

Shakespearean Madwomen and the Gendered Portrayals of
Mental Illness that Devalue Them

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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the University Honors College

Spring 2019

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I'd like to thank my wonderful advisor and professor extraordinaire, Jette Halladay. She has taught me so much about how to spread kindness and love to everyone I encounter, and I believe that people will continue to radiate joy after receiving a hug from this woman. Jette Halladay changes lives.

Second, I would like to thank my theatre history professor, and reader, Dr. Richard Hansen. I look forward to the many red marks on my paper anytime I get a draft back. The joy he takes in teaching pushes me forward and encourages me to continue learning and to seek knowledge everywhere.

Third, I am thankful for the many friendships I have fostered while being here at MTSU. The love and support I feel is immense. Thank you for listening. Thank you for words of encouragement and so much joy. Thank you for teaching me how to live the fullest life and love fiercely.

Fourth, I want to thank my wonderful family. I truly would not have achieved what I have without their guidance and support all these years. Mom and Dad, thank you for shaping me into the person I am today.

And lastly, I want to thank my art. Theatre has changed me and shaped my life in ways I cannot even begin to describe. It has brought me many friendships that carry immense worth. My art consistently challenges, delves, grows, changes and shakes me to my core. I want to never lose that feeling. I am thankful for powerful words that are not mine, yet I have somehow had the privilege to utter and bring to life. I am thankful for theatre. I love my art.

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ABSTRACT

When people think of William Shakespeare's greatest works, this most prominent tragedy comes to mind: *Hamlet*. The central theme within this tragedy is that of mental illness and hysteria. Primary male characters aside, how does this theme influence the creation of the female characters? And how does Shakespeare write the portrayals of these women within the context of his time? Mad characters are a recurring theme in Shakespeare's plays, because he was surrounded by misunderstood information regarding mental illness. While this simple, and misunderstood information inspired him, he created complex female characters in the place of simple portrayals.

This thesis endeavors to provide an examination of how Ophelia, a mentally ill and victimized female character is portrayed in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as compared to modern and contemporary understandings of mentally ill representations. By using historical context, understanding of floral symbolism, gender performance, and gendered language, I provide evidence to support my thesis that these female characters are victims of their circumstance and the expectations that bind them, rather than simply hysterical or cruel women who create plot points.

INTRODUCTION

Although people have been suffering from mental illnesses for centuries, the treatment and representation of mentally ill people unfortunately has not been well-represented until more recent times. And even at present, mental illness is often misrepresented and stigmatized. The term “madness” was described as foolish behavior or wild and chaotic activity (*Oxford English Dictionary*) and encompassed all ideas of mental illness but did not provide specificity. While the Scientific Revolution was happening between the late 1500s through the 1700s, the understandings of mental illness were not advanced. Elizabethan era understandings blamed supernatural reasons or witchcraft as the root and cause of madness. Hence, in the context of Shakespearean times, what constitutes madness and how do gender roles/gender performance contribute to the labeling of “madwomen?” Mad characters are a recurring theme in William Shakespeare’s plays, as a result of being surrounded by misunderstood information regarding mental illness. His female characters with mental illness were developed and inspired within that scientific context, which will be explained later. This thesis project examines how mentally ill and victimized female characters are portrayed in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as it is compared to modern and contemporary understandings of mentally ill representations, with a concentration in the enforcement of gender expectations and gender performance within the context of floral symbolism and gendered, hysterical verbiage.

Shakespeare’s greatest achievements and acclaim are arguably because of his attention to universal themes and skillful portrayal of human characters. Madness, and

mental illness itself, fascinated Shakespeare, as evidenced in so many of the poet's works, from tragedies, to comedies, to poetry. Many writers of his time were writing about women with madness, so one could argue that he was complying with the societal perceptions of madness. But this essay argues that Shakespeare was ahead of his time in the analysis of and depictions of women usually deemed mad without a proper reason. The hysteria and madness present in his works were caused from outside sources as well as from within. He portrayed complex characters with a myriad of illnesses that society knows well today, such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, but they were not known by these labels during his time. He gave these characters life and caused readers to be empathetic towards the humanistic portrayals of them. Carol Thomas Neely provides a significant look into madness within Shakespeare's tragedies. "The plays, by representing both madness and the process of reading madness, theatricalize and disseminate the complicated distinctions that the treatises theorize. In the drama, as in the culture outside it, madness is diagnosed by those who observe it – both specialists and laypersons" (Neely 321). Shakespeare's works paved the way for better representations of mentally ill people and were revolutionary during the social context and time period of Elizabethan theatre.

