Ophelia’s Descent into Madness

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfillment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Design for Film. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of costume as a visual language, examining how Ophelia's character is constructed, constrained, and reimagined across three major adaptations of *Hamlet*: Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), and Gregory Doran's Royal Shakespeare Company filmed production (2009). Although Ophelia occupies relatively limited textual space in Shakespeare's original play, her body and madness have repeatedly been reinterpreted, reflecting shifting cultural anxieties surrounding femininity, sexuality, and control. In this context, costume does not merely function as decoration or spectacle, but as a central interpretive tool through which Ophelia's identity, emotional state, and social positioning are visually constructed for the audience. In Olivier's post-war cinematic adaptation, Ophelia is infantilized and aestheticized, with her costuming reinforcing societal nostalgia for Victorian values and aligning her with patriarchal ideals of innocence and beauty. Branagh's periodized Victorian setting reframes her madness through the discourse of hysteria and institutional control, showing Ophelia's tragic decline from a respectable woman of status to a figure humiliated and confined to a tattered straitjacket. By contrast, Doran's contemporary stage adaptation presents Ophelia's breakdown as an expression of anger and resistance to societal expectations, using costume deterioration and the act of undressing to signal a rejection of social propriety in her madness. Through close visual and comparative analysis, this study reveals how Ophelia's tragedy is shaped by directorial vision, historical context, and performance medium. Across these adaptations, costume design operates as a central mechanism through which meaning is framed, negotiated, and imposed, demonstrating the extent to which Ophelia's body becomes a contested site for cultural anxieties surrounding gender, power, and spectatorship.

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Introduction

Ophelia is one of Shakespeare's most enduring female characters, whose meaning has remained persistently contested by critics, performers, and directors. Despite having relatively few lines in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the legacy of her character occupies a disproportionate space in culture, repeatedly referenced and redefined across centuries of stage and screen adaptations. Her narrative is limited in the source material and it is often even further reduced by both the play's internal power structures and by the interpretive decisions of directors adapting the text to the screen. Her role, her body, and her eventual madness all become tools through which meaning is shaped and reworked, and as a result, she is particularly vulnerable to interpretive reinvention, constructed as much by Shakespeare's text as by the directorial vision and cultural context of each adaptation.

Screen adaptations of William Shakespeare's works cannot be understood as neutral acts of translation, but rather they are meant to serve as cultural and ideological reinterpretations, reimagined for a contemporary cinema audience. As Robert Hapgood argues in *"Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, and Video"* (Boose & Burt, 1997), cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's works focus on visual spectacle over narrative, reinventing and popularizing the play by transforming it and prioritizing what can be seen on screen rather than what is said in the text. By controlling the spectator's gaze through framing, editing, and close-ups, the filmic medium enables directors to manipulate the audience's gaze, and

in turn shape their understanding through ‘ocular proof’. As Stephen Buhler points out in his 2002 book entitled *“Shakespeare in the Cinema: Ocular Proof”*, filmmakers utilize visual storytelling techniques to *prove* their meaning visually, as opposed to verbally (Buhler, 2002). The visual language, and thus the costume design of an adaptation, is therefore used as an area onto which interpretive meaning can be imposed.

While cinema focuses on visual control, theatrical adaptation prioritizes physical performance as a means of producing meaning. As Sarah Hatchuel discusses in *Shakespeare, from Stage to Screen* (Hatchuel, 2004), theatre foregrounds embodiment and the physical presence of the actor, allowing emotion and meaning to emerge through bodily performance rather than cinematic manipulation. Without the fixed gaze of the camera, the theatrical space allows for moments of unpredictability and raw expression that cinema often disciplines or aestheticizes. Filmed theatre, occupying a middle ground between stage and screen, retains the authenticity of theatrical performance while subjecting it to visual manipulation through cinematic techniques.

This dissertation examines how costume operates as a crucial visual language, shaping the construction, constraint, and reinterpretation of Ophelia’s character across different adaptation modes. When Ophelia’s voice is limited or silenced, costume operates as an alternative form of expression, signalling sexuality, innocence, madness, obedience, or defiance. Clothing becomes a site where Ophelia’s relationship to the male gaze, social expectation, and institutional authority is expressed. Examining her costume

across three contrasting adaptations reveals how visual design participates in shaping Ophelia's tragedy, determining whether her decline is aestheticized, pathologized, or resisted. Through a comparative analysis of three adaptations of Hamlet, this dissertation explores how Ophelia's tragedy is reframed according to historical context, adaptation mode, and visual strategy. Each adaptation utilizes costume differently in order to negotiate Ophelia's position within structures of gender, power, and spectatorship, thus revealing how her character is repeatedly reshaped to serve shifting cultural and ideological concerns.

The first adaptation examined is Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), the first major cinematic version of the play and a defining example of what Maurice Hindle describes as the filmic mode of adaptation (Hindle, 2015). In *Shakespeare on Film*, Hindle outlines how the filmic mode privileges the expressive capacities of cinema itself, using camera movement, editing, lighting, and mise-en-scène to construct meaning beyond the spoken text. Olivier's adaptation exemplifies this approach by reimagining Hamlet as a psychological drama, visually aligned with post-war cinematic traditions such as film noir and German Expressionism. Within this framework, Ophelia, played by the eighteen-year-old Jean Simmons, is constructed as a figure of infantilized innocence, her character subordinated to the visual and emotional trajectory of Hamlet. Her costuming reinforces a nostalgic, Victorian-esque femininity, preserving her beauty even through madness and death, and positioning her as an object of sentiment rather than a subject with agency.

