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Ophelia and the Feminine Construct

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One of the most paradigmatic and iconic of William Shakespeare's heroines is the tragic noblewoman Ophelia, whose descent into madness and despair has remained an archetypal illustration of romantic suicide for centuries. The mystery surrounding the circumstances of her untimely plight adds to this enigma, to the point where her character has developed into a facet of popular culture that is almost synonymous with female suicide and depression. Music, literature, photography, art, television, and film have all paid and continue to pay homage to Ophelia, owing much success to her unfortunate stage life. She is most associated with drowning and is hailed as beautiful even in death; this attitude contributes to the inundation of contemporary society with the idea that suicide is a tragically beautiful and poetic fate. This inundation particularly resonates with female youths, who in many ways find it easy to identify with Ophelia— the sorrowful, lovelorn teenage girl torn between her father's expectations and the impulses of the heart— and this identification is understandable, given Ophelia's predominance in modern culture. The purveyors of this predominance, various artists and poets and the like, are often unaware of Ophelia's subliminal influence, which speaks to her subtle unconscious presence in society. Many young women grow up knowing the imagery associated with Ophelia without even knowing who she is or *that* she is, much less where she originates. All things considered, this presence demonstrates that Ophelia is immortalized through her own tragic circumstances and will continue to be reincarnated in artistic works and the identities of young women for decades and even centuries to come.

Interestingly enough, in reference to women who have drowned themselves, there are those who, rather glibly and offhandedly, use the expression, "she pulled an Ophelia," and we as a culture automatically know exactly what that means. However, given that there is much dispute in the scholarly world over whether she intentionally or unintentionally drowned, Ophelia's

suicide is not something so easily classified, and this confusion has a tendency to impede the analysis of her character. Thus, before we can continue with the aim of this paper, we must discuss the context of Ophelia's alleged suicide and the spectrum of ideology on its importance. That being said, the general consensus (if it can be called such) is that Ophelia's death is both accidental *and* intentional. In her essay on the subject, Barbara Smith states, "Freud [...] sees even inadvertent actions, including falling or slipping, as carrying out an unconscious death wish rather than as an accident," and then goes on to cite Freud's idea "...that an unconscious intention should wait for a precipitating occasion which can take over a part of the causation and, by engaging the subject's defensive forces, can liberate the intention from their pressure (Freud, 181)," (106-7). Smith's suggestion is that Ophelia "[carried] out an unconscious death wish," and that rather than making an attempt to save herself from drowning, she merely accepted her circumstance and made the decision, whether rationally or irrationally, to let herself drown (106). There are many arguments, both sociological and scientific, that argue against the concept of "rational suicide," maintaining that choosing to end one's own life is inherently irrational. "Although suicide may be understandable in any particular circumstance," says David M Clarke in his essay, *Autonomy, Rationality, and the Wish to Die*, "it is not technically rational [...] The requirements for 'rationality' cannot be formally met," Clarke asserts, explaining his idea that the emotional bias surrounding the decision to end one's own life clouds judgment, and therefore impairs the rationality and, indeed, autonomy of the individual in question (458-9).

Furthermore, if Ophelia's death was, indeed, a subliminal expression of an unconscious desire to die, it is essential to discuss the reason for this unconscious desire; whether or not it was due chiefly to Hamlet's brutal rejection, her father's death, or an amalgamation of the two. In Carroll Camden's essay, *On Ophelia's Madness*, she discusses just this topic. While many critics

hold that Ophelia was driven to insanity solely because of Polonius' demise (in some cases, even going so far as to claim that Hamlet had nothing to do with it) Camden conjectures that such claims are inchoate, and "the death of Polonius, then, may well have been only the last in a series of shocks to her basically weak personality" (253). Similarly, Barbara Smith says that "the loss of her father— her link to emotional security once she can no longer trust in her own perception— is the final, fatal assault on her tenuous mental stability and survival instinct," but it is not, as others may argue, the sole cause of her madness (98). It is, rather, the combined shock of Hamlet's rejection and her father's death that ultimately destroys her, as evidenced largely by her songs in act four, when her madness is revealed. Certainly Ophelia's songs are very telling of her mental predicament, and clearly center both on her father *and* on Hamlet, the two strongest male influences in her life. One of her songs blatantly describes a deceitful sexual relationship that can be likened to hers with Hamlet:

