

*The Story of O*  
*An Exponential Analysis of Ophelia's Role*  
*in William Shakespeare's Hamlet\**

Farzad Boobani\*\*

**Abstract**

Ophelia, as the main female character in *Hamlet*, plays a very important role in the drama. To some extent, however, her part has, hitherto, been ignored. A new approach to the play, aiming at a more meticulous investigation into her mind and her personality would certainly help to restore Ophelia to her proper place as the protagonist of a tragedy as meaningful as Hamlet's. By reconstructing the succeeding scenes of her inner tragedy, this study tries to present a rather full account of Ophelia's story, in general, and her relationship with Hamlet, in particular.

**Key words:** Ophelia, the female, madness, tragedy, Hamlet, suicide.

---

\* تاریخ وصول ۸۴/۸/۸ تأیید نهایی ۸۵/۱/۲۶ -

\*\* - Lecturer at Guilan University. E-mail: farzadboobani@yahoo.com

## Introduction

Hamlet is probably the most famous character in world literature. He looms large behind many great works and his story has inspired many a great writer with ideas for new literary creations. This claim can be easily justified by the large number of examples that can serve as supporting instances: James Joyce's *Ulysses* has established intertextual relationships with the play, and Stephen Dedalus, one of its major characters, could be identified with Hamlet himself; T. S. Eliot has alluded to *Hamlet* and its characters in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," one of his most successful poems; and Heiner Müller, the German playwright, has written a play entitled *Hamletmaschine*, a postmodernist version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. And the list can go on *ad infinitum*. But one unfortunate outcome of this greatness is that the other characters and their roles in the play have been quite obscured by Hamlet's presence and his tragedy. Now, the reconsideration of the lives of the other characters in *Hamlet* may not only reveal the richness of the drama more, but provide the opportunity to arrive at some new interpretations of the play as well.

Of the many men and women with whom the world of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been peopled, Ophelia seems to have the most crucial role next to the major character. She is Hamlet's beloved, and, consequently, an inseparable part of his life and his world. This is not, however, the only reason for her importance. Ophelia's restless mind, verging on rebellion, finally gushes out from every pore of her silent being and compels the reader to rethink what it means to be a woman. Her story is to be retold, so that due justice may be done to her essential role as the main female character of the play. In what follows, the plot of

the tragedy we may entitle *Ophelia* is described at full length, and, at the same time, attempt is made to provide analytical studies for the successive scenes of this tragedy in the light of the exponential approach to literature, which stresses the consideration of the most meaningful images and patterns in the text, and, in this way, allows the reader to “gradually ... live the experience inherent in the work.” (Guerin, 1978, p. 196)

### **Towards an Exponential Analysis**

“Why Ophelia committed suicide?” (Joyce, 2000, p. 93) This is a question Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, asks himself. Along with Bloom, many readers may have asked the same question. Whatever the answer might be, this question opens up the way to another grand consideration: Ophelia’s story and the role assigned to her in the play. This subject, in a play that pivots around the character of Hamlet, may at first glance seem insignificant. But a more careful examination of the tragedy of Hamlet will reveal the existence of a minor drama inside it, which, however short and compact, is not without the characteristics of a veritable tragedy. This second drama, the analysis of which we are going to undertake, is the story of Ophelia.

According to Elaine Showalter, the American feminist critic, “Ophelia appears in only five scenes of the twenty scenes of the play.” (Showalter, ‘Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism’ in Brooker, 1996, p.31) It is true. But a closer study of these five scenes shows that there is a one to one correspondence between them and the five basic stages into which the

plot of a classical drama is divided. These stages could be shown in what has come to be known as Freytag's pyramid. Gustav Freytag, the German critic, in *The Technique of Drama* (1862) "analysed the structure of a typical five-act play thus: (a) introduction; (b) inciting moment; (c) rising action; (d) climax; (e) falling action; (f) catastrophe." (Cuddon, 1982, p. 280) These stages could be imagined to form a pyramid, the apex of which is the climax. In the introduction, or more usually, the exposition, the reader learns about the characters and the central issues of the play. The rising action furthers the play and prepares the reader for the climax which acts as a turning point. It is at this stage that a crisis of one form or another dominates the plot. Then comes the falling action which takes the reader a step closer to the determination of the fates of the characters; and, lastly, the catastrophe or the denouement puts an end to the world of the play. Freytag's pyramid can be successfully applied to what we have decided to call Ophelia's tragedy. In the *exposition* of this inner play, we come to know about Ophelia's love affair with Hamlet. The *rising action* includes the account Ophelia gives about Hamlet's unexpected entrance into her room. The *climax* comes with the Nunnery scene where Ophelia is rejected by Hamlet. The *falling action* coincides with the Mouse-trap scene and contains Hamlet's indecent jokes at the expense of Ophelia. The last scene or the *denouement* concurs with Ophelia's madness and her suicide. As a result, the tragedy of Ophelia constitutes a separate drama, and she, herself, becomes the protagonist of a play as brief as her life, but not less meaningful than Hamlet's tragedy. Concentrating on the issues put forward in each scene will tell us much about Ophelia and her character.