SUMMARY OF HAMLET

Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark has returned home in the wake of his father's death, King Hamlet, just two months earlier. His mother, Queen Gertrude, has married King Hamlet's brother, Claudius, who has now taken the throne after his late brother. Hamlet is disgusted by this. Shortly after Hamlet's death, a ghost begins appearing to the night guards and to Horatio, a good friend of Hamlet's, but refuses to speak to anyone. The men believe that it is the ghost of Hamlet's father. Once Hamlet arrives, however, the ghost speaks to him and reveals that it was Claudius, his brother, who poisoned him to take the throne. Hamlet then vows to avenge his father, and the revenge plot that sets the stage for the rest of the tragedy is set into motion.

Meanwhile, an intertangling plot is that of Ophelia's, whom this following section will examine in depth. She has been warned by her brother, Laertes, to be wary of Hamlet's affections towards her; they have been in love, so she believes. Her father, Polonius, forbids her from seeing him anymore. She has a couple encounters with Hamlet before he leaves. She begins to go mad as a result of the absence of her father, who was accidentally killed by Hamlet, and the absence of Hamlet himself. Ophelia is grief-stricken. She then drowns herself as a result of her feeling of hopelessness. Laertes and Hamlet mourn her death, argue, and schedule a duel that will end badly for all parties involved at the end of the tragedy.

MADNESS IN THE ELIZABETHAN ERA

There is no surprise that there is a habit of characterization with “madwomen” in early English medical and literary writings. The “mad woman” is a popular stock character type in Early Modern drama, she was one of high familiarity and highly entertaining. “By the time of the Restoration, madness on the stage became confined almost entirely to women... restoration writers presumably realized that madness could provide actresses with ‘depth and scope’, and that, it could also offer the audience titillation, for many of the conventional signs of madness were sexually suggestive” (Leigh 30). Some notable examples would be: The Jailer’s Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Zabina in *Tamburlaine*, and Isabella in *The Spanish Tragedy*. These female characters are incessantly identified as hysterical, despite underlying factors within their society that could have possibly contributed to the madness. “The speech of the mad characters constructs madness as secular, socially enacted, gender – and class – marked, and medically treatable” (Neely 322). William Shakespeare’s plays specify this in his characterization of female characters, as he is well known for writing memorable mad women, that continue to be objects of artistic expressions and examinations. Aside from the fundamental picture of a Shakespearean madwoman, in Ophelia from *Hamlet*, there are a few other examples that are worthy: Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth*, Katherine from *Taming of the Shrew*, and Cassandra in *Troilus and Cressida*. Heather Froehlich discusses the construction of mad characters outside of the physical embodiment of mad characters that are listed above:

The Shakespearean plays containing the construction ‘mad woman’ or its plural ‘mad women’ are *Richard II*, *Merchant of Venice*, and *Timon of Athens*. Each play has one example, and each example functions slightly differently. In *Richard II*, a husband calls his wife a mad woman for not complying with his wishes; in contrast, in *Timon of Athens*, Apemantus describes the dancing women as mad. Finally, in the *Merchant of Venice*, ‘mad woman’ Portia uses off-record utterances in reference to herself out of her disguise. Each instance presents a sense that a female character has lost her senses and/or her understanding of herself, making her potentially dangerous according to Early Modern understandings of social order. (Froehlich)

These examples provide evidence that mad female characters were consistently used as a literary trope and stock character in Early Modern dramatic pieces, and heavily influenced Shakespeare’s work. In each example listed above, a “mad woman” in one of Shakespeare’s plays is defined by her unpredictable, irrational, and ultimately, uncontrollable behavior. “Because women’s bodies and by extension their internal states are policed so forcefully by Early Modern standards, any deviance from this enforced norm is anticipated to be explicit” (Froehlich). A mad woman is most often described in Shakespeare’s plays as either literally mad or “mad” in the way that they threaten to act outside of the prescribed social norms of the time. The men who describe these women as mad, are in a place of social power and are afforded the social standing to make these gendered constructions and assumptions of women who defy their authority.

