Ophelia Revised: The Paradox of Femme Fragile in Modern Revisionings of Hamlet

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Abstract

Ophelia is a paradox. She is marginalized, victimized, and even brutally mocked in Hamlet, yet she is one of the most quoted female figures of Shakespeare. Her victimization and above all, her poignantly symbolic and yet picturesquely framed suicidal death have given rise to certain movements and trends in art. Her corpse has been eroticized, with her pictures demonstrating a transcendental sensuality. Ophelia has been transformed in revisioning literature; yet the revisionings of Ophelia cannot be construed as mere responses to the text of Hamlet which creates a tendentious ambience for her characterization; the play provides meagre insight into her psyche and represents her not only as a meek but as an unsavoury character. This paper argues that these revisionings of Hamlet constitute a response to the image of Ophelia as femme fragile that has taken form throughout the centuries. The present article explores the voice, mind, and agency of Ophelia as depicted in three 21st century novels which have transformed Hamlet. Attempts are also made to demonstrate that modern revisionings of Ophelia are not an exclusive reaction to the text of Shakespeare which was written more than four hundred years ago; the transformations of Ophelia have to be construed as responses to a range of historical and artistic accounts of Ophelia.

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1. Introduction

Shakespeare’s Ophelia is not only fragile, but she is often conceived of as the mirror of madness. Romanska (2005) mentions that Hamlet’s Ophelia is traditionally regarded as femme fragile, representing the frustration of women in the past history; simultaneously, Ophelia has been lauded, at least, since the Romantic period, as a cult figure which has engendered momentum for the development of male necro-aesthetics as illustrated in numerous paintings of her corpse with accessible sensuality. The eroticization of Ophelia’s corpse is the transcendentalist continuum of her sexuality that has gained an independent existence outside the Shakespearean text. In general, sexuality, whether carnal or transcendental, has been associated with Ophelia. Showalter (1985) deplores that she cannot be severed from the discourse on her carnality; this has led to jaundiced readings of Ophelia’s actions throughout Hamlet to the extent that even her presenting flowers, during her derangement (Act 4, Scene 5), to his brother, Gertrude, and the King, has been interpreted as a self-deflowering incident.

The text of Hamlet, which was most probably completed around 1600, underscores Ophelia’s emotional frailty and her submissive personality. She is ordered by her brother and father to shun Hamlet’s amorous overtures for they are thought to be the eruption of unrestrained youthful emotions (1.3.5-9; 1.3.105-20) and because Hamlet’s decisions, as the prince of Denmark, are influenced by the body politics to which Hamlet is accountable (1.3.17-24; 1.3.125), yet it has also been argued that the reason of her abstaining from love is apparently the corollary of the contemporaneous masculine mindset. For instance, Traub (1992) reflects that patriarchal mentality, in Shakespearean era, was heedful of women’s erotic power. Such an attitude toward female sensuality manifests itself in the reification of women as statues, corpses, and gems. In other words, women were allowed no other choice but to appear as objects of love to meet their tragic deaths. The apprehension arising from feminine sexuality is expressed in tales of cuckoldry, adultery and incest in many of Shakespearean plays as well as in the works of his contemporaries. Within the context of Shakespeare’s era, a woman devoid of her virginity cannot exist, for it is chastity that constitutes all her existence.

This article intends to explore, however briefly, the transposition of Ophelia in three novels: Lisa Klein’s (2006) Ophelia, Matt Haig’s (2006) The Dead Fathers Club, and Graham Holderness’ (2002) The Prince of Denmark. Each of these novels is situated in a different milieu. Ophelia is set in late 16th and early 17th century European ambience with incidents and characters added to the original play. The Dead Fathers Club is set in 21st century England; the novel draws largely on the original plot of Hamlet, yet it is a medley of humorous and, at times, poignant recasting of the story of Hamlet. The Prince of Denmark is set in the eleventh century Denmark with a medieval ambience, though there are anachronistic incidents which belong to the sixteenth century Reformation period in Europe. The three revisionings of Hamlet in this article take different trajectories and respond to the original play differently; however, attempts are made to focus on certain features which characteristically distinguish the figure of Ophelia in the three novels. In this article, all references to Hamlet are based on Jenkins (1982).

