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Ophelia: Neither a Green Girl Nor a Wanton Woman

Pattarakulvanit, C.*, Kramer, P., Wimuttikosol, S., McLachla, C., Nakhachai, S.

Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University, Thailand

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Abstract

The article examines the roles of Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Despite her apparent submissiveness and obedience, Ophelia displays her resistance against the male authorities and questions the double standard of the patriarchal order. The article discusses how her behaviors and speeches, as well as her madness and suicide, do not fall easily into any convenient and recognizable category. Hence, her unidentifiability and undefinability force us to question not only her identity and behavior, but our own criteria of defining and identifying her.

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: chusakp@gmail.com

A number of critics seem to view Ophelia in a similar manner to how Polonius thinks of her: "You speak like a green girl / Unsifted in such perilous circumstance."[1] For example, G.F. Bradby says that, "she is merely pretty, simple, submissive, and innocent" (Bradby, 1928, p. 26). Carroll Camden idealizes Ophelia as, "a tender hearted, delicate-minded young girl, well reared in proper obedience to her father . . . ." (Camden, 1964, p. 247). K.R. Eissler psychologizes Ophelia as being, "weak and passive; incapable of self assertion or of the pursuit of her personal goals; submissive, accepting of her inferiority, and finding self-fulfillment in obedience" (Eissler, 1971, p. 433). On the other hand, some critics view Ophelia in light of Hamlet's misogynist abuse of her: "You jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creative, and make your wantonness your ignorance" (3.1.145-47). Rebecca West claims that Ophelia is not, "a correct and virgin of exquisite sensibilities" (West, 1958, p. 18). G. Wilson Knight, although sympathizing with Ophelia, insists that, "the prettiness of Ophelia does in truth enclose a spirit as fragile and untrustworthy as her earthly beauty…" (Knight, 1957, p. 39). In short, these opposing views of Ophelia merely echo what the male characters think of her and overlook what Ophelia thinks of herself.

Feminist critics, rejecting both versions of Ophelia as "a green girl" and "a wanton woman," have difficulties in presenting a real version of Ophelia. Elaine Showalter sums up these difficulties: "To liberate Ophelia from the text, or to make her its tragic centre, is to reappropriate her for our own ends; to dissolve her into a female symbolism of absence is to endorse our own marginality; to make her Hamlet's anima is to reduce her to a metaphor of male experience" (Showalter, 1985, p. 79). Her conclusion, however, raises some questions. First, we do not see that feminist critics, in dealing with Ophelia, have to make her as a tragic center of the play. The notion that feminist criticism means making a protagonist out of a female character in a text is no more a gross misconception than the idea that woman's liberation aims at establishing female superiority over the male. Secondly, although we disagree with the concept of Ophelia being a female symbolism of absence, we do not think that such a notion has to necessarily mean endorsing a female's marginality. Elucidating though her essay is in tracing the history of the cultural representation of Ophelia inside and outside of text, it lapses into

[1] *Complete Works of Shakespeare* 3rd edition in Bevington, D. (Ed). (1980)

relativism when she maintains that, “there is no ‘true’ Ophelia for whom feminist criticism must ambiguously speak, but perhaps only a cubist Ophelia of multiple perspectives, more than the sum of all her parts” (Showalter, 1985, p. 79). We believe that Ophelia has her own true voice in the text. Although her protesting voice against the inhumane treatment towards her may not be “full of sound and fury” like Hamlet’s, it is loud enough to disturb, if not disrupting, the patriarchal order.

Prior to her madness, the male characters close to her tried to suppress her own identity and to appropriate her for their own purposes. Laertes, Ophelia’s brother, urges her to discontinue her love relationship with Hamlet (1.3.1-51). Polonius, her father, orders her to stop seeing Hamlet (1.3.88-136). Despite their ostensible concern for Ophelia, both Laertes and Polonius regard her as their own property. Both also view marriage not as a personal affair but as, in Laertes’s case, a political maneuver or as, in Polonius’s case, a commercial contact. Later Polonius and Claudius use Ophelia as a decoy to find out the real cause of Hamlet’s “madness.” Even Hamlet also uses Ophelia as a displacement of his anger and repulsion at his mother’s unfaithfulness, redirecting his sexual verbal abuses meant for his mother to Ophelia. It is true that Hamlet abuses Ophelia partly because he suspects that Ophelia, like Rosencranz and Guildenstern, is sent by Claudius to spy on him. Yet, we find that it does not sufficiently explain his excessive cruelty toward Ophelia.

