

March 2018

"She May Strew Dangerous Conjectures": The Political Sediton and Social Potency of _Hamlet_'s Ophelia

Christina M. Luiggi
Wright State University, puntasecca.2@wright.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc>

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Luiggi, Christina M. (2016) ""She May Strew Dangerous Conjectures": The Political Sediton and Social Potency of _Hamlet_'s Ophelia," *Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*: Vol. 9 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol9/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Literary Magazines at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

“She May Strew Dangerous Conjectures”: The Political Seditious and Social Potency of *Hamlet’s* Ophelia

Christina Puntasecca Luiggi, *Wright State University*

The Pre-Raphaelite painting entitled “Ophelia,” by John Everett Millais, is perhaps the most recognizable and influential artistic representation of Ophelia’s character.¹ The painting presents Ophelia as beautiful, but pallid and weak. The only expression of bodily strength lies in the grasp of her bright floral garlands. The orchids and long purples “that liberal shepherds give a grosser name,” suggest a sexual essence, echoed by the “mermaidlike” gown Ophelia wears in death (4.2.70-75). In the painting’s suspended animation of death, Ophelia’s skirts are frozen in the act of billowing, as the play’s text describes, “Her clothes spread wide/And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up [. . .] as one incapable of her own distress (IV.vii.201-203). Her embellished white garment is reminiscent of a bridal gown, perhaps as a representation of her purity or unrequited love. Despite her misfortune, Ophelia’s face is left vacant, expressionless, as if to convey to the audience the absence of Ophelia’s consciousness. The spirit of Millais’s interpretation lives on today through a social media trend comprised of women posing as Millais’s imagining of Ophelia, a trend coined “the Ophelia effect.” Thus, through the painting’s depiction of her, and through its longstanding popularity, Ophelia is denied agency and motivation. This vacancy, I contend, belies the powerful connotations of Ophelia’s strength and political understanding of her environment in the play, despite elements of madness often upheld by critics as superior to her actions. The long-standing and virtually unanimous dismissal of Ophelia among critics, particularly within feminist literary theory, fails to account for this aspect of Ophelia’s character and is therefore incomplete. I argue that Ophelia is a politically seditious and verbally dangerous character, albeit restricted by the social constructs of gender and social class during the Renaissance period. A close reading of the text followed

¹ For an online image of the painting, see <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506>.

by textual comparison with Anthony Cimolino's 2015 Stratford Shakespeare Festival provides a contemporary tapestry with which to demonstrate such possibilities for Ophelia.

Literary critics widely accept readings of Ophelia that fall within three basic categories: Ophelia as vacant, Ophelia as mad, and Ophelia as a victim of misogyny. Elaine Showalter argues that Ophelia's madness is widely accepted, that her role is merely meant to provide a feminine contrast to Hamlet's "metaphysical" madness, and that she "literally has no story without Hamlet" (2). Depictions of Ophelia's madness have evolved over time to reflect society's understanding of feminine psychosis. In this regard, Showalter asks, "is [Ophelia] indeed representative of Woman, and does her madness stand for the oppression of women in society as well as in tragedy" (2). Showalter contributes to the concept of Ophelia's madness as an evolving representation of women's powerlessness in society, but does not account for the problematic assumption that Ophelia is mad to begin with. Gabrielle Dane further develops the concept of Ophelia's madness by exploring instances of causation within the play. She points to the lack of a mother, and the control of men in Ophelia's life. She explains, "Motherless and completely circumscribed by the men around her, Ophelia has been shaped to conform to external demands, to reflect others' desires" (Dane 406). Dane asserts the feminist critique of the male gaze as applied to Ophelia, while at the same time she neglects the power of Ophelia's use of songs and their effect upon authority.

