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POSSESSING OPHELIA: THE POLITICS OF THE FEMALE BODY IN *HAMLET*

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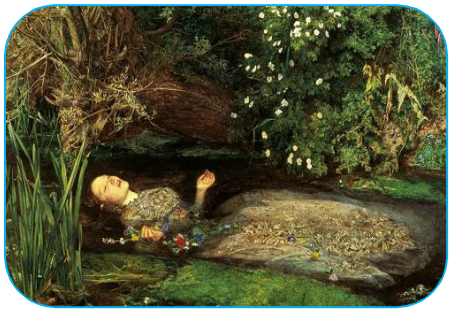
ABSTRACT:



This paper examines the representation of Ophelia's dead body in Shakespeare's Hamlet as a site of male contestation and symbolic possession. At her funeral, Hamlet and Laertes transform Ophelia's corpse into an object over which masculine rivalry is enacted, revealing how patriarchal structures persist even in death. The struggle to claim her—whether as beloved or as sister—underscores the denial of agency and dignity to the female body within a male-dominated discourse. From the gravediggers' cynical remarks to the public spectacle of her burial, Ophelia becomes a text subjected to male scrutiny and interpretation. Drawing on feminist criticism, the discussion highlights how the spectacle of female death—familiar yet disturbingly normalized—exposes cultural blindness toward the objectification of women. Ultimately, the paper argues that Hamlet transforms Ophelia's body into a symbolic battlefield where desire, guilt, and power converge, reflecting the play's broader anxiety about gender, death, and possession.

Keywords: Female body; death and gender; patriarchy; possession; male gaze; objectification; Shakespearean tragedy

Ophelia
Mr. G., my instructor, with wild eyes
And feet
Like a pigeon's, stands
In the shadows of the high school stage
Directing my speeches with his hand
In his hair. I'm his
Ophelia this year, naming the fistful
Of herbs that isn't there,
Trying to imagine my brief life closing
In this lunacy.

Tomorrow, says Mr. G.,

You will fall in the river, free
Of Hamlet's intelligent disdain. Enunciate.
0 how the wheel becomes it! You must see
The fennel and the columbines.
It's after school; the janitor's cart
Squeaks down the hall, then his soft wide
Broom sweeps the sawdust backstage.

Mr. G. comes closer, I am 16, he loves me a little.
He looks at me with infinite sorrow
Then he straightens his glasses.
In a few years he's out of there, selling
Insurance. I can still do
That Ophelia he'd know anywhere,
Stumbling, stuttering, never too clear.

--Brenda Hillman[1]

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the dead body of Ophelia becomes a site of contention among the male characters—Hamlet, Laertes, and even the gravediggers. Her body transforms into an object of possession, a symbolic territory over which men assert dominance and rivalry. At Ophelia's funeral, Hamlet's concern lies less with grief for the woman he once professed to love than with Laertes's attempt "to outface me with leaping in her grave" (5.1.267). For Laertes, too, Ophelia seems to have occupied a marginal position in his varied preoccupations, and it is only in her death that she commands his attention. Ironically, both men recognize her existence most intensely when, to use the cliché, she "is no more."

At the funeral, their struggle is not for Ophelia's memory but for the symbolic ownership of her body—the "object" that lies in the grave. Whether as beloved or as sister, Ophelia is denied the dignity customarily accorded to the dead. Her corpse becomes a contested space upon which masculine rivalry is performed. Is this not, then, a violation of the female body itself? As Brenda Hillman asks, "Could it be because they are so familiar, so evident, that we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death? Though in a plethora of representations feminine deaths are perfectly visible we only see it with some difficulty."[1]

Even the gravediggers, men of the lower social order, question Ophelia's right to burial rites on the assumption that she took her own life. The spectacle of her lifeless body, surrounded by male commentary, creates a stark and unsettling image on stage. Subject to scrutiny, Ophelia's corpse becomes a text to be read, examined, and appropriated by men. As one critic notes, "the gaze of the anatomist is also already a form of touching the dead woman. It is as dangerous to her integrity as the physical contact that will lead to exposure and dissection."[2][2] In this sense, Ophelia's body—open, silent, and defenseless in the grave—is symbolically dissected and possessed by the male figures who surround her. Before both spectator and reader, she is transformed into an object of interpretation and contestation, her identity fragmented between those who claim to mourn her and those who seek to define her. She is subjected to male scrutiny—"the gaze of the anatomist is also already a form of touching the dead woman. It is as dangerous to her integrity as the physical contact that will lead to exposure and dissection". [2] Ophelia, an open object in the grave, is dissected and examined as it were by the men around at the time of her burial. She is presented in this form before the spectator/reader who is left guessing her state and the claimant's rights on her. The crucial question that needs to be asked here is:

> Why is it, I want to know, that a playtext crowded with male bodies presented in all stages of *post mortem* recuperation, from ghost-walking Hamlet to fresh-bleeding Polonius to moldering Yorrick to Priam of deathless memory; why
> is it that a playtext whose core issue exhaustively and excessively examines the imperatives of male reactions to deaths of men ("remember"; "revenge"); a playtext that valorizes killing and heroic death (but nicely condemns murder): why is it that this playtext, when it finally arrives at the grave, lays out a *woman's* body for speculation?[3]

[1] Brenda Hillman, "Ophelia", *The ThreePenny Review*, No. 10, (Summer 1982) p.9.
[2] Elisabeth Bronfren, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, UK: Manchester UP, 1992, p.3-10.

Why does Ophelia become the issue of speculation? Ideas about her forlorn state, conjectures regarding her death, analysis of the nature of her death, her hurriedly arranged makeshift funeral, together fill the space. Unlike male deaths (for instance, of Polonius, Hamlet, Laertes and others) that take place on stage, and are shown as events in full public view, Ophelia's death is imagined to have happened away from the human eye.

Meaningfully, the incident is simply narrated by others, and is subject to their skewed comprehensions. Being their construction rather than an account to which they were witness, it inevitably carries flaws and limitations that might work to the detriment of her position. Add to this the point that unlike male deaths, hers is a case of violation of specific codes—it is a woman the male world is dealing with, one who has to live and die under the questioning glance of the men around.

Having taken the step to end her life, Ophelia has hurt entrenched interests. Her death creates an awkward situation for the King who must dispose of her body without causing stir in the social sphere. The suspicious nature of her death could become the point of unrest, like her father's earlier that stirred up "the people muddied / Thick and

[3] Carol Chillington Rutter, "Snatched Bodies: Ophelia in the Grave", Shakespeare Quarterly, vol. 49, no. 3, (Autumn, 1998) p. 300.

unwholesome in thoughts and whisper" (4.5.81-2). Mark Shakespeare's words in the context, the playwright choosing dark signifiers as "muddied," "unwholesome" and "whisper." If something is rotten in the state, Ophelia is an innocent, or not so innocent victim of the phenomenon. Questions are asked whether she deserves even to be a subject of mention in the public domain. Apprehensions expressed by males in the situation degrade Ophelia in death as well, since dead she stands denied the chance to present her side of the story. She is appreciated best in her passive state of death. Such appreciations constitute the history of a girl long buried in the discourse of pathos and innocence.[4]

We see varied responses to Ophelia's death in the text—Gertrude, Hamlet, Laertes as also the gravediggers present different *Ophelias*. For Gertrude, the dead Ophelia represents crushed innocence, whereas for Laertes, Ophelia is a symbol of the family's lost prestige and honour. For Hamlet, Ophelia's death is a moment of both triumph and defeat, and for the gravediggers she is no man or woman but a human being now dead. Thus, to each the dead body speaks of not its (Ophelia's) but their concerns. For them, understandably, their own interests (including their mental make-up) matters. This is the key to her insignificance—in her death she is at once many people and many things, except what she actually might have been.

We can pick up a few of these responses to see the *thing* Ophelia becomes in other's hands post her death. In his interpretation of desire in *Hamlet*, Lacan refers to "the object

[4] We are told "Stagings of Ophelia's mad scene (4.5) have always been influenced by prevailing stereotypes of female insanity, from sentimental wistfulness in the eighteenth century to full-blown schizophrenia in the twentieth". One may call them nothing but stereotypes that work equally on assessment of her death as on her conduct when she was alive. What is required is the recognition that Ophelia is being treated with prejudice by the males of her circle. Introduction, *The Arden Shakespeare: Hamlet*. Ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor.London: Methuen, 2006, P.29

Ophelia" and "that piece of bait" abused by all others in the play. In Lacan's view, she has worth and value in relation to Hamlet alone[5].