The second adaptation considered is Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), which operates primarily within the periodization mode of adaptation. Unlike Olivier, Branagh retains Shakespeare's text in full, relocating the play to a late nineteenth-century court and inviting the audience to interpret its characters through the social and ideological frameworks of the Victorian era. As Hindle suggests, periodization does not merely update Shakespeare's setting but actively produces new meanings by placing the text in dialogue with a historically specific cultural moment (Hindle, 2015). In this context, Ophelia's madness is reframed through contemporary Victorian discourses surrounding hysteria, femininity, and institutional control. Kate Winslet's Ophelia is granted a fuller textual voice and an explicit sexual history with Hamlet, yet her body still ultimately becomes subject to medicalized containment. Her costume follows this trajectory, moving from structured gowns that signal status and autonomy to garments that symbolize confinement, humiliation, and loss of agency.

The third adaptation explored is the filmed version of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2008 production of Hamlet, directed by Gregory Doran and released in 2009. This adaptation is an example of the theatrical mode, which retains the conventions of stage performance while incorporating cinematic techniques to mediate the viewer's experience. Costumes, setting, and performance remain rooted in theatrical practice, foregrounding physical presence and emotional immediacy. Mariah Gale's Ophelia exists within a contemporary, visually ambiguous setting, allowing her tragedy to be read

through modern expectations of class and femininity. Unlike Olivier's aestheticized innocence or Branagh's pathologized hysteria, Doran's Ophelia expresses her breakdown through anger, resistance, and physical excess. Her costuming deteriorates alongside her mental state and she refuses to render her madness beautiful or contained.

Across these three adaptations, and in the original text, Ophelia is rarely presented as an autonomous figure with control over her own fate, her choices constrained by the authority of the men who govern her life. Her descent into madness emerges from grief, abandonment, and silencing, and this open narrative is what allows directors to impose divergent meanings onto her character. By examining how costume mediates these shifts, this dissertation argues that Ophelia's body becomes a site where cultural anxieties about femininity, sexuality, and control are repeatedly staged and negotiated.

Chapter 1 - Aestheticized Innocence

Laurence Olivier's 1948 *Hamlet* was the first major cinematic adaptation of the play. Upon its release, it was met with widespread critical acclaim, earning Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Actor, as well as a Best Supporting Actress nomination for Jean Simmons for her role as Ophelia. In his essay entitled "Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear on film", J. Lawrence Gunter describes the film as "probably the most influential Shakespeare film and Hamlet portrayal of the twentieth century" (Gunter, 2000). Gunter argues that Olivier's Hamlet owes a significant debt to both German expressionist cinema and the conventions of film noir. This filmic mode of adaptation, as described by Maurice Hindle in his 2015 book *Shakespeare on Film*, allows Olivier to utilize the advantages of the cinematic medium in order to highlight the dark implicit aura of the original text. Through the use of canted camera angles, dramatic lighting and the somber setting, the viewer is able to see inside the mind of Hamlet, not only through what is spoken aloud, but most importantly, through the established visual language (Hindle, 2015). The production and costume designer, Roger Furse, presents the audience with a dark, lonely and overbearing Elsinore, using the winding staircases and extensive gloomy sets as a visual representation of Hamlet's psyche (Gunter, 2000). When discussing the film in his 1986 book entitled "On Acting", Laurence Olivier reinforces this idea by describing how the story "is seen through [Hamlet's] eyes and, when he is not present, through his imagination… I saw the camera seeing most things through Hamlet's eyes."

(Olivier, 1986). The visual narrative of the film therefore directly relates and is augmented by Hamlet's dwindling sanity as the story progresses.

Olivier's "Hamlet" centers around the narrative of its titular character, celebrating masculinity in a post-war era of cinema, consequently leaving little room and suppressing the countertext of Ophelia (Rutter, 2001). "They have to achieve their heroic Hamlet under erasure." argues Carol Chillington Rutter in her 1998 essay "Snatched Bodies: Ophelia in the Grave" in which she examines how four directors use Ophelia's role in the play, as well as her physical body, to serve a masculinist narrative of their "Hamlet" adaptations. Rutter notes how Olivier's direction of the role, following the traditional Victorian tropes associated with Ophelia's character, is representative of post-war nostalgia for the self-confident patriarchy of the Victorian era. Olivier's "Victorian" Ophelia can therefore be seen as a sentimental symbol of the straight-laced values and the sexual repression of "the good old days'.