In the context of sixteenth century culture, Ophelia asserts her political agency through the feminine domains of song, engaging existing cultural scripts as a means for narrating an expression of her circumstances. Within a contemporary framing in the 2015 Cimolino theatrical production, Ophelia's character is able to express her agency through the ownership of physical space during assertions of song and speech. Critics have neglected to account for the political resonances within Ophelia's choice of songs, and more specifically the affectation of fear her performances caused among court authorities. Ophelia's words confounded her authorities, incited fear, and were performed within the text for the audience to see. Ophelia overstepped courtly manners with her interruptions through songs manipulated to reflect her experiences with Hamlet and Polonius, thus reasserting her feminine experiences and

reclaiming public space through song and dance. Literary critics have stated that Ophelia's songs of Hamlet are the songs of a lost love; I argue that Ophelia is presenting her trauma to the court.

Ophelia's famous songs are performed after she learns of her father's death, and she echoes her personal circumstance as she sings of romantic expectation juxtaposed with victimization. She describes her naïve attitude toward Hamlet as portrayed in earlier scenes of the story: "And I a maid at your Window/ To be your valentine." She goes on to describe Hamlet's abuse by singing:

Then up he rose and donned his clothes
 And dugged the chamber door,
 Let in the maid, that out a maid
 Never departed more. (4.5.48-55)

Ophelia situates the colloquial song within a retelling of Hamlet's invasion of her sewing room, and the presumed effect it has on her image. Hamlet's actions, regardless of Ophelia's responses, directly affected her standing with her father and the court. Ophelia highlights this in her depiction of the Hamlet's abuse and Polonius and the King's manipulation of the circumstances. Ophelia mocks the condoning attitude toward male promiscuity: "Young men will do't if they come to't / By Cock, they are to blame." She goes on to tell the story of Hamlet's denial of Ophelia and his disregard for her outside of his needs:

Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me,
 You promised me to wed.
 He answers:
 "So would I'a' done, by yonder sun
 And thou hadst not come to my bed.

By asserting her version of this story in the physical domain of the royal court, Ophelia subverts patriarchal structure and brings to light a gender-based tradition of violence, which politically draws attention to Hamlet. Ophelia leaves little room for misunderstanding as she puns, "By yonder sun" in the final lines, and draws Hamlet as the subject into focus. Since Hamlet is self-exiled due to the murder of Polonius, this creates a threatening situation for the royal family.

In Ophelia's second scene of songs, she focuses on the hierarchies of power that enacted misdeeds against herself and Polonius: through feminine retelling of the stories, Ophelia reclaims the public space that

shame and vulnerability deny her. Her brother Laertes is in the room and thus the songs describing Polonius's funeral are directed at him in the same way songs about Hamlet are directed at Gertrude. Ophelia is telling stories through these songs in an effort to demand responsibility from parties who should have offered protection, but failed. She ties these examples together, asserting herself and her father as common victims through physical manifestation of vulnerability through the word "bed." Ophelia describes Hamlet's use of the bed to rob her of the life expected through social constructions of purity and gender roles as she sings, "So would I 'a'done, by yonder sun,/ And though hadst not come to my bed." She connects this physical manifestation of vulnerability to her father: "He is dead, Go to thy deathbed. . .and we cast away a moan (4.5.190-191, 196)." With regard to Ophelia's song performance, the narrative of personal abuse paired with the songs about her father's death could be seen as drawing suspicion or accusation toward the court. ²

Ophelia's actions confound authorities due to their existence outside the social construction of sixteenth century femininity and social stratification. In scene four, as Ophelia enters the court and before her songs are performed, a gentleman and Horatio relay Ophelia's public behavior to the Queen. The gentleman states:

She speaks much of her father, says she hears/
There's tricks I' the world [. . .] Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move the hearers to collection;
they yawn (gape) at it, and botch the words to fit their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought. (4.5.4-15)

The power of Ophelia's words, particularly in this scene, demand the reader's attention. Her effect upon the common people, presumably due to the people's affection for her father, exacerbate Horatio's concern that Ophelia could drive people to riot and would most likely have been followed by an official attempt to prevent unrest. Horatio asserts that "T'were good she were spoken with, for she/ may strew/ Dangerous