2. Ophelia revised

2.1 Agency and voice

Hamlet’s conscience and mind have traditionally been of prime importance in Shakespeare’s criticism, for he expresses a broad range of ideas on salient aspects of a man’s life. Hamlet itself, according to Kinney (2002), presents a spectrum of thoughts in late Tudor kingdom; Hamlet and Horatio both attended the University of Wittenberg which was, during the Tudor age (1485-1603), the hub of theological and philosophical rationalizing; it was the place where Martin Luther taught his reforming beliefs. During the same period Montaigne’s philosophy was prevalent and construed as learning to die; this has been mentioned as the reason of Hamlet’s reflections on death. Despite the bulk of literature on Hamlet’s qualms and convictions, the question of
Ophelia’s intellect has not been an issue in traditional criticism of *Hamlet*. Conversely, it seems this question is prioritized in the revisionings of this female character. That Hamlet adores Ophelia and that during her burial ceremony, he openly declares, “I lov’d Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum” (5.1.264-6) is a crux, at least, for certain critics. Klein (2006), as a revisionist author, challenges Shakespeare, and a much more established critical, and even feminist, literature which is ineluctably male-oriented in its perspectives of Ophelia, for the text of *Hamlet*, according to Showalter (1985), does not provide any noteworthy insights into Ophelia’s mind.

The modern Ophelia expresses a range of thoughts on a variety of issues; for instance, Klein’s (2006) Ophelia has no tolerance for books on Christian morals. She has to read such books as a part of her education at the court of Elsinore; however, she describes, with a caustic tone, the attitude of these books which encourage women to remain “silent, chaste, and obedient” (p. 38). In defiance of all the teachings of moral books, she earnestly reads those books which are considered “dangerous” and even “condemned” by “all moralists” (p. 50); she wishes to travel to Italy “where the men are taught to overcome virgins and the women know many freedoms” (p. 50). In *The Dead Fathers Club*, Leah, a twelve-year old girl who represents the figure of Ophelia, discloses her sexual awareness as well as adeptness to the eleven-year old Philip who is entrapped in a Hamletian world with the ghost of his father incessantly urging him to revenge his murder. As Philip, after being plagued by the ghost of his father, has revealed certain symptoms of a schizophrenic, his mother as well as Mr. Fairview (whose role in the novel is comparable to that of Polonius) provide a gathering in which Philip can meet Leah, Mr. Fairview’s daughter. She, though senior to Philip by one year, is, in certain respects, far beyond Philip in intellect, social experience, understanding, and determination. She regards Philip as “funny” (Haig, 2006, p. 80) and teaches him how to kiss; the experience of being kissed which, at first, seems to Philip a “weird” experience (p. 80) sharpens his sense of curiosity, and he wonders if kissing the other girls he knows would be as pleasurable.

In *The Prince of Denmark*, which is mainly a sequel to *Hamlet*, Ofelia blankly tells Hamlet “Your lordship knows himself to be my prince….Yet my own virtue as a maid, and the dignity of my family, I prize in good earnest as highly as my loyalty to my sovereign” (Holderness, 2002, p. 93). Not only is she bluntly declaring that she will not yield her virginity to the prince as an authority or as the would-be sovereign of Denmark, it is finally Ofelia herself who, out of her own volition, suggests coitus, declaring that she “would fain die, rather than live a maid” (p. 101). Determination in Klein’s (2006) Ophelia is multifaceted, for she boldly declares that she wants to be independent: “I … wanted to be the author of my tale, not merely a player in Hamlet’s drama or a pawn in Claudius’s deadly game” (p. 241). The twelve-year old Leah daringly smokes cigarettes, and, with a sarcastic tone, challenges authority: “Who says [we can’t smoke]? God?” (Haig, 2006, p. 94). The three revisions of *Hamlet* characterize, though in differing extents, a new Ophelia who acts as a result of her own will and agency and not as a consequence of being forced by the rulings of a patriarchal or even divine figure.