As Patty S. Derrick notes in her article entitled "Julia Marlowe's Ophelia: A Portrait of Resistance and Failure", the 1940s audience was used to, and even welcomed and embraced a more one-dimensional characterisation of Ophelia (Derrick, 2003). As Derrick points out, audiences cherished the portrayal of her character as an epitome of "true womanhood", following the long standing Victorian tradition of portraying Ophelia as submissive, modest, and pious. In the 19th century, her character served as a symbol and role model for the ideal woman, celebrated for, and often reduced to just her beauty, her virtue, and her innocence. Anna Brownell Jameson, an Irish

art historian from the 19th century describes Ophelia as a character “in whom the feminine character appears resolved into its very elementary principles - as modesty, grace, tenderness. Without these a woman is no woman.” (Jameson, 1833). In 1884, Grace Latham also expressed this traditional notion, that obedience, gentleness, patience, purity and quiet endurance are necessary for a beautiful female character (Latham, 1884). By 1908, theater historian Walter Prichard Eaton lamented the widely accepted, albeit already outdated expectation of Ophelia’s traditional portrayal. “Old traditions flourish just because they are traditions, old conventions, moldy with time, still prevail and are accepted by audiences long after every one knows they are false and hollow.” notes Eaton in “The American Stage of To-Day” (Eaton, 1908). He argues that the early 20th century audiences lacked the initiative to give up these comfortable conventions, instead choosing to romanticize Ophelia’s character and reduce her to a symbol of traditional femininity, preventing her from becoming a more well-rounded complex character.

40 years later, Olivier furthers this diminishment and plays into the same long-established expectations by presenting the audience with an Ophelia that, as Carol Chillington Rutter describes, exists “to be looked at” (Rutter, 2001). He chooses to strip her of her final soliloquy, cutting her only moment of subjectivity in lieu of expanding her visual presence in added scenes that are only reported in the original text. Instead of hearing Ophelia speak her mind, the audience gets to witness Hamlet’s intrusion to her closet and observe her final moments before her drowning. Both of these moments

objectify Ophelia, as she becomes more prop than character, a silent pawn to be used in Hamlet's narrative. Such textual cuts, as described by Derrick, help to establish Ophelia as a "sweet" one-dimensional character, omitting the uncomfortable lines that do not align with the desired "pure" portrayal and do not serve the simplified, male-centric narrative (Derrick, 2003).

Figure 1: Jean Simmons as Ophelia in *Hamlet*. Directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.

The first time Ophelia appears on screen in Olivier's "Hamlet", the camera finds her gazing out of the window of her barren chamber. With plaits in her hair and a wide-eyed look ever-present on her face, the 18-year-old Jean Simmons plays Ophelia as childish and naive, a portrayal typical of the stage

traditions of the era. Her flowing white dress stands out and looks disconnected from the rest of Olivier's tudor-esque dark and brooding Elsinore. In "On Acting", Olivier talks of how he decided to dress his Ophelia in what he describes as an "innocent Victorian dress" (Olivier, 1986). However, as Chillington Rutter points out, the dress is actually neither Tudor nor Victorian, and could never be worn in any Victorian public place. "It belongs to the Victorian boudoir, chaise longue—or nursery" argues Rutter, pointing out the simultaneous sexualization and infantilization of Jean Simmons' Ophelia (Rutter, 2001). For Olivier, "Victorian" means 'oppressed' and 'submissive'; and "Innocent" means 'infantile' and 'naive', and the multiple layers of skirts and the childish high waistline of her gown serve as a visual symbol of these traits.

Figure 2: *Erma Ulmer Williamson,* young girl in empire waist dress. *Pennsylvania Colony of Nebraska,* 1897

Figure 3: Jean Simmons as Ophelia in empire-waist gown in *Hamlet*. Directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.

Her dress is not historically accurate to the Victorian era, however it resembles styles typically worn by Victorian girls. There are similarities in the two costumes worn by Ophelia at court and the cut of Victorian children's clothes, namely the high, ruffled neckline and the Empire waistline placed right under the bust. Reminiscent of Renaissance Italy and the Antiquity, the Empire waistline grew popular in the Regency era and remained a popular silhouette of children's clothing even to this day. With the turn of the century and the collapse of the French Empire, the early 19th century fashion trends turned towards a more conservative and simple silhouette, following the growing cultural sentimentality for the values of the past just like Olivier does in his *Hamlet.* No longer wanting to mimic the corseted and structured style of the aristocracy, the fashion in Europe turned to recreating the styles of classical statues of Greek and Roman goddesses, mirroring the shift in culture. In stark contrast to the late 18th century where ostentation was celebrated, the early 19th century embraced modesty as a fundamental virtue and thus a plainer, less structured, and more naturalistic style of dress became fashionable. The waistline was no longer accentuated by a corset, instead it was concealed beneath loose and flowing skirts that concealed the shape of the wearer's body. The empire waistline can therefore be seen as a symbol of societal nostalgia for the puritan values of the past, and in Olivier's *Hamlet* it serves exactly that purpose. While this style of dress is neither Tudor, nor Victorian, it serves to conceal Ophelia's body, and by extension, protects her virtue.

Figure 4: Jean Simmons as Ophelia in court costume in *Hamlet*. Directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.

