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## Who is Ophelia? An examination of the Objectification and Subjectivity of Shakespeare's Ophelia

Tynelle Ann Olivas

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Olivat1@unlv.nevada.edu

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WHO IS OPHELIA? AN EXAMINATION OF THE OBJECTIFICATION  
AND SUBJECTIVITY OF SHAKESPEARE'S OPHELIA

By

Tynelle Ann Olivas

Bachelor of Arts in English  
Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education- English  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
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Department of English  
College of Liberal Arts  
The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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We recommend the thesis prepared under our supervision by

**Tynelle Ann Olivas**

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**Who is Ophelia? An Examination of the Objectification and Subjectivity of Shakespeare's Ophelia**

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Evelyn Gajowski, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Phillip Rusche, Ph.D., Committee Member

Vincent Perez, Ph.D., Committee Member

Lezlie Cross, Ph.D., Graduate College Representative

Kathryn Hausbeck Korgan, Ph.D., Interim Dean of the Graduate College

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## Abstract

William Shakespeare's Ophelia, from his tragedy play *Hamlet*, has predominately been perceived and depicted as an objectified female with very little purpose other than to support Hamlet's role as protagonist. I explore the ways in which Ophelia was objectified by her brother, father, and Hamlet. I also analyze how Ophelia not only exhibits subjectivity, that is the ability to think, act, and speak for herself, but plays the part of Shakespearean fool. In her interactions with Hamlet specifically, Ophelia addresses Hamlet first, raises questions of the prince, and conducts herself in a way that is not always in keeping with the tenets of proper female decorum, that is silent, chaste, obedient. Likewise, in her madness, Ophelia is an autonomous being showcasing her subjectivity by thinking, acting, and speaking of her own accord. Throughout his comedies and romances, Shakespeare's court fools convey truth and honesty in a way that the audience recognizes, but the characters in the play fail to realize. It is in her madness that Ophelia adopts this role of Shakespearean fool and in so doing, articulates the quagmire of female subjectivity in Elizabethan England.

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## Introduction

Who is Ophelia? This is the question that began my literary journey into the heart of William Shakespeare's most objectified, but least understood, female character. Ophelia is, for many scholars and non-scholars alike, the tragic, pitiful creature who drowns towards the end of the play *Hamlet*<sup>1</sup>. She is the beautiful maiden immortalized in Sir John Everett Millais's painting, *Ophelia*. A minor character most often remembered for going mad and doling out flowers. Ophelia's story has been perceived as one of insignificance, except for what she reveals to us about the protagonist, Hamlet. With the advent of feminist criticism in the 1970s, Ophelia as subject gained and has continued a rise in status in scholarly inquiry.

In analyzing who Ophelia is, the most obvious perspective is that of objectified female. Although Shakespeare's England was ruled by a female monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, society, as a whole, was very much patriarchal. Males were the head of the household, the figurehead responsible for protecting and procuring the needs of their wives, children, and property. Females were seen as extensions of male property or possessions, tethered first to their father's households and then later their husband's. During this time period, relations with women were believed to be "paradoxically both necessary to and threatening to the accomplishment of adult masculine identity" (DiGangi 199). Being a man was signified by becoming a husband and father, and yet "the period's dominant gender ideologies assumed the moral and intellectual inferiority of women, and typically portrayed sexual passion for women as emasculating" (DiGangi 199-200). Early modern English women were constructed as the more sexual of the

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<sup>1</sup> All textual references to the play, *Hamlet*, are taken from *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, ed. Susanne L. Wofford, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1994).



two genders and as such men felt justified in their constant patriarchal policing by father, brother, and husband (Gajowski).

A woman who spoke too much was branded a harlot. In early modern England, “excessive or public female speech could easily be perceived as disorderly; moreover, it was a common belief that a woman who was open with her mouth was likely to be open with her body as well” (DiGangi 261). Conversely, a married female who harped too much on her husband was likely to be socially and physically punished. Puritan minister William Whately’s popular 1617, marriage treatise *A Bride-Bush, Or a Direction for Married Persons*, clearly instructs wives to “acknowledge her inferiority” while practicing the “virtue of subjugation” and reminds them always “to show reverence” for her husband (270). Whately explicitly states that a wife’s speeches to her husband should neither be “cutted, sharp, sullen, passionate, tetchy, nor yet rude, careless, unmannerly, and contemptuous” (270). A woman who exhibits these faults is, according to Whately, “rude, shameless, graceless; next to harlots, if not the same with them” (270). It was widely accepted throughout England during Shakespeare’s time that a good woman was a quiet woman.

Many Christian men of the period believed in the biblical teachings from the book of Timothy that state “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection” (*King James Bible*, 1 Timothy 2:11). A talkative or scolding woman was seen as evil and disorderly, specifically a challenger to the patriarchal system of order. In order to quell such subversive behavior, English men instituted machinations of torture and rehabilitation such as the cucking stool and scold’s bridle. The cucking stool was a “chair attached to a lever used to dunk the victim repeatedly into a lake or river” whereas the scold’s bridle was an “iron headpiece with a metal bit that pressed down on the victim’s tongue, preventing her from speaking and possibly causing gagging or

lacerations” (DiGangi 264-265). These forms of social chastisement and physical punishment reinforced patriarchal rule and supremacy. The act of humiliation was seen as a positive rehabilitation for the offending female and a warning for her contemporaries to toe the line. Living in this era, Shakespeare would have been privy to these public displays of shame and retribution. Depicting Ophelia as a young maiden trapped by these social dictates would have been a natural course of action for the playwright and his audience. To view Ophelia as just another objectified female would have been in keeping with the mindset of the time. To be objectified is to be treated as an object, a silent, passive thing upon which meaning is constructed by others. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum outlined objectification as:

1. *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of Autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. *Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of Subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. (257)

The need to maintain a woman as either devoted wife or virginal daughter was a man's primary concern relative to providing food and shelter for himself and his family/ property. As physical proof of his good standing in society, a man's females (wife, daughters) reflected his ability to exert his dominion and maintain control. A man whose wife was constantly talking and harping on him obviously lacked manly prowess to keep his woman in line and deferential to him. Additionally, any man whose daughter was not married and not a virgin faced public humiliation as the town idiot. The philosophy was simple: a man who controls his women shows leadership and can be trusted, a man who cannot control his women is weak and a fool. Instructional manuals of the day, such as William Perkins's 1608 *Christian Economy*, argue that the male is "man of a superior sex...the female is woman of an inferior sex" (305). Perkins goes on to compare male heads of household to that of Christ who is "absolute lord and king of his church, so is not the husband absolute over his wife" (307). A woman's duty is to be "obedient unto her husband in all things" (309). This lopsided standard of expectation minimized the roles of females to that of property or objects to be bought and sold, controlled and manipulated, by their male sovereigns, in this case their husbands and fathers. Socially speaking, women were objectified and marginalized.

The prescribed behavior for females of Elizabethan England was simple: be demure, subservient, and quiet. Women who acted outside the realm of this socially dictated state found themselves labeled and treated as outcasts and abominations. "The common cultural association between female speech and female promiscuity" resulted in many women being branded harlots and whores (DiGangi 264). Suppressing women's speech, and therefore their thoughts and actions, was an act of controlling both a women's supposed sexual wantonness and maintaining the prescribed social order of male dominated society. Women's unwanted speech grew to

encompass female insanity (speaking and acting disorderly) which in turn created an inferred correlation between madness and sexuality.

For Ophelia, madness grants her subjectivity, that is, the ability to think, speak, and act for herself. Madness was freedom because it removed the social constraints of what was expected of her and how she should behave. As a madwoman, Ophelia is free to say and do what she wants without fear of public disapproval; she's already mad and perceived as an outsider to society. Showalter explains Ophelia's madness in concise terms:

Clinically speaking, Ophelia's behavior and appearance [in her mad state] are characteristic of the malady the Elizabethans would have diagnosed as female love-melancholy, or erotomania... Women's melancholy was seen as biological and emotional in origins.

Showalter, 225

Madness was the predicted outcome for a young female experiencing a loss of love. This blanket idea illuminates the demeaning patriarchy of the time: women are too frail to handle their emotions, specifically a loss of love.

It is in her mad state that Ophelia not only exhibits her subjectivity, but pronounces her role as Shakespearean fool. Throughout his works, Shakespeare employs various clowns, jesters, and fools to espouse the truth and folly of his characters. These fools act as mirrors reflecting the vice and foolishness of others, and yet, the characters fail to realize the truth the fools speak. Ophelia, like Touchstone, Feste and the fool in *King Lear*, plays the part of court fool who sees through the guises of the monarchs, King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. Ophelia comprehends and warns, but unfortunately no one believes or understands her words because they have

dismissed her as nothing but a madwoman. Ophelia is treated as a creature to be pitied and reviled, but never understood.

Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia is in keeping with two very distinct and popular traditions of the time: Petrarchan lover and Ovidian discursive tradition. Petrarch was a 14th century writer who believed in the power of love and words. Petrarch is famous for his love letters and sonnets to his idealized female, Laura. Petrarch called for young male lovers to install their female lovers onto pedestals, to refer to these young maidens as nymphs, angels, and other imaginary creatures, to extol their virtues as magical, divine, and celestial, to essentially reconfigure their very human and very flawed female companions as objectified creatures wholly unreal and therefore unattainable. By inspiring whole generations of young men to take up this unrealistic prescription for love, Petrarch effectively created a state of accepted objectification and marginalization. He advocated for men to see women as objects of affection, itemized elements of perfection, trophies to chase and woo. In Sonnet 248, Petrarch compares the object of his love to both Heaven and Nature, an angel of virtue and beauty:

Who wishes to behold the utmost might  
Of Heaven and Nature, on her let him gaze,  
Sole sun, not only in my partial lays,  
But to the dark world, blind to virtue's light!  
And let him haste to view; for death in spite  
The guilty leaves, and on the virtuous preys;  
For this loved angel heaven impatient stays;  
And mortal charms are transient as they're bright!  
Here shall he see, if timely he arrive,

Virtue and beauty, royalty of mind,  
In one bless'd union join'd. Then shall he say  
That vainly my weak rhymes to praise her strive,  
Whose dazzling beams have struck my genius blind:--  
He must for ever weep if he delay!

On the opposite end of the spectrum sat Ovid who also advocated for the unrealistic style of romancing a woman, but whereas Petrarch romantically objectified women, Ovid sexually objectified women. Ovid's *Ars amatoria* is a case study in animal behavior, of giving in to the Id's instant gratification need to possess, consume, and discard female lovers. Petrarch saw females as objects on a pedestal, beautiful things to be adored and beheld, goals to strive for, but never really attain because the chase was more intriguing than the actual attainment. Ovid argued that women were sexual objects to be chased and used for a man's sexual pleasure. Women served a purpose: to fulfill a man's desire. A woman's sole function was to act as the hare to the man's hunting dog, the flower to his garden shears. In his Book I of *Ars amatoria*, or Art of Love, Ovid instructs his young male audience to "First, be a confidant soul" since "Women can always be caught; that's the first rule of the game." Ovid continues to educate by stating "She'll make you think she means "No!" while she is planning her "Yes!" Ovid's most telling sexually objectified statement comes when he advises:

Don't always show in your talk that you know you are going to get her—  
What you are eager to be, tell her, is *Only a friend*.  
I have seen this work, on the most unwilling of women—  
*Only a friend*, who was found more than proficient in bed!

Lines 719-722

Hamlet switches between these two forms of love: the Petrarchan lover and the Ovidian seducer, in his interactions with Ophelia. In both cases, he objectifies the woman for whom he later claims “I lov’d Ophelia” (5.1.255).

In Elizabethan England, women were very much under a man’s thumb, relegated to secondary roles, punished for projecting their subjectivity, and objectified as often as they were vilified. For Shakespeare, presenting a female whose thoughts and actions reveal the truth was tricky given the time period. Presenting a tragic heroine who is objectified and nullified was easy and even expected, but a female who spoke, acted, and thought independently of any male influence, that required more nuance. Hence, Ophelia in her madness is able to exhibit subjectivity and in doing so speaks the truth of what is really occurring in the play. Madness is the shield granting Ophelia subjectivity, a coup that has been largely ignored by pre-feminist critics. Who is Ophelia? It is a question and a quest convoluted by the dichotomy of her roles as both object and subject, sane and insane woman. Living in a patriarchal world, Ophelia fluctuates between what society expects from her, what Hamlet asks of her, and what she wants for herself.

“Part I: Ophelia as Object,” explores Ophelia’s objectification at the hands of her father, brother, and Hamlet. As Laertes’s mock-daughter, Ophelia is objectified as a play-thing for Laertes to act out his future patriarchal duties. For Polonius, objectifying his daughter as a pawn for his political pursuits is just another casualty in his bid to improve his social station. Hamlet’s objectification of Ophelia falls under two branches: Petrarchan and Ovidian. The prince treats Ophelia as both a beautiful creature worthy of a pedestal and nothing more than a sexual thing to consume and conquer. Hamlet’s objectification of Ophelia is in keeping with his ruse to expose

his murderous Uncle Claudius, as well as act as surrogate for his misplaced anger at his mother's betrayal of his father's love and memory.

“Part II: Ophelia as Subject,” analyzes Ophelia's budding subjectivity with Hamlet in the mouse-trap scene, as well as her liberated and autonomous state once she has gone mad.

Ophelia's subjectivity affords her the opportunity to play Shakespeare's fool, exposing the court's corruption but failing to exact real change. The tragedy of Ophelia plays out as the audience realizes that the silent, chaste, and obedient maid analyzed in Part I of this thesis is able to exhibit her subjectivity in the oppressive patriarchal society of Castle Elsinore only once she has gone mad.



## Part 1: Ophelia's Objectification

## Chapter 1: Ophelia as Laertes's Mock-Daughter

The opening lines of William Shakespeare's tragedy *Hamlet* are "Who's there?" This seemingly basic question becomes the crux of Shakespeare's heroine Ophelia; she does not know who she is outside of the constraints of her designated role of object. She is the epitome of Renaissance female conduct: she is obedient, chaste, and silent. Perceived by many Shakespeare critics as being an "insignificant minor character in the play, touching in her weakness and madness but chiefly interesting, of course, in what she tells us about Hamlet," Ophelia has been objectified and marginalized (Showalter 220). For most of the play, Ophelia only speaks when spoken to, acts only when dictated to do so, and always obediently acquiesces to the demands of her male sovereigns. Ophelia is the object upon which the three male overlords in her life -- Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes-- exert their dominion and control to further their own personal and political agendas. Whereas Hamlet treats Ophelia as both a courtly love object of affection and a sex object to be vilified, and Polonius maneuvers Ophelia about as a human chess piece in his scheme to win King Claudius's favors, Laertes encapsulates both these ideological treatments of Ophelia in his quest to be a patriarchal lord of high esteem.

Patriarchal societies, like the one displayed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, existed under a strict code of moral obligation and social norms. Males were the heads of household, solely responsible for the edification and protection of their female subjects. Fathers were seen as keepers of their daughters' virtue, procurer of her future husband, and provider of her physical and spiritual needs. A female's one and only physical value, her only tradable asset, was her virginity. Being chaste, obedient, and silent guaranteed a female a positive reputation and acceptance in society. To act, speak, or behave in a way that contradicted any of those three edicts was considered scandalous and abnormal; a guarantee of shame and blame. For fathers,

daughters were seen as tradable commodities, ways to procure alliances, gain social and political standing, and establish working or financial relationships. Daughters were things or objects to be sold off for the father's benefit, not the daughter's. Likewise, male suitors saw their female counterparts as subservient and inferior. Females existed for the males' comfort and pleasure, not her own. Her duty was first to her father and his household, and then after marriage, that allegiance transferred over to her husband's household and management. Her life was never her own, she was always subjected to the rule and control of a male.

Laertes is not Ophelia's father and he is not her suitor; he is her brother. Laertes's objectification of Ophelia is interesting in his need to exert power over Ophelia to establish himself as a patriarchal man. Ophelia represents to Laertes a mock-daughter upon whom he may practice out his future fatherly duties, as well as a symbol of his good reputation. Laertes, as a young man of marriageable age, needs Ophelia to maintain an unblemished reputation as a virtuous maid lest her scandalous actions reflect poorly upon his character and chances for social mobility via marriage.

Ophelia is first introduced as the recipient of Laertes's moral instructions. Laertes, son of Polonius and older brother to Ophelia, is about to go off to college. He begins his discourse with Ophelia by first stating his intentions that he is off to study abroad. By beginning with himself, he is exerting his priority over her. Next, Laertes refers to Ophelia as sister. This is a nameless reference to one's title of association to the speaker. Ophelia is, upon her first reference, seen and treated as an object; she is *his* sister. Next, Laertes instructs Ophelia "do not sleep,/ But let me hear from you" (1.3.3-4). After commanding her to keep him abreast of her activities, Ophelia asks "Do you doubt that?" (1.3.4). Laertes does not answer her, instead he declares that Hamlet

is a typical youth who merely plays with women until he gets his fill of them, and then he discards them.

Laertes is not talking to Ophelia as an equal, but an object to be spoken at, much as one speaks at a mirror when practicing a speech or presentation. Laertes is exhibiting his patriarchal duties in this scene, dictating to Ophelia what is and is not acceptable for a young lady. In a way, Laertes is objectifying Ophelia as a mock-daughter for whom he may practice his future fatherly duties, specifically doling out directives for maintaining proper conduct and steadfastness.

Laertes informs Ophelia that:

Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,  
Hold it a fashion and a toy in blood,  
A violet in the youth of primy nature,  
Forward, not permanent, sweet, but not lasting,  
The perfume and suppliance of a minute-  
No more.

