

The Fismonger's Daughter Goes Crazy (I): the Domineering Father, the Mad Lover, and the Dead Mother

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The purpose of the present paper is to make a reflection about Ophelia, her madness being the central issue. Mine is an attempt to provide the reasons which might explain her final collapse. The initial assumption upon which I build my essay is that Ophelia can really be analysed as an “apparent” human character. I am far from viewing her merely as a convergence of social, cultural and economic influences. This perspective denies the possibility “that Shakespeare’s characters are susceptible of analysis as *people*” and instead tries to bring out “a series of specific cultural issues of the early modern period” in order to show the ways “in which ‘femaleness’ was significant in a network of possibilities for categorising and discriminating experience” (Jardine 1983: 6). My critical procedure starts in *Hamlet*. This is an assumption that is no longer taken for granted in light of recent literary criticism, which often ends in the text simply to confirm the political stance that has already been made (Bloom 1998: 8-9). From the text I will move to those contexts I consider relevant for its full understanding: among them myself, my own personal vital existence, my human experience, for I am convinced that the best way to fully understand Ophelia, as she is described in the text, is to read it closely and ask myself the timeless questions that she poses. My view is that one which professor López-Peláez, scholar and friend, described with some degree of mistrust as “a kind of psychological realism, a character-based criticism at the service of a supposedly timeless and unchanging human nature” (1997: 69), a method which, he admits, “seems to have been more resistant to theory” (1997: 70)¹. I do not know whether or not Shakespeare “invented the human as we continue to know it” (Bloom 1998: xviii); what he certainly did was to grasp, as Chaucer or the Gawain-poet had also done before him, that which makes us authentically human: that which, “according to Johnson, justly imitates essential human nature, which is a universal and not a social phenomenon” (Bloom 1998: 3). I feel comforted when reminded that Ophelia, Macbeth or Horatio are creations of personality which are similar to myself in essence, moods and attitudes, rather than mere products of the history, culture and ideology that conditions them (Wofford 1994: 212-13) (See Barbeito 1989, Dollimore 1989 and 1990, Dollimore and Sinfield 1992, Drakakis 1991, Greenblatt 1984 and Sinfield. 1992). To me, historicised approaches to Shakespeare do help us to understand many of the responses and views of his characters, but they fail to explain their

¹ I thank professor López-Peláez for all the critical apparatus he has provided me with concerning “Simple Historicism”, “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism”. I find most enlightening his clarification of the differences between these literary schools (López-Peláez 1997).

excellency, their permanent appeal to generations other than Shakespeare's: "Why do his personages seem so *real* to us" (Bloom 1998: 6). This is still an open question, not only for traditional Marxist literary criticism, but also for both New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. So, allow me to start with the text.

Ophelia "appears in only five of the play's twenty scenes" (Showalter 1994: 221). This dearth of textual references has been considered by Feminist literary criticism as the result of sexist marginalisation by Shakespeare², either conscious or unconscious³. Therefore, some have stated that "Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet" (Showalter 1994: 222). Others, somehow obviating the text, conclude that her tragedy *is* the real tragedy in *Hamlet*, a tragedy of nothingness. A third group claims that she symbolises the victimisation of femininity. And finally, some claim she is a metaphor of the Prince of Denmark (Showalter 1994: 221-23) (See Edwards 1979, Irigaray 1987, Leverenz 1978 and Wilbern 1981.) I agree with all of these interpretations to a certain extent, as they all play a part in my reflections on the Fishmonger's daughter, as well as those which are content with pointing out the defencelessness or vulnerability of her role⁴.

1. Jephthah, the Fishmonger and the Imposed Female Self-Sacrifice.

It is not until the third scene of the first act that Ophelia enters into the play. One might draw a lot from the fact that she is presented in a very precise and delicate situation: being admonished first by her brother and then by her father. Both characters separately agree concerning the Prince of Denmark's real intentions and, consequently, feel compelled to warn Ophelia about Hamlet. This implies that men assume the moral teaching role, whereas it is the duty of women to, and this is not only because of an open mistrust on female moral discernment (Polonius's words clearly show this), but because both father and son share a certain suspicion on the integrity of female virtue (I.iii.34-42; 115-17). It has been noted that Shakespearean texts did reflect the values of patriarchal society; for some even Shakespeare's works are "the most patriarchal body of texts" (Jardine 1983: 1). However, I still think that Shakespeare's conception of femininity is not

² Bradley 1904 showed his doubts "'whether from the mere text of the play a sure interpretation' could 'be drawn'" on Ophelia (Jenkins 1989: 149). See Bradley 1904.

