
Peter Brix Søndergaard
(Aarhus University)

‘Something strangely perverse’. Nature and Gender in J. E. Millais’s *Ophelia*

Abstract

This paper analyses J. E. Millais’s Pre-Raphaelite painting *Ophelia*. Drawing on ideas formulated by Hermann Broch regarding the origins of romanticism and Adorno and Horkheimer’s theory of a dialectic of Enlightenment, the analysis focuses on the complex handling of gender and nature in the painting in order to show the shifting and contradictory constellations of meaning inherent in the subject. Central to the argument is the relationship between the characterization of Ophelia as a *femme fragile* and the nature that surrounds her, rendered with an almost hallucinatory clarity. Both nature and woman are shown to be capable of both conforming to and escaping from Millais’s painterly control. The painting turns out to be a vehicle for a young middle-class Victorian and his anxieties and yearnings.

Keywords

Pre-Raphaelite painting, J. E. Millais, Ophelia, Gender, *Femme fragile*.

Ophelia (oil on canvas, 1851–1852; fig. 1) by John Everett Millais (1829–1896) is probably the most well-known and most popular painting of English Pre-Raphaelitism. As Julia Thomas points out, his ‘focus on nature ... situates Millais as an inheritor of Romantic ideals ...’. The painting, however, contains a doubleness: ‘In this picture, nature has the dreamlike and mystical qualities that characterize earlier romantic paintings, but it is juxtaposed with a photographic realism ...’.¹ A discussion of this interrelatedness forms the focus of what follows.

Ophelia depicts a tightly enclosed space reminiscent of a bower, which engenders an encapsulated and claustrophobic spatial effect enhanced by the upper round arch. In an odd manner, it is like looking into a diorama designed to recreate the natural habitat of various stuffed animals. It is not, however, a specimen of English fauna that resides behind the glass in this apparent nature

¹ Julia Thomas, ‘Ophelia 1851–52. Painting by John Everett Millais’, in *Encyclopedia of the Romantic Era, 1760–1850, Volume 2*, ed. Christopher John Murray (N.Y. & London: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 829. Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1999), 21ff. The latter source gives a good account of the way that Pre-Raphaelitism grew out of romanticism.



Fig. 1: John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851–1852. Oil on canvas, 76.2 x 11.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

idyll, but a delicate young beauty, Ophelia, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, floating on her back in the darkish water of a brook on her way to 'muddy death'. This endows the picture with an undercurrent of tragic morbidity somehow at odds with the almost hallucinatory clarity and nearly overwhelming density of the female protagonist's obsessively detailed surroundings. In any case, a reviewer writing for *The Times* found reason to make a critical comment on Millais's handling of the subject exactly along these lines when the painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1852: '[T]here must be something strangely perverse in an imagination which souses Ophelia in a weedy ditch ... while it studies every petal of the darnel and anemone floating on the eddy and pricks out a robin on the pollard from which Ophelia fell ...'.²

After a few remarks on the iconography of the picture, the present study will explore the background of this peculiar juxtaposition of excessive scientific accuracy and, an apparently resigned, late romantic version of the *Liebestod*-motif to point out the strong tensions and contradictions that this involves in the meaning-making processes.

Ophelia was the daughter of the old courtier Polonius who went mad because of Hamlet's scorn and the death of Polonius at the hands of Hamlet. The episode,

² Quoted in Kimberley Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture* (London & N.Y.: Routledge, 2008), 90.

which provides the literary source for Millais's painting is described as follows, by Queen Gertrude, Hamlet's mother (IV; VII):

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come
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 coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;
Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,
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.

