

“We know what we are, but we know not what we may be:”

Marianne Faithfull, Ophelia and the Power of Performance

By Gabriel Rieger

Few Shakespearean performances have proven as polarizing as Marianne Faithfull’s Ophelia in Tony Richardson’s 1969 film of *Hamlet*. In a January 12, 1970 review of the film, *Time Magazine* declared her performance “remarkably affecting... ethereal, vulnerable, and in some strange way purer than the infancy of truth.” Other critics have been less effusive. David Bevington, reviewing the film in *Shakespeare: Stage, Script, Screen* writes that Richardson’s “most controversial choice involves Ophelia, acted (poorly) by rock singer Marianne Faithfull, who looks like a sixties flower child.” Dianne Hunter, in an article for the online journal *PsyArt*, writes that Faithfull’s performance evokes other icons such as Twiggy and Mary Travers in “the 1960s ... ideal of femininity,” while Robert Shaughnessy, writing in Henderson’s *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, dismisses Faithfull’s performance as “blank and understated for the first part of the film ... a vacuous sex object” who “degenerates into a perverted flower child, an acid casualty serving as a focus for Hamlet’s (and perhaps the film’s) prevailing misogyny” (73).

In her 1994 book *Faithfull: An Autobiography*, the singer recounts her experience of playing the role. Faithfull writes:

For years I had been babbling about death in interviews. That was playacting. There came a time, however, that it stopped being a performance. The combined effect of playing Ophelia and doing heroin induced a morbid frame of mind – to say the least – and I began contemplating drowning myself in the Thames. I was acting as a child does. I had fused with my part.... I would indulge myself in lurid pre-Raphaelite fantasies of floating down the Thames with a garland of flowers around my head. (162)

Faithfull writes of her experience portraying Ophelia as one simultaneously traumatic and transcendent, an experience which “fused with” her off-stage life. Her performance reflects this. In this study, I wish to undertake a critically-informed reading of Faithfull’s performance, and in so doing come to some understanding of how it might be understood and evaluated, and where this famously divisive performance might be situated in a canon of Shakespearean performance.

There has been a substantial amount of commentary within the last two decades regarding Ophelia, much of it focusing on the ways in which the character is represented visually. The most thorough of these commentaries remains Showalter’s “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism” in which the critic analyzes the performance history of the role in order to expose what she refers to as the “ideology of representation,” that is to say, the ways in which representations of the character in art and on the stage reflect the sensibilities of the artists, and the eras, which produce them. As Showalter writes:

The alternation of strong and weak Ophelias on the stage, virginal and seductive Ophelias in art, inadequate or oppressed Ophelias in criticism, tells us how these representations have overflowed in the text and how they have reflected the ideological character of their times, erupting as debates between dominant and feminist views in periods of gender crisis and redefinition. The representation of Ophelia changes independently of theories of the meaning of the play or the Prince, for it depends on attitudes toward women and madness. The decorous and pious Ophelia of the Augustan age and the postmodern schizophrenic heroine who might have stepped from the pages of Laing can be derived from the same figure; they are both contradictory and complementary images of female sexuality in which madness seems to act as the “switching point, the concept, which allows the coexistence of both sides of the presentation.” (237-238)

Ophelia exists as an icon both of femininity and madness, and as such, she reflects the “ideological character” of the age in which she is represented. If she reflects that ideological character, she has the potential to interrogate it, as well, which brings us back to the question of this study, the performance of Ophelia in the Richardson *Hamlet*.

The film originated as a theatrical production at the Roundhouse in Camden Town in 1968, before touring the United States the following year. As Shaughnessy points out, “[t]he Roundhouse was a pioneering 1960s example in the British Isles of a ‘found’ space appropriated for performance,” a Victorian rail shed converted into a trade unionists’ headquarters converted into a theatre, with all of its associations of mechanization, industrialization, labor and production intact, a performance space which lent itself by its very being to cultural interrogation

(71). Richardson’s theatrical production highlighted this interrogation; when the director recorded the production following its run, he transferred it to the film, as well.

The director distributed his film through his independent production company, Woodall Films, a company he had established expressly to bypass the production system of mainstream British cinema. His *Hamlet* exists then as an example of what Laura Mulvey calls “alternative cinema,” a cinema which is “radical in both a political and an aesthetic sense” and which “highlight[s] the ways in which [the formal preoccupations of mainstream cinema] reflect the psychical preoccupations of the society which produced it....” Richardson was well aware of the implications of his project during the film’s production; indeed, he openly acknowledges them in an interview with the *Times of London* in 1971, following the film’s release in which he expresses his desire to “free the theatre from the tyranny of the proscenium arch and the social habits that go with it” (71). Richardson’s *Hamlet* is quite consciously a countercultural document, a reimagining of the core text of the western canon which interrogates notions of art and, especially, theatrical performance. Central to that reimagining is his casting of the singer Marianne Faithfull as Ophelia.