The next costume that she wears features a veil, a cape, and additional layers of gathering that conceal her chest, further infantilizing her and reestablishing her as a character with little agency over her fate. However, this costume also reinforces the contrast between Jean Simmons's head and her body, allowing the film to aestheticize Ophelia's femininity while simultaneously denying her sexual agency. The dark eyebrows, long black lashes and her long platinum blonde hair are typical of Hollywood stars of the time and they make the 18-year-old look much older. There is a dichotomy between her infantile white dress and her heavy Hollywood makeup marking Jean Simmons as a sexually mature screen actress rather than a childlike figure. Her hair, however, is braided in childish plaits, an intricate hairstyle that looks more like it belongs on a porcelain doll.

The gown Ophelia wears in court provides a strong visual juxtaposition with the clothing she dons the next time that we see her, and that is when she goes mad. Her madness strips her of her child-like innocence and her costume changes accordingly, becoming more disheveled and revealing. One of the first shots of the mad Ophelia is of her running into the castle, her skirt clinging to her leg, revealing its outline to the viewer. She no longer wears multiple loose layers that conceal the shape of her body - her costume now shows off her skin, her legs, her shoulders and her décolletage. Her bodice is fitted around the waist and slightly undone at the bust, which can be seen as a suggestive detail that introduces the element of sexuality into her costume. The waistline of her dress has shifted down significantly and now accentuates her curves instead of obscuring them.

Despite being mad, Olivier's Ophelia remains perfectly disheveled, shrouded in flowers that cling appealingly to her loose hair. Her make-up is just as beautiful as ever, with her eyes wide, her voice still sweet, and her lips pouted. Her wide-eyed innocence remains but her costume reveals that the seed of sexuality has been planted along with her madness. While it is her madness that drives her to suicide, one cannot ignore the link that Olivier creates between madness and sexuality. It is almost like her sexuality is what drives her to her death and it is the loss of innocence that sends her to her demise. Her death comes at a perfect moment - she is still beautiful, still a virgin, sexualized enough to become an erotic object but not enough to become provocative or sexually liberated.

Figure 5: Jean Simmons as Ophelia in her mad sequence (fitted bodice and split skirt), *Hamlet*. Directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.

Olivier's construction of Ophelia closely reflects what Freud describes as the Madonna–Whore complex, in which women are divided into figures of purity or sexuality but are not allowed to exist as both. Throughout the earlier part of the film, Ophelia is firmly aligned with the Madonna figure as her body is concealed and her sexuality denied legitimacy, her value lying in her innocence rather than her agency. Although signs of adult femininity are present, such as her blonde hair and makeup, they are carefully displaced and controlled, ensuring that her body remains visually and morally contained. When Ophelia descends into madness, this balance breaks down as her costume begins to reveal her body, and sexuality is no longer merely suggested but becomes visibly attached to her physical form. At this point, Ophelia can no longer function as the innocent figure the film requires, but

she is not permitted to exist as a sexual subject either. Caught between these two roles, she occupies a position that the narrative cannot sustain and her death serves as a resolution of this contradiction, preserving her beauty while removing the threat posed by a sexualized female body that exists outside patriarchal control.

Figure 6: Jean Simmons as Ophelia, drowning shot, *Hamlet*. Directed by Laurence Olivier, 1948.

Jean Simmons' Ophelia is a symbol of innocent beauty, even as she walks the line between virgin and whore. Max Beerbohm summarizes this notion in the following quote: *"Lunacy is a painful thing, and Shakespeare did not mean the mad scenes of Ophelia to be painful: he merely meant them to be beautiful... The only right way for an actress to interpret these mad scenes is*

through her sense of beauty.". Ophelia is meant to be beautiful in her madness, and even in death she is to serve the male gaze. Her role in Olivier's "Hamlet" is to perform for the men in her life and be a beautiful object to be looked at and controlled. Jean Simmons performance sparks pity in the audience, as the ever-beautiful and wide-eyed Ophelia drowns in the river, however for the collective patriarchy, her death conserves her as a tragic symbol of beauty, diminishing her character.

Chapter 2 - Institutional Containment

The Ophelia we see in Kenneth Branagh's 1996 adaptation provides a stark contrast to Olivier's interpretation of the character. In contrast to Olivier's version, where Ophelia's lines are cut by almost a quarter, Branagh's adaptation does not omit any of her lines. As Kendra Preston points out in her 2012 essay titled "The Lady Vanishes: Aurality and Agency in Cinematic Ophelias", Kate Winslet's Ophelia is one of the only cinematic Ophelias to retain her Act 3 soliloquy, and as a result she becomes a character with a more fully realized voice rather than just an accessory to Hamlet's narrative (Preston, 2012). Not only is she the most outspoken Ophelia, she also appears in additional scenes through flashback sequences that are shown from her perspective.

Figure 7: Kate Winslet as Ophelia in bedroom flashback in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

While the original text leaves ambiguity about the nature of Hamlet's and Ophelia's relationship, Branagh chooses to remove it by presenting the audience with Ophelia's memories of the pair making love in her bedroom.

The scenes are sensual and intimate, but they do not objectify Ophelia or portray her as a passive vessel of Hamlet's desire like in Olivier's adaptation. Instead, Branagh presents Ophelia as a mature woman in control of her own body and sexuality. A second flashback sequence shows Ophelia wearing Hamlet's loose white shirt as he sits shirtless beside her in bed, underlining her autonomy and the maturity and intimacy of their romance. When seen from Ophelia's perspective, their relationship seems mutual and tender. She is not presented or treated as a submissive girl but rather as an equal partner who loves Hamlet with the same intensity that he loves her.

