

Water and Woman: Ophelia's Femininity in the Elizabethan Age

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ABSTRACT

To further the studies about Shakespeare's Ophelia in the play *Hamlet*, this paper will discuss Ophelia and her femininity by looking at the association between water and woman. By exploring the attributes of the dew and Ophelia's womanhood, as well as the connection between the two, we can find the implied features of Ophelia's femininity including the delicacy, hollowness, and the duality of purity and eroticism in the femininity. Moreover, the paper will correspond Ophelia's womanhood to the Elizabethan expectations for woman. Ophelia thus can become an example for the female victims who were much required and expected by the patriarchal gender ideology. As for the methodology, this paper will mainly employ close-reading to look into Ophelia's character and her interactions with other male characters including Hamlet and Polonius.

Keywords: *Ophelia, Shakespeare, femininity, water, woman*

1. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare portrays Ophelia a traditional submissive female in *Hamlet*, the lover of Prince Hamlet but rejecting his love and spying on him according to her father Polonius' will. Hamlet verbally abuses her and kills her father mistakenly. After that Ophelia goes mad and drowns herself in a brook. Although Shakespeare's Ophelia was repeatedly represented in later paintings and literature, she has been eclipsed by either Hamlet the male protagonist in the play or the New Women in Shakespeare's plays such as Portia and Rosalind. Feminist critics often considered Ophelia an obedient and traditional woman who can hardly make her own choice. Observing the woman's plight, feminists often showed empathy to tragic heroine and blamed patriarchal society. However, literary research has neither paid much attention to the nuance of Ophelia's femininity nor viewed the female character specifically from the perspective of her association with the image of water. What is the association between water and woman from the perspective of symbolism? How does Ophelia show her femininity other than to obey? How does *Hamlet*, a production under Elizabethan age, displays Ophelia's femininity in parallel to the patriarchal gender ideology? To answer these questions, I will discuss the association between water and woman from the perspective of symbolism in order to conclude that Shakespeare's Ophelia is an epitome of Elizabethan femininity.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This paper will mainly employ close-reading to look into Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Before furthering the investigation

on Ophelia, I will first analyze the significances of water and connect them with woman according to symbolic logic. Moreover, the paper will use feminist criticism and archetypal criticism to reveal Ophelia the female character. Lastly, I will critique the Elizabethan age and patriarchal society by employing the historical criticism.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ophelia as the heroine of a classic work enjoys less research than I expected. She often appears as a background for studies about *Hamlet*, while she herself is seldom the object for analysis. As Lee Edward pointed out, "we can imagine *Hamlet*'s story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without *Hamlet*" [4]. In addition to serving as a background for *Hamlet*, Ophelia has also been eclipsed by the New Women in Shakespearean plays. For example, Portia became the favorite character among Victorian women whereas Ophelia, who tended to serve as a negative example in feminist revolt, had been dismissed and marginalized in literary studies. Critics find Ophelia weak and unimportant, so that they pay more attention to stronger and more complicated characters.

Since Ophelia was believed to be obedient and passive, research concerning Ophelia mainly focused on her death and madness rather than her personality. Concerning her drowning, scholars such as Nosworthy argued a suicide under the cover of the accidental death. The critic claimed that Gertrude's narration of Ophelia's inadvertent drowning was "an inspired, but inconsistent, afterthought" [9]. In this occasion, Ophelia appeared to gain more agency when she chose to end her life. But Stilling argued that Ophelia's suicide was actually the last act of

obedience. [16] Ophelia permanently silenced herself by the conscious drowning, leaving no opportunity for further voicing. Disagreeing with Nosworthy and Stilling, Freudians such as Gaston Bachelard [1], Lilly Romestant [12], and Barbara Smith [15] refused to take stand of either accidental or intent. Bachelard argued that Ophelia's death was both accidental and intentional. Psychoanalysis proved that Ophelia carried out an unconscious death wish when she accidentally fell into the brook, and as Bachelard argued, Ophelia's watery death represented a desire for a very feminine death. [1] As for the insanity, Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet that Ophelia goes mad after a series of blows including her brother's leave from Denmark, Hamlet's verbal attack, and Polonius' death. [13] Lopes pointed out that all above constitute the factors which lead to her madness. [8] There are arguments that the insanity is an evidence which proves her incapability to manage her own distress, which is a feature of femininity. But Stilling regarded the insanity as a way for Ophelia to freely express herself. Through the nonsense songs, Ophelia was able to voice her pain and sorrow rather than give way to others' ideas. [16] I will further Stilling's point in my paper in order to discuss the features of Ophelia's speech in the patriarchal society.

