# S K E N È

**Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies**

---

**11:1 2025**

Receptions of Ophelia:
from the Early Modern Period to the *Fin-de-Siècle*

Edited by Emanuel Stelzer

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri*

| | |
|---|---|
| *Executive Editor* | Sandra Borghini. |
| *General Editors* | Silvia Bigliazzi, Gherardo Ugolini. |
| *Editorial Board* | Chiara Battisti, Simona Brunetti, Camilla Caporicci, Sidia Fiorato, Sotera Fornaro, Massimo Fusillo, Felice Gambin, Alessandro Grilli, Chiara Lombardi, Leonardo Mancini, Michele Marrapodi, Stefania Onesti, Nicola Pasqualicchio, Antonietta Provenza, Susan Payne, Cristiano Ragni, Antonio Sánchez Jiménez, Alessandra Squeo, Alessandro Stavru, Emanuel Stelzer, Savina Stevanato, Martina Treu, Gherardo Ugolini, Antonio Ziosi. |
| *Managing Editors* | Valentina Adami, Emanuel Stelzer. |
| *Assistant Managing Editors* | Marco Duranti, Roberta Zanoni. |
| *Editorial Staff* | Chiara Battisti, Petra Bjelica, Francesco Dall'Olio, Serena Demichelis, Carina Fernandes, Sidia Fiorato, Beatrice Righetti, Carla Suthren. |
| *Typesetting* | Francesca Giulia Pizzi, Elisa Podavini, Cristiano Ragni, Mia Rigoni. |
| *Advisory Board* | Anna Maria Belardinelli, Anton Bierl, Enoch Brater, Jean-Christophe Cavallin, Richard Allen Cave, Rosy Colombo, Claudia Corti, Marco De Marinis, Tobias Döring, Pavel Drábek, Paul Edmondson, Keir Douglas Elam, Ewan Fernie, Patrick Finglass, Enrico Giaccherini, Anna Giust, Mark Griffith, Daniela Guardamagna, Stephen Halliwell, Robert Henke, Pierre Judet de la Combe, Eric Nicholson, Guido Paduano, Franco Perrelli, Didier Plassard, Donna Shalev, Susanne Wofford. |

Copyright © 2025 S K E N È.
The Journal is a CC-BY 4.0 publication
(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)
SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it
info@skeneproject.it

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com
www.edizioniets.com

Distribuzione
Messaggerie Libri SPA
Sede legale: via G. Verdi 8 - 20090 Assago (MI)

Promozione
PDE PROMOZIONE SRL
via Zago 2/2 - 40128 Bologna

ISBN: 9788-8467-7300-5
ISBN (pdf): 9788-8467-7299-2
ISSN 2421-4353

# Contents

## Receptions of Ophelia: from the Early Modern Period to the *Fin-de-Siècle*

Edited by Emanuel Stelzer



## Miscellany



## Special Section and Critical Notes

Emanuel Stelzer*

# Introduction

## 1. "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (*Hamlet*, 1.3.103)[1]

This monographic section aims at investigating some of the receptions of Ophelia from its Elizabethan/Jacobean original context to the end of the nineteenth century, encompassing different fields, including theatre history and the history of literature in England, France, Italy, and Spain; girlhood studies; material culture studies; classical receptions studies; the history of emotions; opera, and iconography. The decision to stop at the end of the nineteenth century has the following motivation (apart from the vastness of the field): psychoanalysis changed how Ophelia has been considered and portrayed on stage since Freudians strongly re-sexualised her (Showalter 1985, 89). Neil Taylor has noticed that, even today, in the responses he collected from a number of contemporary actresses who have played Ophelia "the indirect influence of Freudian thinking was often discernible" (2012, 48), investigating her backstory such as her relationship with her absent mother – although Mary Cowden Clarke with her prose adaptation titled "Ophelia; the Rose of Elsinore" (1851 volume of *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*) anticipated this interpretative angle (see Laura Tosi's contribution in this issue and Del Sapio 2002).[2] But why have Ophelia's afterlives been so rich?

[1] All quotations from *Hamlet* refer to Shakespeare 2006.