Figure 8: Kate Winslet as Ophelia at court in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

Ophelia's costumes in the film establish her as a fashionable woman of status and wealth, one who is at ease within the social order of the court. Her gowns are structured and tailored, and her hair is worn up and styled in accordance with the etiquette of the late Victorian high court. She looks composed and controlled, moving through the palace as someone who understands her social position and how she is expected to present herself. This is particularly evident in her first appearance in the film, at the formal

court assembly following Claudius's accession and marriage, where she wears a bright red, tailored gown with a uniform-like silhouette. With its high stand collar, heavy wool fabric, and epaulettes, the garment carries a distinctly military visual language, mirroring the cut and visual authority of the king's own jacket. In contrast to the lace, ruffles, and overtly feminine dresses worn by the other women at court, Ophelia's appearance notably stands out as restrained and serious. Rather than softness or ornamentation, her clothing emphasizes duty, discipline, and alignment with institutional power. Unlike the infantilized Ophelia in Olivier's adaptation, Branagh's Ophelia is not visually coded as fragile or naïve, as her appearance instead suggests self-regulation and maturity, aligning her body with the rigid expectations placed upon women of her status. This sense of order is integral to the understanding of her character, as it gives her later breakdown a point of contrast, making the loss of control feel abrupt and externally imposed rather than something inherent.

Figure 9: Kate Winslet as Ophelia in private domestic costume in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

Branagh further reinforces Ophelia's maturity and self-awareness by presenting her as intellectually engaged and visually distinct in moments of privacy. She is repeatedly shown holding or reading a book, a detail that signals literacy, interiority, and independent thought rather than passive obedience. As M. G. Aune argues in *Ophelia's Space*, cinematic Ophelias gain agency when they are afforded private spaces that allow them to exist as thinking subjects rather than merely reactive figures (Aune, 2019). In these scenes, Ophelia's appearance also becomes noticeably less formal, as her hair is worn loose and her clothing lacks the rigid structure seen in her court gowns, visually separating her private self from the regulated femininity she performs in public. Her clothing features flowing skirts, floral patterns, and layered looks that feel bohemian and youthful, and even a bit mismatched. While the film remains rooted in a Victorian aesthetic, these moments invite a contemporary reading of Ophelia as a modern woman situated within a nineteenth-century world. The informality of her clothing further aligns her with modern ideas of individuality and self-expression, positioning her between Victorian restraint and more contemporary expectations of female autonomy. When she is removed from the spectacle of the court and its constant scrutiny, Ophelia is allowed to exist as a subject in her own right, shaped by thought and interiority rather than by her role as an ornament. Branagh's Ophelia is therefore not simply modernized through dialogue or narrative invention, but through a visual language that frames her as intellectually and emotionally self-possessed before her eventual institutional silencing.

Figure 10: Kate Winslet as Ophelia in straitjacket in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

Through the periodization mode of adaptation, Branagh reframes Ophelia's descent into madness within the Victorian discourse on hysteria and institutional treatment of women in the 19th century. By setting the film in the 1890s, Branagh forces the audience to read her breakdown not only as a personal and tragic undoing, but also to interpret it through a diagnostic criterion that the historical period itself suggests and supplies. When Kate Winslet's Ophelia goes mad, the visual shift is abrupt and devastating, as one moment she appears as a respectable woman of status, and the next she is confined to a padded cell, restrained in a straitjacket and wearing a white cap. These methods were historically used to treat and discipline women diagnosed with hysteria, and in the film they serve as a symbol of stripping Ophelia of her autonomy. The straitjacket restrains her body in both a physical and metaphorical sense, mirroring the way the court has restricted her agency throughout the narrative. Notably, it is also the first garment Ophelia wears that is not pristine. Unlike her carefully tailored gowns and her paper-white nightgown, the straitjacket appears worn and coarse, with raw

edges at the neckline and a shapeless, sack-like silhouette that contrasts starkly with the refined clothing of the court. This visual degradation further intensifies her humiliation as she is confined against her will and transformed from an intelligent young woman capable of love and thought into a psychiatric patient defined entirely by her assumed hysteria. This rapid transformation makes her tragedy even more disturbing, as in a matter of moments everything she was allowed to be is taken away from her, evoking pity in the viewer.

Figure 11: Kate Winslet as Ophelia performing her mad scene in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

Unlike Simmons, Winslet's Ophelia is not beautiful in her madness. Branagh does not soften or aestheticize her breakdown, and there is no attempt to make her suffering visually pleasing. When she speaks about Hamlet, flashbacks of them in her bed appear on screen, as she throws herself onto the floor and begins thrusting her hips, explicitly imitating sexual intercourse. These memories make the moment especially uncomfortable, as scenes of mutual intimacy are pulled into a context of loss of control and public

scrutiny. Any erotic reading of the moment is immediately undercut by the chaos and vulnerability of her performance. Her singing is out of tune, her voice cracks and screeches, and her facial expressions become uncontrolled and distorted, deliberately defying conventions of cinematic femininity. Her movements are abrupt and unfiltered, reading as distress and psychological anguish rather than coherent self-expression. In this state, Ophelia is no longer framed as attractive or composed, and her madness does not invite admiration or fascination. Instead, it produces discomfort and pity, reinforcing Branagh's refusal to prettify her suffering or offer it up for the male gaze.

