

Dossiê Shakespeare

**Voicing Ophelia: An Analysis of Franco Zeffirelli's and  
Kenneth Branagh's Representation of Ophelia**

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## Voicing Ophelia: An Analysis of Franco Zeffirelli's and Kenneth Branagh's Representation of Ophelia

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**Abstract:** This essay compares and contrasts two different performances of William Shakespeare's Ophelia. The first performance is from Franco Zeffirelli's filmic production, *Hamlet*, from 1990, in which Ophelia is played by Helena Bonhan Carter, and the second is from Kenneth Branagh's filmic production, *Hamlet*, from 1996, in which the role is played by Kate Winslet. The scene here foregrounded is the famous "madness scene" (4.5), which dramatizes the character's mental break down and serves as prelude for her iconic death.

**Key-Words:** Ophelia; Franco Zeffirelli; Kenneth Branagh; Madness; Hamlet.

**Resumo:** O presente artigo compara e contrasta duas atuações distintas da personagem Ofélia, de William Shakespeare. A primeira diz respeito à produção filmica de Franco Zeffirelli, *Hamlet*, de 1990, na qual Ofélia é representada por Helena Bonhan Carter, e a segunda se refere à produção filmica de Kenneth Branagh, *Hamlet*, de 1996, em que o papel é desempenhado por Kate Winslet. A cena aqui topicalizada é a célebre "cena da loucura" (ato 4, cena 5), que dramatiza o colapso nervoso da personagem e serve de prelúdio à sua morte icônica.

**Palavras-chave:** Ofélia; Franco Zeffirelli; Kenneth Branagh; Loucura, Hamlet.

Ophelia is a deceptively simple character in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. The character is a noble young woman, daughter of Polonius and sister of Laertes, and she is in love with prince Hamlet. She is one of the two female characters who appear in the play, and, as the arguable heroine, she ends up going insane and dies drowned. Ophelia stands out in the play in comparison with the other female character, i.e., Gertrude, Queen of Denmark and Prince Hamlet's mother, although they share some thematic similarities, such as: the condition of being women, their love for prince Hamlet,

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and their status as “traitors” in the vision of the protagonist. According to Leonardo B. A. Carneiro in *Thy Name is Woman: A (Re)Construção das Identidades Femininas em Adaptações Narrativas de Hamlet*, a doctoral dissertation from 2014, both female characters are involved in thematic ambivalence in the play. Carneiro believes that Ophelia and Gertrude, despite being the object of relatively negative views in much of the Shakespearean criticism over the centuries, have the power to attract the attention of the audience.

Gertrude has often been received by the critics as a mischievous adulteress and/or a protective mother. Ophelia went from contempt to acclamation in Victorian adaptations, and both characters have been frequently used in gender discussions about Shakespeare's drama. In spite of being, strictly speaking, a secondary character, Ophelia has become one of the most important and pictorially represented of Shakespeare's characters, especially in the visual arts. Yet the similarities and dualities shared by these two female characters have not been perceived in the same manner or with the same persistence, at least not in the history of Western art. Ophelia stands out and has been represented by neoclassic, romantic, Victorians, expressionists, surrealists, symbolists, cubists and post-modern artists, having become iconic, rendered, e.g., in the highly popular painting *Ophelia* (picture1) by the great master Sir John Everett Millais (1829-96).



Picture 1 – Sir John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1851-52)

This intense exposure happens because of the depth and complexity of her character. After all, when we analyze Ophelia, we must consider some intriguing thematic aspects that are intrinsic to her, such as, melancholy, gender issues, psychological depression, and especially the mysterious circumstances of her death. For Alex Miyoshi, in his essay “A escolha de Ofélia: Representações visuais da dama nas águas no século 19”, from 2010, the multiplicity of representations of Ophelia is caused by the ambiguous understanding of the action pertaining to her demise, as famously narrated by Queen Gertrude in mere seventeen and a half lines (act 4, scene7), an action that is not staged, and therefore more suggestive:

