Noble Minds and Nymphs: The Tragic Romance of Hamlet and Ophelia

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Scholars have sometimes placed Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship into the Romeo and Juliet category of young star-crossed lovers, cursed by fate and circumstance. However, though circumstance does drive the development and eventual termination of their relationship, the romance ultimately fails because Hamlet and Ophelia do not share the same fundamental understanding of love. Hamlet is idealistic and aspires to have the soul of a poet, while Ophelia is more comfortable in reality. Even if the characters feel for one another, their inability to reconcile their definitions of love compromises their ability to communicate and essentially dooms the relationship. When tested by demanding and traumatic circumstances, the love of Hamlet and Ophelia cannot survive.

Hamlet is a melodramatic character and sees himself as a philosopher-poet, though his role in the play prevents him from truly achieving this status. His first appearance reveals him to be a moody, contemplative, troubled youth lamenting the death of his father and marriage of his mother to his uncle. Soon after he is introduced, his mother tries to comfort him and persuade him to dispense with grief, asking, "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.75). Immediately,

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Hamlet rebukes his mother for assuming his countenance and appearance betray insincerity and retorts, "'Seems,' madam? Nay, it is. I know not 'seems.' / …I have that within which passes show" (1.2.76, 84). This exchange establishes Hamlet as a young man who deals with emotions in the superlative, feeling deeply and indiscriminately. In his first soliloquy, he waxes poetical, referring to the agony he has suffered as a result of his circumstances even before the ghost appears to introduce greater conflict (1.2.75). He mentions his "sallied flesh," and the "unprofitable...uses of [the] world," in a prolonged lamentation of his position, and his rumination as a whole is filled with metaphors, many of which are references to nature and Greek mythology—two subjects often the focus of classical poets and scholars (1.2.129, 133-134). Being not only learned but royally educated, Hamlet is obviously intelligent, but he does not apply his mind to facts and analyze his situation rationally. Instead, he retreats inward and wraps himself up in a virtuous yet tortured persona, denying himself the ability to move on as his mother, uncle, and other members of the kingdom have done.

Though he aspires to have the soul of a poet, Hamlet does not quite have the ability to transform himself entirely into one, as evident in his letters to Ophelia, which give a glimpse into his views of love. He writes:

> "Doubt thou the stars are fire,
> Doubt that the sun doth move,
> Doubt truth to be a liar,
> But never doubt I love." (2.2.115-118).

While Hamlet's claims of affection are grand, measured against such sureties as the laws of the universe, Harold C. Goddard remarks that they might be entirely unoriginal, more suited to "Osric addressing some Elizabethan maid of honor" rather than "a man with a deep capacity for affection and a rare power to express it simply and directly"

(403). That is, Hamlet's verse does not distinguish him from many other Renaissance poets who set their beloveds on pedestals and view them from a distance through rose-colored glasses. Perhaps, however, his intent is not to be set apart but to join the classically romantic fraternity no doubt encountered in his studies at Wittenberg.

Hamlet attempts to reproduce in himself and identify in others the physical manifestation of ideal abstractions; he strives to be a theorist and a philosopher with a lover's brooding melancholy, not a thoughtful lover. A. P. Rossiter even goes so far as to link Hamlet with noted philosophers of Shakespeare's day, claiming that his reflections parallel "the skepticism of Montaigne...which set men's minds to the discovery of what in this mutable world was enduring and stable, and whose method led to Descartes [and his] method of doubt" (qtd. in Cefalu 401). If Hamlet's character is such that he is inherently prone to paving the way for modern philosophy, the conflict introduced when his father's ghost commands him to take action is easy to anticipate. A thinker placed in the role of a doer, Hamlet acknowledges and bemoans this tragic casting by saying, "The time is out of joint: oh, cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right," invoking poetic references to time and destiny (2.1.189-190). His philosophical tendencies become his tragic flaw. Unlike Fortinbras or Laertes, Hamlet is unable to turn from introspection to action when tasked to avenge his father. Hamlet is "an unwilling instrument in the gradual drift towards disaster...a perfect example of an idealist who shrinks from accepting the role forced upon him" (Javed 327). Hamlet's idealism, compounded by his continual self-examination, not only contributes to the play's tragic end, but proves problematic in his relationship with Ophelia as well.

