

## Ophelia and the Weight of Men

*Hamlet* remains as one of Shakespeare's most iconic works. While the play focuses on Hamlet and his quest for revenge, the side characters and their own complexities are what make the play so unforgettable. Ophelia's character is extremely well known despite her being a side character. Her mental health is the subject of many topics, with many questions regarding her eventual death - and what truly led her mental health to deteriorate. With a combination of patriarchal expectations and the men in her life, Ophelia held a heavy burden on her shoulders and that ultimately led to Ophelia's downfall.

*Hamlet* takes place during the 14th to 15th century, also known as the Elizabethan Era. During this time, women's roles in society were extremely limited. They were kept to the sidelines. According to *Elizabethan Women: Women in Tudor History*, "Elizabethan society was patriarchal, meaning men were in control". A woman's value was heavily influenced by men and their role within society. Ophelia, as a woman, is seemingly controlled by the male figures in her life, starting with her brother, Laertes. Act 1, scene 3 of *Hamlet* starts with Laertes warning Ophelia about her feelings for Hamlet:

LAERTES. Fear it, Ophelia; fear it, my dear sister,

And keep you in the rear of your affection,

Out of the shot and danger of desire.

The chariest maid is prodigal enough

If she unmask her beauty to the moon.

Virtue itself 'scapes not calumnious strokes (1.3.37-42)

Here, Laertes is urging Ophelia to remember Hamlet's role in society, and how that would ultimately affect any kind of relationship they have with one another. He continues and

mentions how she must protect her virtue. Women during this time were also placed on pedestals based on their virtues and were often criticized if they were free with their sexualities. Laertes, though he is playing the role of Ophelia's watchful big brother, is unknowingly controlling Ophelia and her life, making it so she has no real autonomy over her own body. Her feelings for Hamlet are dismissed and instead met with warnings. Ophelia chooses to accept his words but doesn't defend herself or say anything to contradict Laertes. She is quick to obey the men of her family without another thought, exhibiting her learned behavior of accepting their words quickly without any fuss. According to *Shakespearean Tragedies: Condemning the patriarchy*, "From the beginning of the play, it is evident that Ophelia has no voice regarding her personal life" (Garzon, 2025). Ophelia's lack of freedom to express any part of herself and her emotions are part of what keeps her so confined by the patriarchal society around her.

Ophelia's relationship with her father, Polonius, seemed to be a complicated relationship. Polonius, much like Laertes, warned Ophelia against her emotions for Hamlet, but he takes on more of a condescending tone. In Act 1, scene 3, Polonius says:

POLONIOUS. Marry, I will teach you. Think yourself a baby

That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay, Which are not sterling.

Tender yourself more dearly, Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase

Running it thus) you'll render me a fool (1.3.114-118)

Polonius's warning stems from fear that Ophelia will damage his reputation and, like Laertes, that Ophelia will risk her virtue for Hamlet. Polonius takes his control of Ophelia a step further, however, when he spies on Hamlet and uses Ophelia as the "bait" to discover the root cause of Hamlet's sudden madness. Polonius has bred Ophelia to be the obedient dutiful daughter, as was customary during the Elizabethan Era. When he tells her to stop seeing Hamlet,

she does so. When he tells her to meet with Hamlet and allow him to eavesdrop in the conversation, she does so. Ophelia often looks to her father when she's unable to form an opinion on a subject on her own, such as when he's chastising her for having feelings for Hamlet.

According to *Ophelia's Reflection* from the University of South Carolina, "her involvement is legible both as loyalty to Polonius and as disloyalty to Hamlet; it suggests nothing of her internal character other than her passivity" (Kennedy, 2017). Ophelia, because of the way she was raised, lacks a personality, making her easily manipulated and dependent on the men around her. Her inability to be her own person made her father's death hit harder.

Polonius's death at the hands of Hamlet acts as a catalyst for Ophelia - her grief and loss was so immense that she lost what little sense of self she had. Her father, who essentially dictated every aspect of her life had suddenly died, leaving Ophelia alone when she had never been. She was left vulnerable and was unable to continue, hence the scenes where she's expressing her grief through song in Act 4, scene 5. Ophelia had been dominated by the hand of her father, the hand of patriarchy, for her entire life and she was unable to grasp onto a life where she had no male figures in her life to rely on.

Throughout the play, Ophelia and Hamlet mirror each other somewhat - as Ophelia's mental health slowly falls, Hamlet's is declining just as rapidly. Before Hamlet entered a depressive state, he was affectionate toward Ophelia. In Act 1, Scene 3 she says:

OPHELIA. He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders

Of his affection to me (1.3.108-109)

Here, she's explaining to her father how Hamlet has treated her - expressing his love and affection for her. Ophelia, for a long time, believed Hamlet's words. However, this all changed

when Hamlet words changed. In Act 3, scene 1, Hamlet's character has taken a turn and his language becomes misogynistic.

HAMLET. I have heard of your paintings too, well  
enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another.  
You jig and amble, and  
you lisp; you nickname God's creatures and make  
your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on 't (3.1.154-159)

Hamlet is quick to realize Polonius and Claudius are listening to him and uses Ophelia as a pawn, with no regard to her feelings. Throughout the play, Polonius embedded into Ophelia's mind that the reason for Hamlet's madness stem from his love for Ophelia. When Ophelia witnesses firsthand Hamlet's mind unraveling, she interprets it as her fault. According to *Ophelia and the Feminine Construct*, "...so it is an apt supposition that Ophelia's madness begins when she believes herself to have unwillingly destroyed her lover" (Romestant, 4). Ophelia even says to "restore him" because she recognizes he was a different person and fears she's the source.

Ophelia's character has become well-known throughout media, with her madness and poetic suicide becoming the inspiration for many other forms of art. By taking a closer look at her and her impact throughout *Hamlet*, we're able to see that she was a victim in a society ruled by men. She was used as a pawn, with no real consideration to her heart, and what ultimately transpired was her death. Ophelia's tragic fate shows the consequences of having a life shaped entirely by expectation and control. Shakespeare utilizes her character to show how restrictive a woman's life was - and how devastating the loss of autonomy could be.

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