

Beyond Hamlet: The Impact of Ophelia

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Shakespeare's *Hamlet* tells the story of a young prince avenging his father's murder. As Hamlet grieves his father's death, his mother marries Claudius, his uncle, who becomes the new King of Denmark. When Hamlet learns from the ghost of his father that Claudius is the one who committed the murder, Hamlet begins to question everything. In an effort to avenge his father's death, Hamlet feigns madness in an attempt to buy himself time to prove Claudius' guilt. By seeming mad he appears as less of a direct threat to Claudius. Through the course of the tragic play there are many unnecessary deaths, including the death of Hamlet himself. One such death is the death of Ophelia the daughter of Polonius, the love interest of Hamlet. Ophelia is controlled by many of the characters, including Polonius and even Hamlet, for their own advancement. While Hamlet spends the play feigning madness, Ophelia loses her mind. Her death, commonly read as a suicide, is a pivotal moment in the play for the plot of her brother, Laertes, and Hamlet, but it is also a profound moment in the world of mental health. Ophelia ends up being more important to the audience and readers than she is to any other character within the play. While she is often dismissed as weak or flat, her fall to madness and her death change the conversation of mental health for women, even to this day.

Many of the early criticisms of Ophelia's character viewed her as weak. In the first scene where Ophelia speaks in the play, she is responding to the advice given by her brother, Laertes, and then by her father, Polonius. In both encounters, the men give many lines of advice, to which Ophelia only ever responds with a few words. Laertes warns her of Hamlet's intentions and that while he may love her now, because of his title, "his will is not his own" (I.iii.17). He tells her to stay chaste and to be wary of Hamlet. Her response to her brother's concerns is to tell him that he should also heed his own advice but that she will listen to him. Her father shortly after asks

her what Laertes said. He expands on Laertes' warnings about Hamlet, adding the impact it would have on his own reputation. He ends his advice to her by saying "I would not / Have you so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet" (I.iii.132-3). Her response to him, and the last line of this scene is simply "I shall obey, my lord" (I.iii.135). These two interactions demonstrate both Ophelia's reserved and obedient manner, and the ways in which the men in her life, especially her father, strive to control her. In the interaction between Polonius and Ophelia, she is already being presented as a tool for his own political and social standing. If his daughter were to be deemed a "whore" in the society by sleeping with Hamlet, it may threaten his connection to the king.

The two main questions that surround Ophelia both within the play and in criticisms are whether or not Hamlet truly loved her and what caused her madness. Hamlet tells her throughout the play that he does love her and then will immediately turn around and say he never loved her. He does this to again appear mad to the onlookers, but also because his opinion on women in general has been greatly tarnished by his mother. While Hamlet says to her "I loved you not," and tells her that she was foolish to believe he loved her, upon Ophelia's death, Hamlet proclaims that "Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love/ Make up my sum" (V.i.258-60). On the question of what caused her madness, most of the other characters believe it is her father's death that leads to her breakdown. When the gentleman tells the queen, Gertrude, of Ophelia's worsening mental state, he says that "she speaks much of her father," and that "her speech is nothing" (IV.v.5-6). Claudius furthers this idea with the statement that "this is the poison of deep grief; it springs/ all from her father's death" (IV.v.76-7).

What these debates over the source of her madness, the truth of Hamlet's love, and her character's seeming meekness leave out is her story on its own. The characters each look for a

single cause of her madness, overlooking the buildup of suffering her character has endured. She is pushed into the role of an obedient daughter, doing her best to obey her father's wishes, and even her brother's. She also tries to be true to her love for Hamlet, feeling the weight of guilt when Polonius uses her to find out about Hamlet's madness. She is pulled in so many directions and used so ruthlessly by the characters that she loses herself in this process.