A significant example of the reasoning behind the subordination of women to men lies in the context of the time. Most thinkers in the sixteenth century believed men were

far more superior to women, and this ideal continues today. This philosophical thinking contributed to the creation of traditional gender roles and differences based in biological reasoning. Early modern European writers regarded Aristotle's ideas of biological gender difference as highly esteemed, and because of this, medieval theorists elaborated on his ideas further and provided society with the elemental theory. Within the constraints of the elemental theory, the human body housed four elements: air, fire, earth, and water. "Of these, the first two were considered warm, dynamic, and therefore masculine; the latter pair were cold, moist, and feminine" (McDonald 252). Shakespeare often used these themes that outline the elemental theory in his writing, as exemplified in Gertrude and Ophelia's deterioration in *Hamlet*, which will be explained later. "The cold disposition ascribed to women in the Early Modern period construes femininity as unstable and unpredictable, with the phrase 'mad woman' in Shakespeare's plays applied only where social power threatens to become unbalanced: when a wife tries to make an independent decision, or when a woman acts otherwise outside social norms" (Froehlich). Another example is Shakespeare's portrayal of Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*: "she asserts her transcendence of her female body, at her suicide – itself a Roman, masculine deed" (McDonald 252). She declares, "I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life" (Shakespeare 5.2.289-90). Cleopatra takes control of her life, literally, and challenges the definition of her female body and what she does with it. Because of this specific example, readers can see that Shakespeare was already beginning to challenge traditional gender performance and differences, or at least, beginning to bring awareness to how they were usually portrayed.

In her essay, “Fluid Economies: Portraying Shakespeare's Hysterics,” Kaara L. Peterson writes about how “hysterical pathology is defined according to early modern medical and cultural contexts and how it is represented in Shakespeare's plays... rather than adopting the psychoanalytic construct of ‘hysteria’” (Peterson 35). Until a few years ago, the term “hysteria” was associated with Freud’s idea of repressed female sexuality that presents itself in physical expressions. “While the hysterical female character in Renaissance literature frequently may share a similar set of physically represented behaviours of the body – tics, convulsions, syncopes, and traits – with the later patients of Charcot and Freud, the early modern representation of *hysterical illness* in its multiple forms is not limited to the performance of the symptoms of *hysteria*” (Peterson 36). Even today, female actors portray these mentally ill women with the outdated version and idea of hysteria.

Medical texts translated unsatisfied sexual desires as uterine illnesses, which as a result, caused hysteria. The context of this provided authors the ability to write “mad” female characters with no questions about a deeper meaning behind their actions other than the fact that they were hysterical. “In women, as another Hippocratic text puts it, ‘the womb is the origin of all diseases,’ so it would be fair to say that, in Hippocratic gynecology, all diseases are hysterical” (Peterson 39). According to medical literature, “Hysterical illnesses – *furor uterinus* (‘womb fury’ or frenzy), *chlorosis* (greensickness), and *strangulatus uteri* (strangulation of the ‘mother’) – develop within the uterus because of suppression of the menses or, even more often, because of the unexpelled ‘seed,’ or female sperm, produced by sexual desire” (Peterson 39). It should be noted that sufferers of “womb frenzy” were described as virgins who were hopelessly in love and as a result

suffered from repressed desire. “One recommended cure is marriage, which institutes regular sexual relations and thus aids in evacuation of fluids and brings the wild uterus under a husband’s control” (Neely 320). A woman’s hysteria was seen as a burden and something that could only be wrangled by a man, especially through matrimony. “Desire in female virgins is understood as a pathology, in pointed contrast to the construction of desire in men as relatively chivalric and heroic” (Peterson 42). Understanding the appropriated power difference between the two sexes is an intrinsic component to examining the “madness” that Ophelia presents in *Hamlet*.

FLOWER AND GARDEN SYMBOLISM

Medical writers and practitioners often used agricultural terms for female genitalia and processes, such as with “flowers,” “rose leaves not yet ripened,” and “the deflowering of the hymen.” This sort of language further infantilizes and objectifies women based on how it was used to describe their sexuality. That language carries into modern and contemporary representations of virginity and female capability. It is an ideology that encourages praise of sexual inexperience and naivety and pushes women to vulnerability and dependency on men in society. On the opposite side of the idea of the perfect woman, “The belief in the buildup of fluids thought to turn into noxious stews and even poisonous vapours extremely quickly is related to holdovers from ancient Greek models of female sexuality, which stated that women are the sex predisposed to uncontrollable sexual appetites; by comparison, the male body, with its superior humoral composition and physiological structure, easily regulates its desires” (Peterson 40). It is a literary trope that women are unable to contain their sexual desires and therefore become hysterical beings to be ridiculed.

It is important to provide some context regarding flower and garden symbolism in Christianity, which heavily influenced many works during the Middle Ages and then the Elizabethan era, including the works of Shakespeare. Flower imagery and symbolism can be found throughout history: in Greek and Roman history, Indian texts, Native American rituals, and in Middle Eastern culture, to name a few. However, as Christianity began spreading in the Middle Ages, Catholic leaders worked tirelessly to abolish that ritual in the West because it was often associated with pagan practices and succeeded.

