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Shakespeare  
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## The Purpose of Ophelia's Madness

### I. Introduction

The madness and subsequent death of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is much more important to the characters in the play and the audience than the scenes we have where she is in control of her faculties and the hints of what kind of person she was prior to the start of the play. Across centuries, her madness and death have caught the eye of countless artisans and her "document in madness" is one that many psychiatrists in the past have looked at as a trope and type to real life cases in madness among women. But the questions of who Ophelia was before she loses her mind and what the cause and purpose of her insanity plays to both within and outside of the stage are ones that are generally overlooked by scholars, or only ever given the passing of a glance.

Arguments have been made against the very importance of Ophelia as a character within the play and that she only exists for the audience to pity (Camden 246). Although this statement is quite strong, there is some veracity in the point that, at the very least, if none of the characters in the play love or care for Ophelia, then the audience did and by her reoccurring role in art, holding the title as the most depicted heroine (Kiefer 11). Before the latter half of the twentieth century, Ophelia was seen as the ideal feminine: passive, beautiful, following every order given to her by her male counterpart. It is in viewing Ophelia as a lady, many have argued, is the reason why English artists found themselves painting her during her descent into madness and her death (Rhodes 17). She is only able to be sexual when she no longer has her wits to hold her. Claudius, similarly, always views Ophelia as a lady, and when she acts contrary to this in Act 4,

scene 5, Claudius tries to stop her by saying “Pretty Ophelia” (4.5.55). In more recent scholarship, under the helm of feminist criticism, Ophelia’s madness has been viewed as her defining act of self-liberation. The fore-mentioned scene may be appropriate here, as well. He tries to calm her by reminding her that she is a lady, but she cuts him off with another song, thus taking agency and no longer allowing herself to be silenced by the men who surround her.

Although much is to be said about Ophelia’s madness, whatever the cause, giving her agency, there must also be further purpose for her madness than just William Shakespeare allowing for his feminist side to show. The obvious reason is, of course, for her true insanity to parallel that of Hamlet’s “antic disposition.” But if we view, as some scholars do, that Ophelia has no purpose other than the emotion she excites from the audience, then perhaps her madness is a case common in women of the Elizabethan age, and so her action is a way to understand these girls, or give someone pending cases of this madness to relate to. The final theatrical reason for her death is, if we believe Hamlet does love her, then she is Hamlet’s one connection to the world so when she dies, Hamlet no longer has anything binding him to this world, so he can enact the revenge of his father, committing treason, thereby condemning himself to death. Each of these reasons is valid in context of the play and working backwards in order I shall arguably prove each of them.

## II. Hamlet’s Love Lost

Ophelia is depicted as “a tenderhearted, delicate minded young girl, well reared in proper obedience to her father and experiencing . . . her first introduction to the bittersweet delight of love” (Camden 247). In the first scene we have of Ophelia, we encounter her in reference to the men in her life. Her brother Laertes is about to leave Denmark and before he goes he imparts some wisdom unto her regarding her budding relationship with Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark.

He warns her that they are both still young, and the attention Hamlet is currently giving her is probably no more than a passing fancy and not something she should take heavily and should keep herself chaste no matter what Hamlet might say of his affections (1.3.10-43). In one of the few shows of Ophelia's keen sense and wit, she tells Laertes to listen to his own advice (1.3.44-45). Without a doubt, Ophelia believes that Hamlet does truly love her, and instead takes her brother's advice as egocentrically empathetic. Although he is trying to give his sister honest advice, he sees Hamlet as he sees himself: one who uses women and discards them once satiated with their gifts. Shortly thereafter, her father Polonius gives her similar advice and berates her by claiming she has taken Hamlet's "tenders" as "sterling" (1.3.105-106). He exclaims that she is not in the same social class as Hamlet and that it is in her best interest that she no longer see the Dane and turn away any attempt he makes to see her.

Ophelia follows her father's advice and refuses Hamlet access to her. Shortly thereafter Hamlet begins to show his first signs of false madness. He goes into Ophelia's room with his clothes a mess and his face pale which frightens Ophelia to the point that she feels it is necessary to share it with her father (2.1.74-82). Polonius, believing Hamlet's madness is due to his daughter's refusal to see him, goes to the king to tell him of the event and brings a letter that Hamlet sent to her (likely while he was away at school), which proclaims his love for Ophelia (2.2.113-117). In the letter, Hamlet uses celestial language to prove his love, while Polonius's talk of stars is used to prove that their love cannot be, for "Lord Hamlet is a prince out of [Ophelia's] star" (138). Polonius believes Hamlet's madness is due to Ophelia's sudden refusal of him, to the point that he will bet his life and station in the court on it (153). Once he persuades Claudius, they set up a plot to "loose" Ophelia on Hamlet to prove his hypothesis (159).

