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Ophelia's Mistreatment and Ignored Monastic Opportunities

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Thesis Abstract

Title: Ophelia's Mistreatment and Ignored Monastic Opportunities

Thesis: I will argue that Ophelia could have saved her own life if she had left home and fled to a nunnery; the treatment she received from Laertes and Polonius was worse than Hamlet's treatment of her throughout the play and especially in Act 3.1.

Through thorough research, the play Hamlet, by William Shakespeare, is explored. This thesis specifically focuses on the character of Ophelia and Ophelia's relationships with Hamlet, Laertes, and Polonius. Through the examination of Ophelia, with a literature review of Ophelia's reputation amongst scholars, the argument is made that Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is one of love and kindness during the nunnery scene, while her father and brother's treatment of her is harsh and cruel. The suggestion is made that Ophelia had entered a nunnery as Hamlet instructed her to do, she would have fulfilled the longing she had for a mother, as well as have opportunities in leadership in education; this is something women lacked during this time. An examination of her relationship with Polonius and Laertes will culminate with an inspection of the relationship between Ophelia and Laertes, using the feminist theory employed by Virginia Woolf in *Shakespeare's Sister*, from *A Room of One's Own*, as well as other Feminist critics such as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar. This thesis also employs the methods of Performance Theory. After further discussion, it is concluded that the best option for both Ophelia and Gertrude during this time would have been to enter a nunnery, and that Ophelia did in fact end up like the character of Judith, as described by Virginia Woolf.

Danielle Tovsen

Dr. Grieco

Thesis

5 May 2010

Ophelia's Mistreatment and Ignored Monastic Opportunities

The character of Ophelia, in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, has been overly discussed and analyzed throughout the years. The events in *Hamlet* lead to her madness – the death of King Hamlet, remarriage of Gertrude to Claudius, and the Prince's revenge plot—and all impact the way Polonius, Laertes, Hamlet act towards Ophelia, therein her “mistreatment.” Ophelia, daughter of Polonius, sister of Laertes, and love interest of Hamlet, is a sad soul of a character who is mistreated repeatedly by both her father and her brother. Some would argue that Hamlet also mistreats Ophelia, specifically in Act 3.1, also known as the “nunnery scene.” Critics such as Carol J. Carlisle, author of *Hamlet's 'Cruelty' in the Nunnery Scene: The Actors' Views*, and Paula Blank, author of *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man*, view Ophelia as a victim. While she is passive in her interactions with Polonius and Laertes, Ophelia acts as a woman in love in her interactions with Hamlet. Her mistreatment, plus the events that occur in *Hamlet* propels her into the realms of madness as she inadvertently holds inside her anger, aggression, and feelings until she lapses into insanity.

To understand Ophelia, the history of her character must be studied. In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom suggests, “When Shakespeare was a boy, a young woman named Kate Hamlet or Hamnet drowned herself in the Avon River, near Stratford, supposedly because she was disappointed in Love” (389). This of

course mirrors Ophelia's death as she drowns herself after losing her father by the hand of her lover. I will argue that Ophelia could have saved her own life if she had left home and fled to a nunnery; the treatment she received from Laertes and Polonius was worse than Hamlet's treatment of her throughout the play and especially in Act 3.1.

Initially, the absence of Ophelia's mother is significant. Typically, Shakespeare presents few mothers in his works; Ophelia's mother remains a mystery. Her absence has an affect on her as she lacks the guidance of a mother when it comes to the matter of Hamlet. Perhaps if Ophelia had entered a nunnery as Hamlet had suggested to her, she would have fulfilled the longing she had for a mother. The Prioress or Mother Superior would fill the role of the mother that Ophelia has lacked throughout her life; however, these options are blocked for her and Gertrude, Hamlet's mother. She is the only mother figure presented to Ophelia throughout the course of the play. Gertrude even expresses her desire to have Ophelia as her daughter-in law as she is lamenting Ophelia's death she states "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife/I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid/ And not have strewed thy grave" (5.1.228-230). First, Gertrude seems to be the epitome of what Ophelia's life could be like if she had remained alive and lived in Denmark as Hamlet's wife (She is also the only female role model that Ophelia has although she has not set a good example for her). When Gertrude's husband had died and she remarried his brother all within a month, it upset the already disturbed Hamlet. In *Hamlet's Mother*, Carolyn Heilbrun presents some ideas about Gertrude:

...Not only is she the mother of the hero, the widow of the Ghost, and the wife of the current King of Denmark, but the fact of her hasty, and to the Elizabethans,

incestuous marriage, the whole question of her “falling off” occupies a position of barely secondary importance in the mind of her son, and of the Ghost (9).

Gertrude does seem to sympathize with Ophelia and is the most affected when Ophelia goes mad: “One woe doth tread upon another’s heel. So fast they follow. Your sister’s drowned, Laertes” (4.7. 134-135). She delivers this news to Laertes and Claudius as they are plotting the duel with Hamlet. Furthermore she states:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook

That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make

Of crow—flowers, nettles, daisies and long purples... (4.7.137-140).

Besides these flowers, the willow is also important; it symbolizes both mourning and “forsaken love” (Greenblatt 1739). Shakespeare has chosen these specific flowers to represent Ophelia in her death: mourning is one of two reasons, or a combination of the two—the fact her lover killed her father, or because Hamlet left. Forsaken love makes her feel rejected by him. Gertrude continues recounting her death by describing how she fell into the brook and that Ophelia had her clothes spread around her. She was madly singing as she was in the previous scene and her dress was so heavy from the water that it pulled her down to her death (5.1.148-154). If Gertrude saw this, why did she do nothing to stop it from happening? If she did indeed witness this, perhaps she watched Ophelia die knowing she was better off; she is now free. According to Elizabethan traditions, Gertrude’s passion and lust for Claudius keeps her son from the throne and also leads her to the incestuous marriage (Heilbrun 11). A mirror to the nunnery scene occurs in Gertrude’s closet: “His mother, meanwhile, waiting for him, has told Polonius not to fear

for her, but she knows when she sees Hamlet that he may be violently mad; Hamlet quips with her, insults her, tells her she were not his mother, and when she, still retaining dignity, attempts to end the interview, Hamlet seizes her and she cries for help” (Heilbrun 14). The atmosphere of this scene seems as if Hamlet is questioning his mother’s role in the death of her husband. It could be argued that Ophelia reminds Hamlet of his mother, and that is why he treats her as he does—because she is the only other female influence in his life. Hamlet’s tone may be performed either way but when looking at the social restraints and control he himself is under, one can say that he wanted to discharge Ophelia from the same social institution that holds him in Act 3.1. Ophelia is portrayed as a passive person, which Sharon Hamilton studies in *Shakespeare’s Daughters*.