[2] This special issue originates from a conference held on 10-11 December 2024 for *Accessing Ophelia*, an interdisciplinary subproject (PI: Emanuel Stelzer), within a nationally funded project at the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Verona, *Inclusive Humanities: Perspectives for the Development of Inclusive Humanities in the Research and Teaching of Foreign Languages and Literatures, 2023-2027*; see https://inclusivehumanities.eu/en/accessing-ophelia/ (Accessed 20 June 2025). *Accessing Ophelia* aims at investigating the representation of cognitive disability

* University of Verona - emanuel.stelzer@univr.it

© SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies 11:1 (2025), 5-18
http://http://www.skenejournal.skeneproject.it

Ophelia speaks very little. In the First Folio version, her lines count is 173, a number which seems ludicrous if compared to Hamlet's 1506.[3] She is constantly silenced and commented upon by the other characters. Chillingly, when she does speak before her descent into madness, she seems to have internalised the language of patriarchal control. In several productions, Ophelia has been marginalised even more: she has been made to embody little more than vulnerable prettiness. One can argue that her immense popularity stems not despite, but precisely because of what could be termed the 'flimsification' of her character. As Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams remind us:

> Culture, indeed, continues to project its own enterprises upon the malleable figure of Ophelia – but her malleability and absence was always Shakespeare's deliberate invention. If artists and critics have frequently claimed that they wish to 'give' Ophelia a voice, it is because Shakespeare elected to mute hers in the first place. (2012, 2)

Think of her offstage death, narrated by Gertrude, or her mental disorder being described by Laertes with these words: "Thought and afflictions, passion, hell itself / She turns to favour and to prettiness" (4.5.182-3). Laertes' statement "shows how the reading of madness . . . can aestheticize the condition, mitigating both its social critique and its alien aspect" (Neely 1991, 325).[4] Ophelia's "malleability" and relative "absence" do not necessarily imply that her character should be reduced to a mere symbol of femininity, pathetic passivity or "female suicide" *tout court* (Bachelard 1942, 112),[5] although such interpretations have ever so frequently been offered. Tracing

in drama texts from the sixteenth century to today, with a focus on the reception of a few Shakespearean female characters: first and foremost, Ophelia. The project entails also the creation of a digital database of texts which feature relevant interpretations of the cognitive disability of the selected Shakespearean *dramatis personae*.

[3] These data are retrieved from Crystal and Crystal 2025.

[4] Certainly, one should take into account the madness-as-spectacle culture within which *Hamlet* was composed, an aspect which feels alien and offensive to contemporary sensibilities: in the early modern period, instead, "the stage depiction of mad figures . . . shifts, sometimes disturbingly, sometimes entertainingly, from ridicule to compassion, from 'laughing at' to 'laughing with' the madman or woman" (Escolme 2014, 178). But the fact that one is meant to sympathise with Ophelia in the context of the tragedy is clear – her death is portrayed as a source of "woe" (4.7.161) for Elsinore and she is repeatedly called "Poor Ophelia" (4.5.84; 4.7.183). One proof is the parody of her madness in *Eastward Ho*! (1605) by Ben Jonson, George Chapman, and John Marston: parody can operate only when the original subject is intended to be taken seriously.

[5] All translations, unless otherwise stated, are mine. Bachelard's argument is that "Water is the element of the young and fair death, of the flowery death . . . Water is the profound, organic symbol of the woman who can only cry over her sorrows" (1942, 112-13).

the history of her receptions in various fields (including drama, literature, the visual arts, and music) invites reflection on how frequently she has been used to prescribe ideals of young womanhood – often emphasising her passivity while overlooking her resistance (see below). It also prompts deeper consideration of how her madness has been interpreted and symbolised, both within *Hamlet* and in broader cultural contexts. Yet, Ophelia "pre-scribes and reabsorbs nearly every replica of her melancholic body" and mind (Del Sapio 2002, 131), and her personal grief and songs of denunciation of both a corrupted state and patriarchal authority can pierce through attempts at simplification or universalisation.

Ophelia's enduring popularity has largely hinged on two key moments in *Hamlet*: her mental disorder and her offstage drowning. Laertes and Polonius' warnings in 1.3, her account of Hamlet's distress in 2.1, the psychological abuse she endures in the nunnery scene, and her comments during the staging of *The Mousetrap*[6] have had comparably less impact in popular culture. We should bear in mind, however, that all these were most probably Shakespeare's own innovations to the Hamlet story. The Ophelia character in the play's main source, François de Belleforest's novella rendition of Saxo Grammaticus's chronicle, does neither run mad nor die.[7] In Saxo/Belleforest, the Ophelia character is a beautiful, unnamed woman whose role is minimal. She is sent to test whether the prince is actually insane, since it was believed that a madman would be unable to engage in sexual intercourse, but that 'naturally' it would have been impossible for an able-bodied man not to seize the opportunity. Saxo puts it like this: "Natura siquidem tam praeceps in Venerem esse ingenium, ut arte dissimulari non possit; vehementiorem quoque hunc motum fore quam ut astu interpellari queat, ideoque, si is inertiam fingeret, futurum, ut, occasione suscepta, voluptatis illico viribus obtemperaret" (1931, 78). In Peter Fisher's translation: "Men's characters are so naturally inclined toward love that no subtlety may keep its existence secret. His cunning could not obstruct so violent an emotion and so, even if he simulated indifference, once the opportunity presented itself he would succumb to the powers of pleasure there and then" (Saxo 1979, 84).[8] In both Saxo and Belleforest, the woman has

[6] Often omitted in nineteenth-century productions, the scene can be described as featuring "a dialogue that reveals both Ophelia's knowledge of sexual puns and her ability to assert herself through verbal repartee" – whereas Ophelia's responses in the nunnery scene were routinely kept, "suggesting that Ophelia's behavior [here] was more socially acceptable" (Rhodes 2008, 59).

