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Ophelia and the Perils of the Sacred Feminine

Yet, sister woman, though I cannot consent to find a Mozart or a Michael Angelo in your sex, cheerfully, and with the love that burns in depths of admiration, I acknowledge that you can do one thing as well as the best of us men – a greater thing than even Milton is known to have done, or Michael Angelo: you can die grandly, and as goddesses would die, were goddesses mortal.

– Thomas de Quincey

Ophelia: ‘... *Good night, ladies, good night, good night. Sweet ladies, good night, good night*’. Exit.

– Shakespeare

Introduction

In the midst of a fertile period for feminist criticism, Elaine Showalter publishes a seminal essay which poses vital questions for Ophelia, breaking away with a certain malaise in the academic community which treated the Shakespearean heroine summarily and considered her analysis, to borrow A. C. Bradley’s term, a “desecration” (160). Showalter’s reflections and her rather challenging proposal that Ophelia “does have a story of her own” and that this story is the “history of her representation” have borne fruit: Ophelia has undergone many different critical readings. As a sign, she fits into any number of myths and stereotypes of Woman that have permeated the representation of women in Western literature and art, much like a “Cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of her parts,” as Showalter puts it (92). She has thus been read, at different times, in different places and from different theoretical perspectives, as the obedient daughter/sister, as the fallen woman, as the fragile maiden crazed by unrequited love, as the beautiful dead woman, as the sacrificial heroine. This essay contributes to the cultural discussion of the history of the representation of Ophelia’s death by proposing that the feminine and the sacred¹

¹ I should probably clarify from the start that I do not intend to explore the *feminine sacred*, but rather the *sacred feminine*. The distinction is an important one since the feminine sacred is often associated with the figure of the female goddess, which does not interest me here. Rather, the concept of the sacred in this paper centres on the sanctified figure of the beautiful dead woman. The idea of the

are brought together in visual representations. But how have critics treated her death? Have they also offered her “maimed rites” like the “churlish” Priest in her burial? And, perhaps more importantly, could there be an alternative way to re-view the sacred in the mainstream representation of Ophelia’s death?

The idealization of Ophelia as the archetypal doomed virgin-heroine, “the young, the beautiful, the harmless and the pious” (196), in Samuel Johnson’s words, emerged in full-force in the nineteenth century with Victorian critics such as Anna Jameson who situates Ophelia in a religious setting in her highly popular book *Shakespeare’s Heroines: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical*, published in 1832. In using Shakespearean heroines as models of virtue, Jameson enhances “the poor and delicate” Ophelia’s “holiness” with terms such as dove, briars, thorns, worship, virgin innocence, and victim. In the twentieth century, much of the scholarship devoted to the investigation of the “sacred” facet of Ophelia echoes Johnson’s and Jameson’s sense of character and interprets Ophelia through religious rites and images. Such is the case of Alison A. Chapman who analyses Ophelia’s “old lauds” (*Second Quarto*) and suggests that the images in her “ravings also display a complex awareness of England’s medieval Catholic” (111). Similarly, Guilfoyle (1980), linking Ophelia’s name to the idea of succor, argues that strands of Magdalen legends are woven into Ophelia’s words (especially in the mad scene) and actions. Others² have investigated religious aspects of the Anunciation in the “nunnery scene”. Pursuing another ramification of the sacred in his chapter on invalidism, Ophelia and the fetish of sleep, Bram Dijkstra discusses, amongst other aspects, the nineteenth century fascination with the cult of the dying/mad woman in visual representations of the love-crazed self-sacrificial Ophelia as a fetishe for the sadistic Victorian men.

Ophelia, (self)sacrifice and the figure of the beautiful dead woman

Indeed, Ophelia is not the exclusive beautiful dead woman in the Shakespearean canon: the playwright explored the dramatic potential of the feminine and the sacred by creating a memorable repertoire of (self)sacrificial heroines who figure more prominently in the tragedies. For instance, in the Roman tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia personifies the notion of female self-sacrifice. Raped, her arms and tongue severed in order to keep her silent, Lavinia is condemned to a life of pain and silence. She is only able to expiate the dishonour her rape brought to her family by submitting to be killed by her father so that “her shame could die with her” (5.3). Similarly to Lavinia’s death, it is the suicide of the pure and virtuous Lucrece (in the narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*) that reasserts the patriarchal order by enabling the hero to carry out his

beautiful dead woman is linked to female sacrifice in the sanctified moment of death; it is thus female sacrifice, or rather female self-sacrifice, that is being held up here as sacred.

