rae similarly employs the repetition of red to guide the viewer's eye from Ophelia's speckled flowers across to the guards dressed in red in the center background, to eventually land on the unified

crimson mass of the King and Queen, their painted expressions starkly contrast from their counterparts in West. Gertrude and Claudius huddle towards each other as they slide down their thrones. As Gertrude reaches over to Claudius for support, the king himself raises his curled fingers to his mouth as a sign of fear and apprehension. The subjects of Ophelia's insinuations of knowledge and threats of exposure cower in fear, and thereby legitimize Ophelia's authority and accuracy in her assertions. Rae's Ophelia does not appear delusional or irrational, but dominates the situation by signaling her awareness of their crimes under the guise of floral offerings. Rae restores Ophelia's agency and identity as a defiant, rather than submissive, woman by emphasizing and legitimizing Ophelia's intellect and influence over figures of power.

Rae further articulates the tension between the conflicting forces of the moral and the malevolent through her placement and incorporation of the figures in the Shakespearean scene. Rae engages with hierarchy of scale to depict Ophelia as the prominent figure. As the royal couple shrinks into themselves, Ophelia towers over them and radiates from the dark background. The stark contrast between Ophelia's pale blue gown and the darkness of the room highlights her presence, while the muddled red of the king and queen blend into the shadows almost to the extent of obscurity. Ophelia becomes an emblem of symbolic enlightenment as she confronts Gertrude and Claudius with her knowledge of their misconducts. By positioning the figures at opposite ends of the piece, Rae fills the separation with a sense of tension that derives from the anticipation of the king and queen's actions as they lean towards each other in deliberation. Rae omits Laertes from the scene to portray a direct juxtaposition between the embodiment of integrity, Ophelia, and the quintessence of malice, the royal couple. Rae's organized composition serves to elevate Ophelia away from her unsubstantiated role of a deranged woman, and present her as a feminist figure who directly counters and engages with characters of deceit and manipulation.

Unfortunately, in other Victorian paintings, Ophelia is again stripped of her role as being resilient even at the time of her death, as artists Joseph Severn and Arthur Hughes manipulate the surrounding landscape to encode her death as definitively suicide, contradicting the ambiguity in the play. Gertrude retells Ophelia's death as an accident:

There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook.⁹

According to Gertrude, Ophelia attempted to hang one of her garlands on a willow tree, but when the branch snapped, she consequently fell into the river and drowned. Gertrude contends that Ophelia did not have the intention to kill herself, but Severn and Hughes both diverge from the written description of the landscape, and ultimately eliminate the ambiguity of Ophelia's death in favor of her suicide. In Hughes' *Ophelia* (fig. 3), she sits on the sturdy, skewed trunk of a willow tree while inattentively dropping flowers into the creek. The absence of a branch on which to hang her garlands from eradicates the possibility of her death as an accident, resulting in certainty that Ophelia committed suicide. In Severn's *Ophelia* (fig. 4), the artist minimizes the presence of the iconic willow tree, a popular symbol of grief in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁰ Instead, Ophelia collapses on the bank of the creek and rests her legs on a branch of the willow tree, while her floral stalks lie beside her without a clear intent to be hung. By undermining Gertrude's account of Ophelia's demise and inventing a landscape that suggests Ophelia unequivocally committed suicide, the artists disregard Ophelia's defiant and strategic temperament to perpetuate the inaccurate narrative of women as overly emotional and fragile. The powerful imagery of the landscape ultimately becomes aesthetically pleasing ornamentation to the scene, and disempowers Ophelia even after death.

By neglecting the symbolism of Ophelia's flowers, Severn and Hughes conclusively portray Ophelia as naive and unpredictable through associations with obsessive love and youthful innocence, which supposedly served as catalysts to her suicide. Prior to her death, "fantastic garlands did she make / Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples," but the flowers play a limited role in the paintings and their symbolism is overshadowed.¹¹ The flowers in Hughes' piece are mostly obscured, and Ophelia's youthful representation becomes a key feature

⁹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.172–175.

¹⁰ Vickery, *A Dictionary of Plant-lore*, 400.

¹¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 5.1.166–167.

in the painting's narrative. Her juvenile appearances, coupled with her sickly thinness and pale skin tone, associate Ophelia with naïveté and frailty. By infantilizing her, Hughes evidently depicts Ophelia as a child who is incapable of a complete comprehension of reality, and is driven to madness. Her downturned eyes and opened mouth that hints at an eerie gasp reveal her vacant disposition, and emphasize the perception of Ophelia as a tragic victim of her own feminine characteristics, rather than a defiantly strong character.¹²

Severn similarly disempowers Ophelia, but rather than physically weakening her, he depicts her as a heart-broken maiden who is driven to suicide due to unrequited love. Severn reduces Ophelia to Hamlet's former love-interest and identifies Hamlet as the cause of her madness. As Ophelia drapes herself over a letter signed by Hamlet (fig. 5), and arranges stalks of digitalis to spell out his name, she is simplified to a woman who is volatile and unable to cope with rejection or heartbreak. The Ophelia that Severn illustrates cries on Hamlet's letter and fixates on her unrequited love to the extent that she seems incapable of contemplating the affairs of others, such as the king and queen, that she so skillfully alludes to earlier in the play. While Hughes depicts Ophelia prior to her death as a weak and unthinking child, Severn portrays Ophelia as a maiden who has become crazed with love and cannot detach herself from her emotional devastation. Furthermore, both artists fail to fully engage with the symbolism in the flowers found at Ophelia's literary death scene. In the original text, her garlands are formed by weeds, which Shakespeare believed represent neglect and the displacement of flowers, the benign, in favor of weeds, the immoral.¹³ Ophelia's death in the play relates to the demise of innocence, and the influx of manipulative actions that ensue shortly after her death.¹⁴ Through the parallel between her malnourished physicality and her adolescent mind, and her reduction to a stereotypical representation of a woman driven mad by unrequited love, Hughes and Severn, respectively, distort Ophelia's death scene to