[7] It is possible that these elements were first introduced in the mysterious *Ur-Hamlet* – a play about which we know very little – prior to Shakespeare's version (see Muir 1977, 163). However, any claims about that earlier tragedy must remain purely conjectural.

[8] William W. Lawrence states that Belleforest omits "Saxo's flat statement that

loved Hamlet from her infancy and alerts the youth of the danger – and that is the end of her narrative function. When one considers that Shakespeare introduced both Ophelia's madness and her death[9] (besides the other moments mentioned above), it becomes clear how significantly he expanded the role, even as he wove it into a framework of gaps and forced silences.

Despite many attempts to trivialise[10] and downplay it in favour of Hamlet's 'artful' madness, Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia's mental disorder is profoundly compelling. "[W]hile Ophelia's mental condition appears to be physically encoded in bodily signs, the language she employs in her songs seems to reveal a contradictory diagnosis" (Oggiano 2012, 190). Her trauma has somehow emancipated her; "the imagery" of the ballads she sings can "be interpreted as a ritualized passage of her losses[, actual] or imagined ones which are linked together according to a logical frame of reference" (191). Shakespeare has her perform her madness: a performance which, at the same time, arguably "transforms the widely admired and imitated contemporary Italian model of the *innamorata forsennata*" (Nicholson 2008, 96) and channels contemporary views on erotomania (Camden 1964), and yet is "harrowingly character defining" (Henze 2017, 174). Such uniqueness has frequently been banalised, but, already in the seventeenth century, it elicited critical responses on themes such as virtue and innocence, and Ophelia's behaviour was alternatively called indecent (Collier 1698, 10) or defended as natural (D'Urfey 1698, 9).

Virtually every culture which has received Ophelia has made much of her

indulgence in sexual intercourse would indicate sanity" (1947, 412). It would be more correct to state that he obscures it, since he does not refer to madness but more generally to the fact that "tout jeune homme" (all youths) would find it "impossible de couvrir telle affection, n'y d'en dissimuler les apprehensions par art" (Belleforest 1581, 199-200; impossible to conceal such affection, and dissimulate its hold with artful pretence). However, an early modern audience would have recognised the trope of the insane, and hence, impotent man – see, for instance, how it is used to comic effect in act 4 of Richard Brome's *The Antipodes*, where melancholy-induced madness is considered coterminous with sexual impotence: "So is a madman made a fool before / Art can take hold of him to wind him up / Into his proper centre" (Parr 1995, 306).

[9] There were antecedents: "Ophelia's death is a more complex exploration of the feminine suicide-for-revenge presented in the earlier *Spanish Tragedy*, in which the suicide of Isabella follows directly upon her mad 'vengeance' against the arbor in which Horatio was hanged, and which, along with that of Belimperia during the play-within-a-play, results from 'grief and frustration' over Hieronimo's failure to take his revenge quickly enough" (Gates 2008, 230). On Ophelia and suicide, see MacDonald 1986.

[10] In the anonymous German adaptation *Der bestrafte Brudermord* (Fratricide Punished, seventeenth century?), Ophelia's madness is almost farcical: she believes it is her wedding day and whacks the foppish courtier Phantasmo thinking that he is Hamlet (3.11).

as one of the prototypes of (female) mental illness, bridging the spectrum between prettified, violated innocence and socially disturbing mania. On the other hand, Anglophone-centric studies often forget that Ophelia's figure drastically changed for a long period of time on the Continent: in the second half of the eighteenth century, she became a figure of strength and defiance. Ophelia stayed sane and even survived at the end of the play (as did Hamlet himself) in Jean-François Ducis's Neoclassical adaptation (1769), which for decades exerted considerable influence.[11] Here, Ophélie is Claudius's daughter and is endowed with sophisticated eloquence. She determinedly manages to obtain the queen's blessing for her union with Hamlet and begs him for her father's life. Following Corneille's formula, she and Hamlet forsake their love for one another out of loyalty to their filial obligations. This was the version of *Hamlet* staged in Italian translation in Florence in 1793; this is how the Spanish stage first came to know the play (see Keith Gregor's article in this issue), and various iterations of Ducis's adaptation "were used on the [Dutch] stage at least until 1868" (Delabastita 1993, 226).[12] Ophelia became even more assertive and bolder in Russia, where, in the first adaptations, Aleksandr Sumarokov's 1748 *Gamlet* (prior to Ducis!) and Stepan Viskovatov's 1810 version, she "is a vocal agent, capable of public argumentation and private introspection" (Chernysheva 2017, 191), and "becomes the ideal epicenter for questions on authority and tyranny" (193). This strong, independent Ophelia was, however, destined to withdraw when Shakespeare's prestige, via Romantic Bardolatry, caused *Hamlet* to revert to its original form in the whole of Europe, and Ophelia's figure regained her 'original' character, achieving wider and wider circulation.