Tomorrow is Saint Valentine's day,
 All in the morning betime,
 And I a maid at your window,
 To be your Valentine.
 Then up he rose, and donned his clo'es,
 And dupp'd the chamber door,
 Let in the maid, that out a maid
 Never departed more.
 [...]
 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.
 (4.5.48-55, 58-61)

This section of the song illustrates a dishonest encounter between a young man and young woman who engage in sexual intimacy after the man beguiles the woman into believing he loves her when, really, he only wants to sleep with her. Though it is the man who is to blame in this scenario, it is exclusively the woman who will suffer the humiliation and derision for which the

man receives impunity. In relation to Ophelia, Smith contends that “in her songs, Ophelia for the first time gives voice to and interprets her own thoughts,” and if that is the case, then this song about rejection must reflect on Hamlet— as it makes no sense for it to reflect on anyone else (98). In fact, this song could resonate with Ophelia’s predicament in a multitude of ways, most markedly with the blemish on her purity that Hamlet has left— a blemish that will cause her an unsustainable amount of shame and disgrace inculcated by the culture in which she lives, just as the woman from her song. She has been sweetly seduced and violently abandoned, and this is the first in a series of misfortunes that contributes to her definitive downfall.

Moreover, Ophelia internalizes blame for Hamlet’s own feigned madness based on her feigned rejection of him as per her father’s Machiavellian instructions. Carroll Camden comments on this self-flagellation, justifying its textual presence by saying that “having been warned by her brother and her father of the sexual frailties of youth, she finds some support for their remarks in the actions of Hamlet in her closet [and] fears that [if] Hamlet is mad for love, [...] she is the cause of Hamlet’s madness” (248). No young girl wants to take the blame for such a thing, but in Ophelia’s mind she is entirely culpable, especially after being subjected to the lewd and pessimistic insinuations of her father and brother. It is in this way, Camden avers, that “Hamlet’s pretend madness [...] actually contributes to Ophelia’s real madness” (249). We know that Ophelia loves Hamlet, and we know that Hamlet at least *thought* himself to be in love with Ophelia based on the love poetry he gave her (even though, later in the play, he claims out of rage that he never loved her), so it is an apt supposition that Ophelia’s madness begins when she believes herself to have unwillingly destroyed her lover. Even during the ruse her father concocts that forces her to effectively terminate her relationship with Hamlet, Ophelia lapses into expressing the truth of her love for him. “O, help him, you sweet heavens,” she exclaims, when

he begins to vehemently rail against her, and, “O heavenly powers, restore him!” (3.1.134, 141). She cries out due to fear, most likely, but not fear for herself— fear for him, for his soul, and who he once was. “Restore him,” she says, indicating that she senses the cruel turn in his temperament, but rather than pray for herself and for her own protection against it, she intercedes on behalf of her lover, that he be restored to his former self. Then, as if that is not evidence enough of her true love for him, her soliloquy after his departure concretizes it.

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,
 The glass of fashion and the mold of form,
 The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
 That suck'd the honey of his music vows,
 Now see that 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: O, woe is me,
 To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!
 (3.1.150-161).

If she did not feel any affection for him, she would not refer to his mind as “noble,” nor call him “the observed of all observers,” nor describe his vows of love as “honey.” She loves him, undoubtedly, and seeing him in such a state, especially directed toward her, is incredibly traumatizing: “O, woe is me / To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!” And what has driven him to this? Polonius’ manipulation of Ophelia with perorations on the falsity of love, specifically Hamlet’s, combined with his arrogance and conceit. It is Polonius’ machinations that unwittingly condemn his daughter to death and lunacy.

Typically, Polonius is interpreted as a tiresomely bumbling idiot whose passing devastates Ophelia because he was her guiding light in the darkness— but his contribution to his daughter’s mental deterioration does not begin with his death. In support of this speculation,

