

The Anatomy of Madness: Ophelia and the Body

“In her madness, there is no-one there. She is not a person...Incomprehensible statements are said by nothing.” (Laing 195)

Such is R.D Laing's appraisal of Ophelia. She is an absence, a voice with no sense and therefore no self-hood. It is an appraisal made explicitly in the play by the words of the King, who accounts her “divided from herself and her fair judgement, without which we are pictures or mere beasts.” (IV.iv.80-81) When Ophelia first appears on-stage, her speech is purely reactive; she replies to questioning and volunteers herself as repository for Laertes advice: “’tis in my memory locked, and you yourself shall keep the key of it” (I.iii.85), assuming the role of blank parchment on which he can plan her actions. Ophelia is more than a blank canvas; but her self-hood is imperilled by the insistence of others on ignoring, defining or denying her speech. If her speech is denied (Gertrude: “I will not speak with her!” IV.v.1) or dismissed as unintelligible (“her speech is nothing” IV.v.7) then she lies dangerously open to interpretation; her audience, both on-stage and off, can “botch [her] words up to fit their own thoughts...as her winks and nods and gestures yield them” (IV.v.11). The King and Queen seek to make Hamlet's manifestations of melancholy intelligible; “there's matter in these sighs...you must translate, 'tis fit we understand them” (IV.i.1-2). Ophelia, however, is deprived of language and so she must use the language of the body to communicate her grief. She resorts to a complex symbolism, distributing flowers loaded with meaning and singing bawdy songs, a modified and abstracted form of speech. Elaine Showalter described the image of the flower-bedecked and singing Ophelia as “a potent and obsessive figure in our cultural mythology” (Showalter 221), a template for our understanding of picturesque female madness.

If Hamlet is a prototype melancholy hero who was associated with “intellectual and imaginative genius” (Showalter 225), Ophelia is suffering from what the Elizabethans would have

diagnosed as “erotomania”, madness that is “biological and emotional in origin” (Showalter 225). Erotomania and hysteria (the latter deriving from the Greek word for uterus) are culturally defined as specifically female maladies, placed in opposition to the intellectualised existential suffering of men. To be a woman is already to be half mad- insanity, in the bawdy sense of 'nothing', is integral to the body. Ophelia's physicality becomes both her identity and the ultimate symbol of her dissolution. Her destruction of self in her suicide is paradoxically her only direct form of self-expression, an immediate experience more shocking than her symbolic flowers or songs. However this too is appropriated by those in power; her death is reported rather than seen, and interpreted rather than experienced. Even after death, her body is co-opted as a prop in a masculine power struggle, as Hamlet and Laertes struggle over her corpse in the grave. Anatomy and identity become conflated; in the sacred and ordered renaissance world, the body was a template for the understanding of the divine order. John Donne in the epitaph to his poem '*An Anatomy of the World*' summed up the link between the body and the cosmos: “by occasion of the untimely death of Mistress Elizabeth Drury, the frailty and the decay of this whole world is represented” (Donne 62).

Renaissance anatomy illustrated women as no more than “vehicles for the womb”, eroticised images of opening and revelation where women made their bodies available to view. The organs of madness are shown in images which owe more to religious and vanitas art than medicine, with the female subjects demurely displaying their interiors in the name of knowledge and science. This scientific justification sanctioned a highly intrusive gaze, which was made 'safer' again by the complicity of the subject in opening themselves and inviting the intrusion. The complex language of gesture and the iconography of the renaissance combined to present the women's bodies not as medical texts but as illustrations of society. Sawday describes renaissance anatomy as “a form of cultural location” designed to 'place' the body within “a nexus of complementary discourses, so that it's full symbolic significance would be appreciated” (Sawday 68). He also highlights the

conjunction between the anatomy theatre and the playhouse, which it rivalled for “theatrical performance...and the hold it exerted on those who flocked to these Vitruvian structures” (Sawday 75). In a telling comparison he aligns Hamlet with the the anatomist, searching for knowledge through epistemology and experience: “[Hamlet's] tools are the tools of the natural scientist- observation and analysis- but...inhabiting the sphere of rhetoric rather than natural philosophy...In what may be read as a commentary on the new science of the body, Hamlet eventually finds himself repeating the nocturnal explorations of Vesalius, turning over the disjointed members of corpses in a graveyard” (Sawday 93). If Hamlet is turned grave robber and anatomist, then what of Ophelia? It is her body which will become the site of conflict, which must bear the weight of representation. In the nunnery scene Hamlet uses rhetoric to divide Ophelia's identity. He instructs her that to “be honest and fair, [your honesty] should admit no discourse to your beauty” (III.i.106), and the tropes of language and speech comes once again to the fore. Honesty cannot “translate” beauty into a likeness; there can be no discourse between the body and the mind without corrupting both. Physicality is shown as speech, as Hamlet offers to “interpret” the “dallying” between her and her love (III.ii.233). Ophelia appeals to others for instruction and understanding of the world; during the play she asks Hamlet for an interpretation of the dumb show- “Will 'a tell us what this show meant?”- and is unable or unwilling to 'read' the physical language of the play. She declares her opinion of the play-action to Hamlet: “I think nothing, my lord” (III.ii.110). It is only in her brief and false solitude on-stage, observed by the King and Polonius, that she is able to interpret events for herself but functions as a passive observer, lamenting “O, woe is me T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” (III.i.160). Hamlet may be “th' observed of all observers” (III.i.153), but it is Ophelia who is constantly made the object of a gaze. Her own observations, however, are devalued; she need “not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, we heard it all” (III.i.178-9).

