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

Edited by Emanuel Stelzer

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Bloodless, Attractive, and Silent: Ophelia's Death On- and Off-Stage in Nineteenth-Century France and Italy

Abstract

During the nineteenth century, Ophelia became one of the most frequently depicted characters in iconography symbolising virginal purity and self-sacrificial victimhood. In France and Italy, Ophelia's reception was connected to *Hamlet's* adaptations for the stage in the respective countries, but Ophelia's iconography partly followed its own path, as evidenced by the large occurrence of pictures showing her off-scene death, with significant details such as Ophelia's clutching the branch before drowning, while keeping her eyes wide open. Highlighting the differences between French and English iconography in the gendered iconisation of the character, this article focuses on the mutual influence between the diffusion of a visual tradition and *Hamlet's* stage re-elaborations, both in drama and opera. The reworking of the figurative theme in France took a turn during the Romantic period, following the success of Harriet Smithson's performances, which contributed to the transformation of Ophelia's character into a visual icon of romantic lovesickness. The death scene reached a climax of popularity with the 1868 operatic adaptation with music by Ambroise Thomas, in which the drowning was performed on stage, creating an osmotic intertextuality between iconography and theatre. Christine Nilsson's successful Ophelia contributed to popularise the *topos* of a melodramatic victim of love, an image which the visual arts transposed into the context of a disquieting Gothic atmosphere, triggering a morbid voyeuristic fascination towards the subject.

KEYWORDS: Ophelia; *Hamlet*; visual arts; iconography; drama; opera

... the sleeping, and the dead,
Are but as pictures ...
(*Macbeth*, 2.2.52-3)¹

The figure of Ophelia in nineteenth-century visual culture has been examined from multiple perspectives, inspiring a wide range of studies and critical interpretations. Compared to Shakespeare's other heroines, Ophelia

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Shakespeare's plays refer to Shakespeare 1988.

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is arguably one of the most passive and constrained characters; yet in her afterlife, she has evolved into a complex and multifaceted figure. Numerous scholarly investigations have centred on Ophelia's madness scene and its implications, often linked to *fin-de-siècle* studies on hysteria and melancholy rooted in sexual repression. These interpretations have contributed to extending the character's life and constructing what Stanislavsky might term the 'subtext'. In the nineteenth century, Ophelia became also one of the most frequently depicted characters in iconography, as a symbol of virginal purity and a self-sacrificing victim, associated with the feminine virtues of passivity, fragility, and docility. The cult of Ophelia's figure in visual culture has been the object of an ever-increasing scholarly interest, starting from fundamental studies dating back to the 1950s (see Mander and Mitchenson 1952).

The proliferation of the iconography of Ophelia's demise also contributed to the late nineteenth-century obsession with death, as can be seen in Sarah Bernhardt's artistic production and quirks.² One of the reasons for Ophelia's popularity is that she became the focus of the pathos that Hamlet was unable to express, given that his melancholy is a reflection of thought rather than emotion. The reduction of Ophelia to an icon has created what can be termed its 'Victorian legacy' for later artists, not only in the figurative domain, but also in dramatic rewritings, fiction and cinema all around the world. Recent studies have also explored the artistic issues of Ophelia's melancholic longing and potential desire for death (Wildschut and Clevis 2009). The popularity of the subject, which reached its climax in the nineteenth century, gave birth to "the perpetuation of an Ophelia trope which privileges gendered voyeuristic modes of representation" (Barnden 2020, 150), which was later remediated through photography (Perni 2012, 193-211). Also the Victorian defence of Ophelia's chastity can be considered as part of this general conception (Rhodes 2008, 6). The objectification of the character has been remarked by feminist scholars, with new insights into Ophelia's forced submission to the patriarchal system and the 'feminisation' of madness, but also with re-inventions of her story (see Showalter 1985). Besides the transposition of Ophelia's iconised figure on other characters or lyrical images, such as in Victor Hugo and Alfred de Musset (Vest 1989, 130-8), during the nineteenth century she underwent a process of reification as an object to be gazed at, such as in Charcot's shows on hysteria at La Salpêtrière, where women in white, with garlands of flowers, performed Ophelia's postures as portrayed in the visual arts (Didi-Huberman 2007). For example, the same morbid interaction between actual madness and Ophelia's myth is to be seen in photographs taken at the English Surrey Asylum, opened in 1841 (Rhodes 2008, 127-33).

² See Isabelle Schwartz-Gastine's contribution in this issue of *Skenè.JTDS*.

The prominence acquired by Ophelia's death can be interpreted as a triumph of poetic imagination over dramatic action, since it is a scene that is merely reported and not an action conceived to be performed on the stage. Gertrude's description is a lyrical ekphrasis in which the poor girl is compared to a mermaid-like creature, with a sort of transfiguration of human nature that redeems her from the vulgar materiality of (staged) madness. Incidentally, it is interesting that the long description repeatedly refers to water without ever mentioning it by name, as if it were the implicit subject around which the speech revolves. After some bucolic images of the natural surroundings, and the maiden's falling "in the weeping brook" (*Hamlet*, 4.1.147), the Queen's description focuses on the image of Ophelia as dead, with poetic details but also with a certain verisimilitude:

... Her clothes spread wide
 And mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
 Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
 As one incapable of her own distress,
 Or like a creature native and endued unto
 That element. But long it could not be
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death.
 (147-55)

Founded on the evocative power of words, this off-scene description could not be visually transposed on the stage (also for practical reasons). While the madness scene would later become an occasion for actresses to display their histrionic skills in later adaptations, Ophelia's 'original' drowning and the moments preceding this tragic event seemed to be destined to be excluded from the audience's gaze. From the nineteenth century onwards, Ophelia's drowning gradually acquired a centrality rarely accorded to off-stage scenes, as well as a symbolic preeminence exalted by a voyeuristic attitude that is paradoxical, as it is based solely on imagination.

While the reduction of Ophelia to a visual icon of romantic lovesickness was already established before the middle of the nineteenth century, the casting on the character of a morbidity linked to the male gaze reaches a climax in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the prominence and popularity of Ophelia on the operatic stage. In this article, I will analyse a number of aspects associated with the intertwining of the visual arts and stage practice. My analysis will take into account Ophelia's re-interpretation in the figurative arts in relation to the spreading of Shakespearean adaptations in France and Italy in the early nineteenth century, in both drama and operatic theatre (on the latter see Emanuele d'Angelo's article

in this issue). A fundamental role in this process has been played by the numerous paintings and engravings devoted to the subject, with an osmotic relationship of intertextuality and mutual influence between iconography and theatre. I will attempt to demonstrate how figurative imagery was crucial in establishing a pathetic *topos*, which French theatre exploited and re-elaborated, subsequently returning it to the visual arts. Due to the circulation of pictorial works and mutual influences in the artistic domain, my analysis will not be restricted to a specific context, and I will take into consideration also some English paintings which played a fundamental role in the creation of the *topos*. The overwhelming number of figurative works inspired by the character of Ophelia means that a comprehensive survey would require more than one volume.³ Therefore, I will limit my survey to a few cases relevant to the topic. For reasons of brevity, I will not discuss the cultural context from which they emerged or the critical evaluations they have undergone. While examining both French and English paintings, I will occasionally point out differences between the contexts to which they belong, particularly in how feminine attractiveness is portrayed, as it was often viewed implicitly through the lenses of gender and identity. Similarly, I will occasionally refer to some actresses on the English stage, aiming at a contextualisation and a comparison of a stage practice intertwined with reciprocal influences. Moreover, in the nineteenth century, the practice of *tournées* facilitated the circulation of shared acting styles across different countries, fostering an intertextuality that played a significant role in the stereotyping of the character.