² See R. Chris Hassel, “Painted Women: Annunciation Motifs in Hamlet”, *Comparative Drama* 32 (1998-99): 47 and Bridget Gellert Lyons, “The Iconography of Ophelia”, *ELH* 44 (1977): 60-74.

acts of vengeance and establish the Roman Republic. In the same vein, Juliet's suicide in *Romeo and Juliet* can also be read as a type of atonement for her family's perpetration of the violence in Verona. Another example of female sacrifice is Desdemona in *Othello*: irrationally accused of infidelity by her husband, she is strangled by him. Upon dying, Desdemona exonerates her murderer of guilt when she tells Emilia that she has killed herself. And yet, it is only Ophelia who gains the status of a paradigmatic figure for female self-sacrifice in Western literature and culture.

The visual arts, mainly in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contributed toward promoting Ophelia as the quintessential beautiful dead, or dying, woman. But what are the sociological implications of those images? Indeed, images are generally understood as functioning in a powerful discourse network that involves both the perceived and the perceiver. Michel Foucault's concept of discourse is helpful here in clarifying the ways in which power operates to produce certain kinds of subjects and knowledges. Images, in the Foucauldian sense, "normalize" ideas in order to maintain relations of dominance and subordination. Images of Ophelia, more specifically, circulate within a discourse network of the body that Foucault calls "biopower."³ For Foucault, the body is "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (25). If we see the body as being "normalized" and domesticated through the circulation and reproduction of images, we can understand how the plethora of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and, more recently, twentieth-century "beautiful dead" Ophelias has contributed toward the marking and marketing of ideologies that have had a profound effect on the way men view women and women view themselves. One of the most pervasive of these ideologies has been that of female self-sacrifice.

"The death of a beautiful woman," asserted Poe, "is (...) the most poetical topic in the world" (1601). For all Poe's blatant sexism, the concept of aestheticized death is unmistakably gendered, and has been all-encompassing in Western literature/culture from the earliest times. Beauty and death, down through the ages, have been linked with the universal figure of Woman. The connection is so obvious and ubiquitous, indeed, that it has often been disavowed or occluded. The circulation of beautiful dead women in art is so visible that it has become invisible – a paradox central to Elisabeth Bronfen's seminal study, *Over Her Dead Body*, which draws on psychoanalysis to examine the connection between death and sexuality in Western culture, from the late eighteenth century to the present day. Bronfen analyses the trope of the beautiful dead woman across a wide range of different paintings and literary works, arguing that beauty

³ Biopower refers to forms of power that are exercised on the body so that people's sexuality and individuality are constituted in ways that are connected with issues of national policy. For Foucault, bodies are regulated, adjusted and constructed through biopower. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I: an Introduction [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

functions as the mask of death: "Because the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity, culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women" (xi). Bronfen also points out that cultural myths of femininity that link women to death often involve the juxtaposition of the concepts "womb" and "tomb"; the "mother's gift of birth" doubles as a "gift of death," reinforcing age-old misogynist ideologies such as that of Eve and the Fall, which suggest that women are originally responsible for bringing death into the world.

Ophelia thus represents another link in a long signifying chain that features the beautiful dead/dying heroine. Her beauty is stressed throughout the text in images of the "the most beautified Ophelia," "fair Ophelia," the "beautiful Ophelia," the "nymph," "celestial," "rose," "mermaid-like," etc. This beauty is further consolidated in the poetic language Gertrude employs to describe her death:

There is a willow grows askant the brook
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clamb'ring to hang, and envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid-like they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and indued
Unto that element. But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
To muddy death. (4.7.165-375)

The compelling imagery of the Gertrude's poetic verse brings out the links between beauty, sensuality, fluidity and madness. Together, these images paint a strikingly aestheticized portrait as, wreathed in flowers, clutching at fragile water-lilies, Ophelia is eventually engulfed by the unforgiving tides and is dragged down to her death, "like a creature native and indued unto that element." This description creates a tableau that is more than just decorative because it reinforces and directs our perceptions of Ophelia: visually, it stresses the rich flower symbolism with which she has been connected, and the natural beauty rather than the horror of the scene of her death. Gertrude's lyrical images are powerful enough to make us visualize Ophelia's death, even though they should not be taken at face value. After all, Gertrude is hardly a reliable narrator as she was not even present

at the scene of drowning. Moreover, her speech bequeaths a certain quality of “stillness” to Gertrude’s account which moves Ophelia, as Kaara Peterson notes, “out of narrative and into some ‘cosmic order’” (34). And yet, it is the “beautified” account of the death of the “beautified” (to borrow a term Hamlet used to address Ophelia) Ophelia’s death that remains important in the history of Ophelia’s representation, not the grave-diggers’ version.⁴

