
Ophelia as Shakespeare's Character of the Tragedy

Ophelia's situation in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* not only invokes pity in the reader but also provides an example of the nature of men and women and accentuates Hamlet's tragic flaws. Shakespeare so beautifully links the female with the liquid, insanity, and frailty through this character that we often fail to realize the underlying message he intended for us. Ophelia's mistreatment by the various men in her life drove her to insanity, and eventually to her symbolic death.

Ophelia had little self-esteem to begin with. When Laertes confronts her about her relationship with the prince Hamlet, she simply complies. He does not try to be sensitive when he tells Ophelia that Hamlet's love is "a fashion and a toy in blood, a violet in...nature, forward, not permanent, sweet, [and] not lasting" (1.3.7-9). Laertes, however, is the least of the harmful influences the male sex has on Ophelia. Ophelia's father Polonius is incredibly unkind, insensitive, and disrespectful of his daughter. Polonius does not credit Ophelia with enough common sense to be able to judge anything on her own. He cruelly twists her words and tells her she should consider herself a baby. His mistreatment of his daughter permanently forges an emotional barrier between Ophelia and the male sex.

Ophelia's frailty makes her vulnerable to exploitation, for deceit's sake by her father, and for lust's sake by Hamlet. In what literary scholars have come to know as the "nunnery scene", Polonius uses Ophelia to spy on Hamlet to find out the reason for his "madness". Hamlet tests Ophelia's loyalties when he asks her, "Where's your father?" (3.1.141). When Ophelia outright lies to him, he loses his temper. Hamlet tells Ophelia that he never loved her, probably in an attempt to make her forget him because he knows that they can never have a relationship while he still has this revenge to carry out. Of course, Ophelia does not see this, so she is silently but effectively hurt. When he tells her to "get thee to a nunnery" (3.1.148-149), he could be referring to a convent, or, he could be making the first of many cruel manipulations of words and referring to a brothel. Hamlet notices in himself some womanly characteristics that he does not like, like his excessive mourning for his father and his hesitance to kill Claudius. As critic Showalter states, "Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent revulsion against women and into his brutal behavior towards Ophelia".

Showalter also notes eloquently that "Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears". Ophelia cries because she truly thinks that her lover has gone crazy. This situation is not unlike that of Gertrude when Hamlet confronts her about her hasty remarriage. Hamlet warns Gertrude not to flatter herself: "Lay not that...unction to your soul that not your trespass but my madness speaks" (3.4.166-167). Gertrude attempts

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to comfort herself and justify her sin by attributing the accusations to his insanity, just as Ophelia tries to excuse Hamlet's cruelty. Ophelia's effort is a bit nobler than is Gertrude's, but this scene is symbolic for a woman's blame-shifting nature in general.

Hamlet appears much happier and more tolerant later in the play when things start going his way. As he sits and watches the "play within the play" with Ophelia, he makes crude, manipulative, and conflicting comments. In what at first appears to be flirtatious innuendo, Hamlet begins bullying Ophelia by manipulating her harmless banter into sexual harassment. Ophelia innocently asks, "Will he tell us what this show meant?" to which Hamlet replies, "Ay, or any show that you will show him. Be not you ashamed to show, [and] he'll not shame to tell you what it means" (3.2.164-167). She playfully shakes a finger at him and brushes it off as flirting, but he does not stop there. Hamlet probably thinks he is furthering his attempts to expedite Ophelia's recovery after being "dumped", but it seems as though his plan backfires. While Hamlet tries to think like a woman, Ophelia tries to think like a man, and neither really sees the other's perspective. Hamlet thinks that by making crude sexual references, he will disgust Ophelia and facilitate her "getting over" him. Ophelia, knowing the nature of men, sees his comments as flirting and possible reacceptance of her love. When Hamlet tells Ophelia that "nothing", which was Elizabethan slang for the female genitalia, was a "fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (3.2.125), or that "it would cost [her] a groaning to take off [his] edge" (3.2.273-274), he only contributes to the confusion that eventually leads to her pseudo-suicide.

Ophelia's descent into dementia was inevitable considering the loss of her terrible father and the mixed messages she received from Hamlet, her lover. However, this is the point at which we learn the most about Ophelia. Shakespeare proves through Ophelia that there is honesty in insanity. Once grief and anxiety free Ophelia from her submissive shackles, she speaks freely about the way she feels the men in her life have treated her, and her consequential views of them: "Young men will do 't, if they come to 't...they are to blame." (4.5.65-66). And, just like a drunken confession, she reveals the extent of her relationship with Hamlet: "Quoth she 'before you tumbled me, you promised me to wed.' He answers: 'So would I 'a done, by yonder sum, An thou hadst not come to my bed'" (4.5.67-71).

Ophelia's manner of death is the most poignant symbol Shakespeare makes concerning the association between femininity and fluidity. The phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard deems it "a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element" (Showalter). Similarly, Laertes laments that "too much of water hast...Ophelia, and therefore I forbid my tears. But...nature her custom holds...when these are gone, the woman will be out" (4.7.211-215). His tears are symbolic of his purging the femininity within him.

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