This depiction of Shakespearian erotic death or 'love death', is framed by richly varied flora painted with minute botanical correctness and in part carrying symbolic values. Some of these flowers and trees are identified in Shakespeare's text. This is true of the weeping willow, the nettles, and the daisies, which signify forsaken love, pain, and innocence, respectively. Others are introduced by Millais, such as the poppy beside the floating daisies, which represents death and sleep, and the forget-me-nots situated on the far bank, at the right edge of the picture plane. To the left of these, we see a configuration of light and shadow vaguely resembling a skull. This common *memento mori* may refer to both Ophelia's death and the famous graveyard scene that follows the scene of her death in the play (V, I). Millais has also painted a robin as a reference to one of the songs Ophelia sings ('For bonny sweet Robin is all my Joy') in the throes of madness (IV, V).³

Let us begin, however, by considering Ophelia. Her pose was based on that of Millais's model, Elizabeth Siddal, as she floated in a bathtub filled with tinted water. Millais inserted this figure into the scene on returning to his London studio from a trip to the Hogsmill River in Ewell, where he painted the surrounding scenery. If we follow the Austrian novelist and essayist Hermann Broch's 'Notes

³ Cf. the essay on *Ophelia* in Alan Bowness, ed., *The Pre-Raphaelites* (exhibition catalogue, London: Tate Gallery/Penguin Books, 1984), 96f.

on the problem of kitsch', this figure is a product of the precarious handling of sexuality found in the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeois response to the threat of sexuality was often asceticism, which had an understandable strategic appeal to this new, power-seeking class in whose interest it was to advocate puritan ideals at sharp variance with the extravagances of the nobility. Asceticism, however, was problematic for the Enlightenment which 'did not favour the ascetic spirit (it is not mere chance that it produced *libertinage*)'.⁴ The spirit of Enlightenment, with its comparative moral laxity, was not to be denied: 'nor was it possible to restore the old faith which had provided the incentive for asceticism'.⁵ Accordingly, the bourgeoisie faced the seemingly insoluble problem of how to preserve the ascetic spirit while at the same time making allowances for new Enlightenment norms. The solution to the problem, according to Broch, was a sublimation of sexual impulses resulting in an overwrought, religiously inflected tension that manifested itself as romanticism in art and literature:

Puritanism certainly did not impose a monastic type of chastity, but strict monogamy ... Monogamous love was saved by being intensified to a level of exaltation which at one time had been severely condemned by asceticism. Puritan frigidity was transposed into passion. Every causal act of love was raised to the astral plane ...⁶

By means of this pseudo-overcoming or rather pseudo-reinstatement of the ascetic tradition, the bourgeois middle classes wanted not only to solve their erotic problems but also to reach a compromise between their puritan art-asceticism and their enjoyment of decoration:

Even if courtly-feudal decorative art secretly appealed to them, they had to disdain it so as to remain faithful to their own ascetic tradition; and if they were now able to grant freedom to their taste for decoration, the result was to be a form of art that was more serious, more elevated and more cosmic than that of their predecessors. One is immediately struck by the parallel with the erotic and sentimental situation ...: the aesthetic pleasures of the libertine are looked down on, but the bourgeois would also like to indulge in them, even if on a higher plane. And in fact just as, in the sphere of erotic relationships, love itself has to come down from its celestial heights to consecrate and take part in every human act of love, so in the aesthetic field beauty has to be incarnated in every work of art and consecrate it.⁷

4 Hermann Broch, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch', in Gilles Dorfles, ed., *Kitsch. The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1970), 54. Originally read at Yale in 1950, the paper is still, in spite of its stamp of modernism typical of the time of writing, worth reading.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 56.

7 *Ibid.*, 58.

Sublimated love and its attendant cult of beauty are condensed in the Pre-Raphaelite female ideal, as primarily incarnated by Elizabeth Siddal and Jane Morris. Without wanting to contest the artistic merits of the Pre-Raphaelites, Broch states that 'the goddess of beauty in art is the goddess kitsch', a remark expanded on later in his text: 'Into what type of work of art, or rather artifice, does kitsch try to transform human life? The answer is simple: into a neurotic work of art, i. e. one which imposes a completely unreal convention on reality, thus imprisoning it in a false schema.'⁸ To be sure, modernism as an artistic praxis, and as a set of ideas through which the history of art is represented and its artefacts explained and judged, has lost its monopoly and narrative painting is being critically rehabilitated and re-evaluated. In this context, the labelling of Pre-Raphaelite art as kitsch no longer seems to stand to reason. As will be demonstrated, however, that does not rule out the possibility of such art being neurotic.

