CHAPTER 5  Argument Synthesis

MODEL PAPER

Two Ophelias

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is probably the most well known of tragic heroes. But Hamlet’s love, the “fair Ophelia,” who dies shortly before the prince, is often overlooked. In our fascination with and concern for Hamlet, we often give too little regard to the grief and pain that this innocent young woman suffers and the way that she deals with her sorrows. Some call Ophelia mad, others depressed; but regardless of how we classify her, we cannot deny that she is a complex character who deserves our fuller attention. Franco Zeffirelli and Kenneth Branagh each chose to tackle the enormous task of directing a film version of Hamlet. Branagh stated that when he first saw Hamlet performed, he did not understand much of the play’s language, but he recalled that “[a]s Ophelia lost her reason, I was moved to tears” (xii). In their contrasting versions, these two directors depict Ophelia’s character in quite different ways. Throughout Zeffirelli’s Hamlet (1991), Helena Bonham Carter portrays Ophelia as almost childlike and dreamy, giddy around her brother Laertes and other characters, such as King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. In Branagh’s Hamlet (1996), on the other hand, Kate Winslet’s Ophelia seems more mature and strong-willed. These contrasting interpretations, reinforced through the films’ different approaches to the staging of the action, to the acting, and to the cinematography, are particularly evident during the scene showing Ophelia’s loss of sanity.

In Shakespeare’s play, the “mad scene” comprises Act IV, scene 5. Prior to this scene, Hamlet has staged his “play within a play,” the result of which convinces him that his uncle Claudius had indeed killed his own brother, Hamlet’s father (just as the ghost of old King Hamlet had told his son). After the murder, Claudius became king and married Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude. Following the play scene, Hamlet berates Gertrude and kills Polonius, Ophelia’s father, mistaking the hidden counselor for Claudius. Claudius then sends Hamlet to England, intending to have him killed there. As Act IV, scene 5 begins, a “Gentleman” tells the queen and Horatio, Hamlet’s faithful friend, of Ophelia’s pitiful state. Gertrude agrees to see her, and Ophelia enters (“distracted”), and begins singing songs (“He is dead and gone, lady,/He is dead and gone”). The king enters and gently questions Ophelia but can get no sensible
reply from her. Claudius asks, “How long has she been thus?” Ophelia exits, and Claudius asks Horatio to keep watch over her. Soon afterwards a messenger arrives with word that Laertes, Ophelia’s brother, has returned from France, angrily demanding to know what happened to Polonius, his father, and threatening to kill Claudius. The king eventually manages to calm Laertes, but then Ophelia re-enters, in her distracted state, to Laertes’ amazement (“O heavens, is’t possible a young maid’s wits/Should be as mortal as an old man’s life?”). Ophelia continues to sing songs, while distributing imaginary flowers to Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude. She then exits for the last time. (We later hear from Gertrude that she has drowned herself.) As the scene ends, Claudius promises to give Laertes satisfaction for what has happened to his father and sister.

The “mad scene” is important dramatically because it sets up the final confrontation among the various antagonists and the catastrophic acts that leave the stage littered with corpses. The scene itself shows us the effect upon Ophelia of both her unaccountable rejection by Hamlet (who must give up his love to devote himself to avenging his father’s death) and of the senseless death of her own father. Ophelia’s condition further motivates Laertes to seek revenge upon Hamlet and gives Claudius the opportunity to plot Hamlet’s death either through a poisoned sword wielded by Laertes or, if that plan fails, through a goblet of poisoned wine. As it turns out, Hamlet does indeed die, but so do Laertes, after Hamlet switches swords with him, Gertrude, who drinks the wine intended for Hamlet, and Claudius, who is killed by Hamlet after Laertes, in his dying moments, reveals the king’s treachery.

Re-creating this scene, directors Zeffirelli and Branagh differ significantly in their staging of the action, in their direction of the actresses playing Ophelia, and in their use of cinematography. Consider first the differences in staging, or the way the director arranges the characters and the settings in front of the camera. Zeffirelli chooses to portray Ophelia as small, childlike, and helpless. At the outset of the scene, he invents a sequence in which we see Ophelia emerging from hiding, behind a wall. First the tips of her fingers, then her head pops up. She runs over to the castle battlements and, as Gertrude watches from the castle window, begins fondling the face and then mischievously tugging at the sash of an embarrassed sentry. The man awkwardly attempts to continue standing
at attention while ever so delicately fending off
Ophelia’s advances. Finally, another guard leads her
away. We next see her running into the entryway of the
castle demanding to see Gertrude (“Where is the
beauteous majesty of Denmark?”). She is wearing a
shapeless smock that makes her look like a little girl,
especially when the camera views her from above. Running
up the stone steps, she begins singing her songs to the
startled assemblage. At this end of this part of the
sequence, she again runs away, and ends up sobbing
against the rough stone wall, sinking to her knees.
Horatio must pick her up and carry her away, accompanied
by three women attendants. She looks helpless and
overwhelmed by the events that have befallen her.

Later we see a tiny Ophelia dwarfed by the tall
back and sidepieces of the huge throne where she sits.
She distributes her imaginary flowers (sticks and bones)
to the dumbstruck Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius. She
leaves the room framed between two large guards in the
foreground. Our final views of her show her running
outside through a gully, then through a wooded area,
to the stream where she will drown herself. As in the
castle scenes, she seems small and insignificant and,
again, is shot from above, helping reinforce our view
of her as helpless.

