

**TO SEE AND HEAR LIKE OPHELIA, OR HOW NOT TO TAKE LEAVE OF
ONE'S SENSES: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MADWOMAN IN YOUTUBE
CULTURE**

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Abstract: Ophelia, fated to insanity, has attracted incomparably more interest than any other Shakespearean heroine. As an archetype of a madwoman Ophelia has been in the limelight for a wide range of supporters and adversaries: literary critics, theatre and film directors, actors and actresses, psychiatrists, philosophers, writers, poets, painters, photographers, feminist and gender revolutionists, and ordinary people, especially women who want to act the story of her losing her senses. The last-mentioned category appear to be fulfilling their dreams of becoming madwomen by posing as lunatic Ophelia and being filmed. The destiny of these amateur films is to be posted on YouTube.

Keywords: Ophelia, performance, popular culture, YouTube, the senses

Though This Be Madness, There Is (Opheliac) Style in It

She speaks much of her father; says she hears
There's tricks i'th world, and hems, and beats her heart,
Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt
That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection. They aim at it
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts
Which, as her winks, and nods, and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (4.5.4-13)

The case of Ophelia (the causes and symptoms of her unusual state of mind and body, her body language and articulated language) has been “put under the microscope” so many times and at such different times that another attempt might be called a mad deed and each new investigator could be advised to have their head examined. Yet I believe I have found my ramification within this huge artery—the topic of the madness of Ophelia—by analyzing her most contemporary representations, the very postmodern ones. My intention is to put these representations into the broader context of YouTube culture. Simultaneously, I shall be posing a provocative question that appears in the title of my essay: “To see and hear like Ophelia, or how not to take leave of one’s senses”, pertaining to the recurring cultural motif of a madwoman in *Hamlet*, yet arranged according to Internet aesthetics.

I do not aim to fully explore the complicated representational history of postOphelias, yet I wish to signal a relatively fresh cultural phenomenon that has a strong connection with self-expression through a videotaped act of “going mad like Ophelia”. Additionally, “going mad like Ophelia” might be comprehended as a category referring to numerous amateur video scenes posted on YouTube. They characteristically capture the abnormal psychosomatic state of this Shakespearean female protagonist in performance. In our e-culture, the shape, function and representation of women are still typically created and re-created by active participants in cultural life, while emblematic fictional female figures like Ophelia function as possible “skins” to be worn or masks that enable playing-out. Lois Potter notices that: “In fact, the cyber-media are still exploring Shakespeare’s potential, with YouTube, for example, allowing anyone to perform Shakespeare at virtually no cost, and transmit the result to an invisible but potentially enormous audience” (430).

I wish to examine the widely disseminated representations of Ophelia in YouTube culture, which derive both from works by visual artists and writers and from interpretations of her character in theatrical productions of *Hamlet*, revealing her as a nexus of the struggle for the subjugation of the female body. By considering a broad range of amateur materials and paying special attention to images women have produced, I want to present Ophelia as a figure whose story has crossed traditional media and entered the space of YouTube. My analysis yields insights into this most visited of video-sharing websites and reveals the compelling associations between popOphelia, gender, madness and non-professional techniques of performance.

The new media seem to have galvanized innovative interpretations of Shakespeare, yet for my analysis I narrowed the data down: my choice was to watch YouTube versions of Ophelia’s mad scene. In her article *iShakespeare* Laurie Osborne informs us that:

The explosion of YouTube Shakespeare videos suggests that his plays provide a useful starting place for do-it-yourself video production. From stop-action Claymation (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5OKUBVb4sI>) to musical performances of *Macbeth* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YVOEoWR44ug>), Shakespearean YouTube hosts more than rare performance recordings like the summary film of the Wooster Group Hamlet (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AO2XOOsbK8>). “Canonical” films prove useful, even recyclable, for example, in the mini-boom of YouTube Ophelia music videos—such as Ophelia’s Immortal (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qs0m9dGI5zQ>) and Hamlet’s Immortal (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZm4gRBzY20>), which set clips of Kate Winslet’s performance in Branagh’s Hamlet to an array of pop songs” (48).