There is a willow grows askaunt the brook,  
 That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream,  
 Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
 Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples  
 That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
 But our cull-cold maids do dead men’s fingers call them.  
 There on the pendant boughs her crownet weeds  
 Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
 When down her weedy trophies and herself  
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
 And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,  
 Which time she chaunted snatches of old lauds,  
 As one incapable of her own distress,  
 Or like a creature native and indued  
 Unto that element. But long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pull’d the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death. (166-82)

82

Dossiê Shakespeare

Drawing on a myriad of filmic options, this essay intends to compare and contrast two specific depictions, actually, performances of Ophelia, one from Kenneth Branagh’s film, played by Kate Winslet, and the other from Franco Zeffirelli’s film, played by Helena Bonhan Carter. The scene analyzed is the famous “madness scene” (4.5), which dramatizes Ophelia’s emotional break down and serves as prelude for iconic her death.

*Hamlet* is the longest Shakespearean play to be staged. Although it has become a classic and, therefore, often staged according to standard aesthetic values of any given time, *Hamlet* has been produced by hundreds of directors in hundreds of different ways. All such productions are connected by the text--which can be the First Quarto (1603), the Second Quarto (1604), the First Folio(1623), or a conflated edition--but the uniqueness of each production is set by the arrangement of non-textual elements, such as, costume, set, music, lighting, enunciation, stage business, cast, etc.

To be sure, Dennis Kennedy, in his book *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-century Performance*, proposes that “The written drama is usually the foundation of a performance [...]” (8). However, Kennedy submits that, although written drama is fundamental to traditional theatre, it is far from being the only or primary rationale. Written drama is a guideline to a play, but what can make a production successful is not the “play on paper” but the “play in action”; by “play in action” we mean what happens on stage, the action that is often referred to as “stage business”, a combination of elements that transform the written play into a unique production. This is the dimension that elicits different approaches

to the same written drama. In order to understand the importance of such elements, and their combination in a production, let us take as case studies two different filmic renderings of the same Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*.

Two great productions of *Hamlet* are Kenneth Branagh's and Franco Zeffirelli's. Both directors worked with the original written drama, but their respective filmic adaptations of *Hamlet* could not have been more different from each other. Branagh's *Hamlet*, from 1996, is a sizeable production, with a large budget, in which the director displays luxurious costumes and sets. This magnificent version has the exterior scenes shot at Blenheim Palace, in Woodstock, in Central England, and for the interior scenes has a set specially designed to reflect the English baroque style of the palace. Branagh's *Hamlet* has significant visual appeal. We can notice that the director shows that Shakespeare did not write his plays for the purpose of being read, but to be staged, to be seen by an audience for the purpose of enjoyment. Branagh states:

I do believe that Shakespeare is more understandable when it is performed. His plays were not written as plays which had an immediate life as a published document. They were written very quickly and put on stage very quickly. If they weren't popular then they were taken off very quickly. Shakespeare's company had a very commercial intent and purpose. They were all business partners in this venture. If a play didn't work, it was off.<sup>3</sup>

Possibly, in order to make Shakespeare's text more approachable to the viewers, Branagh uses silent "Flashbacks", as mechanisms to help the audience visualize parts of the original text that are just spoken in the play and not staged, for example, the death of Hamlet's father, or prince Hamlet's famous memory of Yorick playing with him when he was just a kid. Branagh proudly uses the whole text of the First Folio and Second Quarto combined in his production, adding just one word to the original, the word "attack". The film ends up being one of the longest productions in the history of cinema, with four hours. Disclosing his own interpretation of Shakespeare's written drama, Branagh makes strong statements in the movie, such as affirming the sexual nature of the relationship between prince Hamlet and Ophelia, which in is one of the most polemic issues in the original play.