(1.3.5-9)

Laertes uses a barrage of words like “trifling,” “fashion,” “toy,” “youth,” and “sweet” to convey the notion that Hamlet is merely playing with Ophelia, that his affections for her are simply falsities, all a part of the courtly tradition of temporary, but insincere, love. Laertes’s final words of “No more” are very condescending, stating that Hamlet’s actions and words towards Ophelia are empty and ephemeral, that she is incapable of extracting true love and feelings from the Prince, and that she is silly for thinking otherwise. By stating such powerfully dismissive words, Laertes exhibits his objectification of Ophelia: she is a silly, gullible girl that needs protecting

from men and herself. She cannot be trusted to have agency of herself and her actions. This is further exemplified by his thirty-five line edict in which he describes in great detail the ways in which Hamlet most definitely cannot sincerely love Ophelia and how Ophelia must guard herself against such a royal rogue as Hamlet lest her virtue and reputation fall into disarray.

Laertes commences with his edification of Ophelia by stating that she does not comprehend his words because she is still growing in body and mind, as he states “As the temple waxes,/ The inward service of the mind and soul/ Grows wide withal” (1.3.12-14). Essentially, Laertes has just insulted Ophelia’s intelligence, claiming that she cannot comprehend his statements because she lacks the intelligence to do so. Laertes continues his assault on Ophelia by lamely acknowledging that “Perhaps [Hamlet] loves you now...but you must fear...his will is not his own” (1.3.14,16,17). *Perhaps* is a word of possibility, not tangible fact, and *now* is a time constraint of momentary space. By using these words, Laertes is creating a negative sphere that places Ophelia in a state of doubt. If Laertes cared for Ophelia as a person he would not be so cold and dismissive of her feelings and emotions, but he does not see her in that light; she is his play-thing, his mock-daughter to act out his future role of father.

As a father figure acting out his patriarchal duties on his mock-daughter sister, Laertes is adamant about preserving Ophelia’s virginity and therefore, virtue. “The construct of marriage as a male-centered institution -- one that is concerned with male control of female sexuality and the female procreative process,” as Evelyn Gajowski notes (64), “has been with us since the origin of patriarchal cultures.” This explains why Laertes views and treats Ophelia as a sexual commodity. Laertes first instructs Ophelia to “weigh what loss your honor may sustain” and then quickly warns “your chaste treasure [will] open/ To [Hamlet’s] unmas’tred importunity”

(1.3.29,31-32). Laertes deems it his duty to protect Ophelia's virtue, that she herself is somehow incapable of protecting that which is her only form of tradable value as a female in her society.

Laertes ends his pontification by painting a most unladylike picture for Ophelia. He warns Ophelia, by using images from nature, to drive home his point:

The canker galls the infants of the spring  
Too oft before their buttons be disclos'd,  
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth  
Contagious blastments are most imminent.

(1.3.39-42)

By using the imagery of nature, Laertes is trying to appeal to Ophelia's feminine nature as females were most readily associated with nature, housework, and child-rearing. Laertes has expressed his fears and commands to Ophelia by deconstructing and dismissing Hamlet's affections by stating Hamlet is subjected to the will and rule of Denmark, and therefore, his choices, like whom to marry, are not his own. Finally, Laertes opts to appeal to Ophelia's nature via a nature metaphor. The metaphor is grossly given as the canker worm he introduces in line 39 is representative of phallic imagery, the spring buds with their buttons not yet opened symbolizes a virgin and her virginity, the morn is the morning after the sexual encounter has taken place, the "liquid dew of youth" references a man's sexual release in the form of semen, and finally, the "contagious blastments [that] are most imminent" represent the bastard child growing in her unmarried mother's tainted womb. When something is contagious means it is quickly caught and grows in number, much like a fertilized egg takes form and becomes a child. Laertes employs nature imagery as his last appeal to Ophelia to behave and maintain her virginity. He specifically refers to her as an unbuttoned flower, admitting that he knows she is still a virgin. His fears for

her may reflect his own insecurities of gaining a tainted reputation as a consequence of Ophelia's dalliance with Hamlet. In this sense, Laertes's objectification of Ophelia serves two purposes: to enact his fatherly duties upon his mock-daughter, and to secure his own unblemished reputation.

Treating Ophelia in this manner exemplifies not just Laertes's treatment of her as an object needing protection and edification, but Ophelia herself acquiescing to the objectification. Instead of being indignant at Laertes's directives, Ophelia thanks him for his "good lesson," and says it will serve "As watchman to my heart" (1.3.44-45). She then tells him not to "Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven" while you act like a "reckless libertine" (1.3.48-49). Ophelia shows a little backbone in this scene by telling her brother not to be a hypocrite, but essentially she passively accepts her brother's overbearing rant that she is intellectually incompetent and unable to ward off Hamlet's sexual advances. She does not interrupt him, does not defend herself against his worries, and does not assert herself. Even as he leaves, Laertes's departing words to Ophelia are not "farewell, my sister" or even an "I love you." Laertes warns Ophelia to "remember well / What I have said to you" (1.3.83-84). He acts as a father warning and chastising his child to obey his commands and behave as a virtuous young lady should. He obviously feels that Ophelia cannot govern herself and therefore is in need of moral edification.

Laertes projects his patriarchal duties on Ophelia in an attempt to "make her conform to some feminine stereotype that reflects well on his honor" (Hamilton 80). His edification of Ophelia is remarkably similar to the one Polonius gives her in the moments after Laertes leaves for college. Laertes gives out orders and edicts without considering Ophelia's feelings and desires, a conditioned state he adheres to when next the siblings meet.

The next time Laertes sees Ophelia is in ACT 4, scene 5, after she has started to go mad. He speaks of her, but never to her. Upon seeing Ophelia enter the castle foyer with her hair in

disarray, dressed in loose fitting clothing, and singing, Laertes does not rush to her, he does not address her, he does not react to her; instead, he turns the attention away from Ophelia and onto himself. He exclaims “O, heat, dry up my brains!” as though what he is seeing is too much for him to comprehend, that he wishes his brains were fried and addled rather than actually be cognizant of the event unfolding in front of him (4.5.154). He continues his astonishment at Ophelia’s transformation by next trying to inoculate his senses by burning out his sight with “seven times salt” (4.5.154).

Laertes is once again objectifying Ophelia by not addressing her as a feeling, thinking person with needs; instead he is concerned only with himself and how Ophelia’s bedraggled state affects him, not her. When Laertes does finally address Ophelia and not himself, he immediately objectifies her as a “rose of May!” (4.5.157). Roses are most often symbols of love and beauty. May is a springtime month, representing youth, innocence, and vitality. Thus, Laertes has objectified his sister as a beautiful youth who, like a rose, is wilting before his eyes.

Laertes continues his objectification of Ophelia as he lists her roles in descending order: “Dear maid, kind sister, sweet Ophelia!” (4.5.158). Laertes has listed the roles or forms Ophelia fits into, that of maid first and foremost. Maid is an undistinguishable moniker for any female in any social class, mainly determined as a young, unmarried female. Thus, Laertes first sees his sister as a thing, one of many indistinguishable females without identity or individuality. Next, she is *his* sister, the relationship is important because of the role she plays in regards to him, Laertes. She serves a purpose as it relates to him and his needs; she is the mock-daughter to his practicing father figure. Finally, Laertes refers to Ophelia as “sweet Ophelia!” Sweet denotes a person who is kind and affectionate, giving and amiable. Ophelia most definitely exhibits all of these characteristics, and yet, is that all Laertes sees of Ophelia? A kind and pliable young maid



who has some related affinity to him? Laertes does not describe Ophelia as intelligent, witty, or even beautiful. He chooses to highlight her sweet nature which makes others happy, others like himself. When designating someone as “sweet” the label has connotations of a person whose gracious and giving temperament effuses happiness in others, as Ophelia did to those with whom she came in contact.

Ophelia tries to engage Laertes in discourse, but he once again dismisses her and claims “This nothing’s more than matter” (4.5.173). Even when his sister tries to talk to him, he will not listen. She is an object of madness, and one does not talk to madness as it is absurd to do so. A mad person has no sense, and without sense, the ability to think realistically and clearly, that person is unworthy of conversation. Laertes continues his demeaning objectification of Ophelia as he refers to her as “A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted” (4.5.176). She is a piece of documentation, a thing to be studied and dissected, most definitely not a person with subjectivity, at least in Laertes’s view. His final thoughts on Ophelia are “She turns to favor and to prettiness” (4.5.186). Ophelia is, in Laertes’s eyes, merely a gracious and pretty thing, no more. He has done with Ophelia as he questions the Almighty “Do you [see] this, O God?” (4.5.198). By turning his attentions to the Lord, Laertes is behaving as if Ophelia were already dead and he is in the second stage of grief, that of anger. He questions why God would allow Ophelia’s descent into madness to happen. It’s as if Laertes has already given up on Ophelia, placed her in the grave, and is trying to move on, even though Ophelia is still alive, talking, and acting of her own accord. To him, the dutiful, sweet maid of beauty is dead, and this thing that has replaced her is nothing but a shell of his former beloved sister. In her greatest time of need, Laertes has abandoned her.

It is interesting to note that Laertes, despite all his protestations otherwise, believed Ophelia to be virtuous and chaste. After witnessing Ophelia's madness firsthand, Laertes intimates to the king that Ophelia "Stood challenger on mount of all the age/ For her perfections" (4.7.28-30). He admits that Ophelia was an untainted virgin whose character was unblemished, yet he made ridiculous demands upon her to retain that which she was already protecting. To her, he maintained an air of authority and command, but when discussing her, he proudly extolled her virtue. Like the owner who chastises his pet at home, but brags about it at work, so Laertes objectifies Ophelia's virtue.

There are only two more scenes involving Laertes and his objectification of Ophelia: the scene where he discovers she is dead, and the funeral scene that turns into a feud with Hamlet. At the end of ACT 4, scene 7, Gertrude states: "Your sister's drown'd, Laertes" to which he exclaims "Drown'd! O, where?" (4.7.164-165). Gertrude then describes in great detail, the environment in which Ophelia succumbed to death, out in nature, surrounded by flowers. Twice earlier, Laertes had employed nature imagery in the form of flowers to describe Ophelia. First, as an unopened flower bud in peril of being unbuttoned before her time, and later, in her madness, as a rose of May. In both instances, Laertes objectifies Ophelia as a young, spring flower still innocent and pure. In Gertrude's retelling of the events that led to Ophelia's demise, flowers once again play a prevalent role in describing and objectifying Ophelia. Gertrude lyrically tells Laertes:

There is a willow grows askaunt the brook,  
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream,  
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples

(4.7.166-169)

The willow tree growing "askant a brook" conveys images of drooping branches, weeping tears of sadness and depression (4.7.166). The fact that the willow tree is askance of the brook shows that the sadness the tree represents is not in line with the brook, or "glassy stream" (4.7.167). Water is symbolic of cleansing and renewal, the fact that it was glassy means the renewing, baptizing water acted as a mirror, a reflection of the discordant sadness. Ophelia is sad at the loss of her father, who could be seen as the "hoary leaves" of grey and white, but also rejuvenated by her new-found agency and autonomy that her madness granted her (Bevington footnote 4.7.168).

The garlands Ophelia created were made of "crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples" (4.7.169). Crow flowers are also known as buttercups which are symbolic of humility, neatness, childishness and wealth, characteristics that Ophelia exhibited throughout the play. She was always humble and neat, and only acted childish when she began to go mad. She was wealthy in the sense that she had a family and Hamlet's love, albeit both only for a short while. The flowering nettles are sharp and stinging, representing her state of pain after the loss of Hamlet and her father. Nettles are the kindling used to start a fire, much in the same way Hamlet's abjuring of her and her father's death acted as the catalyst for Ophelia's transformation and rebirth as an autonomous woman with subjectivity. The daisies symbolize Ophelia's innocence and virginity; she was unmarred and virtuous to the end, despite Laertes's and Polonius's admonitions that they feared otherwise. Finally, the long purples are orchids which can be seen as sexual love (testicles) as well as signifying amorous love, beauty, refinement, many children, fertility, thoughtfulness and mature charm (Bevington footnotes 4.7.170-171).

The orchid is the last flower to be mentioned because it represents the last stage of Ophelia, her sexual awakening. The fact that Gertrude says this flower last, followed by the explanation -- "shepherds give [it] a grosser name,/ But our cull-cold maid's do dead men's fingers call them" -

- portrays Gertrude's apprehension about including such an amorous and sexually associated flower with the virtuous and chaste Ophelia (4.7.107-171). She explains that the chaste or "cull-cold maid[s]" call it "dead men's fingers" as a way of distancing herself, Ophelia, and the maids from all things sexual, even flowers. Dead men's fingers is something unnatural and scary, which is how females in this society were expected to view sex; as something dirty, unnatural, and feared. Even in death Ophelia continues to be objectified. Her patriarchal society places their dictates of social norms upon her, denying the symbols of her sexual awakening as downplayed and besmirched of all meaning.

Gertrude continues her account of Ophelia's death by explaining the young maid fell into the brook as she tried to hang her garlands and that "mermaid-like, awhile [her clothes] bore her up,/ Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes" (4.7.176-177). By comparing her to a mermaid, Gertrude objectifies Ophelia as a supernatural creature of folklore. Mermaids are known to be beautiful, but water-bound. Gertrude's analogy projects an image of an otherworldly figure, and perhaps that is how Gertrude saw Ophelia. Ophelia's actions as a mad woman (hair loose and unkempt, wearing a loose-fitting nightgown in public, speaking and acting of her own accord) would surely have scared someone like Gertrude, which may explain the monarch's patronizing explanation of Ophelia's state of mind:

As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element. But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death.

(4.7.178-183)

According to Gertrude, Ophelia was a “poor wretch” totally “incapable of her own distress,” that somehow Ophelia lacked the wherewithal to comprehend her precarious state (4.7.183,178). This summation on the part of Gertrude serves to further alienate Ophelia as an object, an abomination, marginalized, and dismissed as a creature of little consequence.

In this scene of objectification and revelation, both Gertrude and Laertes refer to Ophelia as “drown’d” thrice. Three in Judeo-Christian ideology references the trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. In this context, it appears Shakespeare was employing the use of three to associate it with Peter who thrice denied Christ even as the rooster crowed three times. Laertes acts as Peter, denying what he knows to be true, that Ophelia has indeed died. Gertrude acts as the rooster crowing the truth three times: first, to say that she is drowned, then as her lyrical description of the event leading to Ophelia’s demise, and finally, to answer Laertes’s disbelief of “Alas, then she is drown’d” with her own parroting “Drown’d, drown’d” (4.7.183-184).

Laertes ends this scene with a fitting tribute to Ophelia. He tells Gertrude he will “forbid my tears” in honor of Ophelia who has “too much of water” about her already (4.7.186,185). Yet, even Laertes cannot maintain this façade as he admits “Nature her custom holds” and he cannot stop the tears from flowing, but vows once his tears have run their course the “woman will be out” (4.7.187,189). In other words, Laertes will cry for his sister’s untimely death, but like his weeping, once he is done he will throw off his womanly behavior and once more behave as a man. Laertes associates his emotions of grieving for his sister as womanly, objectifying even his feelings for Ophelia as a temporary state.

The final scene between Laertes and Ophelia occurs at the graveyard during Ophelia’s funeral procession. Thrice Laertes questions the priest with “What ceremony else?” or what

“more [to] be done?” (5.1.209,211,221). Laertes is concerned with Ophelia’s soul, as the last remaining male in the household it falls upon him to procure proper ascension into heaven for his too-soon-dead younger sister. When the priest informs Laertes for the last time that nothing else can be done for Ophelia, Laertes instructs the grave diggers to “Lay her i' the earth” and informs all in attendance that “from her fair and unpolluted flesh/ May violets spring!” (5.1.224-226). Laertes has idealized Ophelia as beautiful (fair) and virtuous (unpolluted flesh), worthy of being the foundation upon which “May violets spring!” (5.1.226). The “May” could denote the verb permission or allowance as in let violets spring from her deathbed grave. It could be the springtime month of May that Laertes referred to Ophelia as the “rose of May” in ACT 4, scene 5, line 157. Either way, Laertes’s statement conjures up his previous discussions with and about Ophelia since he once again uses flower imagery to objectify and reference her. Laertes chooses violets as a metaphor for Ophelia for two reasons: her humility and her faithfulness (Bevington footnote 4.5.188).

Violets, as symbols of humility and faithfulness, were readily employed in Christian art of the Virgin Mary. Saint Bernard, who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, described Mary as "the violet of humility, the lily of chastity, the rose of charity" which explains why “these attributes are often depicted in scenes from the life of the Virgin” (Meagher). In many Renaissance paintings, the Virgin Mary is seen holding the baby Jesus with violets somewhere in the artwork to symbolize her humility and faithfulness, as well as allude to Jesus’s death. This can be seen in Leonardo da Vinci’s "Madonna Benois," where Mary and the baby Jesus hold the same two violets in their right hands. In “Madonna of Humility” by Giovanni Paolo, one can see tiny violets in the foreground.

It is appropriate that Laertes would idealize Ophelia as a violet since she embraced the flower's symbolism. The violets that he implores will grow from her deathbed act as monikers to Ophelia's faithfulness and humility, reminders of the sweet maid gone too soon. Laertes continues with his idealization of Ophelia as he tells the "churlish priest,/ A ministering angel shall my sister be,/ When thou liest howling" (5.1.226-228). He contrasts Ophelia's angel-like pureness to that of the "churlish priest" who is more of a "howling" animal. This contrasting imagery is meant to extol Ophelia's affinity to divinity as she is revered as far more important as even that of a priest, who is a man of God. Laertes infers Ophelia surpasses the priest in importance because of her angel-like purity and goodness, her divine humility.

Laertes, in his grief, asks the grave diggers to stop their motions, to "Hold off the earth awhile,/ Till I have caught her once more in mine arms" (5.1.235-236). Laertes is enacting motions that seem superfluous and insincere given his earlier reactions to her mad scene and news of her death. Laertes has venerated Ophelia in her death, placing her on a pedestal as a virginal goddess: innocent, humble, and virtuous. The lamentations of Laertes followed by his jumping in her grave are not actions for Ophelia but rather actions meant to reflect back onto the subject of the action, Laertes. Ophelia's death is making *him* depressed and irrational, the injustice created by Ophelia's untimely passing are manifesting themselves in Laertes's grief.