In contrast to Hamlet's psychological intellectualism, Ophelia is a relatively quiet, trusting, and practical young woman. She first appears in the middle of Act I, speaking with her brother Laertes, who warns her not to invest herself too much in the "trifling of [Hamlet's] favor"

(1.3.5). Laertes' advice is gentle, albeit shallow, and Ophelia shows that she is not foolish by regifting her brother's warnings back to him with a jab at the double standard between the sexes: "Do not, as some ungracious pastors do / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven / Whiles, a puffed and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads / And recks not his own rede" (1.3.46-49). Polonius later reinforces Laertes's words and he demands that his daughter disregard Hamlet's "vows, for they are brokers / Not of that dye which their investments show / But mere implorators of unholy suits, / Breathing like sanctified and pious bonds / The better to beguile" (1.3.126-130). Though Hamlet's attention draws her in, pragmatism tempers any idealism, and she tells her father that Hamlet "hath importuned me with love / In honorable fashion...And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord, / With almost all the holy vows of heaven" (1.3.109-110, 112-113). Ophelia takes note of Hamlet's conduct towards her, which proves that she is concerned with love not just as emotion, but as a necessary element of courtship that must be expressed and displayed properly. Her father's desires ultimately eclipse Hamlet's determination, and she answers her father, "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.135). Some scholars make the argument that her passivity is be due to her limited social mobility as a woman, but James J. Marino dismisses this theory:

> It was normal and unremarkable for daughters in Shakespeare's England or medieval Denmark to obey a father and thus deny a lover. But Ophelia is fictional, not governed by the laws of nations nor of nature but by literary convention. In an Elizabethan or Jacobean playhouse, the conventional result of Polonius's command should be Ophelia's elopement (822).

Ophelia's adherence to cultural convention rather than literary convention gives her character a paradoxical uniqueness considering the typicality of her position among Renaissance women. In fact, Ophelia is the only daughter in Shakespeare's canon to renounce a lover to appease her father. For this reason, her actions must be linked more directly to her own nature than her sex. She finds peace in predictability, does not to stray too far from accepted fact, and does not cross over into existential pondering. Counteracting Hamlet's long soliloquies, after being prompted to voice her thoughts on two separate occasions, she offers the replies "I do not know, my lord, what I should think," and "I think nothing, my lord" as evidence of her unassuming nature (1.3.103, 3.2.105). Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia does not seem prone to soliloquize on her emotions or question extensively what she is told; she is "a tenderhearted, delicate-minded young girl, well reared in proper obedience to her father, and experiencing what is apparently her first introduction to the bittersweet delights of love," but she is also likely aware that love is more than just a fantasy for starry-eyed youngsters (Camden 249). Even though she initially defends Hamlet's sincerity, she must have some inclination that the kind of warning issued to her by her father might in some cases be applicable to a blossoming relationship. Thus, she finds herself able to yield to his better judgment, believing naively yet understandably in his wisdom and experience as her father and authority figure. While her view of love is grounded in observable action, Hamlet's remains untethered, which creates a barrier that hinders their communication and is only aggravated by his dedication to avenge his father's death.

Hamlet's climatic interaction with Ophelia at the beginning of Act III further demonstrates the irreconcilable differences in their characters and clearly presents opposing views of love that ultimately lead to the end of the relationship—Hamlet sees Ophelia as a romantic entity; Ophelia sees Hamlet as a willing caretaker. Before he notices

Ophelia, Hamlet is pondering the great question "To be or not to be…" and, in keeping with his philosophic demeanor, meditates on the relationships between life and death, suffering and relief (3.1.55). In his rumination, he lists "the pangs of despised love" among other noble tortures like "the spurns that patient merit of th'unworthy takes" and places them all in the category of "the whips and scorns of time" (3.1. 69-73). This reflection suggests that Hamlet views love, especially despised love, as yet another idea to be contemplated. He does not separate love in any way from the other abstract concepts he mentions; they are all subjects to be dealt with in idealistic or romantic terms, worthy musings for a classical Grecian philosopher-poet. At the end of his soliloquy, Ophelia makes her entrance, and Hamlet acknowledges her presence: "Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins remembered," referring directly to Greek mythology with the word "nymph" and imposing upon Ophelia the role of animated innocence—youthful, nubile, and perhaps even divine (3.1.88-89). He earlier names her "the celestial and my soul's idol, the most beautified Ophelia" (2.2.115-118). These characterizations imply that Hamlet does not believe Ophelia's role to be that of a partner or lover, but rather, a vessel into which he may pour his own ideas about love.

Seeing her as a receptacle for his ideals, Hamlet believes his relationship with Ophelia gives him the ability to interact with an embodiment of the abstract. The possibility arises that he loves her either because she is his self-created reflection of the purest form of love or because he sees in her a willing potential to conform to his standards if not eventually meet them. However, while his perception of her may be faulty, it is not necessarily unkind or insincere. Hamlet's tendency towards lofty thinking clouds his judgment and, arguably, could even contribute to his inaction in the first half of the play, and Ophelia can simply be seen as a victim of his poetic yearning. It is possible that Hamlet's love for Ophelia is filtered through his own mind and

translated into a form that would better match his own interpretation. Instead of recognizing his love and acting upon it, again, as Laertes or Fortinbras might be able to in a similar situation, Hamlet elevates his feelings into abstraction, thereby distancing himself from them without ignoring them.