With regard to representations of women, Ariane Thomalla has expressed the aforementioned sublimated cult of beauty in terms of the *femme fragile*, a view of women which, according to Thomalla, often inflects Pre-Raphaelite work and its shaping and staging of this specific representation of woman. Friederike B. Emonds goes further, tracing it back to early romanticism.⁹ The *femme fragile* has a childlike body, lithe and slender, without fully developed sexual characteristics: 'a body which denies its sexual predestination' and 'ends its artificial existence in perverse over refinement.'¹⁰ While her delicate figure is the carrier of 'the germ of consumption', her facial features radiate pathological tiredness and exhaustion like a reflection of the beyond.¹¹ The *femme fragile* with its asexual, ethereal apathy tending towards the morbidly delicate, is symptomatic of a repressed attitude towards the erotic and can be seen as a counterpart to the women found in the later, Symbolist-oriented Pre-Raphaelitism of D. G. Rossetti and E. Burne-Jones: i. e. the *femme fatale*, characterized by erotic lasciviousness and calculating cruelty.

Both types can be understood as being bound up with the sexual nervousness that conflicted with tightly-laced Victorian sexual morality. Both the *femme fragile*

8 Ibid., 59 and 63–64.

9 Ariane Thomalla, *Die "femme fragile"* (Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann-Universitätsverlag, 1972), 7. Cf. Magda Romanska, 'Ontology and Eroticism. Two Bodies of Ophelia', *Women's Studies* 6 (2005): 497: 'With her vulnerable, consumptive beauty, Millais' model, Elizabeth Siddal was one of the most popular models of her times. Revered for her death-like pallor and deep, aloof gaze she was the perfect *femme fragile*'. Friederike B. Emonds, 'Femme Fragile', in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature*, eds. F. Eigler & S. Kord (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 165–166.

10 C. Moreck, *Das weibliche Schönheitsideal im Wandel der Zeiten* (München: Franz Hanfstaengel, 1925), 268.

11 Ibid., 269.

and the *femme fatale* are attempts to master this sexual anxiety by way of specifically male aesthetic constructions of femininity.

The figure of the *femme fatale* can thus be seen as the expression of an anticipatory escapism into an exoticism of the senses: into a world of unleashed erotic phantasies, eventually into perversion. This phenomenon is at once a protest against rigid bourgeois morals and expressive of the fear of the potential pitfalls of sexuality, a fear which by way of projection became represented by the diabolical and demonic lascivious woman, *venus lasciva*. Femininity is here cast as the Other, which, by an autonomous, ego-strong bourgeois male is perceived as unpredictable and destructively threatening. In the Pre-Raphaelite version, to be sure, the phantasies are relatively luxurious and marked by energy strong enough to invest the figure of the *femme fatale* with a masochistically flavored fetishistic fascination.¹² We do not find the hateful panic-fear that characterizes works such as those by the German painter Franz von Stuck (e.g. *Sensuality/Eve and the Snake*, 1891) at about the same time.¹³

The other type of woman, the *femme fragile*, represents an escape into repression and, consequently, as a corollary to perversion, into neurosis. The *femme fragile* represents surrender to and resigned identification with normative morality in order to counter and perforate its intolerable pressure. The Victorian interpretation of femininity did not make allowances for sexual drive. The defining essence of womanhood consisted in idealistic love, delicate feelings, and moral sensitivity. Because of her morbid spiritualization, the *femme fragile* carries such characteristics to a pathological extreme, a state of mind implying a field of tension between acceptance and (unconscious) resistance. She is regarded as a point of 'access to a mental spiritualized nature which transcends all bodily and sexual desire'.¹⁴ The *femme fragile* can thus be seen as a symptom of the latent tragedy of navigating precariously between sinful, tabooed profane sensuality on the one hand and profound sublimation on the other: a tragedy that stems from the impossibility of ideal love as reflected in Wagner's musical drama *Tristan und Isolde* and Goethe's novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Broch points to an atmosphere of necrophilia resulting from these circumstances.¹⁵

12 Cf. Griselda Pollock, 'Woman as sign: Psychoanalytic readings', in *Vision & Difference* (London & N.Y.: Routledge, 1988).