Let me start with a simple fact. Out of all Shakespeare's characters, and in spite of the fact that her drowning occurs off-scene, Ophelia is the one who is most often depicted as dead in the visual arts. When she is not represented as a simple standing figure with flowers, as an icon of beauty and youth, she is more frequently shown in her mad state or at a moment close to her drowning. The frequent choice to depict Ophelia's death could be seen as evidence of the fact that the images evoked by the tragedy are based more on private reading than on stage representations. Most of eighteenth-century actresses, such as Sarah Siddons, Kitty Clive, and Peg Woffington, portrayed Ophelia in her pathetic innocence, but nothing that could directly evoke the drowning scene. In the nineteenth century, the beautiful, floating young corpse became the symbol of an involuntary martyrdom linked to virginal attraction. It is in this century that paintings and engravings devoted to her off-stage death reached a peak of pathos, together with the madness scene,

³ For an extensive iconographic repertoire see the meta-archive *Arianna/Shakespeareana* (<https://arianna.lett.unitn.it/welcome>, accessed 12 June 2025), to which I refer for some of the images (quoting the ID file card number).

with the recurrence of flowers and their symbolism. It has been remarked that “so abundant were the Ophelias, indeed, both as paintings and as engraved illustrations in books, that eventually, any girl accompanied by wildflowers was labelled an Ophelia” (Tuckrozzett 2000, 186). Some elements taken from the Queen’s account became essential to the characterisation of the figure, and Ophelia was shown wandering through the woods in the grip of madness, or drowning in the stream, her hair wantonly loose and flowers scattered around her. After distributing her flowers in the presence of the King and the Queen, she sensually reconnects with nature in a symbolic, innocent defloration of herself. But in fact, poor Ophelia has always found her reason for existing within death, as if the heroine did not have enough depth to assume a defined character beyond her tragic fate.

From the end of the eighteenth century and until the middle of the nineteenth, artists often chose to depict the moment immediately preceding the drowning, when the maiden endeavours to hang wreaths of flowers to a branch, which will break causing her to fall into the water. This detail can be found also in the famous 1843 painting by Eugène Delacroix, in which a bare-breasted Ophelia is half submerged in water and clutches a frail willow branch (ID 25). The painter produced more versions of the subject, starting from the 1838 painting housed at the Munich *Neue Pinakothek* (ID 10972), and then choosing some variations of the same maiden’s attitude and similar details (Young 2002, 338-9; see ID 385, 18646, 11849). Delacroix’s paintings show an insistence precisely on the moment preceding the tragedy. One reason could be the aesthetic pleasure derived from the moment anticipating the climax, a notion that was emphasised in Lessing’s *Laokoön: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (Laocoon; or, On the Limits of Painting and Poetry) on the inefficacy of depicting the culmination of the action in order to achieve an intense emotional effect. However, a more plausible explanation for this choice could lie in the artists’ desire to emphasise the unintentional nature of Ophelia’s drowning, to dispel any lingering ambiguities surrounding her death, and to highlight the playful and childlike aspects of her wanderings and falling into the water.

Leaving aside the association with the studies on hysteria and female eroticism at the end of the nineteenth century, it must be remembered that Ophelia’s death was seen as caused by a descent into madness, and was therefore considered involuntary. And yet, in French literary commentaries up to the eighteenth century, her drowning is often described as a deliberate act, probably more as a simplification due to a lack of knowledge of the text than as an intentional re-interpretation of the scene. Abbé Jean Bernard Le Blanc, for instance, defending the tragedy against its detractors, states that the young woman ends up drowning herself (“elle finit par se noyer”), probably as a reminiscence of Voltaire’s equally lapidary summary: “et va se

noyer” (Vest 1989, 66 and 73; and she goes and drowns herself).⁴ In another passage of his comments, Voltaire even writes that Ophelia throws herself into the sea: “elle se jette dans la mer, et se noie” (Vest 1989, 74; she throws herself into the sea and drowns). As a matter of fact, aiming at criticising Shakespeare’s dramatic choices, Voltaire ends up withdrawing from the reality of the play. This shift from a brook to the sea is noteworthy. The specificity of the place is eliminated to give way to a generic exterior, perhaps due to the influence of classical French drama, in which all bloody actions took place offstage. Like the evoked sea in Racine’s *Phèdre*, which is almost an abstract entity associated to the mythological presence of Poseidon, in French re-elaborations of the scene Ophelia’s drowning is set in a generic place, confusing the brook with the sea. Coming back to the unintentionality of her death, also in the first French version of the tragedy translated by La Place, from which Jean-François Ducis drew for his re-writing of the tragedy for the stage in 1769, the brief account of Ophelia’s drowning refers to her suicide (“La Reine vient annoncer, en pleurant, qu’Ophélie s’est noyée, dans un accès de folie”, La Place 1745, 378; The Queen comes to announce, weeping, that Ophelia has drowned herself in a fit of madness). It is perhaps to refuse this crude imagery that eighteenth century iconography emphasises the accidental nature of the tragic deed, showing Ophelia clinging to a branch. It is worth remembering early modern practices such as the “communal desecration and denigration of suicide, which was then regarded . . . as one of the most terrible sins a Christian could commit” (Stelzer 2016, 67-8) – practices which in part were still carried out in the eighteenth century. Banishing the ambiguous spectre of suicide and avoiding the crudeness of the theme, the artists redefined its contours through a process of implicit visual re-interpretation, framing Ophelia’s character within the limits of a naivety perfectly in tune with her childlike purity.

A romantic fascination for the drowning of young women, certainly linked to Ophelia’s popularity, emerges in European iconography during the nineteenth century. They belong to “the large category of prone female nudes, whether dead, dying, or otherwise, that seem to have played such an active role in nineteenth-century erotic fantasy as revealed through works of art” (Young 2002, 339). Since the first version of Ophelia’s death painted by Delacroix was executed in 1838, his interest for the subject can be associated to his journey to England in 1824, during which he could have had the chance to see a staging of *Hamlet* (though there is no evidence of this in his diary). In 1822, with the first tour in Paris of an English company staging Shakespearean plays, the tragedy had begun to raise some interest also in France, at least among the intellectuals, and was often cited in the

⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

struggle between Romantics and Classicists. It is worth remembering that in that very year Stendhal wrote his *Racine et Shakespeare*, which played a decisive role in the defence of romantic creative imagination which became to be epitomised by Shakespeare's genius. The first version of his text was a reaction to the incident of the Porte Saint-Martin theatre hall, where traditionalists attacked the staging of some of Shakespeare's tragedies by the English company headed by Samson Penley, though they were performed in heavily cut versions (Raby 2016). *Hamlet* was staged in Rue Chantierine, where the company was forced to retreat and was not appreciated by the French audience, accustomed to more classical tragedies. But intellectuals were excited by the new 'romantic' wave, and Stendhal's interest was not incidental. Twenty years before, in November 1802, he had begun to draw up an outline for a rewriting of *Hamlet*, soon abandoned, in which Ophelia was doomed to kill herself after going mad (Vest 1989, 112).