scholar Myron Taylor holds that Polonius is actually one of the show's villains, arguing that "as [a] typical Elizabethan Machiavellian, Polonius wills evil. His ineffectuality does not excuse his duplicity. [...] Appearance has become his reality, [...] hypocrisy is commended over genuineness, selfishness over generosity" (273). His "'few maxims'," Taylor says, "are Satanic in origin," in that they promote deception and cruelty (273). Indeed, his relationship with Ophelia exemplifies this idea. He fervidly discourages her from engaging in a relationship with Hamlet, forbidding her to see him except to formally break off their affair— a formality which he and King Claudius almost sadistically watch from a hidden vantage. Even though she does not want to end things with her lover, Ophelia is duty-bound to her father, not only by the societal conventions of the time, but also because she is a loyal daughter. Perhaps she is loyal to a fault. At any rate, whether Polonius is a true villain or not, it is not a stretch to suggest that Ophelia has a strained relationship with him. Though she is dutiful and obedient, he does not support her autonomy and discredits her own beliefs, coercing her into relying on him singularly for all direction. He has an inexplicable need to control her, as a chess player would a chess piece, and does not seem to acknowledge that she is her own human being with her own thoughts and her own heart. Ophelia, consequently, has a stilted sense of self and a smothered identity. Even her brother Laertes, who decidedly takes after their father in all the worst ways, functions as an extension of Polonius and of Polonius' ignorant pedagogy. Without the presence of a mother figure, Ophelia grew up sandwiched between these two men and their rigid ideas alone, and did not have an opportunity to develop any kind of sophisticated identity. When she does finally make her own choice and becomes Hamlet's lover, she is immediately censured— and whatever sense of self she had striven to cultivate with Hamlet is destroyed. So, what does Ophelia do, bereft once again of her own character? She regresses to an emotional state where she is utterly

dependent on her retentive father. Thusly, when Polonius dies, so too does her entire sense of being— without a controlling male presence in her life, Ophelia flounders. Her father is dead, her brother is absent, and Hamlet has rejected her. Her body and mind cannot sustain such deep abandonment. So, she does the only thing she *can* do: she disappears.

It is no coincidence that the oppressive forces in Ophelia's life are all male, just as it is no coincidence that she has therefore become a symbol of degraded femininity and vindicated chastity. As aforementioned, Ophelia is almost inseparable from the social construct of womanhood: but how did this happen? As Bridget Gellert Lyons suggests in her article, *The Iconography of Ophelia*, Ophelia has been a symbol ever since her creation, and in fact was designed to be somewhat of an icon from the beginning. "Significantly," Lyons says, "Ophelia is not coached in what to say to Hamlet [...] Rather, she is supposed to communicate an impression by her visual appearance alone" (60). This is true. When Polonius instructs her on how she ought to behave when facing Hamlet pre-breakup, he tells her how to stand, which book to read, and how to invoke the image of "loneliness" and give the impression of being "pious," but he does not explicitly tell her what to say— only the desired outcome of the scenario (3.1.46-48). Fascinatingly, Lyons details that "the image of a solitary woman with a book was conventionally interpreted as representing an attitude of prayer and devoutness," and that Hamlet "is to be imagined as responding to an established iconographical language," with which the Elizabethan audience would also be more than familiar (60-1). "The woman with a book was reminiscent of countless representations of the Virgin," and therefore Ophelia is unambiguously representative of a specific religious personage, one who is potentially the most important female figure in the Bible's canon (61). However, this is not the only religious paradigm to which Ophelia is deliberately linked. After she suffers mental delirium, Ophelia takes on the characteristics of a

popular pagan goddess, Flora, who is associated with dichotomous meanings that, according to Lyons, Shakespeare knowingly exploits “in order to establish the difference between a mythical world of natural fertility and innocence, and an urban courtly world of deception and calculation” (63). Flora’s story exists in “two contradictory versions [...] [that] were both very familiar during the Renaissance” Lyons illuminates (63). The first, the Ovidian Flora, “is associated with the beauties of spring and with love that is purged of the jealousy and libidinous turbulence of the antimasque’s Cupid,” while the second, the Plutarchian and Boccacian Flora, “was a Roman prostitute” whose legacy facilitated an “urban commercial” festival in ancient Rome (64). These two opposing images of Flora suggest both purity and sexuality, which are two huge components of Ophelia’s symbology; nonetheless, combined with the Catholic Virgin, Ophelia’s innate pagan whims are suppressed, and it is only after she is relinquished from sanity and societal strictures that Ophelia’s sexuality can emerge without proscription.

An interesting subject of reflection on this idea of the romanticized Catholic Virgin in conjunction with pagan imagery appears in the Victorian era, perhaps the first epoch in which the iconography of Ophelia seeded in popular culture. In the twenty-first century, artistic expression surrounding Ophelia is favored by photography; in the Victorian era, by painting. In the Victorian social topography and inherent deeply learned misogyny, the male gaze pervaded and diminished the feminine construct in artistic expression— and Ophelia was no exception. The most iconic of these paintings is, arguably, Millais’ *Ophelia*, whose problematic elements are vital to the dialogue of this essay and beg attention. In this famous painting by Sir John Everett Millais, shown below, Ophelia’s death scene is depicted in a way that evokes a very visceral and emotionally intense response, a response which is still being processed today— as evidenced by

the sources cited, taken from two current, up-to-date popular websites in both the United States and the United Kingdom.