Hamilton illustrates Ophelia’s personality in the chapter entitled, “Daughter’s Who Acquiesce: Hero (*Much Ado About Nothing*), Lavinia (*Titus Andronicus*), and Ophelia (*Hamlet*).” She presents Ophelia as a good girl who will do what her father asks of her, and not question his motives (69). What the three in the title have in common is that “The plays begin as that tranquil stasis is about to be disrupted. In the crisis that comes with the daughters’ maturity, these fathers are convinced that they know what is best, and they feel no qualms about imposing their wills” (69). Hamilton also points out the idea that Ophelia does not have a woman friend to talk to; Hamlet has Horatio, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern: “The men who do put words in her mouth have little understanding of her feelings and needs. They give her orders, dismiss her protests, insult or condescend” (80). Both Laertes and Polonius wish to protect Ophelia, yet she is caught in the middle of her duty to her father and brother and duty to her lover (80). Possibly the duty she feels towards her father is the strongest out of the three.

Polonius provides Ophelia with harsh treatment. Harold C. Goddard of *Hamlet to Ophelia* describes Polonius as a “domestic tyrant” while Goddard views Ophelia as a “timid, docile, and obedient child” (410). Polonius begins his mistreatment by interrogating Ophelia on her relationship with Hamlet. He commands her to stay away from Hamlet and when she confesses that Hamlet has told her how he feels about her, Polonius responds with, “Affection, Pooh! You speak like a green girl/Unsifted in such perilous circumstance/Do you believe his ‘tenders’ as you call them?” (1.3.101-103). Polonius does not care how his daughter feels and he does not want her associating with Hamlet. Like Laertes, he believes that Hamlet’s affections are insincere and even mocks his own daughter’s naivety. Ophelia rebuts with, “I do not know, my lord, what I should think (1.3.104). Why does Ophelia not know what she thinks? It could be that she is merely stating this to submit to her father’s will; however, if she were in love with Hamlet, she would have confessed it to her father here, in this scene. Instead, she is intimidated by her conversation with Laertes and her father and she is unable to show her true feelings. However, Polonius is attempting to be a good father by protecting his daughter. He challenges her assertions about Hamlet’s love by refusing to listen to his daughter’s unconventional reasons: “....This is, for all/I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth/Have you slander any moment leisure/As to give words or to talk with the Lord Hamlet/Look to’t, I charge you. Come your ways” (1.3.131-135). Ophelia obeys as a dutiful daughter would.

Linda Welshimer Wagner’s *Ophelia: Shakespeare’s Pathetic Plot Device*, illustrates best the behavior exhibited by Polonius:

Ophelia—naively telling Polonius of Hamlet’s “mad” behavior, accepting meekly her father’s ultimatums, bearing unquestioningly the restraints of her position—is pictured as the epitome of unsophistication and of purity (94).

The ultimatums Polonius gives her exhibits his form of fatherly control as he does not give her a choice. There are two instances in Act 2.1 where Polonius shows his parental dominance over both children. First, he is so concerned with the affairs of his son that he sends Reynaldo to spy on him: “Enquire me first what Danskers are in Paris/and how, and who, what means, and where they keep/What company, at what expense” (2.1.6-9). Furthermore, Polonius demands Reynaldo to inquire to see what his friends know of Laertes: “As thus: ‘I know his father and his friends/And in part him’—do you mark this Reynaldo?. But if’t be he I mean, he’s very wild/Addicted so and so; and there put on him/What forgeries you please—marry, none so rank” (2.1.17-20). He gives Laertes such advice as to listen to everyone, but not to judge; to limit the spending to what he can afford; not to borrow or lend money to others; and also leaves him with the most famous guidance, “This above all—to thine own self be true/and it must follow, as the night the day” (1.3.75-80). This is good counsel that a father can give a son, but Polonius does not trust that Laertes has followed his advice. He explains to Reynaldo that he also wants a report if Laertes is “...drinking, fencing, swearing/Quarrelling, drabbing—you may go so far” (2.1.26-27). His fatherly control extends to Ophelia in this same scene.

Exhibiting power again, Polonius formulates a plan using his own daughter to please the king. Near the end of Act 2.2, Ophelia is frightened by Hamlet and explains her ordeal to her father. As she was in her room, Hamlet enters after he has spoken with his father’s ghost; he is disheveled (2.1). Ophelia elaborates that Hamlet held her, and

after he grabbed her wrist he explored her arm, and then her face (2.1.88-91). It is in this scene that Ophelia begins to think Hamlet is mad, but it is also the scene where Polonius believes he has found the source of Hamlet's strange behavior; he now believes Hamlet's actions are due to the restrictions he placed on his daughter—that Hamlet is mad with love (2.1.112-114). Because Polonius believes this, he forces her to give him one of Hamlet's love letters which he reads to Claudius, violating their trust and also sharing a message that was just intended for her: "To the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia" is how the letter begins (2.2.110-114). Polonius is so embarrassed he can barely share this letter with Claudius and Gertrude; however, he continues reading and within Hamlet's message to her, lies encrypted foreshadowing of events to come: "Doubt thou the stars are fire/Doubt that the sun doth move/Doubt truth to be a liar/But never doubt I love" (2.2.116-119). In these lines, Hamlet tells Ophelia that she should doubt the logical ideals in life, but never doubt the love he has for her—this includes in the nunnery scene when he "berates" her. If she would have taken this to heart, she would have saved herself from madness; even though Hamlet acts strangely to her, he reaffirms his love for her over her grave. Polonius continues reading the letter by stating, "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" (2.2.120-122). Of course, because he has planted the idea into Ophelia's head that she may believe that she is responsible for the madness of Hamlet, she begins blaming herself when she is used as a pawn of the monarchy. When this scene was performed in the 1996 movie starring Kenneth Branagh, Ophelia, who is played by Kate Winslet, is forced by her father to read the letter that Hamlet has written to her. When she can barely read, it is snatched by Polonius as he

continues, but in this version, Ophelia seems to undergo more stress; she is embarrassed by her father in front of Claudius and Hamlet's mother reveals Polonius' mistreatment of her (Branagh NP). Ophelia should have taken Hamlet's advice to go to a nunnery; if she had, her life may have been spared. Like Polonius, Laertes has similar motives and "good" words for his sister.