As to whether Ophelia passively surrenders to the brook or unwillingly succumbs to it is another matter; whatever the case, her suicide can be interpreted as the only instance where she has some modicum of authority over life. As Bronfen puts it in more general terms, “Suicide (...) is both the literal attainment of alterity through death and the performance of an autobiographical desire. For suicide implies the authority of one’s life...” (142). One of Bronfen’s examples of the suicidal heroine is Tennyson’s Elaine,⁵ who is only able to get the attention of the man she loves by staging her own beautiful death: “By transforming suicide into an act of self-textualisation, Elaine at last controls her own life and insists on the public recognition of her love denied to her during her lifetime” (Bronfen 153). The same might be said of Ophelia, for it is only when Hamlet sees her in the coffin that he publicly recognises his love to her, declaring: “I lov’d Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/ Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum” (5.1.264-5). Ophelia, in this reading, is not a helpless victim, but rather the author of her own destiny, evading the repression and rejection of a corrupt and patriarchal court. This contextual reading challenges the view of Ophelia as archetypal sacrificial heroine, a view visually supported in such semi-pagan, semi-Christian iconography as her seductive “mermaid-like” appearance and her “crown of weeds,” which suggest a link to the messianic crown-of-thorns.

Ophelia as object of desire, as objet d’art

Some paintings of Ophelia actually feature her wearing an improvised crown-of-thorns, a classic example being Arthur Hughes’ *Ophelia* (1852), which combines images of innocent femininity and Christian martyrdom. The painting shows a pale childlike Ophelia, dressed in white and crowned with rushes which stick out like spikes – like a crown-of-thorns. Leaning over the brook, she sits on a willow tree, her gaze distracted as if in anticipation of her imminent death, keeping with some of the dominant iconographic conventions of the day. Such pictorial representations, many taking their cue from Delacroix’s “La Mort d’Ophelie” (1843), proliferated throughout the nineteenth century and became,

⁴ The epistemological problem caused by the two versions of Ophelia’s death – suicide or accident – inserts Ophelia in a liminal state that promotes her absence in the narrative. Paradoxically, this gap in the text has contributed to generate many visual representations of the heroine.

⁵ I am referring to the episode “Lancelot and Elaine” in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (1856-85). But the source for Tennyson’s inspiration, the Arthurian character Elaine, who died for Lancelot and was set adrift in on a boat, also applies to Ophelia.

according to Richard Altick, the single most represented subject of English literary painting, reconfirming Ophelia's double status as both prized object of desire and equally valuable objet d'art (299). For many of these painters – and this would still be true today – the story of Ophelia is indistinguishable from the story of her death, a death usually (fore)seen in two distinct sets of images: either Ophelia as solitary figure standing by the brook, about to plunge into the water – thereby prefiguring her own self-sacrifice, or Ophelia already in the water, her apparent serenity (blank face, white dress) offset by dense vegetation (trees, reeds) – confirming her own inevitable death. In both sets of images, Ophelia's status as sacrificial heroine is tied in with her still-intact virginity. The girl on the cusp of womanhood⁶ radiates a powerfully sacrificial aura: she already possesses the biological capacity to *procreate* – women's primordial function – but has not been *penetrated* yet. The liminal figure of the sacrificial virgin, of course, is hardly a Shakespearean invention, standing at the heart of Western civilization's sacrificial economy. In effect, the association of the sacred with sacrifice can be established by retracing the etymology of the term sacred,⁷ derived from the Latin term "sacer" which means to be made set apart. Therefore, the concept of sacrifice for Kristeva, Bataille and Girard is intimately bound up with the sacred and with the symbolic sphere of our society. As Julia Kristeva observes of the self-sacrificial Catherine of Siena, "lethal sacred drives the machine of spiritual improvement and, quite simply, the social machine" (Clement and Kristeva 120). Ophelia's virginity, like Catherine's, cannot be shared, lest she become "a breeder of sinners" (3.1.122); as Hamlet warns Polonius: "Let her [Ophelia] walk i'th' sun. Conception is a blessing..." (2.2.184-5).