“Eventually, however, flower symbolism was integrated into Christianity as well, particularly when associated with the Virgin Mary. In direct contrast to how flowers were used as positive symbols of female sexuality in India, they were now being used as negative symbols throughout Europe. The enclosed garden became a symbol for virginity and sexual innocence in general, indicating flowers untainted by the outside world, and the Virgin Mary specifically” (Frownfelter 29). The use of a white rose or lily flower in association with the Virgin Mary stood for chastity, purity, and repressed desire, a negative connotation in contrast with a positive celebration of female sexuality through flowers that is found in other cultures. Women suffered at the hands of the church because of the shame that they were taught to feel about veering from the icon of purity.

HAMLET ANALYSIS

A prominent tradition in early modern England is that of *hortus conclusus*. The term, as described by Peterson, “metaphorizes enclosed gardens as the inviolable space of the Virgin Mary's body and refers more broadly to inviolable virginal and chaste-within-marriage bodies” (Peterson 43). With this context in mind, a strong example would be the use of garden imagery with the portrayal of Gertrude's sexuality in *Hamlet*. The use of the words “rank” and “unweeded” describe her lust, as compared to that of Hamlet's uncle, Claudius. In the context of this story, Claudius has also sinned by lusting after his brother's wife, then killing his own brother and marrying Gertrude. He is just as corrupt as Gertrude is. It is unclear whether they had a relationship and partnership previous to King Hamlet's murder and their following marriage. Despite their similarities, the play's perspective states that Gertrude's “garden” has become unruly and rank with weeds faster than they can be removed. “The ‘unweeded garden’ operates as a metaphor for Hamlet's ‘fall’ into a post-Edenic, contaminating sexuality once he is forced to come to terms, after the death of Old Hamlet, with the fact that his mother possesses sexual desires” (Peterson 44). Assuming her lustful appetite sends Hamlet into his first long soliloquy, which links more garden imagery to her sexuality. In act III, her lust for Claudius is also imagined in similar ways: “Rank corruption, mining all within, / Infects unseen... And do not spread the compost on the weeds / To make them ranker” (Shakespeare 3.4.155-59). While Gertrude herself never confirms or denies Hamlet's feelings to be true, because she is denied the opportunity to express her inner thoughts and feelings, Hamlet provides her characterization and identity through his one-sided view of her. Her characterization and

role in the tragedy is that of *hortus conclusus* that has been corrupted and ended in the worst way.

Hamlet is not the first time Shakespeare used flower imagery and symbolism in his works. Take the verb “to bloom” for example. It can be argued that it has the same roots as “to blow.” This is exemplified in one of Shakespeare’s earlier works, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “‘I know a bank where on the wild thyme blows.’ To blow has sexual connotations today, but even in Shakespeare’s time, its derivatives (blowze, blowzy, blousy) meant both overblown and a wench or whore – a woman who had sexually ‘bloomed’ too much” (Frownfelter, Goody 31). The language places blame on women who are more promiscuous and prizes women who are pure and chaste before marriage. By using this type of language, the reinforcement of restraints and societal control over female sexuality becomes increasingly prominent and the easiest way to dehumanize women of all statuses. Shakespeare created a perfect character of foil and corruption in Gertrude which aligns with the expectations of her gender within the time period, as women were often blamed for the corruption of the men around them.

Ophelia does not escape this association with gardening, either. Her “flowers” represent virginal purity in contrast to Gertrude’s “rank garden.” Femininity is defined by youthfulness and ignorance, and Ophelia is usually a character associated “with docility and sexual naivety” (Gregory 107). These are prized traits that still hold true with the female gender. In Naomi Wolf’s “The Beauty Myth,” she emphasizes that, “Youth, and (until recently) virginity have been ‘beautiful’ in women since they stand for experiential and sexual ignorance... women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young

ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span” (Wolf 121). In comparison to Gertrude, Ophelia fulfills the praised standard of being a pure, virginal flower, and this is seen through textual evidence. Flowers are often associated with being sexy to the male gaze, especially ones that are unattainable, so it only seems fitting that women are put in the place of a flower. But are these two characters that different based in the way that Shakespeare borrowed medical terminology to describe their madness? Does Ophelia hold on to this trope throughout the text until her demise? Ophelia’s brother, Laertes, advises his sister at the beginning of the play to preserve her virginity and “not follow the ‘primrose path of dalliance’ (1.3.50) to destruction. Because the flower imagery in the passage links the untouched and “unblasted” to images of death and decay, this makes a persuasive parallel to “flowers” of seed that potentially may, and eventually do, become the poisonous stew within Ophelia’s body.