Upon Laertes' first interaction with his sister, he insists on warning her against Hamlet: "For Hamlet and the trifling of his favour,/Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood/A violet in the youth of primy nature/Forward not permanent, sweet not lasting" (1.3.5-8). Laertes believes Hamlet is not sincere with his intentions; he feels that his affection is not genuine, but "trifling" and that his love is "forward not permanent/sweet not lasting"(1.3.7-8). Laertes thinks that Hamlet will eventually hurt Ophelia, and he will find another woman more worthy of his love and status and that she should not become entranced by his insincere affections and words. Overall, he believes that Hamlet is not interested in marriage, and illustrates the need to give her advice when it comes to the matters of love; however, there is not a point throughout the play that Laertes' own love interests are revealed and also there is no record of his being involved with another person. Therefore, his ability and experience to give advice about love to his sister is flawed without any experience on which to base his advice; although he reveals his "big brother" character, he utilizes a form of control that, in the same scene, is furthered by her father, Polonius. Sharon Hamilton again elucidates the relationship between Ophelia and Laertes by presenting the idea that "...Ophelia has the presence of mind to resist this ill counsel. She is very fond of her brother. ..but perhaps because of their closeness in age, she recognizes the source of his suspicions about other men in his loose behavior"

(82). She will not protest Laertes' advice because she is too dutiful a sister. Hamilton furthers her observations by stating that yes, Ophelia can see through her brother's ill given words; however, she shows no indication of being able to see through her father's

(82). In order to understand the options Ophelia would have had if she escaped, Shakespeare's knowledge and understanding of convents/nunneries must be reviewed.

Alison A. Chapman's *Ophelia's "Old Lauds": Madness and Hagiography In Hamlet*, illustrates that Shakespeare was not current in his references to religion, especially nunneries. Though he was writing in the time of the Renaissance, he was writing according to the ideals and beliefs of fifty years prior to *Hamlet* (117). Chapman suggests that Stephen Greenblatt refers to this as "the 'fifty year effect,' in which Shakespeare foregrounds and queries practices of half a century earlier, such as the doctrine of purgatory" (117). This could place Shakespeare's references in *Hamlet* to the late middle ages. According to Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries*, "There were in England during the later middle ages (c. 1270-1536) some 138 nunneries, excluding the double houses of the Gilbertine order, which contained brothers as well as nuns" (1). Historically, Shakespeare would be familiar with nunneries, specifically English nunneries even though they were disbanded before his lifetime. He would know that: "For those who entered young and of their own will, religion was either a profession or a vocation. They might take the veil because it offered an honourable career for superfluous girls, who were unwilling or unable to marry; or they might take it in a real spirit of devotion, with a real call to the religious life" (25). Throughout this informative history, Power illustrates the stresses of daily monastic life during the medieval period. The choices for women included being a maid, a wife (either a wife of man or a wife of

Christ), a prostitute or a widow. Their options were very limited; it had to be women's prerogative to liberate themselves from these roles where few opportunities existed.

Woman Under Monasticism, authored by Lina Eckenstein, describes the nunneries that were dissolved just shortly before Shakespeare's birth. There were two charges brought upon both nunneries and monasteries; the first was an accusation about the art housed in the nunnery, and the second was that the nuns were living in scandal (446). There were also numerous accounts that the heads of these nunneries were corrupt (446); corruption is something of course Ophelia was familiar with—the corruption of Denmark by the poison of Claudius. One may argue that had she gone to a nunnery during the time previous to the dissolution (in the 1500s), she may have become corrupt herself; however, looking at the years the play was set (1200s), Ophelia would have flourished as in the description by Power. Taking into account Shakespeare's time, there were very few small nunneries that endured the dissolution; these nunneries "...secured a license to remain" (449). Convents such as Chatteris with Anne Seton as Mother Superior survived the dissolution (449).

In discussing Renaissance women, Greenblatt states "When Sir Thomas Smith thinks of how he should describe his country's social order, he declares that 'we do reject women, as those whom nature hath made to keep home and to nourish their family and children, and not to meddle with matters abroad, nor to bear office in a city or commonwealth'" (9). This is precisely the position in which both Polonius and Laertes place Ophelia. Because of these stipulations on their freedoms, women had to see that there was benefit in joining a nunnery: Why would any woman put herself in the position to be pushed into the conventional role similar to the one Smith describes? Even though

women did have these restrictions, they actually had a few more freedoms such as the ability to “inherit and administer land, make a will, sign a contract, possess property and sue and be sued” (9-10). In *Hamlet*, none of these freedoms appear to be within the grasp of Ophelia, except the ability to join a nunnery; she seems powerless in her father and brother’s company. If Ophelia had faced the option to enter a nunnery on her own, she may have chosen against it; she may have seen it as a prison, as some women did, but what she did not realize was that Denmark itself was more of a prison than a nunnery; as Hamlet illustrates in Act 2.2, “Denmark’s a prison” (2.2.239). For example, in Act I, Claudius persuades Hamlet to remain in Denmark after his father’s death, even though he desires to return to school in Wittenberg: “Do I impart towards you. For your intent/In going back to school in Wittenberg/It is most retrograde to our desire/And we beseech you bend you to remain/Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye/Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son” (1.2.112-117). Ophelia’s place could have been found elsewhere. In fact, Power elaborates on the girls that were forced into the nunneries:

For other girls the nunnery might be a prison, into which they were thrust, unwilling but often afraid to resist, by elders who wished to be rid of them; and many nunneries contained also another class of inmates, older women, often widows, who had retired thither to end their days in peace (25).

If Ophelia had gone to the nunnery, according to Eileen Power, she would have become the Mother Superior (42). It was all at Ophelia’s grasp before her death.

In order to understand Ophelia’s opportunity within the nunnery, we must study the Shakespearean women who would have had the same opportunity as she. Isabella in Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* is certain of her desire to join a nunnery; in the

following scene, she records her reasons for joining a nunnery. Isabella wishes for a more “strict restraint.” In this scene she is introduced to the restrictions she will have in her interactions with the opposite sex:

It's a man's voice! Gentle Isabella,
 Turn you the key, and know his business of him
 You may, I may not; you are yet unsworn
 When you have vow'd, you must not speak with men/
 but in the presence of the prioress
 Then, if you speak, you must now show your face;
 Or if you show your face, you must not speak (1.4.7-14).