Our first encounter with Ophelia is at the time her brother warns her against Hamlet and his love:

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

.....

Be wary thou; best safety lies in fear.

(I, iii, ll. 33, 43)

These cautions are followed by her father's stern rebukes. He explicitly orders Ophelia to forget Hamlet. But Hamlet, she says, loves her, is kind to her, and has paid court to her. She is wrong, her father believes. For Polonius, Ophelia is still a "green girl," not experienced enough to understand such matters. Ophelia is perplexed. Whom should she trust; her father or her lover? She loses the power to reason or to decide:

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

(I, iii, l. 104)

She is at her wits' end. At this stage, she shows symptoms of an inclination to be ruled over by her father. She wants to be schooled, to be told what to do. Whatever orders her father issues, she will obey.

The second time Ophelia appears on stage is after Hamlet has gone to her room. It might be interesting to know that she is the first person Hamlet goes to after talking to the ghost of his father. Why should Hamlet do so? Is it because he hopes to find a shelter in Ophelia in order to alleviate the pain caused by the horrible words of the ghost? Or is it a symbolic farewell to a woman who was up to now his sweetheart and henceforward would be another member from the tribe of "frailty?" We may leave the question unanswered, but Ophelia would not ignore her duty; she should report to her father:

My lord, as I was sewing in my closet,  
 Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbraced,  
 No hat upon his head, his stockings fouled,  
 .....  
 Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other  
 .....  
 .... he comes before me.  
 .....  
 He took me by the wrist and held me hard.  
 Then goes he to the length of all his arm,  
 And with his other hand thus o'er his brow,  
 He falls to such perusal of my face  
 As 'a would draw it. Long stayed he so.  
 At last, a little shaking of mine arm,  
 And thrice his head thus moving up and down,  
 He raised a sigh so piteous and profound  
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk  
 And end his being. That done, he lets me go....

(II, i, ll. 78 – 97)

After this incident, Polonius has no doubts that Ophelia's love is the cause of Hamlet's madness. To confirm this discovery and to persuade the king to accept his findings, Polonius produces a love letter in which Hamlet has confessed his feelings to Ophelia. For further assurance, he devises a scheme involving his daughter. Ophelia becomes a *means* through which Hamlet's secrets will be brought into open. This leads to what the critics have unanimously called the Nunnery scene.

In the Nunnery scene we, for the first time, witness Ophelia and Hamlet encounter. It is a climactic moment for both of the protagonists

because the future course of their love and relations will be decided upon in this scene.

It is noteworthy that this scene is preceded by an episode featured by Hamlet's famous soliloquy: "To be, or not to be...." Before meeting Ophelia, Hamlet had been brooding on the grave matters of life and death. His words lay bare the obsession of his mind with philosophical contemplations on the meaning of existence. Not surprisingly, he is in the grip of melancholy. It is in this mood that Ophelia finds him. She begins to remind Hamlet of the past. But Hamlet roughly denies everything. He harshly accuses Ophelia of dishonesty, hypocrisy, and deception, and dubs her a future "breeder of sinners." Ophelia is shocked. She did not expect to be treated so undeservedly by the person who had dearly cherished her before. Now, that very person is commanding her to go to a "nunnery." Remember that the term was, in Shakespeare's time, used to refer to a "brothel" as well. So, is Ophelia already a whore? Has she become a worthless creature? Does Hamlet have any justifications for this treatment? According to David Leverenz, in an essay called 'The Woman in *Hamlet*', "Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent revulsion against women, and into his brutal behavior towards Ophelia." (Showalter, p. 32) This may be an acceptable excuse, but it does not change anything for Ophelia: she breaks down. As Jacques Lacan puts it, "Ophelia is after this episode completely null and dissolved as a love object." (Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*' in Felman, 1982, p. 34) The first seeds of madness have been sown in her mind.

During the Mouse-trap scene, Hamlet teases Ophelia with a language full of puns and words with sexual connotations. He asks to lie in Ophelia's lap and, as she rejects, goes on to ask, "Do you think I meant

country matters?” Here is Hamlet’s first equivocation. The word “country” is a pun on the female genitalia. In response to this question, Ophelia says, “I think nothing, my lord.” And, the word “nothing” was, in the time of Elizabeth, the slang for the female genitalia as well. Ophelia, however, does not use it in this sense, but Hamlet, with a poet’s sensitivity to words, uses it a few seconds after to convey its other meaning:

*Hamlet:* That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.

*Ophelia:* what is my lord?

*Hamlet:* Nothing.

(III, ii, ll. 17 – 19)

For the French poststructuralist feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, men have always tried to reduce the women to *nothingness* by emphasizing a virtual lack on the part of the women, namely the absence of the phallus. In their eyes, this has always given the men the upper hand and has associated them with what is traditionally considered to be the positive side of binary oppositions such as presence/absence, or activity/passivity. All of these terms – absence, nothing, and lack – are thought to belong to the female world, which, as a result, has “nothing” to offer to the male world in which “something” is always present. Viewed in the light of these ideas, Hamlet’s response to Ophelia takes on much significance. Ophelia, herself, is now identified with nothing. She is gradually driven to insanity.