The Choice of Going Insane and Dying Like Ophelia

For most of the play, assuming in a simplistic manner that it consists of both a visual and a verbal layer, Ophelia is hardly perceptible to the eyes or ears of other *dramatis personae* or the audience’s senses of hearing or sight. She steps into the course of events not by uttering a sentence but by directing a question at her brother: “Do you doubt that?” (1.3.4) during their farewell dialogue before Laertes’ departure (“that” in Ophelia’s question paradoxically relates to her confirmation that she will remain in contact with Laertes while he is away). It is however possible that Shakespeare’s idea was to “throw” her figure into the play one scene before scene 3 (only the First Folio informs us about her silent presence in 1.2). Some theatre and cinematic productions allow for her to make a “beautiful” entrance, for her to witness Hamlet’s revelation, *inter alia*, that he has “that within which passes show” (1.2.85). She grows in importance as she immerses herself in lunacy. The transgressive figure of Ophelia is a threatening one because of its prophetic words and unpredictable actions. Even if only for a while, insanity thrusts her into the limelight. This altered psychosomatic state is also responsible for attracting public interest, namely YouTube-performers.

Unquestionably, portraying the mad scene from *Hamlet* is second best to acting the death scene. In the course of my previous research into the topic of NecrOphelia I found that the proliferation of Ophelia-like images within popular culture during the last twenty years has—on the one hand—rendered her figure “ophelia-less”, that is to say has taken it away from any detectable original source, displacing it from the context of the play, while on the other hand it has made her “ophelia-ful”, in other words has made her contain all Ophelias up

to the present, by conflating pieces of this female necro-figure into a single yet paradoxically “defragmented” Ophelia.¹

Our contemporary ocularcentric reality allows us to generate many more representations of Ophelia than in the past, when “pre-digital” technical development provided very limited means to translate the existence of this literary figure into the language of another art such as painting or music. I focused on Ophelia’s floating dead body, which partly accounts for postmodern thanatophilic imagination. These representations included video scenes available on YouTube, amateur photographs in bathtubs, reproductions and remakes of classical paintings (e.g. John Everett Millais), and musical allusions (e.g. Nick Cave’s song “Where the Wild Roses Grow”).

In a similar way, in this article I will centre on globally shared images of psychOphelia. Insanity, the dangerous zone that merges fascination with fear, is *terra incognita* for any daredevil who wishes to understand its intricacies. Any effort to imitate the state in which mind and body are “driven into desperate terms” (4.7.27) can be accepted only on condition that it involves nothing but a mere experiment. Performative experiments by YouTube content producers rely on the assumption that in enacting madness, they are deliberately violating their personal integrity in order to exist in the Web 2.0. culture in this act of Ophelia-revival. The twofold motivation of amateur role-playing can be expressed as the YouTubers’ desire to wake up the uncanny (in themselves), and as their wish to become visible/socially recognized by virtual others. Thanks to user-friendly websites such as YouTube, such longings are within reach of attainment. For some Internet users, Ophelia is an inevitable step to extending their personal identity.

YouTubers Like Shakespeare

While trying to categorize the reasons for the YouTube Shakespeare boom, I realized that some of the clips are created by students preparing for their “Shakespeare English project”. Many student-produced and thus amateur bits and pieces of Shakespeare on YouTube are a response to the *Zeitgeist*: as we are part of a visual culture, the innovative aesthetics of generating images and making them accessible almost at the speed of light is starting to achieve triumphs, especially among the young. In his book *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (2010), Michael Strangelove reminds us of the

¹ My article “Too Much of Eroticism Hast Thou, Poor Ophelia”: Postmodern NecrOpheliac Fantasies in Popular Culture” was accepted for publication in *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture* 3, Łódź: Łódź University Press (forthcoming 2012).

obvious yet easily forgotten fact that YouTube does not involve high-cost video production and that it allows mass participation due to the Internet culture being globally accessible (27).