Unlike Hamlet, Ophelia's views of love once again seem to be more grounded and practical. Obedient to her father's wishes, she behaves like one who is accustomed to the social rules of love by returning Hamlet's letters, saying "My lord, I have remembrances of yours / That I have longèd long to redeliver; / I pray you now receive them" (3.1.92-94). Ophelia's gesture shows how important physical tokens of affection are both to herself and to the customs of the time period. Loreen L. Giese observes that such gifts were not unprecedented in an Elizabethan courtship, the customs of which Shakespeare seems to establish as the cultural romantic standard in *Hamlet*. At the turn of the fifteenth century, "rings...were the third most common gift exchanged prior to marriage, preceded by items of clothing and personal accessories (the most common) and money" (Thompson 635). While Hamlet's letters may be considered slightly less romantic since they fail to rank among the more popular tokens, they can still be considered one of the "tenders of...affection" Ophelia speaks of in Act I, since they were given freely by a marriageable young person to a marriageable young member of the opposite sex (1.3.98-99). Giese also notes, however, that gifts "were all subject to interpretation in different ways by the parties involved," and Ophelia's interpretation of Hamlet's letters shows her practicality with regard to the relationship (Thompson 635). She speaks of his "remembrances" and letters with "words of so sweet breath composed / As made these things more rich," implying that even if the words had been poorly written or the sentiment badly expressed, the gesture of giving in itself was enough to solidify his affection in her eyes (3.1.92, 97-98). This statement substantiates Ophelia's desire for the

comforts of predictability and custom. Polonius remarks on her limited life experience when he tells her to be wary of Hamlet, saying, "You speak like a green girl / Unsifted in such perilous circumstance" (1.3.100-101). As a young woman with an unassuming social position and a domineering father, Ophelia has grown accustomed to a certain security found in the conventionality of simply being a woman and her father's daughter. Her involvement with Hamlet provides her with both an illusion of independence as a partner in a relationship and a promise of a safe transition from her father's care in role of daughter to the safety of a husband's care in the role of wife. To Ophelia, Hamlet's letters are evidence of his desire to fulfill the duties of suitor and potential husband, and in rejecting them, she does not necessarily reject his affection, but rather his course of action that should customarily precede matrimony. Unfortunately, Hamlet does not see her obedience to her father and her returning the letters as dutiful or customary acts; he mocks her by asking, "Are you honest?...Are you fair?" (3.1.102,104). His cruelty may be understandable, however, when viewed in the light of his own attitude towards his gifts to Ophelia.

Again trying to be the philosopher-poet, Hamlet's written affection memorializes his devotion in sonnets and songs. His remembrances are accompanied by letters, some of which are written in verse, like the one Polonius presented to Gertrude and Claudius in Act II, betraying the importance of words to their author. If Ophelia is Hamlet's vessel for ideal love, then there is no better way to convey his feelings than in written word, the vessel for ideal immortalization of pure emotion, especially for one who "know(s) not 'seems'" (1.2.76). Hamlet feels love deeply, as the romantic poet who deals in abstract superlatives should. In keeping with his character and philosophy, he must feel his love's rejection with equal depth—a reaction that Ophelia neither expects nor understands completely. After he denounces her, she remarks, "Oh, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown," suspecting

that he has succumbed to madness (3.1.147). Her exclamation signifies that she does not possess a full enough understanding of Hamlet's nature to realize his vehemence and loquacity are an attempt to parallel the dramatized emotion of the ideal poet or spurned lover. Essentially at a communicative standstill, Hamlet and Ophelia's formal romantic relationship meets a piteous end.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has provided scholars with enough topics for debate to last over four hundred years, but in the confusion, they often dismiss Hamlet and Ophelia's relationship as less significant than Hamlet's relationship with his father, mother, or uncle. However, the relationship and interactions between Hamlet and Ophelia are just as complex and perhaps more tragic than the others in the play. Their personalities could easily have complemented each other in a successful romantic partnership: Hamlet's philosophical nature and Ophelia's more practical viewpoints, when applied to persons in a relationship, may illustrate Shakespeare's awareness of the fact that opposites do sometimes attract. Unfortunately and tragically, though, the problem still lies in their inability to recognize and effectively communicate their ideas and expectations with regard to love.

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