Isabella will gain freedom from associating with men if she does not have the opportunity to escape from the oppressive nature of men; by joining the convent she is forbidden by her order to come into contact with them. If she speaks, she must not show her face; it is in this that women lose their identity as an object of beauty and affection. Their individual identity is veiled. If Ophelia were faced with the same opportunity, she would be excluded from contact with Claudius, Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet all of whom contribute to her death. Furthermore, in *Measure for Measure*, Claudio allows his sister to be involved in his business; however, he does not wish to educate her in his estate until she has become part of the nunnery—perhaps because of the education she would have received. Claudio implies that as soon as his sister enters the convent, she will be entrusted with his secrets. It is within the convent walls that she will be protected. The friends she makes within the convent will most likely be in a position of power and highly influential. In the end Isabella is forced to marry the Duke, although she wanted

to enter a nunnery; the idea seems forgotten: "...Dear Isabel,/I have motion much imports you good; /Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline,/What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine./So bring us to our palace, where we'll show/What's yet behind that's meet you all should know" (V.1.531-535). Her wishes are silenced, and although it appears she loves the Duke, she cannot even consider a nunnery at this point because it seems as if her life has already been decided for her by her male influences. *Measure for Measure* ends abruptly with these lines and Isabella has no time to respond to his offer of marriage as her fate has already been decided in this situation; he does not allow her time to rebut his desires. It is assumed that the two wed; the desire of Isabella's entering a convent is silenced by her becoming his wife, instead of becoming a bride of Christ. Like Isabella, Ophelia's outcome is foreshadowed by the male presence in the play.

Too many critics have placed Ophelia in the category of Hamlet's victim in the nunnery scene. Ophelia is not a victim, rather a person who Hamlet wishes to help. Because of the interpretation of the word "nunnery," Shakespeare's intention of the word itself must be analyzed. In *Notes and Queries*, Richard Levin presents a clear understanding of it: "That [the meaning] can only be determined by the context, which makes it clear that he is advising her to avoid any contact with men, especially sexual contact, so it would be very appropriate to urge her to enter a convent but wholly inappropriate to urge her to enter a brothel" (41). Furthermore, he asserts that it is not appropriate to command her to enter a brothel and "That, it seems to me, is the basic case against interpreting—nunnery' in the bawdy sense in this passage, and it cannot be affected by the discovery or more contemporary examples of the use or the word (or of—nun') in this sense, no matter how many of them turn up"(41). While there have been

many arguments against this scene's actually meaning a convent, it is well defined through the language Hamlet uses that he was urging her to leave Denmark.

It is clear that he meant that she enter a nunnery, not a brothel. The only way this could happen were if he feigned cruelty towards Ophelia: "You should not have believed me, for virtue cannot so/inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you/not (3.1.118-120). Hamlet sets up the scene by denying his love for Ophelia. Although the previous letter said never to doubt Hamlet's love, he could be reacting rashly because Ophelia is attempting to return his letters. He continues with her "mistreatment" by making the claim that she should "Get thee to a nunnery. Why would'st thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me" (3.1.122-125). It is in these lines that the meaning of the word "nunnery" is clear; if he does not want her to be a "breeder of sinners" then he would not tell her to go to a brothel; instead, he wishes her to live a life of chastity. He continues with listing his faults for her: "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between heaven and earth?" (3.2.126-128). Because of his faults, he is not good for her; the best place for her would be a nunnery.

Hamlet's love for Ophelia does not falter and his emotions must have been strained during this scene. By telling her he does not love her, and also by the insults he throws at her, he is hoping that she will realize that leaving is the best option for her. The clarity presents itself in the form of: "We are arrant knaves all. Believe none of us" (3.1.128-129). His clue "believe none of us" applies to himself, Claudius and her father

whose intentions are to please the king; the king wishes to find the source of Hamlet's madness and as far as Hamlet is concerned, she cannot know his hidden motives. Men, in this case, are all "arrant knaves." He wants to illustrate the dishonesty of men, specifically the dishonesty of the king and her father. When Hamlet ends these lines with "Where is your father?" (3.1.129), he saves the absolute most controlling person in her life for mention last; she responds with, "At home my lord" (3.1.132). Ophelia is dishonest; she knows that her father and Claudius are hiding and listening to their conversation to find the source of Hamlet's madness—they are responsible for her forced confrontation with him. Hamlet is aware of this and states, "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in's own house. Farewell" (3.1.132-133). When Hamlet refers to Polonius as a fool, he gives his true opinion about Ophelia's father to her. This could also be construed as another warning that he is trying to communicate to her. Hamlet knows that Polonius is involved with the affairs of Claudius. It is also interesting, because depending on how this play is staged, at this point the audience realizes Hamlet feels as if he is being spied upon. Immediately after he exits, Ophelia attempts to rationalize his behavior to herself: "O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (3.1.149). Ophelia has not taken into consideration what Hamlet has told her as she thinks he is insane and is also hurt by his words towards her. She describes herself as "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched/That sucked the honey of his music vows" (3.1.154-155). She feels that she is a fool to have believed words of love that Hamlet did not mean. It is in this scene, that she believes both Laertes and Polonius when they told her to stay away from Hamlet: "Now see that noble and most sovereign reason/Like sweet bells jangled out of tune and harsh/That unmatched form

and feature of blown youth/Blas'd with ecstasy. O woe is me/T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see!" (3.1.156-160). If Ophelia would have listened to Hamlet's words instead of becoming upset she would have realized that the solution he is presenting to her is valid. Instead, she remains in Denmark to be a pawn to her father and Claudius and will feel the impact of the death of her father and descend into madness. Carol J. Carlisle references Hamlet's madness further in *Hamlet's 'Cruelty' in the Nunnery Scene: The Actor's Views*.

