

ЛИТЕРАТУРА НАРОДОВ СТРАН ЗАРУБЕЖЬЯ

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СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ ВЗГЛЯД НА ОБРАЗ ОФЕЛИИ

Снежко Д.М., Чалахян А.Л.

alexandrial@inbox.ru

*Московский педагогический государственный университет,
г. Москва, Россия*

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются два произведения искусства – выдающаяся пьеса Уильяма Шекспира «Гамлет», написанная в Елизаветинскую эпоху, и современный кинофильм «Офелия», адаптированный по одноименной книге Лизы Клейн 2006 года и снятый женщиной-режиссером Клэр Маккарти во втором десятилетии XXI века – 2018 году. Статья рассматривает эти произведения через призму литературной теории «Культурный материализм», возникшей в 1985 году. Основная цель данной статьи – изучить, как второстепенный и на первый взгляд незначительный женский персонаж Офелия представлен в этих двух произведениях и объяснить, почему в современном мире образ женщины в искусстве стало возможным поставить на первый план. Было установлено, что вторая волна феминизма, длившаяся с 1960-х до начала 1990-х годов, появление феминистской литературной критики в 1960-70-е годы и смещение внимания с «андротекстов» (произведений, написанных авторами-мужчинами) на «гинотексты» (произведений, написанных авторами-женщинами) оказали огромное влияние на восприятие женщин в современной культуре. Кроме того, развитие гинокритики побудило общественность обратить внимание, признать произведения, написанные авторами-женщинами, и изменить к ним отношение. Подводя итоги, можно сделать вывод, что в силу вышеизложенных причин теперь мы имеем возможность поставить Офелию в центр повествования и взглянуть на события «Гамлета» с точки зрения женского персонажа.

Ключевые слова: Культурный материализм, вторая волна феминизма, феминистская литературная критика, гинокритика, Елизаветинская эпоха, Гамлет, Офелия.

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REPRESENTATION OF OPHELIA OVER TIME

Snezko D.M., Chalakhyan A.L.

alexandrial@inbox.ru

Moscow State Pedagogical University, Moscow, Russia

Abstract. The article discusses two works of art – William Shakespeare’s eminent play “Hamlet” written during the Elizabethan period and a modern film “Ophelia” made by a female director Claire McCarthy in the second decade of the 21st century – in 2018, and adapted from Lisa Klein’s young adult book with the same name. The article looks at these cultural products through the lens of a literary theory called Cultural materialism that came into being in 1985. The main objective of this paper is to study how a minor character Ophelia is portrayed in these two works and explain how a change of perspectives from a male character to a female one became possible

nowadays. It has been found that the second wave of feminism, the emergence of feminist literary criticism in the 1960s-70s and a shift of attention from ‘androtexts’ (books written by men) to ‘gynotexts’ (books written by women) had a great influence on the perception of women in society and art. Moreover, the development of gynocriticism encouraged the public to recognize and acknowledge works produced by female authors and change the attitude to them. Summing up the results, it can be concluded that because of the reasons mentioned above it is possible now to place Ophelia at the center of the story and look at the events of the play from Ophelia’s point of view.

Keywords: Cultural materialism, the second wave of feminism, feminist literary criticism, gynocriticism, Elizabethan period, Hamlet, Ophelia.

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“You may think you know my story. Many have told it. It has long passed into history...into myth. It’s high time I should tell you my story myself.” These words are spoken by Ophelia herself at the very beginning of the film *Ophelia* made by a female director Claire McCarthy in 2018. Here, she promises the audience that we will look at the events of prominent William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* from a new angle, from an angle of a marginalized character who was not able to speak up at the time when the tragedy was written. Nevertheless, why have we, people of the 21st century, got this opportunity now? This article focuses on two cultural products – Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*, written between 1599 and 1601 and belonging to the Elizabethan period, and a modern film *Ophelia* directed four hundred years later – in the second decade of the 21st century. With the help of a literary theory called Cultural Materialism, it intends to find a link between the past and the present and explain why this transition – a shift of perspectives from a man to a woman – took place.

To begin with, it is crucial to mention that the term ‘Cultural Materialism’ was used for the first time in 1985 by English theorists Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield. The British critic Graham Holderness considers cultural materialism as ‘a politicized form of historiography’. In other words, it is the process of analyzing historical documents and data (including literary texts) within “a politicized framework” which also includes the present times that those literary texts have somehow helped to influence [1].

The two words that comprise the term ‘cultural materialism’ can be explained in the following way: ‘culture’ refers to all forms of culture including ‘high’ culture (Shakespeare’s plays) and mass culture (popular music, television and video games). ‘Materialism’ in this sense means that culture is significantly affected by prevailing political and economic circumstances [1].