Quite influentially, Anna Brownell Jameson drew a paradoxical portrayal of Ophelia. For her, Ophelia is "[l]ike a strain of sad, sweet music, which comes floating by us on the wings of night and silence, and which we rather feel than hear" (1848, 110), while also considering that "[b]eyond every character that Shakspeare has drawn (Hamlet alone excepted), that of Ophelia makes us forget the poet in his own creation. Whenever we bring her to mind, it is with the same exclusive sense of her real existence" (111). For Jameson, Ophelia is both uniquely realistic and impalpably ineffable ("Eloquence is mute before her", 110). This interpretation of the character

[11] On Ophelia's reception in France in general, see Vest 1989.

[12] There was resistance in Germany to Ducis's rewriting, also due to to the early Shakespeare translations such as Wieland's (1762-6). Ophelia's portrayal was then influentially discussed by Goethe via the character of Aurelia in his *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795-1796). I thank Albert Meier (University of Kiel) for his paper "'Not much can be said about her'. Ophelias's Emancipation and Individuation Process (Thanks to Goethe)" read at the *Receptions of Ophelia* conference held in Verona in December 2024 (see below).

is drenched in sentimentalism and yet should be contextualised because the Victorians were rediscovering a sense of Ophelia's sexuality, after the eighteenth century had censored the lyrics of her ballads (Leonard 2009, 38) and she had been depicted as "genteel" and "refined" and with "a total ignorance of sexual matters" (Iyengar 2016, 1322). However, scholars are not unanimous on this stance. It has been argued that, in fact, eighteenth-century English Ophelias "exhibit[ed] a powerful, unconstrained, and virtuous (i.e. *unfulfilled*) heterosexual desire that is received as comforting, even reassuring in an unmarried woman" (Lamb 2017, n.n., italics mine).[13] What emerged was a very ambivalent figure which could be politicised, since the character was linked to notions of nature and womanhood: "In a time of rapid industrialization, urbanization and social change, Ophelia [turned into] a romantic *femme eternelle*, intimately connected to nature and therefore the natural roles and character of women" (Rhodes 2008, 4). Ophelia soon became the most easily recognisable Shakespeare character in paintings with portrayals ranging from her being an emblem of sorrowful victimhood to Ophelia as a mermaid-like temptress (118).[14] With the success of Ambroise Thomas's opera adaptation, hers became a role coveted by sopranos, in the wake of Christina Nilsson's mesmerising performances. Ophelia was also regularly regarded as the type for female madness among medical professionals and laypeople alike. The latter point has recently been called into question:

> Contrary to widespread assumption, Ophelia was not the prototype of female insanity for nineteenth-century alienists. By mid-century, she rarely entered the academic writing of even the most urbane physicians; instead she belonged increasingly to a distinctly secondary body of writing whose principal significance is as a reflection on the social status – and the literary pretensions – of the authors . . . Ophelia came into her own in a context where medical treatment was no longer the main issue. (Small 1996, 57)

Helen Small is right to signal that discussing Ophelia was a way for medical doctors to prove that they were fashionable, gentlemanly members of society. But, increasingly, within as well as outside of the UK (including in Germany, Italy, France, and Spain), articles on her appeared *en masse* in scientific journals and publications, to the point that this interest cannot

[13] Lamb's essay can be seen as a response to Showalter 1985 and the equally insightful essay by Mary Floyd-Wilson, which contends that, "by the late eighteenth century, the era's evolving notions of gender and the paradoxical effects of censorship actually infused representations of Ophelia with 'erotic and discordant elements'" (1992, 397).