It is also worth bearing in mind that YouTube material is quickly disseminated and of much briefer existence than typical cinematic material. It is also fractional in comparison with the duration of e-material itself (understood in terms of the editing of the material). Moreover, as Christy Desmet explains, the notion of transparency does not harmonise with the YouTube-window, since it is “a layered composite of different frames” (548). To substantiate her statement, she elaborates:

The actual video is a small screen embedded in a Web page that includes other kinds of information, from the submitter’s description, and metadata to viewer comments and suggested videos for further viewing. Sometimes even an advertisement intervenes between the viewer and the video’s virtual reality, so that the viewer of a YouTube page moves constantly from looking at and looking through the screen (548).

Internet culture offers totally original and hi-tech modes of mass production, mass participation and mass reaction that were unfamiliar before 2005, the year when YouTube in its embryonic stage originated.

The Past and the Present: Ophelia’s Madness Performed

Once performed only by men, the role of Ophelia has undergone incredible metamorphoses. Artistic practices—which are both cultural products and influence cultural production—are determined by and interwoven with the media landscape of subsequent times. Therefore, the Shakespearean Ophelia was inseparable from the theatrical practices of Elizabethan times. For many centuries Ophelia in performance was confined to the stage, where from the reign of Charles II onwards women biologically appeared in the theatrical space. Ophelia commenced her theatrical life in the bodies of male actors, who, according to Renaissance notions of madness, performed it “as the predictable outcome of erotomania” (Showalter 81). Later, female incarnations of a madwoman differently exploited the potential of a sexually frustrated body finding relief in nonsensical speech, pulsating bodily movements and indecipherable gestures.

Theatrical practices were not isolated from other artistic and creative domains such as critical writing, philosophy poetry, painting, music, and, later, photography and film. Performative embodiments of Ophelia evolved along with the revolution in the media world. Their realization ranged from page and stage through still and moving images to digital and

cyber representations. They started to permeate into the soil of their predecessors and even to merge into one cultural organism.

It is no secret that the twenty-first century feeds on images. Their provenance is almost invisible for the viewers, yet the outcome (the image itself) can even be hyper-perceptible to their sight, for example, billboards that advertise products may attract them with representations that are the result of manipulation or compilation—the intertextual game of “cut, copy and paste”. Mass consumption of visible signs enhances their production. With regard to representations of Ophelia, the re-creation of amateur video scenes available on YouTube is the epitome of the postmodern frenzy of remixes, reproductions and re-workings. One quick search for the mad scene on the Internet and the “chain” of YouTube windows flashes on to the main screen. In each of the small screens the viewer finds no more than a hint at what might be the content of the videoclip, e.g. the duration of the film or a still from it. Selection of the right item on a display screen is, therefore, a matter of intuition or luck. Sometimes the content disappoints, while another “click” brings amusement and visual pleasure.

Interestingly enough, Strangelove observes that: “YouTube is home to all forms of sexual fetishes and marginal or underground sexual practices” (87). From one standpoint, a YouTube viewer may find pleasure in watching a pretty woman go insane, while from another, a pseudo-actress who plays Ophelia’s mad scene might—through an act of self-expression—discover unknown forms of taking pleasure in acting with her body, in taking leave of her senses like Ophelia. As the culture of non-professional pop-performers flourishes, many of them are turning to immortal motifs from Shakespeare, without any deeper knowledge of his works. Generated at home or in any other place, as far from the stage or a professional setting for the film as the Earth is from the Sun, these YouTube videos inevitably leave a trail in our cultural (Internet) universe. Amateur video film that exploits the theme of Ophelia becomes another form of prolonging her afterlife, more and more distant still from the prototype and even gradually more aberrant (as in the case of acting out insanity).

As I searched for “mad Ophelia” videos on YouTube, I realized how right Christy Desmet was when in her article “Character” she observed that the contemporary status of Shakespeare’s protagonists—what she calls “Shakespearean characters after computers” (540)—is that “in the digital or post-human age [they] are dispersed as packets of data that circulate through the porous membrane between self and environment” (541). Self-made videos in Opheliac style also belong to this virtually available data.