Figure 12: Kate Winslet as Ophelia in white nightgown in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

Her final sequence on screen shows Ophelia in her white nightgown. Her shoulders are exposed, her hair is messy and loose, and her feet are bare. At first glance this image could risk inviting a sexualized reading, especially since the last time she appeared in such a state of undress was in her chamber with Hamlet, sharing a private, passionate moment of intimacy. In this case, however, her nightgown no longer signals desire or sexuality but

rather it serves as a symbol of her vulnerability and her impending death. Her behavior shifts noticeably in this sequence as her movement and her face become infantile and uninhibited. She no longer dons the elegant, cultivated smile of a courtly woman, nor does she smile genuinely like she did with Hamlet in her bedroom. Instead, her smile takes the form of a primitive, unsettling grin that provokes discomfort and pity in Polonius as well as in the audience. The white gown does not sexualize her body but rather it strips it of dignity, marking the collapse of her maturity, autonomy, and public identity. In this state, Ophelia appears less as a woman and more as a figure reduced to dependency and institutional control.

When Ophelia reenters the padded cell, she does so without visible resistance, reinforcing the extent to which her agency has already been eroded. The following image of her shows her being doused with cold water, underlining the violence embedded within Victorian treatment practices for hysteria. In this context, the practice reads more as punishment rather than care, and it reestablishes how her body is now subject to discipline and correction. The one moment of resistance that remains occurs when Ophelia steals and conceals the key to her cell inside her mouth. This small but deliberate act of defiance reasserts her capability and intelligence, showing the audience that even in sorrow and apparent madness she retains her capacity for choice. By withholding the key, she briefly reclaims control over her confinement and her fate, choosing death on her own terms. Her suicide becomes the final act through which she determines her own outcome, converting her restricted autonomy into self-determination.

Figure 13: Kate Winslet as Ophelia while drowning in *Hamlet*. Directed by Kenneth Branagh, 1996.

The final image of Ophelia shows her submerged underwater. Her face is warped by ripples, and she is neither serene nor beautiful, rejecting the romanticized imagery traditionally associated with Ophelia's death. Instead, her body appears distorted, and unsettling, aligning visually with the tragedy of her narrative rather than offering solace through beauty.

Across this adaptation, Ophelia's descent into madness is charted through her costumes, as they precisely follow her psychological decline. She begins the film in structured gowns that signify composure, status and authority, only to gradually lose piece after piece of her identity until she is reduced to just her nightgown. The straitjacket and the padded cell are not only instruments of containment but they are also the visual proof of a social sentence. The pity this portrayal evokes arises not from the loss of beauty, but from the recognition of the life, agency, and potential systematically denied to her.

Chapter 3 - Resistance and Rupture

Gregory Doran's 2009 adaptation presents an Ophelia who faces pressures similar to those in Branagh's version. Although he does not fully periodize the play, as the setting of his adaptation remains ambiguous, he chooses to frame Shakespeare's text within modern costumes and a contemporary stage design. The result is a hybrid world in which the original language of the play is interwoven with contemporary visuals and real-world settings, allowing the audience to read Ophelia's tragedy through the lens of modern gender expectations. Mariah Gale's Ophelia is plagued and constrained by her gender, and by what that gender demands of her within her social environment. She is expected to uphold a traditional, obedient femininity, and it is precisely that expectation that she rebels against as she descends into madness.

Figure 14: Mariah Gale as Ophelia in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*. Directed by Gregory Doran, 2009.

Almost all of her costumes feature elements of nature and femininity such as soft colors and floral patterns. Ophelia's first appearance in Doran's production takes place within a domestic space, during the farewell scene with Laertes and Polonius, where from the outset she is framed through familial authority and instruction. She is positioned between her brother's warning and her father's interrogation, and her costume in this scene reinforces this sense of regulated femininity. She wears a short-sleeved, floral button-up shirt paired with three-quarter-length capri trousers and flat ballet shoes. The floral print visually aligns her with softness and conventional femininity, while the trousers introduce an element of practicality that distinguishes her from the more formally dressed women of the court. This combination suggests a quiet desire for independence and mobility, while still remaining within socially acceptable boundaries. The flat shoes and casual cut of the outfit further mark this as a private, domestic version of Ophelia, one that exists outside spectacle but not outside control.

Figure 15: Mariah Gale as Ophelia in floral court dress in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*. Directed by Gregory Doran, 2009.

When Ophelia appears at court for the first time, she abandons the trousers and wears a simple floral dress. The pattern is busy and the colors on it are slightly muddied, lacking the refinement or elegance associated with courtly femininity, and Gale appears visibly uncomfortable within it. The dress sits awkwardly on her body, making her movements appear tentative rather than assured. Although it signals her willingness, or obligation, to return to an obedient, feminine role, it also suggests that this version of Ophelia does not fully belong within the courtly space she is attempting to navigate.