When in 1827 another English company came to Paris, the audience was more prepared for Shakespeare's originality and the dissimilarities of his characters to classical models. The times were ripe to popularise the image of a pitiful female figure, destined for a sacrifice that would make her the perfect victim. Curiously enough, although more than half of the text was cut, Ophelia's part was left rather close to the original (Vest 1989, 123). The mad scene was a perfect virtuoso set piece for Romantic acting. When a young and unexperienced Irish actress, Harriet Smithson, appeared as Ophelia in the 1827 production of *Hamlet* at the Odéon theatre in Paris, she was able to capture the attention of the audience thanks to the romantic connotations of her performance. "[B]ecause of Smithson, Ophelia came to occupy a more central position in performances of *Hamlet*, at least in France" (Sen 2021, 48). Critics of the time spoke of irregularity and disjunction between gesture and words (Vest 1989, 59; Raby 1982), typical features of romantic acting. As a reviewer stated: "Miss Smithson a un abandon de manières, un désordre de mouvement, une irrégularité et pour ainsi dire un décousu de gestes et de paroles" (Anonymous 1827, 380; Miss Smithson has a neglect of manners, a disorder of movement, an irregularity and, so to speak, a disjointedness of gestures and words). But was her acting completely innovative and transgressive compared to the character's interpretation that had emerged in Britain? The traditional opposition between Harriet Smithson's vibrant and excessive gestures and the more statuesque and dignified performance by Sarah Siddons – who played Ophelia at Drury Lane in 1786 together with her brother John Philip Kemble – has rightly been questioned, arguing that "both performances, in different ways, drew on the notion of sensibility" (Britland 2013, 59).

But let us take a look back at the first French adaptations of the tragedy, which greatly contributed to Ophelia's burgeoning importance and renown.

In 1769 Ducis's rewriting for the stage, the focus had shifted to the star-crossed love of the two young lovers, echoing the neoclassical model of *Le Cid*. Moreover, just as in Corneille's tragedy, the impediment to the marriage was the contrast between filial affection and passionate love, since here Ophelia was Claudius's daughter. It is perhaps exaggerated to say that "Ophélie is elevated to the position of principal player in an eternal drama" (Vest 1989, 94), nevertheless, in Ducis's version, Ophelia is a strong and determined character in the Cornelian conflict between love and honour, not at all the timid and emotionally unstable maiden of later romantic reinterpretations. The affirmation of Ophelia's death and the madness scene as essential moments to the character was partly due to the new translation by Guizot and Barante, which appeared in 1821. As James Vest argues, "In Guizot's introductory essay and in Barante's 'Notice sur *Hamlet*' Ophelia's madness and death are seen not just as acceptable, but as essential attributes of a lyrical soul that has difficulty harmonizing with a world that is out of tune" (Vest 1989, 120).

The first French actresses who played the character, from Mlle Dubois to Mlle Fleury, contributed to the character's success, playing on sentimental chords of tenderness and sensitivity (Monaco 1974). The focus on the sentimental *affaire* as well as Hamlet's survival would become important features of the play's fortune in France until the middle of nineteenth century, as in Alexandre Dumas's and Paul Meurice's 1847 adaptation. This trend also had a considerable influence on the Italian adaptations, as is clearly shown in the 1850 version by the actor Alamanno Morelli who heavily altered Carlo Rusconi's translation. In these adaptations for the stage, clearly inspired by Ducis's rewritings, Ophelia's death was restored, and Hamlet was the only one to survive. In 1864, Meurice revised the text and reverted to the original ending for the celebrations of the tercentenary anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, but the production was stopped by royal decree and was finally performed only in December 1867.

For a long time, Ophelia remained a minor character in drama, defined primarily by her relationship to Hamlet. As a result, she was less appealing to actresses until the twentieth century, when her role began to gain greater importance. As has been noted, also "modern criticism has seen Ophelia as indissolubly linked to Hamlet, less a character herself than a vehicle through which the protagonist's figure is brought into focus" (Britland 2013, 53). For this reason, the influence of stage interpretations on the iconography was initially limited, and one can even assume the opposite direction, whereby actresses draw inspiration from late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries' pictorial depictions for their portrayals of the character, at least as far as costume and basic postures are concerned.

In most of the depictions preceding the twentieth century, Ophelia wears a long white gown, a conventional symbol of purity, though there are also images in which she is dressed in black, such as in James Bertrand's *Mort d'Ophélie*, a painting that was exhibited at the 1872 Salon in Paris (and is now part of a private collection; ID 6641). In the madness scene, Harriet Smithson introduced a long black veil of mourning, which she spread on the ground in the shape of Polonius's bier – as can be seen in *Les Souvenirs du théâtre anglais à Paris* (1827), with drawings by Devéria and Boulanger (Fig. 1). It is worth noting that Ophelia's madness is the only scene to be accompanied by a quotation (with the lines of her song) in English instead of French. In the caption, Miss Smithson's performance is described in detail, emphasising the originality of the gestures she makes ("Passant tout-a-coup de la plus déchirante douleur à une espèce de joie stupide et convulsive qui ressemble au rire sardonique d'un mourant"; suddenly passing from the most heart-rending pain to a kind of stupid and convulsive joy which resembles the sardonic laughter of a dying man). The text also describes her offering flowers and spreading the black veil. Harriet Smithson's success was enhanced by the fact that people marvelled at how an almost inexperienced actress of twenty-five could prove herself so well, and this after only a few days of rehearsal (since she had to replace another actress at the last moment). Her lively acting, with romantic outbursts of emotion and excessive, enhanced gestures, established a new standard for the character. However, this vehemence associated with madness tends to be denied or neutralised in death iconography, where the magmatic nature of lunacy blends with the water element creating an icon of silent, restful and recomposed beauty.

Like Hamlet's inky cloak, Ophelia's long white dress became a sort of pictorial tradition during the Romantic period, even in the absence of any textual reference. And yet, at least in France, it was not immediately adopted on stage. As can be seen in a coloured engraving reproduced in *Costumes et annales des grands théâtres de Paris* (Fig. 2), Ducis's Ophelia played by Mlle Fleury appeared in a costume later described as a "robe bleue pâle rayée de bandes à fleurs roses ouvrant sur une jupe blanche rayée de passementerie jaune" (Vest 1989, 93; pale blue dress striped with pink floral bands opening onto a white skirt striped with yellow trimmings). Ophelia's white clothing can be seen as an obvious allusion to purity, but in figurative arts it is often tight enough to enticingly emphasise the shape of her body. This aspect emerges particularly in French iconography and is confirmed by nineteenth-century actresses, starting from Miss Smithson, whose alluring youth and charms made Hector Berlioz fall in love with her. In a drawing published in *Les Souvenirs du théâtre anglais à Paris*, depicting the madness scene, the position of her arms, suggesting a sinuous, undulating movement, gives her figure a grace that is only apparently dishevelled due to her mental disorder,



Fig. 1: *Les Souvenirs du théâtre anglais à Paris*, dessinés par M.M. Devéria et Boulanger, avec un texte par M. Moreau, Paris, Henry Gauguin, Lambert et Compagnie, 1827.



