

The Water Nymph

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While Ophelia's character in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is often construed as passive and too accepting of her outrageous fortune, her strengths of intelligence and virtue are revealed through her discretion and later insanity.

We are first introduced to Ophelia through her dialogue with her brother, Laertes, in Act I Scene III. Shakespeare creates an intimate moment between the two siblings as they bid each other farewell. However, Laertes does most of the talking, while Ophelia responds briefly. Because Ophelia is not given a substantial amount of dialogue or mental process in comparison with the rest of the cast, she behaves as a mirror, reflecting the character of those around her through her responses. She warns her brother, "Do not, as some ungracious pastors do, show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, whilst, like a puff'd and reckless libertine himself the primrose path of dalliance treads and recks not his own rede" (Act I, Scene III). The clever maiden acknowledges her brother's good intentions but promptly reminds him of his own implicit inclination toward dishonorable behavior. Ophelia loves and respects her brother, but she also sees the shortcomings of his humanity.

Laertes treats Ophelia with more respect than most members of the cast do. His language to her is cautionary as opposed to obligatory. His attitude suggests a relationship of heartfelt comradery as opposed to domination. Laertes presents Ophelia with the argument that because Hamlet is by birth a political figure, the heir to the throne of Denmark, he is not his own man. Of Prince Hamlet, Laertes admonishes her, "Perhaps he loves you now, and now no soil nor cautel doth besmirch the virtue of his will; but you must fear, his greatness weigh'd, his will is not his own; for he himself is

subject to his birth” (Act I, Scene III). As a good brother ought to, Laertes would not have his sister in the care of someone who cannot care for her. Laertes is not arguing that Hamlet does not sincerely love her, but rather that Hamlet is not capable of caring for her due to the demands that the state of Denmark will make of him.

When responding to her brother, Ophelia is not afraid to question and even challenge him to heed his own advice. This type of response on Ophelia’s part testifies to her ability and even tendency to think not only for herself but in the interest of others as well. She lovingly interacts with Laertes; the siblings are mutually concerned for each other's well being. Ophelia's response is both gracious and discerning and, more importantly, is equally considerate. Their relationship is reciprocal. Though we are not told which of the siblings is the elder, their closeness in age gives the two a unique bond. While this exchange is primarily where Laertes shows his most selfless self, Ophelia here also displays a sense of consideration that only develops consistently as she interacts with the rest of the cast.

In contrast to her role as sister and confidant to Laertes, Ophelia as daughter to Polonius undergoes a disparate alteration. When interacting with Polonius, she is spoken to. The moment Laertes takes his leave, Polonius questions Ophelia in regard to their private conversation. Ophelia responds wittingly, telling her father of the topic though not the lesson itself, as she had told Laertes it would be kept in confidence. Whereas Laertes spoke to Ophelia as one capable of understanding, Polonius primarily attacks her for her youth, citing her age as rendering her incapable of understanding. When she mentions Hamlet's affection for her, her father responds, “Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl, unsifted in such perilous circumstance” (Act I, Scene III). This argument is the first one against Ophelia's virtue. Polonius claims that she is too young to know either herself or the limitations of her position, especially in relation to Hamlet, whose youth Polonius attacks as well. Furthermore, Polonius is concerned that his daughter’s position and actions might reflect on him. He

goes on to forbid her, who can by her audience with Hamlet make a fool of Polonius, from spending time with the Prince and from speaking to him.

Now we would have Ophelia passionately assert herself. Now, in the name of youth, love, and the free will of an intelligent young woman, we would have Ophelia defy her father's self-serving command and pursue the one whom she believes loves her. Instead, the maiden submissively replies, "I shall obey, my lord" (Act I, Scene III). Ophelia submits her way into the next argument against herself; that is, she does not stand up for herself or for love, yet for such a reasonable girl, is this criticism fair?

