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“Sweets to the Sweet”: Arthur Hughes’s Versions of *Ophelia*

Gertrude’s eloquent description of the last moments of Ophelia’s life inspired Arthur Hughes to paint what is universally regarded as his first Pre-Raphaelite work. Younger than Rossetti and Hunt whom he had met in 1849, Hughes was won to the Pre-Raphaelite cause by his 1850 encounter with the *Germ*, and in 1852 the first fruit of this conversion appeared in the exhibition of *Ophelia* at the Royal Academy (1247, fig. 1). Late in life, Hughes wrote John Guille Millais of his first meeting with his father:

One of the nicest things that I remember is connected with an “Ophelia” I painted that was exhibited in the Academy at the same time as his [Millais’] own most beautiful and wonderful picture of that subject. Mine met its fate high up in the little octagon room; but on the morning of the varnishing, as I was going through the first room, before I knew where I was, Millais met me, saying, “Aren’t you he they call Cherry?” (my name in the school). I said I was. Then he said he had just been up a ladder looking at my picture and that it gave him more pleasure than any picture there, but adding also very truly that I had not painted the right kind of stream. He had just passed out of the Schools when I began in them. . . . He could not have done a kinder thing, for he knew I should be disappointed at the place my picture had.¹

Rossetti, who had expressed admiration for the picture when he saw it in Hughes’s studio, calling the bat to which Deverell objected “one of the finest things in the picture,”² was instrumental in its sale, sometime prior to 1854, to Francis MacCracken of Belfast, the first owner of the work.³

The Shakespearian moment that inspired

Hughes’s first Pre-Raphaelite endeavour was taken up again in the mid-60s. In this version, Hughes again depicts Ophelia just before her death, but this time she is standing, her back to the viewer; her head turned, she looks back over her shoulder as if surveying her past life, momentarily distracted from the natural trappings of her immediate surroundings with which she had been preoccupied (fig. 6). Unlike the 1852 *Ophelia*, which in her childlike innocence, her sense of abandonment, and uncomprehending attitude is a near-literal realization of Gertrude’s description, the lady of the later version appears considerably older and possesses a maturity of stature and poise inconsistent with either Hughes’s first or Shakespeare’s original Ophelia. Whereas the 1852 *Ophelia* depends heavily on the literary context of the Shakespearian lines, the standing version more nearly resembles a portrait in which the mood or atmosphere is conditioned by decorative elements in the picture. As Ophelia absent-mindedly raises a hand to a branch above, her hair luxuriates down her back, a few flowers placed strategically rather than casually in its strands. Her mantel, in a corner of which she is gathering the forest blooms, richly overlays her gown, its elaborate sleeve calling to mind a lush and courtly world. Behind her, the wind plays with a wisp of her veil, spreading it in the direction of her “watery death.” Although her sorrowing eyes speak of pain, the natural imagery seems in its richness and ornateness almost antithetical to the thematic intention of the literary source, to which the unkempt Ophelia of the earlier version is much more faithful.