³ According to Lisa Jardine, there are two types of Feminist approaches to Shakespeare. First she talks about the "perfectly reflecting glass" (1983: 6) group, who assert that Shakespeare's "female characters, (...), reflect accurately the whole range of specifically female qualities (...)" (1983: 1-2). Nevertheless, according to this interpretation "'Shakespeare's vision of women transcends the limits of his time and sex' (...). This means, we are told, that Shakespeare's women characters 'offer insights into women's perceptions of themselves in a patriarchal world'" (1983: 2). See: Dash 1981. Dash, Dusinger or Barton are leading critics of this first approach.

The "distorted masculine view" (1983: 6) best defines the second approach: "Shakespeare's *maleness* therefore makes it inevitable that his female characters are warped and distorted" (1983: 3). Two attitudes are to be noted here. The *non-aggressive* exculpates the author of any responsibility: living in a "oppressively chauvinistic" society, Shakespeare simply reflected the facts of life (1983: 3). Smith's views should be included here. The *aggressive* attitude claims that since Shakespeare is sexist, the critic has to uncover his prejudices, being careful about the limitations of this author. For others, this author no longer deserves the place he has occupied (1983: 4). Kahn or French well represent this attitude.

⁴ Jump 1968 includes excerpts from essays on *Hamlet* by, among others, S. Johnson 23-24, G.H. Lewes 33-34, L.L. Shucking 43-44 H.D.F. Kittle 108-17, and J. Kott 196-209.

as “monolithic” as it has been assumed. We should be careful to realise that the author is far from simply placing Ophelia in an inferior moral position. While taking to heart her brother’s “good lesson” (I, iii. 45) without mockery (Jenkins 1989: 201), she does not waste the opportunity to remind Laertes of his own moral obligations (I. iii. 45-51)⁵. I do not suggest this is a defiant or rebellious attitude; Ophelia’s behaviour is, generally speaking, conditioned by paternal authority. I simply imply that human responses to stimuli are many, not simply submission or rebellion. To assume for her any of the two attitudes is to constrain Ophelia by our own ideological discourse, “to reappropriate her for our own ends” (Showalter 1994: 223), ignoring the complexity of human personality. This oversimplification is at odds with Shakespeare’s artistry.

Paternal authority is, as I have stated, the main factor shaping Ophelia’s behaviour in *Hamlet*. As Tillyard puts it “the conception of order is so taken for granted, so much part of the collective mind of the people, that it is hardly mentioned except in explicitly didactic passages”, among them, the Church Homily *Of Obedience* (1998: 17). It is clear that the acceptance of parental authority was one of the basis of this order, primarily cosmic but domestic too, one in which observance of “degree, priority and place”, as Ulysses states in *Troilus and Cressida* (I. iii. 86) prevented confusion or disorder: parents have the right to rule their sons, as the sun “Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil/ And posts like the commandment of a king/ Sans check, to good and bad” (*Troilus and Cressida*, I. iii. 92-94). Taking into account the prevalent submission of women to men in Elizabethan England, it is easy to infer that parental authority would be primarily exercised by fathers upon daughters⁶. In W. Lowth’s translation into English (1581) of Bartholomew Batty’s *The Christian Man’s Closet*, the assumption is that the responsibility of “the godly training up of children” (Aughterson 1995: 165) falls solely on the father⁷:

“And for that your worships are fathers of many children (which I am persuaded are daily beloved unto you), and masters of great families, whereof I know you have care to be virtuously instructed, guided, governed and trained up in the fear of God.” (Aughterson 1995: 165)

Polonius is obviously aware of all this: “I have a daughter -have while she is mine.” (II. ii.106). Possession is emphasised twice (*have, mine*), implicitly stating that Polonius will no longer own his daughter, when a husband does. Because of

⁵ Shakespeare seems to suggest Laertes’ warnings about “the shot and danger of desire” (I. iii. 35) do betray his own personal experience; Polonius’ later words to Reynaldo in the opening scene of Act II confirm (if not indulge) Laertes’ youthful peccadilloes.

⁶ According to Stiller, in a statement which refers mainly to the Medieval period, “If fathers fought to control their sons and legislated to possess their wives as chattels, their control over their daughters seems to have been as close to absolute as possible without actual enslavement. From ancient times well into the Renaissance, daughters passed from their fathers’ hands into those of their husbands or other male guardians” (1980: 6).