Branagh stages this sequence very differently, in
ways that downplay Ophelia’s childlikeness and that
rather emphasize her determination in the face of abuse
by others. After a brief glimpse of Ophelia screaming in
distress from behind a railing as her dead father is
carried away, we next see her in a padded cell, garbed
in a strait jacket, bouncing against the walls, trying
to get out. When she makes her next appearance, with the
line “Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?” she is
not running into the room, like Zeffirelli’s Ophelia,
but lying prone on the floor, immobile in her strait
jacket. As she sings her apparently nonsense songs, she
writhes in sexual motion; Branagh intercuts a brief
glimpse of Ophelia and Hamlet in happier times, in bed
together. This Ophelia, we understand, is no child, but
a mature woman, although one who has lost her sanity.

After the sequence in which she distributes
imaginary flowers to Laertes, Claudius, and Gertrude,
Ophelia is seen twice more in Branagh’s film. First we
view her being hosed down in her padded cell. (The shot
reminds us of how civil rights demonstrators in the
1960s, fighting for their rights and their dignity, were
attacked by police with water hoses.) After the guard
leaves, she changes her expression from one of distress to determination and takes a key—the key to her cell—out of her mouth. When we last see her, she is already dead; shot from below, she is floating face down in the stream. This is a woman who has been sorely abused, but one who has, to some extent, taken her fate into her own hands. Winslet’s death is not accidental; Bonham Carter’s death might have been (she could have fallen from her seat on the plank bridge over the stream).

These opposing visions of Ophelia are further reinforced by the directors’ and the actresses, approach to the character. Zeffirelli likely cast Bonham Carter as Ophelia because of her immature appearance: reviewer Jeanne Cooper of The Washington Post noted that Bonham Carter “looks childlike,” as she did in one of her previous films, Room with a View. Recall that when we first see Bonham Carter’s Ophelia in the “mad scene,” she is behaving like a little girl who doesn’t want to get caught, hiding behind a wall getting ready to do something bad. Before running to the sentry she darts a quick look to one side to make sure that no one is watching. Throughout the sequence, she suddenly, and without any apparent motivation, changes expression and mood, from happy to sad to whimsical to indignant. As she talks she frequently opens her eyes wide. She makes quick, often unexpected or repetitive movements, as if she were not fully in control of her face or her body. As she rocks back and forth, her messy hair hanging in front of her eyes, she looks like a scared, lost child. As web critic Ed Arnold noted, “[s]he was shy and overpowered by the personalities around her. . . . [S]he was bewildered by the conflicting messages and backbiting.” In Zeffirelli’s film, as Ophelia descends into madness, she reverts to an earlier stage of life.

Kate Winslet’s Ophelia also becomes deranged, but Winslet’s insanity takes a different form. In general, she seems angry at how she has been (and is being) treated; and she appears to act with strong purpose. Reviewer Janet Maslin of the New York Times noted Winslet’s “fervent performance.” This Ophelia has not reverted to an earlier, confused and more innocent stage of life. She is in critic Roger Ebert’s estimate, “touchingly vulnerable . . . red-nosed and snuffling, her world crumbling about her.” But Branagh’s Ophelia does not come across as “shy and overpowered.” On the contrary, she strikes out—although illogically, even insanely—at the injustice of what has happened to her (and to Hamlet and to her father). She reacts no
differently to being confined in a strait jacket and to being hosed down in a padded cell than any sane person would. When she takes the key from her mouth after the guard has left, she appears, almost like Hamlet, to have been faking madness in order to throw others off the track about her true condition and intentions. During her song and speech directed to Laertes toward the end of the sequence, she barely moves. Her face is calm and composed and her voice is even; she displays none of the childlike mannerisms or facial tics of Bonham Carter’s Ophelia. When she finishes talking, she quietly says “Goodbye, you” to her brother, looks meaningfully at him, then slowly gets up and walks away. At this moment, nearly our last view of her alive, she looks both sane and dignified.

The cinematography of each director reinforces these contrasting views of Ophelia. As mentioned earlier, many of Zeffirelli’s shots of Ophelia are filmed from above; this high-angle point of view makes her look small or lost. Camera movement is also significant. In one segment, the camera follows Bonham Carter’s Ophelia as she distributes flowers first to Laertes, then to Gertrude, then to Claudius. The movements of the camera, tracking Ophelia’s apparently random movements, create a sense of confusion and haphazardness for the viewer. Where will she turn next? In contrast, Branagh’s Ophelia, after her purposeful entrance, makes no such random movements; she sits down in front of the mirror and remains there. The stillness of the camera suggests that Ophelia at this point may have found a kind of peace as she prepares to end her life. Zeffirelli’s and Branagh’s cameras also differ in the way they show how the characters relate to one another. In Zeffirelli’s film, the camera shows the individual reactions of Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius to Ophelia’s condition. They rarely appear in the same shot with her. Visually, they stand apart from Ophelia, as they react to her condition in amazement and sadness. In Branagh’s film, in contrast, the camera frames these characters in pairs: Ophelia appears in the same shot as her brother; Claudius appears with Gertrude. By shooting this way, Branagh emphasizes the closeness of brother and sister; and he may be foreshadowing the coming break between Laertes and his co-conspirator Claudius.

While a play comes to us as a printed text, it doesn’t live until it’s performed—on stage or on film. Performance means interpretation: the director devises ways to stage the action for the audience and, working
with the actors, shapes intonation, facial expression, body movement, and more. An accomplished director will make such choices in line with a larger conception of the meaning of the play and its characters. Does the director see Ophelia as a dreamy child or as a strong-willed adult? Because either of these two Ophelias—as well as others—can be “read” into Shakespeare’s Hamlet, we can expect to see as many Ophelias (and Hamlets and Gertrudes) as we have productions of the play. Zeffirelli’s and Branagh’s different renderings of the character demonstrate just how important a director’s interpretations are to a production. Neither of their Ophelias can be called “definitive.” Both make sense in the context of their productions and remind us that a play is always a creative partnership between writer and director.

Works Cited