Abstracts

- **Petra Bjelica and Hugo Sánchez.** Ophelia in Contemporary Thought: Language, Subjectivity, Femininity

This conversation shifts the usual paradigm of philosophical approaches to Hamlet: rather than treating Hamlet as the play's principal source of philosophical thought, it places Ophelia at the centre of inquiry. We will offer a short overview of major critical paradigms and approaches in order to explore how Ophelia might inform new philosophical paradigms for thinking and reading: paradigms attentive to fractured language, embodied knowledge, gendered forms of interpretation, and the limits of coherent subjectivity. How have feminist and philosophical readings challenged the reduction of Ophelia to an image of feminine madness, beauty, or victimhood? What does her cultural afterlife reveal about the conditions under which women's speech is heard, interpreted, or transformed into image? Bringing Bachelard's reflections on water and Ophelia's poetic afterlife into dialogue with Deleuze's account of stammering and Showalter's feminist critique of the gendered appropriation of her speech, we will explore the new philosophical possibilities that Ophelia offers for contemporary thought.

- **Nicoleta Cinpoeş.** Drowning Becomes Ophelia

'*Enter the corpse of Ophelia*' is arguably one of the most arresting stage directions in Shakespeare's plays. Every stage production of *Hamlet* has to deal with the challenges posed by the entrance of the dead female body – never scripted to exit – just as the play returns, in Act 5, to the other disputed body: the body politic. While acknowledging that 'snatching' Ophelia's body – as Carol Rutter puts it – impacts Hamlet's story, this paper focuses on twenty-first century European productions that add elaborate drowning scenes. If in Jan Klata's *H.* (2004), Scooba divers kept Marta Kalmus's Ophelia afloat in the drowning scene, Xenia Snagowski, in his 2013 *Hamlet*, intertextualised Shakespeare's Ophelia with Heiner Müller's to drown her. In Monika Kleczewska's 2010 *Hamlet*, Ophelia was drowned by Horatio in the bathtub Claudius had just emerged from. Andréane Leclerc's Ophelia met her watery end in a stunning scene of vertical ballet on a digitally screened brook in Martin Tulinius and The Tiger Lillies' 2011 *Hamlet.* Similarly, the brook – a water-trench separating the audience from the stage – swallowed Ophelia as we watched the scene projected on the backdrop screen in Javor Gardev's 2014 *Hamlet*. Even in *Hamlet*, *the Dance of the Melancholic* (2019), Begoña Arce's Ophelia danced her drowning in real water. Ultimately, my paper argues that by scripting in Ophelia's drowning, stage productions engage critically with the wider narrative that "drowning becomes Ophelia", which visual arts – painting, cinema and art installations – have trafficked for over a century and a half.

- **Fernando Cioni.** Deconstructing and reconstructing Ophelia in contemporary theatre: Heiner Müller, Carmelo Bene, and Robert Lepage

In contemporary theatre, as in culture at large, the classics are updated, modernized, in order to free them from tradition and, presumably, enhance their relevance. Revising Shakespeare is often a reading, a re-reading or a mis-reading, to use Harold Bloom's definition. It is characterized by an appropriation of the Shakespearean text; hence the original is adapted, re-contextualized, deconstructed and reconstructed. The paper will focus on three appropriations of Ophelia: Heiner Müller's postmodern, and post-Brechtian *Hamletmachine*, Carmelo Bene's five "Hamlets" (from *Hamlet: or the Consequences of Filial Piety*, from and by Shakespeare, to *One Hamlet Less*, to *Hommelette for Hamlet*),and Rober Lapage's *Elsinore.*

- **Chiara Di Dio.** Ophelia in the XXI Century: Media, Trans-codification, and Digital Aesthetics