Despite her apparent submissiveness and obedience, Ophelia displays her resistance against the male authorities thereby questioning the double standard of the patriarchal order. She does not simply accept Laertes’s advice but also turns that advice back towards Laertes:

> I shall the effect of this good lesson keep
> As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
> Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
> Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
> Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,
> Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
> And recks not his own rede. (1.3.45-50)

Here her apparent passivity is in fact quite aggressive since her reply implicitly criticizes Laertes's double standard. It is also effective too. Laertes, realizing that Ophelia outwits him, suddenly changes the subject. Her following exchange with Polonius also shows a faint voice of protest. Undeniably, she does not confront her father quite as directly as her brother. Yet, Ophelia's silence and brief speech does not have to signify her docility. On the contrary, it suggests her internalized rebellion. Asked if she believes in Hamlet's "tenders," she answers, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (1.3.104). Polonius's use of the word "tenders" in a sense of a legal document concerning dowries is one example of his concept of love based on commercial value. We think only a fool like Polonius would believe that she does not really know. Ophelia intentionally uses such elusive language to efface her own true feelings.

Furthermore, this particular scene (1.3) embedded in the Hamlet's narrative (1.1-2 and 1.4-5) significantly draws a strong contrast between Hamlet's and Ophelia's reactions toward the authority that seeks to contain their emotional feelings and to impose its own value on them. In 1.2, Claudius and Gertrude demand that Hamlet discard his melancholy and remain in Denmark. In 1.5, the ghost, another authority figure, commands Hamlet to avenge his father's death. The swear ritual repeated three times not only binds Horatio and Marcellus to keep the secret but also powerfully impinges on Hamlet's conscience to keep his promise to the ghost. Both Hamlet and Ophelia have to make some kinds of a concession to the authority's demand: Hamlet, "I shall in all my best obey you, madam" (1.2.120); Ophelia, "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.136). However, while Hamlet externalizes his rebellion against the authority through soliloquies, Ophelia internalizes hers by silence. The discrepancy of their modes of discourse, no doubt, reflects the Renaissance gender bias that denies the woman's voice. Besides drawing our sympathy and understanding toward her final breakdown, the denial of Ophelia's voice criticizes the gender bias for being a root cause that drives Ophelia into madness since it prohibits her to externalize her grief.

Ophelia's madness prompts a wide range of responses from characters in the play as well as critics. Novy (1984, p. 84) suggests that, "[Ophelia] must go mad in order to escape social restrictions and take center stage." Structurally, toward the end of the play Ophelia's madness becomes the focus of everyone's attention in the same way Hamlet's "madness" is in the beginning. Her madness and death also precipitate the

actions of the play. However, Ophelia's madness seems to defy rather than escape social restrictions. Dollimore offers an interesting comment on the nature of subversion:

> The mere thinking of a radical idea is not what makes it subversive: typically it is the context of its articulation: to whom, how many and in what circumstances; one might go further and suggest that not only does the idea have to be conveyed, it has also actually to be used to refuse authority or be seen by authority as capable and likely of being so used (Dollimore, 1985, p. 13).

By this definition, Ophelia's madness is indeed subversive. Gertrude explicitly expresses the potential danger of her madness: "'Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (4.5.14-15). Claudius not only realizes the subversive nature of her madness but also tries to contain it. He orders Horatio to "Follow her close. Give her good watch, I pray you" (4.5.71). On the other hand, Laertes, who attempts to overthrow Claudius, also uses Ophelia's madness to justify his subversive acts: "Hadst thou thy wits, and didst persuade revenge, / It could not move thus" (4.5.169-70). Thus, in a political sense, Ophelia's madness, like Hamlet's "madness," creates power anxiety and renders potential disruption of the existing order.

Furthermore, Ophelia's madness, in terms of her own struggle for self-expression, allows her to externalize her suppressed grief, to articulate her internal desire, and to voice her protest against the patriarchal appropriation of her life. In his report of her madness, an anonymous gentleman points out the possible hidden meanings of Ophelia's fragmented and incoherent speech.

> Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection; they yawn at it,
> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
> Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (4.5.7-13)

The comment here suggests not only her words but also her gestures that signify some profound meanings. Laverenz observes that, "even in her madness she has no voice of her own, only a discord of other voices and expectations, customs gone awry." (Leverenz, 1978, p. 301). It is true that Ophelia's songs and speeches are a collection of fragments from old ballads, contemporary popular songs, proverbs, and well-known phrases from other literary works. Yet, it can be argued that by putting all these fragments together to express herself, she transforms them into her own voice. Ophelia's strategy here resembles her use of Laertes's advice to backfire at him. Similarly, one may venture, Shakespeare's comedy female characters use a male disguise to express themselves, to enact what they cannot otherwise do, and most importantly to assert their power over the male characters. We would like to think that the distinction between the use of male disguise to confirm the male power and to subvert it are whether the female characters are conscious of their disguised role or not and what is an outcome of their use of a male disguise.

Ophelia's gestures, especially her distribution of flowers (4.5.172-87), also symbolize her protest against the authority. Like her use of songs to express herself, Ophelia uses the flower symbolism to express her attitude toward the authority figures. We have seen in the beginning of the play that all of the authority figures try to appropriate Ophelia for their purpose. In the flower distribution scene, Ophelia reverses the situation and becomes the authority figure who appropriates everyone around her.

