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The Ophelia Syndrome: Gender, Madness, and the Making of a Literary Archetype

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Original Article

Abstract

This article examines the gendered construction of madness in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, focusing on the disparity between Ophelia's insanity and Hamlet's own. It argues that Ophelia's madness is never treated as her own: it is read through her chastity by her brother and father, dismissed by Gertrude and Claudius, and later appropriated by Victorian medicine and art as the visual template for female insanity. Hamlet's instability, by contrast, is granted interiority, philosophical weight, and even heroism, exposing a persistent double standard in how the play and its critical tradition assign meaning to male versus female breakdown. Drawing on Elaine Showalter's history of the "female malady", Shoshana Felman's work on madness and discourse, and period medical sources on hysteria and asylum practice, the article traces Ophelia's construction across her scenes in the play before following her reception into nineteenth-century psychiatry, where doctors staged asylum patients in her poses, and into Pre-Raphaelite painting, where her drowning was recast as erotic surrender. It also situates Ophelia within the broader Elizabethan climate that produced the witch trials, arguing that her fate belongs to a longer history of women diagnosed as mad for reasons that had little to do with their minds. The article concludes that Ophelia's outsized cultural afterlife, disproportionate to her minimal role in the text, reveals more about the readers and institutions that needed her than about the character herself.

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Ophelia is among the most painted, quoted, and diagnosed characters in English literature, and one of the least developed. She appears in five scenes of *Hamlet*, speaks a fraction of the lines given to the men around her, and is dead by Act Four. Yet her name has since lent itself to a recognized clinical shorthand, the "Ophelia syndrome", used by psychologists to describe adolescent girls' loss of voice and selfhood. Few literary figures have traveled so far from the page into medicine, art, and popular culture on so little textual ground. This article argues that the distance between Ophelia's thin characterization and her outsized cultural afterlife is not an accident of literary history but the product of a gendered double standard in how Shakespeare, and the centuries of readers who followed him, represent madness.

Madwomen have always been part of literature, and the Elizabethan era, a period of extraordinary literary achievement, produced one of the most enduring of them. William Shakespeare, who returned often to the theme of madness, reserved a particular version of it for his female characters. On one hand, docile, delicate, and feminine, as though madness itself were gendered. On the other, wicked and threatening, feeding the association between mentally ill women and danger. Either way, Shakespeare was not kind to the madwoman, and no case makes that clearer than Ophelia in *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Her madness, which ends in her drowning, is attributed by turns to grief and to lovesickness, but rarely to anything she might be allowed to feel or explain herself. This article traces Ophelia's construction in the play, measures her treatment against Hamlet's own descent into instability, and follows her afterlife into the medical and visual culture of the nineteenth century, where she became the template for the Victorian image of the female asylum patient.

Everyone is familiar with the tale of the tragic prince *Hamlet*. His story, thoughts, motives, and suffering are all known; however, very little is known of the woman he was meant to share his life with. Ophelia is introduced as the young maiden who is in an amorous relationship with Hamlet. The two lovebirds are initially infatuated with each other, but their love story is cut short due to the death of Ophelia's father, and shortly her own death. She is almost violently plunged into the depths of madness after her father's death as a way of portraying her fragile state. Various other characters in the play such as Gertrude, Claudius, and Laertes all dismiss her as a madwoman with no consideration for her circumstances. Her

madness almost feels self-absorbed, especially when it is compared to Hamlet's own slow descent into insanity in the name of revenge. His guilt over his father's death and inability to exact revenge properly feels tragically heroic. Although he is paranoid and frantic, his madness is justified and almost encouraged. In the context of the play, Hamlet did not simply go mad, he is a martyr in the name of justice. Alternatively, Ophelia is but a naive young woman who is unable to contain herself. One cannot help but sense a certain disparity in terms of the madness presented by the two characters. One is logical while the other is portrayed as quite silly. As Elaine Showalter stated in her groundbreaking 1985 essay "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism", Ophelia's "tragedy is subordinated in the play; unlike Hamlet, she does not struggle with moral choices or alternatives" (2). This leaves her as a seemingly flat and insignificant character, existing only to remind Hamlet of the dangers of being too emotional.

