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| Drowning in Womanhood: Ophelia's Death as Submission to the Feminine Element

For Shakespearean heroines, a most fascinating, yet critically dismissed, character is Ophelia from *Hamlet*, the Danish prince Hamlet's lover who goes mad and drowns after Hamlet murders her father. For generations, Ophelia has captivated artists, critics, poets, and musicians alike, who revive her spirit within their creative works, allowing the mystery and tragedy of her death to live on. Within the text, Ophelia struggles with womanly duty and obtained agency over her own life. She is constantly silenced and disregarded by the characters for no reason other than her youth and gender. No matter how she communicates, through words or physical symbols, she is misunderstood, ignored and called "mad," which ultimately leads to her watery demise. Ophelia's drowning is the consummate representation of an eternal retreat into the feminine, trading an individual voice for eternal silence in union with feminine essence. In turn, her death expresses the danger of reducing an individual to his or her gender and disregarding the voice of the marginalized. The silencing of Ophelia has surpassed her textual death given the amount of critics that see her as flat, under developed, and used only for emotional upheaval.

A majority of Ophelia's critical reception precipitates the quashing of her voice by disregarding her actions within the text. Critic Linda Welshimer Wagner critiques Ophelia's character by stating, "It would appear that Ophelia has two primary purposes in her ingenuous role—that of providing a convenient hinge for several of Hamlet's analytical scenes, and of providing [...] emotional impact for the audience [...]" Apparently Shakespeare intended for her to be a minor character, using her sparingly and

almost forgetfully throughout the plot” (94). Wagner’s reading of Ophelia is problematic, particularly considering Wagner’s attempt at definitively explaining authorial intent, an impossible task. That reading fails to allow the text to take on a new life under analysis because she views it under a scope that is impossible and irrelevant. She views Ophelia only in relation to Hamlet’s actions, effectively reducing Ophelia to a plot device rather than a dynamic character in her own right. Wagner’s reading directly mirrors the dismissive treatment Ophelia receives within the drama, which perpetuates the silencing of her character from the world of the play into the world of critical analysis. When viewing Ophelia as a character in her own right rather than an object hinged to Hamlet’s character development, she has much more significance and depth than simple emotional upheaval.

In a more sensitive way, C.K. Resertaris posits, “The majority of critics have viewed Ophelia as a weak character, in both form and function, and many have dismissed her as a woman [...] who couldn’t stand by her man” (215). Resertaris recognizes the injustices towards Ophelia’s character by critics because of their focus on Hamlet’s character development and how she affects it, rather than her own development. Resertaris goes on to admit, “Most studies have quickly turned to Ophelia's flowers, madness, death, or nymphomaniac tendencies rather than trying to understand her unique character and how it might function in the play” (215). This sentiment addresses the largest problem of the critical reception of Ophelia—the constant sexist misreading and disregarding of her character. By breathing new life into Ophelia through an analysis of her life in the text, her death and the loss of her individuality therein becomes expressly clear.

Within the play, Ophelia's voice is noticeably minor. Ophelia is talked at, not conversed with, by her father Polonius and brother Laertes. When she is able to engage in conversations with Hamlet, he simply insults her in a dismissive or an aggressive way. Polonius and Laertes dominate the first scene she appears in, and Ophelia only speaks eighteen lines of the 136 lines of the scene, most of which are short replies (Resetarits 216). Polonius and Laertes lecture her about their disapproval of her relationship with unmarried Hamlet, commanding her to guard her virginity like a precious treasure. Ophelia is spoken *to*, not conversed *with* and not allowed to speak or express herself, for she is the receiver of the words and wisdom of Polonius and Laertes. Her forced receptiveness in conversations with males represents the patriarchal idea of a woman's position of receiving male initiative. Her life is not her *own*; it is *owned* by every man and powerful figure around her. She tries to be the passive, obedient and submissive maiden society demands of her, but in doing so, she loses her agency and identity because she is not free to discuss her relationship with her family.

