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That is the [Virgin] Question: Overthrowing Ophelia's Noble Mind

Cleopatra, Goneril, Juliet, Lady Macbeth, and Portia are five of the women in Shakespeare's plays to commit suicide; a sixth, and perhaps more shocking and puzzling, is Ophelia. The interpretation, as many would have it, is akin to the lovesick insanity Juliet displays and the direct result of Hamlet killing her father, Polonius. But Ophelia's words in her last scenes betray an organized chaos within her mind and upset a straightforward reading of the text. Ophelia's virginal symbolism is a circular rationalization best represented in Laertes' indeterminate character motivations, rendering her death impossible to interpret.

Suicide, in Shakespeare's time, was seen as a violation of God's laws. The Biblical precedence was seen in such passages as the Sixth Commandment or the Jesus' words: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand." (*New International Version*. John 10:28). Killing oneself was also associated with the final act of Judas Iscariot, who hanged himself from a tree. However, the one instance where suicide was considered acceptable was when it was "to preserve virginity rather than submit to unwanted 'violation'" (Kirkland 664). An influence on such belief stemmed from the story of Jephthah in the Book of Judges, who killed his daughter after making a rash promise to God in exchange for helping him defeat the Ammonites in war: "After the two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. And she was a virgin" (*New International Version*. Judges 11:39).

The act of killing oneself to protect virginity was perceived as a heroic deed; an act of martyrdom, which was the ultimate sacrifice in the name of faith.

In Roland Barthes' two essays, "Death of the Author" and "From Work to Text", he challenges the idea of assigning definitive understanding to a text. From the authorial perspective, the text is a mixture of various cultural signifiers and language on which the author can only imitate, not originate. The author, in essence, is merely a messenger, so to think of the author as more is: "to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" ("Death" 1469). Likewise, the text cannot be thought of in conclusive terms. For Barthes, the text is a malleable field that holds pluralized meaning in metaphoric, symbolic, literal, and cultural language. Furthermore, all of these meanings carry various interpretations among readers: "the text itself *plays* (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing the Text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it" ("Text" 1474). The uncertain authorial message and the interpretive fluidity means that the text is an impossible field to define.

In the case of Ophelia's death, Elaine Showalter focuses on the historical influence that the character set. In her essay, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism", Showalter demonstrates how Ophelia's presentation onstage has indicated a complete lack of coherent understanding from Shakespeare to modern day. Some productions, like the Victorian era, attired Ophelia in white robes and displayed her as an object of innocent maidenhood. Others, like French Gothicism, dressed her in a black veil, imposing the belief that Ophelia is seeped in the corruption of Denmark. The issue is: "the representation of Ophelia changes independently...for it depends on attitudes toward women and madness" (237). Essentially, Showalter deconstructs the image of Ophelia as a single perception

on virginal ideals. The role of the feminist or any person is to acknowledge the diversification of Ophelia and her audience's interpretations.

The main problem with fixing a definitive understanding of Ophelia's death is that the text presents various degrees of interpretations. One of the major contradictions is found in her own brother, Laertes. During his sister's funeral, Laertes directs a harsh outburst at the priest:

DOCTOR: No more be done:

We should profane the service of the dead

To sing a requiem and such rest to her

As to peace-parted souls.

LAERTES: Lay her i' th' earth,

And from her fair and unpolluted flesh

May violets spring! I tell thee, churlish priest,

A minst'ring angel shall my sister be

When though liest howling (5.1.221-28).

The Doctor of Divinity echoes the sentiment of the gravediggers, that the Christian burial of Ophelia is a mockery unto Christianity itself. The suicides have a special place outside of the righteous "peace-parted souls". Laertes' immediate response is not only in defense of his sister's virtue but a direct attack at the priest's holiness. Laertes' outburst demonstrates a full acknowledgement of what Ophelia's suicide indicates in terms of her placement in the afterlife, but his denial is ripe with troubling contradictions. He clearly establishes that he has a strong belief in his sister's moral righteousness, and is fit to be a "minst'ring angel". Yet, for Ophelia to be in heaven as Laertes suggests, one of two things must have happened: Ophelia has killed herself in order to protect her virginity or Ophelia's death is not technically a suicide.