Carlisle refers to Beerbohm Tree's interpretation of Hamlet: Tree analyzes Hamlet's pretend madness and reveals that Hamlet does not mean to use his feigned cruelty in this scene; instead, Ophelia becomes his victim (139). In a sense she should not be considered a victim of Hamlet; she is first and foremost a victim of her father and brother. Ophelia again is confused in the following scene, when the players are performing *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet sits next to her purposely and begins a conversation as if Act 3.1 had never occurred. Hamlet bawdily asks Ophelia "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" and as she refuses he continues with "I mean my head upon your lap?", "Do you think I meant country matters?" and "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (3.2.101,103,105, 107). Greenblatt believes this to be a reference to "rustic doings (with an obscene pun on 'cunt')" (1710). When Ophelia replies to Hamlet's question, she replies with "I think nothing, my lord" (3.2.106). Greenblatt again explains the meaning of "nothing" by illustrating "The punning continues in the following lines where 'nothing' suggests the female genitals (often linked to the shape of zero), and 'thing' the male genitals" (1710). Mixed messages and puns fly back and forth between Ophelia and Hamlet, almost as if the previous scene has been forgotten. However, there are a few

words exchanged between them that reveal Hamlet's feelings. Hamlet asks Ophelia, "Is this a prologue, or the posy of a ring?" and Ophelia responds with "'Tis brief my lord" (3.2.136-137). Ophelia responds with this in order to alert Hamlet that the prologue is short and the play will start soon, attempting to prevent any insult of the players by Hamlet. Hamlet ends the conversation with "As woman's love" (3.2.138). The audience may realize that he treats Ophelia in such a manner because she had refused to see him as well as she returned the love letters he gave her. His reactions and actions in Act 3.1-3.2 may be fueled by her actions (i.e. refusing to see him, returning his letters), but overall the message in the nunnery scene is good advice. His last line could also remind him of his mother and how briefly she waited after her husband's death before she married Claudius; of course this in turn may remind him that Ophelia could be like her one day, which makes him push away love and therefore, reject her. Paula Blank, author of *Shakespeare and the Mismeasure of the Renaissance Man*, exhibits her views and touches on the nunnery scene.

In her chapter "How Smart is Hamlet?", Blank illustrates that: "He [Hamlet] has a bad habit of passing judgment on others far in excess of their faults, for example, in his cruel treatment and the precipitous murder of Polonius" (196). Did Hamlet really treat Polonius with cruelty? No. He may have been devastated because Polonius forbade Ophelia to be with Hamlet and mocked him in certain scenes, but Hamlet knows that Polonius has been spying on him, which causes the disintegration of his relationship with Ophelia. On the other hand, Henry Sebastian Bowden, author of *The Religion of Shakespeare*, offers useful insight in supporting the argument that Hamlet was not cruel to Ophelia; he feels that the prince is aware he must give Ophelia up if he is going to

accomplish his task; he does this in a way that he feels will let her down the least. He is effective by making Ophelia believe that he does not love her (303). Hamlet could feel it is wounding to her feelings whereas Ophelia perceives his words in a different light than he intended—she thinks he is mad. Henry Bowden goes on to illustrate Ophelia's realization that Hamlet is not her type; she also must realize that the marriage between them can never be, and that she must forget her love for him (303). Why is he not the kind of man for her? In Denmark, what other male prospects are available to her? No other options present themselves throughout the play—certainly not Horatio, Rosencrantz, or Guildenstern—she shows no interest in any of them, nor would they be good for her.

Bowden continues with, "He [Hamlet] did love Ophelia once, and traces of it remain, as is seen in his desire for her prayers. But now the only advice he has to give her is to go to a nunnery. She is not to think of him. He is too evil for her" (304). Perhaps the act of avenging his father's death is evil, but even that is arguable. He still loves Ophelia and it is evident in the scene by her grave. Hamlet's distraction has an effect on their relationship, and eventually leads to Ophelia's death. Harold Bloom does not have a high opinion of Hamlet: "The prince has no remorse for his manslaughter of Polonius, or for his vicious badgering of Ophelia into madness and suicide, or for his gratuitous dispatch of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their undeserved deaths" (408-409). Hamlet does not badger Ophelia viciously; instead, he attempts to warn her to leave Denmark. Greenblatt, editor of *The Norton Shakespeare* clarifies Hamlet's behavior towards her with the idea that "when he [Hamlet] speaks with his old school friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, with the courtier Osric or with Polonius, he is deliberately

evasive, but his exchanges with Ophelia are equally oblique and baffling” (1663).

Furthermore, Greenblatt analyzes the psychology of Hamlet’s behavior:

[Hamlet’s] bitterness at his mother’s remarriage spreads like a stain to include all women, including the woman he had once ardently courted. ‘Get thee to a nunnery,’ Hamlet urges Ophelia, as if the only virtuous course of action were renunciation of the flesh. ‘Why would’st thou be a breeder of sinners?’ (3.1.122-23). Even this desperate advice seems to be undermined by Hamlet’s obsessive sense of rampant female sexuality and of his own corruption... (1665).

Carol J. Carlisle, author of *Hamlet’s Cruelty in the Nunnery Scene: The Actors’ Views*”, states that “His [Hamlet’s] treatment of Ophelia might be described as consistent with his cruelty to the other characters...” (130-131). Furthermore, Carlisle suggests that Hamlet is most cruel to Ophelia by insulting her in the nunnery scene, killing her father, and furthermore abandons her when she needs him the most after the death of her father (130-131). In fact, by the nature of the songs Ophelia sings in Act four, it is clear she is more upset that Hamlet has left than about her father’s death. Instead of Polonius, Hamlet intends to kill Claudius, as seen in Act 3.4: “Ay, lady, ‘twas my word/[To Polonius] Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell. I took thee for thy better” (3.4.29-31). Hamlet had hoped it was over—that at this moment Claudius was dead—the deed of avenging his father’s death would be complete. He shows remorse and he is only cruel to the characters that have wronged him in some way; for example, Claudius has killed his father so he in turn kills Claudius; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are spying on him so he turns the table on them and sends them to their deaths; even though Polonius told Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet, Hamlet is remorseful in his murder by stating:

O, such a deed/As from the body of contraction plucks/The very soul, and sweet religion makes/A rhapsody of words. Heaven's face doth glow/Yea, this solidity and compound mass/With trustful visage, as against the doom/Is thought-sick at the act (3.4.44-49).

Moreover, Hamlet does not behave abominably to her brother at her grave; instead, he professes his love for her: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers/Could not, with all their quantity of love,/make up my sum" (5.1.254-256). Hamlet is questioning her brother's love for his sister; Laertes was not there for her when he needed her when her father died—he was sent for and by the time he returns, she has gone insane. In the end, Hamlet is the one who gives her the opportunity to leave and thinks that if he pushes her away, she will leave. Instead of giving her the opportunity, her father restricts her freedoms by denying her access to Hamlet, and using her to aid the king in determining Hamlet's source of madness. Furthermore, Hamlet goes on to list a ridiculous amount of acts he would accomplish for her that Laertes would not: "Woot weep, woot fight, woot fast, woot tear thyself/woot drink up easle, eat a crocodile?/I'll do it. Dost thou come here to whine/To outface me with leaping into her grave?/Be buried quick with her and so will I" (5.1.260-264). Hamlet is clearly overcome with sadness and anger. In reality, he probably would have never completed any of these sacrifices, but he states them here because he wants to compete with Laertes, who was away at school for most of the play and therefore could not look after his sister. He, not Horatio, should have been protecting Ophelia in her state of madness. In order to visualize the conflicts between these characters, it is important to look at the different outlets of media that present these.