Elaine Showalter wrote “there is no 'true' Ophelia for whom feminist critics must

unambiguously speak, but perhaps only a Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts.” (Showalter 238) In this case, to represent Ophelia takes multiple views, a trick of perspectives. If there is no one, 'true' Ophelia, then the only clear view we will experience is one of the lenses through which she is viewed, the constructions placed on her. Ophelia is “freighted with emblematic significance...her part in the play [is] primarily iconographic” (Showalter 224). I chose to show Ophelia twice, once as the idealised and obedient virgin, and then again once mad—an image of suicide which exposes the violence of the act. Showalter traces the critical reception of Ophelia and her bodily expression through drama and art, pointing to the tendency to show her as “an object d'art”. She appears either in images of “childlike femininity and christian martyrdom”, or as “sensuous siren as well as victim” (Showalter 229), chiming with Gertrude's description of her as drowning “mermaid like”, “as one incapable of her own distress” (V.i.176-178). This plays upon what Sawday noted as a tendency to portray female sexuality as trauma, the anatomists tendency to make the “opening and penetration” of bodies “a further inflection of the woundedness metaphor [of the] female erotic response” (Sawday 120). Carol Rutter notes that “mad, Ophelia is lewd” (Rutter 34), and her suicide is an act of self-violence which is transformed into an erotic act not just by popular iconography but within the frame of her sexually damaged and damaging 'mad' state.

Using a variety of renaissance and pre-renaissance images and anatomical illustrations as secondary texts, I took the idea of the anatomised body as a “liber corpus”, “the body [as] the anatomists stage upon which he outlined a complete text” (Sawday 131). If Ophelia is deprived of sense and speech and has to speak through her body, then these were to be bodies that spoke for themselves and literally 'embodied' the ideas which Ophelia is forced to inhabit and express. Using classic images of enormous cultural visibility, I created two images of Showalter's imagined “Cubist Ophelia”. In the first (fig 1), Ophelia the Virgin is shown in a natural and harmonic world, a pre-fall Eden in which she exists as an “object d'art”, almost as a classical statue. The King promises for

Ophelia's grave a “living monument” (V.i.283), perhaps a statue echoing the role of Hermoine at the end of *'A Winters Tale'* and the awakening of Juliet. Ophelia will be memorialised as a beautiful body, and here she has assumed that role even prior to death. Anatomical images of the period such as Spigelius's 'flowering foetus' (fig 2) sought to express the “centrality of the body, even in division, to the articles of the Christian faith” (Sawday 104). Aldegraver's Eve in the garden (fig 3) and the Virgin Mary combine in this image with Botticelli's famous painting of Aphrodite (fig 4), to create an ideal image of patriarchal womanhood, both virginal and sexually available. An apple lies unbitten at her feet and the twisted tree trunk coils like a snake on the right-hand side of the picture, announcing her potential for corruption and sexualising her chastity, placing her in the patriarchal double bind. She demurely covers her groin with her left hand, the 'sinister' hand in the renaissance “language of gesture” (Sawday 104), while with her opened right hand she indicates her body and the idyllic natural setting. Sawday quotes from an early sixteenth century formula which advised “whan thou speykyst of any heauenly mater or devocyon to holde up thy handes” (sic, Sawday 104)- the open palmed gesture here indicates the body as a work of the divine, sanctioning the anatomist/viewers gaze as a demonstration of holiness. The picture can be 'read' from left to right as an image of fertility, the barren phallic mountain on the far left leading the eye to the tree stump on which new leaves are beginning to sprout, while Vesalius famous image of a vagina as an inverted penis (fig 5) flowers from Ophelia's stomach. Vines and lush grass grow at her feet while the tree's leaves and the clouds suggest a halo around her head. She looks directly but impassively at the viewer, her hair neatly piled on her head and the lines of her body echoing the natural shapes around her. Here is the obedient Ophelia who will “lock up” and internalise Laertes and Polonius' advice and authority, allowing him “the key” to her actions and thoughts, her acceptance of his phallogocentric authority vividly represented as biological fact. Vesalius's key 1543 text *'De Humani Corpis Fabrica'* uses a title page which laid out firmly his view of the world and anatomy (fig 6).