Fig. 2: Michel-René Hilliard d'Auberteuil, *Costumes et annales des grands théâtres de Paris*, Paris, De l'Imprimerie de Couturier, II (avril 1787-avril 1788), planche 23.

while her white dress does not hinder but enhances the perception of a sweet feminine sensuality (ID 16699). In a coloured lithograph by August De Valmont, Harriet Smithson wears a long black veil making a vivid contrast with her white dress and is staring aghast, bringing one hand to her heart (fig. 3). The lines in the caption clearly refer to her father's death, but nevertheless the sentimental connotation of her figure also evokes the suffering of rejected love. The actor's typical gesture to express love, as the acting treatises of those years reveal, is one hand held to the heart, a posture that will be emphasised by opera singers.

The more or less explicit eroticism of the character would remain a constant in French figurative arts, reaching its climax in an 1880 photogravure by Madeleine Lemaire, where Ophelia's virginal attractiveness in intertwined with a malicious sensuality (Fig. 4) and in the marble relief created by Sarah Bernhardt, where she is depicted bare-breasted (Young 2013, 3-5; ID 14413). Madeleine Lemaire's Ophelia has been termed as "a Dionysian spirit of natural and sexual renewal, invading enfeebled civilizations to transform them" (Auerbach 1997, 241). But in fact, it shares the same male voyeuristic attitude, just as the images centred on the appealing figure of her dead body do in quite a different way. In a painting by Léopold Burthe from 1852, for example, the detail of the uncovered breast – which is to be seen in Delacroix's paintings too – is accompanied by the softness of the gesture with which she stretches out her arm to cling to the branch: an attitude between modesty and the revelation of a femininity at the culminating point of youth, as revealed by the rounded shapes of her hips and breast (ID 18639).

As far as sensuality is concerned, there is a considerable gap between English and French iconography. In British iconography, explicit references to the sexual attraction exerted by the young woman's body are very unusual. It can be seen exceptionally in an 1823 engraving by Samuel Noble, based on a design by Thomas Unwins, where a sitting Ophelia is hanging up garlands of flowers with a twisting of her body, so that she turns her back to the viewer (ID 10349). Alan Young observes that no other (British) Ophelia "exploits her erotic potential in quite this way" and wonders "whether Unwins had been looking at works by Titian, Rubens, Watteau, or Jordaens" (Young 2002, 329). In Victorian figurative arts, Ophelia will be more often transformed into an icon whose appeal is paradoxically enhanced by a subtraction of the flow of life and the elimination of movement, leading to a stillness in which beauty and purity are reconciled. Moreover, common aesthetic taste dictated that her innocent and pure aspect should enhance her sexual appeal, as evidenced by many Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Pale, bloodless and immobile, Ophelia becomes the nymph of sublime and ethereal beauty celebrated by Millais, Rossetti, and Waterhouse. In the well-known oil on canvas by John Everett Millais, dating 1851-1852, she is depicted peacefully lying in the water of

the brook (London, Tate Gallery; ID 6356). Although conveying a remarkable emotional intensity, the painting was criticised for, among other things, its excessive adherence to the Queen's realistic description (Rhodes 2008, 87-90).

Thus, Ophelia reached her fullness and fulfilment only through death, which seemed to serve as the symbolic culmination of a sublimated femininity. In fact, in Victorian imagery, the idea of women undergoing a process of evolution or change of identity is perceived as a potentially unsettling phenomenon, diabolically charming and dangerous (Dijkstra 1988). Only marriage or death can save women from the risk of a constant metamorphosis of the self. Not only in the figurative arts but also in English fiction, a state of weakness could even enhance a woman's attractiveness, leading to what has been a "cult of feminine invalidism"; even illness is conceived as form of spiritual purification, leading to the 'consumptive sublime' (Dijkstra 1988, 29-30). Ophelia perfectly represents the equivalence between helpless debility and spiritual purity. One of the most remarkable exceptions to this removal of erotic energy in British visual arts is the *Ophelia* by Henrietta Rae, an oil on canvas painted in 1890, representing the scene of madness with the young woman shown in a provocative attitude, her body sensually wrapped in a tight-fitting dress, while the King and the Queen are set apart in a darker area (Rhodes 2008, 171-2; ID 6603).

From the eighteenth century onwards, the usual way to unsex Ophelia's figure is to reduce her to a sort of icon. The image of the mermaid, for example, with its allusion to the aquatic realm, hints at the allure of female seduction but at the same time neutralises it through symbolic abstraction. In fact, this tendency can also be seen in the highly stylised, very original watercolour by Johann Heinrich Fuseli, that does not seem to belong to its age but foreshadows a visionary conception encompassing an entire century (Fig. 5). The wave-like lines evoke the element of water, further emphasising the symbolism of the figure, but on the other hand the allusion to the sinuous forms of the body convey a certain sensuality. It is worth recalling how Laertes, mourning his sister's death, evokes a clear contrast between the feminine (tears and liquid elements) and the masculine (represented by fire):

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet
It is our trick; nature her custom holds
Let shame say what it will.
He weeps When these are gone
The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord.
I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,
But that this folly douts it.
(*Hamlet*, 4.7.158-64)



Fig. 3: August De Valmont, Mlle Smithson, rôle d'Offélia dans Hamlet, Paris, chez Chaillou Potrelle, 1827.



Fig. 4: Madeleine Lemaire, *Ophélie*. Photogravure, 1890-1899.



Fig. 5: Johann Heinrich Fuseli, *The Death of Ophelia*, 1770-1778.
London, British Library.

The sorrowful farewell to his sister is also a parting from the feminine side of himself, expelled together with his tears to make way for the masculine principle of fire and action. By floating on the brook Ophelia surrenders to nature, returning to the liquid element, a sphere where women are supposed to belong.

The contrast of genders, male and female, is the keynote of several interpretations characterising Ophelia's reception in the Victorian age. In 1892, as a comment to a painting by the French artist Hugues Merle, the academic David Hilton Wheeler underlined the difference between Hamlet's and Ophelia's sadness, attributing to the "solemn calm shining in the face of Ophelia" the outcome of a passive and resigned nature, voted to submission (Zalewski 2022, 66-8). He contrasts the "energy of action" embedded in Hamlet's sadness, deriving from a deep emotion concerning his whole life to Ophelia's "touching and most pitiful submission to a wholly uncomprehended fate", due to her unawareness of what is haunting her lover's mind. Though specifying the reason for this difference in mental attitude, Wheeler was conditioned by gender stereotypes that find a perfect echo in the widely shared Victorian conception of the two characters. As has been stated referring to a more general view, "Hamlet can be affected by sensibility and retain his faculties; Ophelia's sensibility strips her of her mind" (Britland 2013, 63). This difference has remarkable implications: while Hamlet moves in the realm of thinking and mental distress, Ophelia remains confined to the less noble sphere of (deranged) physicality.