To suggest that Ophelia has killed herself for noble reasons is to state that she is protecting her virginity. But then the problem remains: who is she protected her virginity from? This question leads to a number of different options, each with their own indeterminate evidence. For one, Ophelia could be protecting it from Hamlet. Her father has been murdered at Hamlet's own hands, and that, combined with the seeming madness of Hamlet, suggests he is mentally unstable. As for Ophelia's song:

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’” (4.5.58-63)

The song implies a strong fear that sexual relations will directly lead to misery and despair. Sex, in the song, is used as a ploy, a devious seduction. For Ophelia, her death is protecting her from this betrayal.

And for another comparison, Ophelia can look no further than Gertrude. Hamlet perceives Gertrude, in her remarriage, as symbolic of the destruction that sexual desire has created within Denmark. However, there is also strong indication to suggest Ophelia holds the same opinions. In the only direct line that the two leading ladies interchange (given exclusion for the scene with Ophelia's assumed insanity), the Queen tells Ophelia before the enactment of Polonius' scheme to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia together:

And for your part, Ophelia I do wish

That your good beauties be the happy cause
 Of Hamlet's wildness. So shall I hope your virtues
 Will bring him to his wonted way again,
 To both your honors (3.1.36-41).

Gertrude's words make a direct correlation between the honor and virtue of Ophelia to Hamlet.

What is heavily implied in the Queen's words is that Hamlet's madness reflects poorly on Ophelia, as it not her virtue or a nobleness that so detract Hamlet from reason but Ophelia's superficial "good beauty". Gertrude seems to imply a certain unhealthy sexual attraction that is driving Ophelia and Hamlet together, and if Ophelia can break Hamlet out of his reverie, it is also breaking the carnal desires that they share. Ophelia's inability to spark sensibility back within Hamlet later in the scene only reinforces the immoral sexual division, heightened in Hamlet's words:

"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" (3.1.120-123).

Here, just as Gertrude had made the correlation between Ophelia to Hamlet, Hamlet is furthering the chain by linking himself to his mother, and completing it by connecting his mother to Ophelia. The circular argumentation follows that Hamlet believes he should not have been born to a woman of dubious nature, Gertrude is suspicious of Ophelia's symbolism for Hamlet, and Ophelia is caught between the two, at once being directed toward Hamlet to present her "virtues" and being pointed toward Gertrude as a "breeder of sinners". Either way, her life is being forcibly guided into a snare. Her woe is the inability to escape a trajectory that does not end in a

sexual corruption that both Gertrude and Hamlet lay out for her. Therefore, Ophelia in her suicide is defending herself from the carnage that an unchaste life will inevitably forge.

The issue at hand for Laertes in all of this is that he is not made aware of most of these arguments in defense of Ophelia's virginity. Laertes' belief in his sister's placement among the heavens is based on purely their experiences together, and those situations throw Ophelia's virginal aspect into serious doubt. In the first scene between the siblings, Laertes ventures into a lengthy warning on the danger if a woman should "[her] chaste treasure open...[and] unmask her beauty to the moon [Hamlet]" (1.3.31, 37). The language he uses is not one of forewarning, but of result—"If" this, then "that" shall happen. Laertes is not so much concerned with the action itself but the consequence, indicating a strong suspicion on his part that the sexual deed has either already been done or is imminent. Ophelia's response is likewise ambiguous and cautiously worded: "I shall the effect of this good lesson keep / As watchman to my heart" (1.3.45-46). Here, she is not making a promise of chastity or an assurance to Laertes that her relationship with Hamlet will not progress further than social custom dictates. Her words simply acknowledge that she understand Laertes' advice.

With this conversation in mind, consider Laertes' next interaction with Ophelia. Her insanity is in full display, and in the midst of it, she sings: "It is the false / steward, that stole his master's daughter" (4.5.171-172). Now, it could easily be that Laertes would not have taken this line as a serious admission of any fault on the "steward" or the "daughter". However, Laertes is in the midst of an existential crisis, rooted in two questions: Why did Hamlet kill Polonius and what drove Ophelia to insanity? In the order of events according to Laertes, he gives advice to Ophelia warning her that Hamlet will have a negative reaction if she is unchaste, then Hamlet kills Polonius, and Ophelia responds with mad songs about death and betrayal. The connecting

thread seems to Laertes to be deeply embedded in the relationship between the Prince and his sister, a relationship on which he has already established has troubling sexual overtones. As long as that doubt is present and unverifiable to affirm or refute, then so too is the belief that Ophelia has killed herself to protect her virginity. And if Ophelia did not die as a martyr, then it casts a strong shadow over her symbolism of virtue.