Laertes' conversation with his sister marks a point prior to her madness, which looks to be caused by the same toxic soup that finds constant mention in the medical texts” (Peterson 44). He knows of her strong desire for Hamlet, his desire for her, and warns her of what could happen if she gives up her virginity to him. Polonius, her father, also echoes Laertes’ instructions and forbids her from seeing Hamlet anymore as well. She complies and says that she will obey their commands. “Female submission is grounded in the creation account recorded in Genesis 2 and 3, in which man is created first and then woman is formed from a rib taken from man” (McDonald 257). This hierarchal relation between men and women applies just the same for a father-daughter or a brother-sister dynamic. Religious ideals regarding the position of women, especially

noble women, in society contributed heavily to the dependency she had with the men in her life for her sense of identity and self-worth.

Ophelia dwells in this horrible, tumultuous environment of conflict. This could be viewed as a clinical version of schizophrenia, because she has many conflicting voices in her head, none of which is her own. She feels stuck and caught in-between her devotion to her father, her duty as a daughter, and her love for Hamlet. Elaine Showalter brings this evidence to light with R. D. Lang's clinical research and view of Ophelia's madness in the context of her wanting to fulfill the wishes of the men around her (Showalter). The first confliction is between her and her father, when he tells her that he cannot see Hamlet again and forbids her love for him. "I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth / Have you so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet / Look to't, I charge you" (1.3.141-144). He then later goes back on his word and orders her to test how in love with her he is. The conflict from Polonius is hard enough without the added conflict of damaging words Hamlet uses against her. He holds much destructive power in how he speaks with her. A strong example of this is in Act III Scene 1. Hamlet tells Ophelia that, "I did love you once" (125) and then in his next monologue, he renounces this statement and proclaims that "I loved you not" (129). She responds disheartened, "I was the more deceived" (130). The clashing of different voices that control her life could be a significant cause of her descent into madness.

For a woman of noble status, Ophelia's virginity is of utmost importance, as her value depends on retaining it or losing it out of marriage. In "The Cult of Virginity" by Jessica Valenti, the discussion regarding the importance of purity is highlighted well: "purity' isn't just about not having sex, it's about not being a woman – and instead being

in a state of perpetual girlhood” (Valenti 143). Another source of domination that men had over women in noble statuses is that of controlling how they are desired by suitors. “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been spilt between active/male and passive female... In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 62). Rigid gender performance defined the identities of nobles, but it made many women, especially exemplified with Ophelia, to feel like they were trapped in a cage.

Not only does Laertes advise her on the issue of reputation and virtue, but also of her actual health and well-being. As a noble brother, Laertes, and their father, Polonius, act as a husband or ruling monarch for Ophelia, to make decisions for her until she is married. Because of this, “Husbands, like monarchs, were expected to be conscious of their duty... and were exhorted not to behave tyrannically toward their wives, children, and servants” (McDonald 257). But in this case, them telling Ophelia what she cannot do and how they should control her desires, is practicing tyranny over her. “And thy desire shall be subject to thine husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Genesis 3:16). Ophelia’s individuality and identity are defined by her father and her brother. She leans into this because that is the only way she has known. Shakespeare writes her as someone who cannot speak for herself, “I do not know my lord, what I should think,” Ophelia says to her father, Polonius, and in return, he tells her, “I will teach you. Think yourself a baby...tender yourself more dearly” (1.3.110). Because she takes her identity and presence in society in her father and in Hamlet, it can be argued that her “madness” is derived from the loss of her male influences in her life – Laertes leaving, Polonius dying,

and Hamlet rejecting her love for him – they were her voices. Her character is defined by the relationship she has with higher-status men, her father, her brother, and her lover, Hamlet. Ophelia has no self-worth outside of her identity in these men, so she is significantly more susceptible to losing control of her mind and falling into madness.

In a stark comparison between the identities of Hamlet and Ophelia, Carol Neely observes that Ophelia is a double to Hamlet. This perhaps gives more worth to her role in the tragedy, as she relates and compliments Hamlet's behaviors with her own. There is quite a bit of imagery and symbolism that they share as well. Margaret Ferguson observes that Hamlet tells Claudius in Scene 2 of the tragedy that he is "too much in the sun" (1.2.69) and then later tells Polonius, in regard to Ophelia, to, "Let her not walk I' th' sun" (2.3.201). Ophelia is only described as a *feeling* being while Hamlet is a *thinking* being. Ophelia feels too fiercely, and as a woman in her time, this is a negative thing, while Hamlet thinks too much. Shakespeare has cleverly inserted parallels between these two characters through the link of mental illness. "Ophelia's true madness is the complement to Hamlet's feigned insanity; Hamlet's madness takes the form of political, thoughtful speech where hers is somatized and eroticized" (Neely 325-326). Because Hamlet is a man and disgusted with "womanly feelings," someone has to take them on. And in this world that Shakespeare created, he writes Ophelia to be the personification of satisfying them in Hamlet's place. Laertes' line, referring to his tears, in Act IV Scene 7, encompasses the idea that in this world, feeling is shamefully womanly: "When these are gone / The woman will be out" (4.7.214-215). He temporarily surrenders his masculinity, and then "becomes a man again" once his eyes are dry and the tears have stopped. The shameful part of him will be purged after he finishes his tears. Madness, as has already