In conversation with Hamlet, she is disrespected in a different manner. He hatefully speaks to her by commanding, "Get thee to a nunnery, wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?" (3.1.122-3). He reduces Ophelia to a vessel of pleasure, denying her reproductive capabilities, given the double entendre of "nunnery" in Elizabethan slang-- a whorehouse and an actual nunnery. If she cannot serve those purposes, she should be locked away forever to save men from her innate infidelity in an actual nunnery. Within this conversation, Hamlet rails on Ophelia for the ills of womankind not for anything Ophelia has necessarily done. Hamlet does not see Ophelia as an individual; rather, she is the embodiment of "woman," a stand-in for her entire sex. After his unnecessary abuse,

Ophelia is left only to lament the “noble mind that is here o’erthrown,” remembering the former Hamlet that sent her tokens of his love rather than unkind barbs about her sex (3.1. 149). Her sensitive reaction to Hamlet’s unkindness shows her kind-heartedness and innocent nature. She is not an outspoken, assertive heroine, and that sense of demure sensitivity and open-heartedness is part of the reason Ophelia eventually turns to suicide.

The catalyst that brings Ophelia to her end is Polonius’ death by Hamlet’s hand. Ophelia’s estranged lover killed her father on a whim, thinking he was a rat behind a tapestry. At this point in the drama, Ophelia has no recourse or protection. Her father is dead, her lover has abandoned her, and her brother is thousands of miles away. Every mode of male guidance and protection for her is gone. Although it can be seen as a liberating moment to a twenty-first century audience, the circumstances of her freedom are anything but truly freeing, especially given her timidity and innocence in a society that demands male guidance. Her subsequent actions express the anguish of her compromising situation, and her attempt at finding a voice.

Ophelia’s madness is much more multifaceted than face value allows. “Madness” is a term used here loosely because there is little that is disjointed in her actions and songs upon inspection. In 4.5, Shakespeare describes how Gertrude does not want to talk to Ophelia, but the gentlemen insist that she see Ophelia because “her speech is nothing, /Yet the unshaped use of it doth move/The hearers to collection” (4.5.7-9). Ophelia is insistent that she see Gertrude, quite unlike the usually obedient Ophelia that would likely have left upon Gertrude’s command. Queen Gertrude, realizing the revolutionary power of Ophelia’s words, no matter how “disjointed,” invites her in. If Gertrude is threatened by Ophelia’s “mad” utterances, there must be a level of truth to her words. Ophelia’s

songs and “ramblings” are key elements to understanding Ophelia’s mental state and realizing her actual *sanity*.

Gertrude believes her to be mad because Ophelia does not do what she is told. Gertrude says, “Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?” (4.5. 27). Instead of answering directly, Ophelia responds in a short verse about her dead father. Ophelia responds,

Say you? Nay, pray You mark.  
 He is dead and gone, lady,  
 He is dead and gone;  
 At his head a grass-green turf,  
 At his heels a stone.  
 O, ho! (4.5.28-32).

Gertrude tries to interrupt her song, but Ophelia demands that she be heard rather than spoken to; it is her time to tell her story. Ophelia is considered mad by Gertrude because Ophelia finally defies proper expectations, disobeying the command of the queen. Gertrude may also call her mad to discredit the factual nature of her songs because of their ability to make the Danish people think there is something wrong in Denmark’s leadership.

Ophelia then sings about a woman who loses her honor to an inconstant lover by singing,

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,  
 All in the morning bedtime,  
 And I a maid at your window,  
 To be your Valentine.  
 Then up he rose and donn'd his clo'es  
 And dupp'd the chamber door,  
 Let in the maid, that out a maid  
 Never departed more [...]  
 Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,  
 You promis'd me to wed.'  
 He answers:

'So would I 'a' done, by yonder sun,  
An thou hadst not come to my bed.' (4.5.47-64)

This song can be seen as Ophelia expressing her relationship with Hamlet, subtly admitting to the loss of her honor to Hamlet and his hasty abandonment. Instead of responding directly to Gertrude's and Claudius's questions, Ophelia's songs are all applicable to her life, which should not be the case for someone supposedly mad. In this way, the ever-obedient Ophelia, through experiencing heartbreak and abandonment, breaks the chains of her receptive and timid nature by choosing to say what she wants rather than what Gertrude wants.