The various media that were created at the turn of the century made it easier to expand on the portrayal of Hamlet. According to Michael Bristol and Kathleen McLuskie, authors of *Shakespeare and Modern Theater*, these modes of distribution to the audience provided a different outlook on the play. They explain that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, they changed from live performance to film and video; however, live performances are still popular today(1). Bristol and McLuskie state that “Hugh Grady, in his *Modernist Shakespeare* (1991), has argued that Shakespeare gave to modernism an unusually powerful resource for articulating its own contradictions... [Shakespeare] represents the possibility for the celebration of modernity’s themes of emancipation and for the resistance to modernity’s chronic dislocations” (3). Of course the emancipation of specific female characters is focused on more now than it was in the past; Ophelia is the prime example. Incidentally, Hugh Hunt, author of *Old Vic Prefaces*, suggests that she has a undoubted conscience, and she realizes the differences between right and wrong; however, where she fails is in her confidence level and in that trust she places in Polonius and Laertes (41). Ophelia is rarely portrayed as a strong character as she often obeys what her father and brother say to her; however, the one person she should have obeyed Hamlet because at least his advice had good intentions. Furthermore, she “gives way too readily, ‘I will obey, my lord’ is her death knell. Perhaps this is the fault of Polonius for being too much of a petty tyrant, or of Laertes for being too positive in his views” (41). Overall, the way Ophelia is portrayed differs from actress to actress.

When it comes to performances, *Hamlet* is staged in several different ways. Hugh Hunt exemplifies these ways. First, he explains that the Elizabethan audience thirsted for

revenge, murder and drama (29). The producer must think first about the setting and how it is going to be portrayed:

The superficial observer, influenced by the romantic criticism of the early nineteenth century or by the “Strum and Drang” influence of German productions, is apt to stress too heavily the theme of the gloomy Dane and impose upon the play a dark and dank atmosphere of a vast castle, in which the festering evils of Claudius’s court flourish like a poisoned fungus (30).

Continuing, he discusses the setting by deciding to focus on its seaside element (31), which should help in taking away the “dank and gloom” reputation that Hunt wants to avoid. After commenting on Hamlet and Claudius, he discusses Polonius and his family: “Polonius is not a buffoon, as he was often portrayed in the eighteenth century, nor is he a dear old man, as he is sometimes played to-day” (38-39). In recent productions, such as *Hamlet* on Broadway with Jude Law, Polonius is portrayed as a comical character; Hunt would not agree with this portrayal. He believes that Polonius should be “the ageing civil servant, loyal to the crown, which for him is always right no matter how it has been won, applying his rather superficial knowledge of human character arbitrarily to all cases” (39). If Polonius would have cared who was king and how the throne was attained, he could have avoided his own death by supporting Hamlet. Hunt describes Laertes as a “tough, captain-of-the-rugger-team type of young man, inheriting from his father, a glib way of advising others how to overcome their difficulties, as instanced in his advised to Ophelia” (40). Therefore, Laertes is the younger version of his father. In most productions, he is portrayed in this manner.

Shakespeare: The Two Traditions by H.R. Coursen suggests a few ideas on how Ophelia may be portrayed and how it affects the audiences' view of her: "... Gertrude drops flowers on Ophelia's grave, wishing that she could instead deck Ophelia's 'bride-bed' as 'Hamlet's wife' (5.1.230-31). Ophelia's 'maimed rites' (5.1.205) are further compromised by a brawl emerging from a debate about who should be chief mourner" (100). This is portrayed in most productions, such as the 1995 Branagh version. There really has been no deviation from the messages that are delivered to the audience in this scene. Correspondingly, Coursen discusses the Zeffirelli film and the portrayal of Ophelia: "The Ophelia here was perhaps the most excruciating since Diane Verona's opposite Kline in 1986. Twice she was given center stage, while the others stood around and watched her" (114). He continues with another view of Ophelia by referring to Jan Kott who believes that Ophelia has become part of this "madness" that has engulfed Elsinore—she is both the victim and the catalyst (114). She should leave her father, her brother, her love. If Ophelia would have caught onto Hamlet's discreet message, she would be alive, well, and in a nunnery. If she had joined a nunnery, suicide would not have been an option for her, if her act of drowning were intentional.

In *Two Hamlet's* Kate D. Levin smartly compares the 1995, 1998, and 1999 versions of various *Hamlet's*. She specifically focuses on the portrayal of Ophelia's character from the beginning which sets the tone of her character for the rest of the play: "It was instructive to see how clearly the relationship of this father and daughter could be evoked without the earlier scene. Polonius silenced Ophelia with a wave of the hand as he completed some paperwork; her repressed acquiescence—she went from loose-limbed terror to a tightly clasped, seated posture of waiting----spoke volumes" (107-108). This

reading of the 1995 version supports the idea that Polonius was controlling, and even her illustration of his silencing Ophelia by the wave of his hand shows the weakness of her character. Her argument for the 1999 version supports these ideas wholly as she presents the ideas that, "...Hamlet's insistence that she get herself to a nunnery was not abusive so much as a heartfelt plea for her self-preservation" (113). This reading of this particular production of *Hamlet* is almost identical to the most recent production of *Hamlet* on Broadway; one of the first productions of *Hamlet* on film was the 1948 version with Sir Laurence Olivier.