Ophelia also takes in the emotions of every character with whom she interacts. In each interaction Ophelia has with others, they are giving her advice to follow, telling her who she is or should be, or releasing emotion. (Resetarits). Ophelia in this way takes in their emotions and strives to placate and please them. In the famous "nunnery" scene where Hamlet says cruel things to Ophelia, perhaps aware of the presence of Claudius and Polonius eavesdropping, Ophelia does not fight back (Sen). Taken aback by what Hamlet says, Ophelia gives simple one sentence responses to Hamlet's intense and cruel words. When she says she did believe Hamlet loved her, he tells her "You should not have believed me...I loved you not," to which she responds "I was the more deceived." (III.ii). Ophelia even upon being told it was all a lie, still tries to please. While some read her lack of response and her inability to fight back as weak, it is important to see the weight of expectations upon her from the start. She is torn in so many directions by the men in her life that when they scream, accuse, or control her, she does everything she can to remain dutiful. Ophelia's limited responses are not a sign of weakness, but a sign of her internal suffering that women throughout time will be able to see within themselves.

It is clear from her first interactions with Polonius and Laertes in the text that the men in her family have strong opinions on how she should behave. This continues when Polonius decides that Hamlet's madness stems from his love of Ophelia. Polonius and Claudius conspire to use Ophelia to uncover the root of Hamlet's behaviors. As they begin to use her as a pawn for

their own discovery, Hamlet, knowing her loyalty to her father, uses her to spread the knowledge of his madness. Hamlet's madness begins to spread through Ophelia. Off stage, he presents himself to her "with his doublet unbraced.../Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other." (II.ii.78-9). She is terrified of his state and confides in Polonius for help. There is no reason for Hamlet to feign his madness for Ophelia privately other than to spread it to Polonius who will tell it to the king (Wagner). This back and forth continues on both sides, Hamlet, Polonius and Claudius, all using Ophelia as a pawn. Ophelia's desire to please leads her to be manipulated by these men, despite her own reservations about her actions. Along with being used, Ophelia is also told that she is the cause of Hamlet's madness. Polonius decides that Hamlet is "mad for [her] love" and that his advice for Ophelia to stay away from him is what leads to Hamlet's insanity. Not only is she a pawn to these men in their world of revenge, but she is told a large part of the chaos and madness is her fault.

After her own fall to madness, Ophelia's character remains off stage. Her death is not something witnessed by the other characters or by the audience, but is instead reported to Laertes and the audience through Gertrude. She tells that Ophelia was by the river,

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of cornflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples...
Her clothes spread wide,
And mermaid like awhile they bore her up...
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. (V.i.165-181).

The description of her drowning is left ambiguous as to whether it was a suicide or not. This continues on when her grave is being dug and the man questions how she is having a Christian burial. While her death is most often read as a suicide, the ambiguity surrounding it adds to the unlimited interpretations of her character. Her madness, her reserved manner, and her death are all presented in such a limited fashion that her character is able to be read in countless ways. Because of this, her image has become one of the most iconic. (Showalter). The beautiful and sad language used in the description of her drowning lends itself to countless artistic interpretations. One of the most famous paintings relating to Shakespeare is John Everett Millais' "Ophelia," painted in 1852. This painting shows a woman dead in a river, grasping flowers, and surrounded by nature. It is a beautiful painting and one that represents the general understanding of Ophelia. She is constantly represented with a focus on the "mermaid like" and peaceful descriptions Gertrude presented, rather than the reality of her "muddy death." (Jana).

While Ophelia is often written off as a minor character, her madness, her suicide, and her struggle with her role in society becomes something to which countless women through time have related. She becomes the representation of young women struggling under the pressure of society. Being pulled in so many directions, being told that she is the cause of Hamlet's madness, being used by others, and losing her mind, Ophelia represents the damaging impact societal expectations can have on young women (Piper). Each generation has its own idea of Ophelia, and her representations on stage and in film reflects this. Over time, her character reflects the views of the society of the time. For some, she is an innocent and abused character, for others she is a sexual being who pushes boundaries (Jana). Because of how broad the interpretations of her character are, she is able to be represented in all time periods (Camden). Her struggle to be

true to herself while being used by others is a timeless notion. Because of this, her importance transcends the context of the play and becomes about Ophelia on her own.

