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A document in madness: a study on the insanity of Shakespeare's Ophelia

Uma lição na loucura: um
estudo sobre a insanidade de
Ofélia

La lección de la locura: un
estudio sobre la insania de
Ofelia

Abstract

The chief aim of this paper is to analyse the character of Ophelia, from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. By investigating the elements in the play that are most significant to her character, this study seeks to assess the factors that, woven together, culminated into her madness. The main aspects to be studied are the characters that are closest to her, such as Polonius, Laertes and Hamlet, the challenges of her role as a woman, a daughter and a potential lover, and the abiding influence of the late King Hamlet in the play's events.

Keywords: William Shakespeare; Ophelia; Hamlet; Madness.

Resumo

O principal objetivo desta pesquisa é realizar uma análise da personagem Ofélia, da peça *Hamlet*, de William Shakespeare. Ao examinar os elementos mais relevantes à trajetória da personagem na peça, este estudo busca determinar os fatores que, de forma conjunta, culminaram em sua loucura. Os principais aspectos estudados são os personagens que compartilham interações significativas com Ofélia (como Polônio, Laertes e Hamlet), os desafios de seu papel como mulher, filha e amante em potencial, e a contínua influência do falecido Rei Hamlet sobre os eventos da peça.

Palavras-chave: William Shakespeare; Ofélia; Hamlet; Loucura.

Resumen

El objetivo principal de este artículo es analizar la personaje Ofelia de la pieza *Hamlet*, escrita por William Shakespeare. Al investigar los elementos de la obra que son más significativos para su personaje, este estudio busca evaluar los factores que, unidos entre sí, culminaron en su locura. Los principales aspectos estudiados son los personajes más cercanos a ella, como Polonio, Laertes y Hamlet, los desafíos de su papel como mujer, hija y potencial amante, y la influencia permanente del fallecido Rey Hamlet sobre los eventos de la trama.

Palabras clave: William Shakespeare; Ophelia; Hamlet; Madness.

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Foreword

Over the course of the years, numerous authors have theorised about the topic of madness in *Hamlet*. There is no surprise in this: it is only natural that a play so rife with musings about the human mind should garner the interest of critics and researchers, even today. Yet, much like the mental afflictions that exist in the real world, the madness depicted in *Hamlet* has never been fully understood. There is, for instance, no ultimate consensus about the true extent of Hamlet's fakery of his mental state. Similarly, many hypotheses have been drawn about the main cause of Ophelia's madness, each reaching a different conclusion that often rules out all others.

This study proposes a broader, less exclusive interpretation of Ophelia's insanity. By taking former analyses – and the multiple perspectives contained in them – into consideration, this work seeks to analyse the aspects that have influenced Ophelia's character throughout the play, and to assess how these elements may have impacted her mental state. What is suggested here is the idea that her madness is a product of a number of circumstances presented in the play, and not a direct response to a single event.

This work will be divided into two sections, in an attempt to explore Ophelia's relations with the various elements from the context in which she is inserted. The first section, "Ophelia's burdens", will focus on Ophelia's interactions with other characters in the play, and the effects those interpersonal relationships have caused in her personality. The second part, "The inheritance of ghosts", is an analysis of the effect of King Hamlet's death – and the abiding interference of his ghost – upon the atmosphere of the play and, consequentially, upon Ophelia's character.

Ophelia's burdens

Among most critics, there is little or no doubt that Ophelia's madness must have been prompted by another character in the play. When it comes to a character within a play, where speech and relationships define everything the audience knows, it seems inevitable to correlate the plights of a character to the actions of others.

In Ophelia's particular case, the blame tends to fall upon her would-be lover and her family. Most essays usually describe her distraught state of mind as a result of her unfulfilling relationships with Hamlet, or with Polonius and Laertes. This section will explore her relationships with each of these characters, and analyse how they may offer some insight on the subject of her madness.

The plights of a dutiful daughter

The social expectations imposed upon female figures are a heavy burden to carry. Throughout the play, it becomes clear to the audience that Ophelia is expected to be chaste and meek, even when circumstances have her face the tenacious advances

of a seemingly lovesick Hamlet. Laertes and Polonius are quite protective of her – perhaps overprotective, even –, a fact that may be due to the lack of a maternal figure in their familial context. The two men may feel that they ought to be particularly defensive of her, in order to raise her well and keep her out of harm's way.