Feminist critics usually approached Ophelia in three different ways. Firstly, to defend Ophelia by telling the whole story of her. However, we can hardly imagine her past by the little information Shakespeare provided. Besides, as I mentioned above, Ophelia often appears as a part of Hamlet's story, yet it is hard to tell her own. Secondly, French feminist criticism represented womanhood in patriarchal society mainly as madness, fluidity, and silence. Ophelia is an ideal example of the featured femininity, and therefore she helped to confirm the theory. Lastly, to regard Ophelia's story as a repressed version of Hamlet's tragedy. Since Hamlet betrays a feminine passivity in his action to revenge, critics such as David Leverenz pointed out that Hamlet denied the femininity in him. He converted the disgust towards this part of himself into the attack against woman. [7] Ophelia's death, therefore, signified the rejection against woman in a male-dominant world. [14] In the above approaches, I will use the latter two to give my account of Ophelia's role and her femininity.

Among the feminist interpretations of Ophelia, studies of eco-feminism inspired me to think on water and woman. Ecofeminists have explored the similarities between nature and woman which occurred as intertwined social issues in the past few centuries. Woman similar to Nature contributes to civilization with her power of breeding but has been exploited under the patriarchal society. Ophelia represents the victimized woman as well as the nature. She was manipulated by her father to spy on Hamlet for political end. Ophelia's drowning then is believed to be a tragic consequence of patriarchal mindsets, "a persistent reminder of human abuse, censorship, victimization, and even destruction of nature." [6] According to ecofeminist criticism, natural elements occurring along with Ophelia have profound connotations beyond what have been simply thought as poetic. Kordecki argued that Ophelia

incarnates fire, air, water, and earth, [6] among which I find water the most powerful image that relates to woman in literature. Therefore, I started to do research about the association between water and woman in literature.

The link between water and woman is evident. Water symbolizes reproduction capability, feminine sensuality, and woman's fluidity as opposing to men's aridity [14]. Alexis Wick connected water and woman through the narrative of Narcissus. The scholar traced back to the myth of Narcissus in Ovid's *Metaphores* and compared woman to Echo, saying woman's speech has been an incomplete reflection of men's words according to modern western logic. [17] Apart from Wick, Capkova likewise studied Narcissus and Ophelia by connecting them with the water-mirror motif. "Ophelia can be considered a mirror, a reflection of man for whom and through whom she exists." [3] Both Wick and Capkova pointed out the repression of woman in the male-dominant society where Ophelia exactly functions as an obedient victim to the tyrannical suppression.

Shakespeare has mixed Ophelia's innocence with Hamlet's obscene flirt, and this juxtaposition attracted me to investigate on Ophelia's innocence which had been posing a strong impression. Although Ophelia is traditionally supposed to be pure and innocent, a few critics believed in a sexual Ophelia. Stilling studied Ophelia's feminine sexuality by interpreting the image of songs and flowers, both of which symbolize the female sexual power. Ophelia's poems recalling sirens' songs signify sexual invitations. The flower resembles the female genital, and Ophelia's distribution of flowers indicates the loss of maidenhead. [16] In addition, an interpretation of Hamlet's words confirms that she lost her virginity. In Act 3 scene 1 Hamlet says to Ophelia, "we will have no more marriages" [13]. In Elizabethan vocabulary "marriage" is a synonym to sex, and thus scholars supposed that Ophelia actually had had sex with him. Therefore, a few critics denied the innocent Ophelia but defined her as a harlot instead. [10] Some even compared Ophelia to Anne Boleyn, mother of Queen Elizabeth, who obtained power by sexual allure. The contradiction of the purity and sexuality is pointed out by McGrory as the duality of Ophelia's femininity. [10] I will further the scholar's study by exploring the duality in Ophelia as well as the suggested expectations in the Elizabethan ideals for woman.