For several critics, Ophelia's status as sacrificial object has won her a place in the pantheon of Western legend. James Vest, for example, sees her in death as approaching 'the legendary apotheoses of myth' (150-51). For Vest, among others, Ophelia's passing, like Jesus' and Lucrece's, "appears as a form of surrender rather than self-destruction" (56). Moreover, her last words are unambiguously religious: "God a mercy on his soul./ And of all Christian souls. God buy you" (4.6.196-7).⁸

⁶ I am grateful to Griselda Pollock for discussing the idea of the sacrificial virgin as a "girl on the cusp" in my paper during the seminar "The Sacred and the Feminine" ("The Sacred and the Feminine: Image, Music, Text, Space" 14 -16 Jan 2005, Leeds, UK.). Many societies consider the virgin marginal to society. The virgin's life is "expandable" as she has not reproduced and can therefore be sacrificed. In ancient Greece, for instance, some parents would yield their daughters to save the city. Unmarried girls were also considered "untamed" so they were suitable to suffer the rites of death. See Nicole Louraux, "The Pure Blood of Virgins" in: *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1987), chapter II.

⁷ Kristeva explains that the term *sacré* in French, apart from "sacred," can also mean "damned," "blasted" or "bloody," indicating how the two possible readings are foregrounded in the origin of the term (Clement and Kristeva 15). See also Girard 257; and Griselda Pollock and Victoria Turvey Sauron (eds.), *The Sacred and the Feminine. Imagination and Sexual Difference* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 3.

⁸ On Ophelia's religious references, see Vest 54-5 and Harold Jenkins "Hamlet and Ophelia" in: *Proceedings of the British Academy* 49 (1963), pp. 135-51. Linda Kay Hoff offers an interesting analysis of

This reading suggests that Ophelia's death is part-compensatory, functioning as atonement for the rottenness of Denmark; for it is only when Hamlet sees Ophelia in her coffin does he act as "Hamlet the Dane," as he will henceforth proclaim himself. Ophelia's death can thus be seen as redemptive in so far as it allows Hamlet to fulfil his task as a tragic hero, avenging his father's death and eventually accepting his own so as to restore order to the ailing state. The etymology of Ophelia's name – it derives from the Greek *opheleia*, meaning "help" or "succour"⁹ – apparently confirms this redemptive mission as Cherrell Guilfoyle argues in "'Ower Swete Sokor': The Role of Ophelia." Ophelia thus becomes, in Rene Girard's terms, a catalyst for "social metamorphosis" (86). She earns her sacrificial spurs, according to Girard, "by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacred figure, both desired and disdained, alternatively elevated and abused" (141-2). Indeed, Ophelia is used throughout the play – by Polonius, Laertes, Claudius, and is abused by Hamlet. At first, Polonius and Laertes reproach Ophelia for being naive, claiming that "Hamlet is a prince out of thy star." Underpinning her image as a chaste sex object, her father and brother lecture Ophelia on maintaining her virginity, lest she should let her 'chaste treasure open /to his [Hamlet's] unmastered opportunity.'" In addition, Ophelia will be used by Polonius and Claudius as a decoy to discover what ails Hamlet. Lastly, in the "nunnery scene," as if in validation of her status as object, Hamlet orders Ophelia to a nunnery: "Get thee to a nunnery!" (nunnery was a slang term for brothel in Shakespeare's time). From this perspective, Ophelia's story becomes a locus of silence and repression; a void to be filled by the male experience. In ironic exchange, however, Ophelia attains the status of an archetypal model as well as a cult heroine, one of Shakespeare's most textualized female characters. For Girard, this duality reflects "the metamorphosis the ritual victim is designed to effect: the victim draws to itself all the violence infecting the original victim and through its own death transforms this baneful violence into beneficial violence, into harmony and abundance" (95).¹⁰

ScopOphelia: Ophelia and the male gaze

It is with the nineteenth century, in particular, that the cult of the beautiful

the Mariology in *Hamlet. Hamlet's Choice: Hamlet – A Reformation Allegory*, (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

⁹ The etymology credited to Ophelia's name is vast. For the sake of coherence in my argument, I have chosen to adopt the Greek *opheleia*, which is often associated to her. Cherrell Guilfoyle makes a strong case for *ophelian* in "'Ower Swete Sokor': The Role of Ophelia" (*Comparative Drama*, 14:1, 1980: Spring). For more on Ophelia's name, see Murray J. Levith, *What's in Shakespeare's Names*, (Hamden: The Shoe String Press, 1978), p. 52, as well as Showalter 92 and Vest 56.