13 Simonetta Falchi argues that Ophelia is also able to embody the *femme fatale*: Through time Ophelia has become 'a multifaceted heroine apt to embody all the victims of patriarchal domination, but also ... the *Belle Dame Sans Merci*, who would annihilate her tormentor'. With specific regard to Millais's *Ophelia*, Falchi suggests that the open arms and the watery death suggests mature sexuality and a fallen woman. See Simonetta Falchi, 'Re-mediating Ophelia with Pre-Raphaelite Eyes', *Interlitteraria 2* (2015), 181 & 177. This paper argues for a reading of Ophelia as an unambiguous *femme fragile*.

14 Cf. Regina Schaps, *Hysterie und Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus Verlag, 1983), 141.

15 Hermann Broch, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch', 56.

Millais's *Ophelia* shows yet another way of coping with such perilous negotiation: namely, a regression to the womb of nature, a yearning for oblivion in its boundless organism. Indications of this can be found in the closed, uterus-like space of the painting and in the lack of demarcating contours between Ophelia and the nature that surrounds her, the diffuse melting together of the two elements. This does not apply, however, to the rest of Millais's description of scenery, which is characterized by minute precision. As described by a reviewer from the *Athenaeum*, Ophelia's surroundings suggest the 'botanical study of a Linnaeus' saturated with a Protestant work ethic.¹⁶ This is evinced in the following anecdote told by Millais: 'Perhaps the greatest compliment ever paid to "Ophelia", as regards its truthfulness to Nature, is the fact that a certain Professor of Botany, being unable to take his class into the country and lecture from the objects before him, took them to the Guildhall, where this work was being exhibited, and discoursed to them upon the flowers and plants before them, which were, he said, as instructive as Nature herself'.¹⁷ Millais's uncompromising investment in an exhaustive work process (he spent around fifteen hundred hours at the easel) combined with his reductive treatment of nature as nothing more than botanical facts, signalled a strong wish to bring the world under clear-eyed control.

The Pre-Raphaelites at this point in time were obsessed with reality, or 'nature', an obsession underpinned by the notion that utmost reliability and truthful reporting of observable facts would, by a sort of osmosis, produce a spiritual reality on a higher level. Inspired by the leading Victorian art critic, John Ruskin, the literal fact was endowed with an almost sacred aura, as if visual fact were truth itself. Scientific truth and divine truth converged. Empirically certified visual fact became a metaphor for spiritual light and truth, and the mere accumulation of visual facts amounted to a revelation of a divinely ordained moral order, expressed through physical beauty. The overwhelmingly telescopic clarity of Millais's approach corresponded to the Pre-Raphaelite belief that art must be true to nature to be morally reliable. Style and meaning were considered as one and the same thing.¹⁸

Millais's *Ophelia* thus appears as a painstaking transcription of the chosen locality at a given time, although the specific circumstances in terms of light, weather, and even vegetation of course change during a period of several months. Millais circumvented such problems by adopting an isolated, myopic view of his subject matter. Microscopic, natural detail appears at the expense of

16 Quoted from Allen Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

17 J. G. Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 145.

18 This argument is developed throughout John Ruskin, *Modern Painters I-V* (London: Dent, ca. 1906).

space, atmosphere, or any feeling of light and shadow. Shadows do appear in the green vegetation, but they do not indicate a particular time of day. Questions of atmosphere and weather are also ignored by Millais, who instead creates a near-vacuum, characterized by intense concentration on botanical details. The Pre-Raphaelite critique of academic painting, as codified in Sir Joshua Reynolds's normative lectures at the Royal Academy of Arts, clearly informed Millais's dismissive attitude toward the use of composition and lighting to indicate important areas of the canvas.¹⁹ The surface as a whole is characterized by the same penetrative, detailed realism, in prismatic colours, so that everything demands the same degree of attention. The result is a strong tension between depth and surface. The background is resolved as distinctly as the foreground, which results in space tilting onto the picture plane and forcing accumulated details to crowd into a shallow foreground. This effect is heightened by a brilliant luminosity, which results from Millais's use of a fresco-like, wet, white ground that enhances every little detail.