been examined, is something that is feminine, in contrast with Hamlet's feigned insanity. Karin Coddon discusses this in detail. Hamlet feels feelings of betrayal and paranoia, but because the act of feeling is not a masculine act, someone else has to personify them, and Ophelia does just that. Because such intense emotions like fear, betrayal, and paranoia that are consistently suppressed lead to madness, Ophelia suffers the insanity in place of Hamlet because she was the one to "feel" the intense emotions. (Showalter). Hamlet's disgust with the femininity within himself translates to being outwardly violent in his loathing of women and his brutal manipulation of Ophelia. Additionally, in the context of this world, it would have been womanly for Hamlet to kill himself, despite vividly considering it in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy (3.1.64). Ophelia is the one who fulfills this wish of his, killing herself and doing away with the womanly feelings he chastised himself for feeling.

Ophelia is frustrated because she feels trapped between her own sexual desires, social helplessness, and the forced control over women's bodies that girls and women during that time faced. In an article titled "Night to His Day: The Social Construction of Gender," Judith Lorber explains how gender performance seeps into everyday life and in relationships. "Most people, however, voluntarily go along with their society's prescriptions for those of their gender status, because the norms and expectations get built into their sense of worth and identity as the way we think, the way we see and hear and speak, the way we fantasize, and the way we feel. For humans, the social is the natural" (Lorber 70). This explanation of gender performance is extremely relevant to the context *Hamlet* provides. Frustrated and suppressed desire plays a significant role in Ophelia's madness. Themes of guilt are portrayed very strongly in this story, as "In this sense,

Gertrude and Ophelia share the same representational fate, a gesture that critics recognize as only a purely symbolic action on Hamlet's part to see all women in terms of corrupted sexuality" (Peterson 46). Ophelia's madness is certainly gender-specific. This madness of unrequited love stems from Ophelia loving Hamlet and Hamlet not being able to love her back because of his feigned "madness." She convinces herself that she is the cause of his sudden insanity. Her father, Polonius, predicted this earlier in the play before his death. He predicts that Hamlet is, "mad for [Ophelia's] love" (2.1.95). This guilt weighs heavily on Ophelia. "Ophelia comes to believe that Hamlet is in fact 'mad for the love that she has been forbidden to give him'" (Camden 248).

Some scholars argue that Hamlet and Ophelia have already been physically intimate with each other. Marguerite Vey-Miller and Ronald Miller speculate that because Ophelia is continually being praised for her purity and she has been rejected by Hamlet with whom she was intimate, she falls into madness because of the sheer hypocrisy of the situation (Miller and Miller 82-83). From the text in Act III Scene 1, one will find that their claim is unsupported based on the interaction of Hamlet and Ophelia in this scene, and the way that they continue to interact for the rest of the play until her death. Her character remains that of bewilderment and innocence. A significant example of this is when Hamlet asks Ophelia, "Are you honest... are you fair?" (3.1.113-115). "Honest" and "fair" are other terms for chastity. He wouldn't ask these things if he knew he had taken her virginity, thus, he is blatantly picking fun at her and making a joke of her innocence. In response, she is genuinely confused and questions what Hamlet means by this. And in Act III Scene 2, a similar exchange happens. Hamlet asks if he can lay his head in her lap and she flatly tells him no. He inquires further and asks if it is because she

thought he meant something else, and she still responds with confusion and no understanding of sexual flirtations. She states, “I think nothing, my lord” (3.2.124). He then maliciously warps her words:

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

Ophelia – What is, my lord?

Hamlet – Nothing (3.2.125-128).