Sawday notes that “in the *Fabica*, the anatomical universe revolves around the conjunction of the womb and the tomb”, and that “what is depicted is no less than demonstration of the structural coherence of the universe itself, whose central component- the principle of life concealed within the womb- Vesalius is about to open to our gaze” (Sawday 70). Vesalius may use the womb as the central point of his image, but the figure of the anatomist standing over the corpse is still more important as the controlling figure of the piece. In the first image of Ophelia the focal point of the picture is Ophelia's womb as a symbol of fertility, but in the absence of an anatomist figure it is necessary for male power to assert itself through her body. Just as Ophelia decks herself with “long purples that liberal shepherds give a grosser name” (V.i.170) in the play, here she holds that phallic image even closer, blossoming like her flower garlands in an image that is obscene and shocking even as it appears natural and logical in the literalised landscape.

In the second image (fig 7), I chose the moment of Ophelia's suicide to depict the violence implicit in the first image exploding into open torture. Ophelia once mad is “lewd. She is also politically dangerous” (Rutter 34), but in images of this off-stage death scene she is usually made 'safe' by being reduced to a picturesque and ornamental corpse like the “living monument” the King promises for her, or reduced from her humanity to a “mermaid” to whom the water is a “native and indued” element (V.i.179). I wanted to make the ontological violence that Ophelia suffers horrifically explicit. Still using the framework of Christian imagery, I took the idea of Christ on the cross and also Bernini's sculpture '*Apollo and Daphne*' (fig 8 and 9), which depicts a failed rape, and used them to show Ophelia as impaled on the willow tree that “grows askant the brook” (V.i.170). Daphne, fleeing the forced embrace of Apollo, is caught in the moment between two states of being: her female body, the desired object of violence, is transforming into a laurel tree. The laurel, traditionally used to symbolise power and prestige after the use of laurel wreaths in ancient Greece, is a cage for Daphne just as madness is to Ophelia- it both protects and encloses

her. Ophelia's descent into madness is the destruction of her identity, but it also paradoxically has become her identity in the culturally-pervasive Ophelia myths and symbolism which haunts the representation of mad women down the ages (Showalter 231). In the second image of Ophelia, her sexuality becomes more explicitly uneasy, as the tree on which she hangs, Christ-like, is depicted reaching into her opened abdomen and sprouting from between her legs. This image of penetration and rape creates an intense violence which her tortured pose echoes, her hair loose and twisted into the tree branches, transforming into leaves just as Daphne's transformation is characterised by her contorted pose and the agonising appearance of her flesh and hair becoming bark and leaves. Her uterus is this time closer to anatomical correctness, although the renaissance characterisation of the uterus defining and filling the woman's body is still evoked, pinning it as the cause of her erotomania by positioning it centrally to the image once again. The mad Ophelia is tortured, picking up on the idea of female sexuality as wounded, but her distress is also eroticised. Estienne's '*De Dissectione*' of 1545 depicts an anatomised female figure reclining with her head turned from the viewer, an expression of sensual pleasure seen in profile. With one hand she gestures weakly towards the viewer, while her other arm hangs limp. Sawday noted the "extravagantly sexualised manner" of Estienne's anatomised female bodies, and linked it to the court tradition of the "*blason*", a rhetorical anatomisation of the female. Indeed, "the *blason* and the anatomy text soon [began] to appear as different sides of the same coin" (Sawday 194). Ophelia here exists in a Daphne-like state of flux; she is both the "fair and unpolluted flesh" (V.i.224) which Laertes asserts they are burying, and the corpse which will soon decay. Hamlet, holding the skull of Yorrick, says "let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come" (V.i.180); Carol Rutter identifies Yorrick as the "jester who grounds ghastliness, displacing it from Ophelia *now*, for newly-dead her corpse still registers her sweetness" (Rutter 41). The ruined city behind her tree evokes the inevitable decay that she will suffer, while on the right the tower of Babel, as represented by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in 1563 (fig 10) stands

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in ruins. The tower of Babel is testament to Ophelia's inability to speak and be understood, the conflicting languages of body and speech which she is forced to inhabit incoherently. Ophelia is unable to speak and make herself understood by speaking the language of the power, and the responsibility for her speech and expression is assumed by the men who surround her with disastrous consequences for her self-hood. Without personal expression or development, both of which are precluded by her expressive obstruction, she can only exist as a stunted self and this barrenness is echoed in the landscape, which is sparse and nettled ground. Ophelia once mad is also monstrous, an unintelligible message. Laertes calls her a "document in madness"; she expresses through her being an unnatural and feared state. Thus the barren ground is juxtaposed with the living womb which forms the focal point of the picture, and Ophelia herself is removed from the feminine silhouette of the previous image. Her body is no longer easily readable as abundant and fruitful; set apart from these elements, her anatomy loses the cultural meaning and purpose attached to it. Cut adrift from the symbolism she is anchored in, Ophelia is subject to a violent loss of identity. Far from drowning, Ophelia is impaled on a bare tree in a desert, the ruins of her court values and defined identity lying overgrown with weeds behind her as the phallic tower, symbol of her linguistic impotence and now-externalised masculine power, rises into the clouds. Her death is not immersive but dissective. Showalter praised feminist critics for "exposing the ideology of representation" (Showalter 238); in these images the ideology of representation is itself represented, unmasking the violence of Ophelia's situation by depicting the mask itself.

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