² In order to understand the political nature and perceived danger of Ophelia's famous songs, it is necessary to consider them through the context of libels as understood in Renaissance England. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines libels, as used in the late sixteenth century, as, "to make libelous accusations or statements; to spread defamation." Libels could come in the form of songs, pamphlets, or other mediums. Publishing of libels wasn't necessary for accusations to be made, and there have been recorded cases of sentencing for libels that were merely questionably seditious in nature (Manning 100).

conjectures in ill-breeding minds (4. 5.14-15). Just as Ophelia's words are beneath the unnamed gentlemen, the minds and wills of ill-bred citizens are considered below the agenda of nobility. Horatio and other members of the court saw Ophelia's acts of public dissent and engaging with commoners as undermining traditional social conventions, resulting in direct threats against the interests of the nobility against factionalism.

Ophelia's performances were political in their use of feminine domains of song and dance for the court to (re)tell stories and subvert authority. Despite the power hierarchies that exist within the play, Ophelia asserts herself through the conscious retelling of her feminine experiences and reclamation of personal and public space through the medium of song. The use of her feminine voice in the public sphere is a political act, subverting authority in an effort to reveal the corruption she has witnessed within the royal court. Ophelia's actions confound authorities and create a threat of commoner uprising through inspiration by her songs and speech. Her performances among commoners served to undermine traditional social conventions while uniting the marginalized groups of elite women and the common citizen. In his 2015 production of *Hamlet*, Anthony Cimolino explores these actions through a contemporary perspective, providing Ophelia with mannerisms of strength and with full utilization of space on the stage. Cimolino removes all aspects of romanticism from Ophelia's character by placing her in a plain white shift and transforming her flowers into concrete objects that represent the dead Polonius, further broadening Ophelia's access to space in the retelling of her experiences.³

³ As Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival, Cimolino discusses the concept of rapid change during the Early Modern Period and in the current and postmodern world of the 21st century in the first page of the 2015 playbill. Cimolino mirrors these time periods through an interlacing of themes regarding the struggle between nostalgia or religious superstition and philosophic rationality that comes with the evolution of thought and the self. Cimolino states in his director's note, "Shakespeare lived in an age of rapid change, a time of new worlds, new beliefs and scientific discoveries. In short, he lived in a world much like our own. But in that early modern age, change was especially unsettling, overturning societal foundations and leading to revolution." Cimolino's trans-historical staging of the play includes a hodgepodge of period costumes, props and military customs in order to create a timeless impression of the struggle of the self. His use of multi-period women's costumes serves to bridge Ophelia's timeless struggle with the double-bind of oppression and class privilege. Ophelia's character grapples with the change around her much like societies have repeatedly grappled with instability, seemingly mad yet grounded in truth. Cimolino creates a parallel between Ophelia's struggle and women's history through a trans-historical aesthetic interpretation. The abstract and creative interpretations of the 2015 production of *Hamlet* challenge the audience to consider the relevance of Ophelia's conflict as an integral part of a larger story.

Ophelia's character, played by Adrienne Gould, is presented as a strong, seemingly secure young woman within a loving family structure. Her clothes are white throughout the play, even in her final scenes of supposed madness. Her scenes are always well-lit. Her facial expressions and body language in the first scenes express enthusiasm and skeptical wit as she interacts with her father, Polonius, and her brother Laertes. The props in her scenes include a sewing machine and violin, which she uses to present gifts to her family- a scarf for Laertes, and a song for her father. While the text presents Polonius as controlling and ill-concerned in regards to Ophelia, the set and actors create a sense of mutual admiration one might expect in a healthy father-daughter relationship. Gould uses strong physical contact in her representation of Ophelia. She hugs or touches everyone she interacts with throughout the play, whether the scene is positive or negative.