This leads us into the famous “Get thee to a nunnery” scene. When Hamlet first comes upon Ophelia, he appears happy to see her (3.1.88-91), however when she returns tokens he gave her in the past, his mood begins to change and he starts to confuse her with questions of her “fairness” and “honesty” (102-104). At first she attempts to go along with his word play (108-9), but as his discourse continues he becomes harsher and crueler with his words to the point that she is no longer able to respond. He does, in fact, proclaim that he once loved her and she responds that he did make her believe this (114-5), it is obvious to the audience that their relationship has now officially begun to unravel and in his heartbreak Hamlet tells her never to marry and makes a string of attacks against her character (120-140).

At some point, it is obvious that he realizes the two of them are being watched, so it is unknown how much of this is a show and what is not, but in the end it is clear that at one point Hamlet did love Ophelia, if not still, and that her reason actions have hurt him in some way. In the play-within-a-play scene, Hamlet marks upon the brevity of women’s love. While this line is generally read as referring to Gertrude, it is possible he means Ophelia, and for Ophelia the remark can be pointed at none but her (Camden 250) and it must sting since she has now lost her love because she has done the socially proper thing of following her father’s instruction.

After this, the next time we see Ophelia she is crazy. Her father is dead, her brother is still away at school and her love is lost. She has no alliances and no sense of agency as a woman stuck in the Danish court. By now, Claudius’ conscience has been “caught” and in the scene prior Hamlet declares his dedication to the pursuit of avenging his father (4.4.64). The next time he sees Ophelia she is dead and the court is burying her body. He reacts irritated with Laertes’ show of love to his sister by leaping into the grave with her, claiming that his love for Ophelia is worth more than that of forty thousand brothers (5.1.253) and he could perform just as

meaningless acts as Laertes to prove his love (5.1.257-267). It is because of his love for Ophelia that he agrees to fight Laertes and it is the fight he has with Ophelia's brother that eventually leads to his death. Were it not for Ophelia's madness which led to her death, Hamlet would have merely extracted his revenge, and thereafter possibly taken her as his queen as Gertrude claims to have hoped (225).

### III. Ophelia and the Audience

If we take, instead, for Shakespeare to have created Ophelia as the standard female during the Elizabethan period, then perhaps we may view her madness as an epidemic many women were facing. In her article *On Ophelia's Madness*, Camden parallels Ophelia with another Shakespearean heroine, the Jailer's daughter from *Two Noble Kinsmen*. She, like Ophelia, sings snatches of songs and attempts to drown herself. Unlike Ophelia, however, she is saved by her Wooer (253). Perhaps if Hamlet had been in Denmark at the time she fell into the brook, she might have saved her, but that is a different matter all together. The Jailer's daughter claims to be suffering from "mope" which is another term for erotomania (254), a kind of love sickness linked with women, madness and suicide.

Madness signified a terrible loss for it rendered the body and the mind (in respect to others) useless and it was a disease given to a person not because of the sins she has committed, but by the works of others.

All the songs Ophelia sings in her hysteria are about loss: lost love, lost virginity and lost life (Neely 51). Through the course of the play, she has experienced loss of her lover, the death of her father and bereavement, things every person in the audience would have shared an experience of in some sense (51). In her songs, she imagines her father's corpse which she has not seen and performs a funeral in song in the place of the funeral that never occurs (52). Anyone

could only imagine how painful it must be for a child to lose her father and not even be able to say goodbye. What's worse, is that her father was killed by the love she had lost an act prior. For the love sick ladies of the Elizabethan era, she most definitely would have been either an icon or a case in caution.

“The iconic representation of Ophelia in paintings and on the stage throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries aestheticized her madness and made female sexuality and feminine nature itself the source of the ‘female malady’, madness” (Salkeld 116). Which psychiatrists past and present have agreed with in their claims that the female mind is much more susceptible to madness, especially in the vein of love sickness and erotomania (Camden 255).