According to Elaine Showalter, the translation of the Elizabethan slang word “nothing” was a term for female genitalia, as exemplified in *Much Ado About Nothing*. To Hamlet, “nothing” is what lies between her legs, as for a male’s visual system of desire, a woman’s sexual organs, “in the words of the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, ‘represent the horror of having nothing to see’” (Showalter 2). She becomes uncomfortable by his insinuations and finally states, “You are merry, my Lord” (3.2.129). Hamlet is taking advantage of this knowledge and using it to tease her and play upon her innocence. The use of the word “nothing” is also symbolic of her forced silencing as a woman in society. “When Ophelia is mad, Gertrude says that ‘Her speech is nothing,’ mere ‘unshaped use.’ Ophelia’s speech thus represents the horror of having nothing to say in the public terms defined by the court. Deprived of thought, sexuality, language, Ophelia’s story becomes the Story of O—the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference” (Showalter 2).

While it is not certain if Shakespeare aimed to have Hamlet and Ophelia act on their desires or not, the text leads readers to believe that the consummation of their love never happened. Ophelia’s madness has characteristics of “greensickness,” which basically means that virgins do not act on their desires and become overwhelmed by

them. Carroll Camden theorizes that Ophelia suffers from “erotic melancholy” or “erotomania,” a female specified disease of unrequited love. Another definition for depression, especially one popularized in the Elizabethan era, is “melancholy.” This definition leads one to believe that Ophelia’s illness is not just passing feelings but rather something that has been inside her for a while. Cara Scott discusses Camden’s observations in depth, “one of the causes of hysteria is sexual desire, so placing “erotic” in front of “melancholy” creates a kind of oxymoron due to the fact that the two diseases are very different. While melancholy indicates depression, the addition of “erotic,” implying hysteria, suggests fleeting emotions ... This oxymoronic diagnosis fits in well with the contrast of Shakespearean women’s true mental state versus their perceived mental state by society at the time (Scott 6-7). Because she is already depicted as fragile, losing her identity marks the peak of her madness. This is further fueled by sexual frustration. By not knowing how to practice agency over her body, because she was taught that it was something to be controlled by the men in her life, she falls into societally pressed madness. But the ultimate cause of Ophelia’s downward spiral from sanity to suicide lies in the turmoil of their love and the duty she feels to the men in her life.

Further following the flower imagery and ideology, Peterson discusses how this imagery brings much of Shakespeare’s intentions for Hamlet full circle. “If flowers are identified with menstruum and ‘to penetrate the hymen is to deflower’ (Carroll 290), then Ophelia's being surrounded by flowers as she drowns in the brook suggests her literally drowning in ‘flowers’ of blood and seed, not ‘deflowered’ but pathologically ‘enflowered,’ to coin a term. This gains reinforcement in Gertrude's account of her death

by drowning, presented as a conspiracy by nature, by trees and the 'weedy trophies' (4.7.175) – themselves a close parallel to the unweeded garden – to drown her in a brook. The brook itself is of course another body of fluid, appropriately bringing together as a metaphoric parallel all the liquids reported to have killed her, interior and exterior to the body cavity" (Peterson 47). The flower can be viewed as a positive or a negative symbol, and the use of flower imagery with Ophelia quickly turns to something negative despite the absence of her female sexuality that the flowers represent. She fulfills the Western stereotype of an ideal and perfectly chaste woman, but this ultimately becomes her downfall and leads to her tragically symbolic death. Laertes mourns his sister's death and speaks a line that solidifies her purity and innocence, "And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring!" (5.1.249-250). The argument that Ophelia's madness is the result of defilement or impurity is not valid because of Laertes plea and use of positive floral symbolism words. "Gertrude narrates Ophelia's death as beautiful, natural, and eroticized, foreshadowing later representations of it and representations of female hysterics as sexually frustrated and theatrically alluring" (Neely 325). This representation of Ophelia makes way for translating madness into the context of being gender-inflicted. In her madness, she has finally taken agency over her own mind and body and begins to make decisions for herself for the first time. *She decides* to take her own life to end her hopelessness and circumstances which cause her victimization. For the first time, she has taken her life into her own hands, literally and figuratively.

Ophelia's only expression of sexuality lies in the finalization of her death. According to Valerie Traub's observations, Hamlet explains to readers earlier in the text that death is "A consummation / Devoutly to be wished" (3.1.71-72). This is the only

form of consummation that Ophelia experiences during this story, because according to the evidence in the text, they never act on their desires. Throughout the course of the play, Hamlet goes back and forth with her, claiming to have loved her and then claiming to have never. But it isn't until she has taken her own life that he confesses his love for Ophelia. "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.285). She never gets to experience the pleasure of her love for Hamlet and "consummation" because hers was expressed through finality in death.