In the contemporary landscape, Ophelia stands out as an element of extraordinary cultural persistence, whose influence transcends Shakespeare's original context to take root in the aesthetic and social practices characterising the digital age. In particular, her current reception is evident in the proliferation of online 'moodboards' and 'aesthetics' – such as the 'Ophelia Core' – which visually and symbolically reinterpret the character's distinctive traits: fragility, melancholy, privileged relationship with nature, and the tension between innocence and sexual desire. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how Ophelia's capacity for transmedia adaptation acts as a symbolic nexus where artistic-literary tradition and digital culture converge, revealing how the past continues to inform the aesthetic and identity practices of the present. It will be argued how, starting from the fundamental recoding of Ophelia by the Pre-Raphaelite (Millais and later Waterhouse), the 'Ophelia Aesthetic' is now embedded within a broader culture of performative identity, analysing the ways in which individuals construct and communicate themselves through the creation and re-composition of images via social media. Particularly, I will analyse how Ophelia becomes the archetypal object of a specific type of aesthetic, in which emotional vulnerability, the relationship with the natural environment (floral or aquatic) and a certain model of ethereal and melancholic femininity are condensed and crystallised in digital media.

- **Fiona Gregory.** "Tell Us What the Show Mean": The Legacies of the Ophelia Role in an Actress's Career

What does it mean to take on the role of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? There is an aura attached to this role; it is held to *tell us something* about the actress playing her, something that goes beyond their approach to characterisation. As a role type, Ophelia has shifted across history, being variously allocated to the singer-actress, the ingénue, the prima donna, and the up-and-coming star. Despite these shifts, playing Ophelia has been associated with particular qualities of body, voice and emotion that have remained remarkably consistent across stage history. Also consistent has been the association of this role with questions of reality disturbance, emotional truth, and the nature of performance. In both the reception of real-life actresses in this role and representations of actresses playing Ophelia from literature, film, the visual arts and popular culture, anxieties have circulated about the relationship of the actress to the role, and of her ability to separate on and off-stage selves. Drawing on examples of actresses playing Ophelia from the 1930s to 1950s, including Lillian Gish, Sarah Churchill, Mary Ure and Claire Bloom, this paper considers the place of this role in the trajectory of an actress's career, and its significance for the development of her performance identity.

- **Nancy Isenberg.** Dancing Ophelia, Boldly. Dada Masilo's South African 'Through-the-Eyes-of-Ophelia' *Hamlet* Ballet (2024)

The historical-geographic-cultural context of *Hamlet* on the ballet-dance stage originating in the late 18th century continues to be mostly Europe-centred, and in most ways also mostly male, white, elite dominant. Standing out in this landscape is the recent danced *Hamlet* production created by Black South African dancer-choreographer Dada Masilo who also danced the role of Ophelia. Further distinguishing this work are (1) that the narrative is from Ophelia's perspective; 2) that it is performed by black dancers blending ballet and black dance styles; (3) that it is set in a contemporary urban South African context. Words like bold, brave, fearless are typically used to describe Dada Masilo, who died suddenly in 2024 shortly after the premier of this work. She was known and admired for the ways her works and dancing break boundaries and challenge gender stereotypes and homophobia. Her premature death (she was 39) sadly threads itself into the weave that bonds the performer with the role. Within this frame, my paper aims to

explore Masilo's choreography and performance of Ophelia as she interacted with other characters and articulated accusingly what and who drove her to despair and madness. As I argue elsewhere, the relational dynamics at the core of Shakespeare's art, when played out through dancers' bodies that can shape them with incomparable emotional and physical energy, generate heightened awareness of the tensions that define them. Thus it follows that bringing this dancing Ophelia into the discussion will help us reflect on the ways Ophelia can mean today.

- **Frédérique LeBel.** Critical Disability Mental Health, and Theatre Practice: Heiner Müller, Carmelo Bene, and Robert Lepage