Branagh's film is played in a Great War, classy atmosphere. The director explains that he has tried to evoke a more contemporary sense of the classic play in order to make the audience relate better to the production. In an interview for *Spotlight*,<sup>4</sup> made by Josie Brown, Branagh says: "I personally find it hard to accept 20<sup>th</sup> century Shakespeare, because we've had 100 years of films now, and people didn't talk that way. But look a little further back and you're not sure how people spoke, so Shakespearean language doesn't sit so uncomfortably". And he continues, explaining why he chooses to bring *Hamlet* forward in time:

3 Available in: <http://www.filmeducation.org/pdf/film/Hamlet.pdf>. Accessed on: 24/06/2015

4 Available in: [http://www.josiebrown.com/signal\\_editorial/files/Branagh.pdf](http://www.josiebrown.com/signal_editorial/files/Branagh.pdf). Accessed on: 24/06/2015.

The medieval look for Hamlet – the woëd look, if you like, the ‘sack top’ look – it does not tell stories to me in the same way. The Elizabethan period doesn’t do it for me either. But in this kind of world, it seemed a good place for that story to be set [...]. It was a period in history when a lot of Europe was wronged by few large, extended royal families, often intermarrying with arranged marriages to try and protect boundaries which were always changed anyway. We borrowed from a pretty incestuous and excessive world: the Czars, the royal family, you know, the Romanovs, The Hapsburgs—both of which had the elegant looks: the women and the men both looked marvelous. (*ibid*)

On the other hand, Zeffirelli’s production, from 1990, is played in a medieval period. The movie was shot in Blackness Castle, close to Edinburgh, in Scotland, Dunnotar Castle, in the east of Scotland, Dover Castle, south-east of England, and sets were built in Muchalls Village, north-east of Scotland, as well.<sup>5</sup>The film lasts two hours and eighteen minutes. Being much briefer than Branagh’s, this adaptation offers a more concise version of the original text, omitting entire scenes, characters, such as Reynaldo, and famous lines, such as Marcellus: “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90). Zeffirelli’s idea seems to be not to show *Hamlet* in the same way that it had been played in traditional theater over the years, and, in contrast with the flashbacks used by Branagh, he plays the original text using a direct sequence of events—except for the opening scene, in which we get to see King Hamlet dead.

When we analyze Branagh’s and Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* the differences are many. The different representations of Ophelia made by the two directors, for instance, which is the main subject of this essay, produce important contrasts if the two productions are analyzed back to back. A great characteristic of Branagh’s film is the attention given to Ophelia. Branagh is arguably the first film director to allow Ophelia to become more than a mere “object”, a character marginally necessary to the plot. Looking at major English language cinema productions of *Hamlet*, we notice that in Laurence Olivier’s film of 1948, for instance, Ophelia is accorded 803 words; in Zeffirelli’s 456 words; and in Michael Almereyda’s a scant 447 words. In contrast, Branagh’s Ophelia has 1233 words, and the character is allowed her whole soliloquy in act 3.<sup>6</sup>

When we talk about Ophelia, it is almost impossible to dissociate her from the famous “madness scene” (4.5). This is probably one of the most commented scenes in *Hamlet*. This scene becomes important in the play because this is the moment when we can see Ophelia’s ruin, after realizing that her father is dead, killed by her lover, that she is being rejected by prince Hamlet, and that she is left alone, since her only family, her brother, is absent.

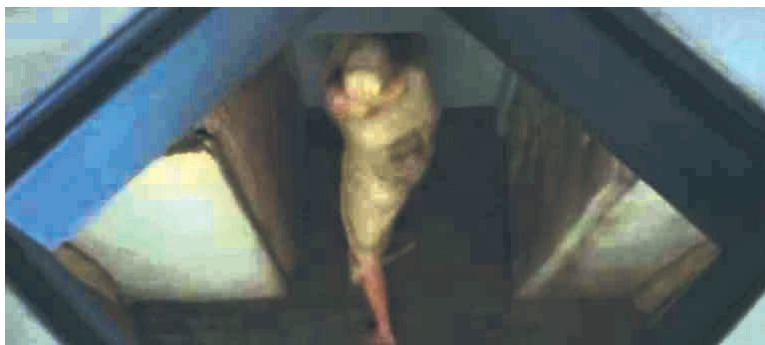
5 ZUBA, Márcio Eduardo. Do texto dramático para a tela: Hamlet por Franco Zeffirelli. TCC (Graduação)- Universidade Federal do Paraná, Setor de Ciências Humanas e Letras, Departamento de Letras Estrangeiras Modernas, Curitiba, 2006. Available in: [http://www.letras.ufpr.br/documentos/graduacao/monografias/ss\\_2006/Marcio\\_Zuba.pdf](http://www.letras.ufpr.br/documentos/graduacao/monografias/ss_2006/Marcio_Zuba.pdf)