Everything said and done is not about Ophelia the person, but rather Ophelia as the image of lost innocence. In this final scene of Ophelia, she is the exemplar of the ideal woman: chaste, silent, obedient. In death, Ophelia has fulfilled the obligations of her sex; she remained a virgin, she is silent in her grave, and she obediently lies on her deathbed as the adults around her bemoan and objectify her death. Her brother's final words to her are not about her, but about himself.

After jumping in her grave, Laertes informs the grave diggers to “pile your dust upon the quick and dead,/ Till of this flat a mountain you have made” to rival the mountains of northeastern Greece (5.1.237-238). Laertes’s final, departing words to the younger sister for whom he enacted his father-figure role are not words reflecting Ophelia the person or even Ophelia the object. His last words are to the people present at the funeral. He states that he wants to be buried with Ophelia in a mound of dirt that shall surpass the height of the northeastern Greek mountains. What is Laertes trying to achieve by jumping in Ophelia’s grave? How does this action affect her or improve her state? The act and desire do not match Laertes’s previous self, but they do explain his thought process. By outwardly exhibiting his grief, Laertes is playing the role of saddened brother (which he is) who, in his distraught state, wants justice for Ophelia’s death (i.e. seek revenge upon Hamlet). By objectifying Ophelia in this way, Laertes has used her to drive his own political ends: to engage Hamlet in a duel to kill him for King Claudius and to revenge his slain father, Polonius, whom Hamlet murdered.

Laertes, for all his protestations and warnings, could not protect nor save Ophelia. He, like his father and Prince, objectifies Ophelia to fulfill his own personal agendas and desires. Laertes needlessly warns and advises his sister in the ways to maintain her honor and good reputation, yet when she needed him most, he refuses to address, much less help, her. He chooses instead to project her downward spiral onto himself and make her descent into madness all about him. Even in death, Laertes cannot allow the moment to be about Ophelia. He dives into her grave, removing the attention from her onto himself. He laments to God his state of woes, not hers. When Hamlet shows up and calls Laertes’s bluff, publicly chastising Laertes’s false and superfluous actions as insincere, Laertes engages Hamlet. Although it is Ophelia’s funeral and the moment should be about her, she is once again silenced, objectified, and marginalized.



Ophelia and Laertes may be siblings, but Laertes treats her like his mock-daughter to practice his patriarchal control. Despite what actions dictate their lives before, in the moments before their deaths, Laertes and Ophelia are able to exhibit agency and end their lives on their terms.

## Chapter 2: Polonius's Obedient Pawn

In much the same way Laertes objectifies Ophelia to fulfill his own needs, mainly those of an overbearing brother acting out his future fatherly duties upon his obedient younger sister, so does Polonius as Ophelia's father treat her as a pawn in his game of intrigue and machination. As the King's councilor, it is Polonius's job and responsibility to provide advice to the King in matters of state. Polonius functions within the same guise as other manipulative political men of Shakespeare's plays, mainly Gaius Cassius Longinus from *Julius Caesar* and Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester, from *Henry IV, part 1*. These great political conspirators schemed, plotted, and maneuvered their way to the top, each willing to withhold or conjecture information to secure their agendas. Most alarming is their ability to sacrifice someone close to them in order to bring their contrivances to fruition. Cassius was willing to not only sacrifice his emperor Julius Caesar, but his good friend Brutus, in order to rule a part of the Roman Empire. Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester, withheld information from his nephew Hotspur in an attempt to protect his own livelihood knowing that King Henry's offer of truce would protect his nephew's life, but surely forfeit his own. Polonius, acting in the same self-absorbed manner, is willing to sacrifice his daughter Ophelia to procure and sustain his own political agenda, regardless of Ophelia's feelings or desires. Polonius is a "hypocrite, a busybody, and a fool" for whom Ophelia's rewards are "humiliation, madness, and death" (Hamilton 80).

Polonius's first words to Ophelia are a command for her to disclose what transpired between her and Laertes. Polonius demands "What is't, Ophelia, he hath said to you?" (1.3.88). Polonius wants to know what Laertes said to Ophelia, not the other way around for Polonius knows Ophelia is an obedient daughter who speaks only when spoken to. What is important is

what his son said, what she said is of little to no consequence. This first attempt at dialogue speaks volumes about Polonius and his relationship to Ophelia. It is a one-sided relationship of Polonius placing his views, demands, and edicts on her. Ophelia is the recipient of his patriarchal ruling. Their relationship is made of one way communication arrows traveling from sovereign (Polonius) to object (Ophelia); never do the arrows run in both directions.

Ophelia, in keeping with her role as dutiful daughter, answers that she and Laertes were discussing “something touching the Lord Hamlet” (1.3.89). It is important to note that this is the only time that Ophelia refers to her father without the title or invocation of my lord. The reason she omits it in this address is because she has supplanted Hamlet as her lord in this sentence; Hamlet deserves the title of her attention and respect for he is, at this point in the play, of higher rank and importance than her father.

Polonius continues his discourse with Ophelia by admitting he has heard of late that Hamlet and Ophelia have been spending quite a lot of time together lately. “’Tis told me” is Polonius’s way of saying his daughter’s actions have been relayed to him, that although he may not be around physically, he always has eyes on his daughter (1.3.91). It is a subtle exertion of his power over Ophelia that she is always being watched as he relates once more that “’tis put on me” meaning he has people relaying Ophelia’s actions to him (1.3.94). Polonius continues by stating the “private time” Hamlet has afforded Ophelia has been reciprocated by her in a “most free and bounteous” manner (1.3.92-93). After establishing his knowledge of their relationship, Polonius informs Ophelia that “You do not understand yourself so clearly/ As it behooves my daughter and your honor” (1.3.96-97). Like Laertes’s earlier admonition that Ophelia lacks the mental capacity to comprehend Hamlet’s machinations, Polonius believes his daughter is too naïve and gullible to understand what has transpired between her and Hamlet, that she cannot

possibly understand the Prince's true motives. Polonius makes a declarative statement in his phrase "my daughter." This is an act of dominion and control. "My" denotes a relationship of affinity or ownership, in Ophelia's case she is both. She is related to him as his daughter, but she is also subject to his rule as his daughter. The "my daughter" phrase is used to remind Ophelia that she is his property and object of dominion (1.3.97). As such, her thoughts and actions are not her own; she does not have agency and subjectivity. This is reinforced when he says "your honor" (1.3.97). He may be responsible for what she says and does publically, but her virtue is solely her own. A woman's virginity was her one and only tradable value, her only commodity, and to lose it was to lose her trading power, her marriageability, and her chance at a respectable life. For Polonius to state "your honor" he is firmly placing the responsibility on Ophelia's shoulders while simultaneously reminding Ophelia that she is Polonius's object and is expected to behave as such.

Ophelia tries to explain to her father that Hamlet's intentions are pure, driven by love and not lust. She confesses "[Hamlet] hath, my lord, of late made many tenders/ Of his affection to me" (1.3.99-100). Polonius's reaction to his daughter's honest answer demeans and objectifies Ophelia as an insipid creature wholly incapable of seeing through Hamlet's obvious false entreaties to entrap Ophelia. Polonius responds "Affection, puh! You speak like a green girl,/ Unsifted in such perilous circumstance" (1.3.101-102). He belittles Ophelia for her naivety and gullibility, and yet, that is proof of her innocence and purity that she takes Hamlet's affections at face value. She has not been jaded by the false promises of previous lovers. Polonius is very contradictory in wanting to keep Ophelia an object of purity and innocence and yet beleaguer her for lacking the experience to know better than to believe Hamlet's sweet tenders.

Polonius further objectifies Ophelia when he places her in a very precarious position of answering a question that she knows not how to answer, other than truthfully. Polonius asks her “Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?” to which she replies “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (1.3.104). Ophelia is conditioned to a state of subjugation and objectification that when asked what she thinks, she does not know what to say. She is used to being controlled and told what to do, what to say, what to think, so for her to try and formulate her own thoughts on Hamlet’s sincerity she cannot as she lacks the agency and experience to do so. Also, if she answers that she does believe Hamlet’s sincerity, Polonius may further belittle her as an insipid creature incapable of seeing through Hamlet’s guise. If she answers that she does not believe Hamlet’s love for her, she looks like an even bigger fool for remaining with a man whom she knows does not love her. Ophelia’s options are limited and neither one constitutes a positive outcome, so her best defense against further chastisement and ridicule is to claim ignorance. For Ophelia, it is better to portray that state of being most readily associated with females of her time period: chaste, silent, obedient.

Edification is an integral aspect of a father’s duties which explains Polonius’s diatribe against Ophelia and her sex. In response to Ophelia’s confession that she knows not what to think, Polonius condescendingly states “I’ll teach you: think yourself a baby” (1.3.105). Ophelia is a young woman of marriageable age, and yet, Polonius remarks that he must educate Ophelia as one does a child. The implication attacks Ophelia’s mentality and ability to comprehend what Polonius is trying to explain. This is further complicated as Polonius continues with his education of Ophelia:

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,  
[Wringing] it thus) you'll tender me a fool.

(1.3.106-109)

Polonius employs a pun here by utilizing the word tender. In the sense Ophelia used it, tender refers to affectionate emotion and actions, such as letters and recitation of heartfelt feelings. Polonius, in a gross and crude manner, uses tender to refer to legal tender, as in financial payment, and as the verb to offer or give. The first phrase “tenders for true pay,/ Which are not sterling” creates the imagery of a quid pro quo trade between Ophelia and Hamlet. Polonius insinuates that Ophelia, in being young, naïve, and gullible, will trade her virtue in exchange for Hamlet’s sweet words which will eventually tender or give up Polonius as a fool; in other words, Polonius will be offered up as a fool for allowing his daughter to be ruined by Hamlet and made a grandfather to a bastard grandchild. In his *Shakespeare’s Letters*, Alan Stewart argues that Polonius “contemptuously mocks her use of ‘tenders’, recasting Hamlet’s tender affections as counterfeit coins and suggesting that she needs to force a harder bargain” (232). Stewart’s summation is that Polonius is not preaching Ophelia’s inability to protect her virtue, rather her inability to raise her value as a viable chaste female. Even though Polonius is speaking to Ophelia, the way in which he treats her (naïve child incapable of understanding Hamlet’s insincere affections) exemplifies his objectification of her. He does not see nor treat her as a person, instead she is his object to control and manipulate as he pleases.

Whereas Laertes employed flower imagery to commodify and objectify Ophelia, Polonius instead uses birds, specifically woodcocks. In response to Ophelia’s plea that Hamlet’s entreaties were like “the holy vows of heaven,” Polonius compares Hamlet’s words to “springes” meant to “catch woodcocks” i.e. to ensnare his daughter (1.3.114-115). Laertes and Polonius

choose to use nature imagery in describing Ophelia because as a female she is most readily associated with nature, housework, and child-rearing. Using flowers and birds, which are elements of the natural world, to minimize and belittle Ophelia are further examples of the objectifying and misogynistic nature of patriarchal societies that deem, and therefore treat, women as inferior and substandard.

This misogynistic tendency plays out as Polonius dictates Ophelia's future relationship with Hamlet. Polonius commands Ophelia to:

Be something scanter of your maiden presence,  
Set your entreatments at a higher rate  
Than a command to parle. For Lord Hamlet,  
Believe so much in him, that he is young,  
And with a larger teder may he walk  
Than may be given you.

(1.3.121-126)

Essentially, Polonius is ordering his daughter to refrain from meeting with or talking to Hamlet, to disengage herself from his attentions and affections. For a young girl in love with such a charismatic and enigmatic young man as Hamlet, it would be heart-break, nay soul-crushing, to surrender her feelings and attachments to appease her father, and yet Ophelia does it because it is her duty to obey her father's commands. Polonius's decree that she "set [her] entreatments at a higher rate" commodifies Ophelia as a tradable object, a thing to be sold to the highest bidder (1.3.122). This financial imagery is in contrast to Polonius's summation that unlike Ophelia, who is honor bound by her sex to adhere to the social dictates of behavior and expectation, Hamlet is blessed with a "larger teder" with which he may walk (1.3.125). Hamlet's tethered to the throne

and all its social binding, but unlike Ophelia who must remain chaste and virginal, Hamlet is given leeway to enjoy his sexual dalliances. Polonius acknowledges this double-standard that exists between males and females to explain to Ophelia that Hamlet's actions are not liable to the same social and moral ramifications that apply to her. As a female, she is the denoted steward of moral fortitude which is why he warns Ophelia "Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers,/. . .mere [implorators] of unholy suits,/. . .The better to [beguile]" (1.3.127,128,131). Polonius is didactic in his command that Ophelia not believe Hamlet's vows, claiming that Hamlet's vows are false and empty entreaties meant to manipulate Ophelia's feelings to garner her only physical value, her maidenhead. Polonius's imagery of "brokers" denotes financiers who trade goods for services, the "unholy suits" alluding to the Christian sin of engaging in premarital sex, and beguile refers to Hamlet's ability to exploit Ophelia's innocence and trusting nature. In this context, Polonius is comparing Ophelia's virginity to an item being bought by Hamlet's affections and promises of love.

Polonius ends this edification session, the second for Ophelia as she previously endured her brother's moral subscription tirade, by commanding Ophelia to not "give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet./ Look to't, I charge you. Come your ways" to which his dutiful daughter responds "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.135-136). Polonius's command conveys a feeling of a master commanding his dog, chastising the animal even as he instructs it what to do. His "come your ways" paints the image of a dog running after its owner with its tail between its legs. Ophelia's acquiescence is in keeping with her duty as an obedient daughter. She tried to explain that she thought Hamlet's words were sincere, but Polonius was hearing none of it. Understanding her place within the social order of life at Elsinore Castle, Ophelia abandons her own wants and maintains the tenet of obedient daughter.



Despite their protestations otherwise, Ophelia is obedient, chaste, and silent. She refers to her father as lord, listens and answers him when questioned, and agrees to follow his edicts concerning her love, Prince Hamlet. Nothing in her demeanor or actions have warranted the over-bearing suspicions and verbal abuse by her father and brother, but because she is a young female, and not a male, her male sovereigns make it their mission to assault her with moral instruction.

Polonius's instructions are followed, to the detriment of Ophelia and Hamlet. In ACT 2, scene 1, Ophelia seeks her father out to inform him of her upsetting encounter with Prince Hamlet. She relates how Hamlet showed up in her closet as she was sewing and he looked all disheveled and strange. Upon hearing more of what transpired in detail, he tells Ophelia that they should seek out the king. Polonius wants to use the information to further advance his station with the king, despite the cost to Ophelia. Polonius begins to tell her how Hamlet's actions are the "very ecstasy of love" how these "passions...afflict our natures" and then he abruptly stops by stating "I am sorry-/ What, have you given him any hard words of late?" (2.1.99,102-104). Polonius forgets himself and to whom he was speaking. He relays his thoughts to Ophelia in a manner that does not treat her as an object or subservient creature; he freely speaks his thoughts as one does to an equal, which is why, when he realizes to whom he is speaking his thoughts, he states that he is sorry. His apology works twofold: one, to excuse his lapse in behavior for discussing such a delicate matter as passions with his daughter who, for all intents and purposes, cannot possibly comprehend the nuance of such a subject; and two, to act as a marker to bring himself to the present, that the conversation with Ophelia needs to get back on track to Hamlet and maintaining the king's favor. His "What" of line 104 most likely denotes a tone of accusation and anger. This is evidenced by the switch in topics from line 103, and the caesura

between “What,” and “have you given him any hard words of late?” (2.1.104). The comma between ‘What’ and the rest of the sentence creates a caesura or pause that highlights the power of ‘what’. A caesura at the beginning of a sentence or thought, or in this case an interrupted thought, serves to emphasize the word preceding the pause to punctuate the word and its meaning. Hence, the use of what is used negatively and aggressively. The accusation of “what have you done?” rather than the less aggressive “what transpired between you two?” creates a mood ripe with truculence. This explains Ophelia’s adamant “No, my good lord, but as you did command/ I did repel his letters, and denied/ His access to me” (2.1.105-107). Ophelia’s use of “good lord” serves to remind Polonius of *her* status as the good daughter, the one who obediently followed her father’s command.

The irony of this scene is that Polonius realizes the fault of his earlier summation about Hamlet’s behavior towards Ophelia. He admits that he is sorry he had not witnessed Hamlet himself, that he “fear’d [Hamlet] did but trifle/ And meant to wrack” Ophelia’s virtue, and that he wishes he could have a plague take away his suspicious mind (2.1.109-110). What seems to be an admission of guilt and remorse is really Polonius’s manipulation seeming repentant but really maintaining control. At first it appears Polonius is sorry for having doubted Ophelia’s word that Hamlet really did truly love her, but what Polonius says is “I am sorry that with better heed and judgment/ I had not coted him” (2.1.108-109). Removing the prepositional phrase “with better heed and judgment” the intent of the sentence is clear: Polonius is sorry he had not witnessed for himself Hamlet in action. He regrets having relied on Ophelia’s account of her interactions with Hamlet. Polonius does not feel remorse for disbelieving his daughter nor for commanding her to break all ties with the prince; what Polonius is expressing remorse about is not being in charge and witnessing Hamlet with his own eyes. Polonius chastises himself for

lacking better judgment in having his information solely given by his daughter, a female for whom he has already postulated was like a baby.

The driving force of the actions towards and regard of Ophelia is the men's inability to see her as anything more than an *object* to be protected and sold off to the highest bidder. Prince Hamlet is a man of incredibly higher rank than herself, a monarch who, in keeping with patriarchal tradition, would be granted leniency and access to his sexual dalliances with the local female populace. Laertes and Polonius cannot fathom the possibility that a man of Hamlet's station would actually love the *person* Ophelia as opposed to the *sexual object* Ophelia. In the midst of ACT 2, scene 2, Polonius admits to King Claudius and Queen Gertrude that he had previously admonished Ophelia, telling her "Lord Hamlet is a prince, out of thy star;/ This [relationship] must not be:" (2.2.141-142). By his own confession, Polonius admits that he thinks Hamlet is too good for Ophelia; that she is not of his caliber, rank, or spherical station. The classist notion that Ophelia is out of her league with Hamlet is condemning enough, but their misogynistic incredulity has blocked them from even entertaining the notion that Ophelia could attract and keep a man like Hamlet without forfeiting her virtue. The larger issue at play here is that Laertes and Polonius have deemed Ophelia not worthy of a man such as Hamlet. It would explain the contradictory reaction Polonius exhibits when realizing his daughter is the cause of Hamlet's madness.

