WATERHOUSE'S *OPHELIA* – A REVERSED EKPHRASTIC APPROACH OF SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET, PRINCE OF DENMARK*

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Abstract: Shakespeare's masterpieces seem to possess a remarkable connection with visual art. Yet, despite the aesthetic appeal of painting Shakespeare, there was a fear that "the art of the painter" could never "equal the sublimity of our poet". The fear of having Shakespeare conversed into works of visual art appears to be grounded on a narrow perception of the visual art work, which neglects the fact that such analogues are capable both of enlarging the meaning of a literary text and of adjoining new meanings: far from being a reproduction of the source text, meant to render an accurate representation of its content, the visual target text becomes a conversion developed, through the process of reversed ekphrasis, as a reframing or destabilization of the origin text, yet possessing an identity equal in range to that of its literary source. The Pre-Raphaelite artists, who set out to paint Shakespearean characters, not only recreated them according to new visual terms, but, in doing this, they materialized their own image of women as icons.

Keywords: reversed ekphrasis, Pre-Raphaelites, Waterhouse, Shakespeare, visual texts.

John William Waterhouse was born in 1849, the year when the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood "took the British art world by storm" (Moyle, in *The Daily Telegraph*, 2009) and his art, approaching mythical past or interpreting literary sources, is now praised as an important example of late Pre-Raphaelitism despite its dismissal, as insignificant and representational, claimed by the French-affiliated critics, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Waterhouse's style, developed thirty-five years after the exceptional moment of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, shares his predecessors' relying upon mediaeval sources, and recreates the classical world.

Waterhouse, who in 1870 entered the Royal Academy Schools in order to be trained as a sculptor, seemed to have changed his initial option so that, in 1874, on the occasion of his first public appearance at a Royal Academy exhibition, he participated as a painter (with a canvas entitled *Sleep and his Half-Brother Death*) who, like other young artists of the time, completed the imperfect education provided by the official art school with instruction outside the Academy Schools. Although his early work approached classical themes in the manner of Alma-Tadema (whom he is acknowledged to have studied in order to complete his artistic education) and Frederic Leighton, as well as genre scenes, his pictures belonging to a later period show his interest in plein-air painting and in exploiting themes deriving from the Pre-Raphaelite art (mainly tragic and powerful women).

In the opinion of Elizabeth Prettejohn, although it is quite difficult to confine Waterhouse within the established art groups, he was, on the one hand, fully conscious of the Pre-Raphaelite painting principles, and, on the other hand, his working manner was a modern one and

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subsequently owed its importance to the developments it determined during the period ranging between 1890s and 1900s. (Gunzburg, 2010: 2)

Waterhouse's pictures also show that he was acquainted with the artistic developments outside Britain (French academic classicism, for instance), and in the 1880s, he experimented plein-air painting as well as a "square brush technique associated with French artists such as Jules Bastien-Lepage" and was then "much closer to the French-oriented painters of the New English Art Club than he is to the Royal Academicians." (Gunzburg, 2010: 2)

While, during his lifetime, Waterhouse was considered an artist who was more admired by other painters than by large audiences, in the twentieth century he became associated with popular taste, perhaps as a result of the attraction his works exerted on a large number of persons.

During a period of more than twenty years, Waterhouse, who is now considered a "brilliant dramatist of subjects and narratives" and who "instantly makes sense", which represents "his virtue as a painter, and a pictorial composer" (Gunzburg, 2010: 5), painted three works that approached the Shakespearean character of Ophelia, in various postures preceding her drowning.

An interesting aspect that equally regards Waterhouse's life and work documentation, is the lack of primary evidence upon him, as it appears that, besides the five letters written by the painter or his wife to a patron in New York, which are preserved at the Beinecke Library, at Yale University, he neither used to write letters nor kept diaries. Accordingly, there are no available data able to leave evidence of the first stage of the process of reversed ekphrasis, involving the painter's reading of the Shakespearean source.

The conversion stage of all the three versions of *Ophelia* relies on the inexistent drowning scene in Shakespeare's play and is achieved through a destabilization of the source text. Waterhouse's visual target texts convert an absent scene, the moment of Ophelia's drowning, which is turned into a subjective and mental construction operated by the painter, who, in the absence of the playwright's direct rendition of the character's death, builds up particular appearances of the character. The moment displayed by the painter, indirectly presented by the literary text, strongly claims for the level of destabilization, which forcefully replaces the gap in the play (the drowning scene).