¹⁰ Carol Thomas Nelly observes that "[Ophelia's death] magnifies Laertes's obsession with revenge... It draws from Gertrude an uncoerced acknowledgement of her own guilt. [It] repurifies Hamlet, freeing him to love her and to achieve his own revenge" (103).

dead woman is associated. This was a time when bourgeois moral hypocrisy was ubiquitous; also a time when innocent fantasies linked to the Sleeping Beauty trope provided a convenient alibi for voyeuristic male delight. Images of beautiful dead women or “dead alive” women in deep sleep, permeated the visual arts during this period; as Bram Dijkstra wryly observes, “many males could barely look upon a sleeping woman without imagining her to be virtuously dead” (60). In many of these portraits, eroticism is heavily accentuated. After her madness gives way to death, Ophelia, now a sensuous dead siren, is rendered even more powerless before the voyeuristic male gaze. Ophelia’s beauty obliterates death, and the viewer is made to gaze, not on death itself, but on the figure of a beautiful woman, as A. C. Bradley exemplifies: “the picture of her death, if our eyes grow dim in watching it, is still purely beautiful” (165). One example of this process is in Millais’ famous portrait, *Ophelia* (1851-2).¹¹ In the portrait, one of the most popular postcards in the Tate Gallery, Ophelia’s eyes are depicted as being open and her mouth is parted as if she were chanting “snatches of old lauds” (4.7.176). Her body is almost totally immersed in the water, and both her hands are raised in a gesture of religious acceptance. Red and white flowers bedeck both her dress and the surface of the water, an ambiguous allusion to her combination of sexual passion and innocent purity. The beauty of the moment, in this and other portraits, seems to efface the subject herself. The sacred is domesticated to the eye; it becomes profane in the name of High Art. As Griselda Pollock and Deborah Cherry suggest:

High Culture plays a specifiable part in the production of women's oppression, in the circulation of relative values and meanings for the ideological constructs of masculinity and femininity. Representing creativity as masculine and Women as the beautiful image for the desiring masculine gaze, High Culture systematically denies knowledge of women as producers of culture and meanings (...). [I]t works in a phallogentric signifying system in which woman is a sign within discourse on masculinity. (23)

Is it the art that is most devoted to objectifying women that has the best chance of being “sacralized”? Certainly, the art that represents Ophelia’s death can be seen as attempting to do justice to Gertrude’s speech by imprinting the fixed image of a desired/desirable heroine within a “sacred” mimetic tradition.

Ophelia’s image has not only seduced generations of visual artists, but has captivated a number of prominent writers as well. The French Symbolists, in particular – Baudelaire, Gautier, Rimbaud, Mallarme, Laforgue – were fascinated by Ophelia, suggesting a lively interplay between poetic and visual depictions of

¹¹ The model, Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s wife, Elisabeth Siddall, nearly died herself of pneumonia after sitting for hours in the bathtub posing for the painting. On Siddall’s life as an artist and Rossetti’s wife, see Bronfen 168-78 and Pollock 128-62.

the muse which can still be witnessed today. Writers and artists alike have been intrigued, not only by the actual scenes of death and madness in Shakespeare's play, but also by the tantalizing cuts in its various editions – cuts which seem to hold out the promise of more. In this sense, as Elaine Showalter argues, the text itself has proved less interesting than a history of representations that far exceeds its original boundaries (91-2). Ophelia has become a multi-faceted myth, a "phenomenon" that still thrives in contemporary literature and art. The portrayal of Ophelia as repressed female, for example, proliferates across a wide range of twentieth-century representations: on the stage, in books and paintings, the screen arts and in the internet.

