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10 Nov 2015

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The Marian Nymph: Ophelia's Impact on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

For thousands of years, literary womanhood has been relegated to three basic archetypes: the mother, the virgin, and the whore. The mother is seen as the paradigm of the female form; she is the life-bringer, the herald of divine love and mercy in a seemingly godless world. The virgin is equally as celebrated, having millions of maidens cast into her immaculate mold. And the whore is degraded and slandered, a scapegoat for the scores of men unfortunate enough to be caught in her grasp. These were the women of old, the basic manifestations of femininity in a time of simplicity. Yet things are no longer as simple as they once were. Centuries ago, there was time not to dwell on philosophy and the metaphysical when attention to basic survival was demanded of all. Mankind houses a complexity within that rarely presented itself in works of the past. Now, however, both man and woman cannot be merely designated to a centralized group or behavior within the literary sphere. The pure of heart can play the whore out of force or necessity, just as the whore can be the holiest of mothers to her children. These ideals that have heretofore been seen in opposition may now lie together as the lion and the lamb.

The noted playwright, William Shakespeare, took heed of this evolution, and his works reflected this newfound fluidity of characterization. Shakespearean characters, especially his females, are a melting-pot of dispositions; they are round characters with three-dimensional actions and attitudes. Dr. Samuel Johnson speaks of this attribute in his "Preface to Shakespeare," writing:

They [Shakespearean characters] are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.

(1342)

This distinction is clearly shown in Shakespeare's tragic characters, as their talents and flaws are contrasted against the dismal backdrop of melancholia. Chief among these lessons in moral ambiguity lies Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Ophelia is portrayed as the paragon of victimhood, an innocent martyr enslaved in the shackles of deception and meek subservience. However, she cannot be completely absolved of guilt in regards to her demise. Her forlorn passivity had a heavy hand in her troubles, as did her surprising lack of moxie relative to her father, Polonius, and her brother, Laertes. In fact, Ophelia's absence of conviction and direction in the play drives much of the plot prior to the play's turning point within "The Mousetrap." Ophelia is a pawn in this "game of thrones," and she plays the role until her death.

Each character within the play had a different view of Ophelia, and this view depended solely on what she could do for them. In regards to Claudius and Polonius, their perception of her was colored by the knowledge of her affair with Hamlet. The utilization of Ophelia as a tool to further their political ambition within the second act of the play is a shining example of Ophelia's unfortunately submissive nature. In "The Weeping Brook," Daphne Browning references Gabrielle Dane's "Reading Ophelia's Madness" when she writes, "... she [Ophelia] is both elevated as the idealized, virginal female and reduced to a piece of political currency" (74). Ophelia could be used as a spy for the royal couple and as an asset to her father - something

known by this quasi-"unholy trio." Consequently, Polonius received a wealth of intelligence on the prince's feelings towards his daughter, all by Ophelia's own hand. "This in obedience hath my daughter shown me," Polonius admits to the king and queen, "And more above, hath his solicitings, / As they fell out by time, by means, and place, / All given to mine ear" (II.ii.124-127). The reader can determine that Ophelia's loyalty to Hamlet crumbled in the face of her father's wishes when she divulged to him ever her most personal letters from her beloved. Perhaps it could be argued that her innate desire for her father's approval outshone her hopeless devotion to the Danish prince. In any case, Polonius took advantage of Ophelia's filial duties in an obtrusive and manipulative manner.

The reader is exposed to Ophelia's passivity yet again in Act III. This time, Claudius and Polonius physically involve Ophelia in order to get to the root of Hamlet's madness. In scene one, the reader sees Polonius positioning his daughter, giving her direction in this deception, saying, "Ophelia, walk you here... Read on this book, / That show of such an exercise may color / Your loneliness. We are oft to blame in this - / 'Tis too much proved - that with devotion's visage / And pious action we do sugar o'er / The devil himself" (III.i.43-49). The reader could therefore infer through these lines of dialogue the subliminal command for Ophelia to seduce the information from Hamlet, much like a seventeenth century Delilah. The utilization of the word "color" in these lines can be logically linked to the rouge used to paint the face of prostitutes, metaphorically likening Ophelia's actions to the mask of the whore. Yet Ophelia is much aware of the ruse, and she allows her strings to be pulled like those of a marionette.

However, Hamlet sees through Ophelia's attempt at coy innocence. He realizes her part in Claudius' machinations - albeit unwillingly - and drags Ophelia's spirit through the mire, dashing every hope she had for reattaining his love. Hamlet exclaims, "I have heard of your paintings

well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another" (III.i.142-143), alluding to Ophelia's dualistic efforts to regain intimacy with Hamlet. His earlier command, "Get thee to a nunnery," (III.i.121) can be seen as a final rejection of Ophelia's sexuality and perhaps an admission of premarital consummation with her. Regardless, by "both encouraging and chastising her for her sexuality," as Browning writes later in her article, "Ophelia's fellow protagonists cast her into the contradictory roles of virgin and harlot, and into an impossible ideology in which female sexuality both exists and is denied" (74). All the men of *Hamlet* want Ophelia to be either chaste or seductive, but each character changes his respective desire several times during the play in order to achieve his own end. Ophelia is left helpless to stand for herself atop this pile of shifting sand; the reader can infer that she will inevitably fall under and the pressure of it will suffocate her.