As Barry (2002) further puts it, Cultural Materialism uses “the past to read the present, revealing the politics of our own society by what we choose to emphasize or suppress of the past” [1]. Thus, the ultimate goal of this theory, firstly, is to explain how the society – with all its cultural, political and economic processes – shapes different cultural products from memes and fan fiction to Renaissance paintings and Federico Fellini’s films; and, secondly, what these cultural products can tell us about the society and the world we live in.

Returning to *Hamlet*, it should be mentioned that this is the longest of William Shakespeare’s tragedies written during the Elizabethan era. This play is thought to be one of the most influential and well-known works of Western Canon that includes numerous profound themes such as betrayal, revenge, depression and madness, love and relationship between people. It tells a remarkable story of the Prince of Denmark, Hamlet, “a character about whom we are told so much yet understand so little” [2]. Throughout the play, readers can follow how Hamlet spends a lot of time hesitating, overthinking his doom and struggling to take a decisive action – to avenge his father and kill his uncle Claudius at the behest of the Ghost. One can argue that Hamlet is, perhaps, one of the most complex, multi layered and true to life literary characters which is extremely interesting to study and analyze. His indecisiveness and “inability to behave like the revenge heroes of the plays he has seen” make him a problematic and psychologically realistic hero [2].

Additionally, we should be aware of the fact that this most popular and widely read work of Western canon is written by a man, in the period when only male authors could have the power of voice. Therefore, this text represents the domineering and biased voice of the one who had been in authority

in the Elizabethan period [7]. Patriarchy, that was the most influential force in Shakespeare's time, had the power to deprive women of their freedom. For the most part, they were regarded as extensions of a man's property; firstly, their father's and brothers' and then in the future the husband's. All the commonly held beliefs and ideologies of Elizabethan England claimed that women were intellectually and morally inferior to men [10]. Therefore, due to the fact that women had limitations, they were either underrepresented or suppressed in the many works of art, including *Hamlet*.

Talking about a poor Ophelia, an insignificant and passive minor character, who is often regarded as *femme fragile*, she can be considered even a more tragic heroine than Hamlet himself. Her story line inspires nothing but pity: used as a pawn by Polonius and the king for their own purposes and goals, she gets rejected by her boyfriend, goes insane and then drowns in the river committing suicide [9].

As other women of the 16th and the 17th centuries, Ophelia is only defined as "vis-à-vis man" [3]. She is depicted as a silent woman and a victim of patriarchal structures, who is suppressed by males' influential and powerful voices – her father's, her brother Laertes', Claudius' and Hamlet's. She is always dependent on these men, cannot take her own decisions and actions and is forced to obey Lord Polonius and agree with his statements concerning Hamlet:

“LORD POLONIUS: I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,

Have you so slander any moment leisure,

As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.

Look to't, I charge you: come your ways.

OPHELIA: I shall obey, my lord”. (I, 3, lines 132-136)

In contrast to Hamlet who has numerous soliloquies that help him express his feelings and concerns, Ophelia is deprived of this powerful voice; we do not have a single clue what her actual thoughts are. Her speech is forbidden by men [6]. “I think nothing, my lord”, replies Ophelia to Hamlet in the famous Mousetrap scene (III, 2, line 126). The lines “so please you...my lord...I do not know, my lord, what should I think...I shall obey, my lord” (I, 3, lines 89-135) addressed to her father

describe Ophelia in the best way possible: she is only able to obey and listen to authoritative figures – male characters; she does not have her own opinions and judgments and cannot decide for herself. She supposes that her father and brother know better than she does. According to Showalter (1993), Ophelia is “deprived of thought, sexuality and language”. She lacks distinctive personality traits: she does not know what to think, she has no direction without a man [6].

Talking about Ophelia’s madness, it seems that only during these mad scenes readers are able to put themselves inside her mind and try to understand the heroine through her tragic songs. Finally, she gets the opportunity to speak: to express her pain of losing Polonius (“He is dead and gone, lady/He is dead and gone”, IV, 5, lines 29-30) and to show that she is broken-hearted because of Hamlet’s betrayal and his treatment of her:

“How should I your true love know
From another one?
By this cockle hat and staff,
And his sandal shoon” (IV, 5, lines 2427)

It is also worth mentioning that Ophelia’s madness is not taken seriously; it is linked to her female nature by people of Elizabethan period. While Hamlet’s melancholic behavior is a result of a struggling intellectual and imaginative mind, Ophelia’s melancholy or erotomania, on the other hand, is regarded instead as biological, and emotional in nature. Whereas Hamlet tends to think too much, Ophelia tends to *feel* too much. Even on the stage, from 1660 to the beginning of the 18th century, “the most celebrated of the actresses who played Ophelia were those whom rumor credited with disappointments in love.” Later, critics of the Romantic era of the 19th century stated that “the less said about Ophelia the better; the point was to look at her” [15]. It shows that Ophelia was not regarded as a complex and sophisticated character, she was only seen as an object.