(John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-1852)

On the website for the Tate Britain Museum in London, the article on Millais' Ophelia states that "Shakespeare was a favourite source for Victorian painters, and the tragic-romantic figure of Ophelia from *Hamlet* was an especially popular subject, featuring regularly in Royal Academy exhibitions" (Tate.org.uk). Indeed, the Victorian era spurred a massive movement in the rediscovery and re-appreciation of Shakespeare, and many of his heroines became translated into their culture as derivatives of Victorian female gender roles— that is, fragile, nurturing, martyrs who need above all else to be protected and cared for by their male guardians. Martyrdom and, likewise, suicide, was heavily romanticized in Victorian culture for a multitude of reasons. It was, in a strictly analytical sense, a reflection of the ultimate sacrifice a woman could make to prove her emotional dependency on society and ergo elucidate a greater implication that reinforced the idea that she had to be protected. Plainly speaking, female suicide

validated patriarchal virility and oppression— unfortunately, this is not dissimilar from Ophelia’s presence within *Hamlet*’s original text. It is no accident, then, that Millais’ painting, as well as the countless other artistic odes to Ophelia created during this period, made her the exemplary of Victorian beauty standards. In a way, the complexity of her original identity, as analyzed in this paper, was dismantled and reconstructed to fit with a sort of innately misogynistic propaganda in the nineteenth century.

To delve more into an actual analysis of the art itself, it is prudent to decipher mood and tone from the pose, color, and lighting of the piece. Most notably there are a palette of greens and golds, with a touch of red and of the pale bluish color of her dress. This scene seems to be representing the poignant yet controversial moment of Ophelia’s decision to give in to death: “Ophelia’s expression shows no panic or despair. Her skin glows with life yet, not death. She gazes up, mouth open in song, and her position recalls a Christlike pose” (victorianweb.org). The overwhelming spirituality in this “Christlike pose” is also a stronger Victorian assimilation, given that pious and devoted worshippers of Christianity were essential elements of the Victorian female gestalt. Her Christlike pose reinforces the Victorian tendency to regard as a martyr, and again reinforces the Catholic imagery within the text of the play itself. Furthermore,

Millais has captured a specific, fleeting moment just after her fall but before her death, and he has immortalized Ophelia. Every reflection and flick of light give the impression of frozen time, and it suggests that Ophelia, though unchanging on the canvas before the viewer, had not always been so close to death and would not remain afloat much longer. Millais’ painting presents a crystallized moment between life and death (victorianweb.org).

This observation is very astute and, to his credit, Millais achieves this delicate moment with reverence and grace. All things considered, he does Shakespeare's famed heroine justice in articulating her final moments in an intimate and beautiful way, even if that articulation is derived from the inherently problematic male gaze, which, as expressed in earlier segments of my analysis, seems to be something from which Ophelia can never escape—until, of course, the twenty-first century and the rise of second-wave feminism.

Indeed, Ophelia's influence and symbology has retained its prevalence in modernity, and I believe that this is principally due to her early establishment not only as a Christian or pagan essence but as the epitome of marginalized femininity as well. Her struggles—the constant friction between her own wants and desires and the wants and desires of the men attempting to control her, the rejection of her lover, the loss of her father and the shattering of the codependency she had with him—are all accessible to women in every generation, regardless of class, intellect, age, or culture. Women are unified in their punishment for being women, and Ophelia truly encapsulates that tragedy. It is no wonder that she has become such an icon for young women around the world, and that social groups and art forms and colloquialisms have all nursed their own culture out of her story. Webmaster Alan Young, in his web-essay entitled *Ophelia and Web 2.0*, certifies that “Shakespeare awareness is not in decline in our age but within popular culture possesses a vigorous and burgeoning afterlife” and Shakespeare is in a “constant [state of] reinvention” by all those who participate in this niche of popular culture (1). For example, an entire subgenre of photography and artistry has emerged in response to Ophelia's plight, with thousands upon thousands of images compiled into groups tagged as “Ophelia,” enabling them to be searched for and viewed by others who take part in Ophelia's culture. The “Ophelia” tag on visual art archive website deviantart.com has a total of 50,170

submissions tagged with that name. Similarly, on flickr.com, a group entitled “~ O p h e l i a ~” is dedicated to the photographic interpretation of her death scene, and boasts a proud 315 members with a total of 843 image contributions. What exactly is an Ophelia-esque photograph? Young offers this deduction:

Viewers are typically presented with a beautiful young woman, who is wearing a long, often white, dress. She is bare-foot, her hair is often undone, and she is submerged fully or partially in water. In most examples, she lies face up in the water. She is usually holding flowers or is surrounded by flowers, and in a large number of cases, she is placed in and perhaps even merges into a natural setting (2-3).

