Ophelia’s Role in *Hamlet*

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* Ophelia demonstrates a nearly identical persona, and experiences a similar situation, to that of Hamlet. Both Ophelia and Hamlet lose a father, and are deemed mad by the noble court. Hamlet though, provides insight into his thought process and the reader understands his madness as overbearing intelligence and conflicting scenarios. While other characters consistently tell Hamlet that he is mad, the reader does not believe it because we understand what he is thinking and implicate ourselves with him. Ophelia acts out in the same way after her father’s death, but this time when everyone claims Ophelia is mad, the reader is drawn to believe it. Ophelia meets her demise just as Hamlet eventually does, but her death instantaneously occurs after her madness is unveiled. Since gender is the most discernable difference between them, it would be advantageous to explore these differences in greater detail to determine if it is Ophelia’s femininity that results in her demise. Ultimately Ophelia proves to be a dynamic character in the play. Despite moving the plot forward this is not her sole purpose. She develops throughout the play and reveals a complex demeanor that contradicts the idea of her irrelevancy. Linda Wagner and C.R. Resareteris are quick to dismiss Ophelia as an insignificant and replaceable character, but Carroll Camden is right to justify Ophelia’s insanity. But Camden ends her argument prematurely, not only is Ophelia justifiably insane, but she is also instrumental in the play and continues to be developed up until her death.
Hamlet and Ophelia both rouse trouble in the kingdom by noting the apparent flaws in the noble realm. Hamlet is able to escape the threats to his life through his wit. Through quick thinking he is able to doom Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and remain unharmed. This affirms to the reader Hamlet's higher intellect and cunningness. It is implied that Ophelia takes her own life (the reliability of this can be questioned, but for the sake of argument we will assume she has committed suicide). In the face of death Ophelia's suicide implies mental fragility, while Hamlet demonstrates intellectual prowess at the same forefront. Ophelia is consistently used and abused by those in her life (particularly Polonius and Hamlet). Her constant struggle to obtain independence and agency without any success does not imply mental fragility, rather mental strength for her ability to withstand such abuse.

Judith Butler employs Foucault’s methodology to approach feminist critique. This “genealogical” approach shy's away from defining the origins and deeper meaning of sexuality and gender but rather its implications. The genealogy “investigates the political stakes in designating as origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points or origin” (Butler, 2490). This methodological approach will be beneficial to our interpretation of Hamlet as it delves directly into the political and structural differences between Hamlet and Ophelia. Butler points out the differences of gender on the political stage, and her arguments are applicable to the characters of Hamlet's disregard of Ophelia. Ophelia has a minimal role in the actual events of the play, showing an apparent discount of her importance. The characters within the play also disdain Ophelia, deeming her insane.
instantaneously despite Hamlet displaying similar tendencies and Ophelia’s truthful message.

Many, including Linda Welshimer Wagner, argue that Ophelia’s role in the play is purely that of a device. She is used by Hamlet, Polonius and even Shakespeare himself to drive the plot forward but is removed when there is no need for her or her absence springs characters into action. Shakespeare uses Ophelia as the fool when she pinpoints the treacherous nature of all those in reigning positions. Her death carries the plot by launching Laertes into colluding with Claudius against Hamlet and various points of reference in regard to Hamlet’s alleged madness. Apart from these roles, Ophelia bears no deeper insight. She shows no development as a character and is immediately sprung into madness, as it is convenient for the plot. Wagner’s argument is the accessible answer that those who initially read the play are drawn to believe. Ophelia is rarely in the play and her madness seems to sprout from a traumatizing but not maddening incident. Wagner’s theory fails to hold much weight though as we come to understand the pressures and subjugation Ophelia repeatedly faces.

Ophelia’s role as a plot mover is far from uncommon, but this accusation of Ophelia’s worth is not firm fact. Previously I discerned that Ophelia finds herself in the same scenario as Hamlet and their difference lies in how they respond to this adversity. C. R. Resetarits fights against the anti-Ophelia stigma and pronounces that “she is Hamlet’s emotional antithesis, not overthinking but overfeeling: she waits for the emotions of others to flow through her and then she responds” (Resetarits, 216). He argues that Ophelia does not think as Hamlet does, rather she feels. This is why Hamlet does not fall into madness as Ophelia does. Their flaws of overfeeling and overthinking limit both Ophelia and Hamlet,
but Ophelia is quicker to fall into madness because of her emotional frailty. Ophelia’s lack of a substantial intellect is actually supported in the play when Ophelia’s replies to her father’s questions with “I do not know, my lord what I should think” (1.3.104) and “I think nothing, my lord” (3.2.110). Hamlet responds to each difficulty through an intellectual lens, but Ophelia’s whirlwind of emotions and subdued demeanor degenerates her character into madness. Ophelia’s emotional core is undisputable, but this characteristic does not mean her insanity is a sign of weakness. As Carroll Camden will point Ophelia has justifiable reason to become insane and this degeneration should not be as scrutinized as it is.

The reason Ophelia’s madness has drawn such speculation is because we see, particularly because of Hamlet’s sanity, that the death of her father and Hamlet’s rejection of her, while traumatizing, should not result in utter insanity. This is why critics assert that she is merely a plot device unrealistically utilized by Shakespeare, or that she is weak minded. But Carroll Camden insinuates that the reader is as guilty as the other characters in the play as they fail to recognize how distraught and ignored Ophelia truly is. Camden outlines Ophelia being thrown around from character to character with no recognition of her feelings. First she is used by her father to uncover Hamlet’s madness with no attention to the harm it does to herself. Then, after believing Hamlet’s love for her is the source of his madness she is rejected by Hamlet himself. In both instances she is used as a tool for other characters with no recognition of her mental state. Characters consistently use Ophelia and she mourns the death of her father, subsequently it is not completely implausible that she would devolve to a maddening state. Not a single character empathizes with Ophelia and Shakespeare has drawn her so that even the reader is quick to discount her. Shakespeare’s
depiction of Ophelia and Ophelia’s absence from the majority of the play contributes to her tragic demeanor.

The latter reasoning for Ophelia’s descent into insanity seems the most evidenced and plausible. Because Ophelia’s role in the play is minimal (she is only present in five scenes in the entire play) readers often assume that she is underdeveloped, fragile character, seen as a less intelligent Hamlet, and this assumption often correlates with her femininity. She is one of only two prevalent female characters, the other being Gertrude. Gertrude also (on the superficial level) is depicted as troubled because of her marriage to the murderer of her late husband and Hamlet’s uncle. However, both characters are far more complex than the plain text gives them credit for. Ophelia, while minimally present in the play, holds a monumental stake in the outcome.

Ophelia’s past is clearly worthy of her descent into insanity. It has been proven by Camden that Ophelia has every right to be insane, but Ophelia’s madness is also more than just a convenience for the plot. During the revelation of Ophelia’s insanity, she speaks truthful insults about the other characters in the room. The truth in her accusations show that she is not simply overlooked Ophelia as insane. She is far more than just a nascence in the room. Ophelia’s insanity has actually led to implications that another character that she insulted may have actually murdered her. Ophelia’s worth to the play is all to often overlooked or intentionally ignored, and at great fault in concern to the feminist perspective.
Works Cited