[14] It seems that "during the long nineteenth century, Ophelia was the single most represented subject of English literary painting" (Falchi 2015, 175).

simply be reduced to the alienists' fashionable pretentions or their attempt at catering to general readers. In his study on the uses of Shakespeare among the first American psychiatrists, Benjamin Reiss, channelling Foucault, has proved that "grabbing the mantle of the timeless genius helped to mask the novelty" (770) of the new powers of these professionals. And this proclivity showed no signs of dwindling in the second part of the nineteenth century. Hand in hand with the progress of psychiatry as a new, separate discipline, Ophelia began to be variously diagnosed with nymphomania, hysteria (as Hamlet himself was),[15] acute *amentia*, *dementia praecox*, monomania, simple mental confusion, erotic and suicidal mania, and so on and so forth. Actresses visited asylums searching for inspiration (most memorably Ellen Terry who found the mentally ill people "too *theatrical*"; Terry 1908, 169), and patients were asked to pose as Ophelia (see Showalter 1985). Recent studies have delved into actresses' experiences of playing Ophelia, and, for instance, Fiona Gregory has studied the dynamics between Mrs Patrick Campbell's performances at the Lyceum Theatre in 1897 and the psychiatric treatment she underwent in a nursing home. At the end of the so-called 'rest cure', she felt "extinguished" because of the isolation she had to endure and the degree of impassivity she was forced to have. "Campbell's psychiatric treatment is figured as a brutal awakening that has extinguished part of her essential self" (Gregory 2018, n.n.). She loved playing Ophelia, but, as she wrote to her sister: "It's only my weak head I am afraid of" (qtd in Duncan 2016, 118).

## 2. Ophelia and the Scholars: "We know what we are but know not what we may be" (*Hamlet*, 4.5.43-4)

The contributions of this issue have greatly profited from Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams' edited volume *The Afterlife of Ophelia* (2012), which has marked a key moment in the study of Ophelia's receptions. That volume was (perhaps surprisingly) the first collection of essays to gauge and explore the field from an interdisciplinary perspective, discussing topics ranging from the cultural connotations of the lute Ophelia plays in the madness scene in the First Quarto to YouTube videos, from modern and contemporary photography to East Asian adaptations. The lines of research proposed by Elaine Showalter in her foundational study have since expanded,[16] but they

[15] On Hamlet as a woman and/or as a hysteric, see Howard 2007, 21-3 and 148.

[16] One should signal at least the following works: James M. Vest's *The French Face of Ophelia from Belleforest to Baudelaire* (1989), which examines Ophelia's French receptions until the second half of the nineteenth century; other important studies with a focus on iconography such as Carol Solomon Kiefer's catalogue *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia* (2001) and the one edited by Catrien Santing, Flos Wildshut, and

still stem from her insightful assertion: "Ophelia does have a story of her own that feminist criticism can tell . . . the history of her representation" (1985, 75). Peterson and Williams have also shown that Ophelia should not be regarded as merely an index of social reality:

> Ophelia's importance as a cultural and critical body of texts lies not solely in her being a "symptom" or *effect* of the culture that represents her according to its own logic, ideology, and concerns, but also in how she is the *generator* or *site* of meaning or cultural shift, not merely a contingent reflection of an era's already existing preoccupations. (Peterson and Williams 2012, 5)

These words encapsulate the aim of the articles included in this issue.

It should be clear that one, supposedly original, authentic Ophelia is nowhere to be found or retrieved, if only because of the aforementioned malleability based on silences and gaps in Shakespeare's play and due to the instability of early modern texts. Indeed, she behaves differently according to the version of *Hamlet* you are reading or is being staged. For instance, Michael M. Wagoner has analysed the differences in Q1 and Q2 marking the nunnery scene and argued that, in this scene, "Q1 Ofelia demands a space of power and agency that her counterpart in Q2 abdicates in favor of the central male character" (2022, 58). Wagoner critiques the editorial practices of the Arden editors and states: "The usage of asides accords better with Q2 Ophelia who has little or no power in the scene, whereas Q1 Ofelia actively engages Hamlet" (72). Looking for consistency and credibility in a character in one particular version is natural enough, although one should remember that characters "are not people, they are elements of a linguistic structure, lines in a drama, and more basically, words on a page", which poses an interpretative difficulty "that drama itself accepts, [and] indeed, embraces" (Orgel 2002, 8).

The case of Ophelia is peculiar because "in her language and in her person [she] most vividly raises questions of the ways by which we know things and of the confusion that may result from using different approaches or different sorts

Krien Clevis, titled *Ophelia: Sehnsucht, Melancholia and Desire for Death* (2009); Simone Kindler's *Ophelia: der Wandel von Frauenbild und Bildmotiv* (2004), and the highly interesting monograph *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* by Kimberly Rhodes (2008), which supplemented the more wide-ranging study by Alan R. Young (*Hamlet and the Visual Arts, 1709-1900*, published in 2002). Peterson and Williams' volume has been followed by Sharon Keefe Ugalde's study of Ophelia's receptions in twenty-first-century Spain (*Ophelia: Shakespeare and Gender in Contemporary Spain*, 2020) and has inspired several contributions such as the aforementioned book by Fiona Gregory on actresses' experiences of mental illness and psychological treatment (2018) and Sally Barnden's 2020 chapter on photography's role in perpetuating as well as challenging the objectification of the female body in Ophelia iconography.

of language. Most pointedly, Ophelia provokes questions of character" (Ronk 1994, 25). "We know what we are but know not what we may be" (4.5.43-4), she states, and her loneliness contributes to an interest in inwardness. And thus, it is no coincidence that her creative and critical afterlives have been so vibrantly rich.

