
Denmark and Languishing. Is a Woman the One, Who Is Guilty?

William Shakespeare's Hamlet, says renowned pundit of literature, Harold Bloom, "is unsurpassed in the West's imaginative literature" (Bloom 384). Surely, its story, style, and many famous lines have transcended time and place to such an extent that even upon a first reading, the play may seem familiar. Humanity remains transfixed upon the Prince of Denmark, who is simultaneously incomparably intelligent, melancholy, uncommitted, witty, introspective, and unbalanced. The poor guy, as is commonly known, is commanded by the ghost of his father to seek revenge on his uncle for committing regicide/fratricide and marrying his mother. Added to this, Hamlet finds that the love of his life is suddenly and inexplicably shunning him, at a time when he needs the most support. While Hamlet does purposely assume an "antic disposition" (1.5.181) in order to discern his uncle's culpability, I contend that the only true madness Hamlet experiences is caused by Ophelia.

Clearly, this idea originates with Polonius, who after talking to Ophelia about Hamlet's recent oddities and confirming that she has not seen him or accepted his letters (per her father's request), decides "that hath made him mad" (2.2.112). The scheme of Polonius and Claudius to overhear a meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet causes them to decide this is not the case. However, there are other factors at work in the contrived reunion. First, it is distinctly possible that in either or both instances Hamlet overheard Polonius and Claudius discussing their intentions, as he enters on-stage shortly after, engaging in some aimless activity. Second, Hamlet probably knew that they were eavesdropping. Ophelia estranges herself from him for two months and then suddenly encounters him while reading a prayer -- the situation more than hints at chicanery. It has also been suggested that Ophelia lacks subtlety and tips him off in her acting. Most interestingly, Hamlet directly asks her, "Where's your father?" (3.1.131) and seems to make an implied threat to the king with, "Those that are married already -- all but one -- shall live" (3.1.150-151). That he would make these statements at all implies they are for the benefit of listeners (Muir 25). Hamlet, who is suffering great stress due to being kept from returning to college, being passed over for the crown, worrying about the shady acts of his uncle, and most importantly, losing his soul-mate, meets her again only to find that she is now cohort to his enemies. Of course, his reaction is going to be a little aggressive, especially since she opens by trying to return his gifts and her comment, "rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind" (3.1.103) is belligerent in itself and seems to suggest he is to blame. The scene is not as decisive as thought by Polonius and Claudius in indicating that love is not the cause of Hamlet's unease.

Hamlet and Ophelia were engaging in sexual intercourse. Both Polonius and Laertes seem to at least suspect it in Act I, and caution her that if she her "chaste treasure open to his unmastered importunity" (1.3.31-32), it will be an embarrassment to the family and a mistake on her part. Later, Hamlet makes many odd comments to Polonius, most significant of which is, "Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to 't' (2.2.184-186). The exact meaning is unclear, but the suggestion is definitely there that Ophelia is being unchaste. When yelling at Ophelia, he tells her "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it" (3.1.118-120) -- almost concretely stating that they have given license to lust -- and wishes that Polonius may "play the fool nowhere but in 's own house" (3.1.134), a euphemism for being a

grandfather and also a literal intimation of his state if Ophelia conceives out of marriage. When she herself has gone crazy, her song seems to explain quite clearly what has transpired. Before Hamlet "tumbled" her, he "promised [her] to wed," and he would have done so, if she "hadst not come to [his] bed." (4.5.63-67). While clearly she is in a delusional state, her song has meaning. Even upon her death, the priest seems frustrated that Ophelia is receiving such reverence and Christian rites and complains that "yet here she is allowed her virgin crants" (5.1.232), rather than being lodged in unsanctified ground unceremoniously. That is to say, even the clergy doubt her purity.