For us, Hamlet's response is set off by his knowledge of Ophelia's death in a context unrelated to her. The information is received in the middle of his memories of the earlier days—he goes into a trance on the discovery of Yorick's skull and is transported to the world of his childhood. To quote:

> Alas poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A
> fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath

borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how
abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it.
Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft (5.1.174)

The dead "poor Yorick" who loved Hamlet dearly takes him to a different zone of romance and longing when he bore "him on back a thousand times." In the course, Hamlet traverses incidents and issues and has a sudden jolt from a funeral procession approaching. This makes him vaguely ask, "What, the fair Ophelia!". He remains unmindful of her death till he hears Laertes's outburst. It is at this moment that he dwells upon "this theme" that links him with Ophelia. To quote:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers
Could not, with all their quantity of love,

[5] Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet", *Yale French Studies*, No. 55/56, 1977, p.11

Make my sum. (5. 1. 254-256)

It requires mention that at this moment in the play Hamlet was in the imaginary world evoked by Yorik's skull in his hands. Ophelia's dead body gets connected with this world and the discourse of death and time past merge into one. Thinking of the good old days, living life as a child and a young man experiencing new love, Hamlet is forced to recognise his isolation from these true moments of joy. Let us dig up a few details of his relationship with Ophelia in that period. There existed a state of perfect happiness when Prince Hamlet's father lived and he enjoyed sweet pleasure coming his way from love-interest in Ophelia. It was a pure world when in the indulgent company of King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude as well as the fond eyes of father Polonius, the two lovers freely moved around, talked and wrote to each other. With the assassination of of his father King Hamlet and 'usurpation/abduction' of the mother by one termed "a vice of kings,/ A cutpurse of the empire and the rule" (3. 4.88-89), Hamlet ceases to be what he was in the past. In the new situation he views Ophelia not as a woman he loves/d, since for him Ophelia has changed into the daughter of a dignitary second in command in the state of Denmark. Thus, no sooner did he fall on bad days than he rejected the girl. The question is if he is being unjust to Ophelia or reacting naturally and acceptably in the new situation.

A faint memory of the earlier Ophelia turns into a tender reference in the Grave-digger's scene. With emotions overpowering him, Hamlet on an impulse comes forward in the burial scene to make the above declaration of his love for Ophelia. Faced with the procession of mourners Hamlet dramatically presents his case:

What is he whose grief
Bears such an emphasis whose phrase of sorrow
Conjures the wandering stars and makes them stand
Like wonder-wounded hearers? (5.1.243-6)

Soon taking up the issue with Laertes, Hamlet adds:

Why, I will fight with him upon this theme
Until my eyelids will no longer wag. (5.1.255)

Certainly caught in a frenzy, he is far from prudent. The following projection earns notice as he doesn't yet stop:

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.
Woul't weep, woul't fight, woul't fast, woul't tear thyself,
Woul't drink up easel, eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost come here to whine
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I.
And if thou prate of mountains let them throw
Millions of acres on us, till our ground,
Singeing his pate against the burning zone,
Make Ossa like a wart. Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
I'll rant as well as thou. (5.1.263-72)

This madness in him ("Woul't drink up easel, eat a crocodile?) is accompanied by a sudden rise of sincerity and is an indicator of his agonized state. Even as the fierce side of his pain dominates the scene, there lingers the apprehension that Hamlet has been unkind to Ophelia. Can this be defended? A.C. Bradley has observed: "Hamlet, by now weary of life, faces Ophelia's death with gloomy resignation; his address to the corpse of Ophelia, 'I loved you ever—but it is no matter', really means that 'nothing matters'."[6]Isn't this inconsistent with the plans Hamlet has to defeat the king and kill him? If nothing mattered, why is he so charged up in the scene after Ophelia's burial in telling Horatio of the motives of the king and the urgency of his plans? The phase passes, and within a span of ten lines Hamlet's tears run dry; transformed, he is practical and business-like as he says to Horatio: "So much for this, sir. Now shall you see the other:/ You do remember all the circumstance?" (5.2.1-2). Isn't "So much for this sir" a reference to Ophelia? The statement comes exactly after Ophelia's funeral and Hamlet's earlier ravings sound jarring if not dishonest. On Ophelia being wiped out soon in Hamlet's mind, one may argue that at the moment the statement was made Hamlet was far from "gloomy resignation." His excited phrasings mentioned earlier come to naught as he suddenly returns ¨to matter¨ with Horatio and returns to ¨normalcy¨ with little regret suggesting