By 1968, when she took on the role at the Roundhouse, Marianne Faithfull was already an icon, a successful vocalist in her own right who was nevertheless most famous as the lover, and the muse, of Mick Jagger. Descended on her mother’s side from Hapsburg nobility, she was also the great great grand niece of the novelist Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch, whose writings had first scandalized Europe and then provided a partial vocabulary for the construction of erotic identity. She had been a model, and remained a fashionable figure and a fixture on London’s social scene, but more than that she was an embodiment of a set of cultural assumptions and representations ripe for exploitation. As Rolling Stones manager Andrew Oldham would later recall, “[a]t a time when most chicks were ... coming on strong, here was this pale, blond, retiring, chaste teenager looking like the Mona Lisa ...,” and yet, as author David Bowman writes “no citizen of the 60s drank, took drugs and had sex with Faithfull’s public abandon.” She was a public aristocrat; conspicuous and yet unattainable. Before the age of twenty five, she had acted for Jean Luc Goddard and studied under the Maharishi. According to legend, she had been the inspiration for Jagger’s “Sympathy for the Devil.” She was the subject of salacious gossip, a scandalous, even satanic amalgam of feminine beauty and masculine sexual aggression, a

counterpart to, and perhaps an extension of, the Dionysian creative force that was The Rolling Stones.

Faithfull’s persona, which she had constructed quite consciously, was erotically desirable and at the same time knowing, supremely visible but aloof, a figure of desire engaged with the production of that desire, both the object and the agent. She was at the height of her fame, or perhaps her infamy, in 1968 when Richardson cast her in the role of Ophelia. She embodied, to borrow Mulvey’s phrase, a “pattern of fascination” for the audience of 1968, a pattern which lent itself neatly to the “fascination of film.”

Faithfull makes her first appearance in the film at the start of 1.3 as Laertes (played by Michael Pennington) is packing his trunk to return to France. Her eyes are painted dark and her lips are a very bright red, full and overripe, a contrast which evokes pre-Raphaelite paintings of Ophelia, with all of their attendant erotic associations. As Valerie Steele notes, "As well as counterfeiting health and youth, cosmetics seem to simulate the physiological changes that accompany sexual orgasm--the brilliant eye, reddened lips, *etc.*," and this is the case with Faithfull’s Ophelia (127). Her bosom is cinched high and largely exposed, creating a visual which eroticizes the character even before she has spoken a line. She looks at her brother with a clear fondness throughout his opening lines in the scene and, after asking “Do you doubt that” in response to his entreaty to “let me hear from you,” she engages him in a long, open-mouthed kiss, a kiss which Laertes returns before breaking it off with an expression that might best be described as unsettled. She reacts to his warning against the “trifling of [Hamlet’s] favor” with a smirk, falling back into bed, and breaking into giggles at his command to “think what loss your honor may sustain / If with too credent ear you list his songs, / Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open / To his unmetered importunity.” She then pulls Laertes on top of her, combing her fingers through his hair and smiling as she warns him against “the primrose path of dalliance,” a bit of mimesis which provoked one anonymous online reviewer of the film to complain that her performance is “not convincingly virginal” (Amazon).

Faithfull’s performance here is provocative, but it is also purposeful. She makes no pretence of either virginity or naiveté, but instead plays the character as not only sexually knowing, but sexually transgressive, heightening the incestuous dynamic between Laertes and Ophelia which is implicit in the text and realizing it, constructing an Ophelia who is by turns coy

and aggressive, seductive and mocking. In short, the character is constructed less as Ophelia than as Marianne Faithfull, or perhaps more correctly, the character is constructed of equal parts Ophelia and Marianne Faithfull. We might return here to Mulvey who, invoking Lacan, asserts that the cinematic image of woman:

stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.

Faithfull, playing herself, playing Ophelia, subverts this dynamic. Through the eroticism of her person and the confrontation of her gaze she ironizes, and finally undercuts, her brother's statements of patriarchal concern, his “linguistic command[s]”. She transforms them into something other than, indeed opposite to, his intention, thus effectively “remaking” their meaning. Central to this remaking is the mimetic element of Faithfull's performance. Ophelia's lines might easily lend themselves to passivity in this scene, were she not in fact Marianne Faithfull, playing herself. Her gestures (kissing, smirking, giggling, caressing) imbue her lines with a meaning which transforms the text, and by extension the character.