While conversion shares a common ground in the three paintings, the next stage, conversion's substantiation, may definitely be considered as differing from one picture to the other, resulting in a succession of visual moments that particularly approach time and space planning, the character, and the details.

Waterhouse's 1889 painting of Ophelia, which represents a young woman in a white dress, lying in a green field, with a stream perceptible in the background, with flowers in her hair and on her dress, holding flowers in her hands, and displaying an ambiguous gaze directed towards the outside world, turns the character into a scarcely identifiable one for those viewers unfamiliar with the subject.

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1. John William Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1889, private collection

2. John William Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1894, private collection



While the commentator of *The Art Journal* (1889, 51:188) wrote, at the time, that the painting is "by no means so ambitious a work as what we had hoped for from this talented artist. It displays the mad maiden in no novelty of attitude; she lies prone in long grass, a posy of plucked buttercups in her hand, and a garland of oxeyes round her dress", Bram Djikstra (1986: 43) considers that Waterhouse's 1889 Ophelia is "rolling madly in a field, a flower toppled off her stern and seeking to regain the balance of nature".

In the 1894 version of Ophelia, "Waterhouse shows Ophelia in the moments before she died, sitting on the slanting bough of the willow that overhangs the brook. She is placing a garland in her hair, while other flowers are shown in her lap and growing among the reeds nearby…" (Trumble, 2002: 104). The setting differs from the landscape of the previous painting and incorporates new elements (the log, the pond of lilies), yet still preserving the vegetal embroiling that surrounded the character in the 1889 picture, as well as the flowers in Ophelia's hair and on her lap. Unlike the gown of the first Ophelia, her dress isn't white anymore, displaying adornments of golden patterns that include the shape of a lion, and she wears a golden belt that contrasts with the environing nature.

The heroine's figure is captured in a profile view and she appears to stare in a sort of rigid pattern that does not quite prefigure her imminent

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and voluntary death. And again, as it was the case of the first version, the character's pose and expression make the subject hardly recognizable.

In 1910, Waterhouse gave a third version of Shakespeare's Ophelia, which has largely been perceived as the most dramatic of the three versions. The artist painted, this time, a young woman dressed in a blue and crimson costume, with golden ornaments, whose figure, preserving no childish features of the previous two representations, is the expression of an emotionally annihilated woman; her eyes stare as if terrified, but her sight is not directed toward the viewer; instead, she seems imprisoned by her own past, which becomes the carrier of a long chain of events leading to her ultimate gesture. Her desperate stare captures the whole attention of the viewer determining, at the same time, a shift towards the questioning of a past from which the heroine seems to have come out on the brink of madness, allowing the 'reading' of the two women in the background as witnesses of the derailment scene, anxious to observe the ending, yet unwilling to interfere with the character.

Ophelia, occupying the whole foreground of the painting, her body slightly curved in movement as one of her feet is about to submerse, rests her right hand on the nearby tree, while grabbing tightly her adorned blue dress with the other one and the bunch of flowers in her lap. The apparent care that might be perceived in the pulling up of her garment above her ankles may be interpreted as a sign of indecision, which could point to her terrifying inner conflict revealed by the expression of her figure. It is as if the character succumbs both to her mental anguish that inexorably directs her to death by drowning and to her physical body, which momentarily and vainly strives to prevent the tragic ending.



It is interesting to notice that the painting seems to put an end to a succession of moments that brutally led the character towards death: while the 1889 Ophelia is placed at a safe distance from the stream and the 1894 heroine comes closer to the water, the 1910 character finally assumes her fate and is on the verge of immersing into the water.

3. John William Waterhouse, *Ophelia*, 1910, Collection Lord Lloyd-Webber, London, United Kingdom

Perhaps the most pertinent aspect characterizing the relation between a visual and a literary text regards their equal rank, as poles of a reversed ekphrastic process, which comes out of their status of works of art.

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The aim of reversed ekphrastic conversions does not concern the degree according to which the visual target texts deviate from the literary source texts; on the contrary, their objective attempts at either widening the meaning of the latter ones or at emphasizing meanings that were not asserted by the literary sources.

And Waterhouse's three versions of *Ophelia* stand as remarkable examples that explore the demanding connection existing between literature and visual art, highlighting visual target texts similar in rank to their literary source text, owing to their belonging to the realm of art.

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