While the play primarily follows Hamlet, there are still a number of supporting characters who are given a proper storyline and a certain depth in their characterization, namely Horatio. Ophelia is not one of these characters. Ophelia's existence in the play serves only as a plot device to further Hamlet's own story. She is tragic and powerless. Fragile and emotional. Naive and unassuming. She is spoken at, not conversed with by the male figures in her life. Ophelia's flat and uninspired characterization leaves much to be desired. Her first appearance takes place in Act One Scene Three alongside her brother Laertes and father Polonius. Her brother cautions her that Hamlet's interest in her is but a passing moment. He explains to her that her greatest assets are her beauty and virginity, and that she should be careful not to lose either one of them:

> If with too credent ear you list his songs,
> Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
> To his unmaster'd importunity.
> Fear it, Ophelia, fear it, my dear sister;
> And keep you in the rear of your affection,
> Out of the shot and danger of desire.(*Ham.* 1.3.508-521)

These warnings are charged with coded language that implies that a woman's worth lies only in her looks and sexuality. Laertes is more concerned with Ophelia's reputation than her well-being. Many scholars theorize that Ophelia's madness is not a result of her father's death, but due to losing her virginity to Hamlet who later rejects her and sends her down a path of insanity and depression. According to this theory, Ophelia the madwoman is not a mourning daughter but a heartbroken and violated young woman. She was told her entire life that the only thing that matters about her is her chastity. Therefore, losing her virginity would evidently disrupt and disturb her entire world. Showalter draws a connection between Ophelia and the Elizabethan use of the word "nothing" as slang for female genitalia in her aforementioned essay. The scholar explains that "nothing is what lies between maids' legs, for, in the male visual system of representation and desire, women's sexual organs, in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, "represent the horror of having nothing to see" (2). She then goes on to say that when Ophelia goes mad and is stripped of all humane characteristics, she becomes a representation of an absence of "the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference" (Showalter, "Representing Ophelia" 2). It is clear that Ophelia never truly belonged to herself, and her madness further cemented that. Ophelia's value as a human being was always placed on her maidenhood, so whether she lost her virginity to Hamlet or not, it is quite understandable for her to go mad in these stifling circumstances. Her sudden madness may have seemed shocking to the other characters, but it is actually quite predictable in the grand scheme of things. She was driven to madness by sexist codes of conduct that the Elizabethan era lived by.

British psychiatrist Derek Russell Davis proposes in his book *Scenes of Madness: A Psychiatrist at the Theatre* that Hamlet's madness is uncertain, but he still suggests that the tragic hero's behavior is erratic and unhinged enough to confirm an unstable mental state. In other words, a comparison of Hamlet's and Ophelia's mental states is feasible and shows an alarming bias towards the male gender. "Hamlet, misunderstood, is seen as mad and therefore to be feared" states Davis, "Ophelia on her own, and without a confidante, becomes 'distract', and her 'unshaped' use of speech leaves her hearers unsure of what she is saying, which carries 'but half sense'" (171). The two characters both suffer from an underlying mental health disorder that is attributing to their deteriorating mental health, which is then perceived as madness. Needless to say, mental health care during the

Elizabethan era was limited, to say the least; therefore, expecting Shakespeare or his characters to treat either Hamlet or Ophelia with any sort of empathy or care, at least in relation to their persistent mental illness, would be unrealistic. However, the way in which Hamlet is clearly given much more thought, garnering more concern from the people in his life, makes for a strong case against the double standards that Ophelia faces. The other characters are far more worried about Hamlet than they are about Ophelia because she is not seen as a fully-formed person. She is instead treated as a silly little girl who is sad about her father and her lover. Moreover, Ophelia's madness is seen as a given considering she is a woman. Her manic episode in Act Four Scene Five is indicative of her urgent need for care, but she is instead brushed aside and given an offstage death.

