

# The Tragedy of Ophelia

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THE impression of Ophelia most people carry from the play is that of wistful pathos. Her character is marked by an incompleteness which tempts critics to add some dimension, ranging from inexperienced demureness to the physical condition of pregnancy and the depravity of one who "was not a chaste young woman."<sup>1</sup> Inside the play characters appear to foist upon Ophelia interpretations for which there seems little evidence in her behaviour. Laertes and Polonius regard her as having the gullibility to succumb easily to Hamlet's blandishments, and they impute the same susceptibility in her to physical desire which they want to find in Hamlet:

Ay, springes to catch woodcocks! I do know,  
When the blood burns, how prodigal the soul  
Lends the tongue vows. (I. iii. 115-7)

Hamlet himself in the nunnery scene is ready to see in Ophelia all the hypocritical wiles of the harlot, and even such a sensitive reader of Shakespeare as John Keats likens his own view of Fanny Brawne to Hamlet's of Ophelia:

If my health would bear it, I could write a Poem which I have in my head, which would be a consolation for people in such a situation as mine. I would show someone in Love as I am, with a person living in Liberty as you do. Shakespeare always sums up matters in the most sovereign manner. Hamlet's heart was full of such Misery as mine is when he said to Ophelia "Go to a Nunnery, go, go!" Indeed I should like to give up the matter at once — I should like to die.<sup>2</sup>

It is distressing to find Hamlet's disordered vision of Ophelia invoked with such vehemence.

I think we do better to ignore the distortions of critics and characters and to concentrate upon the very incompleteness in Ophelia's personality, the readiness for filling

one of these roles rather than any particular role. Ophelia is tantalizingly insufficient because of her immaturity. To be more precise, since her sole preoccupation during the play is her relationship with Hamlet, her immaturity may be defined in terms of the blighting of this relationship. She is innocent, on the brink of sexual commitment, simultaneously fearing and desiring a full love relationship with Hamlet, and trapped by circumstances outside her control. Lawrence's poem, "Ballad of Another Ophelia," catches the tone of her failure:

Nothing now will ripen the bright green apples,  
Full of disappointment and of rain.

His line "What, then, is peeping there hidden in the skirts of all the blossom?" and its answer "Yea, but it is cruel when undressed is all the blossom" gather the distress and pathos of Ophelia's complicated feelings about sexual love.

What, then, does go wrong with the relationship? Hamlet and Ophelia are ideal candidates for a romantic comedy. They are both in the morn and liquid dew of youth, he intelligent and witty enough to be a Benedick, she a graceful and reticent "rose of May." He has wooed her ardently and in honourable fashion with almost all the holy vows of heaven. His love-song (II.ii.114-8) betrays no deception or indecency, and his declaration of love is as sincere and callow as that of any Shakespearean lover:

O dear Ophelia, I am ill at these numbers. I have not art  
to reckon my groans; but that I love thee best, O most  
best, believe it. Adieu. (II. ii. 119-21)

His last words on the matter, beside her grave, are "I loved Ophelia" and his mother laments there, "I hop'd thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (V.i.238). It is not enough to point to *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* and say that there may be tragedies of love as well as comedies. This is to lower both comedy and tragedy to the level of conventional expectations, and to deny them the possibility of common access to psychological truth. There is nothing in the love itself to sow its own destruction, and there is

little to link Ophelia with the truly destructive situation, the murder of old Hamlet and the hasty remarriage of his wife. The parental opposition of Polonius, far from being an impediment, would in a comedy be an invigorating challenge for lovers, and he encourages little more respect than the waspish Egeus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Why, then, is Ophelia, "the young, the beautiful, the harmless and the pious,"<sup>3</sup> sacrificed so unjustly?

To be frank and formalistic, Ophelia commits a sin against the laws that would apply in a comedy. Instead of allowing her eyes and heart to teach her what she must do, she listens to advice from her brother and father. Like Hamlet, she falls victim to the difficulty of determining how far "seeming" is being. Even though she has received only honourable courtship from Hamlet, the badgering of Laertes and Polonius in their separate ways is so consistent, emphasizing alike Hamlet's youth and the fiery, mercurial nature of sexual desire, that she is confused. "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (I.iii.104) shows distressed docility and fear, pleading for tuition from an experienced elder. The advice she receives is "Do not believe his vows." The irony is that her own subsequent conduct seems to Hamlet, who is probably just as innocent as she, a calculated fraud which helps to shatter his own faith in appearances. Her timid words to him later reveal glowing hero worship, but they lack the strong-willed wariness of a Rosalind or a Portia, and she and her lover must pay for her lack of faith in the power of mutual love.