Ophelia's madness has always been mediated through specific understandings of mental illness: erotomania in the seventeenth century, melancholia in the eighteenth and hysteria in the nineteenth. In the twentieth century, Ophelia first becomes an emblem of sexual repression leading to extreme confusion in the eyes of psychoanalysts; then, following the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1952, theatre practitioners diagnose her with schizophrenia. The twenty-first century ushers in a new theoretical framework for the study of Ophelia's madness in critical disability studies. My presentation examines the idea that disability is a culturally ascribed label and not a fixed factuality, like gender. Tobin Siebers applies such theory to Ophelia and suggests that disability is a form of embodied knowledge that she uses "to claim disability and its capacity to represent points of view on the margins of power" (450). However, I employ the concept of cripface to argue that when bodies perform on stage, non-disabled actors claiming disabled knowledge is ethically slippery. I demonstrate this challenge by analysing Gregory Doran's 2009 *Hamlet* film and Robert Icke's 2017 *Hamlet* at the Almeida Theatre. Mariah Gale's Ophelia taps into the embodied knowledge of schizophrenia to perform her madness. Jessica Brown Findlay's Ophelia, meanwhile, appears for her mad scene "in a wheelchair, rigid-limbed and staring" (Clapp), adopting the visual language of physical disability to depict madness. While Doran claims a mental disability and Icke a physical one for Ophelia, I advance that both iterations of the character exemplify cripface.

- **Maria Francesca Montironi.** Cubist Ophelias: Theatrical Afterlives and the Politics of Reception

This paper examines *Five Truths* by Katie Mitchell (2011), *Ophelias Zimmer / Ophelia's Room* by Alice Birch (2016), and *Ophelia's Got Talent* (2022) by Florentina Holzinger as distinct yet interconnected responses to Hélène Cixous's (1984 [1977]) critique of the victimised Ophelia and Elaine Showalter's (1985) call for feminist responsibility in Ophelia criticism. These contemporary, female-authored works reconfigure Ophelia's body, voice, and "madness" by exposing and interrogating the frameworks through which she has been historically defined. They are read against the persistence of mainstream/"malestream" representations, still shaped by an often uncritical reception of John Everett Millais's *Ophelia*, which aestheticises Ophelia as passive, silent, and consumable. This dynamic persists in contemporary media culture, exemplified by the Gucci Spring/Summer 2018 campaign, *Gucci Hallucination*, by Ignasi Monreal. All three works present Ophelia as a product of cultural interpretation; however, read through Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, they also reveal disruptive modes of writing and resistance that exceed traditional structures. In *Five Truths*, Mitchell stages a 'Cubist Ophelia' (Showalter 1985: 92) through multiple acting methodologies, presenting competing truths that destabilise singular authority. Birch's *Ophelia's Room* emphasises confinement, repetition, and surveillance, positioning Ophelia as both an object of observation and a contested site of inscription. *Ophelia's Got Talent* relocates her within a contemporary media framework, where she is subject to commodification and judgment, yet also

multiplied through performance, reclaiming it as a tool of self-determination. Across these works, Ophelia emerges as both an object of inscription and a figure of potential selfwriting, revealing the productive instability of her theatrical afterlives.

- **Eric Nicholson.** Puppet, Showgirl, or…? Dancing Ophelia, from Kozintsev's 1964 film to Swift's 2025 video and beyond

My proposed paper is a sequel to the one presented at the December 2024 Receptions of Ophelia 1599-1900 conference, when I argued that while Ophelia may suffer from cognitive disability, her condition helps to release her singing voice and mobilize her dancing body, thus promoting her transgressive and artistically potent modern celebrity. If "infinite variety" describes the diva-like charisma of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, this principle gains vivid expression in the music video of Taylor Swift's 2025 hit song, *The Fate of Ophelia*. Swift's autobiographical version of the character is also a drastic revision, as her lyrics narrate and celebrate how her then lover/now fiancé Travis Kelce "dug me out of my grave and saved my heart from the fate of Ophelia". Significantly, the salvific male rescuer does not appear in the video. Instead, Swift/Ophelia moves and dances her way through a series of diverse personae, starting with a tableau vivant of and escape from Millais's iconic painting via lavish, elaborately choreographed transformations into a platinum blonde rehearsing backstage, then an onstage brunette cabaret performer, followed by a red-haired "eldest daughter of a nobleman" who walks the plank of a pirate ship, jumps overboard but then re-emerges framed by a lifesaver ring, and launches into an extended revival—accompanied by dozens of swimsuit-wearing female dancers—of an Esther Williams-style aquatic ballet. In her climactic permutation, Swift/Ophelia becomes a confident Folies-Bergère scarlet-feathered showgirl-leader, an absolute contrast to the human-puppet daughter of Polonius in Grigori Kozintsev's 1964 black-and-white film adaptation of *Hamlet*, in the director's own words "a sweet girl, half a child, whom they turn into a doll—a mechanical plaything with artificial movements, a memorized smile, and the like." In this particularly oppressive patriarchal world of Elsinore, Ophelia's natural performance skills are reduced to a tragic self-caricature, at least until she is driven mad. Yet Kozintsev's and Swift's figurations of Ophelia inhabit the same hermeneutic arc. Questions I will ask include: how do added cinematic song-and-dance numbers exalt the histrionic qualities of Ophelia, in similar yet distinct ways, that reveal her as a style-imitator whose own style can inspire imitation? How do kinetic glamor and Ophelia's elusive "It" mystique involve variations of the "public intimacy" syndrome postulated by Joseph Roach? How might recent and future revisions—especially queer and dance-driven ones—enable Ophelia to supersede reductive and fetishistic interpretations of her character?