It is soon after this that Ophelia begins her descent into insanity. In light of Hamlet's rejection of her love, Ophelia, as Cameron Hunt writes in his article, "Jephthah's Daughter's Daughter," "stands poised at the intersection of madness and sexuality" (13). However, she is pushed down the path of madness when her father is unknowingly murdered by her former lover. With her father dead, her brother absent, and her love unrequited, Ophelia is given no comfort in the wake of this tragedy. She therefore copes in the only way she is able - through the breaking of her mind. In Act IV, the reader sees her in this newfound frivolity, singing pieces of nonsensical songs and fiddling with flowers like a young girl. Yet even in this state, Ophelia is able to hint at the conflict unknown to Gertrude and Claudius with the double meaning of her words. She sings to them, "... And I a maid at your window, / To be your Valentine. / Then up he rose and donned his clothes, / And dupped the chamber door, / Let in the maid, that out a maid / Never departed more" (IV.v.50-55). This seemingly harmless rhyme houses therein yet

another possible admission of the physical intimacy of Ophelia and Hamlet. In the article, "Women in Shakespeare," author Alison Findlay writes, "... her snatches of song and speech all advertise her preoccupations with the loss of chastity, with death, and with a sense of helplessness to prevent either" (311).

However, Ophelia expounds further with another song, her words perhaps tinged with bitterness towards society's sexual double standard. She continues, "Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed.' / He answers: / 'So would I ha' done, by yonder sun, / An thou hadst not come to my bed'" (IV.v.62-66). The reader may then infer that Ophelia's obedience in the realm of sexuality cost her the one thing she desired above all, the love of Hamlet. Findlay writes of Ophelia's frustration and despair, "Under the diametrically opposed pressures of sexual invitation from Hamlet and the need for chastity, it is not surprising that Ophelia's insanity collapses" (311). The human mind can only handle so much, and Ophelia cracks - quite literally - under the burden of trying to be pure and holy whilst holding onto carnality and physicality.

Perhaps the most passive of all her actions within the play, however, is Ophelia's suicide. Shunned by the Catholic Church, suicide was deemed the most unforgivable of sins. Dinesh Bhugra notes in his commentary on religion and suicide that suicides were "buried at a distance from the community and their bodies pierced with a stake to offer protection against their malevolent souls" (1497), a notion that the reader sees in scene one of Act V with the gravediggers commenting on Ophelia's debatable "Christian burial." Frederick Costello writes in his letter to Wesley Smith that "Catholics realize that the suffering we endure should be offered with Christ's in atonement for our sins and the sins of others. We, like St. Paul, should be 'glad of [our] sufferings' (Col. 1:24)" (1). The seeking of one's own salvation was considered selfish and

a waste of a God-given life; it was a one-way ticket to the terrifying Wood of the Suicides in Dante's *Inferno*. The consequences for suicide were steep, and the characters of *Hamlet* knew this.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that Ophelia did not actively seek to end her life - but she did nothing to stop it, either. Her almost blasé regard for her own life resulted in her death along the brook: "... she chanted snatches of old lauds, / As one incapable of her own distress... / ... But long it could not be / Till that her garments, heavy with their drink, / Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay / To muddy death" (IV.viii.176-182). Shakespeare's sardonic idea of irony plays out in these lines, as Ophelia - her name being derived from the Greek "Ophelos," meaning "helper" - is unable to help herself as she is gently pulled to her death.

Womankind is one of the world's great mysteries. Ophelia, with her juxtaposed dispositions of purity and wantonness, certainly embodied this mystery within the tragedy of *Hamlet*. Consequently, due to the opposing demands made of her, she was caught in the crossfire between Claudius and Hamlet, whilst fighting a mental battle against herself. Ophelia's internal complexity throughout the play serves as a solemn backdrop against which Hamlet's conflict is displayed; she is the foil to his gleaming gemstone. Many of the same events that befell Hamlet also presented themselves to Ophelia, yet the two characters took vastly different paths. Both, however, ended the same; Hamlet's passive nature due to contemplation led to his death, as Ophelia's passive nature due to submission led to her suicide. But let her not be viewed as a mere victim, nay, she was "a free human being with an independent will" (Brontë 285), and she used her judgment in a way she saw fit, though she was damned if she did and damned if she did not. She held the spectrum of femininity within her hands, even if it was what killed her in the end.

May Ophelia be seen for what she is - an intricate study in chaste wantonness, a siren-like angel dressed in robes of white.

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