4. "MELT LIKE A DEW": OPHELIA AND HER FEMININITY

4.1. Delicacy

In Elizabethan age people believed that woman was weak. The metaphor of dew illustrates the believed weakness of woman: Woman is like the dew. Shakespeare has included this idea into one of Hamlet's monologues, "Oh, that this too, too sullied flesh would melt,/ Thaw, and resolve itself

into a dew,/ Or that the Everlasting had not fixed/ His cannon 'against self-slaughter" [13]. Hamlet expresses a suicidal wish that he could become a dew which is delicate enough to disappear simply under certain circumstances: If he were a dew he could die when sun rises or when he drops into a river, to die without being blamed of committing suicide. Hamlet does not die in the way he wished to, but his lover Ophelia accomplished the death that Hamlet had dreamed. She sinks into the water as if she was "native and endued/ Unto that element" [13] Shakespeare's description presents the dying Ophelia exactly like a dropping dew, which fits into water so naturally for the dew is intrinsically constituted of aquatic elements. What makes the drowning Ophelia disappear like the dew is the frailty and disableness, which are featured by her submission to death and the lack of agency to survive.

4.2 Hollowness

Ophelia is similar to the dew not only for the delicacy but also for a sense of hollowness. I use the word "hollowness" as apposing to solidity, as the dew has no content inside so that one can look through it. The antithesis of hollowness and solidity is illustrated in the above monologue where Hamlet claims himself to be too "sallied" to die like a dew [13]. He puns on "sallied" to mean both "solid" and "sullied" [13]. By the play of the word he expresses his inability to be as hollow and pure as the dew. Ophelia, on the other hand, accomplishes this dew-like hollowness and purity. I will focus on her hollowness this section and discuss her purity in the next one.

4.2.1. Psychological Simplicity

Ophelia displays a psychological simplicity which contributes to the emptiness. One example is her attitude towards Hamlet. It is obvious that Ophelia is less suspicious about Hamlet than her brother and father. When Polonius asks her about Hamlet's pursuit, she says, "He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders Of his affection to me.

Polonius Affection! Pooh! You speak like a green girl Unsifted in such perilous circumstances.

Do you believe his "tenders," as you call them?

Ophelia I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

Polonius Marry, I will teach you: think yourself a baby

That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay

Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly

Or— not to crack the wind of the poor phrase

Wronging it thus— you'll tender me a fool.

Ophelia My lord, he hath importuned me with love in honorable fashion—

Polonius Ay, "fashion" you may call it. Go to, go to!

Ophelia And hath given countenance to his speech,

My lord, with almost all the holy vows of heaven." [13]

Polonius believes in an evil motivation under Hamlet's kind appearance, which may cause dangers to his daughter if she is too trusting. However, Ophelia is unable to understand Polonius' doubts, saying "I do not know...what I should think". She cannot give her own thoughts to solve the issue that confuses her, and the word "should" implies that she needs instructions as she usually does. In other words, Ophelia is in need of others' thoughts— more specifically her father's and brother's— to refill the emptiness inside of her.

It is true that Ophelia still has some personal opinions about Hamlet, and she tries to defend Hamlet and argue against Polonius. Nevertheless, she believes in Hamlet's affection simply based on his appearance. The evidences Ophelia gives in support of Hamlet's genuine affection are merely "honorable fashion", reasonable speech, and "holy vows", which are nothing more than trappings of conventional suitors. Ophelia in her songs more obviously shows her superficiality in discerning love. "How should I your true love know/ From another one? By his cockle hat and staff/ And his sandal shoon" [13]. Ophelia takes the conventional guises of a lover, i.e. the mentioned "cockle hat and staff" and "sandal", as the criteria of true love. The shallowness of her thoughts becomes more evident if we compare Ophelia with Rosalind the heroine in *As You Like It*. When Orlando carves conventional and extravagated love poems on the barks to express his love for Rosalind— a situation similar to Ophelia's— Rosalind, however, recognizes these poetic praises as the external forms of the lover. She pretends to not know the poet and suggests, "I would give him some good counsel, for he seems to have the quotidian of love upon him" [13]. Rosalind uses the words "seem" and "quotidian", which means the "daily recurring fever said to be a sign of love" [13], to stress on what she sees about the Orlando who claims himself to be in love. The accuracy in words use indicates her attempt of trying to divide appearance from what is actually happening inside of the lover.

While the simple Ophelia forms a stark contrast with the skeptical Rosalind, Hamlet displays an extraordinary inner complexity that identifies him to Rosalind rather than his lover Ophelia. He expresses the similar extraction of internal feelings from what he performs when Gertrude persuades Hamlet to take off his mourning dress.