Polonius runs to King Claudius and Queen Gertrude intent on sharing his news about Hamlet and Ophelia. After a long-winded and ironic postulation about the importance of brevity, Polonius intimates to the reigning monarchs that his daughter is the cause of Hamlet's morose state. He tells them, "I have a daughter- have while she is mine-Who, in her duty and obedience, mark,/ Hath given me this" letter from Hamlet (2.2.106-108). There is no need for Polonius to

inform the King and Queen that he has a daughter or that she is his until she marries and becomes a wife. The monarchs know Ophelia and Polonius, there is no warrant for him to state twice that Ophelia is his. Polonius does this to remind Hamlet's parents that he controls and commands Ophelia, that he is in charge of her and therefore can manipulate the situation with Hamlet. He reinforces this idea of dominion and control by stating Ophelia gave him the letter from Hamlet in accordance with her "duty and obedience" (2.2.108). Polonius's postulating is unnecessary and tiresome, but it exemplifies his nature as a man who is willing to exploit his daughter and her feelings to secure his own political agenda.

Polonius further objectifies and marginalizes Ophelia as he reads Hamlet's letter to the King and Queen. Letters by their definition are personal conversations between people, forms of communicating intimacies without judgment from the public. For Polonius to read Hamlet's letter to Ophelia is embarrassing and disgraceful enough, but to publicly critique Hamlet's poetry and the feelings contained within is reprehensible and completely unforgivable. Polonius critiques Hamlet's words as he reads "'the most beautified Ophelia' -/ That's an ill phrase, a vile phrase, 'beautified' is a vile/ phrase" (2.2.109-111). Three times Polonius mocks Hamlet's choice of "beautified" as being a vile or ill phrase. Ophelia has to stand there listening to her father's disparaging remarks about the effusion of words Hamlet has conveyed to her. These are not just words, they represent the thoughts and feelings of the man she loves, and yet, her father is denigrating those words and thus the feelings associated as being inferior and somehow vile.

One would think that a father who goes to such lengths to protect his daughter's reputation and virtue would blanche at the prospect of such a public display of intimate correspondence, but Polonius sees nothing wrong in his actions. Why would he? He does not perceive Ophelia as an individual with thoughts, feelings, and desires all her own. He views her

as his commodity to maneuver at his will. He has made it public knowledge that she is his daughter, subject to his rule. Reading and critiquing Hamlet's letter is of no consequence to him because Ophelia's feelings are of no consequence to him. This scene is aptly portrayed in cinematic director Michael Almereyda's 2000 adaptation of *Hamlet* starring Ethan Hawke in the title role and teen star Julia Stiles as his Ophelia. Almereyda depicted Ophelia's degraded state in this scene by having Stiles convey the utter horror at her public violation through her downcast eyes that open in distressed humiliation, her incessant hand motions that range from rubbing her forehead to crossing her arms, and finally, her daydream of escaping her pain by jumping in the pool. The scene acts as a precursor of Ophelia's future death as Stiles imagines drowning her embarrassment and cleansing herself of the violation. Almereyda's depiction is in keeping with the emotional wrenching of the moment. Ophelia has had her private love letters publically attacked and dismissed. Her privacy, relationship, feelings, and humanity have been violated, yet no one cares. Least of all her father Polonius. No matter what he says and does to her, Ophelia will be duty bound to him to be chaste, silent, and obedient.

Polonius ends the reading of the letter by stating "This, in obedience, hath my daughter shown me" (2.2.125). Twice he articulates the fact that Ophelia is obedient to him. This is an obvious ploy by Polonius to exert and establish his control over his daughter and demonstrate to the monarchs his importance and influence in regards to Hamlet. Ophelia is being established as the bait upon which the monarchs and Polonius may entrap Hamlet. To further exemplify his control over Ophelia and illustrate how she, at his command, played an integral part in the causation of Hamlet's madness, Polonius recounts to King Claudius and Queen Gertrude his dictates to Ophelia:

That she should lock herself from [his] resort,  
Admit no messengers, receive no tokens.  
Which done, she took the fruits of my advice;  
And he, repell'd, a short tale to make,  
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast,  
Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,  
Thence to [a] lightness, and by this declension,  
Into the madness wherein now he raves,  
And all we mourn for.

(2.2.143-151)

Polonius instructed Ophelia to follow his three edict plan: lock yourself away from Hamlet's attentions, receive no messengers, and deny Hamlet's presents. Polonius has secluded Ophelia even more than she was before. Unlike Hamlet who has Horatio as a confidante and Polonius who has King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to share his schemes, Ophelia is without a friend to share her thoughts and ideas. Hamlet was her love, but Polonius put a stop to that. Laertes may have shared some friendly banter with her, but he is away at college and the audience is left without any textual evidence to conjecture whether or not the two shared a friendship other than the relationship seen in ACT 1 scene 3 of Laertes acting out his future fatherly duties upon Ophelia as his mock-daughter. Alienated from any social associations that act as a filter for one's feelings and thoughts, Ophelia is literally at the hands of others who dictate what she says and does.

Political posturing is an art for Polonius that he takes to new heights when he plots with the monarchs to eavesdrop on an upcoming conversation between Hamlet and Ophelia. Polonius

happily states that he will “loose my daughter to [Hamlet]” (2.2.162). In this context, he could be meaning he will untether Ophelia and allow her to speak and act freely with Hamlet as a ruse to gage Hamlet’s true feelings and demeanor. It could be a continuation of the master-dog imagery created earlier when Polonius commanded Ophelia to come along in ACT 1, scene 3. This second meaning most aptly alludes to Shakespeare’s other famous tragedy, *Julius Caesar*, when Marc Anthony so famously decried “Cry ‘Havoc,’ and let slip the dogs of war” of ACT 3, scene 1, line 273. Slip and loose share the same grammatical function. When combined with Polonius’s earlier treatment of Ophelia as a dog, the imagery is obvious and profound: Ophelia is the tool needed to ensnare Hamlet.

Despite Polonius’s statement that he will “loose my daughter to [Hamlet],” the father opts to perform the role of director and playwright in contriving to discover Hamlet’s true state of mind (2.2.162). Polonius instructs Ophelia to walk to a certain spot and to “Read on this book,/ That show of such an exercise may color/ Your [loneliness]” (3.1.43-45). His directive is like a puppet master pulling the strings of his marionette; stand here, do this, say that. Ophelia is very much under her father’s control and socially incapable of behaving other than how he dictates. Her father’s command to read a book to look like she is passing away her lonely time by reading is dismissive of the very real fact that she is lonely, that she is suffering from sadness, that she is a real person with real feelings and thoughts. Ophelia protested, in as much as her female station would allow, that Hamlet’s affections were honest and sincere, but Polonius would hear none of it. She was forced, as an honor bound daughter, to fulfill her father’s commands to sever all ties with Hamlet. She sacrificed her own love and happiness to appease her patriarchal father who could not and would not condescend to give her the same degree of respect and acquiescence. Ophelia had to give up everything: Hamlet’s letters, affection, even his love to execute her

father's edict. Even in this most tender of intimate moments, Ophelia is not alone with Hamlet; she is denied even this small moment of independence for the King and her father are watching.

Polonius's final words to his daughter, his political pawn, his objectified commodity, are to pose a question that he does not allow her to answer. After Hamlet has expelled his tirade of words at Ophelia, Polonius admits to the King that the source of Hamlet's grief is neglected love to which Ophelia comes forth and Polonius asks her "How now, Ophelia?" yet he does not wait for her to answer (3.2.177). Instead, he subverts her thoughts by telling her "You need not tell us what Lord Hamlet said, / We heard it all" (3.2.178-179). Demeaning, belittling, and marginalizing, Polonius has cut his daughter down to nothing. She is forced to stand dumbfounded before her father and the King as they discuss her lost love like it were a match to be bet on, a game to be wagered. Ophelia has lost the only person for whom she had any semblance of an equal relationship. Her father treats her as a pawn to be maneuvered about in his political game, and her brother projects his patriarchal misogyny upon her as his mock-daughter for whom he finds it paramount to press the fears of losing one's virginity. Other than these two over-bearing males, Ophelia has no friends, sisters, or confidants to whom she may confide, express herself, and share her thoughts and feelings. Ophelia is secluded and cut off from the world; her one beacon of light was having Hamlet and that has been taken from her.



### Chapter 3: Hamlet's Ophelia

The first interchange between Hamlet and Ophelia occurs off-stage and is retold by Ophelia to her father, Polonius. Ophelia recounts how Hamlet came to her as she “was sewing in my closet” (2.1.73). Disheveled and unkempt, Hamlet’s actions and attire are wholly out of character and warrant Ophelia to tell her father that Hamlet looked as if “he had been loosed out of hell” (2.1.80). Although Hamlet reportedly says nothing verbally to Ophelia, he does speak by way of action and body language. The fact that Hamlet came to Ophelia’s closet as she was sewing shows his intimate knowledge of her chamber and her habits. He went to her room because he knew where it was; he has obviously been there before. Also, he went while she was sewing. This relates an intimate knowledge of Ophelia’s daily routine. Hamlet went to seek Ophelia out in a place he was familiar with and knew she would be. His actions highlight a relationship with Ophelia that is open and honest; one does not casually go where one does not feel comfortable or has not been before. According to Ophelia, Hamlet grabbed her arm, thrice waved his head up and down, and sighed so profoundly that she felt it would “shatter all his bulk” (2.1.92). In the entirety of this moment, as Hamlet reaches out to her with his being and not his mind, Ophelia says nothing. She is not trying to speak to him, to comfort him, to do anything for or to him. Hamlet, unable to verbally express his thoughts, tries to reach out to Ophelia through his gestures and actions, but she cannot comprehend his purpose, and so he leaves her. Hamlet walks away from Ophelia with his eyes “to the last bended their light on me” (2.1.97). Even when leaving her, Hamlet communicates with his eyes to send Ophelia a message, a message that she cannot understand because she lacks subjectivity. Hamlet tries to connect

with Ophelia but she is conditioned to not speak unless spoken to, to not act unless instructed to do so.

Despite Jacques Lacan's belief that "Ophelia is after this episode completely null and dissolved as a love object," Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia here is one of sincerity and honesty (21). He has just come from seeing his father's ghost, told his uncle murdered his father. He has come before her in his most emotionally naked and vulnerable state, he has implored her with his eyes which many believe to be the windows to the soul, and he has left her a cryptic message. It may be that Hamlet wanted Ophelia to have subjectivity in this scene, that he was willing her to speak first and act of her own volition, but she was not yet ready. Ophelia, despite her love for Hamlet and purity of heart, is incapable of seeing Hamlet's intentions. She has no experience in this matter, does not know what to believe or understand. She has been objectified for so long that she lacks the agency to rise to Hamlet's level. It explains why his letter to her is misunderstood.

In his love letter to Ophelia, that Polonius so callously reads aloud and criticizes, Hamlet tries to secretly inform Ophelia of his true feelings and intentions. In his letter, Hamlet tells Ophelia:

'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)

Three times Hamlet tells Ophelia to doubt the natural world of fire, sun, and truth, but to never doubt his love for her. Given Hamlet's rising paranoia and uncertainty about his course of action,

it was with foresight that Hamlet sought out Ophelia and tried to warn her. Stars are symbolic of light and guidance, specifically for the navigation of sailors. The sun is seen as both a source of light and marker of time as the sun rises to bring forth a new day. Truth is seen as the light that gives meaning to people, things, and ideas. This is seen in most university insignias that use a flame, candle or torch to represent light as a signifier of truth and knowledge. In this context, Hamlet is warning Ophelia that the truth of his words and actions may be hidden from her, but to never doubt his love for her. Unfortunately for Ophelia, she does lose faith in Hamlet's love. This is mainly due to her conditioned state of subservience; she lacks the agency to act, think, and speak of her own volition.

Between this first scene all the way to his last scene with Ophelia in the grave, Hamlet truncates between the archetypal Petrarchan lover who objectifies his love as a woman on a pedestal to be adored, but never attained, to an Ovidian lover who sexually objectifies his woman for his own misogynistic gains. Only the first and last scenes between Hamlet and Ophelia are reflective of Hamlet's true feelings for her. All those in between are an act meant to entrap his uncle and uncover the murderous plot of his slain father.

The beginning and end of Hamlet's letter are in keeping with the Petrarchan ideal, a lover who objectifies his female love interest as being perfect, worthy of a pedestal, and wholly unattainable. Hamlet treats Ophelia as a Petrarchan lover would by referring to her as a "celestial" being, his "soul's idol," a "most beautified Ophelia" (2.2110). In short order, Hamlet has called Ophelia an angel, an idol to be worshipped, and either a *beautiful* person or a person worthy of being *beatified*. In Roman Catholic tradition, the Pope may beatify a deceased person whose holy works on earth are worthy of canonization (sainthood). To be beatified is to be declared a "Servant of God whose virtues to a heroic degree, or Martyrdom, have been duly

recognized” and declared worthy of public veneration (Martins). For Hamlet to associate Ophelia with a person of such high esteem that they are being considered for sainthood, is a bold and unattainable condition. Ophelia is a human being of human proportions, she is not a female of miraculous works who is dead and being considered for canonization.

Hamlet ends his letter with a double statement of protestation of worth that demeans his intent. Hamlet writes “I love thee best, O most best, believe it” (2.2.121-122). It is over-the-top and superfluous, as he states “o most best.” If someone or something is the best there is no upper level or higher regard, the best denotes the ultimate in that category; nothing above it. To phrase Ophelia as the ‘most best’ quite cancels out the meaning of each as being insignificant. “Believe it” then becomes an empty entreaty, a false employ to gain attention and recognition. All in all, Hamlet’s opening and closing are weak and insincere Petrarchan attempts to portray himself as a lovesick lover who has objectified Ophelia as an angel worthy of worship. This is all in keeping with Hamlet’s ploy to entrap his uncle, but it works in filling Ophelia with doubt.

Hamlet turns from a Petrarchan lover to an Ovidian one in his next scene with Polonius, as he objectifies Ophelia as nothing more than a sexual being. Hamlet muses “For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion- Have you a daughter?” (2.2.181-182). Hamlet is discussing how the sun affords flies the opportunity to lay eggs that later become maggots in the flesh of a dead animal and somehow that makes him think of Ophelia. In associating Ophelia with death wrought with flesh-eating maggots, Hamlet is designating Ophelia as a fleshy being either bent on destruction or a sexually insatiable being that will consume his flesh. Either way, she is seen as a destructive thing rather than a human being.

Hamlet continues his assault on Ophelia for Polonius’s sake, as he says “Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend, look to’t”

(2.2.184-185). Again, the sun represents light or knowledge as well as a bringer of growth. In this sense, the sun can create understanding for Ophelia as in knowledge of concepts or, in the bawdy sense, Ophelia will know and grow about sexual things and make Polonius the grandfather of a bastard child. Given Hamlet's earlier cryptic poem to Ophelia to doubt all else but his love for her, this scene plays out his idea of wanting to spare and protect Ophelia. By keeping Ophelia out of the sun, he is saying to keep her in the dark or ignorant of the nefarious goings-on occurring at Elsinore Castle. Hamlet could be trying to spare Ophelia from the quagmire he finds himself now that he knows the truth about his uncle. The full weight of knowledge is debilitating for Hamlet, thus it is understandable that he would want to protect Ophelia from the corruptness taking place around him. Hamlet ends his exchange with Polonius by stating "You cannot take from me any thing that I will not more willingly part withal" which could be Hamlet's way of asserting his power over Polonius, by stating Hamlet *willingly* gave up Ophelia, he did not give her up because Polonius forced her to do it (2.2.212-213).

When next Hamlet and Polonius meet, Hamlet again provides a hidden message to Polonius about Ophelia in a way that makes Polonius believe Hamlet is viewing Ophelia as an object of his former love. Hamlet exclaims "O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what a treasure hadst thou!" (2.2.391). According to the Old Testament, Jephthah made a vow to God that if he should be victorious against the Ammonites and free the people of Israel, "Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (*King James Bible*, Judges 11:31). Upon returning, Jephthah's daughter was the first outside to meet him and thus he was forced to sacrifice his daughter in accordance with his vow. Jephthah's daughter dutifully sacrificed her life for her father and God, a comparison that Hamlet makes to

warn Polonius that his machinations will only hurt Ophelia as he, the King's advisor, tries to manipulate his way to the top. Hamlet's warning is not taken by Polonius, and even Hamlet himself fails to see the irony in his last words to Polonius that "It came to pass, as most like it was" for Ophelia does lose her life, sacrificed in part by her father's schemes and Hamlet's plots (2.2.406).

The first onstage scene between Hamlet and Ophelia occurs right after Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy of ACT 3, scene 1. The scene begins innocently enough, but quickly degrades into chaos. Hamlet finishes his soliloquy and spots Ophelia to whom he addresses "Nymph, in thy orisons/ Be all my sins remember'd" (3.1.88-89). Hamlet approaches Ophelia as a Petrarchan lover, extolling Ophelia's larger-than-life ethereal qualities. He refers to her as a nymph. According to Greek mythology, nymphs were lesser deities known to be young, sensual females connected to their environments, such as woodland nymph, river nymph, and the like. He infers that she prays for him, specifically that she prays on his behalf as an act of intercession. Hamlet has placed Ophelia on a level of ethereal being with good intentions, perhaps one too good for him. Ophelia responds dutifully with "Good my lord" and after a quick pleasant exchange comes to the business side of their meeting, as arranged by Polonius (3.1.89). Ophelia tells Hamlet:

My lord, I have remembrances of yours,  
That I have longed long to redeliver.  
I pray you now receive them.