For Hamlet, the truly destructive circumstance is his mother's prompt marriage to the dead King's brother. This fact disquiets him and sets him apart from the marriage festivities even before he suspects Claudius of murder. With the characteristic desire, noted by Coleridge,<sup>4</sup> to abstract and generalize from particulars he makes his mother's conduct an example of all womanhood: "Frailty, thy name is woman!" (I.ii.146). His very desire not to think on't drives him obsessively to dwell on her wicked

speed, posting to incestuous sheets with the physical "dexterity" of a beast. The sane mind protests that there is more to marriage than sex, but Hamlet's range of perceptions has been narrowed by the event.

If we may take the discussions between Ophelia and her father as being in chronological sequence, then during the two months between his father's death and his mother's marriage Hamlet's love-suit is still being seriously pursued. She shows no sign of recent neglect from him, and both she and her father repeat that he has wooed her "of late" (I.iii.91, 99). The crucial change, then, comes when *she* neglects *him* at the counsel of her brother and father:

*Polonius.* . . . What, have you given him any hard words  
of late?  
*Ophelia.* No, my good lord; but, as you did command,  
I did repel his letters, and denied  
His access to me. (II. i. 107-9)

His apparent madness manifests itself in the familiar Burtonian symptoms of love melancholy,<sup>5</sup> clothes awry, his face pale, trembling and sighing so piteously and profoundly "As it did seem to shatter all his bulk And end his being" (II.i.94-6). It is to Polonius' credit that he recognizes his misjudgment of Hamlet's motives and sees that the suit has been in earnest. But when saying that it is simply Ophelia's rejection that has made Hamlet mad, he is ignorant of the predisposed mental state of the young man caused by his mother's remarriage and the recent encounter with the ghost. Claudius suspects that there is more than meets the eye when he mutters, "Love! His affections do not that way tend" (III.ii.162). We cannot lightly brush aside the suggestion made by Nigel Alexander<sup>6</sup> among others that Hamlet's state is not caused by love but by his encounter with the ghost, but the ambiguity is built into the scene. Nor can we dismiss the possibility raised by Harold Goddard<sup>7</sup> that Ophelia's description of Hamlet's behaviour in her closet is a kind of hallucination. We can, however, suppose that she is beginning to perceive that her prior caution, no doubt a justified device for testing the sincerity

of her lover, has gone horribly wrong, even though she is ignorant of the other matters troubling his mind.

Hamlet himself projects upon Ophelia the guilt and pollution he has found in Gertrude. Tossed helplessly between disillusionment, morbid fixation upon sex, and weary ennui, his tendency to draw all objects into the web of his imagination reveals itself in the way that he accuses Ophelia of his mother's apparent sin in the "nunnery" scene. I do not want to retread ground covered by Harold Jenkins and J. M. Nosworthy among others,<sup>8</sup> but since the strangeness of the nunnery scene lies in the seemingly erratic switches of tone adopted by Hamlet, an examination of them may help understanding. Ophelia enters as he is engrossed in a reflection on suicide, ended by a resigned and rather soothing shrug about the meaninglessness of action. In such a mood it seems unlikely that his greeting of "the fair Ophelia" holds any barb, for he is hardly aware of her presence. As she timidly tests the water with "How does your honour" she meets a civil enough reply. But when she raises the question of their terminated love affair by offering to redeliver the trinkets he had given her, it is not surprising that his hurt dignity should make him haughty:

No, not I;  
I never gave you aught. (III. i. 95-6)

Unwisely, she perseveres. In her gentle voice she reproaches Hamlet for jilting her, and since she is the one who first denied him access (II.i.108), his brittle composure snaps with surprise:

Ha, ha! Are you honest? (III. i. 103)

If she had been "honest" in spurning him, then she cannot be "honest" now. She is, however, "fair", and the solution to the conundrum is that either honesty and beauty hold no discourse, or that the power of beauty may transform honesty into a bawd. The second fits better his mother's conduct which had initially suggested the "paradox" (III.