Hamlet was brought to life on screen in 1948 as Sir Laurence Olivier starred in a classic film that won four academy awards. The character of Ophelia, Jean Simmons, is portrayed as a blonde frail looking woman; the nunnery scene begins with Polonius instructing Ophelia on what to do in order to determine Hamlet's source of madness. Her father points to a place on the floor that she should walk about, and also pats the stone in which she may sit. Both Polonius and Claudius take their eavesdropping places behind a few tapestries; however, before fully concealing himself, Polonius again instructs Ophelia to walk in a certain pattern in front of the tapestries so they may hear, and she obeys. When Hamlet enters, Ophelia looks down quickly at her book, but then again draws her gaze to Hamlet; it is clear that she loves him. As Hamlet makes his way to her, he looks about as if he is checking to see if anyone else is around and then he proceeds to confront her, but not before he takes a quick look around the tapestries. This Ophelia looks as if she is afraid to confront Hamlet in regards to the letters she is returning. She also acts as if she is doing something against her will. She almost gives away the positions of Claudius and Polonius because she continues to glance over at the tapestries, and projects

her voice more than normal. It seems that Hamlet realizes early in the scene there are eavesdroppers. After he refuses the return of gifts, she places them on the stone in the middle of the floor and he holds her hand; Hamlet shows his love for her. When he asks her if she is honest, she cannot even look at him to say that she is honest; instead she looks away (Olivier NP). When he begins with the lines "Get thee to a nunnery," he continues with an even voice, nothing like the productions of the future (1996 Kenneth Branagh version and the Broadway production starring Jude Law). This Hamlet seems calm and does not appear upset at all at the beginning of his request for Ophelia to go to a nunnery; even though his voice is even, it sounds as if it has a kind intention. At this point, Polonius makes a noise behind the tapestries and Hamlet reveals his line, "Where is your father?" (3.1). When she replies, "At home my lord," Ophelia begins to weep and attempts to take Hamlet's head between her hands to show a sign of affection. He shrugs her off—not as violently as in the other productions discussed here—and his speech takes a severe tone. Hamlet is angry that Ophelia has lied to him about the whereabouts of her father, so he mocks her sex; or, it could be that he is acting because he is aware that Claudius and Polonius are listening (or at least someone is listening) and he would like to scare them with his threat of madness. After this point, this Ophelia's voice becomes high pitched as she throws herself on Hamlet, attempting to put her arms around him but he throws her on the ground as she weeps. After his line, "All but one shall live, the rest will stay as they are," Olivier walks by Simmons, who plays Ophelia. She is face down on the ground weeping, and takes a lock of hair in his hands and puts it to his face. He then looks at her with kindness and repeats, "To a nunnery, go" (3.1). He whispers which makes the audience believe these words were intended only for her whereas the rest were

loud and directed towards the eavesdroppers. Out of the Hamlet's studied in the three performances, this Hamlet is the most gentle and kind. When he exits, Ophelia begins to weep very loudly, and Polonius and Claudius expose themselves from behind the tapestry. They continue talking about the source of Hamlet's madness, while Ophelia is weeping. Neither comfort her as she was used for their own purposes (Olivier NP). This Ophelia is the weakest of characters portrayed.

In other productions, such as the 1996 Kenneth Branagh version, during the nunnery scene, it seems as if Hamlet is angrier with Ophelia—angrier than both Olivier and Law portray him. In the nunnery scene, it is apparent that Polonius and Claudius are listening to Hamlet to find the source of his madness therein, using Ophelia as the bait. He greets her kindly by saying, "Nymph in all thy orisons, be all my sins remembered"—at first he is gentle with her and looks upon her with love; then he proceeds to hold her tightly as a man in love (3.1). This is one of the few productions that portrays this scene in such a way. After he holds her tightly, he proceeds to give her a passionate kiss. If this is supposed to set up the mood of the scene that critics have interpreted as cruel, then this Hamlet is clearly sending the wrong message to Ophelia and the audience. It is when she attempts to give back his letters that his attitude clearly changes into a love struck hurt, immature boy. His anger overtakes him because she is giving back his letters, and he states "I did love you once"; he speaks fast throughout this entire scene and he is obviously irritated with her actions. After Claudius and Polonius make the noise behind the mirror they are concealed behind, Hamlet looks around, and then it is clear to the viewer he realizes that Ophelia is not the only one in his audience. Immediately after he hears this noise and the lines between them are exchanged, it is realized that Ophelia is

lying to Hamlet, because she begins to cry; it is here that Hamlet becomes abusive. He is enraged, and begins opening the doors that are on the side of the room to see if anyone is truly listening to their conversation. He puts his hand to her mouth to stifle her cries, and silences her. However, at the end of the scene, he returns to his normal, even, soft voice, and kisses her and caresses her face again... then proceeds to look through the glass, as if he could see Polonius and Claudius. He then states his last lines right through the mirror, with Claudius stationed immediately behind it. Hamlet and Ophelia then enter the room that Polonius and Claudius were previously in, and Hamlet takes Ophelia's face in his hands and says, very seriously, "To a nunnery, go." This is his warning to her—he realizes at this point in this particular production that Polonius and Claudius are using her for their own gain—his warning that she should leave (Branagh NP).

Hamlet on Broadway (2009), directed by Michael Grandage, starring Jude Law and Gugu Mbatha-Raw as Ophelia, presents a new outlook on the play. Ophelia is played by an African-American woman giving the character a fresh perspective. This Ophelia seems to be geared toward a universal woman instead of a white, upper class woman during the Middle Ages/Renaissance. The message that this Ophelia sends is that her situation of abuse, neglect and mistreatment could happen to any type of woman if she allows it. Throughout the play, the characters of both Gertrude and Ophelia are dressed in identical colors—both women are portrayed as innocent. Gertrude is innocent to Claudius' actions, and Ophelia is innocent in her actions against Hamlet. Ophelia and Hamlet don opposite colors, starting with Ophelia in white and Hamlet in black. When Ophelia is questioned by her father, her actions imply she is fighting for Hamlet's affections. Polonius is portrayed as a comedian, which makes it hard to view him in the

same light as when the play is simply read. During the nunnery scene, their argument seems more like a lover's spat than anything cruel. When she offers her letters back, Hamlet holds Ophelia's hand for a brief moment before collecting his thoughts and denying that he ever gave her such favors. Throughout this scene, Jude Law's character is gentle with Ophelia. When he is about to exit, he runs back to her and picks her up, and holds her tightly, and yells "To a nunnery go!"; he then exits quickly. The portrayal presents the ongoing idea of Hamlet's attempting to warn Ophelia to leave because of his gentle nature towards her near the end of the scene (Grandage NP). The character of Ophelia extends from film and stage to art; the most famous representation of Ophelia is portrayed by John Everett Millais, in her death scene.