6 LEONARD, Kendra Preston. The Lady Vanishes: Auralty and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias. Available in: <http://kendraprestonleonard.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/The-Lady-Vanishes.pdf>

Branagh's production stars Kate Winslet as Ophelia, portraying a strong-willed and mature young woman, whereas in Zeffirelli's version, Helena Bonham Carter portrays Ophelia as almost childlike and dreamy. Hence, the directors present two altogether unlike "madness scenes". Branagh's "madness scene" is played in a large, luxurious mirror room of the Palace, and was filmed in a long-shot scene. First Ophelia appears in a radical visual interpolation, inside a padded cell, wearing a strait jacket, bouncing herself against the walls, trying to get out. The camera shoots her from above, from the point of view of Queen Gertrude, who watches Ophelia from an opening on the ceiling of the cell (picture 2).

In the following shot, she appears released from the cell, laying down on the shiny floor of the mirror room, still wearing the straitjacket, saying the line: "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?" The queen unties the jacket, Ophelia struggles and sits up (picture 3). King Claudius, then, enters the scene and seems disturbed by the apparently nonsense songs sung by Ophelia. She talks to the king in a calm way until he mentions her father's death. Then, she screams and runs to the back of the room. The camera that was positioned to film all the characters from a front/group point of view now is located in the opposite side of the room, filming all the characters from the back, except Ophelia (picture 4). The shot places the observer in the position of one of the characters, watching Ophelia's mental break down. Ophelia starts to sing, in a closer shot. The king calls her name and attracts her attention. She walks back towards him and starts to sing the famous Saint Valentine's Day song, with intense sexual content; meantime, she lies on the floor and moves erotically (picture 5). The camera begins in a close-up shot and then turns into flashbacks of Ophelia in bed with prince Hamlet, a scene which, as we have argued, foregrounds Branagh's interpretation of the sexual nature of the young couple's relationship. Then, the king tries to fasten her jacket again, the camera turns into an open shot, Ophelia manages to escape and leaves the room running into the palace (picture 6).

This scene has two most appealing characteristics. First, we are shown the temperance of Branagh's Ophelia. Even taken by insanity, she manages to show maturity as a young woman, an innocent but not naïve person. She is portrayed as a strong figure who lives in a man's world. And second, we have the reaction of the king and queen. They seem disturbed, but there is no deep pain or compassion to Ophelia in their actions. It seems more a selfish concern, apparently different from Zeffirelli's queen's reaction.



Picture 2- Frame 1:16'17"/CD2. Film *Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh.



Picture 3 - Frame 1: 18’55”/ CD2. Film *Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh.



Picture 4 - Frame 00’10”/CD3. Film *Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh.



Picture 5 - Frame 00’46”/CD3. Film *Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh.





Picture 6 - Frame 01'41"/CD3. Film *Hamlet*, dir. Kenneth Branagh.

By contrast, in Zeffirelli's production we see a childlike, helpless Ophelia. The "madness" scene starts with Ophelia in a medium shot emerging behind a brick wall outside the castle (picture 7). She wears a dirty, shapeless gown that makes her look like a little girl; the camera follows her; she acts crazy and erotically with some guard, singing parts of the Saint Valentine's Day song and playing with his belt in a sexual way (picture 8). An independent shot shows the queen watching Ophelia from a window. Here, Ophelia runs into the castle, and, different from Branagh's, who lies down on the floor, demands to see Gertrude and says the classic line: "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?" She goes on singing, looking devastated. The camera goes back and forth, from Ophelia to the queen, while both walk slowly toward each other. The queen stops walking; she seems to be afraid, and tries to escape from the awkward situation. The king enters and the queen then no longer seems afraid, but in deep pain for Ophelia's predicament, feeling pity for the young noble girl who is falling apart in front of her eyes.