The fact of their sexual liaisons is significant for its magnification of the effects of their break-up. Sex is often mistaken for love or made to unhealthily buttress it. In the vernacular it is called "virgin baggage," but by consenting to intercourse both Hamlet and Ophelia felt that their love was forever and that there was a contractual obligation to remain together for all time. Having given up their virginity to each other made the break-up that much more devastating, as it was the seal of their agreement. One must assume that in the time of this play, sex outside of marriage was an even larger debacle, as it would entail great shame, lost social status, and the possibility of remaining unmarried for the rest of life, but even today it is significant, as a 2000 Reuters poll found that 72% of twelve to seventeen year old girls who have had sex regret it (Myers 358). Though Hamlet was male and ostensibly older, this applies to him, especially due to stricter social mores and his sensitivity. "After separations," says Dr. David Myers, "feelings of loneliness and anger -- and sometimes even a strange desire to be near the former partner -- are commonplace" (Myers 367). This explains Hamlet's "pragmatically murderous treatment of Ophelia" (Bloom 421), why he chose to be around her only to verbally attack her. When Ophelia comments on the players' brevity, Hamlet says they are brief "as woman's love" (3.2.152). He does love her, but cannot deal with her desertion on top of everything else. Hamlet also says during that scene, "I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying" (3.2. 244-245). Deprived of communication with her, Hamlet has not unjustifiably assumed that she is cheating on him. This is even more reason to unhinge him. A recent study finds that men and women both respond equally and aggressively to emotional and sexual infidelity on the part of a significant other. It is, in fact, the third-leading cause of violent crime in the United States (Harris 11). To add jealousy into the mix of emotions Hamlet is feeling regarding Ophelia, it is amazing he did not actually kill her. Even simply the frustration-aggression principle (blocking of a desired goal creating anger which directly leads to aggression) could explain Hamlet's behavior (Myers 555). He wants Ophelia, she (like other things) is denied to him, and so he becomes increasingly erratic.

"Prince Hamlet is more aware than we are that he has been assigned a task wholly inappropriate for him" (Bloom 388), and his heart is not in the revenge. There are many explanations for this, but regardless, his father's commandment, though Hamlet says it "all alone shall live" (1.5.103) in his memory, does not cause him to lose control like the loss of Ophelia. There is a noticeable difference between his repartee with Polonius, in which he is clearly pretending to be insane so as to play with him, and the actual break-downs he experiences when in confrontation with Ophelia. The "casual slaughter" (5.2.384) of Polonius could even be explained as some of Hamlet's emotions against Ophelia being misdirected to her father. It was a win-win for him regardless of whether it was Claudius or Polonius behind the curtain, and of course he felt no grief, for he was either avenging his dead father or castigating for his lost love. The "mysterious movement from Act IV to Act V" (Bloom 390), in which Hamlet transforms from the twenty-year-old hot-headed youth to the quieter, wiser thirty-something could also be explained along these lines. "Nothing of Hamlet's 'antic disposition' lingers after

the graveyard scene" (Bloom 390), says Bloom again, and even there, it is only mockery directed at death. Ophelia is dead and his cause of madness is lifted. His grief (and perhaps his general fixation upon mortality) are the explanation of his behavior there, and his leap into the grave of Ophelia is perhaps a final episode of derangement inspired by her. Are we to believe that "forty thousand brothers could not with all their quantity of love" (5.1.272-273) compare to Hamlet's love for Ophelia? I do not doubt the strength and the validity of his emotion.

Shakespeare himself said that love makes fools of us all. Hamlet writes to Ophelia that he "is thine evermore ... whilst this machine is to him" (2.2. 123-124). To be denied, to see her seemingly conspire with his enemies, and to believe that the breadth of the devotion he felt for her in better times was a sham is more than enough to turn him into a lunatic. Love lends itself to hate, and, as the expression goes, when a man starts acting odd, *cherchez la femme*. For a man as brooding as Hamlet is in the first place to have a presumed life-partner leave is quite devastating and almost certainly weighs on his thoughts, eventually driving him to despair. It probably made him doubt all his relations and could help explain his vitriol toward his mother. As the two primary women in his life have each seemed to have deserted him, it is no wonder he tells Ophelia that woman's "wantonness" has "made me mad" (3.1.148-149). It could even be the reason that Rosencratz and Guildenstern are not "near [his] conscience" (5.2.58). Though he says it is because of their "baser nature" (5.2.60) (read: low social class), this does not seem quite fitting to the well beloved prince, whereas self-fulfilling prophecy that since one's soul-mate and mother so easily turned, one's childhood friends probably would, too, does. If we are to accept from Ophelia that Hamlet actually was a great guy (somewhat difficult with his resume of death-causing) and that his "noble mind is here o'erthrown" (3.1.153), then the best conclusion is that bitterness is the reason why. To be stymied in love is the ultimate cause for discontent.

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