⁷ Nevertheless, Thomas Salter wrote *The Mirror of Modesty*, in which he explicitly advises mothers on the education of their daughters. This text was first published in 1578. (Aughterson 1995: 177-78). Similarly, Thomas Becon reports in the *Catechism* (included in his *Works*, published in 1564) a conversation between a father and his son in which we read: “*Father*. [...] It is therefore also lawful for old and ancient matrons to teach.’ *Son*. ‘Whom should they teach?’ *Father*. ‘Young women’” (Aughterson 1995: 175).

the fact that she is a woman and his daughter, she owes her father “duty and obedience” (II. ii. 107) and she must be virtuous (I. iii. 96-7). Polonius’ role as moral instructor is, after all, something we might expect. His attitude, however, is far from being simply that of the “father-who-cares. I can not help feeling provoked by Polonius’ “watch” and “inquire” ways. He himself or his attendants are permanently on guard: he spies on his son (II. 11-73); on Hamlet (III. i. 90-163); and, finally, on Hamlet and the Queen, this being his last mission since he is ridiculously killed behind the curtains (III. iv.7-24)⁸. Ophelia is also his target: his father has been informed in detail about her meetings with the Prince of Denmark (I. iii. 91-93). Once Polonius makes this known to his daughter, there is no possibility of her denying it (if she ever thought of doing so). Her father exhausts her with the typical “how-far-did-you-go” questions, giving her almost no time to answer. Her only defence is to resort to Hamlet’s love (I. iii. 99-100; 110-11 & 113-14), but without conviction. Here, for the first time, I see the victimisation of this character. Confusion is the word that best defines Ophelia’s attitude -“I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (I. iii. 104)-, the step previous to allowing herself to be swayed by the bias of Polonius concerning Hamlet, instead of using her own powers of self-determination. This attitude is reinforced by her father’s “I will teach you” (I. iii. 105). The scene ends with Polonius’ categorical command to Ophelia not to “slander any moment leisure/ As to give words or to talk with the Lord Hamlet” (I. iii. 133-34)⁹.

Together with the deprivation of discernment, Polonius’ attitude towards his daughter victimises her in two more ways. Back to their first interaction, Ophelia is referred to as an item which has to be properly sold to a good buyer, this being his right. The economic connotations of “tenders” (I. iii. 106), “Tender yourself more dearly” (I. iii. 107) and “higher rate” (I. iii. 122) were convincingly argued by Jenkins (1989: 204-05). Together with this, Polonius’ later words have further and ever more degrading implications. In order to find out the cause of Hamlet’s madness, he says: “I’ll loose my daughter to him” (II. ii. 162). Ophelia is presented as a kind of female animal, just fit for mating and breeding: “the mating sense of *loose...to him* can hardly be missed” (Jenkins 1989: 245). Both implications (mating and breeding) are conjured up in the mind of the audience when Hamlet refers to Polonius as “a fishmonger” (II. ii. 174): in the light of contemporary references, that word meant both a trader in women’s virtue and somebody prone to have daughters especially fit for breeding (Jenkins 1989: 465).

⁸ Polonius’ spying attitude towards both Ophelia and Laertes is oppressive and contributes to the creation of that permanent suspicion which makes a prison of Denmark; as Kott 1964 stated: “In this performance everybody, without exception, was being constantly watched” (Jump 1968: 197).

⁹ Juan Luis Vives (1492-1590) was a Spanish humanist, friend of Thomas More and Erasmus. Having dedicated his commentary (1522) on St. Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* to the English king Henry VIII, he went in 1523 to England, where he was appointed preceptor to Mary, Catherine of Aragon’s daughter and Princess of Wales. For her Vives wrote *The instruction of a Christian woman*, first published in Latin in 1523. Six years later, this text was translated into English. A quotation from the English 1540 edition of this text, translated by Richard Hyrde, contextualises Polonius’ prohibition: “First of all, methinks, that it is to be told their father and mother, as Aristotle both did in his history of beasts, that is, that they keep their daughters, specially when they begin to grow from child’s state, and hold them from men’s company. For that time they be given unto most lust of the body. Also the maidens should keep themselves, both at all other and at that time specially, from either hearing or saying, or yet thinking any foul thing, which thing she shall labour to do” (Aughterson 1995: 69).

Ophelia accepts her father's authority ("I shall obey, my lord" [I. iii. 136]) as she had done with her brother's warnings. This time, however, there is no trace of criticism in her attitude and Ophelia strictly obeys her father's imperative commands, refusing to have any further contact with Hamlet and repelling his suit:

Pol. What, have you given him any words of late?

Oph. No, my good lord, but as you did command,
I did repel his letters and denied
His access to me. (II. i. 107-09)

Immediately after, Polonius recognises his misjudgement of Hamlet's motives (II. i. 106, 111-13), but now it is too late: Ophelia's disdain -we have to assume- has already taken place after the first act, once the Ghost has set upon the Prince the task of vengeance. Ophelia is therefore providing Hamlet with a perfect motif for his feigned mental insanity: amorous insanity.