12 Hamlet attributes frailty as inherent in all women in his exclamation in 1.2.146, "Frailty, thy name is woman!"

13 Kerr and Dowden, *Shakespeare's Flowers*, 18.

14 Daisies, also present in the garlands, represent innocence. Furthermore, Ophelia likely kept the daisy herself in 4.5, continuing her representation of virtuousness.

depict her as a senseless being and discredit the possibility that she did not commit suicide.

Despite the textual ambiguity surrounding Ophelia's death and madness, she has been visually depicted as naive and overly attached to Hamlet. West, Severn, and Hughes adhere to an interpretation of the play that assumes Ophelia is simply hysterical. By subverting this tradition in representations of Ophelia, Rae emphasizes the possibility that Ophelia is using the pretense of madness to empower herself. Rae's interpretations illustrates the agency, influence, and protection Ophelia gains from the act of hysteria. In stark contrast, the other artists fail to engage with the entirety of the Shakespearean text, and perpetuate an inaccurate representation of Ophelia. Male nineteenth-century British artists have murdered Ophelia's legacy by shrouding her under sexist interpretations of the perils of femininity, and perpetuated the myth of women as unpredictable, fragile, and diseased.

Works Cited

- Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Deirdre English. *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1973.
- Kerr, Jessica, and Anne Ophelia Dowden. *Shakespeare's Flowers*. New York: Crowell, 1969.
- Powell, Claire. *The Meaning of Flowers: A Garland of Plant Lore and Symbolism from Popular Custom & Literature*. London: Jupiter Books, 1977.
- Shakespeare, William, T. J. B. Spencer, and Anne Barton. *Hamlet*. New York: Penguin Books, 1980.
- Tate. "Ophelia's Symbolism." *Tate*, 2003. Web. 20 Feb. 2016.
- Vickery, Roy. *A Dictionary of Plant-lore*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.



Fig. 1. Henrietta Rae, *Ophelia*. 1890, Oil on canvas, 67.5 x 90.75 inches, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.



Fig. 2. Benjamin West, *Ophelia and Laertes*. 1792, Oil on canvas, 387.4 x 276.9 cm, Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio.

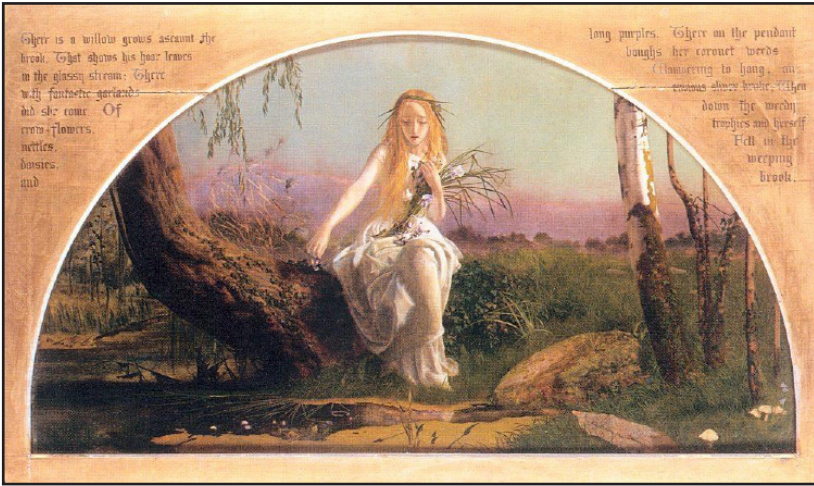


Fig. 3. Arthur Hughes, *Ophelia*. 1852, Oil on canvas, 68.7 × 123.8 cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester.



Fig. 4. Joseph Severn, *Ophelia*. 1860, Oil on canvas, 103 x 142.5 cm.

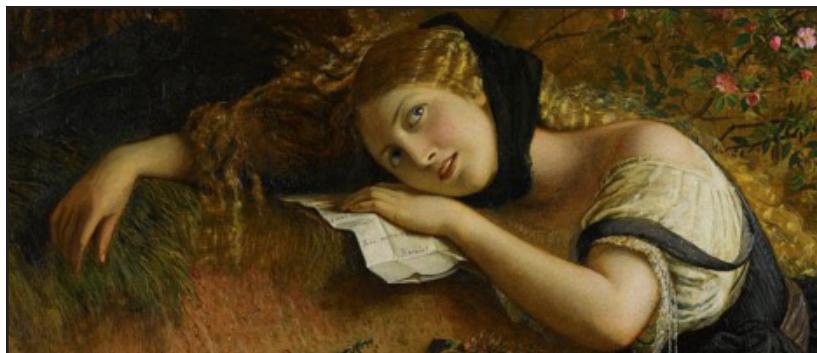


Fig. 5. Joseph Severn, *Ophelia* (detail). 1860, Oil on canvas, 103 x 142.5 cm.