Feminist scholars are critical of the characterization of Ophelia. It is considered harmful not only to women, but to mental health patients of all genders. Showalter strongly criticizes scholars' dismissal of Ophelia arguing that they see Ophelia as an extension of Hamlet, or a representation of one of his characteristics, but not as a person of her own. This ultimately leads to the dismissal of her madness and its relation to Hamlet's own madness, rather than Ophelia's own tormented mental and emotional state. In fact, "depression is almost always reported to be twice as common in women compared with men across diverse societies and social contexts" (2) according to the Department of Mental Health and Substance Dependence in the World Health Organization. But it could be argued that this is to be expected when discussing Shakespearean protagonists because the male lead will always be the center of attention. However,this rationale is ultimately unpersuasive as a justification for dismissing Shakespeare's female characters as unworthy of serious consideration. The issue extends beyond Ophelia alone; it reflects a broader pattern in which Shakespeare's female characters are denied fully developed narrative trajectories and are instead positioned primarily as instruments for advancing the tragic and heroic arcs of their male counterparts. Ophelia's madness is not her own because Ophelia does not exist as an independent character, she exists *for* Hamlet. This characterization is deeply problematic, as it reflects a reductive and dismissive view of women, diminishing their narrative significance

and reinforcing gendered assumptions about whose experiences merit critical attention. It assumes that women cannot operate as autonomous human beings and cannot exist without a male figure in their lives. The presence of a man in a woman's life is not inherently problematic; rather, the issue at hand is how this is often weaponized against women to showcase their inability to function in society on their own. Furthermore, it strengthens the idea that women are more prone to going mad, or at the very least, to experiencing some sort of emotional breakdown. In her essay "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy", Shoshana Felman writes "women as such are associated both with madness and with silence, whereas men are identified with prerogatives of discourse and of reason" (7). In a way, this perfectly summarizes *The Tragedy of Hamlet*'s gendered depiction of mentally ill people. Even in madness, the male character is afforded far greater significance and a markedly higher status than his female counterpart. There was an eventual shift in the years following Shakespeare's death as Showalter states that Ophelia's "visibility as a subject in literature, popular culture, and painting [...] is in inverse relation to her invisibility in Shakespearean critical texts" (Showalter, "Representing Ophelia" 1). As the years passed, Ophelia was brought into the forefront as an almost defiance to Shakespeare's one-dimensional characterization of her. Showalter also connects Ophelia's insanity to her femininity stating that "whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps that nature's purest form." (Showalter, "Representing Ophelia" 3). This is best presented in theatrical adaptations of Ophelia, in which the actresses playing her would exaggerate her femininity to emphasize her tragic condition. They use overly feminine wardrobe and gestures to convey what they perceive as a poor young woman who is driven to madness by a broken heart. In her book *The Female Malady*, Showalter once again states:

> The stage conventions associated with the role have always emphasized the feminine nature of Ophelia's insanity as contrasted with Hamlet's universalized metaphysical distress. As on the Elizabethan stage, Ophelia is traditionally dressed in white, decked with "fantastical garlands" of wildflowers, and has her hair loose. She sings wistful and bawdy ballads; her speech is marked by extravagant metaphors, lyrical free associations, and explicit sexual references. She demonstrates all the classic symptoms of love melancholy (11).

Ophelia's entire existence in the play is permeated with stereotypical notions of the female gender. Her portrayal as the embodiment of conventional ideals of femininity limited her narrative agency and confined her to restrictive and problematic gendered expectations. She is seldom seen without flowers, giving the impression that she has an ethereal aura surrounding her. She is the embodiment of the male fantasy of women: docile, feminine, and obedient. It is almost as if Shakespeare was torn between making her the ultimate male fantasy or an extension of Hamlet. This of course is merely an assumption considering the fact that it is impossible to determine authorial intent. Either way, she is always tied to men and denied autonomy. Her madness, however, is hardly a new concept. Women were often diagnosed with *female hysteria* and subjected to humiliating and shocking treatments in the name of science.