Figure 16: Mariah Gale as Ophelia in green taffeta court dress in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*. Directed by Gregory Doran, 2009.

This contrast between Ophelia's earlier, more practical clothing and her later court attire becomes especially clear in the green taffeta dress she wears at court during the scene in which she is used by Claudius and Polonius to bait Hamlet. Paired with white high heels, the sheen and rigidity of the dress's fabric emphasizes the artificiality of the role she is required to perform. Her body becomes an object of presentation rather than a site of personal

agency as the costume restricts her movement and forces her into a carefully controlled physical posture. The dress appears slightly ill-fitting, as though she has grown out of it, suggesting that the version of femininity imposed upon her no longer aligns with who she is. This sense of discomfort is heightened by the context of the scene itself. Ophelia is placed under surveillance, positioned carefully within the space and instructed to behave in a way that will provoke Hamlet for the benefit of others. The stiffness of the dress mirrors the stiffness of her role: she is expected to stand, wait, and perform emotional availability on command. Unlike her earlier domestic clothing, which allowed for movement and practicality, this outfit signals constraint and visibility. The green dress marks the moment where Ophelia is most clearly shaped by external expectations, her appearance curated to serve a political purpose rather than her own needs or desires.

The pressure to maintain this performance is what eventually drives her to madness, and in this production her breakdown appears as an implosion. The external expectations placed upon her and the pressure to behave correctly and protect her family's status accumulate until she suffocates under their weight. Ophelia can no longer sustain the facade she is expected to uphold, and in her first 'mad' scene she rips off the her floral dress, symbolically rejecting the role she's been made to play and screams in anger. Mariah Gale plays Ophelia as mad in both senses of the word: as both insane and furious. Her madness is shaped by anger at the oppression that has limited her autonomy, and she is no longer contained by obedience, letting her rage spill out at last.

Figure 17: Mariah Gale as Ophelia tearing off her dress during her mad scene in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*. Directed by Gregory Doran, 2009.

Shakespeare establishes a connection between undressing and madness in Ophelia's previous description of Hamlet with his doublet undone and his stockings ungartered. As Bridget Escolme points out in "Shakespeare and Costume in Practice", "[Hamlet's] 'unbrac'd' doublet indicated not innocence but the carelessness of social impropriety that comes with madness." (Escolme, 2020). Doran further develops this connection by presenting Ophelia's undressing as both a symptom of her mental collapse and a sign of her refusal to maintain social propriety. She no longer behaves according to the rules of the court, and she no longer shapes her body for the approval of others. Gale's performance reinforces this reading, as her Ophelia's madness is raw and animalistic. It is unrefined and unpredictable, as she growls, contorts her face, and abandons any attempt to appear graceful or composed. Her madness, even more so than Winslet's, does not seek to be appealing and it does not invite admiration. Instead, it exposes the emotional state of a woman who has been overwhelmed and silenced.

Figure 18: Mariah Gale as Ophelia in dirtied slip before her death in the Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Hamlet*. Directed by Gregory Doran, 2009.

Like Winslet's, Gale's Ophelia retains traces of agency in her final moments. After her first mad scene, she exits the court with an exaggerated curtsy directed at the queen and the onlookers. The gesture is deliberately mocking in nature and it signals Ophelia's rejection of the expectations of femininity forced upon her by her environment. When she returns from picking flowers for her final sequence on stage, her appearance becomes a physical manifestation of her mental breakdown. The white slip she wears, the only garment remaining in her final moments, is dirty, bloody, and muddied. In contrast to Jean Simmons, Mariah Gale is realistic in her mad dishevelment, appearing as though she has truly just walked through thorny bushes. Despite the white slip being a garment that could easily be sexualized in another context, here it is a pitiful sight. Ophelia is covered in mud, her arms and legs marked in scratches and blood, and her hair is out of control. This appearance rejects the male gaze, as she no longer shapes herself for it, nor

does she care to be physically appealing. Her sorrow becomes all the more powerful by this raw portrayal of her pain, as it is made visible through the destruction of her clothing and her body. Doran uses this physical breakdown and deterioration to validate and visualize Ophelia's emotional experience. Her grief becomes recognizable and tangible, rather than stylized or metaphorical. Ophelia appears before the audience stripped of the expectations connected to femininity and is instead shown as a person in genuine distress. Her ruined slip and muddy skin show that her thoughts and feelings have worth even when they do not align with patriarchal ideals.

Conclusion

Across the cinematic history of *Hamlet*, Ophelia has been repeatedly reshaped and reinterpreted. From Jean Simmons' composed innocence to Mariah Gale's explosive defiance of propriety, each adaptation can be seen as a reflection of the cultural understanding of femininity, sexuality, and madness. In Laurence Olivier's 1948 adaptation, Ophelia is mainly a visual presence whose character is constructed through the male gaze and post-war nostalgia for Victorian patriarchy. Jean Simmons' Ophelia is infantilized, rendered largely silent, and presented as an object of beauty, with her tragedy defined by innocence. Olivier's adaptation demonstrates that within the constraints of early filmic storytelling Ophelia's body and visual representation were prioritized over her subjectivity. Her costuming emphasizes her obedience and virtue while masking any signs of agency and aestheticizing her madness. Ophelia's descent and eventual drowning serve the dual function of evoking pity and eroticizing her within narrow cultural norms. Her death conserves her beauty and suppresses her sexuality, reaffirming male control and highlighting how early cinema maintained a limited and patriarchal vision of female characters in Shakespeare.