However, Ophelia is not as much a witless maid as an unadvised reader or spectator might believe. While speaking to her brother, prior to his departure from Elsinore, she seemed quite aware of the matters he addressed in his warnings, and even retorted by remarking that Laertes himself should be mindful while exploring the world in his travels:

I shall th'effect of this good lesson keep,
As watchman to my heart. But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven;
Whilst, like a puft and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede. (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 675)

As Carroll Camden writes in the article "On Ophelia's Madness" (1964, p. 248), Laertes cautions Ophelia that "the chariest maid is prodigal enough" when granted an opportunity, and that "youth to itself rebels" (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 675). Camden, then, proceeds to analyse Laertes' remarks, observing that "of course [his] advice is shallow; he seemingly judges Hamlet to be a man like himself". Ophelia, however, seems unimpressed by her brother's judgement. She is "perceptively aware of his shallowness as she reminds him in sisterly fashion to heed his own warnings." (CAMDEN, 1964, p. 248)

Through this open – albeit timid – challenge of her brother's authority, Ophelia shows herself more capable of independent thinking than her family appears to acknowledge. It is possible, therefore, that Laertes' and Polonius' constant reminders that Ophelia should be careful while minding the matters of the heart – and particularly careful when dealing with Hamlet – could have had the opposite effect. Since the subject of romance was so often brought forth by her father and brother, these constant mentions could have instigated her to pay more attention to such matters, thus kindling her youthful desire for romantic exploration. As Camden remarks,

Laertes may well have aroused what he sought to allay, by focusing Ophelia's thoughts on the subject of love, already kindled by her own inchoate desires. Polonius contributes to Ophelia's absorption in matters of love as he indicates how the senses of youth are easily inflamed. (1964, p. 248)

As a result of the dissonance between her family's advice and her own natural youthful curiosity about romance and sexuality, Ophelia finds herself facing a sort of conundrum. She is instructed to be modest and chaste – and everything seems to indicate that she is quite willing to heed the advice she has been offered – but, soon after, Hamlet's advances reach a kind of desperate, inappropriate insistence which

makes her incapable of ignoring him, or remaining unaffected by the urgency of his pleas.

Still, even faced with Hamlet's constant attention, Ophelia sustained her modest ways. She may have begun to think of Hamlet as a potential lover, but her loyalty to her father kept her from responding positively to any of Hamlet's advances.

Ophelia's will to obey to her father's commands in all situations suggests that she regarded him as a reference in safety. With Laertes gone from Denmark, her father was the only person upon whom she could rely, and the only source of advice she could seek. Barbara Smith writes:

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Hence, one could easily assume that Polonius' death exerted a profound psychological impact upon her. Ophelia's family has instilled in her such an intense feeling of dependency that, when faced with her brother's absence and her father's death, she is unable to assume control of her own life.

Considering the notion that Ophelia's family (particularly her father) played an essential role in her life and in her sense of security, it is safe to assume that her madness results, at least partially, from "the paternalistic undermining of autonomy and perception" (SMITH, 2008, p. 110), combined with the intense grief ensuing Polonius' death. The lack of love and security, along with a possible sense of helplessness, could have led her into a state of distress too intense for her mind to bear.

The ill-fated romance

Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet is rather ambiguous. They are bound together by a sort of romance – or, rather, by an expectation of romance. Although this expectation is chiefly fostered by Ophelia, it is clear that the other characters in the play also believe that a potential amorous relationship grows between the two youngsters. Polonius leads Gertrude and Claudius to believe that Hamlet is madly in love with his daughter, and later, after Ophelia's death, the Queen confesses she had expected the girl to marry her son.

The prince, however, is inconsistent in his displays of affection. His fevered proclamations, as well as his letter to Ophelia ("Doubt thou the stars are fire; Doubt thou that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar; But never doubt I love." (2.2.116-119)), would have her believe that he was genuinely fond of her. Yet, in the following act, he claims to have loved her "once" – but no more –, only to confess, immediately after, that he has never loved her at all:

Hamlet: I did love you once.

Ophelia: Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

Hamlet: You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so innoculate our

old stock, but we shall relish of it: I love you not.
Ophelia: I was the more deceived. (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 688-689)

This inconsistency could, of course, be a mere symptom of the conflicting inclinations that often take room in young minds – but Hamlet is smarter than that. In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom writes (1998, p. 88):

Hamlet denies anyway that he ever loved Ophelia, and I believe him. By the time the play ends, he loves no one, whether it be the dead Ophelia or the dead father, the dead Gertrude or the dead Yorick, and one wonders if this frightening charismatic ever could have loved anyone.