In the *nunnery* scene (III. i. 91-150), her attitude is ambiguous and problematic. This scene is particularly relevant for it shows Ophelia exercising her own will. Apparently, she is just to check Hamlet's reaction by giving him back his love tokens, pretending to *officially* end their relationship; this she does at her father's command. However, paradoxically, once Polonius has recognised his error concerning Hamlet's real intentions, she willingly tries for the last time to gain Hamlet's love back. Inexperienced as Ophelia is, she does so in a very unconvincing manner: by putting all the blame on the Prince for their terminated love relationship. Her words sound fairly naive and more like a declaration of her love for him:

Oph. My lord, I have remembrances of yours
That I have longed long to redeliver.
I pray you now receive them.

Ham. No, not I.
I never gave you aught.

Oph. My honoured lord; I know well you did,
And with them words of so sweet breath composed
As made the things more rich. Their perfume lost,
Take these again; for to the noble mind
Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind. (III. i. 93-101)

Why should Ophelia, ignorant as she is of Hamlet's feelings towards women, love and marriage, reproach him for his unkindness? According to White, Ophelia is basically an incomplete and immature character, "fearing and desiring a full love relationship with Hamlet" (1986: 64). When she feels Polonius is no longer an obstacle and she decided to try and win back Hamlet's love, the Prince of Denmark is far from sharing with Ophelia both her expectations of an affair and her remembrance of their happy man-woman romantic relationship; in fact, at this stage, as Jenkins states, "it is Hamlet who rejects Ophelia's love and not she his" (1989: 150). From this moment onwards Ophelia, like Jephthah's daughter¹⁰, will

¹⁰ "11:29 factus est ergo super Iepthae spiritus Domini et circumiens Galaad et Manasse Maspha quoque Galaad et inde transiens ad filios Ammon 11:30 votum vovit Domino dicens si tradideris filios Ammon in manus meas 11:31 quicumque primus fuerit egressus de foribus domus meae mihi que occurrerit revertenti cum pace a filiis Ammon eum holocaustum offeram Domino 11:32 transivitque

have to assume a role that was originally imposed on her by paternal authority: both women are forced to live as celibates. In the first case, the sacrifice of the woman implied obedient submissiveness to death at the hands of her own father, while still a virgin (*Judges XI, 30-40*); for Ophelia, a virgin too¹¹, it meant self-denial of love, eventual death and madness.

Hamlet ends his love relationship with Ophelia for different reasons. He refuses a woman's love, since he feels repulsion over his mother's recent marriage, the result of "the compulsive ardour" (III. iv. 86)". Consequently, he abhors his own sexual desire and the object towards which it has tended. But above all, he is so tortured by the task that has been imposed on him, revenge, that any other consideration is frivolous, if not hateful (I. v. 98-104). Ophelia's only reason to sacrifice her love was obedience to her father. Like the anonymous daughter of Jephthah, she will also cry for her virginity (*Judges 11, 37-39*), singing songs of neglected love.

2. The Madness of Gertrude's Son and Female Tragic Heroism

It was my intention to analyse Ophelia's character making little or no reference to the Prince of Denmark's inner evolution. I am only concerned with

Iepthae ad filios Ammon ut pugnaret contra eos quos tradidit Dominus in manus eius 11:33 percussitque ab Aroer usque dum venias in Mennith viginti civitates et usque ad Abel quae est vineis consita plaga magna nimis humiliatique sunt filii Ammon a filiis Israhel 11:34 revertenti autem Iepthae in Maspha domum suam occurrit unigenita filia cum tympanis et choris non enim habebat alios liberos 11:35 qua visa scidit vestimenta sua et ait heu filia mi decepisti me et ipsa decepta es aperui enim os meum ad Dominum et aliud facere non potero 11:36 cui illa respondit pater mi si aperuisti os tuum ad Dominum fac mihi quodcumque pollicitus es concessa tibi ultione atque victoria de hostibus tuis 11:37 dixitque ad patrem hoc solum mihi praesta quod deprecor dimitte me ut duobus mensibus circumeam montes et plangam virginitatem meam cum sodalibus meis 11:38 cui ille respondit vade et dimisit eam duobus mensibus cumque abisset cum sociis ac sodalibus suis flebat virginitatem suam in montibus 11:39 expletisque duobus mensibus reversa est ad patrem suum et fecit ei sicut voverat quae ignorabat virum exinde mos increbuit in Israhel et consuetudo servata est 11:40 ut post anni circulum conveniant in unum filiae Israhel et plangent filiam Iepthae Galaaditae diebus quattuor".

The story of Jephthah, judge of Israel, and his daughter was one of the most famous Bible stories in England. It was several times balladised and also served as a suitable topic for homilies and drama, both academic and popular. A XVIIIth century Jephthah ballad is included by Jenkins (1989: 475-77).