(3.1.92-94).

Ophelia is being the dutiful daughter by doing what her father commanded her to do: return the love letters Hamlet sent her. Ophelia is being respectful by addressing Hamlet as lord and

requesting that he take the letters back. Hamlet replies by denying he ever gave her letters, laughs at her, and then asks “are you honest?” (3.1.102).

Honest has double meaning: a person’s ability to tell the truth and a female’s virginity as in the epithet ‘an honest woman.’ Hamlet is playing up the double meaning here by asking her to be truthful about his hand in the love letters and her honesty or chastity. Gone are Hamlet’s Petrarchan overtures, replaced by an Ovidian discursive tradition that objectifies females as sexual objects.

Hamlet continues his vilification of Ophelia’s sex by asking if she is fair. Fair also has a double meaning as in constant, equal or true, and beautiful. Hamlet is making an innuendo about Ophelia’s beauty and her ability to be constant or true. This could be Hamlet’s way of informing Ophelia that he, Hamlet, knows they are being watched and that the whole scene is a ruse to ensnare Hamlet. Hence, Hamlet’s questioning of Ophelia’s ability to be honest and fair is his way of evaluating whether Ophelia’s allegiances lie with him or her father. Hamlet is testing her, but she has no idea that that is what he is doing. She is an innocent not previously experienced in the art of deception and double entendres, so she accepts at face value what Hamlet tells her.

Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia in this scene is his way of transferring his disappointment and frustrations of his mother onto Ophelia; his former love becomes the recipient of his misplaced inadequacies. This is evident when Hamlet muses:

the power of beauty will sooner transform honesty from what it is to a bawd than  
the force of honesty can translate beauty into his likeness. This was sometime a  
paradox, but now the time gives it proof. I did love you once.

(3.1.110-114)

Gertrude is the beauty whose honesty is transformed. As the queen, Gertrude is accustomed to certain conveniences such as luxury, attention, and protection. With King Hamlet dead, Gertrude's station in life was put into doubt, and Hamlet believes it was her fear of losing her conveniences that prompted Gertrude to accept his Uncle Claudius's offer of marriage. By marrying the new king, Gertrude would maintain her title, be the recipient of King Claudius's affections, and be safeguarded against life without the title of monarch. "Time gives it proof" is Hamlet's jab at his mother's obvious unfaithfulness; she stayed honest and true to King Hamlet so long as he was alive, but once dead she moved on, and rather quickly. Gertrude did not even wait the traditional year of mourning before accepting a suitor, much less a husband. Gertrude's actions are not just deplorable to Hamlet, they disregard the social mandate that a widowed woman who marries within a year of her husband's death "shall be branded with the marks of disgrace" and forfeit all monies and property (Nichols 45). This social construct was explained in the Theodosian Code of 438 AD, and one that Hamlet would be fully aware.

Hamlet's beauty and honesty tirade are given to Ophelia, but they are really geared towards his mother. Hamlet reserves the last words "I did love you once" for Ophelia to which she replies "Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so" (3.1.114-115). Hamlet admits he did love Ophelia, and she in turn confesses that his words and actions led her to believe he loved her. Ophelia puts the responsibility onto Hamlet, she says that he made her believe his love. He is the instigator of the action, and she is the recipient. What comes next are secret confessions masked as innuendos and puns.

Hamlet begins his second trade with a hidden warning "You should not have believed me" followed by "I loved you not" (3.1.116, 118). Earlier, Hamlet had tried warning Ophelia to doubt everything, but his love for her. In keeping with that warning, what Hamlet says in this



scene should not be taken as his true feelings, but rather a coded message to Ophelia to escape the corruptness of the court. This is evidenced in his following speech to her:

Get thee [to] a nunn'ry: why wouldst 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: 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 earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunn'ry. Where's your father?

(3.1.120-129).

The entire speech is a warning to Ophelia to leave Castle Elsinore and seek refuge at a nunnery. Most critics insist Hamlet is calling Ophelia, and all females for that matter, lustful, distrustful creatures. Critics seem to latch onto the slang definition of nunnery which is brothel, a house of prostitution and sexual deviances. For Hamlet to command Ophelia to “Get thee to a nunn'ry,” critics claim he is calling her a whore and repudiating her and their former love. Although there is obvious evidence to support those claims, one must acknowledge and address Hamlet’s earlier state when he came to Ophelia in her closet. He visited her in the moments directly following his exchange with his dead father’s ghost. He had just plotted with Horatio to behave melancholy to draw out the truth of his father’s death, and the first person Hamlet seeks out is Ophelia. Despite seeking her out, Hamlet says nothing, but implores Ophelia with his eyes which are the windows

to the soul, and then there is his love letter to her that Polonius read aloud and criticized. In his letter Hamlet warns Ophelia to doubt everything, but his love for her. If we take Hamlet's silent plea and written command as the qualifiers of his argument, every single thing he says after that is false, and all a part of Hamlet's plan to ensnare his uncle Claudius.

Further evidence of Hamlet's true intent comes in the second half of his first sentence "why wouldst thou be a/ breeder of sinners?" (3.1.120-121). If Hamlet is really calling Ophelia a wanton woman who should work at a brothel as has been suggested by some critics, why would he ask her that question? Prostitutes make their money by being pretty and available, not pregnant and weighed down by children. The situation presented by Hamlet is Ophelia needs to leave the evils of Castle Elsinore and seek refuge in the spiritually pure sphere of a nunnery where she will be protected. If she remains she will be subjected to the evils infesting the court, she will become a "breeder of sinners" for she will be expected to marry, have children, and propagate the evils plaguing the once happy kingdom (3.1.121). If Ophelia were to seek refuge with the nuns she will be protected and will not become a "breeder of sinners" as nuns take a vow of chastity and celibacy (3.1.121).

Hamlet continues his hidden message to her by saying he is "indifferent honest" and that it "were better my mother had not borne me" (3.1.121, 123). Hamlet switches between trying to send Ophelia to the safety of the cloisters to himself and his mother. Perhaps he is trying to explain to Ophelia why he wants her gone from court. This is a likely supposition given that his next words relate to his character flaws, he is "proud, revengeful, ambitious" all the traits that will enable him to seek and met out justice for his father's murder (3.1.123). He next talks about thoughts, imagination, and time. If Ophelia truly loved Hamlet she should have been able to read between the lines, to see that Hamlet is speaking about how his thoughts, imagination, and time

are preoccupied with pride, revenge, and ambition. Ophelia of course cannot see Hamlet's hidden message. She takes his words for what they are because she has been conditioned to accept what others tell her, especially males of importance. She is the object used to having others dictate themselves upon her, she lacks the experience to see through Hamlet's ploy and hear his warning.

Hamlet ends this section of his speech with three main ideas: trust no one at court for we are all corrupt, find solace at the nunnery, and I know your father is spying on us. Hamlet confesses to Ophelia "We are arrant knaves, all;/ believe none of us" (3.1.127-128). He is telling her that everyone at court is completely dishonest and that she should believe none of them, which includes her father and King Claudius. Hamlet is echoing the sentiments of his love letter to Ophelia, to doubt everything but his love for her. He begins and ends this speech with the warning that she remove herself from court and seek refuge in the cloisters with the nuns. He cares for Ophelia, in fact loves her, and that is why he wants to protect her; however, he is not explaining himself correctly and Ophelia assumes he is repudiating her and their love. It explains her confusion at Hamlet's question "Where's your/ father?" (3.1.128-129). Ophelia responds with a lie, "At home, my lord" (3.1.130). One could interpret this as Hamlet's way of telling Ophelia he knows they are being watched by Polonius and that Hamlet knows she is being puppeteered by her father. Ophelia's response could be a hidden message of her own as in my father is at home doing what he loves the most, spying. At home in the sense of doing something which is quite natural or causes one happiness. In this sense, Polonius is very comfortable spying and manipulating, thus Ophelia's statement could be interpreted as a coded message so she does not have to lie to Hamlet.

This conjecture is given weight by Hamlet's next statement "Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the/ fool nowhere but in's own house. Farewell (3.1.131-132). Polonius and King Claudius have bestowed themselves nearby and hidden; therefore, Hamlet's odd switching of gears to "Where's your father?" and "Let the doors be shut upon him" give credence to the idea that Hamlet has just discovered that he and Ophelia are being spied upon and who else would spy but her father, the King's advisor. Hamlet's obvious outrage makes his "he may play the/ fool nowhere but in's own house" that much more vitriolic since Polonius is in Hamlet's house and as the King's advisor, Polonius plays the part of fool.

Hamlet tries to depart, but Ophelia's plea to heaven on his behalf stops his exit. He gives another prose speech that is a mix of an attack on women like his mother and his command that Ophelia leave castle Elsinore.

If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague for thy  
dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt  
not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunn'ry, farewell. Or if  
thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know  
well enough what monsters you make of them. To a  
nunn'ry, go, and quickly too. Farewell.

(3.1.134-139).

Hamlet is again transferring his frustration and anger about his mother onto Ophelia. Just as Laertes objectified Ophelia as his mock-daughter to practice his patriarchal duties, so, too, has Hamlet objectified Ophelia to be his mock-mother to act out his aggression. He uses plague and marry in the same sentence, marking the two as interchangeable. The "wise men" made "monsters" refers to Gertrude whom Hamlet feels is partially responsible for his father's death

and fully responsible for the desecration of his father's memory by marrying his slain father's brother and murderer. He also phrases Ophelia's future marriage as conditional by using the word "if" before each proposal; "If thou dost marry...If thou wilt needs marry" (3.1.134, 137). Hamlet no longer sees himself marrying Ophelia perhaps because he does not believe he will live beyond the enactment of his revenge or because he believes Ophelia to be too good and pure for him, we cannot tell. What is obvious is his adamant desire to get Ophelia out of the castle and to someplace safe and unmarred, like a nunnery.

Again, Hamlet tries to leave, he bids her farewell, but Ophelia's plea to Heaven brings him back. Incensed at her inability to comprehend his attempt to protect her by sending her away, and perhaps enraged that they are being spied upon, Hamlet informs Ophelia:

I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God  
hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another.  
You jig and you amble, and you [lisp], you nickname God's  
creatures and make your wantonness [your] ignorance.  
Go to, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad. I say, we will  
have no more marriage. Those that are married already (all  
but one), shall live, the rest shall keep as they are. To a  
nunn'ry, go.

(3.1.139-148).

Hamlet objectifies Ophelia as being symbolic of all women who appear to be pretty pictures that men adore, but are really disguising their true selves, wanton creatures. By labeling and categorizing Ophelia as a "painting," Hamlet is maintaining the Petrarchan discursive tradition of viewing females as objects fit to be placed upon a pedestal. He then switches gears as he says

women have two faces, and then itemizes their walk, speech, and behavior which fits nicely into the Ovidian style of seeing women as merely sexual objects. Although Hamlet is objectifying Ophelia, he is really doing it as a means of vilifying his mother who maintained two faces: the loving, virtuous wife of King Hamlet, and the wanton, conniving incestuous bride of the old king's murderer, his uncle Claudius.

The final scene between Hamlet and Ophelia occurs moments later as the traveling actors begin their show. Hamlet poses several sexual innuendos aimed at Ophelia. He is once again sexually objectifying Ophelia as a way to get back at his mother. The interchange is quick and ripe with double entendres. The first thing Hamlet asks upon seeing Ophelia is "Lady, shall I lie in your lap?" (3.2.105). When Ophelia responds "No, my lord" Hamlet tries to cover up his sexual reference by saying "I mean, my head upon your lap?" (3.2.106-107). Both instances exhibit Hamlet's objectification of Ophelia as a sexual object, to be used by him to fulfill his carnal desires. She is the sexual vessel into which he wants to put his head (penis) into her lap (vagina). Hamlet continues his use of sexual innuendos as he asks Ophelia "Do you think I meant country matters?" (3.2.109). The country refers to a common practice of sending pregnant women, especially those unwed, to the countryside to birth their babies in private and away from society. Depending on the context, "country" could be seen as an idyll or an unrefined place, such as a farm which one associates with animals breeding. Ophelia responds placidly with "I think nothing, my lord" to which Hamlet plays a pun, "That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (3.2.110-111). Nothing is slang for a woman's genitals, hence Hamlet is again referencing Ophelia's vagina. This objectification of Ophelia as a mere sex object is both in keeping with Hamlet's Ovidian discourse and his ploy to transfer his frustrations about his mother onto his surrogate, Ophelia.

Maintaining with the earlier supposition that this is all an act on Hamlet's part to both drive Ophelia away to the safety of a nunnery and exhibit his misplaced anger, it is easy to see how Hamlet's unsavory statements would appall his mother who is seated adjacent to him. That well could have been his purpose as he later admits to Ophelia, "What should a man do but be merry? for, look you, how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within these two hours" (3.2.117-120). After publicly addressing sexual innuendos at Ophelia, Hamlet turns his thoughts to his mother. Hamlet was using Ophelia as a means to draw his mother's attention to the rancor of wantonness and lust, two vices he now associates with his mother. Ophelia is Hamlet's pawn to bait and ultimately shame his mother. This is again evidenced when Ophelia remarks that the prologue to the play is brief and Hamlet replies "As woman's love" followed by his question to his mother "Madam, how like you this play?" (3.2.142). The brevity of woman's love Hamlet is referring to is his mother's short-lived love for his father, not Ophelia's love for him. Of course, Ophelia does not realize this, but taken in the context that he said it, watched the players perform, and then addressed Gertrude with that question, it is not an impossible leap to see that Hamlet is really talking about Gertrude and not Ophelia.

Hamlet's last words to Ophelia are an admission and a warning. Ophelia exhibits some subjectivity as she addresses Hamlet without being posed a question by him. She tells Hamlet, not answers him, that he is "as good as a chorus" because the Prince has habitually stated what the players were about to do or were doing and why (3.2.231). Hamlet responds cryptically "I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying" (3.2.232-233). Hamlet is informing Ophelia that he knows she is being manipulated, subjected to the role of puppet. The "your love" Hamlet acknowledges could mean himself and the "puppets dallying" could refer to his feelings of ineptitude at taking action against his uncle, feeling like a puppet to

fate. Or, Hamlet could be saying “your love” is Ophelia’s love for Hamlet which he cannot determine the sincerity of because if she really loved him she would not allow herself to be manipulated as a pawn for her father’s schemes.

The last and final time Hamlet has with Ophelia is at her funeral. He has just returned from his ill-fated voyage with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and is ignorant to the fact that Ophelia is dead. Upon realizing that it is his former love being laid to rest, Hamlet exclaims “What, the fair Ophelia!” (5.1.228). He is in disbelief and calls her fair for he sees her as chaste, beautiful, and virtuous. Hamlet’s feigned madness has left him, and he is feeling true madness. He is mad at his uncle for killing his father, mad at his mother for dishonoring his father’s love and memory, and mad at the senseless death of his one true love, the only innocent in Elsinore.

Incensed at Laertes’s superfluous and insincere gesture of jumping into Ophelia’s grave and proclaiming various lamentations, Hamlet calls out Laertes’s false nature and engages in a physical altercation with Ophelia’s brother. Hamlet informs the assembly “Why I will fight with [Laertes] upon this theme/ Until my eyelids will no longer wag” (5.1.252-253). Gertrude asks what theme and Hamlet pours out his heart:

I lov’d Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
Could not with all their quantity of love  
Make up my sum.

(5.1.255-257).

So, all of Hamlet’s demands to “Get thee to a nunn’ry,” all his claims that “I loved you not,” all his rants against the inconstancy of woman; it was all a ploy to protect Ophelia and get her away from the corruptness of court. When he made sexual references to her, treated her with an Ovidian inflection of sexualized object, it was transferred aggression. Hamlet’s misguided



attempt to protect Ophelia did not work because she did not understand his cryptic, hidden messages, despite his initial letter warning her to doubt everything but his love for her.

The irony of both Laertes and Hamlet professing their love for Ophelia is that they proclaimed it too late. Their fears and objectification of her sexuality turned out to be moot because she died a most virtuous maid, her “chaste treasure” most certainly closed and safeguarded in her casket along with her dead body. A further irony of this scene is that she died as she lived: boxed in, confined, and objectified.

Ophelia was conditioned to behave according to the tenets of female decorum: chaste, silent, obedient. She had zero experience with reading between the lines and grasping secret messages. As a female, Ophelia only ever did what she was told to do, by her father, her brother, and in some regards, by Hamlet himself. Although Ophelia exhibited some subjectivity in her dialogue with Hamlet, she was never an independent female acting, thinking, and speaking autonomously. She was Laertes’s mock-daughter, Polonius’s political pawn, and Hamlet’s Petrarchan ideal, Ovidian sex object, recipient of transferred frustration, and ultimately, love.

## Part 2: Ophelia's Subjectivity

## Chapter 4: The Sane Ophelia

“The lady shall say her mind freely, or the [blank] verse shall halt for it” (2.2.316-317). Although Hamlet is stating the aforementioned in regard to the play and its players, it rightly surmises Hamlet’s wish for Ophelia: to have autonomy and exhibit subjectivity. According to Shakespeare scholar Evelyn Gajowski, subjectivity is the ability to “speak, act, and construct meaning” (*Much Ado*).

Some people, most notably early twentieth-century literary critics, assume Ophelia is a flat, undeveloped, minor character whose only purpose in the play is to serve as a tool for Hamlet’s character development. Yet, when closely analyzing and deconstructing what Ophelia says and the context of those moments, it is clear that Ophelia is a complex character with more depth than was once believed.

Although Ophelia is obedient, chaste, and silent for the majority of the play, she does exhibit minor moments of subjectivity prior to her madness. The first instance is her questioning response to Laertes’s command to keep him abreast of her activities. Ophelia asks, “Do you doubt that?” (1.3.4). She is questioning Laertes’s faith in her ability to obey his commands, as well as her allegiance to him. Ophelia exhibits some subjectivity here because she is questioning Laertes’s inferences about her loyalty and steadfastness. After politely listening to her brother’s tirade about protecting her virginity against the Prince’s advances, Ophelia replies:

I shall the effect of this good lesson keep  
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,  
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,  
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,

Whiles, [like] a puff'd and reckless libertine,  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,  
And reaks not his own rede.