Bloom defended this idea once again in his 2003 book, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*: “[the beauty of Ophelia’s death] is engendered by Hamlet’s cruelty, indeed by his failure to love. Despite his passion in the graveyard, we have every reason to doubt his capacity to love anyone, even Ophelia” (p. 43). If this is true, and Hamlet indeed never loved Ophelia, then his claims of love were no more than a ruse, part of his plan to deceive Claudius and grant himself more time to plot his revenge. And in Act II, scene 1, he starts to put his plan into action, by heading to Ophelia’s chambers and pretending to be deeply enamoured with her. He must have known, then, that the girl would readily report his odd behaviour to Claudius and Gertrude, thus contaminating them with the idea of his madness.

Ophelia is the first to witness Hamlet’s attempt of incorporating an “antic disposition”. This also makes her the first victim of his plot of deceit. Hamlet’s words affect her with particular intensity because of her family’s warnings. Even though she had been warned not to yield to his advances, he went to her, seemingly maddened by passion, and this must have made her deeply upset. Ophelia was always quite willing to heed her father’s warnings, but even her obedience could not prevent her from being shaken by Hamlet’s ardent displays of affection.

Ophelia’s ambivalent relationship with Hamlet reaches a crucial point in the third act. This is the very moment when Hamlet’s revulsion towards humankind (and towards his mother’s choice of marrying Claudius, in an overt confirmation of her persistent desire for romance and intimacy) leads him to reject Ophelia and urge her to “go to a nunnery”, so as to ensure that she will never breed sinners. The belief that Hamlet did, in fact, love her made Ophelia even more subject to Hamlet’s reprimanding speech:

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest: but yet I could accuse me of such things, that it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious; with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us. Go thy ways to a nunnery. [...] If thou dost marry, I’ll give thee this plague for thy dowry, –be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go; and quickly too. Farewell.
Ophelia: O heavenly powers, restore him!

Hamlet: I have heard of your paintings too, well enough. God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another: you jig, you amble, and you lisp, and nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages: those that are married already, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go. (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 689)

Even though Hamlet's remarks have been influenced by his aversion to female sexuality and to the deceitful ways of men, Ophelia could not have known that. Hearing these words from the man who had made her believe he loved her must have been profoundly troubling. Every insult directed by Hamlet towards womankind as a whole was received by Ophelia, alone.

About this scene, Bloom writes:

There are undertones here of the slang meaning of "nunnery" as "whorehouse", but primarily Hamlet consigns Ophelia to a life of pious chastity. Yet in effect, he is murdering Ophelia, and starting her on the path of suicide. (BLOOM, 2003, p. 41)

The effect these words have had on Ophelia becomes clear in her short soliloquy which takes place once Hamlet leaves the stage, when she praises the prince's virtues and mourns his "noble mind", now overthrown. But perhaps the most telling moment of all is this:

And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,
That suckt the honey of his music vows,
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,
Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh;
That unmatcht form and feature of blown youth
Blasted with ecstasy: O, woe is me
T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 689)

It is evident that Ophelia is horrified at the unhinged state that Hamlet finds himself in. She is, as before, unaware that his apparent madness is a ploy. All she knows is that he is cross at her for reasons that she cannot quite understand, and that her youthful dreams of love have been violently crushed.

Later in the play, Hamlet's intentions become increasingly puzzling for Ophelia. As they watch the "play within a play", the remarks he directs towards her are marked by sexual innuendos (such as "country matters" and "a fair thought to lie between maids' legs" (3.2.3-5)). Bemused by his behaviour, Ophelia is unable – or, perhaps, unwilling – to answer him with more than short, submissive remarks.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare hints at Ophelia's fragility: the constant motif of flowers that surrounds her, for instance, suggests the delicacy of her character. She is fragile "without any indication of weakness. [...] She is so young that neither her mind nor her person have attained maturity; she is not aware of the nature of her own feelings" (JAMESON, 1900, p. 143). This particularity of her character, along with her willingness to love and be loved by Hamlet, indicates that his bitter ambivalence towards her could have been troubling enough to disrupt her peace of mind to some degree.