¹¹ There has been much debate around the earnest question *Did Hamlet sleep with Ophelia?* Ernst Jones, Freud's leading British disciple, published in 1949 a study where he described Ophelia in the following terms: "unmistakably sensual, as she seldom is on stage. She may be 'innocent' and docile, but she is very aware of her body" (Showalter 1994: 235). A similar opinion was held by West 1958, for whom Ophelia was "a disreputable young woman" (Showalter 1994: 235), who died pregnant (White 1986: 63). Modern film readings of Ophelia, such as Kenneth Brannagh's version of *Hamlet*, are built upon the assumption that she and Hamlet had a full sexual relationship, endowing her in this way with a dubious halo of defiance. Textual evidence of this is lacking, if we exclude the supposed implications of the "Valentine song" (IV. v. 48-66), though a weak support it is. As Jenkins claims, we should not assume "that what happens to the maiden in the Valentine song must have happened to Ophelia herself. What the songs must connect with are the fancies which arise in Ophelia's mind released from rational control" (1989: 530). Besides, the priest's words during the burial ceremony seem to be conclusive: "Yet here she is allow'd her virgin crants./ Her maiden strewments" (V. i. 225-26). The priest's certainty on Ophelia's virginity should not be taken as the result of his flattering attitude towards the royal family. He shows no embarrassment when, in the light of Ophelia's doubtful death, he buries her "with such maimed rites" and "in ground unsanctified" (V. i. 212, 222). For Laertes, his attitude is "churlish" (V. i. 233). R. West, on the other hand, claims that the priest knows that Ophelia is not a virgin anymore and his words "Till the last trumpet" (V. i. 224) include a pun, *strumpet* (White 1986: 135, n. 1).

the ways in which Hamlet's behaviour affects Ophelia, without entering into any considerations concerning the protagonist's motivations.

The first issue I want to deal with is Hamlet's tantalising behaviour towards Ophelia, defined by Samuel Johnson as "useless and wanton cruelty" (Jump 1968: 24)¹². In both the *nunnery* and *mouse-trap* scenes, the Prince of Denmark projects upon his former loved one all the rage he bears in his heart and in his mind. Hamlet abuses Ophelia's words, rudely rebuffing her and calling her a whore; as Jardine puts it:

Ophelia is honest (chaste) or a bawd (a whore) depending on how Hamlet now chooses to describe his own behaviour towards her. If he loved her, declared that love to her and she accepted his gifts and embraces, then she is chaste. If he never loved her, but attempted to seduce her only, then *she* is lewd and lascivious, because Hamlet trifled with her. (1983: 73)

His words, his actions and his wit feed on the central stances of age-old misogyny: women's moral depravation and their permanent threat to men's virtue. Ophelia's response in the above mentioned scenes lines her up with the long list of patient women that have born men's cruelty, starting with Griselda. Ophelia's patience is dramatically merciful, for what can she do but stand the retorts and bawdy innuendoes of the mad Prince: "You are naught, you are naught" (III. ii. 143). Her patience, on the other hand, is pathetic too, since she can not keep up with Hamlet's ironies, puns and sarcasms.

The Prince of Denmark's feigned madness is also meaningful for Ophelia. The moment in which Hamlet first goes to her in his *antic disposition*, a kind of allegorical premonition of Madness' later visitation to her, is not actually performed on stage but reported by Ophelia¹³. Be it as it may, once Hamlet goes to her "with his doublet all unbrac'd,/ No hat upon his head, his stockings foul'd,/ Ungarter'd and down-gyved to his ankle", Ophelia assumes Hamlet is mad, mad for her love. Her father is the first one to suggest so (*Pol.* "Mad for thy love? *Oph.* My lord, I do not know,/ But truly I do fear it" [II. i. 85-86]), categorically concluding "That hath made him mad" (II. i.110). Besides, Hamlet's madness is, if I may say so, typical, following a Burtonian description of love melancholy (See Burton 1932: Third Partition, Memb. 3). Polonius is insistent on the cause of Hamlet's lunacy, particularly once he realises that the Queen would accept Ophelia as a very suitable bride for her son (III. i. 38-42)¹⁴. This reiteration, that so well describes Polonius' personality to the reader and the audience, will have a devastating effect on Ophelia. Polonius' last words on this issue come immediately after the *nunnery* scene and are obviously uttered in his daughter's presence: "But

¹² Originally in Johnson's edition of Shakespeare's plays (1765).

¹³ This has led some to believe that her "description of Hamlet's behaviour in her closet is a kind of hallucination" (White 1986: 67).