"Seems,"? Madam? Nay it is. I know not "seem".

'Tis not alone my inky cloak, cold mother,

Nor customary suits of solemn black,

Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,

No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,

Nor the dejected 'havior of the visage,

Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief

That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,

For they are actions that a man might play,

But I have that within which passes show—

These but the trappings and the suits of woe." [13]

For Hamlet all what he appears or behaves cannot truly denotes him; He has something within himself which is beyond any expression. Therefore, neither mad abuses nor conventional praises can represent his inner affections because both are merely showings for him. Ophelia

obviously is unable to understand this complexity, so she fails to recognize Hamlet as a true lover when he pretends to be mad and no longer behaves like a conventional lover.

4.2.2. *The Reflection of Men*

Comparing Ophelia to the dew is a text-specific attempt to realize the more broadened association between water and woman. If we look further into the latter, we may find water-mirror motif is a strong theme that can be applied to women studies as well as the studies about Ophelia in this essay. I will exemplify the water-mirror motif by the myth of Narcissus, so it is inevitable here to trace back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where the narrative of Narcissus and Echo took in form. The story goes as following. There was a nymph named Echo who was punished by Juno to speak nothing other than the last few words of her interlocutors. When she fell in love with the youth Narcissus, she cannot express her affection but to repeat his words. Narcissus, on the other hand, fell in love with his own reflection when he saw himself mirrored in the Styx. He spent all days glazing at his own image, having no concerns for anything around him. He finally died sorrowfully for he could never grasp the image he badly desired. Echo also disappeared after that, only leaving her voice echoing around. [13] In this myth water in the Styx functions as a mirror that allows Narcissus to indulge in his own image while Echo is neglected.

The myth of Narcissus can be applied to the studies about Ophelia in two ways. The first method is to deal with Echo as an archetype for women who fail to voice their own feelings. The inability to speak was often used to argue woman's incompleteness which prevented her from being classified within the category of human. Woman's speech was considered "a speech which is not one", as Wick comments on the modern Western logic about woman's voice. [17] Ophelia is one of the Echoic women. The nymph Ophelia, as Hamlet calls her, can be identified with the nymph Echo regarding their agencies. Ophelia obeys her father, refusing Hamlet's affection and spying on him. Her actions are merely a presentation of a part of Polonius' will. Though she may love Hamlet, we find few words among her lines that show her love. She talks mostly about how Hamlet appears to be in love with her but nothing about her own feelings towards him when she is discussing with Laertes about Hamlet in the third scene of the play. In other words, Ophelia's implementation of Polonius' political scheme and her resign from expressing herself lead her to be an early modern representation of the classic tragic heroine Echo.

Ophelia's passivity in expressing is in parallel with the Elizabethan expectation for woman's silence. The silent woman was graceful and commended. [1] Ophelia's reserve from voicing no doubt met the standard. Therefore, it is reasonable to say that Ophelia was an ideal female for Elizabethan audience though she may have been criticized by feminists in the later modern day.

Ophelia's submission to men continues until she becomes mad. Since then she is able to freely express herself: the

madness frees her from the restrictions of good manners so that she is able to say what she is not expected to. However, people around fail to identify her ideas. The gentleman reports to Gertrude that "[h]er speech is nothing" [13]. What makes Ophelia's speech nothing is not her refusal to voice but the gentleman's rejection to understand. He neglects the nonsense songs which actually make sense in a different way, the lyrical way opposing to reason. That is to say, Ophelia's mad speech does have content; but it becomes nothing "in the public term defined by the court" [14] where males decide the language and expression forms. As Wick notes in the essay-, "[i]t is not that woman does not have permission to speak, but that to be heard, she must speak within phallogocentric discourse" [17]. Therefore, it is arbitrary to simply say that Ophelia is incapable to express her feelings. Instead, her desire to voice is repressed by social norms and expectations, and her sentimental speech is dismissed as unworthy to understand.

The other way to make use of the narrative of Narcissus for interpreting Ophelia is to regard Ophelia as a water mirror for Polonius and Hamlet. Polonius imposes his will upon Ophelia who then becomes a representation that lives out his own ideas. Therefore, Ophelia is not able to live alone when Polonius dies, as Narcissus disappeared together with his reflection. In other words, Ophelia is forced to be a reflection of Polonius' ideas, so that she needs a stable source of instruction from him. Polonius' death, therefore, leaves her to nothing reasonable inside of herself that she can rely on.