The inheritance of ghosts

The transgenerational phantom¹

In his 1975 essay *"Notules sur le fantôme"*², Nicolas Abraham elaborates on his notion of the "phantom", a concept intended to serve as a complement to Freud's metapsychology. Abraham describes the phantom as a human invention, meant to objectify "the gap produced in us by the concealment of a love object's life" (1975, p. 171). In this sense, the phantom is comparable to folkloric entities such as ghosts, revenants and other representations of the spirits of the dead. Like these entities, the phantom is a sort of "haunting", imposed upon the living by the restless dead. These hauntings are the consequence of a matter left unresolved, unclear; the phantom's prime source of nourishment, Abraham postulates, is the existence of unspeakable secrets.

The phantom, however, is unlike the folkloric accounts of ghosts in the sense that it's not described as an actual semi corporeal representation of a deceased individual. Instead, Abraham describes it as a "metapsychological fact", where "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (1975, p. 171). It is a portion of an ancestor's unconscious that has been passed on to their successor's. When present, the phantom works "like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography" (1975, p. 173), often leading its bearer to pursue interests that are not necessarily his or her own, but a mirror of their ancestor's inclinations.

The phantom, then, could be described as a transgenerational entity – an unspeakable secret within the bearer's unconscious, which has been unwittingly inherited from a past generation. While this generational bond may be primarily associated with the bearer's family, it may also refer to "the community, and possibly even entire nations" (RAND, p. 169). As Nicholas T. Rand postulates, in his introduction to Abraham's essay (1994, p. 166-167),

Abraham's theory of the phantom enlarges upon Freud's metapsychology by suggesting that the unsettling disruptions in the psychic life of one person can adversely and unconsciously affect someone else.

[...] those who were denied the rite of burial or died an unnatural, abnormal death, were criminals or outcasts, or suffered injustice in their lifetime [...] do not return, but their lives' unfinished business is unconsciously handed down to their descendants.

The concept of the phantom is particularly relevant in the context of *Hamlet*, where the king's ghost plays an essential role in the progression of the events of the play. The apparition of King Hamlet's ghost introduces the atmosphere of unease that will permeate the play. It will affect Hamlet directly, and act as a prompt that will set the plot into motion. Over the course of the play, the ghost's looming presence –

¹ The term "transgenerational phantom", as well as the concept associated with it, was wrought by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok over their years of work together.

² Translated by Nicholas T. Rand as "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology".

along with its resounding plea for vengeance – is the primary force that leads Hamlet to make a series of decisions that will culminate in his – and nearly every other character's – tragic ending.

Hamlet has been analysed, commented and even complemented by Abraham in *"Le fantôme d'Hamlet ou le VIe Acte, précédé par l'Entre'Acte de la 'Verité'"*³(1987). In his analysis of the play, the author explores his idea of the phantom as the shadow of a secret carried by a deceased loved one. He suggests that most of the tragedy's characters appear to be driven by a strange force. According to the author, Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius and Ophelia "all end up victims of an evil spell, puppets of a phantom" (1987, p. 188).

In the play, the presence of King Hamlet's ghost indicates the existence of a phantom that lingers in the hidden folds of Hamlet's consciousness – a secret that his father has kept from him. That is, the secret told to Hamlet by his father's ghost, regarding the true circumstances of his death, masks another secret. According to Abraham's theory, the revelation of a secret should result in the exorcism of the phantom that is connected to it. This suggests that, even after the ghost's revelation, there is a secret that still troubles Hamlet's unconscious, a force that keeps the phantom alive in his mind.

This hidden truth likely refers to a secret of infamy, a burden that has plagued King Hamlet in life and has been passed on to his son. As expounded by Abraham, "the presence of the phantom indicates the effects, on the descendants, of something that had inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents" (1987, p. 174). However, although the gist of this secret has been unconsciously inherited by Hamlet, he does not have full access to it. He can only make conjectures, attempting to grasp an obscure knowledge that he will never quite attain. Yet, even though he may be struck by the impulse to seek this truth, the very possibility of discovering it is unsettling as well – for a truth such as this, which his father cannot disclose even in death, must be truly unmentionable. According to Abraham (1987, p.188),

the gaps and impediment in our communication with the love object [produced by the secret] create a twofold and contrary effect: the prohibition of knowledge coupled with an unconscious investigation. As a result "haunted" individuals are caught between two inclinations. They must at all costs maintain their ignorance of a loved one's secret [...]. At the same time they must eliminate the state of secrecy; hence the reconstruction of the secret in the form of unconscious knowledge.