¹⁴ Polonius is so insistent on Hamlet's love-madness for several reasons. First, he is absolutely convinced of that fact (II. i.110; III. ii. 176-78). Secondly, he is too vain, too proud of his discernment, as to admit another misconception concerning Hamlet's behaviour (the first one was to assume Hamlet wanted to abuse his daughter). Thirdly, I can not help thinking that now he knows the Queen would accept Ophelia as her daughter-in-law, an eventual marriage between Hamlet and his daughter would place him in a very favourable position. If the Prince is mad for love, let him have the object of his love, Ophelia.

yet do I believe/ The origin and commencement of this grief/ Sprung from neglected love” (III. ii. 176-78). It seems as if Polonius was avoiding, either consciously or unconsciously, all responsibility on the issue of Hamlet’s madness, and leaving it all to his daughter. The course of Polonius’ thoughts might well be this one: although it was himself that explicitly commanded Ophelia not to have any dealings with Hamlet (I. iii. 126-35), his daughter, after all, was the one who actually rejected Hamlet. How does Ophelia react when confronted with her present situation? She has neglected Hamlet on the basis of her father and brother’s wrong assumptions about him. Now the Prince is mad and most offensively rebuffs her. For the time being, I see no apparent traces of self-reproach or remorse in Ophelia’s speech after the *nunnery* scene: she painfully pities Hamlet for his madness and also herself for having lost such an excellent lover (III. i. 152-63). Her remorse, I would say, is soothed by her assumption that Hamlet’s madness, in itself a painful reality, has been but the consequence (tragic consequence) of a higher good: her obedience to paternal authority. So far, Ophelia’s mental balance is preserved, though not for long.

3. The Death of the Fishmonger and the Madness of the Orphan Daughter

The death of Polonius is both tragic and comic. He is surprised in his voyeurism, taken for the king and killed as a rat; his rhetoric proves itself as useless as it has always been: “O, I am slain” (III. iv. 24). After a brief prayer for the victim -ironically uttered by his executioner (III. iv. 31-38)-, the Prince of Denmark goes on tantalising his mother, paying no attention to the bleeding body lying on the floor, until the very moment in which he drags the corpse into the adjoining room at the end of the scene. The death of Polonius almost goes unnoticed until Laertes’ abrupt entrance in Claudius’ court (IV. v. 112ff). And still its consequences are devastating for Ophelia. Her final steps along the path to madness are not shared with us by the author. With a strange sense for her own privacy, Shakespeare does not let his audience watch Ophelia’s last moments of sanity. However, he does perform Polonius’ death, which is, more than anything else, the key to understanding her collapse in the form of real mental insanity. What I mean is there is more in Ophelia’s anguish over the death of her father than the natural sorrow one feels when confronted with the death of such a close relative. In my opinion, it implies something else. Polonius was the living icon of paternal authority, the code that had given sense to all the events of her life, particularly the very last ones: her breaking up with Hamlet and the latter’s madness. She is now confronted with an incongruous chain of events, one for which her code provides no explanation, since she proceeded in the expected way: following her father’s command, she left Hamlet, but he went mad, abused her and, finally, killed her father. Once Polonius is dead, once he is no longer a reference, a painful epiphany takes place and Ophelia realises that the code up to which she was living has ruined her life: at Polonius’ wrong judgement on Hamlet, she caused his madness and, ultimately, her father’s death. She reaches maturity and, for the first time, she uses her own reasoning, just to abandon it forever. Emptiness and remorse are now too heavy for her to bear.

Ophelia always lived in a male universe, since all her referential points were male characters: Polonius, Hamlet and Laertes. To none of them she can turn now: her father is dead, her lover is mad and shipped away, and her brother is

gone. There is no source of refuge, no one to provide an explanation for the things happening, no one to exercise his authority and decide for her. Besides, I have always found meaningful the almost absolute dearth of female characters in the play: from a list of twenty-three named *dramatis personae*, just two of them are women. Even more, Shakespeare's silence concerning Ophelia's mother is tragic for her: apparently, she never existed. Ophelia's incompleteness owes much to the absence of a mother. In her book on the death of motherly characters in Medieval English literature, N. Stiller made reference to the importance of the motherly role in the rearing of daughters, "For the role of mother, and the role of daughter who is to become in turn a mother herself, could have been learned only in part from men" (1980: 6). This is exactly what happens to Ophelia: her rearing solely comes from an authoritarian father, without that mother who might have guided her "into the land of sexual experience" (White 1986: 75). Queen Gertrude is far from acting as a maternal presence or even just as a friend or a guide: the relationship between both simply does not exist. When Ophelia goes mad, Gertrude is the first person she wants to talk to (IV. v. 2), maybe a useless appeal to that feminine complicity she has always lacked; but even now Gertrude is reluctant: "I will not speak with her" (IV. v. 1). She is probably afraid of what Ophelia -with the "happiness that often madness hits on" (II. ii. 209-10)- might say about the queen's hasty wedding or about her tragic awareness of female existence and suffering.