Psychiatrists A. O. Kellogg and John Connolly both mark on the reality of Ophelia's madness and how her words mirror those of the women in the asylums (Rhodes 37). The use of sexual language is common to madwomen, even the inexperienced mark on such things (36). This knowledge, of course, allows for those critics that claim Ophelia is chaste and the perfect picture of female decorum (pre-madness) to keep their idealized vision of Ophelia and allow for her bawdy comments and songs

#### IV. Feminist Criticism

In more recent scholarship, the search to find a stronger female hero in the character of Ophelia has been of some interest for various people as the character is depicted everywhere in popular culture throughout time. In looking to Shakespeare's other plays, and at Hamlet's own feigning of madness, it has been noted that he uses madness in various cases for personal and political survival (Salkeld 86). Although there are political elements to Ophelia's madness, the political aspects is seen more in the character of Hamlet as it allows for him to pretend as if he does not have a larger scheme going on so he can remain at court, interloping with others without

seeming like a menace. Ophelia's insanity on the other hand, is a way for her to survive on her own without the men in her life. She is alone now and so she retreats within.

While her madness is her way in protecting herself, it also leads to her being a threat in the eyes of the establishment as it brings about her own assertiveness (Salkeld 94). Also, as Polonius's death leads Laertes to start a rebellion, the King and Queen of Denmark can only imagine what kind of messages the masses might gain from her words. The anxiety of those around her by her display shows how women who are not controlled are deemed dangers to the state and the culture as a whole (117). Rhodes writes that "Ophelia is praised for what she lacks and what can therefore be projected onto her, rather than the strength of her character or characterization" (4). If this is true, then the two scenes where she actually displays some sense of assertiveness are allowed to be brushed off by those pondering whatever character she may have because one can always say that nothing can be read into those lines because they are mere "documents in madness."

Her madness is caused by and is in response to her father's manipulation (Lenker 55). Before Polonius interjects on her relationship with Hamlet, she is happily on her way to becoming, at the very least, the mistress to the future king of Denmark and although there may be a sense of shame in the role, it would not have been a role that would have left her in rags, peddling for food. At best, she may have been the Queen (assuming they both survived to the end of the play), but Polonius had to intercede and destroy his daughter's perhaps one chance at happiness where she was, indeed, acting upon her own accord. The apparent incorrectness in which Polonius treated Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship is seen soon after by him when he believes Hamlet is mad for her love, rather than tell her to return all the gifts and tokens he has given her and see how he reacts, he should have allowed for Ophelia to return to her relationship

with Hamlet to see how true it may or may not have been. I think in showing just how wrong Polonius was, in both why Hamlet was mad and in his accusations that the Prince is merely using her for whatever sexual delight he may have had or might potentially attain from Ophelia, Shakespeare is showing just how wrong the patriarchal society is.

In the first half of the play she neglects her own feelings to be in service to her father. When he is finally gone, her lines are mixed between her sexual desire and frustrations for Hamlet and the loss she feels both for Hamlet and her father (Neely 52). Lenker describes her as being “paralyzed between childlike innocence and adult sexual knowledge” (54). Although she now interjects and brings attention to herself, her words are not her own but songs she has heard before (55), just like a child who repeats the words of her parents to everyone she sees. She has never before had the chance to speak for herself, so she instead connects songs and phrases she has heard before to make sense of her own feelings.

Her madness is a metaphor for a non-Shakespearean tragic heroine’s sexual awakening as her mixed songs and bawdy references might be akin to a girl trying to understand the changes and emotions that are boiling up within. Her death, similarly, could be seen as a metaphor for her loss of virginity, or what one might refer to as a death to sexual purity. If one views Shakespeare as a feminist and liberator of women (in any sense), then the death of the perfect daughter and ideal lady of the court, that is Ophelia, is an act of destroying the ideals of the patriarchal society from which England, and the bulk of the western world, is based in. Her insanity frees her from the constraints of the world as one scarcely holds a mad person accountable for her crimes (Salkeld 95).

## V. Conclusion

Other possibilities exist, such as her madness and demise show just how blind the forces of death are as Ophelia never once performs an act of evil but remains rather a victim throughout the course of the play, and yet she still meets the same end the other characters do. In addition to this, she is the only character—aside from Claudius—who may very well not experience the Christian heaven, but rather be doomed to hell because her untimely death may have been a suicide (5.1.208-210). And there is the more obvious parallel between her true madness and Hamlet’s “antic disposition,” to show the court and the audience how the truly mad would act in court rather than Hamlet’s methodical treatment of insanity.

Her character is one that has been fawned over more than it has been scrutinized. She may be seen as the ideal woman who has fallen to madness as a victim, or as the renegade who becomes mad by her own accord to buck the reigns of patriarchal society. However one looks at her, the character however passive is one that excites emotion and intrigue from all generations, and gives the characters in the play a concept of ideal and beauty that could never be attained in Shakespeare’s Denmark, otherwise, and for that reason she dies.

Overall, Ophelia is essential to the play as she is just as existential as Hamlet, if not more so, as she enacts everything Hamlet contemplates: suicide and insanity.

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