An answer can be found in a detailed consideration of Ophelia's relationship to Hamlet. It is true that Hamlet loves Ophelia, as Laertes has observed and as Hamlet later confirms. It is also true that Ophelia understands and believes that Hamlet loves her. However, she admits to her father that she does not know what she should think in regard to Hamlet's "tenders" (Act I, Scene III). Ophelia certainly admires Hamlet in return, but she acts on reason as opposed to emotion at this early time. She is only learning of affection that could be the possible beginning of a potential relationship, one which may not even be condoned by the authority figures in the young people's lives. She is aware that she does not know where she stands. As a hopelessly romantic audience, we do not want her to act with caution and reason, but Ophelia is not Juliet. In fact, Shakespeare is giving Ophelia more free will and use of her reason than we are initially inclined to do, as we condemn her on the assumption that her will is bound by love for Hamlet. In reality, her will functions in the realm of logic.

Now we should consider the complications of the difference between actions or decisions based on knowledge as opposed to those based on impression or emotion. In simpler terms, what seems to be is often vastly different from what is. Hamlet, in the way of a politician, proceeds to give the impression to all that he is mad as he seeks revenge for his father's murder. Though he uses reason

and uses it well, Hamlet responds to grief, fear, and love all passionately in contrast to Ophelia's calculated responses. Therefore, Hamlet does not take well to Ophelia's compliance with her father's wishes and proceeds to dramatically, though wordlessly, confront her in Act II Scene I while she is at her sewing. He terrifies her, approaching her with his clothes disheveled and without explanation. Shakespeare does not share this scene between Hamlet and Ophelia on stage; rather, he has Ophelia tell it herself. Here Shakespeare pays her respect by referencing her pure perspective. Whether Hamlet was in fact as intense as Ophelia describes him or not is important, but not as important as the fact that he has left such an impression on the maiden at all. What Ophelia thinks is substantial, beyond the fact that she thinks at all. Ophelia has to tell of the encounter because the crucial point is that Hamlet terrifies her. We are given no reason to believe that she is insincere about this fear. Before he left, Laertes had warned her that "best safety lies in fear" (Act I Scene III). It is only natural that Hamlet's behavior, though genuine, should frighten Ophelia into behaving safely, as he gives her no explanation of his behavior. She is left to make of it what she can, as is the audience. The difference is that Ophelia does not know everything that the audience knows.

This encounter has the greatest impact upon the well known third soliloquy of Hamlet and the following pivotal dialogue between him and Ophelia. Polonius, being convinced that Hamlet is mad with love for his daughter, and King Claudius, being convinced that Hamlet is simply mad, plot to use Ophelia as bait and "gather by him, as he is behaved, if't be the affliction of his love or no that thus he suffers for" (Act III, Scene I). As it were, when Hamlet comes upon Ophelia, he has only just been contemplating existence as opposed to non-existence, the known opposed to the unknown, and among other loftier musings, the "pangs of disprized love" (Act III, Scene I). Here is the third and strongest argument against Ophelia: she complies with the deceptive King and politician in deceiving Hamlet. When he comes out of his dark reverie and into the hope of the presence of the object of his

love, she greets him formally and proceeds with, "My lord, I have remembrances of yours that I have longed long to redeliver. I pray you, now receive them" (Act III, Scene I). When she goes on to say that "Rich gifts was poor when givers prove unkind," it is reasonable that she would be thinking of the manner in which he frightened her with his passion. Ophelia frustrates Hamlet further because he sees through her dishonesty. It is true that she deceives him, using her beauty and knowing of his love for her, but the greater dishonesty would have been for Ophelia to be dishonest to both herself and Hamlet in claiming that she was without doubt. From their sad parting Ophelia gathers that Hamlet's "noble mind is here o'erthrown!" She declares, "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, that suck'd the honey of his music vows, now see that the noble and most sovereign reason like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh, that unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth blasted with ecstasy" (Act III, Scene I). Ophelia was drawn not only to Hamlet's love for her, but furthermore to his noble mind. Therefore, because Ophelia is persuaded that Hamlet is mad, she cannot be considered foolish for not trusting him.