As I stated earlier, different “Internet content producers” (Strangelove 53) have different reasons for their actions. Some decide to share their own piece of YouTube Shakespeare after preparing a clip as part of a classroom assessment. I wish to focus first on an English project, described as such by a female YouTuber, who entitled her project: *Hamlet, Act V Scene IV ‘Ophelia’s Song’*. The e-material was posted by carlojacartist Lauren Allan (Glasgow Caledonian University).

This amateur video presents a two-minute-scene showing Ophelia on her own, a scene that evokes death. Shakespeare’s madwoman is portrayed by a non-professional actress, a student dressed in black, as if in opposition to the traditional image of the white and innocent “Rose of May”. The viewer sees a young girl sitting on the ground, which resembles a stage and thus gives the impression of a theatrical-like performance. In her description of the clip, the author provides information about having used a three-dimensional technique in her project. The first impression is that of a stage scene rather than of a virtual one. Before Ophelia delivers her first lines, the viewer’s attention is attracted by the monumental scenery of the ruins of a Gothic building with stone blocks surrounding the heroine. A dark and paranoid atmosphere, evoking horror scenes, dominates this performance of madness. Ophelia asks about “the beauteous majesty of Denmark”, but paradoxically she is not searching for other human beings in the immediate vicinity. Aware of her own presence only (her shadow being a special effect), Ophelia performs a monologue. While in the play it is impossible for her to be unwatched or not overheard, on this occasion she is allowed to deliver a monologue, which consists of a number of lines from 4.5. Gertrude’s and Claudius’ interruptions are omitted and the world revolves around Ophelia. As she sings “He is dead and gone”, the upper parts of the walls start breaking and fall into pieces just behind her back. Her psychosomatic state is thus stressed by the reaction of the objects nearby. Another example is a large spot of blood on a cloth hanging over a gate. The spot somehow “grows” and becomes more and more visible while Ophelia is spinning around frantically and spewing out an excess of words and emotions in the form of her song about a lost relative or lover. Another special effect used by the author of the *Ophelia’s Song* clip is a rain of sheets of paper, probably letters that imitate the “true love showers” of the girl’s song. Unexpectedly, water starts pouring from the stone walls, as if they were weeping. The video ends with Ophelia’s calm observation: “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we will be. God be at your table!..” The figure of Ophelia fades away, by contrast with the background, which comes more into focus. Ophelia leaves the viewer with uncertainty and premonitions about the

events to come. To my mind, the amateur video discussed could be a music video, where Ophelia is the soloist singer, screaming out her altered state of mind and body.

As I inspected more Opheliac amateur performances on-line, I found *Ophelia's crazy song* posted by dukeenglishvideos. This videoclip is set in a modern garden with a small fountain as the focal point of the scenery. Before the viewer hears Ophelia's first line, their attention is attracted by a sound of pouring water. This monotonous sound is interrupted by Ophelia's question: "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?" which is directed at the figure of an angel—the upper part of the fountain. The small grey angel is the only addressee of the girl's words, which are communicated with fluctuating intensity. Again, other characters' lines are eliminated from this one-actress performance. Although the author of *Ophelia's crazy song* implies that it will be a musical performance, overall there is little singing in this mediocre piece of YouTube Shakespeare. The young amateur actress, wearing a long creamy-peach lace dress (but also glasses, earrings and a watch), balances on the rectangular edge of the fountain as she tries to encircle the water. If her bodily movements and gestures are taken into consideration, this performance is full of bows, snatching at her dress, and strange looks into the incorporeal air, sometimes with the aim of catching the eye of the unresponsive viewer or the angel.

Without the shadow of a doubt the performance discussed can be described neither as a sophisticated rendering nor as characterized by finesse. Rather it presents simplistic everyday scenery, naïve choreography, and an untrained rendering that bears a resemblance to a rehearsal. I had the impression that this non-professional Ophelia was having her first practice session, her constant awareness of the camera being an example of such behaviour. The clip was recorded with a number of cuts that become obvious, for example, when a transition from the image of Ophelia sitting on the edge of the fountain to one of her standing beside it is shown not as a smooth movement but as a discontinuous change of position. The last shot within this typical poor-quality YouTube video zeroes in on Ophelia's Saint Valentine's song, which is unexpectedly broken off after the girl manages to utter the words: "You promised me to wed". It does not leave the viewer with any reflections on the madwoman's subsequent actions, since a mood of unfulfilled voyeuristic expectations takes over. Perhaps the shaky camera ran out of power at this point.