> There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me. We may call it herb of grace o' Sundays. You may wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all when my father died. They say he made a good end (4.5.182-87).

The ambiguity of the text as to which flowers Ophelia gives to whom allows a radical interpretation of this scene. One possible reading is that Ophelia gives fennel and columbines, symbols of flattering and cuckoldry respectively, to Claudius. Rue, a symbol of regret and repentance, is given to Gertrude and herself. A daisy symbolizing unfaithfulness, suggests Hibbard in the note of this scene, is for Ophelia herself, "to

signify her being used as a decoy in 3.1." (Hibbard, 1987, p. 245) Hibbard also offers another alternative reading of this scene, suggesting that fennel and columbines are for Gertrude, and rue for Claudius and Ophelia.[2] Yet, no matter who gets which flower, the scene clearly dramatizes Ophelia's acts of designating other characters. It is poignantly ironic that in order to make her true voice heard, Ophelia has to mediate it through other voices, that to assert her true self, she has to destroy the self and becomes insane.

In terms of intergenerational conflicts, Ophelia faces the same dilemma that her generation, notably Hamlet and Laertes, has difficulties in resolving. Socially, they live in the stage of political transition from the old king to the new king. Psychologically, they are going through the rite of passage to adulthood. Moreover, their parents demand them to live up to the ideals and values which their parents themselves cannot perform and in most cases disregard. Gertrude and Claudius demand Hamlet to be a dutiful son who shares their nuptial joy. Yet Gertrude herself is not faithful to Hamlet's real father; Claudius, as Hamlet finds out later, murdered Hamlet's father. The ghost of Hamlet's father also commands Hamlet to avenge his death but to leave Gertrude alone, ignoring Hamlet's traumatic doubt of his mother's faithfulness. Polonius advises Laertes (possibly Ophelia too as she is also present in this scene): "to thine own self be true" (1.3.78), yet Polonius plays the role of a flattering courtier whose over-eagerness to serve the king results in his death. Polonius also orders Ophelia not to see Hamlet only to impel her to be a decoy to catch Hamlet in Act 3 Scene 1.

Confronted with the corrupted world of adulthood, the political uncertainty, and their own emotional instability, Laertes, Hamlet and Ophelia have to seek their own ways of dealing with the burdens imposed upon them and with their internal rebellion against the older generation. Laertes's swift actions and rash judgement lead him to fall prey to Claudius's shrewd political maneuver. Hamlet's traumatic doubt and contemplating mind trap him in a labyrinth of love/hatred relations and also hinder him from any planned actions. Young Fortinbras also confronts the same predicament. His solution to obey his uncle and to pursue a military career is no better than the others since it transforms him into a man whose greatness is, "not to stir without great argument, / But greatly to

[2] Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Hamlet*, in G.R. Hibbard (Ed). (1987)

find quarrel in a straw / When honor's at the stake" (4.4.53-55). Fortinbras's succession to the Denmark throne thus promises no return to peaceful order.

Unlike her male counterparts, Ophelia, as a woman, has very limited options to maneuver and negotiate. She can neither act out her internal frustration like Laertes; nor can she verbalize her rebellious thoughts like Hamlet. The only possible means of expressing herself and voicing her protest is self-effacement and silent disobedience which tragically precipitate her madness and suicide. In her discussion of the notion of loneliness, especially in Act 3 Scene 1 when Polonius places Ophelia reading alone in a hall so Hamlet who often goes there will meet her as if by chance, Amelia Worsley comments that while Hamlet attenuates his physical loneliness with his famous soliloquy, "to be or not to be," Ophelia's presence that must be assumed as absence in the scene raises an intriguing question on Ophelia's loneliness.

> Ophelia's loneliness, in contrast to Hamlet's, cannot be spoken: her silence does not allow the audience access to what she is (or is not) thinking. This reticence could be read as a sign that she is oppressed by (or at least obedient to) her male counterparts, but it could also be an act of defiance, a willed refusal of theatrical tradition. By withholding language, Ophelia makes the relationship between her outward appearance and interiority difficult to read. She absents herself from the tradition of verbally drawing attention to the disjunction between what she feels and what she says to other characters, and in this, *she enacts a tacit refusal to privilege her offstage audience above her onstage one* (Worsley 2015, p. 525. Emphasis ours.)

It is precisely this, "tacit refusal to privilege her offstage audience," (Worsley, 2015, p. 525) clearly including readers and critics, that renders Ophelia as one of the most enigmatic and problematic characters in literature. Her behaviors, her speeches, and her status, as much as her madness and her suicide, do not fall easily into any convenient and recognizable categories. Her unidentifiability and undefinability force us to question not

her identity and behavior but our own criteria of defining and identifying her. If anything, the final couplet of Ophelia's only soliloquy in this play tells us everything and nothing about her: "Oh woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.154-155). Here, like Ophelia herself, what she has seen and sees depend entirely on what we think she has seen or sees.

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