To Ophelia, a further confirmation of Hamlet's apparent madness is the murder of her father. When Hamlet murders Polonius, Ophelia is bereft. At this moment, Ophelia's world is bleak: her brother is overseas; the man whose mind she admired has lost it and murdered her father, so she is without hope. All this evidence indicates that Ophelia is completely aware of how little power or influence a young woman in her position has. Understandably, this awareness drives her to a true madness, which is a further contrast to Hamlet's apparent madness.

In Ophelia's madness she loses all reservation. Though she speaks in rhymes and prayers, she effortlessly touches on the same topics of the guilty consciences of those around her. Because she is not in possession of herself, her audience's blush is condemnation enough as they are faced with their guilt. Had Ophelia been sane and brought up the topics of Gertrude's infidelity to the memory of her

late husband or the irreverence of Claudius' marriage to Gertrude, she would have been speaking out of turn to those above her (and nearly all of the cast is above her) and only made a fool of herself and her family. Nevertheless, just as the guilt of Claudius could not be denied when Hamlet confronted him with the mirror play, neither could the guilt of those confronted with Ophelia's mirror song and speech be denied.

At long last and though in her feverish madness, Ophelia voices her chief complaint against the position of men in her life. She sings to Claudius in Act IV, Scene V:

By 'Gis and by Saint Charity,
 Alack and fie for shame!
 Young men will do't, if they come to't,
 By Cock, they are to blame.
 Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,
 You promised me to wed.'
 He answers: 'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,
 And thou hadst not come to my bed.

Ophelia, before and during her madness, is well aware of the double standard allotted to men in the realm of romance, love, and courtship. She knows that Hamlet expects her to return his advances, yet if she does, she will be the one who is ruined should she be discovered or become pregnant, while Hamlet would remain off the hook, or leash, as it were. The young lady is to be admired for her shrewd wisdom, though her cutting madness only magnifies the tragedy of her situation. Though she could not proclaim the truth and maintain her appearance, the truth did prevail through her nonetheless. Her beauty would have hindered and transformed the truth because it is a condemning and offensive truth. Her beauty and position set to no consequence, however, allow for her to be honest at last (Act III, Scene I).

The maiden's last words spoken to the audience are once again demonstrative of her concern for others, even in her madness. Having told a shocked Laertes of the death of their father through

song, she exits with, "And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God be wi' you" (Act IV, Scene V). She is bidding farewell and wishing everyone luck simultaneously. It is as Hamlet exclaimed when her figure brought him out of his reverie, "Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remember'd" (Act III, Scene I). Finally, Gertrude gives an account of Ophelia's death. She has drowned while picking flowers from a willow by a stream. Here Shakespeare preserves Ophelia's beauty and appreciation of the beautiful. Ophelia inadvertently goes to her death even as she reaches for the phallic plant, "long purples, that liberal shepherds give a grosser name, but our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them" (Act IV, Scene VII). Shakespeare here refers to the plant "orchis mascula," the final addition to Ophelia's bouquet of guilt that includes the plants rosemary for remembrance, pansies for thoughts, fennel and columbine for infidelity, herb of grace or rue for repentance, a daisy for unhappy love, and violets for faithfulness. Thus, the beautiful flowers portray her feverish mind grasping at truth through beauty. The orchis mascula specifically juxtaposes Ophelia's frail and feminine nature. For such a complex character, drowning haphazardly without any awareness of herself, yet with her beauty preserved and honesty intact, was the only way for her "to die, to sleep; to sleep; perchance to dream" (Act III, Scene I). Her feverish madness, symbolic bouquet, and watery grave match the death that Hamlet wished for himself in Act I, Scene II.

In conclusion, Ophelia's intellect and virtue, though limited to the scope of her situation, are nonetheless remarkable. The quality of her intellect and virtue remain intact despite the limitation of her humble rank as a young woman. To expect Ophelia to transcend her situation through open rebellion would contradict her admirable discretion (before her madness set in, of course). That Ophelia instead transcends her situation through insanity and then death both preserves and magnifies her sincerity, while giving voice to her honesty. She cries for justice until the end. Though tragic, she is true.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New York: Dover, 1992. Print.