Finally, among numerous interpretations of popOphelias, I decided to pick a completely different clip entitled *Ophelia/Complete psychological degeneration*, posted by mashele. This video includes music, in particular a song "Dig Ophelia" by an American cello-driven band, "Rasputina" (the text originates from the album *Thanks for the Ether*, 1996):

Dig Ophelia, consider it dug.
Flowers madness and polar bear rug
Here's the water, just ankle deep high.
Lay back and relax and look up at the sky.
Your eyes never close, your mind's not at rest,
Lay back, get waterlogged
Give us a kiss.
Water spreads the small seed
Water kills the tall weed.
Ophelia.

Cut the stem and you'll see how you feel
Floating orchids just ain't no big deal
Never knowing's like knowing too much
Tap the table, oh here's more bad luck.
Your eyes never close, your mind's not at rest,
Lay back, get waterlogged
Give us a kiss.
Water spreads the small seed,
Water kills the tall weed.
Ophelia.
Ophelia.

Not being a typical YouTube Shakespeare, this video does not use any quotations from his works. Nevertheless it might still fall into the category of "Shakespeare-inspired material" (Ophelia remains the leitmotif of the song). It is noteworthy that the material discussed is not an official musical videoclip (unavailable either on YouTube or anywhere else on the Internet). The author's purpose was to create her own illustration of the lyrics, and the outcome of this is *Ophelia/Complete psychological degeneration*. The audio track of the clip serves more as a background to the visual, not the other way round. In a very postmodern style, the material is selected, fragmented and put together into a composition of pictures of Ophelia, now black-and-white, now colour. Starting from this toying with colour, the entire clip is based on oppositions: immobile/active Ophelia, the presence now of water (in a cup) and now of fire (candles), scene set outdoors (a field, a park)/indoors (a room, a bathroom), freedom/captivity, light/dark settings.

Ophelia, reincarnated by a short-haired blonde amateur actress with a headband, appears to be suffocating, living in a state of turbulence, similar to agitated water (the clip

abounds in representations of either water overflowing from a cup, or Ophelia immersing herself in a bathtub). The viewer experiences it both aurally and visually when Ophelia becomes more and more “divided from herself and her fair judgment”: she whirls around, spills water, eats cork, smudges her make-up, points at the sky without any reason, unnaturally inspects her reflection in the mirror and finally integrates with the watery element. Even when Shakespeare’s words are not exploited, one of the most inspiring female embodiments of insanity in Western culture, Ophelia and her story, is being compulsively translated by YouTubers armed with cameras and pictorial imagination—into the language of the medium of our contemporary visual culture, thus rendering her presence iconic.

The song “Mad Girl” by the American singer, violinist and poet Emilie Autumn is my last example of the Ophelia theme being taken up by popular culture and confirms that Ophelia, herself a soloist and a balladeer, has become an inspiration for contemporary vocal artists (and along with Ophelia, the tragic story of her descent into madness). The performance of the song came to my attention, once again, via the platform of YouTube (“Mad Girl”). The author of “Mad Girl”, a song from *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun & Bohemian Rhapsody* (2008), exploits the archetype of a madwoman in the body of Ophelia to comment on postmodern preoccupations and reflections on femininity. Playing a harpsichord and using her voice to render the madwoman’s narrative a melodious tale, Autumn sets out to express her emphatic personal attitude towards victimized and tormented women figures. Ophelia is revived as a dreaming/dead doll, a weaver of ‘faerie’ tales, whose reduced impact on others within the play (as portrayed by Shakespeare) is continuously re-compensated for by her ever-flourishing afterlife.

