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Rereading Shakespeare's *Ophelia*: Marcelo Marchioro's Performance Aesthetics

“Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night...”

(T. S. Eliot *The Waste Land*)

In a critical essay entitled “Shakespeare, Theatre Productions and Cultural Politics”, published in *Shakespeare Survey* (1995: 13), John Russel Brown states that the bard's plays, with their “inherently flexible structure and openness of style”, invite distinctive re-interpretations mainly in performance, when they can be readjusted at will, depending on the directors' intentions and conceptual choices, reinforced by designers for set, costumes, light and sound. He points out that “even at their most intense and sustained moments – perhaps especially then – the dialogue can support a wide variety of characterizations; Shylock, Hamlet, Falstaff, Prince Hal and Prospero have all served many purposes, taking shape and spirit from the actors and directors who have laid hands on the very same printed words.” While ratifying the validity of the statement above, I propose to provide arguments for the extension of scope of Brown's assertion, by showing that Shakespeare's women characters have also been appropriated to serve many purposes, Ophelia being one of them.

In this essay, I intend to show that Marcelo Marchioro, one of the most creative stage-directors in Paraná, derived his performance aesthetics for the characterization of Ophelia, in his 1992 production of *Hamlet* in Curitiba/Brazil, not only from Shakespeare's text, but also from the multiple

textualizations¹ of the Shakespearean heroine, which have been changing in shape and hue within the vortex of time and imagination. To illustrate my point, I shall briefly discuss the issue that in any representation, be it in the visual, literary or performing arts, Ophelia “is a site of memory, fantasy, projection and desire” (Kiefer, 2001: 12).

Mythologized over time and appropriated by popular culture, Shakespeare’s Ophelia has now attained the status of an archetypal model as well as a cult figure, being one of the most textualized of his heroines. Despite having been neglected by traditional Shakespearean scholarship, she has, since the Romantic period, exerted an extraordinary appeal on painters and poets, as the rich iconography and poetry portraying her figure attest. Since the mid 20th century, she has been rescued from critical invisibility not only by psychoanalytic studies that have established her as an icon of female sexual trauma, but also by feminist discourse that has tended to offer new perspectives on Ophelia’s predicament: her madness has been seen as the result of sexual intimidation and female victimization in general, and the circumstances of her death by drowning have been interpreted as suicide,² a rebellious act of resistance against the fetters that enchained her.

As the cause of Ophelia’s madness is unclear in Shakespeare’s text, an ambiguity surely intended by the bard, a series of possibilities emerge from these unexpressed dimensions of his discourse, constituting a rich subtext³

¹ Robert Scholes (1982: 145), echoing the theoretical premises established by Derrida, Barthes and Eco, has reasserted, in his *Semiotics and Interpretation*, that all reality, as we see or interpret it, is textuality, and that every creative artist shapes his meanings not by reading reality, but by rereading whether consciously or not, his predecessors’ ways of textualizing reality.

² According to feminist critics, this interpretation can be validated by the gravedigger’s comment: “Is she to be buried in Christian burial that wilfully seeks her own salvation?” (V, i: 189). All references from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* are taken from the New Swan Shakespeare edition mentioned in the bibliography. Acts and scenes will be indicated by Roman numerals, followed by page numbers.

³ Marvin Rosenberg, in his article entitled “Subtext in Shakespeare” (Thompson, 1989: 80–90), states that Shakespeare, before Freud, was one of the most perceptive observers of life’s subtext, making us aware of the veiled motivations behind the actions of the characters. Stanislavski, a theatre contemporary of Freud’s, was similarly concerned with the “covert springs of our behaviour”, the mystery that exists between “overt behaviour and masked motivation”. The Russian stage-director developed the concept of *performance subtext*: the careful reading of text and subtext providing the actors with what he called “inner vision”, making them sensitive to the background, impulses, powers and ideas that motivate character, which enables them to give dramatic expression to reactions, conscious or subconscious that lie beneath the words spoken. In his *Dictionary of the Theatre*, Patrice Pavis defines the notion of subtext as a performance strategy, as developed by Stanislavski: “Although it is in the nature of the subtext not to be entirely graspable, it can be compared to the notion of the discourse of the *mise-en-scène*: the subtext comments and controls the entire stage production, is imposed on the audience more or less clearly and affords a glimpse of a whole unexpressed dimension in the discourse, “a pressure behind the words” (1998: 373–4).