It is noteworthy that in many depictions of Ophelia's death – including Millais's painting – her lips appear slightly parted, as if in song, and her eyes remain open. Ophelia's eyes stare into a vacuum beyond the prosaic reality of the external world, but they also create the illusion that the observer can enter the intimate sphere of her harmless femininity. Romantically defined as the mirror of the soul, the eyes are also the noblest door of perception. Indeed, while Ophelia's freedom of action and speech appear to be very restricted, sight is the only sense totally left to her as a means of perceiving the world. As befits an innocent young woman, she interacts with the world mainly through her eyes: "T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (3.1.164), she exclaims lamenting Hamlet's supposed alienation. Additionally, she tells her father *to have seen* Hamlet in great disorder of attire, as she was sewing in her closet, and she is the first to notice Claudius's rising from his seat during the pantomime. "The King rises" (3.2.253), she exclaims: a sort of childish remark that breaks the spell and exceptionally entitles her to speak. When Ophelia talks again, after some scenes, the time for rational discourse has elapsed: she sings her lullabies and rambles words full of double meanings.

We could even say that the chaste idealisation in death counterbalances her embarrassing transgression of verbal decency. Only her gaze remains. Lovesick and mute, she finally finds her peace in the stillness of death, while her eyes bear witness to the purity of an astonished look at the cruelty of the world. This interpretation of her suffering is prevalent in figurative arts from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards and later became a stylistic trait that was also adopted in theatre. In an 1881 photograph by José María Mora of the British actress Maude Branscombe (Fig. 6), who was celebrated more for her beauty than for her acting ability, Ophelia's eyes are well open and have been described by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, quoting Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (section 32), as "homes as silent prayer". The choice of posture reveals an underlying gendered voyeurism, conveyed through the character's iconisation. Pale and silent, the maiden can be celebrated as an icon of extreme purification and idealisation of the feminine through death.

Within the romantic and post-romantic redefinition of her figure, Ophelia represented a significant challenge for young actresses. Nevertheless, despite the numerous interpretations by prominent actresses of the nineteenth century, after the Romantic period the character did not enjoy a particularly high level of popularity among them. Even Sarah Bernhardt preferred to play Hamlet rather than the 'poor Ophelia', though in 1886 she contributed to the transformation of the virgin into an icon of distress, when she appeared herself as the dead Ophelia in the graveyard scene (in the same coffin where she slept to rehearse the role, according to a legend that was spread for sensational publicity). In fact, the carrying on stage of Ophelia's body on a bier was not an original innovation made by Bernhardt, since Edwin Booth is credited to have done it a few years before, in 1882 (Young 2000, 265). According to some critics, this stage exhibition launched the modern necrosexual aesthetic in the visual arts (Romanska 2005). Indeed, the scene was reposed by various artists. In most cases, however, it became a high point for the protagonist's histrionic performance. In the 1915 adaptation staged by the Italian actor Ruggero Ruggeri, for instance, Hamlet appeared alone on stage, without saying a line, accompanied however by a musical theme, sobbing and scattering flowers on Ophelia's grave. The scene, for which he took inspiration from a similar though less extended performance by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, was criticised by some reviewers for excessive sentimentalism (Petrini 2018, 51).

While Ophelia's success on the French stage was secured by decades of popular adaptations – including those in musical theatre, which I will examine later – she generally remained a secondary character in most Italian productions. It is no coincidence that critics devote many pages to analysing and comparing the performances of the great Italian actors, starting with Tommaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi, but deal only cursorily with the



Fig. 6: *Maude Branscombe as Ophelia*. Photograph by José María Mora, 1818.
Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard Theater Collection.

actresses' performances as Ophelia. In the scripts of the late nineteenth-century Italian companies, Ophelia's lines were frequently cut or reduced, sometimes by more than half. Of course, all the lines containing licentious allusions, words offensive or inappropriate to the maiden's pure and delicate nature were eliminated from stage scripts. But the cuts were not only aimed at this purpose. An example of this process, probably involving the audience's reactions, is to be seen in a manuscript that belonged to the company of Cesare Rossi, who recruited among its actors the young Eleonora Duse. The script was presented by an ambitious actor of the company, Andrea Maggi, who had been inspired by the successful adaptation of *Hamlet* made about twenty years before for Tommaso Salvini. The version was performed at the Carignano Theatre, in Turin, in January 1878, achieving only modest success. This script cuts numerous lines also in Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death, including the description of her garments (Pietrini ed. 2013-2014, 221). Probably the audience had not appreciated the long description with all its details (either due to the actress's inability to evoke the scene through her words or, more probably, because it caused a slowing down of the action's pace). Ophelia was portrayed by 24-year-old Teresa Leigheb, whose performance is best remembered for the madness scene. In this scene, despite the purging of the text, the image of the seduced and abandoned girl is accentuated, with a strong emphasis on the sentimental theme. Other actresses would portray the role with greater success, yet the character never achieved widespread popularity. And yet, less than two years before, in February 1876, the opera adaptation with music composed by Ambroise Thomas had been staged in Italy after its successful première in Paris in 1868. But I will discuss further some aspects of this relevant staging, which is exemplary in revealing the intertextuality between the figurative arts and theatre.

As it has been remarked, "Gertrude 'frames' Ophelia's story by making it as 'pretty as a picture'" (Peterson 1998, 20), implicitly encouraging visual re-enactings of the scene. The moment of her death was a perfect cameo for sentimental overflow. In 1842, Berlioz composed *La Mort d'Ophélie* (Ophelia's death) for voice and piano, with a text written by Ernest Legouvé, and he revised it in 1848 for female choir and orchestra with the title *La marche funèbre pour la dernière scène d'Hamlet* (Funeral march for the last scene of *Hamlet*). Legouvé's lyrics describe Ophelia picking flowers to hang them on branches and relates her accidental drowning in poetic terms. It is inspired by the Queen's account, embellishing it with a reference to a Naiad ("elle flottait toujours chantant, / chantant quelque vieille ballade, / chantant ainsi qu'une naïade / née au milieu de ce torrent", Johnson and Stokes 2000, 19; she floated on, singing, singing some old ballad, singing like a Naiad born in the middle of the brook). The *mermaid-like* figure mentioned in the Queen's

description acquires a halo of fascinating vagueness, whereby Ophelia is compared to mythological figures or animals with symbolic significance.