Mad girl
Can you believe
What they’ve done to you?
Wouldn’t they stop
When you asked them to leave you alone
In all your faerie tales
How did the prince say he loved you?
How did your father die?
Was he a good man?
Maybe someday you’ll know

The beginning and the end
Much closer than they seem

Death is but a dream, I know
Dolls are meant to grow away
All broken and bent from petty play
My friend in this world
Is a bottle of nothing
Still I fly
Still I fall

Mad girl
Can you believe
What they've done to you?
Wouldn't they stop
When you asked them to leave you alone
In all your faerie tales
How did the prince say he loved you?
How did your father die?
Was he a good man?
Maybe someday you'll know

Like the water in the well
My melancholy state
Folly, fear and hate, I know
Even time will never tell
She teetered, she tripped
And then she fell
My faith in this world
Is a bottle of nothing
Still I fly
Still I fall

Mad girl
Can you believe
What they've done to you?
Wouldn't they stop
When you asked them to leave you alone
In all your faerie tales
How did the prince say he loved you?
How did your father die?
Was he a good man?
Maybe someday...

The reference to Ophelia is more than inevitable, given the fact that Autumn dedicates one of her albums—*Opheliac* (2006)—solely to this “minor personage of the tragedy” (Camden 247). The body of compositions included in this album might be interpreted as a tribute to all women experiencing unequal treatment, being abused and stigmatized as other(s) in Western culture. Interestingly enough, Autumn integrates her own story as a girl who was raped, a person who attempted suicide (she even spent some time in a mental asylum) and was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, with the Ophelia narrative. The artist raises this uncomfortable and controversial topic and comments on the condition of mentally ill people by making references to literary figures, especially to the Shakespeare heroine. The rendition of “Mad Girl” is an acoustic version, thus “ear-catching”, yet simultaneously the artist, who is famous for her postVictorian preferences, creates the impression of a theatrical performance. The stage operates as a site designed both for a concert and for a theatre performance. As the vocal story of Ophelia develops, four “real” Ophelias appear on stage, one after another, dressed like courtesans. The performance encompasses a wide range of elements of sexuality, protest, mockery and cabaret. Autumn puts her soul into this song, which is full of refinement and delicacy.

Post/Pop/PsychOphelias:

“We Know What We Are, but Know Not What We May Be”

Unrecognized by the troops of male critics, directors, editors, and writers, up to the flowering of the feminist concept of “her-story”, Ophelia remained an insignificant figure in the shadows, a mere reflection of the sun of the play, Hamlet. She was immortalized both as a lunatic and as a corpse, but there was little to remember about this girl/woman before her passing away. Although Ophelia was reinvented for every epoch, the patriarchal tissue of Western culture penetrated every autonomic cell of her organism, leaving no space for a truly independent cultural life. Left in the spiral of silence, she was almost accused of “penis envy”, to use a Freudian term. To face up to the truth, when we consider this character’s significance we have to conclude that she was not given equally treatment with the male characters in the play. Eventually, some light has been thrown on her afterlife, along with the discovery of her miscellaneous cultural representations.

Judging by academic research to date, YouTube Shakespeare is still a neglected aspect of Shakespeare in performance. To some extent this might be put down to the fact that the history of the website is limited to seven years and thus “YouTube Shakespeare is still a

child”, still in its nascent stage. It should also not escape our attention that not all Shakespearean characters have inspired YouTubers to adapt them to the needs of this practical and globally accessible social medium. Ophelia has acquired another dimension of cultural existence. While still remaining an archetype of a madwoman, she has become a post/pop/psychOphelia. She has fulfilled her own prophetic words: “We know what we are, but know not what we may be”. Ophelia’s future will definitely be shaped by the contours of the new media and the creativity of users. They may be inspired not only by the case of Ophelia as depicted by Shakespeare, but also by feminist “risky revivals” such as T. M. Peiris’s conjectures about the madwoman in “Ophelia. A Theory” (1996):

Ophelia was a florist in a former life. Ophelia had endometriosis. Ophelia wore too many clothes for her own good. Ophelia slipped and fell. Ophelia was a slut. Ophelia considered becoming a nun. Ophelia was a junkie. Ophelia was violated. Ophelia was bright. Ophelia had potential, her grade five teacher said so. Ophelia was an angel. Ophelia drowned (144).

The sky is the limit for any storyteller, and Ophelia will wait patiently.

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