## 3. This Issue

The first three essays in this issue examine how Ophelia was – or could have been – received in the early modern context. Some of these receptions highlight aspects that failed to leave a lasting legacy or are fundamentally at odds with later interpretations, while others laid the groundwork for enduring interpretations in later eras.

The first is Lois Potter's "Lutes and Lobsters: Ophelia and Theatrical Cliché". It elucidates how the figure of Ophelia emerged from and shaped the early modern trope of the forsaken maiden lamenting her fate, ultimately deriving from Ovid's *Heroides* (Ariadne, in particular). Potter compares Ophelia with, among others, the Jailer's Daughter in *The Noble Kinsmen* (1613-1614), Penthea in John Ford's *The Broken Heart* (first published in 1633), and especially Belvidera, the tragic heroine of Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserved* (1682). The transition from maidenhood (as embodied by Ophelia) to wifehood (as represented by Belvidera) within the then ambiguously defined domain of betrothal/marriage contracts creates space for both misrecognition and for (self-)destructive fixation.

Lois Potter's essay is followed by Deanne Williams' "Ophelia, Sewing in Her Closet", which situates Ophelia's sewing within the broader context of early modern girls' needlework and can help us better understand a further level on which Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would relate to the character – one grounded on everyday life and material culture. Williams argues that, beyond its educational function and aesthetic value, embroidery also operated as a means of emotional expression and symbolic communication, which endows Ophelia's figure with yet another element of autonomy.

Theories of emotion are at the core of the next article, Anne Sophie Refskou's "'Her mood will needs be pitied': Emotional Ideologies in the Afterlives of Ophelia". By analysing the 'emotional regime' of Elsinore in its early modern context, Refskou shows that the young woman in the madness scene constitutes a disruptive emotional force in a pointedly different manner from the sentimentalism which came to enshroud Ophelia during Romanticism. Refskou examines a kinship on multiple levels which ties Ophelia to Cassandra in *Troilus and Cressida*: both women are meant to elicit compassion, but their madness subtly alludes to repressed violence and the denunciation of a rotten state.

With the next essay, we move onto the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Keith Gregor's "Becoming 'Ofelia': Changing Perspectives in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Spanish Drama" offers a comparative analysis of Spanish adaptations of *Hamlet* revealing the significant shifts Ophelia's portrayal went through in the transition from Enlightenment Neoclassicism to Romanticism, the latter being exemplified by Pablo Avecilla's *Hamlet* of 1856 and *El príncipe Hamlet* (Prince Hamlet) by Carlos Coello (1872).

Meanwhile, in Britain, Victorian culture positioned Ophelia as a figure through which to explore ideas of girlhood in various adaptations. Laura Tosi's "Ophelias for Victorian Girls" focuses on probably the most significant of these, Mary Cowden Clarke's prequel *The Rose of Elsinore* (1850-1852). In contrast to didactic retellings, Clarke's work introduced complexity and interpretative depth, enriching the reader's understanding of Ophelia's motives and emotional trajectory, celebrating sisterly relationships and motherhood.

But nineteenth-century adaptations of Hamlet with a special focus on Ophelia were not only textual. Considering the popularity of opera in the nineteenth century and following the Ophelia mania generated by Harriet Smithson's Parisian performances in 1827, it is small wonder that composers tried to adapt *Hamlet* into opera, amplifying and diversifying Ophelia's voice, in Italy and France. In his essay ("'Fatti monachella'. Ophelia in Nineteenth-Century Opera: the Libretti for Franco Faccio and Ambroise Thomas"), Emanuele d'Angelo discusses Arrigo Boito's libretto for Franco Faccio's *Amleto* (1865/1871) and Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* (1868), in which Ophelia became a *prima donna* capable of captivating her audience. Thomas's Hamlet achieved such success that the visual representations of Ophelia frequently drew more from the opera productions than directly from productions of Shakespeare's play, and indeed, as Sandra Pietrini argues in "Bloodless, Attractive, and Silent: Ophelia's Death On- and Off-Stage in Nineteenth-Century France and Italy", visual representations of Ophelia in the nineteenth century in France and Italy developed an independent visual tradition from Anglo-American iconography.