Ophelia is a “document in madness.” Her bawdy songs, her dress, and the flowers she gathers, all are pregnant with symbolic meanings. Even her suicide points to something beyond the appearances, to an undercurrent flowing beneath the surface of the river in which she drowns



herself. The songs that Ophelia sings are, in fact, lamentations for an unrequited love and dirges for the death of a dear one. The words show the very contents of her mind; it is her unconscious that speaks. This is one of her songs:

**Tomorrow is St. Valentine's day**

Tomorrow is St. 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.

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 promis'd me to wed."

[He answers:] "So would I ha' done, by yonder sun,  
And thou hadst not come to my bed."

( Act IV)

This song is directly pointing to what *may* have had passed between Ophelia and Hamlet. Through the songs, she breaks down the social

barriers and overtly bewails her doomed love affair with the Prince. But at times the songs shift to her father who was, ironically, killed by Hamlet. Ophelia's mental disturbance is quite obvious from the songs.

Her white dress, also, claims some interpretation. The dress is in sharp contrast to Hamlet's black attire of mourning. The whiteness, besides, conveys purity and innocence and makes Ophelia, for a symbolist like Mallarmé, "a blank page ready to be written on or over by the male imagination." (Showalter, p. 37) And the flowers she dispenses are symbols of deception, sorrow, repentance, and unfaithfulness. (Bhatia, 1998, p. 460) Furthermore, there is a flower called "dead man's fingers," which is related to mandrake and bears sexual implications.

All of these companions of her madness recount the story of Ophelia's disintegrated mind: a mind haunted by frustration in love. "Clinically speaking, Ophelia's behavior and appearance are characteristic of the malady the Elizabethans would have diagnosed as love-melancholy or erotomania." (Showalter, p. 32) This epidemic had different origins for the men and women of the time. In the case of the men it was "associated with intellectual and imaginative genius," but for women it had biological and emotional sources. (*Ibid.*)

Beside this love-sickness, or erotomania, Ophelia has shown symptoms of other maladies, too. In our time she has been reputed to suffer from the "Oedipus complex" and "schizophrenia." As Theodore Lidz points out, "While Hamlet is neurotically attached to his mother; Ophelia has an unresolved oedipal attachment to her father. [She] breaks down because she fails in the female developmental task of shifting her sexual attachment from her father to a man who can bring her fulfillment as a woman." (Lidz, 1975, p. 113) And a more recent study diagnoses her to suffer from "schizophrenia" which is characterized by a fragmented

personality, and disillusion and hallucinations about reality. But whatever label may be attached to her, the upshot is the same for Ophelia: mental breakdown. And it is this mental chaos that leads to her suicide.

Ophelia commits suicide by drowning herself in water. For Elaine Showalter, this is a symbolic act. She associates it with “the feminine, with female fluidity as opposed to masculine aridity.” (Showalter, p. 34) She agrees with Gaston Bachelard, the French phenomenologist, that the body of the woman is in flow because it is, indeed, the site of liquids: the tears of her eyes, the milk of her breasts, or even her menstruation. Thus, water, in general, becomes the female element, and as Showalter notes, Ophelia’s suicide is “a beautiful immersion and submersion in the female element.” (*Ibid.*) Therefore, in drowning, Ophelia becomes one with herself and, in joining the female nirvana, enjoys tranquility.

### **Conclusion**

The virtual tranquility that Ophelia reaches should not deceive us, because it is nothing more than the lull *after* the storm, if we can put it this way. It is the peace preceded by rebellion. Yes. Perhaps Ophelia is a rebel. Perhaps her madness is a revolt against the male oppression and abuse which from the very beginning we saw her undergo. Her songs might as well be songs of subversion and freedom: the freedom of the female consciousness to express itself by defying the male dominance. When Gertrude somewhere says, “Her speech is nothing,” it may be construed that “Ophelia’s speech ... represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. [Thus] deprived of thought, sexuality, [and] language, Ophelia’s story becomes the story

of O – the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality...” (*Ibid.*) that can be deciphered by a woman only.

Probably the feminists should be congratulated on the birth of a brave new heroine.

### **Bibliography**

- Brooker, Peter, and Widdowson, Peter, eds., *A Practical Reader in Contemporary Literary Theory*, Harlow: Longman, 1996
- Cuddon, J. A., *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982
- Felman, Shoshana, ed., *Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982
- Guerin, W. L. et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, New York: Harper and Row, 1978
- Joyce, James, *Ulysses*, London: Penguin Books, 2000
- Lidz, Theodore, *Hamlet's Enemy: Madness and Myth in Hamlet*, New York: Basic Books, 1975
- Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, ed., Praveen Bhatia, New Delhi: UBSPD, 1998