(1.3.45-51)

She first dutifully admits she will condescend to her brother's good counsel, but then she gives her brother some sisterly advice about not being a hypocrite. The exchange is interesting because it shows Ophelia as the obedient sister, but one who treads lightly in wanting to be on equal footing with her brother where morals are concerned. Ophelia employs religious imagery to appeal to her brother's Christian sense of morality in much the same way Laertes employed nature imagery to appeal to her feminine sense of duty and obligation.

Prior to her madness, Ophelia speaks her thoughts and fears openly only once, although no one is there to witness her moment save the audience. Hamlet has just repudiated her, or so she believes, yelling at her to "Get thee [to] a nunn'ry" (3.1.120). Having witnessed the prince's harsh and chaotic state, she delivers her only soliloquy:

O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword;  
The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
The observed of all observers, quite, quite down!  
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,  
That suck'd the honey of his music vows,  
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,  
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;

That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth

Blasted with ecstasy: O, woe is me,

To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!

(3.1.149-160)

Ophelia's anguish at this moment reveals her deep-rooted love for Hamlet. She claims his is a "noble mind" one of "noble and most sovereign reason" that has been "Blasted with ecstasy" (3.1.149,156,159). She chooses to lament the loss of Hamlet's mind because that is what she fell in love with, his mind, his intellect, his reason. This is a very telling moment for it not only showcases Ophelia's subjectivity, but her reasoning. Her love for Hamlet is based on intellect; therefore Ophelia, despite her objectification and subservient mannerisms, is more of a well-rounded character than critics have ever given her credit. If she were just a flat character, she would not be attracted to a man's intellect; she would solely base her attraction on physical attributes and monetary wealth or social station. By bemoaning Hamlet's degraded mental state and twice referring to his mind as being noble, Ophelia reveals to us that what she loves about Hamlet is his intellect, his ability to think and reason. This is further evidenced in the next scene when the two young lovers watch the Mouse-trap play.

In most of her scenes, Ophelia only speaks when spoken to, yet in ACT 3, scene 2, she addresses Hamlet on a couple of occasions. Her ability to not only address a man, but the prince himself shows her confidence in her state of subjectivity with Hamlet. Although she must always behave as a proper young lady should, with Hamlet at least she can relax and be more herself, a thinking, speaking, acting human being and not some mute, subservient object.

Hamlet and Ophelia just finished their first exchange at the play (the country matters dialogue discussed in chapter 3 and Hamlet ended the moment by saying "Nothing" (3.2.113).

Hamlet's response does not require any sort of answer on Ophelia's part as his "nothing" statement ended this first exchange, yet Ophelia *chooses* to engage the prince further by stating "You are merry, my lord" (3.2.114). This is not a question which the prince needs to answer nor is it a continuation of their previous dialogue. It is Ophelia's *thought* that Hamlet is happy, it is her observance of the prince's behavior, an idea that does not require Ophelia to state aloud much less address the prince with her musings. Her seemingly insignificant statement reveals Ophelia's subjectivity and the depth of her relationship with Hamlet – to the extent that she could address him so informally and rather playfully.

Hamlet responds in a mock-surprise manner by asking "Who, I?" to which Ophelia replies "Ay, my lord" (3.2.114-115). The two are being playful with each other, gone is the bawdy innuendos of a moment ago and the heart-breaking repudiation of the previous scene. The two are chiding each other in a manner that shows their familiarity and easiness with each other. The scene takes a turn though when Hamlet realizes he is enjoying a happy moment with Ophelia. Up until this moment, Hamlet has exhibited nothing but anger, sadness, fear, doubt, and uncertainty; to be happy when his father's murderer is free and his mother is engaging in an incestuous relationship is the antithesis of what Hamlet wants to be feeling which is why he tells Ophelia:

O God, your only jig-maker. What should a man do but be merry? for, look you,  
how cheerfully my mother looks, and my father died within these two hours.

(3.2.117-119)

Hamlet reverts back to his angry and incensed state, employing sarcasm with his "What should a man do but be merry?" when his mother is cheerful and his father "died within these two hours" (3.2.117-119). Ophelia tries to reign in Hamlet's hyperbole by countering with the fact that

“Nay, 'tis twice two months, my lord” (3.2.120). With Hamlet, Ophelia does not have to be some “yes girl.” She can say what she thinks and even contradict the prince, and he allows it, even welcomes it.

Every time Ophelia speaks with Hamlet in this scene she refers to him as “my lord.” She shows him deference of respect to his gender and social position, and yet their relationship is one of equality and acceptance for Ophelia speaks freely to him, addressing him without waiting to be addressed first and she engages him in playful banter that results in his first true moment of happiness since the start of the play. Ophelia richly exhibits her subjectivity in her interactions with Hamlet in this scene as seen in her questioning Hamlet as the players enact the play. She asks him “What means this, my lord?” (3.2.128). The players have just presented the scene where the King is poisoned and the Queen is first denying and then later accepting the gifts of the poisoner. There is no dialogue exchanged between Hamlet and Ophelia while the play is being acted. Ophelia is the one to initiate this new set of dialogue with Hamlet, and she does it by asking him to clarify the meaning of the action. She is asking Hamlet to use his intellect to reason the events unfolding before her. She trusts his opinion and defers to his reasoning to explain it to her. This is an example of both her respect for Hamlet’s intellect and her trust in him to tell her plainly and truthfully what it means. To ask someone for help understanding something requires faith and trust in that person. Acknowledging one’s failure to comprehend leaves one in a vulnerable state so Ophelia’s deference to Hamlet informs us that she is aware of her own shortcomings and is willing to seek guidance from someone she trusts, namely Hamlet. Had Ophelia been watching the play with her father it is very doubtful that she would have asked him for clarification. In their exchanges she never addresses Polonius unless he first addresses

her. Even when her father asks her what she thinks, Ophelia often replies with “My lord, I do not know” (2.1.82).

Hamlet’s response to Ophelia’s question is a happy reply of “Marry, this’ is [miching] mallecho; it means mischief” (3.2.129). Hamlet does not make fun of Ophelia for needing clarification, instead he warmly replies “Marry” as in surprise or exclamation. Hamlet is getting excited to see his Uncle Claudius’s reaction to the Mouse-trap play. He tells Ophelia that he play is “[miching] mallecho” and then defines what it means (3.2.129). He is engaging her in an exchange of ideas and information. He is treating her as one with subjectivity and she in turns is voicing her thoughts and opinions. Ophelia responds to Hamlet’s statement of mischief by stating the obvious that “Belike this show imports the argument of the play” (3.2.130). Notice that she does not end her statement with the traditional “my lord” as she had in her previous statements. Her omission of the title and its deference to the prince’s station proves that Ophelia is in fact exhibiting her subjectivity and autonomy of thought. She is not the mimicking parrot of an objectified female; she is in fact a thinking, speaking, acting individual.

When the Prologue enters, Hamlet speaks aloud to Ophelia that “We shall know by this fellow: the players cannot keep [counsel], they’ll tell all” (3.2.131-132). To which Ophelia wonders “Will ‘a tell us what this show meant?” (3.2.133). Again, Ophelia does not address Hamlet as lord and she uses the inclusive pronoun “us” which could mean the audience or Hamlet and Ophelia specifically. Given the intimate nature of their conversation and the previous demeanor Hamlet exhibited in talking bawdy matters to Ophelia as if they were not in a public space, it is probable Ophelia meant just the two of them. This “us” then becomes a conspiratorial sphere of understanding. The world outside does not exist so long as the two are together, sharing their thoughts and ideas.



This sphere of understanding starts to crack when Hamlet replies to Ophelia that “Ay, or any show that you'll show him: be not you ashamed to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means” (3.2.134-135). Hamlet is getting excited and anxious about what the outcome of the play will produce hence his aggressive and sexually suggestive “show” innuendo. His uncle’s guilt hangs on the balance and Hamlet is getting riled up with anticipation for and disgust by proof of his uncle’s murderous deeds. It explains why Hamlet would revert back to the bawdy innuendos of the beginning of the scene. King Claudius is about to be exposed and all the corruptness and vile sin plaguing Castle Elsinore will be brought to light; all will be shown.

Unbeknownst to Ophelia, it is just a play although she does have some concerns given her later comments such as “You are naught, you are naught: I'll mark the play” (3.2.136). Ophelia is telling Hamlet that he is wrong for including her in his sexually suggestive “show” statement of above, and that she will decide for herself what the true meaning of the play is. Ophelia declares her subjectivity very clearly in this moment. She informs the heir to the Danish throne that he is not only wrong, but that she will decide for herself what the meaning is. A very bold moment indeed for the usually subservient, objectified dutiful daughter.

Hamlet’s impatience at the Prologue’s announcement that “We beg your hearing patiently” prompts Ophelia to placate him with a promise and a fact (3.2.139). Ophelia tells him “’Tis brief, my lord” (3.2.141). She is trying to calm Hamlet down by reminding him the Prologue will be quick, there is nothing to worry about or get angry over. Ophelia obviously knows Hamlet very well if she can identify the markers that signal Hamlet’s impending anger or morose states. Ophelia’s decision to revert back to the use of “my lord” signals the end of the playful banter and a return of Hamlet’s more caustic manner. The moment of truth is within his grasp and Hamlet cannot contain his emotions any longer; hence, his speech with Ophelia takes

on a darker, more negative turn. He responds to her remonstrance with a negative simile that the Prologue will be as brief “As woman's love” (3.2.142). His anger at his mother's infidelity to his father's memory is obvious as he takes this jab at her that Ophelia interprets as a negative attack on her. It explains why Ophelia chooses not to respond, but, rather, watch the play. The playful banter and ease of speech from earlier is gone, and Ophelia is left in an awkward space of navigating Hamlet's mercurious personality.

As the play progresses, Hamlet's excitement is reaching a boiling point. He intimates to Ophelia that the actor coming on stage is “Lucianus, nephew to the king” (3.2.230). Ophelia takes this moment to return some of Hamlet's sarcasm by telling the prince, “You are as good as a chorus, my lord” (3.2.231). Her jab is not lost on the prince as he counters “I could interpret between you and your love, if I could see the puppets dallying” (3.2.233-234). The quip is Hamlet's way of attacking Ophelia's lack of autonomy and independence when it comes to her father. The “puppets dallying” refers to Polonius as a puppet master dictating Ophelia's thoughts and actions. Hamlet is informing Ophelia that he knows the “Get thee to a nunnr'y” interlude of the previous scene was a contrivance of her father meant to ensnare him. The insinuation is that Ophelia's love is not honest, true, or fair because it can be easily manipulated by her father. Although Hamlet says this, he does not truly believe nor mean it. He knows Ophelia loves him, but she is subjected to her father's rule and must obey his commands as is required of a dutiful daughter. Hamlet's anger is really his frustration at Ophelia's inability to have subjectivity and choose Hamlet's love over her filial duty. Ophelia, for her part, does not deny her father's machinations as they apply to the young lovers, as she replies “You are keen, my lord, you are keen” (3.2.234). In this instance, “keen” refers to one who is intellectually aware or knowledgeable. Ophelia could be saying that Hamlet is correct in guessing her father

manipulates her like a puppet, or it could be a sarcastic response implying that Hamlet is not smart enough to realize the irony that Ophelia is the victim of both her father's manipulations and Hamlet's.

Hamlet's response once again reverts back to sexual aggressiveness as he tells Ophelia, "It would cost you a groaning to take off my edge" (3.2.235). The prince is suggesting that it would take more than a sexual dalliance with Ophelia to remove his angry state. Whenever Hamlet wants to hurt Ophelia for wrongs imagined or real, he attacks where he knows it hurts: her chastity and virtue. As an objectified female, her virginity is her only marketable commodity. Hamlet knows this, which is why he attacks her with sexual innuendos and bawdy jabs. He wants her removed from the corruptness of Castle Elsinore, but she will not leave. She has aligned herself with her father and not him. She says she loves him, yet returns his love letters. Hamlet is angry and hurt, but still loves and wants to protect Ophelia, albeit in the worst way possible, by attacking her chastity and making snide comments.

Ophelia admits she is her father's pawn and yet, when she is away from her father and with Hamlet, she manages to exert her autonomy and subjectivity by speaking and thinking for herself. This is seen in her reply to Hamlet's groaning comment when she tells the prince, "Still better, and worse" (3.2.236). Her statement seems more like a thought spoken aloud to herself that Hamlet's demeanor is better, he is not a disheveled wreck, but worse in that his attitude is angry and full of vitriolic statements. It could also refer to the marriage vows one undertakes. According to the marriage vows in *The Book of Common Prayer* that was first published in 1549, the bride vows to take her "wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and to obey, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance" (424). Ophelia could be referencing this

vow as a testament to her love for Hamlet, that if and when they marry she will have to endure the better and worse times with him as a loyal wife should.

The last words exchanged between Hamlet and Ophelia are the most telling. Hamlet tells Ophelia, “you shall see anon how the murderer gets the love of Gonzago's wife” (3.2.250). The actor on stage is the metaphor for King Claudius who gained the crown through nefarious deeds, including the hand of his dead brother’s wife, Gertrude. Hamlet’s last words to Ophelia are about the actor who murdered the king and stole the wife. It is Hamlet’s crowning moment, catching King Claudius unawares and guilty. It is the motif of the play, people acting and manipulating to undermine and ensnare each other. Ophelia’s response is telling for three reasons. One, she announces to Hamlet that King Claudius is rising, understandably out of guilt for murdering his brother. He is seeing his crime re-enacted on the stage for the whole kingdom to witness. Second, Ophelia’s statement is a reinforcement of what Hamlet knows to be true, but fears: his dead father, the King, has arisen from the grave seeking retribution for his murder. Third, Ophelia foretells what will happen. Hamlet will finally rise to the noble station of being the king and will act as a noble king should by illuminating and removing the corruption of the court. This last exchange between Hamlet and Ophelia highlights not only the conflict of the play, but its resolution.

## Chapter 5: Madwoman as Shakespearean Fool (Or the “Insane Ophelia”)

Ophelia publically pronounces her subjectivity after the death of her father. Polonius’s murder and Hamlet’s physical and metaphorical absence act as the catalyst that drives Ophelia to madness. At what point the young maid gave in to her waning mental capacities are unknown. What is obvious is her ability to exert her autonomy. Ophelia as madwoman is able to do what she was limited to express only when with Hamlet: she is a thinking, speaking, acting individual unhampered by the social constraints of propriety and decorum. Ophelia says what she wants, does what she wants, and believes what she wants.

Queen Gertrude is the first of the main characters to acknowledge Ophelia’s new state of being. At first the monarch refuses an audience with Ophelia as she tells the Gentleman, “I will not speak with her” (4.5.1). It is Horatio’s warning of Ophelia’s ability to “strew/ Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds” that convinces the queen to speak with Ophelia (4.5.14-15). Ophelia addresses the queen as “the beauteous majesty of Denmark,” which alludes to Polonius’s reading of Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia to the monarchs. In his letter Hamlet referred to Ophelia as “beautified” and here Ophelia calls Gertrude “beauteous.” Perhaps it is a sarcastic play on Ophelia’s part to mock the queen’s vanity.

When finally addressed by Queen Gertrude, Ophelia responds by singing. This conjures up imagery of festivals and merrymaking as music is a common aspect of any celebration. It is an ironic moment for Ophelia’s words are not merry, but sad and foretelling of more sadness to come. Ophelia sings:

How should I your true love know  
From another one?

By his cockle hat and staff,  
And his sandal shoon.

(4.5.23-26)

The true love Ophelia references could be Old King Hamlet whom Claudius murdered. This is supported by Ophelia's description of the "cockle hat and staff./ And his sandal shoon" (4.5.25-26). According to Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, Christian pilgrims would often put cockle shells (the symbol of Saint James) in their hats as they made their way to holy sites such as the shrine of Saint James in Spain. If it is to be believed Ophelia is referencing the slain king in her song to Gertrude, Ophelia is saying that like Saint James, Old King Hamlet was murdered for his faith. In this instance, it was Old King Hamlet's faith in his brother's love that blinded him to his brother's murderous capabilities. Ophelia is speaking the truth, yet Gertrude is incapable of understanding her allusion.

Some critics believe Ophelia is speaking of her father, but Ophelia asks Gertrude, "How should I your true love know/ From another one?" (4.5.23). The question is in regard to Gertrude's true love. As Hamlet earlier lamented, Gertrude's true love was Old King Hamlet. This exchange is Ophelia's way of intimating that she knows the old king, like Saint James, was murdered. Twice Gertrude expresses her confusion at Ophelia's words and twice Ophelia chides the queen with "pray you, mark" (4.5.28,35). Like a parent scolding a child to pay attention and listen, so Ophelia communicates to Gertrude the truth of the queen's late husband.

Ophelia continues her song with a symbolic message "White his shroud as the mountain snow,--" (4.5.36). White is symbolic of innocence and purity and the shroud references his funeral dress; hence, Old King Hamlet died an innocent victim of his brother's fratricide. Ophelia ends her song with a sweet reminder for the queen, just as King Claudius enters the hall:

Larded with sweet flowers  
Which bewept to the grave did go  
With true-love showers.

(4.5.38-40)

Old King Hamlet was sent to the grave heralded with the love and respect of his people. The irony of course is that Ophelia is cryptically chiding Queen Gertrude. She is saying that the queen had a man who truly loved her, who was murdered, and died thinking that his wife was steadfast and true. In reality, Gertrude's love was like the flowers strewn over Old King Hamlet's grave: beautiful and sweet, but temporary and quick-dying. Gertrude quickly buried her husband and moved on, specifically with her too-soon-dead husband's brother and murderer. Ophelia tries to get Gertrude to "mark" the truth of her words, but the queen fails to comprehend.

The arrival of King Claudius shifts Ophelia's focus and she addresses the king as a familiar, as one on equal footing with the reigning monarch. She does not address him with the traditional and referential "My lord" nor does she acquiesce to his rhetorical question with a nod or smile. No, Ophelia is an independent spirit at this point and she tells the King freely what she thinks. She exclaims:

Well, God dild you! They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know  
what we are, but know not what we may be. God be at your table!

