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A Spirit So Broken: Branagh's Portrayal of Ophelia's Madness

Previous film portrayals of Ophelia have cast her into the role of perfection personified. She possesses every trait that aristocrats of the Middle Ages and beyond have been taught to value in a woman: beauty, innocence, obedience, subservience, and unobtrusiveness. Accordingly, her mad scenes in these films have been altered dramatically from William Shakespeare's original text. Instead of the true depth of Ophelia's grief being revealed, you are treated to an empty-headed doll who manages to make madness look beautiful. In director Kenneth Branagh's 1996 Hamlet film, the portrayal of Ophelia's madness remains true to the original. As the play progresses, her condition worsens to the point that she is only a mere shadow of her former self. Branagh also adds his own visuals to show a few of the cruelties that people who were classified as mad were once forced to endure, which gives the viewer a little more insight into the breakdown of Ophelia's sanity.

In Ophelia's very first appearance as a woman who has lost touch with reality, she is mostly filled with anger and grief. Someone has locked her in a room with padded walls and she throws herself repeatedly at them while the queen watches her from above through an opening in the floor. She initially refuses to honor Ophelia's request to see her out of guilt. In Branagh's portrayal she breathes heavily and her eyes move constantly as if she is trying to hold back tears. She witnessed the murder of Ophelia's father and it was her son who killed him. Horatio and a maidservant eventually wear down her resistance by explaining that the negative things Ophelia is saying about the monarchy might "strew / [d]angerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (4.5.14-15). Some people might come to the conclusion that they should be wary of the king and queen.

In the following scene, Ophelia is released from her prison adjacent to the mirrored and gold-accented main hall and is lying on the shining tile floor. The queen immediately rushes over to learn Ophelia's reason for wanting to speak with her. The young woman has been bound in a

close-fitting strait-jacket that strongly resembles a large burlap sack and upon her head is a hood of similar construction that binds her hair. Only her face and her feet are visible. She cannot easily move any part of her body below the neck.

Her words are jumbled throughout this scene but are often full of hidden meaning. She asks in a somewhat annoyed voice, "Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?" (4.5.20) then sings a verse of a song about knowing the difference between a true love and someone else. When the queen asks her about the song's meaning, she sings a different one. "He is dead and gone, lady, / He is dead and gone, / At his head a grass-green turf, / At his heels a stone" (4.5.28-31). She is singing about her father. The queen unbuckles the strait-jacket after Ophelia struggles to free herself and she sits up just as the king enters the room. She is very calm while speaking to him until he mentions her father, then she shoves herself away while screaming, "Pray you, let's have no words of this" (4.5.45) with her hands covering her ears. She runs to the opposite end of the hall where the red-carpeted dais that the royal thrones sit upon is located and sings portions of songs that reveal her suspicion that her father was murdered. The king manages to attract her attention again by calling her name. She comes over to him and does not stop until the front of their bodies are touching. Her eyes stay focused on his as she sings part of yet another song, this one sexual in nature. "By Gis and by Saint Charity, / Alack, and fie, for shame! / Young men will do 't, if they come to 't. / By Cock, they are to blame" (4.5.57-60). Young men will pursue sex if they have the opportunity. She stresses the last line by thrusting her pelvis against the king's, who staggers away in shock. She throws herself to the floor and lies down on her back. While she sings, she continues to thrust her pelvis up and down, imitating the sexual behavior of male animals. "Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed.' / He answers, / 'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun, / An thou hadst not come to my bed'" (4.5.61-65). There are two brief flashbacks of Ophelia and Hamlet being intimate interspersed with this. As this scene occurs after Hamlet seemingly rejects her, it is possible that she thinks he no longer wants to marry her because she had sex with him before the ceremony. Branagh's decision to have her exhibit overtly sexual behavior further differentiates her from the "little girl Ophelia" that previous directors favored. She starts to cry and all of the manic energy she previously displayed

seems to have drained away. A close-up reveals that her face is red from exertion and crying but the expression is one of resignation. She kneels upon the floor and the next words she speaks are completely lucid. "I hope all will be well. We must be patient, but I cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him i' th' cold ground. My brother shall know of it" (4.5.67-69). The king quickly pulls her up from the floor and presses her arms against her body in restraint, but she breaks free of his hold. She takes her leave, dodging the hands outstretched to grab her. "Good night, ladies," she calls. "Good night, sweet ladies. Good night, good night" (4.5.70-71). She runs across the hall and down a much shorter one after flinging open a set of double doors. The king orders Horatio and the maidservant to "Follow her close. Give her good watch, I pray you" (4.5.72). This marks the end of the scene.

By her second appearance, Ophelia's mind has lost all of its connections to reality. She often smiles and giggles as if she knows a secret that no one else does. She has mentally regressed to the age of a young child, perhaps as a way to protect what little remains of her former self. Her long red hair hangs loose and tangled about her shoulders and she is now clad in a long white night gown with lace trim. Her feet still remain bare. Throughout the scene she plays with her fingers as if weaving. Her brother, Laertes, speaks aloud his horror at her behavior from only a few feet away but she does not react. Even when he speaks directly to her she does not appear to recognize him. The theme of her songs has become sorrow but she giggles as she sings. When she hands out flowers—rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbines, and a daisy—they are only made of air. Her brother remains nearby yet none of the flowers are given to him. In other portrayals, Ophelia gives these "flowers" to Laertes, the king, and the queen. While they are never real, something usually represents them such as personal keepsakes or various found objects. At the end of the scene she becomes melancholy and sings a song about death. There is little room for doubt that she is singing about her father. "And will he not come again? / And will he not come again? / No, no, he is dead, / Go to thy deathbed. / He never will come again." (4.5.187-191). After she finishes she looks once more at the person only she can see and a viewer of the film cannot help but to think that she has been speaking to her father the entire time. Unlike other film directors, Branagh greatly stresses her relationship with her father. Ophelia rises from the

floor and returns quietly to her padded cell, where she stands utterly motionless with her back to the door. Not once in this scene does she truly see her brother or the king and queen, who are standing nearby.

It is likely that the physical mistreatment Ophelia suffered after her father's death hastened the development of her madness and later led to her suicide. Under the guise of treatment, Ophelia is locked in a small, padded room with no windows or furniture of any kind, physically confined by a strait-jacket, and sprayed with a high-pressure water hose. It is the last that affects the viewer the most. During the "session" shown in the film, Ophelia stands in a small room while a soldier sprays her with a forceful jet of cold water. The cinder block walls are covered with water stains and Ophelia is huddled in one corner, screaming. When the torture finally comes to an end, and the soldier leaves the room, the camera moves in close as Ophelia opens her mouth and slowly removes an iron key. Her body trembles slightly from the cold, but the look on her face is one of pure defiance. A few scenes later, the queen reports to the king and Laertes that she has drowned.

Branagh's portrayal of Ophelia's madness is one of the most realistic that I have ever seen. He draws you so completely into each scene that you can almost see things the way that she does. He is sympathetic to her experience by retaining all of her lines and by showing her behavior as heartbreaking rather than silly, especially during the second scene where it is more suited to a small child than a young woman. By adding information about the way Ophelia's "illness" is treated by those around her, Branagh more than adequately explains the depth of her madness and the cause of her suicide.

Works Cited

Hamlet. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. Perf. Kenneth Branagh, Julie Christie, Billy Crystal, Gerard Depardieu, Charlton Heston, Derek Jacobi, Jack Lemmon, Rufus Sewell, Robin Williams, Kate Winslet. DVD. Warner Home Video, 1996.