[6] Qtd. in Christy Desmet, "Reading Hamlet", *Shakespeare: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin, New Delhi : OUP, 2003, p. 365.

that either the words of affection for Ophelia were a momentary outburst or the subject itself was devoid of substance. Doubting that Hamlet ever loved Ophelia, Harold C. Goddard expresses his discontent with the uncharacteristic nature of Hamlet's letter to Ophelia in 2.2.114-20. He writes: "Here of all Shakespeare's characters is the one who comes closest to possessing the imaginative genius of his creator. Here is a man with a deep capacity for affection and a rare power to express it simply and directly" and "yet when this same man writes to one who, we would like to think, is more to him than all the world put together" he formulates "an epistle overloaded with adjectives and superlatives, with its dears and mosts and bests, its adieu and etcetera". Goddard sharply adds: "It sounds more like Osric addressing some Elizabethan maid of honour". Undeniably Hamlet's love for Ophelia is called into question. Goddard admits, "One is almost driven to believe that Shakespeare inserted this sample of Prince of Denmark's love-making expressly to prove that Hamlet's feeling for Ophelia—like Romeo's for Rosaline—is not the real thing".[7]

To extend the argument further one may ask: does Hamlet ever enquire about Ophelia's whereabouts, her madness or death? Does he hold himself responsible for it even partially? Does he blame himself for killing Polonius which would have caused Ophelia immense suffering? Given the self-reflexive temperament of Hamlet noticed elsewhere in the text, it is strange that Hamlet suffers from no guilt in Ophelia's tragedy. There is no sense of self-reproach or regret in him concerning her. One learns through his various responses to the situation that Ophelia stands belittled in Hamlet's scheme of things.

[7] Harold C. Goddard, "Hamlet to Ophelia", *College English*, vol. 16, no. 7, (Apr. 1995) pp 403-415.

In the other case of coming to terms with Gertrude's supposed lapse, Hamlet feels disgusted by his mother's refusal or incapacity to mourn for the dead King, he expresses his anger with, "The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" 1.2.179-80). More, he would not let Gertrude go "till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you" (3.4.118-9). Instead, there's much Hamlet has to answer for in his treatment of Ophelia and setting up a glass for himself, so to speak. As suggested, he has taken even less time forgetting Ophelia. The ideal of love and loyalty Hamlet expects from his mother may be tested in his own case vis-à-vis Ophelia. Ophelia, we find, remains at the receiving end of violence unfolding in the play. As a result, she gets alienated. The only person who attempts to understand her predicament is Gertrude. She sympathises with Ophelia intensely in her suffering and identifies with the girl at various levels. In this sense Gertrude's perception of Ophelia's death is significant. Her imagination takes her far into the state of the dead Ophelia. Does she imagine in Ophelia her own young self, do we not see in her identification with Ophelia an emotional alignment? Gertrude states this in no uncertain terms: "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife:/ I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,/ and not have strewed thy grave" (5.1.34-5) . For Gertrude, Ophelia's tryst with death becomes a cause lost and bemoaned. It is also her own lost self that she saw dead in Ophelia. The Queen's long speech of pathos romantically projects the death of this young girl. In all of 17 lines, the longest Gertrude has in the play, the grief is expressed thus: There is a willow grows askant the brook

That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds
As one incapable of her own distress,
Or like a creature native and endued
Unto that element.
But long it could not be
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink
Pulled the poor wench from her melodious lay
To muddy death.(4.7.181)

Interestingly, Gertrude couldn't have known the graphic details given here about Ophelia's death. Whose images are these that Gertrude has presented in this speech —her own, the messengers' or someone else's who bore witness to Ophelia's death? Her imagination seems to have added to the weight of tragedy. In Gertrude's narrative, Ophelia's misfortune appears painted with greater effect.