We see further evidence of this at 3.1 when she undertakes the entrapment of Hamlet. Faithfull takes the prayer book from Polonius with a smile, and makes some show of amusement while she reads, reclining a bed as she pages through it. She does not approach Hamlet (played by Nicol Williamson) at the end of his soliloquy, but rather he approaches her, jumping into the bed beside her. The two engage in a playful exchange from this point, turning 3.1 of the play into a kind of love banter rather than an attack. She shows no fear of the Prince as she returns his tokens, and he manifests no offense as he receives them. Indeed, Ophelia's role in this scene is no more or less aggressive than is the role of the Prince; she is his equal in boldness, as well as in erotic agency. Throughout most of the scene the two characters kiss and caress on the bed, and even the Prince's entreaty to “get thee to a nunnery” is offered as an apparent suggestion of concern for her well being, without any implication of threat or intended degradation. It is not until the Prince catches a glimpse of the lurking Polonius that the tone of the scene changes.

Hamlet and Ophelia share a lengthy kiss on the bed just before Hamlet declares himself, almost absently, to be “indifferent honest.” He is lying on top of Ophelia as he delivers the lines, and looking into the camera when he catches sight of Polonius. At this point the scene becomes charged with violence, but it is very pointedly an erotic violence. In a tableau of a rape, Hamlet grabs Ophelia by the wrists and straddles her body as she struggles against him. He leans in close to her face and hisses his “plague for [her] dowry,” practically spitting his words upon her as he does so. At the close of the scene, Ophelia addresses the camera with tears streaming and smeared mascara, sobbing her lament for “what a noble mind is here o’erthrown” into her pillow.

Again, it is impossible to watch the scene without being acutely aware that we are watching the figure of Marianne Faithfull, as well as Ophelia. For most of the scene Ophelia is by turns coy, confident and erotically knowing, a foil for Hamlet who is broken, not by the power of his rhetoric (a power in which she holds a seemingly equal share), but rather by the force of actual violence. Hamlet’s rhetoric is not sufficient to dominate this Ophelia; that rhetoric must be combined with gross physical force. At the end of the scene, Ophelia resembles nothing so much as a rape victim, sobbing and physically broken.

This breaking of Ophelia seems to fit with Mulvey’s construction of mainstream, as opposed to alternative, cinema, that is to say cinema as masculine wish fulfillment, a kind of annihilation of feminine agency and assertion of patriarchal hegemony. The critic describes in her essay “a tension between a mode of representation in film and conventions surrounding the diagesis,” both of which are “associated with a look; that of the spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form” and “that of the spectator fascinated with the image of his like ... gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis.” Ophelia opens the scene as a kind of fetish object, beautiful and erotically desirable, an invitation to scopophilic pleasure. The focus of the audience in the scene, however, progressing as it does from Hamlet’s soliloquy, remains on the Prince. He is centerpiece of the scene, and it is his perspective which dominates. Nevertheless, we must note here that the breaking of Ophelia, Hamlet’s “control and possession” of her, is short lived. By the time she reaches her mad scenes, Faithfull’s Ophelia will have transformed, reappropriated her power in the court, and re-established herself as more than just a “signifier for the male other,” the signifier of masculine desire; she will have become an actual agent.

Before addressing those scenes, we should note the way in which the actress, in her specific interactions with the Prince, here again bleeds into the character. Ophelia and Hamlet are obviously lovers in this production, just as Faithfull and Williamson were lovers off-screen. The actress reflects upon this dynamic in her 1994 book *Faithfull: An Autobiography* in which she recalls that

I got very little direction from [Tony Richardson] – he just let me walk out there and vibrate – but I did get a lot of manipulation. Directors will do almost anything to extract the reactions they want from you. Never mind the havoc this might cause in the lives of the actors. At some point I figured out that my affair with Nicol Williamson had been set up by Tony. Nicol played Hamlet, and Tony wanted to get that charge out of the two of us on stage. We would make love in Nicol’s dressing room before going on stage. (161)

Faithfull is not just representing Ophelia in the film; she is Ophelia, and her Ophelia is Marianne Faithfull. She does not merely act the role, she “vibrate[s]” it, resonating with all of her emotional, physical and psychological attachments, as well as her cultural associations. Her Ophelia embodies the duality of actress and role. The implications of this duality are perhaps most evident in her mad scenes.