Gould's interaction with space is a physical assertion of Ophelia's agency. Contextually, Ophelia is in a double-bind. She is complicit in her own erasure when she stands silent, yet becomes a threat when she uses space. As Marilyn Frye explains in "The Politics of Reality," "It is often required upon oppressed people that we smile and be cheerful. If we comply, we signal our docility and our acquiescence in our situation. We acquiesce in being made invisible, in our occupying no space. We participate in our own erasure" (2). Gould's contemporary portrayal of Ophelia is physical to the extent of exaggeration. Her hugs are rounded, robotic, almost marionette-like in nature. She speaks loudly, whether in joy or rage. Frye explains the effect of using space as follows: "On the other hand, anything but the sunniest countenance exposes us to being perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous . . . at worst being seen [as such] has been known to result in rape, arrest, beating, and erasure" (Frye 2-3). While the text provides the response by the court to Ophelia's use of vocal space, the Cimolino performance shows a confounded response to her use of physical space.⁴

⁴ The only exception to Gould's liberal use of space is during her depiction of Act 3, Scene 1 when Polonius and the King order Ophelia to speak with Hamlet while they eavesdrop, in order to decide whether he loves her. In this scene, held in the chapel, Ophelia is completely still and seemingly introspective. Her stillness seems to signal a shift in her character as her suffering of manipulation by the most important members of her life becomes apparent. In the context of the double-bind, Gould's portrayal of Ophelia shifts to her political demand for both vocal and physical space, regardless of consequence.

Another production depiction of Ophelia's mental shift is expressed through her progressively unstable song performances. The lyrics come from the text in Act 4 Scene 5, after Ophelia is traumatized by the events of the story. The song is depicted much differently in the production than in the play, creating a double meaning in the lyrics and showing a shift in Ophelia's mental state. The first half of the song, "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day / All in the morning betime / And I a maid at your window / To be your Valentine," is played on a violin in Polonius and Ophelia's home, while Polonius cheerfully sings along (4.5.48-51). This manipulation of the text serves to tie Ophelia's song directly to her personal history. The song becomes, much like in memories, an entity that informs her physical experiences. She uses the song again after Polonius's death, as presented through the text, to retell the story of her tragedy.

Gould presents us with a depiction of Ophelia as guttural and dominating, creating a disparity between the concept of early modern feminine propriety and Ophelia's state of mind. However, the alternative use of feminine space politically subverts court tradition. Ophelia's hair is disheveled and looks as if it had been cut. The crisp white dress of her earlier scenes is now a muddied shift and robe. She carries her father's shoes with her, and is herself barefoot. Ophelia sings the first verse of "Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's Day," in the court as she stands upon Polonius's shoes and pretends to embrace his figure before attempting to dance with him. On the surface, Ophelia's vulnerability seems exposed to the audience, highlighting a specter of helpless madness; however, closer consideration of her torn clothes and rage is to take more seriously the social consequences of her grief. Ophelia's tears exist for a moment before she quickly changes demeanor to one of empowerment.

Her political assertion of power is expressed during the second half of the song lyrics. "Then up he rose and donned his clothes / And dugged the chamber door/ Let in the maid that out a maid/ Never departed more," are sung to King Claudius and Horatio as Ophelia uses sexual gestures (4.5.48-52). As the lyrics become more sexual throughout the scene, she enacts increasingly suggestive postures with King Claudius and Horatio, to include sexual gestures on Gertrude's bed. The men are shocked and repelled, and Gertrude seems beside herself. While the court seems disturbed by what, on the surface level, presents as madness,

Ophelia's actions are grounded in intentional liberation through the retelling of her story. Gould's use of space in the singing of these songs causes the men and women to feel discomfort that often comes with lack of agency. She seems to reenact her experiences of helplessness through a role reversal imposed through gestures of feminine sexual dominance.