The brief moment before Ophelia's death when "awhile they bore her up" gets crystallized in Gertrude's narration as the young girl appears to be a fleeting dream. The "poor wench" seems to inhabit the world of willows and brooks and fits in with the picture squarely, "mermaid-like" who belonged to the very place. "Like a native creature" Ophelia becomes one with wilderness, "endued unto the element" (the female element).[8] Is her movement away from social habitation, not a distortion of locale? Her rejection of/by the social milieu brings forth the significant question of positioning. Has she really shunned society, retreating into the primitive world, or contrarily, has she been pushed out of it into a place far back in time? Ophelia's preoccupation with flowers appears a mockery of her education that promised different avenues to her earlier. Even as it mocks her upbringing it

nevertheless becomes her well in the eyes of male viewers, as the fascination with the afflicted young girl continues amongst them. Coppelia Kahn has raised the issue thus: "Why do the cultures of both Europe and Asia continue to recuperate this truncated story of blighted girlhood?" According to her, there is "another story, a different Ophelia—a subject more than an object". Even as inverting Ophelia's position from an object to a subject may only address a part of the problem, it is certainly important to view her as a thinking-feeling human being involved in "a dynamic, a movement of events in which she participates as a subject, in contrast to the static icon of her drowning body that has…come to prevail as prime signifier of Ophelia".[9]

[8] Gaston Bachelard has discussed in detail "the symbolic connections between women, water and death seeing drowning as an appropriate merging into female element for women, who are always associated with liquids: blood, milk, tears, and amniotic fluid". (Qtd in Introduction, *Hamlet*, Arden ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, p.26.). The symbolic connection Bachelard interprets is deeply rooted in male-oriented thought systems that associate women with tender-feeble categories, not to mention it reiterates the lack of rational-analytical faculties in women.

[9] Coppelia Kahn, Afterword, *The Afterlife of Ophelia*, eds. Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams, Palgrave, 2012, p. 232-8.

As we turn to Laertes's perception of Ophelia's death we find that he lacks the engagement exhibited by Gertrude, though expected from him. Indifference is all we get. On learning of Opheliá's death, he remarks: "Alas, then she is drowned". To this voice of resignation, Gertrude responds sharply: "Drowned, drowned". Her emphasis is yet again met by a frigid Laertes who would "forbid my tears" for "Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia". Ophelia thus remains unwept for. No sooner does he give in to tears than he brings in, as if by habit, the manly composure he must exhibit: "When these (tears) are gone/ The woman (the shameful part of him) will be out. Adieu, my lord (addressed not to the Queen who has been insisting the 'woman' in him to show up) / I have a speech o'fire that fain would blaze /but that this folly drowns it" (4.7. 181-9). Note that the 'foolish' impulse of weeping for his sister seems to have drowned his fire. Also, since Laertes is bound in masculine decorum, he has lost grip on his emotions, weak and of use for exterior purposes, for Ophelia. For this reason, his feelings surface in an occasional gesture – "Too much of water has thou." We are further struck by the fact that there is a complete acceptance in Laertes's utterance vis-à-vis Ophelia's fate, the death had to happen, as well as a pragmatic utilitarian approach to the affair. The two offer a queer mix. Isn't it clear that for him and to the larger patriarchal order around him, Ophelia had been dead in her madness, long before her death? In fact death seems to be the natural course ordained for her and an anticipated end of her madness. In her insanity she had become an outcast—a girl ineligible for marriage ("The etymology of Ophelia, Lacan asserts is 'O-phallus'" [10] which suggests her identity is limited to the functional role she

[10] Elaine Showalter notes that Lacan, in his twisted analysis of the character of Ophelia has essentialized her as the "exteriorized figuration" of the phallus. "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism", *New Casebooks: Hamlet*, ed Martin Coyle, London : Macmillan,1992, p.113.

must play vis-à-vis male desire). Thus Ophelia situated outside this functional role owing to her madness is considered redundant, without a use-value in the male domain. Laertes's indifference to the sister is reflective of the patriarchal set up that would not have a woman outside the fold of marriage. He is unable to break free from male-oriented thought-system in his analysis of her as for him she is immortalised as a "document in madness" (4.5.172)[11] and has therefore compromised the family's honour. But Laertes is a brother, too. It hurts him to see that his sister is receiving a quick burial. "Must there no more be done?" suggests his disdain for such an "obscure funeral" much like the one his father earned earlier. His comment on the priest's hurry to perform the rites betrays the fire burning in his

heart: "I tell thee, churlish priest,/ A ministering angel shall my sister be/ When thou liest howling"(5.1.223-30). For a moment, Laertes sheds the dominant male in him and comes down heavily on the religious order inherent in his belief system. In the moment he grieves openly for his dead sister, protesting it and declaring his love for her.