According to a study titled "Women And Hysteria In The History Of Mental Health" that was compiled by a number of researchers at the University of Cagliari in Italy, the now dated term *female hysteria* can be traced back to ancient Egyptians in 1900 BC. Ancient Egyptians believed that women are unstable due "spontaneous uterus movement within the female body" (Tasca et al. 110). In fact the term hysteria comes from the Greek word *hysterika*, which translated to uterus. By the time the Renaissance age emerged, hysteria was still attributed to women and "for the doctors of that time, the uterus is still the organ that allows to explain vulnerable physiology and psychology of women: the concept of inferiority towards men is still not outdated" (Tasca et al. 113). Although the Modern Age explored the idea that genitalia is not related to hysteria or mental health, this concept was still fairly new and relatively unknown. But this did not stop people from prosecuting women for what they perceived as madness. At this time, Christianity was becoming more widespread and concepts such as sexuality and witchcraft, especially in relation to religion, caused social anxieties and enabled violently misogynistic treatment of women. The religious belief that women are more susceptible to coercion from the devil than men led to women being labelled as *witches* throughout history. The term *witch* is heavily coded with gendered misconceptions about women. Witches are viewed as the ultimate example of

madwomen due to their overt resistance against societal norms. Witches and madness often go hand in hand. The Renaissance age witnessed mass hysteria concerning witches which resulted in witch hunts becoming increasingly more frequent. Witches were burned at the stake, drowned in rivers, and hanged the gallows. Although witch hunts were rampant throughout history, the most famous example is the Salem witch trials, which resulted in the killing of thirteen innocent women.

Although this took place in colonial Massachusetts, thousands of miles away from England and several years after Shakespeare's death, the Salem witch trials are a panoptic example of the wrongful prosecution of women due to gendered reasons. Between 1692 and 1693, numerous women were accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials and executed by the Puritan authorities. These accusations reflected deeply rooted religious anxieties and patriarchal fears rather than credible evidence of supernatural activity. Although the infamous "swimming" or ducking test was practiced in parts of Europe and colonial America, those convicted at Salem were primarily executed by hanging. The underlying logic of such practices was inherently paradoxical: survival was interpreted as proof of witchcraft, while death affirmed innocence only after it was too late to save the accused. Rather than serving justice, these proceedings functioned as mechanisms of persecution that disproportionately targeted women. Moreover, the belief that a witch possessed the cunning to evade death reveals that the Puritans' greatest fear was not simply supernatural evil but the perceived threat posed by women who defied established religious and patriarchal authority. They were not afraid of witchcraft, but of women. Authors Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English of the 1978 book *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts Advice to Women* explain that "the charges leveled against the "witches" included every misogynist fantasy harbored by the monks and priests who officiated over the witch hunts: witches copulated with the devil, rendered men impotent (generally by removing their penises—which the witches then imprisoned in nests or baskets), devoured newborn babies, poisoned livestock, etc" (42). This suggests that the archetype of the witch has always had gendered connotations. Women who defy or fail to conform to dominant social norms have historically been labeled as witches. Moreover, the figure of the witch has frequently been associated with descriptors such as "mad," "crazy," or "unhinged," reinforcing the conflation of female

nonconformity with mental instability. As a cultural archetype, the witch is commonly portrayed as a harbinger of misfortune and an embodiment of malevolence, reflecting broader patriarchal anxieties surrounding women who transgress prescribed gender roles. The witch is almost always a madwoman.