- **Lou Pinelli.** Modernist Ophelias: Reception and Resonances in Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys

This paper aims to investigate the direct or indirect relationships established by two canonical modernist women writers with the figure of Ophelia. The first part examines Virginia Woolf's misalignment with the Shakespearean character, from her 1909 reading of A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) to her late draft of "A Sketch of the Past". Although Alice Fox (1990) noted Hamlet as a crucial source of autobiographical identification for Woolf, Valérie Favre has recently argued that Woolf was paradoxically constructed as "a mere variation on Shakespeare's tragic madwoman in the river—a modern, if not modernist, Ophelia" (54). This section highlights the tension between Woolf's distancing herself from Ophelia's potentially patriarchal representation and her own posthumous incarnation as a modernist Ophelia following her suicide by water. The second part turns to Jean Rhys and the Ophelia-esque characters she represented in her early novels, such as *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939). By developing a typology of the Ophelian character in fiction, I examine how femininity, madness,

and drowning resonated for a transnational writer who translated the Ophelian archetype into an urban context. Together, Woolf and Rhys illustrate the tension, in the modernist period, between a resistance to Ophelia as a tragic figure – mediated by a rejection of pre-Raphaelite iconography – and a simultaneous, fragmented re-embodiment of her archetypal values.

- **Anandi Rao.** Ophelia's Sapphic Futures: Race, Class and Sexuality in Melissa Murray's *Ophelia* (1979) and Lauren M Gunderson's *A Room in the Castle* (2025)

This paper brings together two feminist interpretations of *Hamlet* that end with Ophelia living and escaping with her lover in Murray's play and her attendant in Gunderson's play. Murray's play *Ophelia* was performed by the alternative theatre company Hormone Imbalance in London in 1979 and we published by Unfinished histories as part of their collection *Radical Rediscoveries, 1969-1987: Performance Texts from the Women's Theatre Movement* in 2025. In contrast, Lauren M Gunderson's play was first produced by the Folger Theatre and Cincinnati Shakespeare Company in 2025. Both plays were performed by an all-female cast. This paper seeks to answer the following questions:

What happens when we put Ophelia's explicitly sapphic future imagined in Murray's play in conversation with twenty-first century feminist politics and notions of radical fugitivity that The Folger Theatre performance of Gunderson's play with its all-black cast?

In both plays, the two figures who 'escape' are from different class positionalities. In what ways does imagining a companion for Ophelia allow Murray and Gunderson to explore cross-class solidarity?

Do the plays present any limits to using Ophelia as a figure to craft allyship and forge solidarity? The paper will combine a close reading of the scripts, with interviews with both authors if possible.