Precisely because French culture was already deeply saturated with representations of Ophelia in iconography, drama, and opera, audiences were well prepared to critically assess new portrayals of the figure. Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine's "Sarah Bernhardt in Her White Coffin, 1886", investigates, thanks to painstaking archival research, the disappointment faced by the Divine Sarah and her legendary *voix d'or* (golden voice) when she decided to play Ophelia in 1886 at the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin. Bernhardt tried to introduce original elements as she made sure to cater to the necrophilic trends of the era, but her production closed after only twenty-three performances. Bernhardt's Ophelia flopped, but she would later triumph as Hamlet.

As one reads through these essays it becomes clear that, although Ophelia's most radical, feminist reinterpretations were developed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she had already exerted a powerful influence on – and helped shape – ideas of femininity, sexuality, madness, and propriety in earlier eras. Such transmedial responses to Ophelia range from conventional, norm-abiding portrayals that emphasise her role as a passive figure, to more transgressive interpretations that reimagine her as a symbol of resistance. It follows that it is not true to claim that: "If Hamlet changes with the times to reflect the concurrent dilemmas, Ophelia always stays the same: pale, fragile, silent, and dead" (Romanska 2005, 501).

Ophelia's malleability allows for different interpretations: take, for instance, Henrietta Rae's painting *Ophelia* (1890, now in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery, fig. 1). This Ophelia seems to me grief-stricken, but her stance conveys accusation, as if holding those surrounding her accountable for her anguish. Claudius and Gertrude appear in shadow, their faces filled with shock. The young woman enacts her sorrow with intention, transforming grief into a form of expression rather than submission. According to Sandra Pietrini, instead, the painting's focus is on Ophelia's erotic energy in this portrayal of the madness scene: "the young woman [is] shown in a provocative attitude, her body sensually wrapped in a tight-fitting dress" (143). Both interpretations can be correct. It is precisely this interpretative openness that has secured Ophelia a lasting presence in world culture.

Fig. 1: Henrietta Rae, *Ophelia*, oil on canvas (1890). Wikimedia Commons

## Works Cited

Anonymous. 2019. *Der bestrafte Brudermord / Fratricide Punished*, edited by David Bevington. Internet Shakespeare Editions, https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Brudermord_M/index.html (Accessed 23 June 2025).

Bachelard, Gaston. 1942. *L'eau et les rêves; essai sur l'imagination de la matière*. Paris: Librairie José Corti.

Belleforest, François de. 1581. *Le Cinquiesme livre des Histoires Tragiques*. Lyon: Rigaud.

Barnden, Sally. 2020. "'Too Much of Water': Ophelia, Photography, Dissolution". In *Still Shakespeare and the Photography of Performance*, 149-91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Camden, Carroll. 1964. "On Ophelia's Madness". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15 (2): 247-55.

Chernyshva, Daria. 2017. "Transplacing Ophelia: Woman and Nation in the Earliest Russian *Hamlets*". *Comparative Drama* 51 (2): 188-214.

Collier, Jeremy. 1698. *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*. London: S. Keble.

Crystal, David, and Crystal, Ben. 2025. "Characters by Part Sizes". *Shakespeare's Words*, https://www.shakespeareswords.com/Public/Characters.aspx# (Accessed 28 March 2025).

Del Sapio Garbero, Maria. 2002. "Reinvenzione di Ofelia". In *La traduzione di Amleto nella cultura europea*, edited by Maria Del Sapio Garbero, 109-39. Venezia: Marsilio.

Delabastita, Dirk. 1993. "*Hamlet* in the Netherlands in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries. The Complexities of the History of Shakespeare's Reception". In *European Shakespeares: Translating Shakespeare in the Romantic Age*, edited by Dirk Delabastita and Lieven D'Hulst, 219-34. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Duncan, Sophie. 2016. *Shakespeare's Woman and the* Fin de Siècle. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

D'Urfey, Thomas. 1698. Preface to *The Campaigners*, 1-27. London: A. Baldwin.

Escolme. Bridget. 2014. "Ophelia Confined: Madness and Infantilisation in Some Versions of *Hamlet*". In *Performance, Madness and Psychiatry: Isolated Acts*, edited by Anna Harpin and Juliet Foster, 165-86. Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Falchi, Simonetta. 2015. "Re-Mediating Ophelia with Pre-Raphaelite Eyes". *Interlitteraria* 20 (2): 171-83.

Floyd-Wilson, Mary. 1992. "Ophelia and Femininity in the Eighteenth Century: 'Dangerous Conjectures in Ill-Breeding Minds". *Women's Studies* 21: 397-409.

Gates, Sarah. 2008. "Assembling the Ophelia Fragments: Gender, Genre, and Revenge in *Hamlet*". *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 34 (2): 229-47.