In English visual arts, representations of a sexless Ophelia prevail, with her appeal shifting into the realm of idealised beauty. This tendency is to be seen even in actresses' observations on the character. Helen Faucit, in a letter dated 10 August 1880 addressed to her friend, the novelist Geraldine Jewsbury, concludes her long description of Ophelia's nature with an allusion to the "accidental watery death of this fragile bud" and mentions a symbolic death-song, the only melodious sound allowed to her: "She sings her own requiem, and carries the flowers of her innocence along with her to the end. Like the fabled swan, with her death-song on her lips, she floats unconsciously among the water-lilies, till the kindly stream embraces and takes her to itself" (Faucit 1885, 26)⁵. Alongside this melancholy view, a more vitalistic conception of the character emerged in the same years, with actresses such as Ellen Terry evoking the magic power of the mermaid Undine (Auerbach 1997, 241-4). Fragile swan or courageous siren, Ophelia is seen as destined to return to a fluid element opposed to the harsh reality of the earth, that is of a world in which she is rejected, and finally condemned to immobility and silence. In any case, the morbid attraction to the liquid element is a *topos* that goes beyond Ophelia's sexualisation, as an archetype repurposed with different connotations of meaning. As an example, in a comment on *Vanity Fair* (January 18, 1879), the critic "Zophar" defines the sexuality of Ellen Terry's Ophelia "as chaste, as boundless, and as deep as the sea" (32). The sentence implicitly echoes Juliet's expression of her love to Romeo ("My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep; the more I give to thee, / The more I have, for both are infinite", 2.2.133-5), confirming the prominence henceforth assumed by the sentimental sphere.

Ophelia's death is the ultimate expression of her vulnerability: not an unjust murder by a man, as in Desdemona's case, nor a conscious and wilful act. While in more modern interpretations Ophelia is seen as the victim of a patriarchal context and corrupted world, in the nineteenth century she was mainly considered the perfect icon of a special illness, deriving from sentimental suffering, and thus reaching the noblest and spiritualised sublimation of grief. The water element becomes increasingly relevant in iconography as a symbolic dimension is introduced, representing the connection between the natural world and the spiritual realm. Among the most powerful and fascinating renderings of the subject is a painting by Paul Steck, dated 1895 (ID 6645). Here the poor girl is completely submerged in water like in the depths of the sea, in an upright position, with her white

⁵ The volume is a collection of private letters concerning seven Shakespearean heroines and Ophelia is the first character analysed.

robe and her hair swaying fluidly like waves. Realistic details such as the air bubbles emerging from her lips are combined with a remarkable evocative power, introducing a symbolic dimension. But in nineteenth century visual re-elaborations, the pure water flowing of the Shakespeare's brook are not only transposed into something evoking the deep seabed, but also into still and stagnant waters. To enhance this effect, the drowning is sometimes set in a moonlit landscape, introducing a touch of Gothic atmosphere to the scene, such as in a 1852 painting by Arthur Hughes, where the pale, suffering and dishevelled Ophelia – described as emaciated and tubercular (Dijkstra 1988, 43) – is sitting on a large trunk at the brink of the stream (ID 6634). The ghost of consumption looms over nineteenth-century literature and imagery, reappearing at times with symbolic significance, as seen in the death of Elizabeth Siddal, who had posed for Millais's painting and "seems to have taken on part of Ophelia's identity, at least in her poetry" (Rhodes 2008, 100).

These connotations associated with the water element had been capitalised upon in the above-mentioned *Hamlet's* famous opera version with music composed by Ambroise Thomas and libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, staged in Paris on 9 March 1868 at the Paris Opéra. The libretto drew inspiration from the adaptation by Alexandre Dumas and Paul Meurice. Hamlet was interpreted by Jean-Baptiste Faure and Ophelia by the Swedish soprano Christine Nilsson (Björklund 2022), both largely appreciated for their singing talents. But the prejudices towards Shakespearean plays were not completely over: a critic of the *Public Opinion*, on March 21, 1868, after admitting that Monsieur Faure and Mademoiselle Nilsson "acquit themselves well", stated that "the task of assimilating to the French taste the works of Shakespeare . . . is not only an immense undertaking, but an impossibility" (308). In fact, there was not much Shakespearean stuff left in the performance. In the adaptation by Barbier and Carré, Hamlet does not die after killing Claudius; Claudius is the only character who dies besides Ophelia – though the adaptation restored Hamlet's tragic ending for performances in England (Sen 2021, 38). Ophelia's death was ideal to elicit a surge of emotion, shifting the focus on romantic passion. Like Juliet, Ophelia had by then become a symbol of the young woman sacrificed on the altar of love – love that, moreover, remained unconsummated.

In this adaptation, act 4 centres on heightened pathos, with Ophelia's death dramatically staged on a specially flooded set. Notably, in this operatic adaptation, her sorrow stems not from her father's death (since he does not die) but solely from her unfulfilled love for Hamlet, which is expressed in the most classical terms, as if it were the moaning of a Racinian heroine; "Ah! cruel, tu vois mes pleurs! Ah! / Pour toi je meurs!" (Barbier and Carré 1993, 105; Ha, you cruel man, you see my cries! Ha! I die for you). This adaptation was an important landmark for *Hamlet's* legacy and reception, as well as for

the refocusing of drama on Ophelia's figure, which became so central that it even overshadowed the leading character. "*Ophelia*, in fact, would have been a far more appropriate title", states provocatively a critic in an anonymous review of the *Echo* (3 July 1869), appreciating Nilsson's marvellous vocal qualities but lamenting the subordination of all characters "to the one aim and end of creating a blazing halo round the fair locks of the disconsolate Ophelia" (312).

The success of the 1868 representation contributed to the popularisation of the subject. It emerged from decades of reworking the theme in the visual arts, which would later, in turn, be influenced by musical interpretations, forming a continuous cycle of intertextual exchange. Nilsson's interpretation led to the production of several engravings and paintings by the artists of the time, from Alexandre Lamy and Alphonse de Neuville to Alexandre Cabanel (Gervais de Lafond 2012, 176-7). Ophelia became a visual Leitmotiv, relaunched by artists in different contexts, such as the successful productions of Thomas's *Hamlet* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York from 1884 to 1895, with the sopranos Marcella Sembrich, Nellie Melba, and Emma Calvé. The postures shown in photographs are clearly inspired by the most famous paintings. In particular, the similarity between Emma Calvé's portrayal by the photographer Aimé Du Pont and the Cabanel's 1883 *Ophelia* (Gerber 2018, 50) is remarkable. In this photo, the singer is shown lying in the water with one arm raised (ID 8193). Although the pose is less sensual than in the painting (ID 6643)—with the actress using one arm to support her head instead of reclining languidly against the broken branch—the altered posture, driven by practical considerations, still conveys a comparable emotional atmosphere.⁶

Coming back to the 1868 operatic performance, it could be argued that Ophelia's singing before her drowning represents a strong link with the madness scene, and moreover that *Hamlet's* First Quarto features the stage direction "Enter Ophelia, playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing" (Williams 2012). This performative quality has been linked to the Italian tradition, inferring Ophelia's vocation for the sentimental part of the *innamorata* (Nicholson 2008). While it is debatable whether this association is essential in the original text, the historical evolution of Ophelia's character clearly moves in that direction, beginning with the earliest revivals of *Hamlet* – from David Garrick's celebration of the Shakespearean cult during the Stratford Jubilee to the French reworkings of the tragedy. Notably, in the adaptation by Dumas and Paul Meurice, as well as in the 1874 edition of

⁶ It is useful to remember that such photos were mostly taken during rehearsals or in special sessions, as part of the promotional strategy related to the artists' public image as well as their choices of interpretation.