The representations of Ophelia in the arts reflect her mistreated character. In Millais' *Ophelia*, she is depicted on her back floating in the river in which she has committed suicide. The Pre-Raphaelite painting is very romanticized with the use of the flowers beside her; it portrays Ophelia as a sad figure whose focus is solely on her death; nothing else in the play is represented (Millais NP). This is reminiscent of the flower scene when Ophelia invokes each of the characters' seemingly immoral choices they make: "There's rosemary that's for remembrance... And there is pansies; that's for thoughts" (4.5.173-174). She distributes these to Laertes to remember their father and both to Gertrude and Laertes: "There's fennel for you, and columbines/ There's rue for you and here's some for me... there's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died" (4.5.177-181). There is a specific significance for her distribution of these flowers to the characters, especially to Gertrude, "Columbines were associated with ingratitude or martial infidelity, fennel with flattery" (Greenblatt 1734).

This portrayal of Ophelia is a sad representation of women during this time. In order to reflect on Ophelia, the feminist perspective should be discussed.

To outline Feminist criticism, Peter Barry studies its origins in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Barry asserts that modern feminist criticism is a result of “the ‘woman’s movement’ of the 1960s” (121). Furthermore, Barry illustrates the role of women by stating “...the focus of interest is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfillment in her life, or her lack of these” (122). In *Hamlet*, Ophelia clearly fits this description. Hamlet leaving leads to her madness and death; it is because of him that she is not happy as Barry describes. Barry also suggests that two of the most famous feminist critics, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar “use the idea of ‘social castration’, which amounts to the same thing, for this term signifies women’s lack of social power, this lack being represented, by means of the word ‘castration’, as a male possession, though not as in any sense a male attribute” (131). Ophelia does not have any type of social power in *Hamlet*, and Gilbert and Gubar would probably use Ophelia as an example in this concept of ‘social castration.’

Both Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar present interesting stereotypes in *From Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship*; they state that there are two types of women portrayed in literature: the evil woman and the dumb, sweet young girl (1532). Furthermore, they state “If the vexed and vexing polarities of angel and monster, sweet dumb Snow White and fierce mad Queen are major images literary tradition offers women, how does such imagery influence the ways in which women attempt the pen?” (1532). Or in the case of Ophelia, what types of role models in

Shakespearean plays did women have to look up to? Ophelia is not a good role model for any woman, and that is suggested here; however, Queen Elizabeth I was the perfect role model of the Renaissance.

Queen Elizabeth I was also a role model for women during Shakespeare's time. Ruling England without a husband as the "virgin" Queen, she was in the ultimate position of power. Like Ophelia, she passed through childhood without her mother, Anne Boleyn. Though Elizabeth also lost her father at about the age when Ophelia lost, she did not go mad. Instead, she became one of the most resourceful monarchs in the history of Great Britain, both militaristically and politically. In *The Norton Shakespeare* Stephen Greenblatt, et. al notes that "Elizabeth, who had received a fine humanist education and an extended, dangerous lesson in the art of survival, made it immediately clear that she intended to rule in more than name only" (19). Whereas Elizabeth was assertive, Ophelia is passive, and there lies Ophelia's fault. Greenblatt furthers his assertions about Elizabeth by stating, "In reality, Elizabeth's power was not absolute. The government had a network of spies, informers, and *agents provocateurs*, but it lacked a standing army, a national police force, an efficient system of communication, and an extensive bureaucracy" (19). Like Ophelia, Elizabeth was spied upon and had to watch her every move; however, Elizabeth happens to be the figure that made it out alive. Unlike Ophelia, "Those who approached her [Elizabeth] generally did so on their knees and were expected to address her with extravagant compliments fashioned from the period's most passionate love poetry; she in turn spoke, when it suited her to do so, in the language of love poetry" (19). Elizabeth would not have tolerated the treatment Ophelia received, and in turn someone would have been punished for treating her with disrespect. Clearly,

Shakespeare presents the opposite of Queen Elizabeth I in the frail character of Ophelia. The women of the time would have done to model themselves after the rational Elizabeth rather than the ultra-sensitive Ophelia.

Extending from film to art, this portrayal and story of women that were restrained from a better life is elaborated on by Virginia Woolf. Virginia Woolf, a prominent feminist, wrote a chapter in *A Room of One's Own* entitled "Shakespeare's Sister" who she calls Judith. Woolf explains that, "...gifted sister, let suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil" (599). Throughout *Hamlet*, Ophelia is often seen with a book in her hand, but her level of education is unknown; however, it is known that her brother, Laertes, had the opportunity to receive a college education. Woolf continues the description of Shakespeare's fictionalized sister with "She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers" (599). Similarly, Ophelia remains at home while Laertes is at school. Instead of pursuing her education, her father and Claudius have other plans for her—they want her to help them spy on Hamlet. Furthermore, Woolf continues with

...before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighboring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father...He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage (599).

Obviously Polonius does not show this type of cruelty to Ophelia; instead of forbidding her to remain single, he does quite the opposite; he informs her that she should not see Hamlet anymore because Polonius does not believe Hamlet's affections are genuine. In Woolf's piece, the only way out for this young woman is to run away: "... [she] took the road to London... she could get no training in her craft... at last, Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so—killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads..." (599). Ophelia shares the same fate as Judith; in fact, one could argue that Ophelia is Shakespeare's sister. Although Judith is able to escape to pursue her dreams, she was denied them because she was a woman. Woolf's point is that "the story of Shakespeare's sister, as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the villages, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (600). Ophelia shared the fate predicted by Woolf; if Ophelia had not killed herself, her fate would be unclear. Obviously her brother would have to take care of her in place of her father, but after her brother's death, and the death of almost everyone in the kingdom, including her lover, she probably would have had the disastrous fate of a woman as described by Woolf. Ironically, Woolf committed suicide by drowning; she too could not handle the restraints of her society.

Ophelia is mistreated by both her father and brother in multiple ways. Both Polonius and Laertes use Ophelia for their own gain; however, Hamlet loves Ophelia and showed his love throughout the play. She commits suicide, but in an alternate reality, she could have avoided her self-destruction by leaving Denmark. If Hamlet had continued his relationship with Ophelia and the tragic events had not ensued, Ophelia could have been

Queen of Denmark, and would have taken Gertrude's position. On the other hand, in order to avoid the disaster that does follow, Ophelia should have taken Hamlet's "harsh" advice and go her way to a nunnery where she could have been educated and have the opportunity to be in a position of power. This opportunity also would have restricted her interaction with men, which in her case would be an opportunity for her, since it seems it is these men who cause her madness. With the options only nunneries provided to women, Ophelia would have been better off as well as educated. In the end, this fictional society Shakespeare had created won and Ophelia was silenced, like most women during Shakespeare's time. Hopefully readers followed the example of Elizabeth I instead of Ophelia.

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