After singing, Ophelia gives flowers to Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes, and the meaning of each flower correlates to their secrets, transgressions, or character in general.

She says,

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance [...]  
And there is pansies. That's for thoughts [...]  
There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue  
for you; and here's some for me [...]  
There's a daisy. I would give you  
some violets, but they withered all when my father  
died (4.5.173-4, 177-181)

Each flower indicates different attributes that one or more of the characters exhibit.

According to the footnotes of the *Norton Shakespeare Anthology*, columbines were related to marital infidelity, fennel with flattery, and rue to repentance, which can be related to Gertrude and Claudius's extramarital affair and hasty marriage (Greenblatt 1762). Additionally, daisies are related to "dissembling seduction" while violets are related to faithfulness (Greenblatt 1762). Rosemary, violets, and daisies can be related to Ophelia's strife with Hamlet and her father.

Ophelia's madness is not a psychological disturbance because the language of her flowers is so directly related to the figures around her. They represent fact, and madness is intrinsically linked to a disassociation with reality. Ophelia's "madness" is her way of expressing her objectification, abandonment, helplessness, and sorrow over her lost father and lost virtue, a moment of disobedience she certainly now regrets. It is her attempt at gaining agency and a voice in the only way she can—through symbols of her femininity because she is constantly seen as only a woman and not an individual.

Ophelia's voice blossoms through her womanhood and through the language of flowers and song, both linked to feminine sexuality. Scholar Elaine Showalter notes, "Ophelia's symbolic meanings, moreover, are specifically feminine" (3). Flowers are intrinsically linked to femininity, not only in form but also in cultural symbolism. The form of a flower, its petals that gracefully crinkle at the edges and curve open or fold around one another, resembles the female sex. Likewise, Polonius calls Ophelia a "green girl," linking her to flora (1.3.101). Showalter expresses this sentiment, stating, "Her flowers suggest the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination; she is the 'green girl' of pastoral, the virginal 'Rose of May' and the sexually explicit madwoman who, in giving away her wild flowers and herbs, is symbolically deflowering herself" (3).

Working in tandem with flowers, song can also be symbolically linked to feminine expression and seduction. For instance, the idea of a siren's song, as noted in Homer's *The Odyssey*, is an example of a female being using song to her advantage. Ophelia's songs are meant to express her womanly troubles when plain speech does not work. In this way, Ophelia is able to harness her overwhelming femininity through

flowers and songs to express herself completely-- her sorrow, her troubles, and her knowledge.

She takes her songs and flowers and gives them to those around her, as if saying, “If all you see is this womanly body, let my very hindrance, my womanhood as seen in these flowers and songs, tell you my inner thoughts.” Her message, though, falls on deaf ears and blind eyes. Gertrude, Claudius, and even Laertes dismiss her as a madwoman with no further consideration for her motives. Even in harnessing her womanhood, she cannot escape it, for no one can see past it. After realizing that her voice does not matter to those around her, Ophelia’s suicide becomes her ultimate act of obedience to her oppressors by permanently silencing herself through drowning.

Water is the final important component of the triad of feminine symbolism for Ophelia. Water is related to femininity in its relationship to feminine sensuality, reproductive capabilities, and its alignment with emotion. Camille Paglia addresses the feminine link to water, explaining, “Female experience is submerged in the world of fluids, dramatically demonstrated in menstruation, childbirth, and lactation” (91).