Finally, the subject of Ophelia's death is reflected in the discussion of the gravediggers. Here we get an entirely different perspective on it—her dead body receives attention from commoners in the play who are unrelated with her existence, dead or alive, and for once she is seen as an actual human being (not merely a symbol of innocence or purity, of

[11] Viewing Ophelia as an archetype of madness and woman brought together as one, Leslie C. Dunn claims: "In one of the most famous readings of one Shakespearean character by another, Ophelia's brother Laertes calls her a "document in madness". The word document is usually glossed with its older etymological sense of "lesson" or "example". In Renaissance terms, Laertes sees Ophelia as an emblem— an image for which he supplies the text, inscribing it with an apparently self-evident, unambiguous cultural meaning. Laertes is not alone in this tendency to emblematise Ophelia: Hamlet also is quick to construe her in terms of cultural stereotypes, as the Woman whose name is 'frailty'". Leslie C. Dunn, "Ophelia's Songs in Hamlet: Music, Madness and the Feminine", *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality In Western Culture*, eds. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones. Cambridge: UP of Cambridge, 1994.

honour or suppressed desires). The view of the gravediggers is in this sense objective, in that no sense of pathos, or disapproval or anger clouds their view. For them, it is a matter of impersonal disputation, as they agree or disagree on whether Ophelia deserves a Christian burial.

We note with interest that the religious discourse is scrutinised in the process of the case of Ophelia being closely followed. The comic element cannot be missed, too, in the precision shown by the first gravedigger in his contentions, much in the vein of a legal statement. He deliberates -- "Is she to be buried in Christian burial,/ when she willfully seeks her own salvation?" (5.1.1-2). The question of salvation and damnation ever haunted the Elizabethan audience, it being difficult to know the precise sense in which the issue could be interpreted.[12] To the gravedigger's question his companion responds with authority: "I tell thee she is. Therefore make her grave / straight". Apparently, the second man's authority is hinged on the verdict given by the official: "The crowner hath sat (in judgement) on her (case) and finds it / Christian burial". Even when the official seal has ordained a Christian burial for Ophelia, the gravedigger constantly counters it point by point as he says: "How can that be unless she drowned / herself in her defence?". Prolific in his legal phrasing the gravedigger meticulously explains the matter: "It must be *se offendendo*. It cannot be else. / For here lies the point: if I drown myself wittingly, it / argues an act and an act hath three branches—it is to / act, to do, to perform. Argal, she drowned herself / wittingly". This conclusion is met with impatience by the second man

[12] Here Shakespeare's own position on the matter may be of interest to surmise. Victor Kiernan has noted that "Kenneth Clark deemed Shakespeare unquestionably a sceptic, of a kind 'more complete and more uncomfortable' than Montaigne whom he admired; he was 'the first and may be the last supremely great poet to have been without a religious belief'". With this in mind we read the analysis of the gravediggers.Victor Kiernan, *Shakespeare:Poet and Citizen*, London: Verso, 1993, p. 109.

who exclaims: "Nay but hear you, Goodman Delver". Unheeding, the gravedigger continues his catechism: "Give me leave. Here lies the water—good. / Here stands the man—good. If the man go to this water / and drown himself, it is, willy-nilly, he goes. Mark you / that. But if the water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself. Argal, he that is not guilty of his / own death shortens not his own life". Noting carefully the details of the questionable death, the gravedigger persuades the second man to believe that this is an unlawful burial. To close the matter the second man finally confesses:

"Will you ha' the truth on' it? If this had not been a / *gentlewoman* she should have been buried out o' Christian burial" (emphasis added, 5.1.3-25). Being a gentlewoman has earned Ophelia a Christian grave. But what about the 'un-gentlefolk' in society? It is suggested that the prevailing authority may use religion according to its own will based on people's rank and position. It matters little whether Ophelia's death was accidental or a suicide. The state official would have the final word; he, representing the state, can manipulate religion to suit the entrenched powers.

Interpreters and executioners (pun unintended) of religion have another bookish and lazy stand on such an issue. The priest at the time of funeral rites claims: "Her obsequies have been as far enlarged / As we have warranty. Her death was doubtful;/ and but that great command o'ersways the order/ She should in ground unsanctified been lodged" (5.1.215-8). The great command of the powerful people, the King in this case, has the ability to override the normal proceedings meant for Christians. We witness here the hand-in-glove connection between state and religion. The gravedigger's quick response adds a sharp edge: "Why, there thou say'st, and the more pity/ the great folk should have countenance in this world to/ drown or hang themselves more than their even-Christian" (5.1.29). People of all classes may be equal as Christians, but not so socially and economically. Their rights to attain salvation in this sense, too, vary since all is subject to interests of the mighty.