(4.5.42-44)

Her "God [reward] you!" exclamation is ripe with hidden meaning. The reward she hopes God will bestow upon King Claudius is retribution for killing Old King Hamlet and for conspiring against Hamlet. Ophelia's madness has granted her clarity of understanding. She is removed from or outside the realm of courtly corruption. She can see what is really happening and this

new found vision has given her voice to express what she knows and feels to be true. In this case, it is the truth that King Claudius is a murdering usurper. By making Ophelia mad, Shakespeare has made Ophelia a fool, not in the sense of a bumbling idiot, but as the sole observer and articulator of truth at court.

In her essay "Playing the Fool: The Pragmatic Status of Shakespeare's Clowns," Roberta Mullini argues that Shakespeare's court fools are able to "speak both as characters and as voices outside the plays through their metadramatic glosses, spokesmen of the commonsense of the audience and, at the same time, of the utopian aspirations of the playwright" (26). Although Mullini was referring to fools such as Touchstone from *As You Like It* and Feste of *Twelfth Night*, her theory – that fools act as mirrors of truth and subversive agents of hierarchal social order also applies – to Ophelia. She, albeit in mad guise, extols the truth as she sees it, yet she is incapable of forcing the others to understand the honesty of her words.

Ophelia's statement to King Claudius that "the owl was a baker's daughter" (4.5.42-43) refers to the story of Jesus Christ, who turned a baker's daughter into an owl after she failed to "respond generously to his request for bread" (Wofford footnotes 4.5.43). Owls are symbolic of knowledge and therefore are regarded as wise. The baker's daughter gained wisdom through the experience of her folly thus Ophelia, like the owl-daughter, has been made wise through her experience of loss. Similar to the owl that can turn its head seemingly 360 degrees to see all viewpoints, Ophelia can see what the others plainly cannot. It explains why she muses in front of the King "Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (4.5.43-44). She may be talking in the King's presence, but at this moment she is addressing God when she says Lord. In all other instances when addressing her male social superiors she refers to him as my lord. This sentence is more of an aside she addresses to her Lord God, the Almighty. As her maker, God



would know what his children are capable of doing. Her quip is like an inside nudge to God that she is in on the secret. Men know what they are: kings, sons, advisors; however, they fail to reason what they may be when the Wheel of Fortune spins them from their places of wealth and good fortune to loss and despair.

Ophelia ends her dialogue with King Claudius in warning and in hope. She tells the monarch, “God be at your table!” (4.5.44). Her exclamation at the end adds emphasis to her wish that King Claudius behave as a good Christian man and not one bent on devilish deeds. The phrase alludes to the Bible verse: “Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils” (*King James Bible*, 1 Corinthians 10:21). The table represents what feeds or nourishes: good or evil. Ophelia is aware of the King’s evil deeds and tries to warn him and wish him well. As madwoman/fool, she extols a truth that the other characters cannot comprehend. As a Shakespearean fool, her words act as a mirror reflecting their folly. As Shakespeare contemporary Thomas Heywood explains in his *Apology for Actors*, the purpose of the clown was to “show others their slovenly and unhandsome behavior” so that they may “reform that simplicity in themselves which others make their sport” (375).

Not willing to understand her meaning, King Claudius assumes Ophelia is ranting nonsense because she is consumed with the grief of mourning her slain father. Ophelia responds, “Pray you, let's have no words of this” (4.5.46). She dismisses the King’s words and therefore his royal thought as being insignificant and unworthy of discussion. To exhibit such self-righteousness is in stark contrast to the demure and mute Ophelia of the first half of the play. She stands up to the King as an intellectual equal capable of deciding what is and is not worthy of

discussion. It is the epitome of her subjectivity that she is able to project herself in this manner as he represents not only patriarchal society, but the hierarchal social order.

Ophelia informs King Claudius that instead of talking about her dead father, the King should tell people the following song:

To-morrow is Saint Valentine's day,  
All in the morning betime,  
And I a maid at your window,  
To be your Valentine.  
Then up he rose, and donn'd his clothes,  
And dupp'd the chamber-door;  
Let in the maid, that out a maid  
Never departed more.

(4.5.48-55)

The song is a bawdy tune ripe with double entendres and sexual meaning. Valentine's Day of course references Saint Valentine, a Catholic martyr who was believed to have been killed for marrying couples despite a Roman decree that soldiers were not to be wed. He was murdered and canonized. Given his obvious affinity for lovers, he has become synonymous with love. To be someone's Valentine means to be their love interest. In Ophelia's diddy, she sings of being a "maid at your window/ To be your Valentine" (4.5.51). She is a virgin in the bedchamber of the man whom she loves. The next phrase paints a very graphic picture of her supposed Valentine awaking and "donna[ing] his clothes" followed closely by "dupp[ing] the chamber-door" (4.5.52-53). The two have obviously finished engaging in sexual intercourse and the man, her Valentine, has arisen from the bed, dressed himself, and left the bedchamber. This idea of

deflowering and abandoning is reinforced by her last lines “Let in the maid, that out a maid/ Never departed more” (4.5.54-55). The chiasmus Ophelia employs reveals the truth of the lovers’ rendezvous- she entered the bedchamber a maid (virgin), but would not leave it as one (she has been deflowered).

Ophelia’s song is very sexual and therefore very inappropriate, especially for a young lady to sing publically to her King and sovereign. Ophelia does so, though, and, moreover, without shame or guilt. Ophelia’s behavior most readily disrupts the normative social codes that govern her peers. She is talking about sex to her King. Nay, she is singing about it, creating a festive mood with which to relay her thoughts. Young, respectable females most certainly did not engage in such a flagrantly disrespectful manner. Ophelia has shattered her glass cage and declared her independence by way of giving voice to the most taboo of female subjects- sex. It is Ophelia’s *coup d’etat* against the repressive patriarchal society that aims to constrain and oppress her. As a madwoman/fool, her thoughts and words are liberated and wholly her own. Mullini argues that, for a Shakespeare fool, his “word, and not his action, interacts with the other characters, who judge him according to the cultural codes of Elizabethan society” (27). If applying this theory to Ophelia as fool, it would explain how Ophelia’s loss-of-virginity song would be taken as evidence of her deteriorating mental state. Her words and their subject matter are judged by the characters in the play and the Elizabethan society witnessing the play. By their standards, she is obviously suffering some onset of madness that is causing her to speak crazy thoughts that are completely out of character for her or any sane female. It is, on the whole, shocking and disturbing. It explains King Claudius’s exclamation: “Pretty Ophelia!” (4.5.56). She is too “pretty” a maid to speak of such dirty deeds as premarital sex. The King is surprised

by her behavior, but Ophelia seems undisturbed. In fact, she continues to speak as if what she has just song was perfectly natural:

Ophelia serenades King Claudius once more:

By Gis and by Saint Charity,

Alack, and fie for shame!

Young men will do't, if they come to't;

By cock, they are to blame.

Quoth she, before you tumbled me,

You promised me to wed.

So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,

An thou hadst not come to my bed.

(4.5.57-66).

The “Young men will do’t” refers to young men having sexual intercourse. The “if they come to’t” means opportunity to engage someone in sexual intercourse. “By cock, they are to blame” has multiple meanings. Cock refers to a rooster which is a fowl synonymous with virility, boastfulness, and fertility. He is the announcer of the morning which alludes to a man’s morning erection and the signal of man’s departure from his mistress’s bed lest he be caught still in her sheets. The spurned woman of the song dejectedly asks her soon-to-be-gone lover, “before you tumbled me,/ You promised me to wed” (4.5.63-64). To which the young man victoriously replies: “So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,/ An thou hadst not come to my bed” (4.5.65-66). The woman wonders why the man has rescinded on the marriage proposal he gave to her prior to their sexual tumble. The man tells her honestly, by vowing on the sun, that he was going to marry her, but since he gained what he wanted (sex, her presumed virginity) the marriage now

seems unnecessary. The last line is the most telling and scandalous of all the lines, even more so than “you tumbled me” (4.5.63). Ophelia sings the man’s statement that the female had come to *his* bed. That is an action full of scandal. The man did not go to *her* – meaning he was responsible for initiating the sin of premarital sex, she came to him. She was the initiator of the action.

Ophelia’s purpose in publically singing two scandalous and bawdy songs to the King were to warn and chastise him. In both songs, the maid gives up her virginity for a man she believes loves her and in one case would marry her. The two females are duped and left tainted by the sin of their premarital sex. The men of course leave happy and free from shame or guilt; their actions bear no consequence in so far as they are still marriageable entities free of scandal and scorn. Ophelia’s songs act as a warning to King Claudius for his is the spurned and sinned female of the songs. He partook in acts of sin (murder, lying, incest) and when the sun rises and morning breaks, he will have to answer for his wrongs. In that sense, the sun symbolizes both the light of knowledge when everyone in the kingdom will become aware of his fratricide, and the light of God casting judgment upon his soul. The man of the songs could represent the King’s greed, power-lust, envy, temptation, sin incarnate, any of the evil influences that cause one to sin as heinously as Claudius did.

Ophelia arrives in the hall of the King’s court in a state of disarray. Her hair is loose and flowing, unkempt and somewhat reminiscent of someone who has not combed her hair after being in bed. She is in her nightclothes, suggesting a dream-like state, as well as putting her virtue and chastity in question, since a modest maid would not be so scantily clad in public. Her speech is chaotic, disjointed, and sexually charged. Given her disarray and public outburst of sexual songs, it is obvious to all those present at court that Ophelia has indeed gone mad. A

widely held belief of early modern England was that “excessive or public female speech could easily be perceived as disorderly; moreover, it was a common belief that a woman who was open with her mouth was likely to be open with her body as well” (DiGangi 261). Ophelia’s discordant behavior is patriarchal justification for demanding that females be chaste, silent, and obedient. Ophelia has become the tangible proof of male prescribed fear. In his 1608 instruction book *Christian Economy*, William Perkins declares that any female who takes “liberty of wandering, and straying abroad from her own house” sins against the duty of being “commanded, governed, and directed” by her father, brother, or husband (309). Perkins, like many men of the age, felt the need to minimize a woman’s ability to speak or act independently to not only suppress a woman’s wanton and evil nature, but to secure the man as the head of the household. The dictate that “the female is woman of an inferior sex” (Perkins 305) was a commonly held belief that was reinforced by Christian doctrine: “I permit not the woman to teach, neither to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:12). Ophelia is not being silent, she is not staying close to home, and she is not being obedient. Ophelia is dressing the way she wants, she is speaking and addressing those whom she chooses, she is singing sexually suggestive songs to the reigning monarch, and, to the mortification of the court, she is exercising her subjectivity. It explains King Claudius’s reaction: “How long hath she been thus?” (4.5.67). He realizes he can no longer speak to her because she is mad and therefore unworthy of being addressed.

For her part, Ophelia continues as if her songs were not the scandal of the court. Despite her warning and wish to Gertrude and her singing metaphorical songs to Claudius, Ophelia declares “I hope all will be well” (4.5.68). She informs King Claudius:

We must be patient: but I  
cannot choose but weep, to think they should lay him  
i' the cold ground. My brother shall know of it:  
and so I thank you for your good counsel.

(4.5.68-71).

Her declaration that “We must be patient” followed by her speech that she is saddened at the prospect of her father’s body being laid to rest “i’ the cold ground” creates a death connection (4.5.68, 70). For what should they be patient? Death is the obvious answer as she goes on to speak about her own father’s death. Death comes for us all, and in Ophelia’s case she knows that with the corruptness of the court, their days are numbered. It also means that in death she will be reunited with her father. Her parting words to King Claudius are rife with irony. She thanks him for his good counsel yet he has said virtual nothing to her; it is she who has tried to counsel him. Her words, like most words of Shakespeare’s fools, have fallen on deaf ears.

Ophelia’s final scene showcases her subjectivity and importance as a madwoman and a fool. She is dressed in a nightgown with flowing, unkempt hair. She is carrying flowers, singing, and oblivious to the scandal she is causing. Elaine Showalter, in her groundbreaking essay, “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism,” explains that Ophelia’s flowers “suggest the discordant double images of female sexuality as both innocent blossoming and whorish contamination” (224). In Shakespeare’s England, there was the commonly held belief that “female madness was a part of female nature,” that there was a direct correlation between female sexuality and female insanity (Showalter 225). Ophelia’s singing of bawdy songs and presenting flowers was in keeping with this notion of female madness as a result of adolescent sexual awakening or self-awareness.

Perceived as a madwoman, Ophelia is free and able to express her subjectivity in the profoundly patriarchal world of *Hamlet*. Her father is dead and about to be buried, her brother is away at school, and her love, Prince Hamlet, has not only seemingly repudiated and abandoned her, but also murdered her father. Much like Juliet of *Romeo and Juliet*, whose lover murdered her kinsman, Ophelia is torn between her love for Hamlet-- murderer of her father-- and loyalty to her father. This struggle adds to her precarious mental state, but it does not sway her allegiance to one over the other. As seen in her dispensing of flowers scene, Ophelia holds the memory of both Hamlet and her father close to her. As a woman gone mad, Ophelia is liberated from the yoke of male oppression. She is free to say and do what she wants; she is the Shakespearean fool espousing truths that her counterparts cannot and will not heed.

Ophelia returns to court singing “And in his grave rain'd many a tear:--/ Fare you well, my dove!” (4.5.166). She is singing a song about the funeral of her father, but she is also being honest in her irony. She refers to her dead father as a dove which is a bird most closely associated with being a symbol of peace and goodwill. It was the bird Noah sent out into the world after the flood to find dry land. The dove returned with an olive leaf in its beak which is why the olive branch and dove both signify peace. To refer to her father, the master manipulator himself, as a dove is quite preposterous. Nothing in his actions brought about peace and reconciliation; if anything, he was the harbinger of discord and heartbreak. He sent a spy to publicly slander his son's good name; he forced Ophelia to sever all ties with Hamlet and return the prince's letters; with Claudius, he used Ophelia as bait while spying on Hamlet in 3.1; he stood behind the Queen's tapestry to spy on Hamlet. The man was the antithesis of peace and yet his daughter calls him a dove. Yes, she has gone mad, but she is the madwoman/fool who tells the truth, even in irony.



Ophelia once again references the Wheel of Fortune as she sings aloud “O, how the wheel becomes it!” (4.5.171). She is warning any that will listen, that the wheel indeed is moving and those who were once blessed may soon find themselves on the downward side of fortune. Her statement that it is the “false steward, that stole his master's daughter” symbolizes any trusted individual welcomed into a man’s home who betrays that man’s trust and steals his most prized possession whether that be his daughter, wife, crown, or trust. It is a sort of blanket call to reconciliation for those at court guilty of betrayal (Claudius, Gertrude, etc.). Although disjointed and chaotic, Ophelia’s words are full of reason and warning. She is vocalizing what she knows to be true because she has subjectivity and she acts as Shakespeare’s fool. In this instance, Ophelia, like her fellow Shakespearean fools, is playing with words and meanings to convey her astute knowledge and agency. She sees what they do not.

In her most famous speaking scene, Ophelia doles out flowers to the main characters. As she gives out each of the six flowers she tells the recipients:

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray,  
love, remember: and there is pansies. that's for thoughts...  
There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue  
for you; and here's some for me: we may call it  
herb-grace o' Sundays: O you must wear your rue with  
a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you  
some violets, but they withered all when my father  
died: they say he made a good end. . . .

(4.5.174-175,177-183)

Rosemary is a symbol of remembrance often given out at weddings and funerals, as David Bevington points out (n. at 4.5.179). Given that Laertes's final words to Ophelia before he left for school, the rosemary was probably intended for him. In that scene, Laertes told her: "Farewell, Ophelia; and remember well/ What I have said to you" (1.3.83-84). Ophelia dutifully responded: "'Tis in my memory lock'd,/ And you yourself shall keep the key of it" (1.3.85-86). Perhaps the gift of rosemary is to remind Laertes that she has not forgotten what she promised so long ago, and that he himself promised not to be a hypocrite extolling lessons of morality without applying it to himself. It would make her "pray you, love, remember" more appropriate to Laertes than Gertrude or Claudius, especially since she never referred to either one as "love" (4.5.174-175).

The pansies also belong to Laertes, as those flowers derive perhaps from the French *pensees* "thoughts" (Bevington, n. at 4.5.180). Ophelia herself says "pansies, that's for thoughts" (4.5.175). It could be Ophelia's way of telling her brother that his thoughts and worries for her virtue and chastity were unheeded or it could be a ploy of Shakespeare's madwoman/fool to warn Laertes to think before he acts; a warning thought heeded could have spared the youth from dying at the end of his own poisoned sword.

The next recipient of Ophelia's flowers is Gertrude who receives the fennel and columbines. According to Bevington, "*fennel* betokens flattery; *columbines*, unchastity or ingratitude" (n. at 4.5.184). Queen Gertrude exudes both flower characteristics. She married her husband's brother less than two months after his death, and even confessed to her son:

O Hamlet, speak no more:

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;

And there I see such black and grained spots  
As will not leave their tinct.

(3.4.94-96)

Hamlet, for his part, speaks one of the most famously misquoted phrases of the play: “Frailty, thy name is woman” (1.2.146). He knows his mother was taken in by Claudius’s flattery, that her incestuous act of marrying her dead husband’s brother was an act of unchastity and ingratitude to Old King Hamlet’s memory and legacy. Thus, it is only fitting that Ophelia, the supposedly mad woman, would present the Queen with these very telling flowers.