### 2.2 Mobility and education

Shakespeare’s Ophelia is a static character; yet her characterization is not the result of Shakespeare’s individual mind. Traub (1992) observes that as the gratification of male discharge necessitates women’s stillness, and as sexual intercourse symbolizes—though mythically—the unification of the sexes, chastity, in Shakespearean drama, is more associated with stillness and closedness whereas mobility, agility, and openness are ascribed to lasciviousness. In *Hamlet*, Laertes cautions Ophelia against Hamlet’s demonstrations of affection, persuading her sister not to “lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open / To his unmaster’d importunity. / Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister” (1.3.31-3). Death by drowning, too, as Showalter (1985) observes, is a consequence of feminine fluidity versus masculine aridity; just as shedding tears is a violation of masculine codes of conduct, to be lachrymose and to die by drowning is feminine. This is the reason for the numerous instances of women, in literature, who terminate their lives by drowning. On the first pages of narrating her story, Klein’s (2006) Ophelia, as the narrator of her own life, presents certain descriptive images which make her readers...
believe her mobility and anti-fluidity attributes, recalling that when she was young, she used to swim with her brother Laertes “in Elsinor’s river” (p. 7); she, though younger than her brother, at times seems to be endowed with masculine spirit, for she is able to be as adventurous as the boys and occupy herself with activities, such as capturing salamanders and frogs which ordinary girls may eschew out of mere fright (p. 8).

Holderness (2002), too, portrays, though in passing, the time when Ofelia resembled “a tomboy…who fought with her brother” (p. 83). However, Holderness’ characterization of Ofelia differs from that of Klein’s (2006), for Ofelia’s period of boyish vivacity is followed by a period of “sequestration” (Holderness, 2002, p. 85) from public presence when the girls attain the qualifications of a would-be lady; the third stage, in the parlance of the male bachelors, is the period when Ofelia, like any other girl of the same status, is displayed as qualified flesh in the “meat-market” (p. 85) where girls are “declared full members of society, fair game for the matrimonial aspirations or predatory lusts of men on the look-out for wives, concubines or mistresses” (p. 85). Entering the world of men, in Holderness’ view, is a self-deflowering rite in which girls resemble “lambs to the slaughter: sacrificed victims of some general immolation” (p. 85); female debutant is, in its eventuality, the sacrificial surrender of virginity. The contrast between Klein (2006) and Holderness (2002) is that whereas the former regards education for girls as liberating, the latter regards it as embellishment—mere adornment—for being more sexually promising as a bedmate. However, Ofelia, even in Holderness’ novel, is marked with “willfulness, and stubbornness” (p. 84) of disposition as a result of her education.

Mobility has more manifestations in the boisterous character of Leah as Ophelia in The Dead Fathers Club. Leah rejoices in juvenile delinquency and motivates her boyfriend Philip to practice some shoplifting. To prove her deftness in pilfering, she first enters a shop and steals Peppermint Foot Scrub and then, as she leaves the shop, drops it in the garbage can (Haig, 2006, p. 132). As a part of shoplifting education, she teaches Philip “if you nab something youve [sic] got to act like you dont [sic] mind people looking because then they wont look” (p. 133). Leah’s agility and dauntlessness make her appear more intriguing. As Leah and Philip leave the shop where they have stolen a number of small items, they are chased by a security guard. However, they manage to escape and hide. This is the moment when the young Philip feels the greatest affection for Leah: “I looked at Leaths [sic] eyes and her hair all pretty for me and I loved her” (p. 134). Philip’s falling in love with Leah is grounded on the fact that he feels liberated from the intrusive ghost of his father: “I loved her because it was the first time I hadnt [sic] thought of Dad since he was a ghost like she had gone in my head and shoplifted the sad things without me looking” (pp. 134-5). What can be observed in the transformation of Shakespeare’s Ophelia is not only her mobility of body, but also her being endowed with the agility of mind and spirit as a result of her education, experience, and adventurousness not only in facing but also in creating new challenges in life.

2.3 Scepticism and nonconformity

Besides her fragility and sexuality, perhaps obedience is a characteristic trait of Shakespeare’s Ophelia; conversely, the modern Ophelia emerges as a rebel against a range of norms. The new characterization of Ophelia, as a thinking figure, appears to be a function of the modern efforts for the liberation of women, though Klein (2006) claims that she has created the ambience of the Renaissance Europe. Ophelia, in certain respects, epitomizes the skepticism of her modern creator’s period, for every author is situated within, and, thus affected by, his own milieu. For instance, in explaining Shakespeare’s greatness, Bakhtin (cited in Bristol, 1996) remarks that he “was a writer who was vitally in touch with the richest possible sources from a wide range of past cultural formations” (p. 12). Bloom (1998) also regards Hamlet as a “Renaissance wit and sceptic, reader of Montaigne and London playgoer” (p. 387). These remarks stress that Shakespeare is influenced by his socio-historical context, though according to O’Rourke (2012), one must not conclude that context is a homogeneous mould which gives shape to an author or his work. Shakespeare as a playwright had to be conscious of the taste and the favorable or adverse responses of his spectators.