Ophelia's growth from innocence into maturity is a return trip, for experience is so chaotic that it soon gives way to innocence again, in the predictable world of ballads. There she faces no remorse, no sense of guilt and no pain: "the ballad world frees individuals from guilt and responsibility, for it is peopled not with named characters but with 'he' and 'she'. Things simply happen because they have always happened and always will; human agents are accidentals" (White 1986: 71). Music and rhymes provide Ophelia's insanity with a pathos that has been imitated ever since: her madness is more disturbing for that appearance of carelessness and joy. A comparison with Hamlet's mental disorder is now telling. For those who watch, Ophelia, if I may say so, is *madder* than the Prince. Polonius, referring to Hamlet, says to himself, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (II. ii. 204-05). Laertes, at the sight of his sister, concludes she is a "document in madness" (IV. v. 176), a most accomplished instance of it.

Ophelia's mental disorder is apparent too through her odd use of language. Her words are described as "unshaped" (IV. v. 8), carrying "but half sense" (IV. v. 6) and, above all, "Her speech is nothing" (IV. v. 7) or "nothing sure" (IV. v. 13). As the Gentleman reports, Ophelia's utterances are meaningless, imperfect, and rely upon the interpretation of her listeners -probably male- to achieve any meaning, which after all will be theirs and not hers: "And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts" (V. iv. 10). This has always been the story of Ophelia, a story of incompleteness: as R.D. Laing puts it "There is no integral selfhood expressed through her actions or utterances" (Showalter 1994: 236) (See Laing 1965: 195n.). In the end, there is no redemption for her: little consolation is offered by those who claim madness provides Ophelia with enough freedom so as

to show her real, rebellious, character offer¹⁵. Such readings transform Ophelia into a different, contemporary woman, but fail to see the Seventeenth century character, one in whom such a discourse sounds fairly distorting¹⁶. The only mark of protest and rebellion (to put it somehow) I see in Ophelia's madness is so naive that it has generally been unnoticed. According to the already mentioned *The Christian man's closet*, maidens were not supposed to learn ballads: "2. Let her not hear or understand any filthy words, nor merry ballads, nor jests, nor rhymes, but let her young and tender tongue be seasoned with sweet songs and psalms" (Aughterson 1995: 182)¹⁷. Well, it seems that Ophelia had a repertoire of no less than five ballads¹⁸.

Out of the contrast with Hamlet's exasperating passivity, Ophelia's character possesses a dramatic intensity which, at times, equals that of the hero. Hamlet feigns madness, whereas she really is mad, for she cannot stand confusion as Hamlet does. Hamlet's rationality and scepticism enable him to make an anatomy of his own anxiety. He will sit down to observe how he is torn apart by the conflicting demands of vengeance, fear, hatred or love. He will make philosophical reflections on his attitude. He will wonder about the course of action to take, about stoicism or about the destiny of the human soul beyond death; even in his supposed madness, he comes to us reading a book. His pain is no less real for that, in fact that is the substance of his pain: a kind of paralysis at the horror of his own existence. Ophelia is not given that chance: for her, Shakespeare substitutes the book for flowers¹⁹. Ophelia, as a woman, is not able to make such an intellectualisation of her own anxiety: as R. Mulcaster, a notable Protestant humanist, states in his *Positions* "their [girls'] brains be not so much charged,

¹⁵ "For many feminist theorists, the mad woman is a heroine, a powerful figure who rebels against the family and the social order; and the hysteric who refuses to speak the language of the patriarchal order, who speaks otherwise, is a sister" (Showalter 1994: 237).

¹⁶ One instance of this, probably the most radical, is Melissa Murray's 1979 agitprop play *Ophelia*: Polonius' daughter becomes a lesbian who "runs off with a woman servant to join a guerrilla commune" (Showalter 1994: 237). For an account of this production, see Wandor. 1981: 47.

¹⁷ There was a certain degree of mistrust about the effects that too much delight in music might have on young ladies. In *The Christian man's closet* it is explicitly written: "5. Let her not delight and take pleasure in the hearing of musical instruments, shawms [an oboe like instrument], zithers, lutes and harps, nor know wherefore they were invented" (Aughterson 1995: 182).

¹⁸ All of them come in IV. v.: "How should I your true love know" (23-40); "Tomorrow Is Saint Valentine's Day" (48-66); "They bore him bare faced" (164ff); "For bonny sweet Robin" (184ff); "And will he not come again?" (190-200). A brief, but useful, account of the tunes is included by Hibbard 1998: 379-81. For more details, see Seng 1967: 131-56.

