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Assignment: Ophelia and Madness

Though Ophelia's diminutive role in the plot of Shakespeare's Hamlet appears to render her trivial-her dialogue in the play is limited, having only appeared in five of the twenty scenes, and she is only spoken of twice-her presence, nevertheless, permeates the play. Ophelia remains, perhaps to some, as an innocent woman, a dutiful daughter filled with passion and beauty, and is yet stricken with adversity in life. A careful analysis of this seemingly uncomplicated character suggests otherwise, however. Indeed, Ophelia becomes almost characteristically insane-she sings in conversation, weeps and wails, and ultimately ends up drowning herself-but her madness afflicts her so because she has been used by her father, by her brother, and even by Hamlet himself; she has been toyed with emotionally by these men, and the guilt she suffers from Hamlet's artificial insanity and rejected love ultimately becomes too much for her to bear. Thus, in critical review of the play, Ophelia mentally suffers from the scars of unwanted love and exploitation rather than any singular or isolated cause. ...

Polonius instructs Ophelia to think of herself as a "baby" (Act I, Scene II), and even though Ophelia protests that his vow of love were done in an honorable fashion, Polonius insists that the "blazes" of professed love are nothing short of misconceptions that will eventually become extinct (Act I, Scene II). As such, Ophelia is instructed to never see or speak with Hamlet again.

The instruction made by Polonius, as is the unfortunate but common case with most girls stricken with youthful love at the time, is the first blow to her sanity. Though Ophelia agrees to obey, it is clear within her initial protests that she believes both of them-her brother and her father-to be wrong about Hamlet. ...

Hamlet is obviously hurt by Ophelia's lack of affection to his vows of love, but she has done so because she has been instructed to believe his love is irresolute and improper. Had her father and brother been more mindful to her affections, they would not be so blind as to the consequences of their actions.

Having now believed to be the immediate cause of Hamlet's perceived insanity, Ophelia hopes to return his affections. Upon seeing Hamlet further on in the play, she claims, "I have remembrances of yours, that I have longed long to re-deliver; I pray you, now receive them" (Act III, Scene I); naturally here Ophelia is speaking of love, which she wishes now to give to him. However, unfortunately she is denied that which she has come to deliver. Hamlet harshly proclaims that she should not have believed his writings and professions of love...It would be difficult for any person to deal with such a blow. Not only was her love betrayed but she has been mocked as a person and as a female.

Furthering her despair, no doubt, is the death of her father, which, according to the prevailing attitudes of the characters, is the sole reason for her break with sanity. ...

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However, to tie Ophelia's despair into a neat package that aligns with the death of her father is to completely disregard the calamities that befell her before Polonius' untimely death. Here was a woman who was greeted by eloquent professions of love only later to be put in doubt by both her father and her brother. Ophelia was then greeted with erratic and aggressive behavior by a man who spoke passionately of her, and later was mocked and ridiculed by him. Ophelia, in short, was a victim to the uncontrollable forces around her, and the rejection that ultimately led to her suicide.

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