Forty-eight years later, Kenneth Branagh's 1996 adaptation marks a shift in the cinematic treatment of Ophelia, particularly through the restoration of her original textual voice. Unlike Olivier's silenced Ophelia, Kate Winslet's character retains all her lines, including the Act 3 soliloquy, and appears in

additional scenes that depict her own perspective and desires. This adaptation signals a renewed recognition of Ophelia's intellectual and sexual agency, offering a more complex and self-aware portrayal. Branagh situates her tragedy within the historical discourse of Victorian hysteria, foregrounding the period's institutional control over women. Costume functions as a visual gauge of her autonomy: structured gowns convey status and composure, while the straitjacket and white cap visually manifest the social and medical constraints that strip her of freedom. Her madness is raw, unfiltered, and physically degrading, starkly juxtaposing with the premeditated beauty of Jean Simmons' portrayal. Kate Winslet's Ophelia is still faced with her inevitable death, however she arrives at it through an act of defiance and agency - she steals and conceals the key to her cell so her subsequent suicide is self-determined. Branagh's Ophelia thus mediates between the past and present, bridging the traditional narrative of patriarchal containment with a more modern representation of female subjectivity and autonomy, though her liberation is still limited by the social and cultural frameworks that define her world.

Gregory Doran's adaptation extends this trajectory into the twenty-first century, presenting an Ophelia who actively resists societal constraints and the expectations of femininity imposed upon her. Mariah Gale's Ophelia occupies a contemporary visual and cultural space in which adherence to patriarchal norms is neither assumed nor enforced through period-specific codification. Costume plays a central role in signifying her autonomy, but in this adaptation it becomes a site of defiance rather than compliance. The

rejection of trousers in lieu of adopting a more traditional courtly dress reflects a conscious balancing of personal autonomy and socially mandated performance. Ripping off her dress in a public display of anger can be seen as an act of rebellion that visualizes Ophelia's internal tension between social expectations and individual desires. Unlike his predecessors, Doran's interpretation of Ophelia's madness is intertwined with resistance, anger, and emotional honesty, remaining unmediated by aesthetics or eroticization. In her final moments, clothed in a dirtied slip and marked up by mud and scratches, she rejects the male gaze entirely, and through her authentic, visceral response to the pressures of obedience and female expectation, she asserts that tragedy does not require compliance with cultural ideals of femininity or attractiveness. Doran's Ophelia therefore transforms female suffering from something endured into something resisted, even as it still ends in tragedy.

Taken together, these three adaptations indicate that Ophelia's madness and death are neither fixed nor inevitable. Instead, they are shaped by culture, historical moment, and cinematic form. Each adaptation employs costume, visual framing, and narrative focus to construct a distinct version of her character: Olivier foregrounds visual beauty and silenced virtue; Branagh emphasizes autonomy constrained by historical medical discourse; and Doran foregrounds resistance, anger, and refusal of patriarchal expectations. In each case, madness operates as the principal mechanism through which Ophelia negotiates or escapes the constraints imposed upon her. Whether it is aestheticized, pathologized, or politically charged, her mental collapse

remains deeply tied to the historical constraint of women's voices and bodies.

The progression from Olivier to Doran further reflects the evolving cultural and cinematic understanding of women in distress. Early adaptations adhere to established patriarchal ideals, where female suffering is simultaneously aestheticized and controlled. Later interpretations focus on interrogating the social and psychological forces that confine women, focusing on their interiority, resistance, and the consequences of their societal repression. Ophelia is therefore not just a tragic figure within Shakespeare's text but a mirror of the historical and cultural attitudes toward femininity, autonomy, and madness. Through the visual and narrative language of cinema, costume, gesture, and mise-en-scène function as forms of critical commentary on power structures and gender roles. By tracing Ophelia's trajectory across these adaptations, it becomes clear that her tragedy is shaped not solely by personal weakness or fate, but by the interpretive frameworks imposed upon her by directors, costume designers, and the cultural moment of production.

In conclusion, across these cinematic adaptations Ophelia's body and costuming become a lens through which one can examine the interplay between gender, autonomy, and cultural perception. She is simultaneously a victim of patriarchal control, a subject of medical and social scrutiny, and, in some cases, a figure of defiance and resistance. Her madness and death are constructed through visual and textual interpretation, revealing the ways in which women's suffering has been aestheticized, pathologized, and

politicized across decades of film adaptations. Costume and mise-en-scène operate as critical markers of this process, charting the degree to which she is permitted autonomy or subjected to control. From Olivier's silent object of beauty, through Branagh's constrained yet partially self-determining woman, to Doran's rebellious and viscerally authentic Ophelia, the cinematic history of *Hamlet* demonstrates the mutability of female representation. Ophelia's long standing significance lies in her capacity to act as a vessel for current cultural anxieties that surround femininity, illustrating how adaptations of Shakespeare can interrogate, reinforce, or subvert the gendered structures that shape women's experiences on stage and screen.

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