i.114), and Ophelia's behaviour now "gives it proof." And since her dishonesty is shared by his own mother, the terrible implication is that he himself has inherited from "our old stock" that very dishonesty. Hence his certainty of another paradox: "I did love you once. . . . I loved you not." In a spirit of warning, he points out that if she should breed by him she would be a breeder of sinners, and the only advice he can offer is that she should preserve her virginity by going to a nunnery. If she marries, the old calumny will be propagated. The only difference between a fool like her father and a wise man is that the latter knows what he is doing:

Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go; and quickly too. Farewell. (III. i. 138-40)

That women "make of" men monsters surely bears both possible meanings, to transform them into monsters (cuckolds) and produce monsters (marred children) from them, and the implication is that the original sin was woman's. The tangle of his thoughts about the wantonness, ignorance and duplicity of two women in particular causes him to conflate them into a single identity, the Untrustworthy Woman.

Hamlet's quick change in this scene from despair to a frenzy sustained in brutal bantering is shocking, but when closely examined its "useless and wanton cruelty," as Dr. Johnson calls it, is not inexplicable. We need no recourse to Dover Wilson's interpolated stage directions nor to an ironic reading of "nunnery" as "brothel." On the other hand, the meaning cannot be understood by any one of the eavesdroppers for they, like Hamlet himself, are hampered by the limitations of their own points of view. They "botch the words up fit to their own thoughts" (IV.v.10), a habit adopted by all the eavesdroppers throughout the play. Ophelia mingles pity for the noble mind of Hamlet, blasted with love into madness, with self-pity to find herself involved as the "most deject and wretched" of ladies.

Hamlet is too rawly sensitive to the pain caused him by the unwittingly irresponsible actions (as he sees them) of two women to endure the further pain of trying sympathetically to understand their feelings. To dull the pain he tries a brutal detachment from them, adopting a posture of swaggering toughness bred of burning resentment. It shows in the public glare of the "mousetrap" scene in his short, sharp and bawdy retorts to Ophelia: "Do you think I meant country matters?" "*Ophelia*. Tis brief, my lord. *Hamlet*. As woman's love." "So you mis-take your husbands" (III.ii.106-246 *passim*). Ophelia bears his taunts with patience yet with the occasional spirited response: "You are naught, you are naught. I'll mark the play" (III. ii.143). Hamlet's preoccupations are still sex and the perversion of marriage by woman's infidelity, and the convergence of both in his words to Ophelia shows that he is still merging her identity with that of his mother. His mind is lacerated still further by the horror that his imagination can make of sex between his mother and Claudius, and so he confronts Gertrude:

Nay, but to live  
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,  
Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love  
Over the nasty sty! (III. iv. 92-4)

And again, even as he harangues the middle-aged woman, the younger is not far from his mind:

Rebellious hell,  
If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,  
To flaming youth let virtue be as wax  
And melt in her own fire; proclaim no shame  
When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,  
Since frost itself as actively doth burn,  
And reason panders will. (III. iv. 82-8)

Female sexuality simultaneously frightens and fascinates him, and from these feelings he creates a stereotype that he affixes upon both his mother and Ophelia. The responsibility for the incomprehension is tangled and shared. Ophelia, by her pliability, has set the process in motion, but

Hamlet has subsequently distorted her behaviour so radically that the ground cannot be retrieved.

Ophelia's position after the death of Polonius is intolerable and cannot be faced directly without overwhelming mental pain. Her lover has forsaken and abused her, he has refused her trust, he has apparently gone mad and killed her own father. Worst of all, according to her father's interpretation of prior events, her own conduct has been a precipitating cause of the whole sequence:

But yet I do believe  
The origin and commencement of his grief  
Sprung from neglected love. (III. i. 176-8)

For a girl wishing nobody harm, and one prone to harmless hero-worshipping, the sense of implication is as bad as the events themselves. In order to defend her most sensitive feelings, and in order to make some sense of what has happened, Ophelia becomes distracted. The defence mechanism unconsciously discovered by her mind is to disappear into a world where such horrors are shared commonplaces — the world of the ballad.

Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, she turns to  
favour and to prettiness. (IV. v. 184)

In the world of ballads, events like death and forsaken love are swung free from feelings of sharp pain and transformed into aesthetically pleasing patterns of rhythms and rhymes laced with archaic words, which supply the buffering reassurance of universal cycles. Even suffering becomes an aesthetic object, full of contemplated pathos, to be accepted or mocked but not to be experienced immediately on the pulses. More significantly, the ballad world frees individuals from guilt and responsibility, for it is peopled not with named characters but with "he" and "she". Things simply happen because they have always happened and always will; human agents are accidental. We should be grateful that Ophelia's instincts for self-protection find such beautiful and appropriate refuge from rational awareness of her plight. She dies chanting snatches of old lauds,



“As one incapable of her own distress, Or like a creature native and indued Unto that element” (IV.vii.17). She has made herself safe from the bad dreams that plague Hamlet. We cannot condemn her retreat as in any way “childish”, for the ballad itself is surely “adult” in its assertion of a fatalistic dignity in the face of pain, turning particular events into the shared memory of a community. Her words are disturbing to listeners, as if she speaks from a different realm (or even a different play), the inarticulate snatches growing to something of great constancy:

Her speech is nothing,  
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move  
The hearers to collection. (IV. v. 7-9)

Laertes recognizes that “this nothing’s more than matter” (IV.v.171), but nobody can decipher its hieroglyphics.

By a kind of sympathetic magic, the conditions which face Ophelia find their way into her songs, in oblique and confused fashion. Some snatches refer to her elderly father — “He is dead and gone” — but the most consecutive song refers to forsaken love and reflects her own experience. There is an interesting switch of syntax from the personal to the impersonal. The song begins in the present tense — “Tomorrow is Saint Valentine’s day,” and in the first person — “And I a maid at your window To be your Valentine” (IV.v.45-9). As if even this stylized expression is too close for comfort in tense and person, it changes to the past and to the third person:

Then up he rose, and donn’d his clothes,  
And dupp’d the chamber-door;  
Let in the maid, that out a maid  
Never departed more. (IV. v. 50-3)

Here is the ballad mode and tone, implying that the event has occurred not just once but many times from time immemorial. In relation to Ophelia, the change has the added force that, although she did stand outside Hamlet’s door to be his Valentine, in fact she was not allowed entrance. The part of her that wished to enter a sexual

relationship with him is personified in the other "maid". The second verse approaches the uncertain question, "Whose fault?" In the general scheme of things the man seems to be responsible:

Young men will do't, if they come to't,  
By Cock, they are to blame.  
(IV. v. 58-9)

But the man cruelly transfers to her the blame for the broken relationship by falling back on a quibble:

Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me,  
You promis'd me to wed'.

He answers:

'So would I 'a done, by yonder sun,  
An thou hadst not come to my bed'.  
(IV. v. 60-4)

Although Ophelia undoubtedly dies a maid and is buried with her virgin crants and maiden strewments (V.i.227-8), the song reflects the equivocal nature of the break-up of the relationship, and surveys the options she had. Did she forsake him, or he her? And if she had been more forward and yielded her chastity to him instead of succumbing to fear, would she not still have been discarded? On one version of the facts, she has caused the rift by being too fearful to pursue her love. But her love has been constant, and when she had begun quietly to express it, she was rudely rebuffed and called a whore, as if her declaration of love amounted to unchastity. Equally, she must still be uncertain whether Hamlet was not throughout cruelly dallying with her, as she had been warned. There is a cruelly problematical incompleteness in her experience of love, and the songs are an attempt to supply a dimension which will at least find an ending that has some meaning. The flowers she strews further emphasize the ambiguity of the un-lived future, symbolizing on one side the past — memory and love-thoughts — on the other the potential pain of the future — flattery, cuckoldry, sorrow, repentance and dissembling. The flowers of faithfulness significantly ceased

to be, after the traumatic event which destroyed her trust, when her lover killed her father:

I would give you some violets, but they wither'd all, when  
my father died . . . . (IV. v. 181)

One hopes that Laertes speaks prophetically in his benediction over her grave:

Lay her i' th' earth;  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring! (V. i. 232-4)

The Queen's elegiac dirge-description of the death of Ophelia shows her own capacity for intuitively reaching into the feelings of another character and touching them with beauty. The rhythms of her poetry, like the folds of the maiden's clothing, hold and hang her suspended upon the water's surface:

Her clothes spread wide  
And mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
(IV. vii. 176-7)

whilst Ophelia's ballads allow her to rise above "her own distress" with the same buoyancy. Millais' painting matches the words, for it allows Ophelia to hover upon a surface of jewelled richness. Against the upward pressure the tug of the water is a violation of her floating purity:

But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death. (IV. vii. 181-4)

The placing of "Pull'd" and the loading of "heavy with their drink" turn poignant regret into dismay, just as does the juxtapositioning of "Clamb'ring to hang" and "Fell in the weeping brook." Ophelia dies beneath the willow, the Elizabethan emblem for forsaken love,<sup>9</sup> a fit motif for her life as well as her death.