The actress represents the character in these scenes, the mad scenes, with all of the conventional pre-Raphaelite evocations: hollow eyes, disheveled gown and flowers wound into her loose, flowing hair. There is nothing in the image of Faithfull’s Ophelia that is unfamiliar, and yet it is in these scenes that the interbleeding of actress and character is most pronounced. Ophelia enters the scenes singing, and her voice is unmistakably the voice of Marianne Faithfull, distinctive and familiar. She delivers her lines with the same frankness as before, but in the context of her madness they take on an additional charge, becoming confrontational as well as mordant, aggressive as well as knowing. Her smile, the signature of the character from her first appearance in the film, becomes in this scene something sinister, focusing its erotic power against the court and becoming an accusation, an acknowledgement of their sins.

In this scene, the image of Ophelia has shifted; it has crossed from one semiotic category into another. In Mulvey’s construction, the image of woman, the feminine icon, invites one of

two responses: voyeurism, which “has associations with sadism” in which “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt . . . , asserting control and subjecting [the woman] through punishment,” and “fetishistic scopophilia,” which “builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself.” The woman is either objectified or she is punished; no other condition is possible. This presents a problem for the critic of Faithfull’s *Ophelia*, however; in this scene she invites erotic desire, but resists (or perhaps inverts) objectification. The scopophilia which she invites is not “fetishistic”. At the same time, while one might argue that, following Hamlet’s attack on her at 3.1, that she does invite a voyeuristic, which is to say a sadistic, response, by the time of her mad scene at 4.1, she has transformed. The response she invites in this scene is not sadistic. No longer inviting voyeuristic pleasure, Ophelia turns the sadistic gaze back upon her audience.

This is in particular evidence when she sings the ballad of Saint Valentine’s Day, leaning between the thrones of the King and Queen, her face bracketed by theirs. They sit rigid and motionless as they listen to her song, their expressions anguished. They submit to the song, with all of its implicit erotic aggression and emotional violence, not daring even to meet her eyes. The King and Queen do not meet her eyes, but the audience cannot escape them. Faithfull’s Ophelia leers as she sings, shifting her eyes from side to side, from throne to throne, sweeping her gaze over the audience as she does so. Her control over the court is absolute, and remains so for so long as she is on the screen.

The image of Ophelia in this scene is captivating. She is not in any sense a passive victim, and while she is still Marianne Faithfull, with all of her attendant erotic allure, the effect of her gaze is not erotic in any conventional, heteronormative sense. The gaze is mordant, ironic and confrontational, and if it invites any pleasure, that pleasure is neither scopophilic nor voyeuristic. It might be read in terms of what Gaylyn Studlar, invoking Deleuze, calls the *masochistic aesthetic*, a “specific film style offering . . . narrative and visual strategies as well as textual pleasures” and which “embrace[s] the psychic processes engaged by the cinematic experience.” (9) Studlar argues that “cinematic pleasure” on the whole is “much closer to masochistic pleasure than to the sadistic, controlling pleasure” posited by Mulvey and those critics who followed after her. Faithfull’s Ophelia exploits this *masochistic aesthetic* in this scene. Her song, accompanied as it is by her aggressive, ironized and reappropriated gaze,

confronts the audience and all but demands a passive, submissive response. Faithfull’s Ophelia wields control.

Even after Laertes bursts into the scene seeking to avenge the death of his father, Ophelia retains control, and the knowing character of her expression which lent a sense of irony to her earlier scenes resonates differently in this one. When Laertes notes of her song that “[t]his nothing’s more than matter” she replies with a very broad smile, a smile which interrogates, indeed deconstructs, the character’s madness even as it demonstrates it. If Ophelia is mad, her madness is aggressively eroticized. She is simultaneously desirable (an invitation to “scopophilic pleasure”) and disconcerting, the embodiment of a specifically “*masochistic aesthetic*,” an invitation to the audience, not to punish, but to be punished. Faithfull elaborates on this deconstruction throughout the remainder of her scene, tucking her pansies into her bodice and draping her fennels and columbines over the King in a fashion which might, under other circumstances, be construed as flirtatious.