Despite the Pre-Raphaelite obsession with fact, and the requirement of a direct and sustained confrontation with nature, artistic reality was nevertheless always already 'elevated through the choice of beautiful people', in this case in the form of Elizabeth Siddal.²⁰ It was not enough for the Pre-Raphaelites to reject conventional, standardized, academic formulas. The handling of the medium, in itself saturated with moral significance, was supposed to enter an alliance with improving subject matter. Victorian morality thus intervened as a kind of mediating and purifying filter between image and reality. The theme of the painting had to be ennobling.

The representation of nature in *Ophelia*, however, may also indicate a scientific wish to control the world: to effect a 'botanical study of a Linnaeus'. The figure of Ophelia, in relation to her surroundings can be seen to be both in conformity and in conflict with this controlling intention.

In Millais's *Ophelia* we are witnessing a sort of dialectic of Enlightenment on a micro-scale. As conceptualized by the German philosophers Adorno and Horkheimer, the Enlightenment within the development of Western civilization has resulted in the liberation of mankind from the restraints of nature by instrumental reason and its scientific objectification and made the domination and mastery of external nature possible. The domination, however, had got to a point where the consequence was a suppression of both the external *and* the internal, human nature resulting in alienation:

19 Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (London: Forgotten Books, 2012).

20 A. Neumeier, 'Die präraffaelitische Malerei im Rahmen der Kunstgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts', *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literatur und Geistesgeschichte*, 9, 1 (1931).

It is not merely that domination is paid for by the alienation of men from the objects dominated: with the objectification of spirit, the very relations of men – even those of the individual to himself – were bewitched. The individual is reduced to the nodal point of the conventional responses and modes of operation expected of him.²¹

The Enlightenment, which aimed to liberate men from external restraints of nature, is thus transformed into a second nature itself: The social world confronts the individuals embedded in it like a second nature in which nature avenges itself, by forcing on its enlightened masters, constrictive social manners by which they are injuriously affected. Nature is now only to be experienced in a culturally mediated form, as the feared Other, perceived relative to reason and morality as that which must be dominated or repressed but which continually threatens to return. This applies to woman as well. 'She became the embodiment of the biological function, the image of nature, the subjugation of which constituted that civilization's title to fame'.²² As art historian Gert Schiff has pointed out, these abstract determinations are manifesting the need of rigid, Victorian, sexual morality to control inner human nature: 'The pressure of these morals produced jamming of sexual urges, contact disorders, and fear of sin all of which grew to a sense of an all-embracing fatality; along with naturalness, happiness also seems to be banished from this moral order'.²³ With special reference to women, it could be claimed that they

gained admission to a male-dominated world, but only in a broken form. In her spontaneous submission she reflects for her vanquisher the glory of his victory, substituting devotion for defeat, nobility of soul for despair, and a loving breast for a ravished heart ... Art, custom, and sublime love are masks in which nature reappears transformed into her own antithesis. Through these masks she acquires the gift of speech; out of her distortion emerges her essence. Beauty is the serpent that exhibits a wound in which a thorn was once embedded.²⁴

When the erotic and the sexual are universal taboos, the figure of the *femme fragile* enters the frame (for instance, in Millais's canvas) as an ambivalent way of coming to terms with anxiety. Notwithstanding her otherwise unnatural appearance, it is only as a *femme fragile* that Ophelia can be at one with nature, as nature appears in Millais's painting: that is, as controlled nature, as a 'botanical study of a Linnaeus'. In her ethereal, feeble passivity, she represents an absolute availability to man. In contrast to the *femme fatale*, she does not represent 'the demonic nature untamed by bourgeois culture' (Meyer, 1975, 33). Neither does

21 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (London & N.Y.: Verso, 2010 [1944]), 28.

22 *Ibid.*, 248.

23 Gert Schiff, 'Zeitkritik und Zeitflucht in der Malerei der Präraffaeliten', in *Beiträge zur Motivatik des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1970), 178–179.

24 Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 249.