Shakespeare himself used the witch archetype several times to relay the untrustworthiness of women. In his play *The Tragedy of Macbeth,* the lead character Macbeth is lured by Three Witches who tell him a prophecy that eventually causes his undoing. The Witches are to blame right from the start for the misfortune of Macbeth. Shakespeare also uses the witch archetype in *The Tempest*. The plays introduces the character of Sycorax as a "foul witch" (*Temp.* 1.2.392). As a matter of fact, she does not even appear in the play because she is dead, but her so-called abhorred legacy lives on. The protagonist Prospero describes Sycorax as a "damn'd witch Sycorax, For mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible" (*Temp.* 1.2.399-403). Despite not being overtly described as a madwoman, it is implied that Sycorax was not of sane mind. Prospero projects his insecurities onto her and decides to kill her because she poses a threat. She is a voiceless villain whose heinous crimes are relayed to us by a man who is clearly unnerved by her, making him an unreliable narrator. It is also worth noting that Prospero is also a practitioner of witchcraft, but he is not given the same cruel treatment as Sycorax. They both practice sorcery, but only the woman is antagonized for it. Not only that, she is not even given a voice to defend herself. She is but a mad witch who deserved to die. One may argue that literature subtly encourages the perception that the madwoman's death is inevitable, if not deserved. Ophelia's suicide is an example of a premature death that is accepted as inevitable because of her madness. While her death may appear tragic, it is often treated as the only conceivable resolution to her narrative. Nevertheless, a number of critics contend that Ophelia's suicide signifies far more than a simple act of despair, inviting interpretations that extend beyond the surface of the text.

The conventional reading of *Hamlet* presents Ophelia's suicide as the natural consequence of her madness. Once she is portrayed as mentally unstable, her death appears almost predetermined. This harmful demonizing of mental illness

and lack of sympathy concerning suicide is unfortunately still prevalent today. Suicide has frequently been interpreted through a lens of mental instability, reducing those who die by suicide to irrational or "crazy" individuals. This tendency is especially evident in representations of women, whose experiences of depression and suicidal ideation have often been pathologized while the social and structural conditions contributing to their suffering are overlooked. The concept of mental illness is seen as feminine because it relates directly to emotions and feelings: things which are commonly attributed to women. Showalter points this out in her essay by explaining that men's melancholy is attributed to their intellect while that of women is traced back to their "emotional" nature. She points out that Ophelia was not meant to be thought of, but rather looked at. Moreover, the way in which Ophelia commits suicide is a great source of discussion in literary circles. Many scholars believe that by drowning herself, Ophelia is silencing her femininity and succumbing to pressure that others put on her. Some critics even go as far as analyzing the symbolism of water and relating it to Ophelia's womanhood. Showalter assesses this connection in her book by stating that "even her death by drowning has associations with the feminine and the irrational, since water is the organic symbol of woman's fluidity: blood, milk, tears" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 11).

In more ways than one, Ophelia comes to represent the female gender. Nearly every aspect of her characterization suggests that she functions as the embodiment of women as a collective. Consequently, these interpretations imply that Ophelia's overt femininity ultimately leads to her demise. They further suggest that she surrenders to her fate by allowing the water, a traditional symbol of femininity, to engulf and ultimately claim her life. Moreover, Ophelia is surrounded by flowers, which likewise carry longstanding associations with femininity and womanhood. The implication that she is incapable of bearing the emotional burden and grief following her father's death reflects a persistent stereotype historically attributed to women, one that is both reductive and deeply dismissive of women's emotional resilience. Hamlet, who also lost his father, takes on an active role and decides to exact revenge on his father's killer. Ophelia, on the other hand, is paralyzed by the loss of her father to the point of insanity. While Hamlet hatches a plot to expose the truth, Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself. Perhaps this exaggeration of her womanhood is used as a setup to shock audiences

when Ophelia goes mad. This sudden hysteria is only amplified by Ophelia's bawdy and crass language when she goes mad. She transforms from a girl in love to a madwoman who speaks in foul language, and that is a fool-proof way to coerce shock and emotional investment from an Elizabethan audience. But this is no excuse for the horrid treatment that she is subjected to both in and outside the play. She is a flat and stale character whose life is defined by the men around her. A concept that is not only outdated, but quite frankly misogynistic.