Barbier and Carré's operatic version, Ophelia is reassured and encouraged by the Queen regarding Hamlet's love, a scene likely inspired by one of Ducis's versions, which ends with a virtual triumph of love, with Gertrude dying while blessing Hamlet and Ophelia's marriage. Furthermore, Hamlet does not kill Polonius (who is restored as Ophelia's father), although he believes him to be complicit in the crime. In the conclusion, Hamlet, spurred on by the ghost, kills the King and ascends to the throne of Denmark.

A lithograph by Émile Vernier, based on a drawing by Alphonse de Neuville, refers to the 1868 operatic adaptation and shows the scene of the ghost's apparition to Hamlet, while below and less visible there lies Ophelia in the stream, in a sensual pose and with flowers scattered on her dress and in her hair (Fig. 7). The main scene can be seen as a pretext for setting her drowning in a nocturnal and even haunting context, enveloped in mystery. The French operatic adaptation was particularly favored by celebrated singers and, as previously mentioned, was performed in Italy within a decade. In the Italian libretto published in 1881 by Sonzogno, with Achille de Lauzières's translation, the frontispiece image shows the meeting between Hamlet and his father's ghost in the context of a snowy landscape with a medieval castle in the background (Fig. 8). Although Hamlet has his sword drawn, the engraving does not convey the same sense of mystery and suspense of the French edition. However, importantly, Ophelia's drowning is not illustrated. The edition refers to the 1880-1881 season staged at Turin's Teatro Regio, in which Ophelia was played by the French soprano Bianca Donadio, who at the time was 31 years old. As in the French version, the scene of Ophelia's death is described in a caption and performed with the same music as her love duet with Hamlet ("Negar tu puoi la luce!", 10; Doubt thou the light exists).

Due to the diffusion of this melodramatic imagery, Ophelia became a figure who could better communicate the pathetic dimension of her state. Indeed, there was a shift in the interpretation of the tragedy, from Hamlet's existential unease to the pathos of the sentimental matter. This change of interpretation is evidenced by the 1874 Italian edition of Shakespeare's plays, translated by Carlo Rusconi, which contains only one illustration: a childlike Ophelia dressed in white on a riverbank. Also in the edition of Giulio Carcano's translations published the following year, the sole illustration featured is of Ophelia. The figurative choice is thus in stark contrast with the stage practice and the role attributed to Ophelia in the co-eval theatre companies. Carcano's version was brought to success by the actor Tommaso Salvini who, since 1856, starred as Hamlet in open competition with Ernesto Rossi, and there are pages and pages of reviews and comments on their acting while almost nobody recalls the actress playing Ophelia. Nevertheless, the choice of the most representative illustration for the edition goes in a different direction:

the evocative power of the death scene ultimately prevails in visual imagery, imprinting an interpretative turn through the power of melodrama.

The singer Christine Nilsson acquired a huge popularity in the role and was portrayed as Ophelia in various engravings, with the ever-present flowers which had become a *Leitmotiv* (Fig. 9). In a lithograph by Hippolyte Mailly, her face is pictured in a medallion with a nocturnal lake and a Gothic castle in the background (Fig. 10). The aquatic element does not allude to renewal and purification but evokes a stagnant morbidity, a quality that is both disquieting and obscure. Much more than the usual stream, the misty waters of a lake are perceived as more appropriate to the ghostly atmosphere required. As we have seen, this shift towards an unsettling context can be seen also in some paintings, such as the 1852 oil on canvas by Arthur Hughes. Love and mystery: the pathos and suspense perceived on stage are figuratively transposed by resorting to the picturesque, as part of a popularising strategy of the subject. This trend must have been taken to the extreme, inspiring the ironic vein of an artist like André Gill. In one of his caricatures, the actress is submerged in a large ampoule while undergoing a transformation into a frog-like creature, observed by a multitude of spectators represented in the form of frogs holding theatre binoculars (Fig. 11). It perfectly exemplifies the morbid fascination and voyeurism of the male audience towards the disquieting figure of the sacrificial virgin.

The tragedy of Ophelia, helpless and silent victim of a male-dominated world, innocent martyr of a sexophobic, patriarchal and discriminatory upbringing, is reduced to a more traditional tragedy of love, with a touch of mystery and of Gothic fascination. The culmination of this trend is to be seen in performance strategies which, in their turn, inspired the visual arts. But even before the Romantic era, figurative artists transformed Ophelia into an icon of pure lovesickness, a foil to Hamlet's more intellectual distress. Clearly, the character cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender difference; however, to ignore this underlying bias – often subtle or obscured, as seen in the earliest French adaptations – is to misinterpret Ophelia's role. Her identity fully emerges only in death, even more so than in the case of other tragic heroines. The portrayal of her off-stage drowning as a central visual element in stage productions marks a pivotal shift in this reading. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that reinterpretations began to challenge this perspective, offering a more nuanced and less reductive portrayal of the tragic figure of Ophelia.

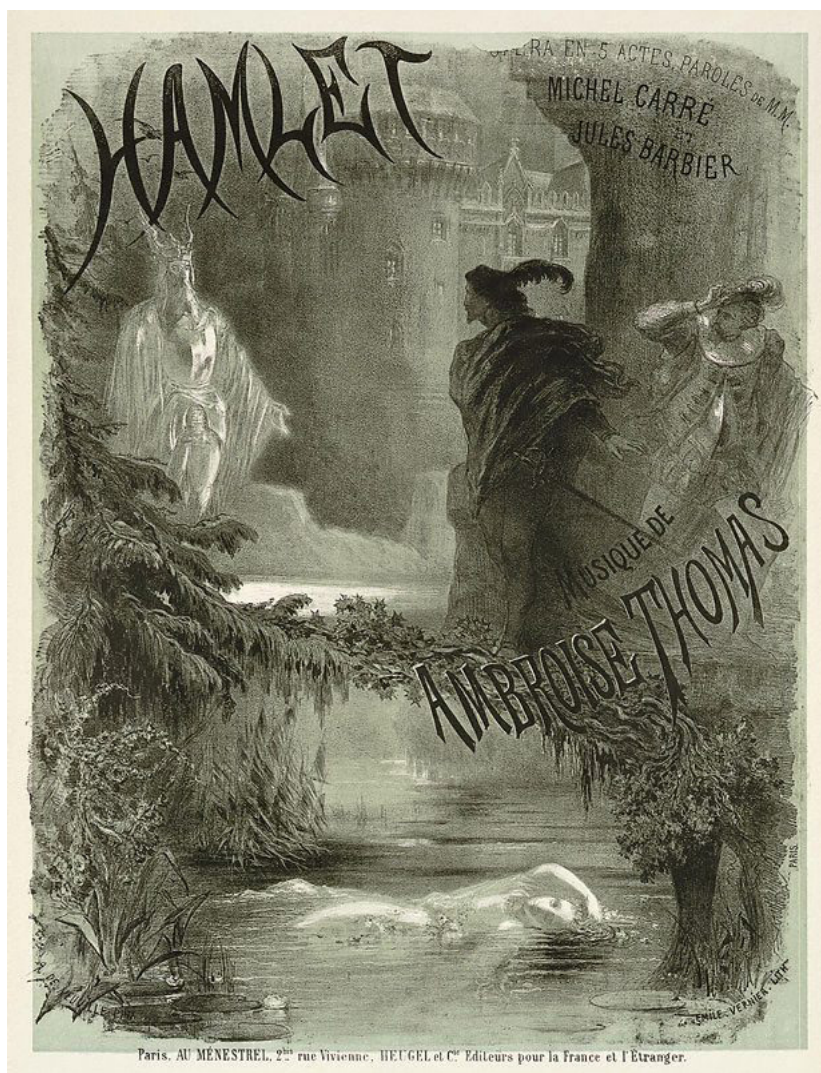


Fig. 7: Émile Vernier, *Hamlet*, opéra en 5 actes, paroles de M.M. Michel Carré et Jules Barbier, musique de Ambroise Thomas, 1868. Lithograph from a drawing by Alphonse de Neuville.