Additionally, Showalter explains the significance of water by stating,

Drowning too was associated with the feminine, with female fluidity as opposed to masculine aridity. In his discussion of the ‘Ophelia complex,’ the phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard traces the symbolic connections between women, water, and death. Drowning, he suggests, becomes the truly feminine death in the dramas of literature and life, one which is a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element. Water is the profound and organic symbol of the liquid woman whose eyes are so easily drowned in tears, as her body is the repository of blood, amniotic fluid, and milk. [...] The romantic Ophelia is a girl who *feels* too much, who drowns in feeling (3-5).

Shakespeare even recognizes this connection when Laertes notes, “Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,/And therefore I forbid my tears;[...] When these are gone,/the

woman will be out” (4.7.157-161). The feminine link to water is evident, thus aligning Ophelia’s death with the feminine.

After Ophelia’s body is found, Gertrude explains the circumstances of her watery grave to Laertes and Claudius by stating,

There is a willow grows aslant a brook,[...]
 There on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds  
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
 When down her weedy trophies and herself  
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide  
 And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
 Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
 As one incapable of her own distress,  
 Or like a creature native and indued  
 Unto that element; but long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death. (4.7.137-154)

In this account, the iconography of Ophelia’s death is extremely poignant. Enveloped in the waters of the river, a feminine space, Ophelia is again given the female symbols of flowers and mermaids. Her connection to mermaids and sirens not only links her to song but, more specifically, to the way in which the song of the sirens is related to femininity and sexual power. In her attempts to be heard and fight against her ruination, she was not regarded; her voice failed. She no longer uses song and flowers to explain herself or to fight back; Ophelia gives in—she relents to her fate. In this preordained death, she embraces and surrenders to her inescapable femininity through completely submerging herself with the consummate symbol of womanhood. Her song becomes a swan song, a funeral dirge, and her flower garlands are her mortuary bouquet. Every aspect of her womanhood, even her clothes, an outward signifier of her sex, envelops her until her life is extinguished.

Through these motifs, Ophelia relinquishes her individual femininity, becoming one with the feminine. She becomes *woman* instead of *Ophelia*, just as Hamlet saw her. In the glass-like coffin of the flowing brook, she freezes herself as a symbol of woman-- as art-- and effectually prevents herself from changing or aging. Shrouded in mystery, her image, the ideal she represents, and truth of her situation are crystallized in her watery death, and this immortality is, no doubt, why she continues to live on in art, song, and poetry. In this way, Ophelia's drowning, surrounded by flowers with her last breath in song, is her surrender to her overwhelming femininity.

In an ironic twist, her watery suicide, which plunges her into the impersonal eternal female essence, works to remind the characters of her humanity and individuality. After her death, they begin to regret the loss of their lovely Ophelia. Hamlet is reminded of his love for her, and Laertes mourns the loss of his beloved sister. Queen Gertrude bitterly concedes that she wishes to be strewing flowers around Ophelia and Hamlet's marriage bed rather than on Ophelia's fresh grave, a painfully tardy revelation in light of her previous disapproval of their union. The characters no longer see her as *woman* because her absence reminds them of her uniqueness and individuality. Her cries for help went unnoticed, and the characters realize this only too late. Ophelia, then, in character and action, is a warning against a reductionist treatment of human beings. Ophelia's death transforms from an accident in the throes of madness to a conscious decision to symbolically relinquish her identity to overwhelming womanhood by drowning.

The character Ophelia represents the dangers of silencing individuals by a reductionist dismissal of one's thoughts, feelings, insights, hopes, and fears. Her death is a conscious, final act of submission to the inescapable nature of her femininity, expressed

in the bounty of feminine symbols surrounding her death, from flowers to song. Although the iconography of her death is visually stunning, the beauty of innocent Ophelia's death only further heightens the pain and tragedy of her loss. By viewing her in this light, calling Ophelia a cheap trick for emotional effect in an otherwise loftily intellectual play is a gross underestimation and disservice to her character. By reviving Ophelia through a character-centered analysis, she takes on a new life within the text as a symbol of reductionist views on womanhood. Ophelia's suicide is a reminder that beneath the physical body, caged by gender, is a mind and a soul that are longing to be recognized and understood.

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