It is also crucial to note that Ophelia is often believed to be a representation of women’s frustration in the 17th century [13]. All over England of the Elizabethan era, “it was widely accepted...that a good woman was a quiet woman.” [10]. Those

women who talked too much were labeled as harlots. Scolding and garrulous females were regarded as disorderly, evil and shameless and posed a threat to the patriarchal system of order. What is more, married women, in particular, who harped on their husbands could be socially and physically punished through various machines of torture such as the scold's bridle and cucking stool. These modes of punishment were aimed at reinforcing patriarchal dominance and rule [10]. This is the main reason why Ophelia is portrayed in *Hamlet* as a passive, obedient and quiet young lady – the majority of women were exactly like that. They could not talk a lot and express their thoughts and ideas openly. Shakespeare witnessed this attitude towards women and, therefore, this representation of Ophelia is a natural course of action for an author who lived in such circumstances.

Despite the fact that Ophelia appears only in five out of the twenty scenes of *Hamlet*, she, nevertheless, is still able to fascinate and enchant everyone: from painters, such as Millais (*Ophelia*) and Delacroix (*La mort d'Ophélie*) and musicians, such as Shostakovich (*Ophelia's song*) and The Lumineers (*Ophelia*), to the 21st century screenwriters of *Simpsons* (*Tales from the Public Domain*) and *The Addams Family*. As Bradley (1906) rightly stressed “a large number of readers feel a kind of personal irritation against Ophelia; they seem unable to forgive her for not having been a heroine” [4].

As we have seen, Shakespeare, who lived in this male dominated society of the 17th century and was, therefore, ignorant of a woman's actual inner world, was not able to create a heroine with her own individual ambitions, thoughts and needs. These days, however, for some reasons, it seems possible to have a great amount of novels and movies from female authors and directors that offer readers and viewers to look at *Hamlet* from a diametrically opposite perspective – from Ophelia's point of view. These works of popular culture, which place Ophelia at the very center, include *Ophelia's Revenge* (2003), a young adult novel by Rebecca Reisert, *Dating Hamlet* (2002), a novel by Lisa Fiedler that tells a version of Ophelia's story and many others. Among them, Lisa Klein's young adult novel *Ophelia* written in 2006 that was adapted to a movie with the same name by a female

director Claire McCarthy. Semi Chellas, a screenwriter that worked with McCarthy, shared her ambitions about the film in an interview with *Vanity Fair* “I wanted to take these characters who have been marginalized and move them central stage...” [12]. Filmmakers succeeded in this: they managed to create a wilful and determined character, not a poor pawn in the hands of men. Finally, Ophelia is given an opportunity to speak up and be the narrator of her own story.

In the film, which starts six years before the appearance of the Ghost, Ophelia is presented as a carefree and free spirited tomboy, running around the castle with her brother Laertes. Later, she becomes an outspoken, ambitious and rebellious woman, so different from helpless and meek Shakespearean’s heroine. In this movie, it is rather Hamlet who has a supporting role, not Ophelia. And even with him, the future king, she is not afraid to be sharp tongued, and show her character; she is able to stand up not only for herself but also for all women, when she replies to Hamlet “Frailty in love is not a habit of my sex. Perhaps, it runs in families”.

Furthermore, in the revision Ophelia is able to choose her own path. This story does not end in madness, hearts broken and blood spilled. She does not lose herself to vengeance; instead, she stays alive and is able to find peace and hope in solitude, far away from Elsinore. In contrast to Ophelia from the 17th century, “a victim of Shakespeare’s era” [5], Ophelia of our times has independence, courage, intelligence and integrity. “In this story, neither she nor the Danish prince she loves waste time worrying about whether to be or not to be” [9].

Unfortunately, this film only resembles a fantasy tale of what could have happened with Ophelia, if she had not been constrained by patriarchal structures of the 17th century [16]. Nevertheless, it is still a poignant story of women taking revenge and justice for all the abuses they had to suffer into their own hands. As a reason for making the film, McCarthy states that “We decided in a world in which women are not valued...they may not have the ability to rewrite their own world, rewrite their own story.” [12]. But how has the revision of one of the greatest works of art even become possible?

In the second part of the 20th century, the second wave of feminism was gaining weight in the USA inspired by one of the central books of feminism “The Second Sex” written by Simone de Beauvoir and published in 1949. In the book, the French philosopher states that women have been always regarded as the ‘second’ sex.