Klein’s (2006) characterization of Ophelia seems to echo the contemporary feminist sensibility. Throughout the novel, Ophelia reveals her knowledge of the Scriptures, asking Hamlet “Does it not say in the Bible that there is
providence even in the fall of a sparrow?” (p. 69). Ophelia’s biblical awareness manifests that Klein is giving a theological consciousness to Ophelia as a believer, for the same notion is posited by Hamlet: “There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow” (5.2.215), but, according to Joseph (1968), Hamlet believes in providence and yields to the fate which is determined for him. When Horatio wants to dissuade him from the dueling match with Laertes, Hamlet regards it as his destiny whose postponement may not change its course and occurrence: “There is special providence / in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ’tis not to / come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not / now, yet it will come. The readiness is all” (5.2.215-8). The paradoxical point is that Ophelia does not believe, for the most part, in any religious system: she sometimes seems even more skeptic than Hamlet or Horatio, for she bluntly declares, “I do not believe in miracles” (p. 312).

In The Dead Fathers Club, some degree of such skepticism can be observed in the character of Leah. She simply detests God, yet to declare that she is a skeptic or an apostate may not do justice to her characterization, for her hatred is intermingled with naïve sentimentalism and can be regarded more the result of her youthful emotions in the face of inevitable hardships than the consequence of atheistic ratiocination. However, she expresses her opinions without dubiety. She despises God as she thinks he was indifferent to her mother’s suffering from cancer. Leah’s belief is that God delights in man’s anguish. In Leah’s view, miseries are inflicted by God to entrench man’s faith: “I hate God….God just looks down at people asking him for help and he doesn’t [sic] do anything because he knows if they are hurt they’ll [sic] want to believe in him more and you wouldn’t [sic] like a person like that so why like him just because he’s [sic] God?” (Haig, 2006, p. 93). Leah’s abhorrence of God is the result of her finding contradictions in God’s commandments: “he says you can’t do things like you can’t [sic] steal. But he steals. He steals people. He stole Dad and he let Mum die and he saw her in pain and he saw her praying and he didn’t [sic] do anything” (P. 93). Not only is the death of her mother construed as divine theft, but her father’s psychological change after his wife’s death and his inclination toward a morose life are also considered as divine unjustness. In Leah’s view, to dream of felicity in the hereafter is a self-delusion, for her father only “wants to think Mums in Heaven” (p. 93). A new dimension which, among others, enriches the characterization of Ophelia in modern revisionings of Hamlet is her skepticism towards, and, her defiance of, the dominant patriarchal or religious beliefs.

3. Conclusion

The new characterization of Ophelia can be interpreted not only as a reaction to Hamlet but also as a response to certain portions of critical—not necessarily Shakespearean or patriarchal—readings of Ophelia which have glorified her corpse and victimization rather than portraying the enrichment of her mind through artistic creation. The three characters representing Ophelia in Ophelia, The Dead Fathers Club and The Prince of Denmark, display certain limits of determination, agency, and nonconformity though the extent of each of these attributes is not unrestrained, and despite the fact she is a minor character in the novels by Holderness (2002) and Haig (2006). Klein’s (2006) Ophelia largely represents the sensibilities of women in our world today, though Klein herself claims that she has created the social ambience of the 16th century for the development of Ophelia’s character. That Haig (2006) has feminist intentions is a matter of conjecture, yet he, too, has given a rather vivacious spirit to the modern representation of Ophelia. Holderness (2002), who substantially draws on certain themes in Hamlet for his characterization of Ofelia and surrounds her with an ambience of lewdness and decadence, still furnishes Ofelia’s character with a limited degree of agency and agility of mind and spirit which distinguish her from her Shakespearean prototype.

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