To try to circumnavigate justifying Ophelia's chastity, the other option for Laertes would be to prove that Ophelia's death was not of her own doing. But if that is the case, then the next logical question is on whom the fault for the death should be placed. Laertes' answer: Hamlet. At the funeral, Laertes makes an explicit comment that reveals he blames Hamlet. "Fall ten times [treble] on that cursed head / Whose wicked deed thy most ingenious sense / Depriv'd thee of!" (5.1.233-235). Today, driving somebody else to commit suicide would be grounds for a wrongful death lawsuit. For Laertes, the best he can do is challenge Hamlet to a duel. And there is a clear connection for Laertes to instantly condemn Hamlet, from Polonius' murder to the desire to avoid confronting the ambiguous nature of Ophelia's virginity.

The problem with formulating concluding Laertes is simply layering hatred and condemnation onto Hamlet is that Laertes' closing words form a contradictory impression as to what he actually believes. At his death, Laertes confesses:

Lo here I lie,
 Never to rise again. Thy mother's pois'ned.
 I can no more—the King, the King's to blame.
 ...
 [*King dies.*]
 [Claudius] is justly served,

It is a poison temper'd by himself.

Exchange forgiveness with me, noble Hamlet.

Mine and my father's death come not upon thee,

Nor thine on me! (5.2.300-302, 309-313).

Laertes takes special care to inform Hamlet of Claudius' betrayal, which is peculiar because he is knowingly sentencing the King to death. His final action is a treasonous act and a seemingly desperate attempt to receive Hamlet's forgiveness. It suggests that Hamlet is, in fact, not the sole object of Laertes' hatred, and even throws into question the duel itself. Hamlet makes sure to praise Laertes' skills before the fight: "Your skill shall like a star i' th' darkest night / Stick fiery off indeed" (5.2.238-239). And during the duel, Hamlet draws attention to Laertes' apparent lack of energy and willingness to win: "Come, for the third, Laertes, you do but dally. / I pray you pass with your best violence; / I am sure you make a wanton of me" (5.2.279-281). It implies that Laertes is reluctant to put his all into fighting Hamlet, which is unusual if he truly believes that Hamlet should be punished for the death of Laertes' father and sister. His reluctance suggests that not only does Laertes not fully fault Hamlet but is also purposely throwing the fight to lose. And since Laertes knows that the sword is dipped in "unction so mortal" (4.2.141-142), it is not so far a leap to wonder if he purposely exchanged rapiers with Hamlet in the "scuffle" (5.2.283). The implicit understanding that springs forward is that Laertes follows willingly in his sister's footsteps toward death. This then draws issue once again with how Laertes perceives Ophelia's suicide. In mimicking Ophelia, Laertes is acknowledging a nobleness in both his and his sister's deaths. For his own, the noble reason comes in challenging his father's murderer as is properly done and also in exposing the corruption within the monarchy. For his sister's, which is tied directly to the questioning of her chastity, because Laertes does not wholeheartedly believe in

Hamlet's absolute incrimination there is an indirect rationalization that associates Laertes' own innocence with Ophelia's. Thus, Ophelia must be considered a martyr in defense of her virginity.

But all this does is bring Laertes back around to the original enigma concerning the reasoning behind Ophelia's assumed suicide, which is drowning in doubt and ambiguity. This uncertainty parallels reasoning that exists among Ophelia, Hamlet, and Gertrude. Laertes, in his desire to vindicate his sister's "fair and unpolluted" flesh, is lost in the paradox of Ophelia's virginal symbolism. Referring back to the previous paragraph, if Laertes forgives Hamlet, then it shatters the conviction that Hamlet has murdered Ophelia, which suggests that Ophelia's death is actually a suicide, which necessitates proving that Ophelia had killed herself in an attempt to protect her virginity, which leads to the realization that her chastity is under significant doubt, which means her suicide is not so heroic as Laertes would like to believe, which forces him to come up with another explanation for her death, which leads him to rationalize that she had been murdered, which steers him to place the blame on Hamlet, which is also thrown into doubt due to the presence of the King, which makes him forgive Hamlet and shatter the conviction that Hamlet has murdered Ophelia.

Ophelia's death is often viewed as the tragic fall of an innocent maiden. However, doubts and suspicions that are best represented in Laertes' own relationship with Ophelia are visible in the text as to whether Ophelia was a virgin or not, and if she even killed herself in the traditional sense. The uncertainty makes Ophelia's demise impossible to definitively interpret.

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