Hamlet likewise sees himself through Ophelia who functions as a mirror for Hamlet to know himself. Ophelia's passivity can recall his own inaction to revenge, so that by looking at her Hamlet confirms the idea that he has femininity in his nature and finds it out that how feminine his passivity is. On the one hand, he desires to be occupied by his revenge plan only. For example, when the ghost of Old Hamlet commands him to revenge and then exits, Hamlet responds to him as following. "And thy commandment all alone shall live/ Within the book and volume of my brain/ Unmixed with baser matter." [13] Hamlet hopes he can nothing more than the revenge, but the passive Ophelia, on the other hand, is a constant reminder for Hamlet that he is not exclusively occupied by the masculine revenge as he wishes. Rather, he is contaminated with the femininity which holds back his actions to carry out the revenge. As he complains, he is not pure enough to melt like a dew. [13] Hamlet's hatred towards the feminine inability results in his impulsion to destroy both himself and the women around him. Elaine Showalter argues that "Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent revulsion against women, and into his brutal behavior towards Ophelia" [14]. In addition to his abuse against Gertrude and Ophelia, Hamlet's disgust towards the femininity also leads to his desire to die which he carries out soon in the duel. Therefore, his death to some extent is a result of self-knowing, in which process Ophelia functions as a mirror for him. That is to say, Ophelia helps Hamlet to know the feminine part in himself which he feels disgust at, and one

of the consequences of knowing his femininity is the desire for self-destruction which he finally fulfills.

5. DUALITY OF FEMININITY: CHASTITY AND EROTICISM

“Country matters” is a part of Ophelia’s death description. “Therewith fantastic garlands did she make/ Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples/ That liberal shepherds give a grosser name/ But our old maids do dead men’s fingers call them” [13]. The indecent suggestions provide a stark contrast to the virgin’s death. The image of male genitals seems incompatible with the beautiful death but is still a part of it. This observation inspired me to explore the contradiction of purity and sexuality formed in Ophelia.

In this section I will continue to compare Ophelia to the dew whose innate attributes symbolize the duality of femininity. On the one hand, Ophelia being as unsullied as a dew leaves the impression of a chaste and pure virgin. She accomplishes this purity by her psychological simplicity as I discussed in the last section. Moreover, her innocence is marked by her failure to understand Hamlet’s vulgar puns. Below is the conversation between them when they are watching the play.

Hamlet Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

Ophelia No, my lord.

Hamlet I mean my head upon your lap.

Ophelia Ay, my lord.

Hamlet Do you think I mean country matters?

Ophelia I think nothing, my lord.

Hamlet That’s fair thought to lie between maid’s legs.

Ophelia What is, my lord?

Hamlet Nothing. [13]

Hamlet implies vulgarly for times throughout this short conversation, by the end which he puns on the word “nothing” to mean the female genital that is usually linked to the shape of the hollow zero. Ophelia’s responses to the sexual puns show that she has no knowledge about sex let alone to interpret the speech in the lewd way. However, no matter how the appeared innocence denies her relevance to sex, sexual capacity is imbedded in Ophelia as an innate attribute of a woman. From the sexual aspect, Ophelia then is still like the dew: the drop of water carries the sense of the hollowness, since it is transparent without solid content, and thus arouses the associations of “lack” and “incomplete” as the vagina does. Showalter confirms the relation of water and woman in the sexual sense that water’s fluidity symbolizes feminine sexuality as opposing to men’s aridity [14]. Therefore, the purity aspect and the sexual indication seem contradictory but form a unity in Ophelia as they form in the image of the dew. Ophelia’s femininity is not only reflected in her chastity and innocence but also the erotic implication that a woman carries.

This duality of femininity is also reflected in the Elizabethan ideal of feminine beauty. The Elizabethans preferred the unity of red and white which form a violent

contrast. [2] Conventional praises of women often acclaim one’s fair skin and rosy lips. The former represents chastity while the latter exemplifies sexiness. Therefore, when Hamlet talks to Ophelia with lewd puns, he appears to find pleasure on Ophelia by adding an erotic flavor to the chaste virgin. He successfully makes up the ideal beauty on Ophelia according to Elizabethan standard of femininity.