Millais's nature, in its reduction to scientific, botanical facts. The Other, nature and woman, is seemingly brought under control. *In this sense nature and woman do not, as The Times's reviewer thought, contrast with each other. On the contrary, nature and woman are subjected to the same logic.*

By minimizing the expressivity of both nature and female, Millais makes the painting uncanny. An almost surreal effect similar to that experienced in a wax-work show is achieved and reinforced by the vacuum-like lack of atmosphere. The model is frozen, a freeze which could be perceived as the result of fear of getting too close to the opposite sex and thus opening up forbidden yearnings, or as a reaction to the fear of femininity, whose element is water. The female body reminds the male of his mortality. According to Julia Kristeva it is not so much woman but first of all motherhood which is suppressed in patriarchal society: motherhood as a reminder of the blind continuity of the species at the expense of the individual ego. The periodic fluctuations of the female body call attention to the organic, to change – birth, growth, death, birth. Still, according to Kristeva, men repress all of this in order to keep the illusion of their immortality. All change, including fluid change and changes in form, must be kept at a distance.²⁵ Ophelia appears unnaturally alabaster-white, without a life of her own, as an artificial product. As a *femme fragile*, she is an object of projection, of a masculine defence mechanism, and as such she is reassuring as the bearer of an aversion to reproduction, of 'a body which denies its sexual predestination' (cited above).

As mentioned above, the figure of the *femme fragile* is ambiguous, and this ambiguity points to the price paid by the bourgeoisie in its attempts to save the ascetic tradition. Caught between consciousness of guilt and an all-embracing sense of fatality, on the one hand, and unattainable, ideal love and religiously-motivated spiritual exaltation within the framework of strict monogamy on the other, the controlling ambition develops cracks, and out of the cracks seep neurotic, hopeless tragedy, romanticization of death, and regressive longing. By pushing the representation of the figure to the verge of the morbidly pathological, the things, which the *femme fragile* as an instrument was intended to help repress, return. *Viewed this way the reviewer of The Times carries his point: A friction arises between the natural and the human element in the painting.*

Interestingly, however, the representation of nature in *Ophelia* is not without ambiguity. The minutely detailed realism of Pre-Raphaelite paintings radically expresses the ethos of a scientific spirit, but although the world is present to an overwhelming extent it does not seem to cohere. It does not constitute an organic whole but appears fragmented, put together from bits and pieces, from mutually isolated and isolating colours and forms, without order and meaning. Karl Heinz Bohrer sees the effect of Pre-Raphaelite paintings as similar to a psychotic

25 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

experience of a deep-seated alienation in relation to the “being” that surrounds them²⁶ The predominant characteristics of Pre-Raphaelite style—colouristic disharmony, insistent linearity, the crowding of equally important details in a shallow foreground, the anti-focal treatment of the picture plane – all serve to undermine the conventions of our perceptual apparatus, which would otherwise organize the visual field in terms of visual hierarchy and figure/ground relationships. In their manic pursuit of reality, Pre-Raphaelite painters ‘looked at the world without eyelids’, and thereby transformed what was acted upon: ‘[T]he labor that went into the copying of each particle was sharpened by a kind of frenzy which goaded them into a burnishing and polishing of their handiwork to a point beyond representation, at which it shone with feverish clarity’.²⁷ This specific approach to assimilating the world had the paradoxical result that it began to slip from their grasp, suggesting that the representation of nature is also infected with a sort of visual dialectic of Enlightenment, which means that *the natural and the human element in Ophelia once again converge, but this time in the form of a shared escaping from control*. The controlling ambition is now collapsing as a whole.

Millais’s choice of a well-known subject certainly helps to explain the notorious popularity of the painting. Because of its continually shifting and contradictory constellations of meaning, *Ophelia* is also centered on the tense interrelationship of gender and nature and, through this lens, provides a mental portrait of a young, middle-class Victorian and his self-perception, his understanding of the world, and his more or less unconscious anxieties, yearnings and dreams.

26 Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens* (Frankfurt a.M.: Ullstein, 1983), 55.

27 R. Ironside and J. Gere, *Pre-Raphaelite Painters* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1948), 13.