

## **CRAZY? ARE YOU SURE?**

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### **Abstract**

This research paper focuses around the concept of madness conceived within literature of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, underscoring historical context of the female image in that period. Selecting as base the well-known ‘love-crazed’ character Ophelia from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the text seeks to develop a new perspective, questioning the possibility that this figure’s mental state was a subtle means of representing a more profound cultural and/or social aspect of women during that time and opening the possibility of a long line of other misunderstood characters.

Keywords: madness, Shakespaeare, Hamlet, feminine image, Ophelia

### **Resumen**

Este trabajo de investigación se centra en el concepto de locura concebida dentro de la literatura del siglo XVI, subrayando el contexto histórico de la imagen femenina en ese periodo. Seleccionando como base el conocido personaje Ophelia de la conocida obra *Hamlet* de Shakespeare, el texto busca y desarrolla una nueva perspectiva, cuestionando la posibilidad de que la razón del estado mental de esta figura literaria fuera un medio sutil para representar una cultura más profunda y/o aspecto social de las mujeres durante ese tiempo y abriendo la posibilidad de otros personajes mal entendidos.

Palabras claves: locura, Shakespeare, Hamlet, imagen femenina, Ofelia

What can one conceive as ‘madness’? Throughout time, this concept has undergone transformation due to the inadequate reasons behind its classification, which were also portrayed in literature. Bearing this in mind, one can’t help but wonder about those characters labelled and known worldwide because of this particular

characteristic. Are these characters truly irrational or simply misunderstood? The literary work chosen to analyze this statement is the legendary play *Hamlet* for its infamous personae named Ophelia who is often concluded to turn insane out of love:

Whatever the exact nature of Ophelia's malady of love, whether it is pure erotomania or *passio hysterica* brought on by lovesickness, the symptoms which she exhibits are so clearly portrayed and most of them so easily recognized that the Elizabethan audience, we have reason to suppose, would at least see Ophelia as a girl suffering physically and mentally the pangs of rejected love. (Camden, 255)

As above, Ophelia's loss of sanity was furthermore perceived as expressed by M. Gonick: "According to Pipher, in the story of *Hamlet*, Ophelia is the obedient daughter who kills herself, drowning in grief and sorrow when she cannot meet the competing demands of Hamlet and her father" (11). In other words, defined by many, it was believed to have been caused by the death of her father, but more distinctively, because of her unrequited love. If all this collected information is certain, with these two perspectives, did this character actually go 'mad'?

First, a look into her daily life. Ophelia can be pictured as a 'young maiden' due to being often referenced by the word 'youth', is the daughter of Polonius, the councillor to the King. In her first appearance, she is found in the chambers of her father alongside her brother Laertes who is embarking on a journey to France. Besides bidding farewell, he warns Ophelia to not fall prey under Hamlet, assuring that he will merely deceive her. Also, to avoid succumbing to her affection towards him:

LAERTES. Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister,  
And keep you in the rear of your affection,  
Out of the shot and danger of desire. (1.3.33-35)  
Be wary then; best safety lies in fear.  
Youth to itself rebels, though none else near. (1.3.44-45)

This conversation can be simplified into Laertes telling Ophelia what she should not do while he is away and unable to keep an eye on her. Though the young maiden does remark that such misleading behavior is practiced by him as well, she nevertheless abides to his advice. Soon after, their father enters the scene. When Laertes receives his blessing and leaves without forgetting to remember his sister of the previous discussion, Polonius asks her on the matter. Upon hearing from Ophelia that Hamlet has shown some interest in her, he quickly mocks this statement by questioning what she thinks:

POLONIUS: Affection? Pooh! You speak like a green girl,  
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.  
Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?

OPHELIA: I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

POLONIUS: Marry, I will teach you. (1.3.102-106)

Polonius expressed how absurd her impressions were and decided to correct his daughter's way of thinking. In addition, commanded her to not interact or speak with Hamlet at all. He made sure to apparent his role as the smartest intellectual and the one who owns the power to be obeyed. Therefore, she bears "...unquestioningly the restraints of her position- ..." (Welshimer, 94) By this scene, it is clear how Ophelia's family nucleus is: controlling and oppressive, as the words of Resetarits in her review titled *Ophelia's Empathic Function*: "...Ophelia is the receiver of seemingly unending verbiage, sometimes advice, sometimes instruction, sometimes abuse." (Resetarits, 216). Which is the opposite of what a home should actually be like. An atmosphere likely repetitive.