The duality of femininity can be seen as a part of the Elizabethan ideology about woman’s nature. The Elizabethans believed that a perfect woman should be chaste. [5] Doubtlessly Ophelia is an ideal example of chastity. However, no matter how good a woman is, she was believed to have great sexual desires in her nature. In addition, woman was thought to be too weak and undependable to keep herself chaste under the strong sexual motivations. The English Church under Elizabeth I took steps to remove the threat. They emphasized that woman should be under the guidance and control of her male relatives to keep her reputation perfect. [5]

According to the Elizabethan ideas about woman, Gertrude can be seen as a typical example of the believed feminine weakness. When the Old Hamlet dies, she marries to his brother within a month. “O most wicked speed, to post/With such dexterity to incestuous sheets” [13]. It is reasonable to say that Gertrude’s quick remarriage derives from, or at least possibly a result of, her eager anxiety for a refill of sexual partner. Hamlet’s comments on Gertrude fits the Elizabethan distrust to woman. He sighs, “Frailty, thy name’s woman” [13]. The remark reflects the idea that woman was incapable to control her sexual desire.

The analogy between water and woman can further explain the historical views on female sexuality. The Elizabethans expected for ice-like chastity and purity. Shakespeare’s Hamlet as a contemporary production voices out this expectation to Ophelia that “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow” [13]. But existence of ice and snow admits the possibility to melt and become fluid. Water’s fluidity symbolizes disloyalty and cheating; woman’s supposed weakness in controlling sexual desires would make them false in sex. Therefore, the water-woman analogy illustrates men’s expectation of woman’s chastity as well as their precaution for her downfall.

Hamlet is aware of the danger of Ophelia’s sexual allure. To stay away from the danger Hamlet repetitively pushes Ophelia to go to a nunnery, [13] a place where sex life is banned. Moreover, Hamlet tells his worry when he abuses Ophelia in the third act, “[I]f thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them” [13]. Hamlet is afraid that his sexual desire to Ophelia will make himself an irrational beast. In other words, the reason why he considers Ophelia’s sexual attraction a danger for him is that he is risking his reason when approaching her. A man has to admit that he let the bodily desires control over him rather than use his reason to govern the body when he fails to resist a woman’s sexual temptations. But reason is one of the marks of masculinity, for woman is known to be unable to manage her sexual desire. Therefore, Hamlet tries to stay away

from Ophelia as well as away from the threat of losing reason.

Therefore, Ophelia's duality of femininity illustrates the contradictories of chastity and eroticism yet both of which are contained in Elizabethan gender ideology about woman. The society expected woman to be chaste, but they take cautions against woman's sexual attraction. It seems that purity was praised while sexuality was resisted, but actually the ideal Elizabethan feminine beauty is made formed by both of the two.

6. CONCLUSION

Ophelia's femininity can be observed through the analogous association between water and woman. Ophelia is similar to a dew in the sense of delicacy and emptiness. The psychological simplicity leaves her in need of her father's ideas and makes herself merely a reflection of others. Moreover, the dew can explain the duality of Ophelia's femininity: She is chaste and innocent but on the other hand carries an erotic sense, as the dew is both the symbol of purity and the suggestion of sexual incompleteness of woman for its hollowness.

Ophelia may thus become a negative example for feminists, so I feel necessary to divert from the character herself in order to emphasize the problems of patriarchal society. Ophelia's passivity in contrast to the men's aggressiveness represents men's inability to empathize woman in Elizabethan Age. Ophelia does have stories to tell about Hamlet and herself, nevertheless her father should be blamed for aggressively pouring his own words into her ears. Ophelia is not dumb but silenced by men who replace her inner world with their owns. Thus, what Polonius sees on Ophelia is merely a presentation of his own ideas, and Hamlet views her as a part of his own image. Other than being suffocated by men's narcissus mindsets, Ophelia is also objectified to implement contemporary ideal of womanhood; She is both required to be pure and expected to carry controllable eroticism.

Ophelia is more than a mere negative example for rebelling feminists. She as a repetitive theme in literary and art representations in modern days is also a constant reminder of the unfair treatment of woman in the present society where we can still find hints of patriarchal remanence. But our sympathy to her as well as the thinking on her tragedy can help woman to be aware of and rebel against the patriarchal abuse.

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