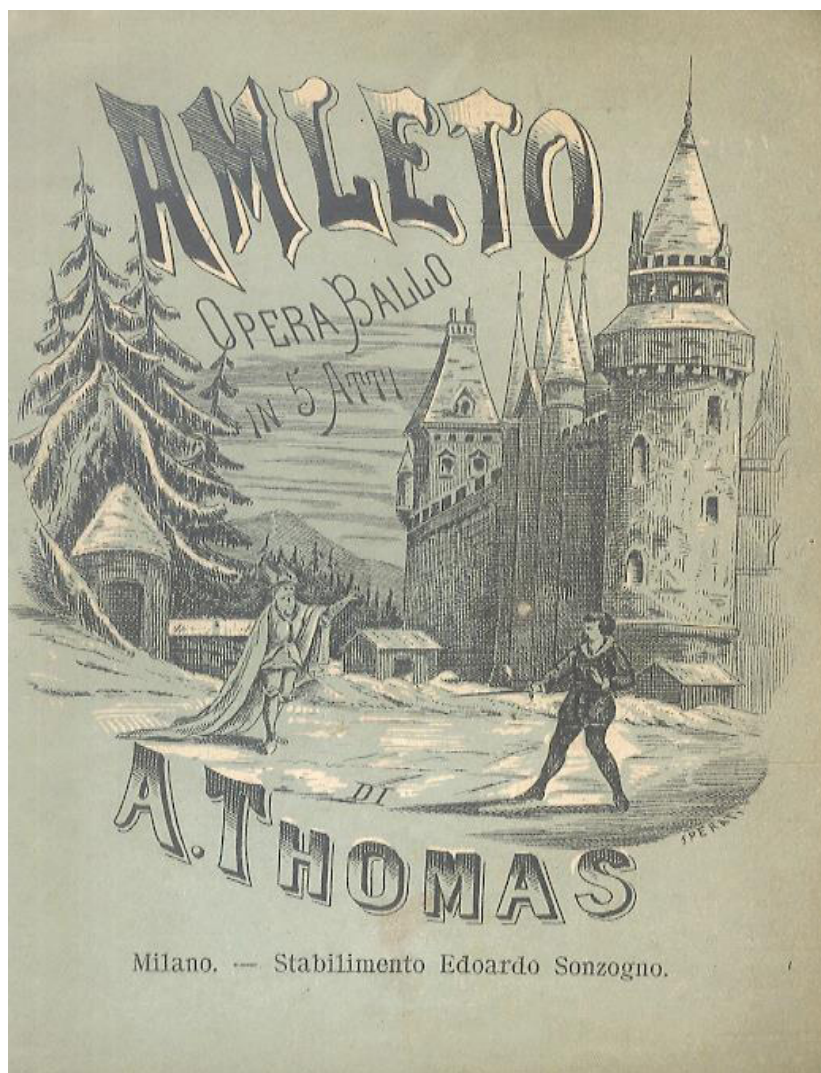


Fig. 8: *Amleto, opera ballo in 5 atti di A. Thomas, Milano, Sonzogno, 1881.*



Fig. 9: Théo, *Christine Nilsson as Ophélie in Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas.
Engraving, 1868.



Fig. 10: Hippolyte Mailly, *Christine Nilsson as Ophélie in Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas, Lithograph, 1868.

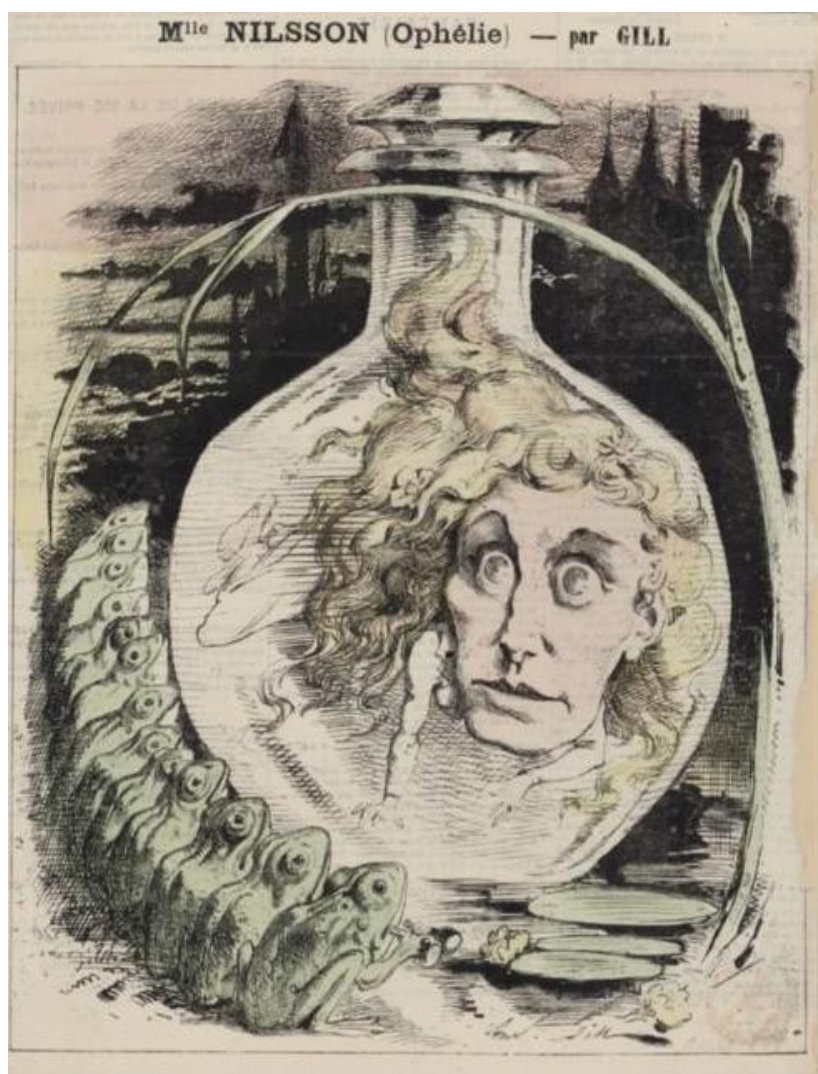


Fig. 11: André Gill, *Christine Nilsson as Ophélie in Hamlet* by Ambroise Thomas. Engraving, 1868.

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