However, differently from Branagh's Ophelia, who delivers her lines in front of the king and queen desolate by her own sad fate, Zeffirelli's sometimes in the scene seems to coerce the queen and king, although not in a conscious way. The king tries to talk to Ophelia, who delivers what appears to be at first nonsense lines. Then, she brings her hands to her head and starts making insane sounds (picture 9). She sits down on the floor. The camera plays again with back and forth perspectives, from Ophelia to the people in the castle, showing her as the center of attention--she is the one being watched. In a long shot we see Ophelia walking away and saying good-bye to some ladies, who follow her out of the castle (picture 10). The queen ends the scene crying, and Ophelia, in despair, cries outside the castle, clawing on the brick walls (picture 11). Finally, Ophelia is carried away.



Picture 7 - Frame 1 18'17". Film *Hamlet*, dir. Franco Zefirelli.



Picture 8 - Frame 1 19'16". Film *Hamlet*, dir. Franco Zefirelli.



Picture 9–Frame 1 21'27". Film *Hamlet*, dir. Franco Zefirelli.



Picture 10 - Frame 1 22'21". Film *Hamlet*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli.



Picture 11 – Frame 1 22'59". Film *Hamlet*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli.

Deconstructing our visual reminiscence of Millais's classic representation of drowned Ophelia floating on her back (fig. 1), Branagh, in his film, has Ophelia die floating face down in a river. This is a woman who appears to have been sorely abused and who somehow took her fate into her own hands. We can say that Winslet's Ophelia's death is not accidental. But Bonham Carter's Ophelia's death might have been. These two Ophelias differ from each other in many ways, but in Zeffirelli's production Ophelia descends into madness reverting herself to an earlier stage of life. She often opens her eyes wide and changes her expression and mood, from happy to sad, to lunatic, to indignant, suddenly, as if she is not in control of her body. Sometimes she seems afraid of being caught, glaring at the sides, hiding behind walls, like a child. But although Branagh's Ophelia becomes a lunatic as well, her insanity seems more due to anger caused by how she is treated and by her present situation. She does not scream or change expression or lose control of her

body. Winslet portrays a mad, self-conscious Ophelia; her face is calm and her voice even.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that Ophelia is supposedly a minor character in *Hamlet*, she can be understood today as one of the most intriguing figures in the play. Her change--from being a fair maiden to madness, followed by a mysterious death--presents a greater complexity to the character than we can initially notice. For Yi-Chi Chen (2011),

Ophelia is more than just a flat character that Shakespeare arranges to play as Gertrude’s double or to strengthen the tragic effects of the play. With her transformation from the obedient daughter of Polonius to the mad woman who speaks of bawdy connotations at the court, Ophelia’s madness displays her inner conflicts and plight that she fails to ease. (CHEN, 2011, p.01)

Thus, the madness scene in *Hamlet* is the moment when the audience gets in contact with the true voice of Ophelia. It is through bawdy language and the “inappropriate behavior” that Ophelia truly expresses her plight and manages to deal with her deep suffering. Ophelia’s madness serves as freedom to the submissive character that we saw in the beginning of the play, and also as protection, since being mad can relieve the pain of her grim reality: the death of her father and the neglect of her lover, prince Hamlet.

Modesty and sensuality, accidental or voluntary death, tragic or romantic action, these are some of the complex thematic issues that surround Ophelia. A written drama offers many different interpretations. We have had innumerable Ophelias, and Hamlets, throughout time, and we will have a lot more, if productions continue to be made. Ultimately, when we compare and contrast Branagh’s and Zeffirelli’s Ophelias, we can conclude how important is the director’s interpretation and reading of a play. A director’s adaptation can “make” or “break” a production and can shape the idea that the audience has in relation to a given play text. There is no right way to portray Ophelia, of course. There are many Ophelias, one different from the other. However, for the sake of artistic success, each and every Ophelia had better be consistent with their own production, making sense between the written text and the visual text.

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