For example, this image:



(Elle Hanley, *Running Water*, 2012)

This photograph is, by Young’s delineation, a typical Ophelia photograph. Though it is not amateur, as it is part of a professional photographer’s archive, it contains all the necessary

components: the model is in a white dress, she is submerged partially in water, she is surrounded by flowers, and she is in a natural setting. For the less practiced photographer, “there is even online advice available on ehowto.com about obtaining an appropriate dress [...] and accompanying makeup” (3). It is this fixation on the image of Ophelia, Young comments, that “draw[s] upon our fascination with death, and [...] sustain[s] the mythic relationship between water and femininity, and the intimate relationship between madness and femininity so often commented upon by feminist scholars” (3). This is an astute observation, and supports the hypothesis that Ophelia and womanhood are inseparable.

In an analogous vein, Ophelia’s silent presence is in books and film as well as the online community. Favored television and film characters such as Rose Dewit Bukater from *Titanic*, Meredith Grey from *Grey’s Anatomy*, Ofelia from *Pan’s Labyrinth*, and Justine from *Melancholia* all encapsulate various Ophelia-esque themes— Rose suffers from isolation and depression and attempts to drown herself; Meredith also suffers from isolation and depression and attempts to drown herself; Ofelia undergoes incomparable psychological and physical torment from her stepfather and is murdered as a virgin martyr; and Justine is catatonically depressed and cannot function in society nor find satisfaction in her life on earth, dreams of drowning, and rejoices in the prospect of death. Upon first examination, one may not notice such similarities or identify them with Ophelia, but her subconscious presence is there, and those characters abovementioned, including hundreds and probably thousands of others, all hearken to the feminine abstraction that is Ophelia. Likewise, many authors owe a debt to Shakespeare’s Ophelia for their different accretions to her subculture. A few examples include such titles as *Dating Hamlet*, by Lisa Fielder; *Ophelia: A Novel*, by Lisa Klein; *Ophelia Speaks*, by Sara Shandler; *Ophelia’s Mom*, by Nina Shandler; *Reviving Ophelia*, by Mary Pipher; *Ophelia Thinks*

Harder, by J Betts; *Ophelia*, by Simone Kindler; and *Bellocq's Ophelia: Poems of Natasha Trethewey*, by Natasha Trethewey. Additionally, there are singers and songwriters who also profit from Ophelia's name: Natalie Merchant's hit single entitled "Ophelia," the Indigo Girls' album called *Swamp Ophelia*, Emilie Autumn's album *Opheliac*, Joyah's album *Ophelia's Shadow*, and A Silent Star's Christmas album *Drowning Ophelia*. Her influence in all these titles and songs—and moreover, her influence in all the various mediums of pop culture discussed—goes without saying. Because of this, it is almost impossible to grow up in this world without being exposed to Ophelia at some point in one's life, before even reading *Hamlet*, or knowing of it at all.

As thoroughly discussed in this essay, *Hamlet's* Ophelia is irrevocably embedded in our postmodern culture and stands as an eternal facet of womanhood, femininity, and female adolescence. Her influence covers so many corners of modernity that she has developed her own subculture, comprised of an outpouring of artistic expressions and emulations in her name and honor. Though some of her romanticization can be viewed as problematical in terms of its suicidal-mortality context, Ophelia is, in my belief, a kindred spirit to careworn women of every age, and a character with whom so many women can identify and appreciate. Her aura in society and in the identities of women has existed for over five hundred years, and will likely continue to exist for many more. She, not unlike Shakespeare's Juliet, is a household name that stands on its own outside the work of literature from which it is derived, and the beauty and meaning of that speaks for itself. In spite of the fact that critics disagree over whether or not her death was intentional, and in spite of the fact that these same critics also squabble over the main impetus for her insanity, Ophelia will remain an icon of womanhood and mental illness in the subculture that her sympathizers have created, and through that subculture will she continue to infiltrate the

dominant culture as well. Though once she may have been disposable in the eyes of the men who surrounded her, Ophelia is now absolutely indispensable to women in the postmodern world.

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