However, and as Davis already mentioned, labeling someone as "mad" as a way to justify their unnerved behavior "obscures the real issues and offends against the truth" (175). The question should not be whether someone is mad, but should instead focus on the context in which this diagnosis was achieved, and if there are any ulterior motives behind it. This is especially relevant in cases concerning women. The negligence of women's mental health and branding them as "madwoman" was, and is, unfortunately, very common. Mental health patients, especially women, were locked up in mental asylums and denied basic human rights without being given a chance to defend themselves. All it took was for a man in their lives to claim that they were insane for health officials to quarantine them in abominable living conditions that worsened their mental and physical states. Treatments for madness in the Elizabethan times were extreme and inhumane. The most notorious example of this is the Bethlem Royal Hospital, commonly known as the Bedlam Insane Asylum. The institution that is still operating today, albeit under far better conditions, is known to have inspired countless horror books and films due to its frightening treatment of its patients. At one point in history, the word Bedlam became synonymous with madness. The patients were often beaten, starved, and treated so poorly that a large number of them did not survive the therapy. The asylum was especially harmful to women who had to endure sexual assault on top of all the other mistreatment. In her book *Bedlam: London and Its Mad*, author Catherine Arnold states that "in an institution where male basketmen attended female patients, sexual assault was inevitable. In the 1680s, Edward Langden was fired for impregnating a patient while his colleague, William Jones, was complicit in a cover-up" (66). Considering the truly terrifying treatment that

mental patients were receiving in 1600s England, perhaps Ophelia was lucky not to have been subjected to this "therapy".

Despite being a widely discussed character, Ophelia's popularity did not truly rise until the turn of the nineteenth century. The Victorian era saw a rise in the fascination of "the madwoman", and people found no better example than Ophelia. Showalter observes in her book that "the figure of Ophelia eventually set the Victorian style for female insanity" (Showalter, *The Female Malady* 92). Her presence became more noticeable as various Pre-Raphaelites painters displayed their own interpretations of her. From Arthur Hughes' sorrowful re-imagining to John Everett Millais' famous painting, Ophelia's madness was now undeniable. She was often painted as a crazed seductress whose femininity and insanity blended together into one interchangeable unity. She was no longer the Shakespearean representation of Hamlet's repressed feelings, but was instead the Victorian embodiment of a madwoman. Showalter reports in *The Female Malady* that "Ophelia became the prototype not only of the deranged woman in Victorian literature and art but also of the young female asylum patient" (11). The Romantics used Ophelia as a device to frame mentally ill women as beautiful and alluring. In 1859, doctor Hugh Welsh Diamond dressed his female patients in clothes and positioned them in Ophelia-like poses to take photographs. He reportedly used these photographs of asylum inmates as a form of shock therapy to cure the patients. The doctor would show the women photos of themselves in this Ophelia-like state to shock them back into good health. Unsurprisingly, these practices produced no positive therapeutic outcomes. Instead, they likely served only to humiliate patients and erode their trust in their physicians, a pattern that became increasingly pronounced as the century progressed.

Ophelia's madness is never really her own. It belongs to Laertes, who reads it as proof of her earlier fall from chastity; to Gertrude and Claudius, who use it to explain away a young woman they never bothered to understand; and eventually to a Victorian medical and artistic culture that turned her into the visual shorthand for female insanity itself. Hamlet, by contrast, is allowed a madness that is strategic, philosophical, even heroic, because the play and its readers assume he has an interior life worth examining. Ophelia is denied that assumption from her first appearance, warned by her brother and father that her only real assets are her beauty and her virginity, and she is denied it again in death, where critics for centuries read

her drowning as an act of submission to her own femininity rather than as the outcome of grief, isolation, and a complete absence of anyone to confide in. This asymmetry matters beyond the confines of one Elizabethan tragedy. The Ophelia figure did not stay contained in Shakespeare's text. Doctors photographed asylum patients in her poses; Pre-Raphaelite painters turned her drowning into a scene of erotic surrender; and by the time Elaine Showalter was writing in the twentieth century, "Ophelia" had become shorthand for an entire clinical category of female breakdown. That a fictional character with so little agency in her own story could supply the visual and diagnostic vocabulary for real women's suffering says less about Ophelia than about the readers, doctors, and artists who needed a docile, drowned girl to stand in for madness itself. The pattern that begins with Ophelia, in which a woman's madness is read through her femininity rather than her circumstances, recurs across the literary periods that follow her, and it is worth tracing precisely because it did not end with the Elizabethan stage.

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