The lyrical adagio of Ophelia's death is followed abruptly by the gravediggers' legal quibbles about whether she committed suicide, whether she came to the water or the water came to her, in the terms of the celebrated law case.<sup>10</sup>

It is significant that Hamlet's entrance is greeted by a snatch of song from the gravedigger, and the mode and subject-matter recall Ophelia's songs. The first verse celebrates the carefree sweetness of love in youth, the second contrasts age, whose stealing steps have clawed him in its clutch as if he had never been young. Hamlet himself has acquired a new voice, more controlled and reflective, less self-tortured. At thirty<sup>11</sup> he can hardly be the man who was emphatically "young" when courting Ophelia (I.iii.7, 41, 124), young enough to be suspected of irresponsibly sowing his wild oats in carefree youth. He now has the self-possession to regret his outburst against Laertes in the grave (V.ii.73-9), and to accept his destiny as part of the way of the world:

. . . the readiness is all. Since no man owes of aught he leaves, what isn't to leave betimes? Let be. (V. ii. 215)

It may be the last lesson that his lover, by her death, has taught him, and if so, then her frustrated life is given a greater value. In the gravedigger's song the aged lover may well renounce his love, but such a jaunty recollection of the past is as much an insult to Ophelia's faith in love as are the "maimed" rites accorded her body and the unseemly scuffle in her grave between Hamlet and Laertes. At last there is occasion for Hamlet to recognize unequivocally his own feelings with the rushing rhythms of spontaneous emotion:

I lov'd Ophelia: forty thousand brothers  
 Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
 Make up my sum. (V. i. 264)

Despite the value given to Ophelia's tragedy by the purposefulness that it unleashes in Hamlet, her death remains a sacrifice to the general meaninglessness and loneliness pervading the play. In the world of comedy, lovers' tribulations take meaning from a consummation within their lifetime instead of after their death. When Viola in *Twelfth Night* speaks of herself as the neglected lover who "never told her love, But let concealment, like a worm i'

th' bud Feed on her damask cheek" (*Twelfth Night*, II.iv. 109-10) we know that her instincts will be answered, the past redeemed and misunderstandings cleared up. In the world of comedy the path from innocence to experience is gently guided by circumstances. But in *Hamlet* the past is responsible for the future to the bitter end. Ophelia is the loser. Unlike Blake's Thel she has had no kind and matronly guide into the land of sexual experience and her desire to see "the secrets of the land unknown" (*The Book of Thel*, plate 6) is a lonely and fearful quest which leaves her at the end still on the threshold. Ophelia's own words, wry rather than bitter, show some comprehension of what has happened: "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (IV.v.41).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Dame Rebecca West, quoted by Harold Jenkins, "Hamlet and Ophelia," *British Academy Lectures* 49 (1963), 135.
- <sup>2</sup>*The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. Buxton Forman (4th. ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 503.
- <sup>3</sup>*Works of Samuel Johnson*, viii, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 1011.
- <sup>4</sup>*Passages from the Prose and Table Talk of Coleridge*, ed. W. H. Dircks (London: John Murray, 1894), p. 202.
- <sup>5</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. H. Jackson (London: J. M. Dent, 1932), Third Partition, Memb. 3.
- <sup>6</sup>Nigel Alexander, *Poison, Play and Duel* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 129.
- <sup>7</sup>Harold Goddard, "In Ophelia's Closet," *Yale Review*, 35 (1945), 462-74.
- <sup>8</sup>See Jenkins, "Hamlet and Ophelia," and J. M. Nosworthy, "Hamlet and the Pangs of Love," *Elizabethan Theatre IV*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Toronto: MacMillan, 1974), pp. 41-56. See also Leo Kirschbaum, "Hamlet and Ophelia," *P.Q.*, 35 (1956), 376-93 and C. J. Carlisle, "'Cruelty' in the Nunnery Scene", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 17 (1967), 129-40.
- <sup>9</sup>See *Much Ado About Nothing* II. i. 193.
- <sup>10</sup>J. Dover Wilson (ed.), *Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p. 231.
- <sup>11</sup>See A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (2nd. ed., London: MacMillan, 1905), pp. 407-9.