Reversing the gaze: two contemporary Ophelias

Perhaps the art devoted to representing Ophelia's death – including Gertrude's aesthetic narrative of her death – provides, in the end, an example of the trivialization of a sacred moment to the point where the eye no longer perceives it. The sacred has become anaesthetized in patriarchal societies that look at women as objects; it clearly needs to be revitalized. But can clichéd perspectives on Ophelia be changed? Can her story be rewritten? Can she at least be provided with a sacred burial, as her brother requests of the "churlish" priest: "What ceremony else?" (5.1.216). Two contemporary portraits engage energetically with these questions without necessarily suggesting answers to them. In Gregory Crewdson's eerie photograph *Untitled (Ophelia)*, 2001, Ophelia can be found at home, bereft of the aesthetic ornaments that usually surround her. In deliberately trivializing the iconographic history that is usually attributed to her, Crewdson works toward denaturalizing the male gaze that has dominated conventional pictorial representations of Ophelia. Light comes from lamps and in through the windows, creating a chiaroscuro pastiche. Household objects lie scattered around – slippers, a robe, overcoats – but there is clearly method here. More specifically, the photograph observes an uncanny geometry marked by the figure three: three coats, three windows, three steps, three pictures, three shelves, etc. The alignment of these objects suggests a premeditated gesture: slippers placed on different steps, the pink robe carefully laid on the stair. Housewifely rituals, one might think – but for the river that has overwhelmed the living room; the river that Ophelia has fastidiously, painstakingly chosen as a place to drown. The analogy between care and pain is also suggested by Ophelia's bandage-like dress, which appears to reinforce her ceremonial self-victimization. The paleness of her skin, meanwhile, becomes one with the whiteness of the dress, and her eyes, though open, are lifeless. Crewdson's is clearly a photograph intent on killing the images of "the angel in the house" and "the angel of death."¹² Her only way of

¹² For a feminist discussion of the cult of the "angel in the house" and the "angel of death" in the nineteenth century culture, see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*:

escaping from the prison-like house is to surrender to a kind of purificatory self-immersion, in which her bandaged body, merging with the water, performs a poetic symmetry of pain. The housewife Ophelia is sacrificed on the altar of her own domesticity, her last rites played out in a living room designed for the non-living, a watery death bed. In the photograph, Crewdson foregrounds the trope of the sacrificial heroine while simultaneously deconstructing it. This Ophelia is both sacred and desacralized, exposed in her not-so-sacred universe. What alternative reading can be given that might alleviate her nameless pain?

The question is left open; perhaps another image can address it. By showing Ophelia's breasts 'floating' in a blue river, Linda Stark's painting *Ophelia* (1999) subverts the very aesthetic/religious symbolism in which it is so obviously invested. Disavowing the aesthetic pleasure canonical art usually devoted to them, these female breasts are more like eyes,¹³ functioning as mirrors for the viewer. The gaze is reproachfully returned: the breasts/eyes look back at the viewer's eyes, transforming an object into another object. In replicating the process whereby the (male) gaze fixates on the (female) breasts but reversing its terms, the painting creates a meta-image – an image which has obvious resonance for visual representations of Ophelia herself. This revisionist dynamic can also be seen in the painting at large. The breasts are placed in the middle of the painting and are surrounded by blue bubbles. The gradation of blue (starting from the breasts) goes from light blue to black, and it is black that frames the picture. These colour nuances might suggest the gradual drowning of Ophelia – the deeper she goes, the darker the blue becomes. But they also provoke a defiant optical illusion in which the breasts appear to stand clear of the water, taking on a life of their own by effectively refusing to submerge. Thus, like Crewdson's anonymous photograph, Stark's painting not only presents a radically revisionist view of an objectified Ophelia, but reproduces the objectifying process of the gaze itself and suggests the conditions under which it might be reversed.

Crewdson's and Stark's images of Ophelia, though powerfully subversive, are exceptional. Most contemporary representations of Ophelia suggest a continuing investment in the sacred, an investment difficult not to read as compensatory. According to Clement and Kristeva (2001) our apathetic Western societies need the sacred more than ever. Most Western societies, they suggest, are experiencing a debilitating atrophy of the sacred; by rediscovering the sacred, we have the capacity to rescue and reinvigorate ourselves. At the same time, the connection of the sacred to female beauty offers a reminder of the persistent objectification of women in society. The sacred feminine is thus Janus-faced: it holds out the promise of regeneration even as it masks continuing oppression, obliterating or effacing it in the name of High Art.

The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹³ The artist, in fact, associates the nipples to eyes that are "wrapped in the black bra of infinity symbol." For Linda Stark, "the painting stares back at the viewer as a goddess looking through eyeglasses" (Kiefer 36).

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