As Ophelia became a representation of the struggles of women in general, the idea of her being a plot device to further the story of Hamlet fades away. Her impact in the play is small, but her impact on the world of mental health and the understanding of women is unprecedented. Ophelia becomes the image of women struggling. Dr. John Charles Bucknill, stated in 1859 that "Every mental physician of moderately extensive experience must have seen many Ophelias" (Showalter). In this way, Ophelia stops being a character of Shakespeare's, but instead becomes a way of understanding women. The idea presented that anyone in the mental health field, even in 1859, will have encountered many "Ophelias" shows just how profound her character becomes. The character of Ophelia sheds a new light on the silent suffering of so many women throughout time.

Ophelia became a tool in the psychological field as an insight into the minds of young women and the pressures of society. In 2005, Mary Piper released the book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. This book presented the idea of Ophelia as a young girl "torn apart by her efforts to please." Piper explains how Ophelia represents "the destructive forces that affect young women" (Piper 25). This book uses this modern idea of Ophelia to "save" adolescent girls from the same tragic fate of Ophelia. Piper discusses the immense societal pressures and violence young women are exposed to, especially through the growing impact of social media. Piper says that Ophelia determines her own value "utterly by their [Hamlet and Polonius'] approval." In this way, Ophelia shows what to look for in young girls as a warning. Suffering in silence, bending to the will of others, defining one's value in other's approval, and living a life to please others are shown through Ophelia as a harsh reality of so

many young women. Piper's book tells the stories of individual girls, always relating back to Ophelia. She ends chapter three, which tells the story of a young girl named Lori who struggles to remain true to herself, saying that "all [girls] are pressured to sacrifice their wholeness in order to be loved. Like Ophelia, all are in danger of drowning" (Piper 125). The idea that Ophelia's death occurs after she loses who she is trying to please others is able to serve as a warning to future generations of women. Throughout the book, Piper touches back on this idea of Ophelia losing who she was because of the expectations of her society. Ophelia's tragic end forced into the light the realities of women's suffering. The fact that young girls were classified as "Ophelias" and that her character is used to save women throughout time from a fate similar to hers, shows the immense, and unintentional, impact she had. In a play that seems to focus on Hamlet's madness, it is Ophelia's that makes a difference. In this way, Ophelia becomes a new type of tool; instead of being used by the men in society, she becomes the key to saving women from her tragic fate.

In the tragedy that is Hamlet, it was easy for critics to overlook Ophelia. Her death was important only in that it led to the confrontation between Hamlet and Laertes that led to both of their deaths. She is an object to further the plot of every other character. This is why she matters. Ophelia is pushed down by her society to the point that she loses herself and takes her own life. She is seen as an object both by the other characters, and even by Shakespeare. And yet, Ophelia is represented more than any of the other Shakespearean heroines. She becomes a classification of women and a way to understand the impact society has on women. While Ophelia only appears in five scenes of Hamlet, she is one of the most well-known characters of the play. To call her weak is to miss the subtlety of her impact. Ophelia is able to represent the ways in which women are silenced by the expected roles they play in society. While Ophelia is judged for her

lack of a voice in the play, in the time, women who spoke up were viewed as shrews and faced horrible consequences. To this day, outspoken women are viewed in a negative light. To see the character who remains silent, who remains obedient and reserved, commit suicide forces the world to look at what society does. As each generation generated their own idea of what it meant to be an Ophelia, her character went beyond the limited role she had in the play. Instead, Ophelia becomes the manifestation of what damage gender roles, societal pressure, and silence can cause. For women reading Hamlet or watching any of the productions, Ophelia stands out. The beautiful representations of Ophelia's peaceful surrender to the river miss the reality of her painful and "muddy" life. To be an Ophelia is not to be a beautiful mermaid like woman, but is instead a painful existence, a cry for help. The existence of Ophelia's character allowed women to see what would become of them if they suffered in silence. Without Ophelia, the understanding of the immense impact society has on the mental health of women would be years behind. The new readings of her character, the interpretations of her on stage and in art, and her changing representations through time conveyed a new understanding of women.

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