What is the obligation that critics and examiners have when they tell Ophelia's story? Carol Neely tells readers that they should assume the role of advocacy, speaking *for* her considering Shakespeare wrote her as a character who could not speak for herself. Elaine Showalter continues this thought process on how to talk about Ophelia justly:

But what can we mean by Ophelia's story? The story of her life? The story of her betrayal at the hands of her father, brother, lover, court, society? The story of her rejection and marginalization by male critics of Shakespeare? Shakespeare gives us very little information from which to imagine a past for Ophelia. She appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes; the pre-play course of her love story with Hamlet is known only by a few ambiguous flashbacks. Her tragedy is subordinated in the play; unlike Hamlet, she does not struggle with moral choices or alternatives. (Showalter 2)

Ophelia's only history is connected with Hamlet. She is merely a tragic element that complements Hamlet's story. Lee Edwards illustrates this well, "We can imagine Hamlet's story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet" (Edwards 36). She does not exist in this world without the men in her life, so when her

father dies and Hamlet leaves, she is torn apart from the identity of being a pure woman and a dutiful daughter. Madness is the only logical solution that follows her, and she dies shortly after the men who constructed her identity are gone. Her character cannot exist on its own.

CONCLUSION

“Desire, we must remember, is as destructive physically as the loss of physical virginity could be socially, and this is why, despite the relative difference in their social-sexual status, Laertes's imagining Ophelia's impending poisoning is the mirror of Hamlet's imagining his mother's poisonously desiring body” (Peterson 45). Through further analysis, one can see that the “madness” and mental illness portrayed through Ophelia was pressed upon her from the society and social context of that time, as opposed to having a preexisting condition present. Women who attempted to practice agency over their bodies and sexualities generated powerful cultural anxiety because they were disrupting the social order of the time. The construction of a “mad woman” is indicative of a certain kind of female character that has revealed itself as being too common in Early Modern drama. That type of female character is recognized by her lack of identity, rationality, and exposing too much emotion and feeling. This is seen through the character of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, her actions of trying to defy social order were seen as monstrous and threatening, whether or not she intended to defy anything. By voicing her lust, Ophelia endured attacks on her promiscuity, as well as scorn because, “looseness of tongue came to symbolize looseness of body and spirit” (McDonald 255). She learned this and had to silence herself to escape the guilt and scorn forced upon her. There are many perspectives of analyzation for Ophelia, but one truth stands alone: she was a victim of circumstance with a characterization and identity written to be constructed solely by the men in her life, and it is ripped out from under her.

She is doomed to a fate of madness and death because she transforms into the patriarchal expectation of herself, and without those influences, she has no individuality to compensate the loss of her identity

My original idea of how Shakespeare characterized his “mad” characters still stands on its own in some respects but is contradicted by how Shakespeare adhered to the Elizabethan standard for madness. Through my analysis of *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean works, his madwomen are underrepresented, given little identity outside of their role as a plot device for their male counterparts, and given very little speaking time in their respected stories. Shakespeare created complex characters in the midst of simple-minded ideas, but ultimately fell prey to how society viewed femininity as related to madness.

GLOSSARY

Anxiety:

- a persistent feeling of dread, worry, nervousness
- fear of the uncertain future

Aristotle:

- philosopher in the Classical period of Ancient Greece
- wrote “The Poetics” – a guidebook for literary theory
- known as the “Father of Western Philosophy”

Charcot:

- French neurologist/pathologist
- known for his theories and work with hysteria

Chlorosis:

- known as “green sickness”
- defined as a menstrual disorder in the 19th century as related to hysteria and anorexia
- first female gynecologist blamed social factors for reasoning behind the disease

Depression:

- feelings of persistent sadness, sorrow, despondency, despair; melancholy

Erotomania:

- excessive sexual desire, a strictly female disease in Elizabethan times

Freud:

- Sigmund Freud was an Austrian neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis

Furor uterinus:

- Latin definition – “agitation of the uterus”
- common medical diagnosis for women displaying hysterical symptoms
- history of term dates back to Ancient Greece

Hortus conclusus:

- Latin definition – “enclosed garden”
- Emblem of Virgin Mary and purity

Hysterical illness:

- once a common medical diagnosis for women in Western medicine
- hysterical illness aligned with *normally* functioning female sexuality
- considered chronic among women until term was dropped in the 50s

Infantilization:

- the treatment and condescension of someone, as if they are still a small child
- to keep in or reduce to an infantile state

Pathology:

- the science of the causes of diseases; a collective study of a disease

Schizophrenia:

- mental illness that breaks down the common relation between thought, emotion, and behavior; withdrawal from reality; delusions and fantasies; fragile mind

Strangulatus uteri:

- “strangling of the uterus” as related to hysterical symptoms

Uterine illness:

- Illnesses of the uterus, as related to hysterical symptoms and reasons for sickness

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