The burial of Ophelia is still a discreet affair with truncated rites. Hamlet's response to the procession "Who is this they follow?/ and with such maimed rites" clearly warrants it. Also, Hamlet being well-versed with the workings of the state is quick to observe that the deceased would be of high social standing as the state has intervened in a religious matter: "This doth betoken / the corpse they follow did with desperate hand /Fordo its own life. 'Twas of some estate" (5.1. 208-10).

Ophelia's death explodes a series of buried truths—casting a suspicious glance on the social system that decided to seal her fate. The exercise of reading Ophelia's (in)voluntary death brings us to an edgy point: Who is responsible for Ophelia's death? Is her death necessary in the scheme of *Hamlet*? According to David Leverenz, "Ophelia's suicide becomes a little microcosm of the male world's banishment of the female" because "woman represents everything denied by reasonable men".[13]Isn't feminine death an obsession for the male cultural world? Is Ophelia's act of 'suicide' an assertion of autonomy of an individual or at least an assertion of will—"To take one's life is to force others to read one's death"[14]? Is the suicide an attempt (on the part of Ophelia / the playwright) to draw attention of the audience (inside and outside the text) to herself

[13] David Leverenz goes on to conclude, "That women, grief, words, and the heart should be confused with nature, guilt, and the body , while filial obedience is equated with noble reason in opposition, is what is rotten in Denmark". "The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal View", *Signs*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter, 1978) p.303.

[14] Margaret Higonnet, "Speaking Silences: Women's suicide", *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1985, p.68.

which has remained neglected /secondary at best throughout the play? Questions such as these surface in reading the play from Ophelia's angle.

Consider that concerns of Ophelia receive ample focus in Act Four scene five (her songs in madness), and the issue continues through to the Fifth act – it occupies the whole of Act Five, scene one. The trajectory of her death is thus remarkably charted in the scenes under varied perspectives. She, a non-entity till now in the play, becomes the subject of serious discussion post death, on the strength of clashing views held by other characters constantly twisting and turning her narrative. The many perceptions of her death appear to be efforts to control her, a dead person's subversive attempt, they aim to incorporate her act of suicide into the prevailing discourse.

Symbolising death, feminine beauty and madness, Ophelia under the said canon is visualised as a pure suffering girl, one who lived and drowned in stasis, so to speak.[15] When alive, she belonged to

the sphere of passive existence with her actions being overseen by her father, the patriarch. It can be argued that after Polonius's death, a vacuum of authority made Ophelia slip into a confused mental state. It would be equally acceptable that in Ophelia's death "as in other Shakespearean tragedies goodness tragically destroys itself".[16] These are stereotypes that reinforce the illusion of Ophelia and evade the basic question of viewing her as a human being in her own right. The issue

[15] Discussing the Ophelia tradition in visual art and the lyric tradition in German poetry, Ruth J. Owen notes: that "John Everett Millais's famous Ophelia oil painting of I852" in fact " reappropriates Shakespeare's drowned girl for the turn of the millennium by placing her in a contemporary suburban wasteland, as though she has been adrift for centuries." It has been influential in "evoking an Ophelia pallid and immobile in the water. In poetry, as in art, Ophelia is never buried, but always drifting past as the water-borne corpse: *treiben* becomes the key verb associated with Ophelia in German poetry". Ruth J. Owen, "Voicing the Drowned Girl: Poems by Hilde Domin, Ulla Hahn, Sarah Kirsch, and BarbaraKöhler in the German Tradition of Representing Ophelia", *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Jul., 2007) p. 782.

[16] Desmet, p. 365.

is effectively raised by Shakespeare in the dramatic mode. So much of the focus on Ophelia in the latter half of the play supports such a reading.

Isn't Shakespeare's own position markedly defined here vis-à-vis women particularly of the category Ophelia belongs to? Shakespeare presented women with immense sympathy in the process of exhibiting their plight in conditions of social suppression. There are indeed other variants of women in Shakespeare who strongly assert themselves and carry out their wishes against odds. In this regard, examples of Portia and Rosalind come to mind. Still, most women are shown as weak and vulnerable whereas their male counterparts are presented as authoritative and commanding. The hapless women as Ophelia (*Hamlet*) and Hero (*Much Ado About Nothing*) only bring to the fore social rifts Shakespeare sharply noted in his surroundings.