- **Francesca Rayner.** In a Different Time and Place: Ophelia in Contemporary Portuguese Performance

Referencing a cinematic Ofelia in Hilary Brougher's *Sticky Fingers of Time* (1997), queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman notes that "Ofelia ….'neither fully resides in her own historical moment nor has a body that opens out into historical time'" (2010: 130). This comment could also be applied to Shakespeare's Ophelia and her sense of temporal and spatial dislocation. Yet rather than view this inability to locate Ophelia in space and time as a negative feature, this presentation argues that it is precisely these qualities that enable alternative reconfigurations of her role. In contemporary performances of *Hamlet* in Portugal, Ophelia is rarely portrayed as innocent or naïve. Indeed, the most recent 2025 Ophelia, Lisa Reis, stated clearly that she did not want her Ophelia to be pure. Yet the director of two earlier performances (2002 and 2004), Ricardo Pais, had been unsure how to deal with his two Ophelias. In 2002, Pais argued that Ophelia was a comic character adrift within a tragedy, but his 2004 performances tackled the misogyny of the play more explicitly in line with feminist criticism of Ophelia as circumscribed by patriarchal norms. In mala voadora's 2014 First Quarto *Hamlet,* Ophelia was as skillful a performer as Hamlet himself, including in her scenes of mental distress and drowning. This presentation explores how these four performances made use of Ophelia's temporal and spatial dislocation to create representations of Ophelia that questioned norms of gender, age and whiteness.

- **Ayushi Sikka.** Guns n' Roses: Reading Ophelia's Dearh in Hindi Film Adaptations of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

The tragic circumstances of Ophelia's death in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* lay in stark juxtaposition to the glamorous, beautified and "mermaid-like" aesthetics of her corpse evoked by Gertrude in Act 4, Scene 7

of the play. Although the violent event originally takes place off-stage, invisible to the eyes of Elizabethan spectators, it has immortalized Ophelia as an unsung Shakespearean heroine and a scapegoat of masculo-phallic corruption. Diametrically contrasting studies have been generated to either view her as an oppressed woman who, in an attempt to elude the burdens of patriarchy, succumbed to a rather feminine death, or to concomitantly establish Ophelia's corporeal demise as an ultimate act of defiance against authority. However, despite being crucial to the plot, the aesthetic and circumstantial portrayal of Ophelia's death remain ever-changing in the subsequent Hindi film adaptations of *Hamlet* due to differences in socio-cultural contexts of the source text and the target text. This paper intends to read and compare Ophelia's death in Kishore Sahu's *Hamlet* (1954) and Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider (*2014) with the original script. Both Sahu and Bharwaj invoke their artistic license by deviating from the original draft of the play; while Sahu portrays the death scene on-camera rather than simply appointing Gertrude as the sole eye witness, Bhardwaj altogether alters the aesthetics of Ophelia/Arshi's demise. My study also pays intricate attention to Ophelia's choice of weapons in the aforementioned texts.

- **Laura Tosi.** When Ophelia survives: Shakespeare for Young Adults

For over four centuries, Ophelia has been defined by her tragic trajectory. However, in the twenty-first century, a wave of Young Adult (YA) narrative adaptations has radically reimagined her fate. This paper investigates a corpus of contemporary YA novels—specifically Lisa Fiedler's *Dating Hamlet* (2002), Lisa Klein's *Ophelia* (2006), and Jackie French's *Ophelia: Queen of Denmark* (2015)—that systematically cross generic boundaries between Shakespearean adaptation, romance fiction, and the *Bildungsroman*. I argue that these novels function as 'fan-fictional' spaces, driven by a desire to explore the 'what ifs' of the Shakespearean text. By providing prequels that detail the romantic courtship of Hamlet and Ophelia, or sequels where Ophelia survives the final catastrophe to find her place in the world, these authors 'fill the gaps' of the off-stage action. In doing so, they dismantle the traditional tragic script in favour of an empowered femininity. These 'New Ophelias'—resilient, reflective, and resistant—serve as empowering role models who navigate patriarchal structures with an agency denied to them in the early modern theatre. By requiring readers to negotiate between the original play and the conventions of the YA novel, these texts offer a 'pleasure of recognition' while simultaneously inviting a subversive critique of the canon. Ultimately, I contend that these narrative receptions transform Ophelia from a passive victim into a central protagonist, challenging established interpretations and allowing today's teenagers to bridge the distance between Shakespeare's world and their own lived experiences.