¹⁹ We only see Ophelia reading a book (a devotional one) at the beginning of the nunnery scene and, in doing so, she is obeying her father's command: "Read on this book,/ That show of such an exercise may colour/ Your loneliness.- We are oft to blame in this,/ 'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion visage/ And pious action we do sugar o'er/ The devil himself" (III. i. 44-49). We may have an approximate idea of the book she was reading if we keep in mind, for example, the recommendations concerning the reading activities of daughters contained in *The Christian man's closet*: "5. Let her appoint herself some task everyday, to read some special part of the holy scriptures chosen for the same purpose" (Aughterson 1995: 182); "Let her first learn the psalter or psalms of David in metre, which may withdraw her mind from light and vain tongues and bawdy ballads. And in the proverbs of Solomon, which may instruct her to good and godly life: and in the *Ecclesiastes*, let her exercise herself to seek out things which appertain to the world. In Job, let her follow the example of virtue and patience" (Aughterson 1995: 183).

neither with weight nor with multitude of matters” (Aughterson 1995: 179)²⁰. She can not stretch her pain as much as Hamlet does. She does not have the ability to tiptoe along the line that separates sanity from insanity. As a matter of fact, her madness comes as an expected consequence of her female condition. Woman’s inferiority is something taken for granted in the Elizabethan period. The standard, pseudo-scientific justification of such assumption was provided by Aristotle (384-322 b.C.) -in both *Historia Animalium* and *De Generatione Animalium*-, a fairly constant reference during the Mediaeval period and still an *auctoritas* throughout the Seventeenth century. With some differences, the Roman physician Galen (131-201 B.C.) supported the philosopher’s hierarchical theory of the sexes. The Aristotelian-Galenic account of female “nature” conditioned (and still does) women’s behaviour: their biology was the basis of their identity. Ophelia’s madness is better understood when reading some lines from Nicholas Fontanus’ *The woman’s doctor*, a textbook aimed at English physicians and lay readers (1652). With Aristotle, Galen and Hippocrates’ conclusions at the back of his mind, this author makes an account of women’s diseases, dividing them into four groups: diseases common to all women; those peculiar to widows and virgins; those affecting barren women; and, finally, such diseases that affect the nurses (Aughterson 1995: 61). The basis of his argument is that “Wives are more healthful than widows or virgins, because they are refreshed with the man’s seed, and ejaculate their own, which being excluded, the cause of the evil is taken away” (Aughterson 1995: 61). When dealing with the second group, and specifically with virgins, he states that because of the impossibility of loosening their humours, they have a propensity to “continual anxiety, sadness, and want of sleep, with idle talking, and an alienation of the mind” (Aughterson 1995: 62). Are not these Ophelia’s symptoms? For now, I leave this issue for a future paper.

In light of Hamlet’s words on suicide (III. i. 60-88) as an escape from his troubled existence, Ophelia’s lunacy is a kind of back-door exit: suicide implies an active will, whereas madness is absolutely passive. Her fall into the river marks her ejection from earth, which according to the Renaissance cultural notions of gender was the male world, “orderly, fixed, structured”, into water, her proper female medium “fluid, vacillating, formless” (Jardine 1983: 5). There she becomes a mermaid (IV. vii. 175), the traditional water woman singer, “a creature native and indued/ Unto that element” (IV. vii. 178-798). It is Gertrude, the *other* woman in Hamlet that dramatically reports Ophelia’s death, probably because she is the only one who can do so. The pathos of her description comes from the poeticity of Gertrude’s words, accounting for a woman that sings, “incapable of her own distress” (IV. vii. 177). Floating prettily but uselessly in the water, her death comes when her garments, the apparent mark of her female condition, soaked and heavy,

²⁰ Richard Mulcaster (1530-1611) was an English schoolmaster, whose many pedagogical theories were not generally accepted until at least 250 years after his death. He was educated at Eton, Cambridge, and Oxford. In 1561 he became the first headmaster of the Merchant-Taylors’ School, later acting as high master at St. Paul’s. Mulcaster’s fame rests mainly upon his two books *Positions* and *The First Part of the Elementarie*. He recommended special university training for teachers, comparable to that for doctors or lawyers, careful selection of teachers and adequate salaries, assignment of the best teachers to the lowest grades, and close association between teachers and parents. He emphasised the importance of individual differences in children, the adjustment of the curriculum to these differences, and the use of readiness rather than age in determining progress.

His *Positions* (first edition, 1581) is a work dedicated to Elizabeth I, though only one of the forty-five chapters is devoted to the education of girls.

pull her down. I see Ophelia's death as a metaphor of the woman who succumbs under the weight of male imposed femininity. Three centuries later, Yeat's lines also seem to account for Ophelia's tragedy in the maddening world of Elsinore.

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.
 (W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming", 4-8)

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