Now, throughout the first part of the play, it is shown that two other characters use this young maiden for their own personal benefit. Tragically, both of them weigh a heavy influence in her life: Polonius and Hamlet. In the second act, when Ophelia narrates Hamlet's sudden visit and odd behavior to her father, he immediately assumes the prince of Denmark's bizarre action was one spawned by pent-up desire. Even though Polonius had forbid the relationship, he now seeks to make it happen. The reason behind this is well depicted by Rebecca West in her book *The Court and the Castle*:

There is no mistaking the disingenuousness of his dealings with his daughter. When Ophelia comes to him with her tale of how Hamlet had come to her as she was sewing in her chamber, "with his doublet all unbraced," and had looked madly on her, Polonius eagerly interprets this as "the very ecstasy of love," and asks her "What, have you given him any hard words of late?" ... The girl is not to be kept out of harm's way. She is a card that can be played to take several sorts of tricks. She might be Hamlet's mistress; but she might be more honored for resistance. And if Hamlet was himself an enemy of the King, and an entanglement with him had ceased to be means of winning favor, then she can give a spy's report on him to Claudius. (West, 1539)

By her own father, she is viewed as a useful object that helps him to establish a closer relationship with the royal family. Meanwhile Hamlet, in order to convince

everyone of his madness, takes advantage of Polonius' assumption and uses Ophelia as the root of its source, usually displaying it in public. However, when both are alone, he does not hesitate to express himself earnestly, taking no consideration towards her feelings or well-being:

HAMLET: I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad. I say we will have no more marriage. Those that are married already-all but one-shall live. The rest shall keep as They are. To a nunnery, go. (3.1.136-141)

Not only is Ophelia degraded at home, but outside as well. And, out of everyone, it had to be from Hamlet, the one she felt affection for. Such harsh words from a loved one could hurt anybody.

Lastly, the final most important scene; when everyone perceives this character as 'mad'. They quickly assume this characterization by witnessing her odd behavior. The young maiden did two particularly peculiar gestures: suddenly sing incoherent verses and give specific types of flowers. However, her actions were instantly linked to her father's death:

KING: O, this is the poison of deep grief; it springs  
All from her father's death—and now behold! (4.5.72-73)

Though it is one of the reasons, the cause of her state of mind is much more profound. Besides viewing her process of coping with grief as a mental illness, Ophelia suffered not only the loss of a parent, but the rupture of that voice who instructed her what to think and do. Living always under surveillance of men's eyes, this abrupt detachment has left her astray. She was kept from developing her own intellect. After yielding to absolute power over a long time and not allowed to voice her opinion, is now found able to speak freely. She chooses to express her new given freedom through the language of flowers, each chosen with a symbolic meaning and gifted directly to the person:

Rosemary- remembrance for both at weddings and at funerals

Pansies- love and courtship. For French: 'thoughts'

Fennel- flattery

Columbines- lack of chastity or ingratitude

Rue- repentance

Daisy- dissembling, faithlessness

Violets- faithfulness

Ophelia also transmits her message through the chosen lyrics she opted to sing. She reflects the restitution of this absolute power bestowed upon her.

Having gathered these details, it is clear that this character can be a representation of how women were conceived as in that era. They were constantly associated with 'Hysteria', due to the belief in that time that such disease was diagnosed because of this gender's excessive emotions. Excellently explained by Audrey Kerr in her article titled *The Sixteenth Century Journal*:

Ophelia, in her madness, provides raw and fertile terrain for the usual stereotypes of women –woman as tormented, excessively dramatic, inherently tragic– such that the greatness of Shakespeare's work is only rivaled by the greatness of this occasion to represent historically comfortable notions of womanhood. (Kerr, 606)

Moreover, one can discover the true reasoning behind the manifestation of Ophelia's conduct. Instead of analyzing it superficially and concluding, it was simply because of her father's death along with Hamlet's deceit, there are other factors of greater influence. In this case, it was caused by the severe dominance of men that she was demanded to abide, or more accurately: the effects generated on women by their imposed role in society. In the end, Ophelia was able to avert men's power by using another language, managing to confront and expose everyone's wrongdoing, something even Hamlet couldn't do. This supported, once again, by Audrey Kerr:

Once seen only as a pathetic, innocent, submissive and dutiful daughter, sister and lover, Ophelia is now also perceived as a figure of strength, a heroine whose madness is seen as an assertion of self, an act of rebellion against patriarchal control. (Kerr, 606)

Her death could also be interpreted as a way of rejecting this type of suppressive life. This character has grown to become "...a feminist icon...as an adolescent girl in a proactive search for self..." (Kerr, 606). Shakespeare granted through Ophelia an interesting view for one to achieve autonomy

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