Gregory, Fiona. 2018. *Actresses and Mental Illness. Histrionic Heroines*. London and New York: Routledge (e-book).

Henze, Catherine A. 2017. *Robert Armin and Shakespeare's Performed Songs*. New York and London: Routledge.

Iyengar, Sujata. 2016. "Iconic Characters: Ophelia". In *The Cambridge Guide to the*

*Worlds of Shakespeare: 1660–Present*, vol. 2, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1322-5. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jameson, Anna Brownell. 1848. *Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*. London/New York: Paternoster Row/John Wiley.

Keefe Ugalde, Sharon. 2020. *Ophelia: Shakespeare and Gender in Contemporary Spain*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.

Kindler, Simone. 2004. *Ophelia. Der Wandel von Frauenbild und Bildmotiv*. Berlin: Reimer.

Lamb, Susan. 2017. "Applauding Shakespeare's Ophelia in the Eighteenth Century: Sexual Desire, Politics, and the Good Woman". In *Women as Sites of Culture: Women's Roles in Cultural Formation from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century*, edited by Susan Shifrin, n.p. London and New York: Routledge (e-book).

Lawrence, William W. 1947. "Ophelia's Heritage". *The Modern Language Review* 42(4): 409-16.

Leonard, Kendra Preston. 2009. *Shakespeare, Madness, and Music: Scoring Insanity in Cinematic Adaptations*. London: Bloomsbury.

MacDonald, Michael. 1986. "Ophelia's Maimèd Rites". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (3): 309-17.

Muir, Kenneth. 1977. *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays*. London and New York: Routledge.

Neely, Carol Thomas. 1991. "'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (3): 315-38.

Nicholson, Eric. 2008. "Ophelia Sings like a *prima donna innamorata*: Ophelia's Mad scene and the Italian Female Performer". In *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, edited by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson, 81-98. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Oggiano, Eleonora. 2012. "Troubled Voices: Reading the Language of Distraction in English Renaissance Drama". In *Distraction Individualized. Figures of Insanity in Early Modern England*, edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, 161-92. Caselle di Sommacampagna: Cierre Grafica.

Orgel, Stephen. 2002. "What Is a Character?". In *The Authentic Shakespeare: and Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage*, 7-14. London and New York.

Parr, Anthony, ed. 1995. *Three Renaissance Travel Plays*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Peterson, Kaara L., and Deanne Williams. 2012. "Introduction". In *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, 1-10. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Potter, Lois. 2012. "Ophelia and Some Theatrical Successors". In *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, 153-67. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Reiss, James. 2008. *Theaters of Madness. Insane Asylums & Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. London ad Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Rhodes, Kimberly. 2008. *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Romanska, Magda. 2005. "Ontology and Eroticism: Two Bodies of Ophelia". *Women's Studies* 34: 485-513.

Ronk, Martha C. 1994. "Representations of Ophelia". *Criticism* 36 (1): 21-43.

Santing, Catrien, Flos Wildshut, and Krien Clevis, eds. 2009. *Ophelia: Sehnsucht, Melancholia and Desire for Death*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Buitenkant.

Saxo Grammaticus. 1979. *The History of the Danes. Vol. 1: English Text*. Translated by Peter Fisher, edited by Hilda Ellis Davidson. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.

— 1931. *Gesta Danorum*, 2 vols. Edited by Jørgen Olrik and Hans Raeder. Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard.

Shakespeare, William. 2006. *Hamlet*. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Bloomsbury.

Showalter, Elaine. 1985. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibility of Feminist Criticism". In *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, edited by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, 77-94. New York and London: Methuen.

Small, Helen. 1996. *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Solomon Kiefer, Carol, ed. 2001. *The Myth and Madness of Ophelia*. Amherst: Mead Art Museum , Amherst College.

Taylor, Neil. 2012. "An Actress Prepares: Seven Ophelias". In *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, edited by Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, 43-58. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Terry, Ellen. 1908. *The Story of My Life: Recollections and Reflections*. New York: McClure Company.

Vest, James M. 1989. *The French Face of Ophelia from Belleforest to Baudelaire*. Lanham: University Press of America.

Wagoner, Michael M. 2022. "Ofelia's Interruption of Ophelia in *Hamlet*". In *Shakespeare and the First Hamlet*, edited by Terri Bourus, 55-72. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Young, Alan R. 2002. Hamlet *and the Visual Arts, 1709-1900*. Newark: University of Delaware Press.

Edizioni ETS
Palazzo Roncioni - Lungarno Mediceo, 16, I-56127 Pisa
info@edizioniets.com - www.edizioniets.com
Finito di stampare nel mese di luglio 2025