In short, Ophelia is throughout this scene, indeed throughout the film, Marianne Faithfull, and the actress is an icon, and by extension a fetish object, every bit as much as is Ophelia. The director films the actress / character as a fetish object, with lingering close-ups and cosmetics which highlight the redness of her lips, the darkness of her eyes and the pallor of her skin. This fetishism brings to mind Mulvey’s construction of the gaze once again, although in this instance it may be impossible to classify Richardson’s gaze as either voyeuristic or fetishistic, the only categories which the critic allows. She tells us that:

[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active / male and passive / female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

The problem for scholars of this text, however, is that Richardson’s gaze is neither properly voyeuristic nor fetishistic; by virtue of its subject, it is both. Faithfull ironizes the gaze and thrusts it back at the gazer, just as Ophelia in her mad songs ironizes Hamlet’s attacks of 3.1 and

thrusts them back at the court. It is a near perfect synthesis of iconic actress and iconic character, which results in an interrogation of both.

As Showalter observes, representations of Ophelia reflect “debates between . . . views in periods of crisis and redefinition.” The late nineteen sixties is unquestionably one such period, and Richardson’s film serves as a document of it. The imposition of character upon actress or actress upon character, however, was not without consequences for Faithfull, who famously suffered a nervous breakdown after completing the film and descended into a spiral of addiction and homelessness from which she would not emerge for several years. She never again returned to Shakespearean performance, and made no attempt to recreate any of the playwright’s mature heroines, although she did receive an invitation from Roman Polanski, following the release of the Richardson *Hamlet*, to audition for the part of Lady Macbeth in his 1971 film. Her heroin addiction rendered her unable to perform, and the role eventually went to Francesca Annis. As Faithfull recalls in her 2008 memoir *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*:

I had once played Ophelia on stage high on heroin – taking it just before the mad scene, it might even have helped in some perverse way. But Lady Macbeth is a different kettle of fish entirely. She demands steely resolve rather than willowy dementia: physically and psychically and in many other ways – spiritually, too, perhaps. I really wasn’t capable of sustaining something like that. And, in any case, my performance wouldn’t have been *intentional*. (240)

Marianne Faithfull’s Lady Macbeth remains a hypothetical, leaving us with an intriguing question as to whether or not she might have achieved a different kind of synthesis in that role, and if so, what perspective such a synthesis might have offered for the critic of Shakespeare in performance. The actress herself, however, posits an answer here. Her Ophelia was less a cinematic performance than a piece of performance art, a reimagining, or perhaps an invoking, of the character as a kind of extension of her own public persona. That public persona, however, was not entirely subject to her control. By the close of the nineteen sixties, her persona, fashionable, eroticized, and aloof, had proven too demanding for the twenty-three year old actress to maintain. The persona, which she had invoked, refined, and interrogated in Richardson’s film, overwhelmed her in the years following as she spiraled into addiction and loss. Her Ophelia, then, exists as a frozen moment, a moment at which she occupied a very

“We know what we are, but we know not what we may be:” Marianne Faithfull, *Ophelia and the Power of Performance*
Gabriel Rieger

specific social, cultural, representational space, a space in which she could locate and re-imagine the iconic character. Her performance was, in her own words, a “vibra[tion],” not one that she could control, much less repeat. It was a moment in time, the apex of her public persona and a rare, indeed, unique, moment of cultural engagement.

Works Cited

Bevington, David, et al. *Shakespeare: Script, Stage, Screen*. Longman, 2006. 630.

“Cinema: Elsinore of the Mind.” *Time*. Jan. 12, 1970. 21 Dec. 2009. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,942189,00.html>>

Faithfull, Marianne. *Faithfull: An Autobiography*. Cooper Square Press, 1994.

_____. *Marianne Faithfull: Memories, Dreams and Reflections*. Harper Collins, 2007.

Hunter, Dianne. “From Ethereal Confrontation to Child Abuse to Womanly Conflict: Ophelia in Three Late-Twentieth Century Films.” *PsyArt: An Online Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts*. (2008). 21 Dec. 2009 <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipa/journal/2008_hunter01.shtml >

Hamlet. Dir. Tony Richardson. Perf. Nicol Williamson, Anthony Hopkins, Judy Parfitt, and Marianne Faithfull. 1969. DVD. UCA, 2005.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” *Screen* 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18. 21 Dec. 2009 <<https://wiki.brown.edu/confluence/display/MarkTribe/Visual+Pleasure+and+Narrative+Cinema> >

Shaugnessy, Robert. *Stage, Screen and Nation: Hamlet and the Space of History. A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Ed. Diana Handerson. Blackwell, 2006. pp. 54-76.

Showlater, Elaine. “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism.” *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*. Ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman. 1985. Reprinted in *Hamlet: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*. Ed. Susanne L. Wofford. Bedford, 1994. 220-240.

Studlar, Gaylyn. *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*. Columbia UP, 1993.