During the fight for women’s liberation, activists demanded legal and sexual equality, equal wages and the right to decide about their sexuality and pregnancy. What is also important, one of the main goals of feminists was to bring to light and condemn beliefs “which degrade and belittle women in our society” [14]. They thought it essential to draw the public’s attention to the “female side of history” which had often been neglected or repressed [14]. Activists in the women's liberation movement, when trying to analyze and learn about their fore mothers’ experience could find very little information about them, since history was primarily written by men, and it presented only their points of view.

Feminist literary criticism was largely influenced by women’s movement of the 1960s. By the time it emerged, approximately in the 1960s-70s, feminist critics saw it as their duty to carry out research for forgotten literary texts written by marginalized female authors. It had two consequences: firstly, authors who had not been published and acknowledged were introduced to a wider readership; secondly, female authors who were already familiar to the public were read in new manner. This movement was of particular importance in the USA, where the issue of evaluating literary texts is believed to be more crucial than in other cultures [14].

Another extremely significant strand of feminist literary criticism was to revise the works of traditional canon. Feminists viewed the works of Western canon as being sexist and criticized them “for providing and promoting an exclusively white male world view” [8]. However, according to Schmitz (2008), “a revision of the canon could not mean merely to look for texts written by women which might fit into this traditional canon, it also had to entail a fundamental debate about the criteria for belonging to this canon” [14]. Feminists argue that demands for this new criterion are absolutely reasonable and must be taken seriously as classical

literature has tremendous and universal importance; it should not be merely a reflection of the dominant patriarchal values of, primarily, white, wealthy and heterosexual male authors and readers [14].

Very soon feminists started to analyze how women are presented, at first, in literature and then in all cultural products. This representation, as one of the forms of ‘socialization’, was crucial as it offered the role models for women and men that dictated what was considered acceptable in the society. Additionally, literature was one of the ways of shaping day-to-day conduct, attitudes and beliefs. Traditionally, feminists explored old texts and looked at them through the new lens [1]. They discovered that the images of women that we saw in literary texts were deeply characterized by oppressive, patriarchal prejudices. Female characters were portrayed very rarely as smart, strong, and independent women with ambitions; most of the times, they were presented as passive and meek men’s objects who only pursued love and marriage. Moreover, they could even fall into various stereotypical, male defined categories:

- Madonna, mother, idealized lover;
- Witch, harlot, *femme fatale*;
- Comical crone, silly blonde, hysteric [14].

Since 1980s, however, feminists set out new goals for themselves such as “to construct a new canon of women’s writing by rewriting the history of the novel and of poetry in such a way that neglected women writers were given new prominence” [1]. As described by Elaine Showalter, one of the founders of Anglo-American strand of feminist literary criticism, in the 1970s there was a shift of attention from ‘androt texts’ (books written by male authors) to ‘gynotexts’ (books written by female authors). She was the one to coin the term ‘gynocritics’ which means the study of literary texts written by women [1]. Plate (2016) claims that gynocriticism’s principal focus is female culture [11]. This study is connected to feminist attempts to get women into print, with the search for female writers and the recovery of their neglected and forgotten texts, the teaching of courses about

women's writing, and the organizing of feminist publishing houses and of feminist lists within existing ones [1].

As it can be noticed, this shift of attention from works written by male authors to works written by female ones is even more relevant in the second decade of the 21st century. Due to the emergence of gynocriticism and scrupulous attention to literary texts produced by female authors, women's works of art are no longer ignored or disregarded, they are studied and analyzed. Moreover, in cultural products, women more and more often are portrayed in a positive light and assigned leading and active roles. This also applies to the movie *Ophelia* directed in 2018.

The focus of this article was to analyze two works of art – William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* and the film *Ophelia*, released in 2018 and made by a female director Claire McCarthy, and explain the change of perspectives from a male character to a female one with the help of the literary theory Cultural Materialism. It can be concluded that this transition became possible due to, firstly, feminist literary criticism, that came to being in the second part of the 20th century, secondly, shift of attention from books written by men to books written by female authors and, thirdly, to the emergence of gynocriticism. Owing to all the aforementioned processes that took place in the second part of the 20th century, the way female characters have been portrayed in various cultural products has changed fundamentally. Because of this, it has become possible to place these female characters at the center of works of art and give them the power of voice to tell their own stories.

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Авторы публикации

Снежко Дарья Максимовна –
 Московский педагогический
 государственный университет
 Москва, Россия
 E-mail: snejko65@icloud.com
Чалахян Александра Леонидовна –
 ассистент
 Московский педагогический
 государственный университет
 Москва, Россия
 E-mail: alexandrial16@inbox.ru

Authors of the publication

Snezhko Darya Maximovna –
 Moscow State Pedagogical University
 Moscow, Russia
 E-mail: snejko65@icloud.com
Chalakhyan Alexandra Leonidivna –
 assistant
 Moscow State Pedagogical University
 Moscow, Russia
 E-mail: alexandrial16@inbox.ru