The use of props on the stage are critical in understanding Ophelia as politically seditious and socially potent. They remove the romantic notion of floral metaphors, and replace it with concrete evidence of injustice. Ophelia enters the castle carrying her violin case and sets it on the floor, centered over the trap door. Framed by the rectangular outline of the door, the coffin-like shape of the violin case becomes apparent. Ophelia opens the case and delivers her famous lines:

There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.
(4.5.179-184)

In place of flowers, Ophelia removes objects from the violin case. She gives Laertes a locket and names it "rosemary, for remembrance." She gives fennel and columbines to Gertrude, in the form of Polonius' rosary and his wooden cross. Rue goes to Claudius, in the form of a bible, Ophelia tearing a page and holding it to her chest as she says, "and here's some for me." Daisies come in the form of the violin handle. Gould apologetically addresses the audience as she laments the lack of a gift due to the withering of violets upon her father's death. Ophelia is giving away her father's things- as Cimolino explained during a director's question and answer session, the small items of everyday use are the dearest to us when we mourn the loss of a loved one. Furthermore, the use of concrete objects seems to modernize Ophelia's grief, departing from the metaphorical trope of femininity through the natural world, forces the court to remember the person they murdered. The songs, combined with Polonius's personal effects, become potent vessels of Ophelia's deep grief as a social complaint.⁵

⁵ In his essay, "*The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet: Infernal Memory in English Renaissance Revenge Tragedy*," Zackariah C. Long discusses the contribution of infernal memory to the actions of revengers, and claims that infernal memory is typically associated with deep grief and a sudden change in their perception of the world (158). He states that, "Subject to involuntary, invasive, and irresistible reminiscences from within and oppressive reminders from without, revengers

Through historical and performance studies methodologies, Ophelia's politically subversive and socially disruptive actions are made apparent. Furthermore, her social relevance is explored in Cimolino's 2015 *Hamlet* production through the lens of contemporary issues. Yet, even in Cimolino's politically charged and progressive production of the play, Gould's body is ultimately portrayed in death as a vacant limp object at the mercy of men-Laertes and Hamlet, fighting over her corpse in the grave. This is the final image we have of Ophelia, and one might see her demise as a sign of her social irrelevance. By (re)visiting her songs, cemented in the text, we have a glimpse of her feminine power and political subversion in life.

Works Cited

- Amussen, Susan Dwyer. "Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meaning of Violence in Early Modern England." *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1996, pp. 1-34.
- Dane, Gabrielle. "Reading Ophelia's Madness." *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1998, pp. 405-423.

genuinely perceive glimmers of the otherworld in their surroundings" (154). Long provides the example of Hamlet's interaction with the Ghost, and argues that "the existential context for infernal memory is the early modern dilemma for being caught between worlds whether Classical or Christian, Protestant or Catholic, material or spiritual" (156). Although Ophelia never sees her father as a ghost, her social agency is tied up in not allowing others to forget the past. Cimolino's production of the play expresses this grief through a scene in which Ophelia dances with an imaginary version of her father while standing on a pair of Polonius's shoes. Her grief causes her to be caught between the moment her life changed, and her present existence with her father's killers. This conflict is expressed through reenactment of memory through use of mementos that Ophelia relates to Polonius.

The collection of mementos used on Cimolino's stage include Polonius's shoes, Ophelia's violin case, Polonius's spoon, crosses from his office, and the handle of the violin used in the earlier singing scene. Long describes the "memento-collecting revengers, whose careful preservation of tokens . . . of loved ones recalls them to [the fatal] duty," as well as the connection between mementos and the creative participation in remembrance (153-154). Ophelia's use of flowers in the text is interpreted as token objects belonging to Polonius in the Cimolino production; both the text and the 2015 production depict Ophelia as using the subject of her speech to represent ideas. Ophelia's use of mementos related to her father correlates with the revenger's method of remembrance rooted in the physical and metaphysical. Long describes this as a "distinctive feature of infernal memory" (160).

- Fitter, Chris. "Mock not Flesh and Blood/With Solemn Reverence:'
Recovering Radical Shakespeare." *Literature Compass*, 2012, pp.
420-430.
- Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality*. Crossing Press, 1983. Print.
- Long, Zachariah C. "The Spanish Tragedy and Hamlet: Infernal Memory
in English Renaissance Revenge Tragedy." *English Literary
Renaissance*, 2014, pp. 153-192.
- Manning, Roger B. "Origins of the Doctrine of Sedition." *Albion: A
Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2,
1980, pp. 99-121.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the
Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism*. Prentice Hall, 1996.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Signet Classics, 1998.