The final bestowing of flowers goes to King Claudius, whom Ophelia gives rue and a daisy. Rue was seen as an “emblem of repentance” (Bevington, n. at 4.5.185). It explains why Ophelia says it is the “herb-grace o’ Sundays” (4.5.180). Repentance is the act of acknowledging one’s wrongdoings which is why it is called the herb of Sundays as people go to church to confess as an act of contrition to repent for their sins. By giving King Claudius the herb Ophelia is, in full view of the court, publically denouncing him as a sinner. Granted, all people sin, some minor and some major, but for Ophelia, an unmarried female of limited prospects, to openly bestow an emblem of repentance on the reigning monarch -- that is unheard of and eye-opening to say the least. The fact that people perceive her as mad somewhat negates her action, but it is an action that she freely acted upon without male manipulation or interference. She is the responsible party calling out the King. She is the one broadcasting that something is amiss. She continues her gifts of truth as she gives the King a daisy, symbol of “love’s victims and faithlessness” (Bevington, n. at 4.5.187). King Hamlet is a victim of his brotherly love; he trusted Claudius and Claudius used that love to betray and kill him. King Claudius is a faithless person, he failed to believe he could be happy without usurping and stealing everything of his brother,

even his brother's wife. The King's faithlessness in people explains why he constantly maneuvers his subjects about (Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Laertes, etc.) to create situations for his advantage, yet only result in the King's own demise and misfortune.

The last flower Ophelia wants to give away is the violet, and that to herself.

Unfortunately, "they withered all when my father died" (4.5.182-183). Violets are symbols of faithfulness and Ophelia was full of faith in many things and people until her father's death. She rested her faith in her filial obligation, her love of Hamlet and his of hers, her brother's well-meaning love, the goodness of the court, even the honesty of the monarchs. The faith she placed in her world of social dictates and expectations did not protect her from the corruption at court. It could not save her father, could not reunite her with Hamlet, and it could not shield her from the realities of life without male sovereigns.

Ophelia ends her gift giving with a dark comedy pun. She tells the court, "They say [my father] made a good end" (4.5.183). Her father was stabbed to death; the end of his life came at the end of a sword. A bit morbid, but humorous nonetheless. And honest. Ophelia is nothing but honest at this point.

She continues her song as she sings "For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy" (4.5.184). Robins are the unofficial national bird of England. Perhaps this is Shakespeare's way of infusing his Danish play with some English national pride. It could also be that he was trying to create a connection between Ophelia and Jesus Christ. Biblical legend believes a robin came to pluck the thorns from Christ's crown of thorns and some of His blood fell onto the brown robin's chest. The bird instantly turned red giving birth the robin red breast. The bird, like Christ, symbolizes renewal and rebirth. Ophelia's words that the "sweet Robin is all my joy" may explain that she no longer worries about the trials and tribulations of this life for she has given herself over to the

Lord. Or it could be that she feels reborn, a woman born anew ready to claim her life as her own. Given her subjectivity and Christian-themed words, either interpretation seems applicable.

Ophelia ends her singing with a song about a man who has gone to his deathbed and will never come again. It is a farewell to her father. She ends the song with an exclamatory “God ha’ mercy on his soul!” (4.5.196). She ends the scene and her physical speaking, thinking, acting presence in the play with a spiritual plea: have mercy on “all Christian souls, I pray God. God b’wi’ you” (4.5.197). Her final words are for God to bestow mercy on the souls of all Christians and specifically, on her countrymen at court with her. She acts on their behalf, praying to God to help them. This is her finally act and speech: to gain God’s favor for others.

Until the advent of feminist criticism in the twentieth century, Ophelia has been relegated to the attic of criticism of *Hamlet*. Her story was one of “rejection and marginalization by male critics of Shakespeare” (Showalter 221). She was dismissed as “that piece of bait named Ophelia,” a flat character, a trampoline upon which Hamlet’s character could pounce and soar (Lacan 16). Her thoughts, actions, and words were rarely addressed and often when they were became sideshow banter of the ineptness of woman, the typical madwoman of insignificance. Today, Ophelia can be seen as both an objectified female and a woman with subjectivity. The rise of feminist criticism, combined with the proliferation of female empowerment on the stage and on the screen, has erected a new vision of Ophelia, one that does not confine her to the realm of trivial minor character. In criticism, as in the text, Ophelia has evolved from just an objectified female character to a thinking, speaking, acting autonomous subject.

Ophelia first shows signs of her budding subjectivity in her thoughts and opinions to Hamlet in Act 3. She chooses to address the prince when it suits her, she chides him, and she decides when to refer to him as “my lord.” Later, as her madness has taken hold, she most

readily declares her thoughts through her words and actions. Gone is the silent and obedient Ophelia who willfully went to her Elizabethan fate of insignificance, much the same way that Jephthah's daughter accepted her fate. As Showalter asserts, "Mad Ophelia's bawdy songs and verbal license . . . seem to be her one sanctioned form of self-assertion as a woman, quickly followed, as if in retribution, by her death" (224-225). Ophelia projected the role of madwoman/fool speaking the truth and manipulating words to convey the reality of the court. Mullini argues that fools like Touchstone and Feste were endowed by Shakespeare with "extraordinary powers of speech... [that allowed] the fool's acute sense of the semantics and rhetoric of language ... to subvert -- for a magical moment -- the hierarchal order of the speakers" (27). Ophelia, in all her seemingly mad glory, played this fool of truth and subversion. Ophelia is the one in power publically illuminating facts about King Claudius and Queen Gertrude. Ophelia warns and chastises, foretells and declares.

Ophelia is able to express her subjectivity in her madness because she is caught in a world of inexperience and uncertainty. She has always been the object of Polonius's rule, she has never had to formally think, act, or speak for herself. Up until the moment of her father's death, Ophelia never had to engage anyone or anything without explicit instructions given by her father, with the exception of her moments with Hamlet. Ophelia was the epitome of female submission and silence, the maiden lauded with virtuous and obedient behavior. Ophelia does not know how to function in a world without her father's objectifications of her. At the same time, without those objectifications, she is free to *try* being a subject. Her madness is a result of both her inexperience with autonomy and her confused state of acting without guidance and manipulation. A toddler first learning to walk will stumble and fall many times before gaining his footing, and yet like that toddler, Ophelia first learned to take those timid first steps in subjectivity in her

moments with Hamlet when she posed questions of him and did not always address him in the superior reverence of “my lord.”

Despite her newfound subjectivity, truthfulness of thoughts, and liberating state, Ophelia is rarely remembered for subjectivity. She is, rather, remembered for her madness. Ophelia’s true tragedy in the profoundly patriarchal world of *Hamlet* is that she can publically express her subjectivity only in her insanity.

## Conclusion

What began as a simple question: Who is Ophelia? transpired into a daunting task riddled with questions, assumptions, myths, conjectures, and feelings. Ophelia appeals to the masses because of what she makes each of us feel: pity, sadness, regret, confusion. She is a character about whom many wonder, but whom they rarely explore. Marginalized by many critics as nothing more than “an essential pivot in the hero’s progress toward his mortal rendezvous” and objectified by others as the epitome of the egregious nature of patriarchal societies, Ophelia has experienced a plethora of opinions and summations (Lacan 18). What I aimed to present here is the view of Ophelia in two parts: the objectified female with whom most people are familiar; and Ophelia as subject, the autonomous woman espousing truth in her madness.

Ophelia is more than just the person who has “the good fortune to be the first person Hamlet runs into after his unsettling encounter with the ghost” (Lacan 20). What Lacan, and his contemporaries, fail to realize is Hamlet sought Ophelia out for a reason. There is purpose in his action to reach out to her in the very moments after seeing and speaking to his dead father’s ghost. He did not seek out his mother or even his confidant Horatio; Hamlet chose Ophelia because she is the one for whom he felt most readily able to comfort him, quell his fears, give him assurance, and a plethora of other feelings of condolence. He sought her out for she obviously was the one he turned to in his time of need; she is his priority and safety. When one is scared, nervous, unsure, or apprehensive, the person whom one seeks is the most important person to fulfill or alleviate one’s needs. Ophelia is that safeguard for Hamlet. He sought her out because she provides him with some sort of assurance and safety. He would not have gone to her in those very scary and vulnerable moments after witnessing his father’s ghost if she was not important to him and a sense of dependency for him.



Ophelia's objectification by both her father and brother is a direct correlation to the prescribed social beliefs of Elizabethan England. All women (mothers, daughters, sisters) of this era are seen as extensions of a man's property and under his dominion. In *The Art of Loving*, Evelyn Gajowski explains that Desdemona's father and husband are incapable of "understanding Desdemona's subjectivity; that is, comprehending in her a humanity that overrides her relationship to either of them" (64). This is applicable to Ophelia as well since her male sovereigns—Polonius and Laertes—fail to acknowledge, much less cultivate, Ophelia's subjectivity.

Polonius and Laertes objectify Ophelia because they fear her sexuality and what her presumed promiscuity will do to them socially and politically. Living in a patriarchal society such as Elizabethan England requires adherence to certain social constructs. "The institution of patriarchal marriage grants the father control of the daughter's sexuality until marriage when it becomes the possession and responsibility of the husband. A man's trustworthiness in worldly matters is called into question if it is known that he cannot manage his own household, that is, control the sexuality of a daughter or a wife" (Gajowski 64). For Laertes, Ophelia must remain pure and virginal to maintain his positive reputation as an admirable man worthy of marriage prospects. Polonius is the adviser to the King. He must project an unblemished persona of control and trustworthiness. To have a disobedient and sexually active daughter would destroy his carefully constructed public image and cost him his livelihood. He would appear a fool which, given his propensity for manipulation and machinations, would have been more humiliating than the fact his daughter was no longer a marriageable pawn.

Furthermore, Ophelia is not just an objectified female or even solely the victim of tragedy or patriarchy. As Shakespeare scholar Evelyn Gajowski so eloquently penned "to view the deaths

of the tragic females as victimizations of patriarchy—and no more than that—is to ignore the commentary that Shakespeare’s texts make upon masculine impulses of possession, politics, and power” (22). Ophelia is more than just the tragic victim who drowns towards the end of the play; she is a thinking, speaking, acting female who gains her subjectivity through her madness. The loss of both her father and her love, Hamlet, resulted in her mad state, but it granted her freedom to exercise her subjectivity freely and openly. Prior to her mad state, Ophelia had only exhibited a limited view of her subjectivity in her exchanges with Hamlet.

During the performance of the *Mouse-Trap* play, Ophelia and Hamlet enjoy a tit-for-tat exchange that allows the audience a small glimpse into the former couple’s relationship. Ophelia freely speaks her thoughts and even chides the Prince. She does not always address him in the reverential “my lord” nor does she wait for him to address her first before speaking. She endures Hamlet’s bawdy sexual innuendos despite his saying them in public view and putting her good reputation to question. She trusts Hamlet and in turn is comfortable enough to express herself. This is the budding of what will later become her subjectivity in her madness.

The Mad Ophelia is often depicted in artwork such as paintings, photographs, and playbills. She is seen in a disheveled state, hair flowing and unkempt, singing bawdy songs, and giving out flowers. For all the fanfare and attention given to her state of madness, who Ophelia is in this in these mad scenes is often overlooked or ignored. She is mad, but she is also honest and relishing her subjectivity. She speaks without being spoken to, sings about sexual rendezvous and double standards, she warns and chides the monarchs, and she acts the way she feels: chaotic and confused, but free. As a madwoman, Ophelia experiences a liberated state free of the commands and dictates of her male sovereigns, specifically her manipulating father and overbearing brother. She acts as Shakespeare’s fool, freely expressing to both King Claudius and

Queen Gertrude their vices and shortcomings. Ophelia fails in her attempt to convey to the monarchs and even Laertes, the truth of the corrupt situation at Castle Elsinore. Where she is successful is fulfilling the Elizabethan audience's fear of female sexuality; a woman gone mad with grief lets loose her speech, thoughts, and emotions. She is unrestrained and therefore, a threat and an abomination.

Ophelia is pigeon-holed into many roles by audience members and critics alike. For some, she is nothing more than a trifling minor character whose sole purpose is to propel Hamlet's story. For others, she is the tragic mad woman doling out flowers and singing songs before her beautiful watery death. Who she is amounts to more than the sum of her parts: dutiful daughter, obedient sister, chaste maid, madwoman, object, and subject. She is a female caught between loyalty to her father and attachment to Hamlet. She is lost in a patriarchal world without confidant or sister to share her thoughts and feelings. She becomes the surrogate for Hamlet's insecurities and frustrations about his mother. She is Shakespeare's fool. She is both the silent, obedient, chaste maid that epitomizes proper female conduct, and she is the fear come to fruition for many members of Elizabethan England's patriarchal society: liberated and free with her speech, action, and thoughts. Ophelia is complex in her simplicity, deep in what appears to be superficial. Ophelia's exclamation at Hamlet's degraded mental state-- "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" -- is really a reflection of herself: a noble spirit overthrown by the dictates of patriarchy and the freedom of subjectivity in madness (3.1.149).

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**TYNELLE ANN OLIVAS**

45 Avenida Arenas, Henderson, NV 89074 | 760-455-1049 | Olivas11@hotmail.com

**EDUCATION**

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV

**Master of Arts, English**

**Expected 2015**

Thesis: "Who is Ophelia? An Examination of the Objectification and Subjectivity of Shakespeare's Ophelia"

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV

**Bachelor of Arts, English**

**2001**

Minor: History

**Bachelor of Arts, Secondary Education**

Major focus: English

**AWARDS**

Graduate Assistantship, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

August 2014 – May 2015

High Desert *Teachers R Heroes*: Teacher of the Month nominee

October 2010

Earned the highest Advanced Placement scores for AP English Language and Composition

2008-2013

B House Teacher of the Year

2005-2006

Earned the second highest CST scores English I and II

2003-2006

International Student Teaching, New Zealand

May – August 2000

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

**Instructor- English 102**

**Spring 2015**

Developed syllabus and overall course structure. Responsible for teaching, modeling, monitoring, and assessing student learning. Assisted students with improving reading, writing, and communication skills. Incorporated technology into daily lessons as well as monthly projects utilizing programs such as all Microsoft programs, WebCampus, and RebelMail. Collaborated with other Graduate Assistants regarding lesson plans, unit programs, various teaching and assessment strategies, dissemination of data, and best teaching practices.

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

**Instructor- English 101**

**Fall 2014**

Developed syllabus and overall course structure. Responsible for teaching, modeling, monitoring, and assessing student learning. Assisted students with improving reading, writing, and communication skills. Incorporated technology into daily lessons as well as monthly projects utilizing programs such as all Microsoft programs, WebCampus, and RebelMail. Collaborated with other Graduate Assistants regarding lesson plans, unit programs, various teaching and assessment strategies, dissemination of data, and best teaching practices.

Marvin M. Sedway Middle School, North Las Vegas, NV

**Educator- English Language Arts 8 and Accelerated English Language Arts 8**

**2013-2014**

Responsible for teaching, modeling, monitoring, and assessing student learning. Assisted students with improving reading, writing, and communication skills. Incorporated technology into daily lessons as well as monthly projects utilizing programs such as all Microsoft programs, Edmodo, eBackpack, Keynote, Notability, Pages, iMovie, iBooks, and iBooks Author. Collaborated with the 8th grade ELA team regarding lesson plans, unit programs, various testing systems (Datawise, Discovery Launch, Scholastic Reading Inventory, Smarter Balance), dissemination of data, and best teaching practices.

Barstow High School, Barstow, CA

**2003-2013**

**Educator- English Language, Literature and Composition, and Journalism (all levels)**

Taught at all levels and skill sets: English Lab 1 and 2; CAHSEE English; Pre-AP and English I: Composite Literature; Pre-AP and English II: World Literature; English III: American Literature; English IV: British Literature; Advanced Placement English Language and Composition; Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition; Introduction to Journalism;

Advanced Journalism; Talk-Write after school program; and English as a Second Language tutoring.

Whangamata Area School, Whangamata, New Zealand

May-August 2000

**Student Teacher: English and History**

Taught students in Forms 1-7 (American 6th-12th grades). Created cross-curricular assignments to incorporate whole learning. Developed lesson plans, assessed student learning, and maintained all records. Applied student-based learning techniques and theories.

RELATED EXPERIENCE

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

**Writing Center Consultant**

Fall 2014

Assisted students in improving their writing skills by specifically employing hands-on activities to guide the students in the proper use of Standard American English and grammar usage. The majority of students that come in are international students, so the needs and exercises vary, allowing for a diversity of educational experiences.

Educational Testing Service- Advanced Placement Program

**Advanced Placement Reader- AP English Language and Composition**

2011 – Present

Employed and certified by Educational Testing Service (ETS) to rate Advanced Placement Language and Composition exam essays from students around the USA. In one week's time, I read and rate about 1,200 student essays. The event hosts nightly professional development sessions and qualifies for Continuing Education Units.

Sedway Middle School/University of Nevada, Las Vegas

**Lead Educator and Facilitator**

August 2013 – February

2014

Collaborated with Principal Dr. Zachary Robbins, English Language Arts 8 team, Professor Rachel Anderson from the UNLV Boyd School of Law, and Doreen Spears Hartwell, President of the Las Vegas Chapter of the National Bar Association, to create, facilitate, and implement our inaugural case study on Voter's Rights. Researched and taught various elements of the Nevada Voter's Rights Laws to Accelerated 8<sup>th</sup> grade English students, assisted those students in compiling legal arguments for violations to said laws in regards to our mock case study, and helped present at the UNLV Boyd School of Law. Facilitated small group learning between the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students and law students in preparation for the presentation at UNLV in front of the law school faculty and students, as well as Commissioner Lawrence Weekly.

European Carousel, Education First International Tours

**Tour Leader**

2004-2014

Organized and conducted high school students on a 15-17 day tour of Europe (Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, France, and England). Helped students research the countries we visited, learn basic phrases for each country visited, and monitored students while on tour. I lead seven student tours with a cumulative total of 50 students and parents.

CONFERENCES

*International Journal of Arts and Sciences*

"Ophelia as Subject"

March 2015

*BritGrad Conference*

"Ophelia's Subjectivity"

June 2015

LANGUAGES

English- Native language

French- read and translate with basic competence

Spanish- read, speak, and write with basic competence

MEMBERSHIPS

Jane Austen Society of North America

Alpha Delta Pi Sorority, Pi status

National Educators Association

California Teachers Association

Nevada Educators Association