Thus, the prince lingers in this delicate state between knowledge and nonknowledge, both attracted and repelled by the answer to the obscure question that his father's ghost has awoken in him. This phantom, the realisation of the existence of a secret, will disrupt Hamlet's peace of mind and, in turn, bring a sense of unease into the entire court.

Throughout the play, the phantom's influence infiltrates the minds of the characters who are part of the court and, thus, closer to the late King Hamlet. Horatio and Fortinbras, the only foreigners who were present in the play's finale, are the only

³ Translated by Nicholas T. Rand. As "The Phantom of Hamlet or The Sixth Act preceded by The Intermission of "Truth".

ones who remain unaffected by the ghost's presence. This suggests that the trans-generational phantom has only permeated the minds of those who had been born in Denmark – those for whom King Hamlet had some sort of familial significance, either due to his paternal authority or to his position as the monarch.

The effect of secrets on Ophelia's mind

Although the theme of insanity is intensely explored in *Hamlet*, the title character is not quite mad, in the strictest sense of the word. Despite being disturbed and willed into revenge by the ghost's influence, Hamlet is still conscious of his own actions, and even his apparent lunacy is deliberate, if his own words to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are to be believed:

Hamlet: [...] my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived.
 Guil: In what, my dear lord?
 Hamlet: I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly
 I know a hawk from a handsaw. (SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 685)

Once Hamlet's apparent madness is discarded and explained by himself to be nothing but a ruse, Ophelia becomes the most genuine depiction of insanity in the play. The delirious state in which she finds herself by Act IV appears to be quite authentic – she truly seems “incapable of her own distress”.

The phantom that resulted from King Hamlet's death was certainly a crucial factor in Ophelia's descent into madness. Its influence struck Hamlet and Ophelia in very different ways. Hamlet has woven an intricate plot, intended to allow him to enact his father's revenge. His uncertainties, derived from his dwelling in the threshold between the known and the unknown, have led him to become uneasy and hesitant in his quest for vengeance. For Ophelia, however, there is more than that.

Her deprivation of knowledge – a product of the surfeit of secrecies that has surrounded her since King Hamlet's death – was an active factor in the progression of Ophelia's insanity. Although King Hamlet's unspoken secret, hidden even from his son, is the prime source of the phantom's existence, there is another hidden truth that haunts Ophelia's mind: she does not know the real circumstances of King Hamlet's death. Although she appears to have an inkling of the foul deeds that have occurred in the castle (as suggested by Horatio's description of her maddened state: “She speaks much of her father; says she hears/There's tricks i'th'world; and hems, and beats her heart [...]” (4.5.81-82)), she cannot truly know that the king was murdered by his brother, for she has never been told so. As written by Anna Jameson in *Shakespeare's Heroines* (1900, p. 151),

she believes Hamlet crazed; she is repulsed, she is forsaken, she is outraged, where she had bestowed her young heart, with all its hopes and wishes; her father is slain by the hand of her lover, as it is supposed, in a paroxysm of insanity: she is entangled inextricably in a web of horrors which she cannot even comprehend, and the result seems inevitable.

This “web of horrors” encompasses the late king’s death, as well as the secret scheming that takes place in court. The phantom that disturbs Ophelia’s mind, then, does not refer only to King Hamlet’s secret – the one unknown even by his son. She is also haunted by her unawareness of the true cause of his death, and of the true extent of the “tricks” that exist in the world and in Elsinore.

As explained by Abraham, the haunted mind will attempt to protect itself from the unspeakable truth, while, unconsciously, engaging in an investigation, in an attempt to appease its disquiet. Like Hamlet, Ophelia is torn between these two paradoxical urges. Yet, unlike him, she is led into complete, incapacitating madness by the intensity of the phantom’s influence. Perhaps this is due to her mind being particularly fragile – but it is far more likely that she has become more sensitive and subject to the phantom’s disturbing influence due to the additional factors that interfered in the balance of her mind.

Conclusion

This study has proposed to analyse the character of Ophelia, and to assess whether her madness might have been induced by a series of factors, rather than a single event. After a thorough analysis of Ophelia and her mental afflictions, it is possible to suggest that her insanity was, indeed, a product of the combination of the traumatic circumstances and events that surround her. In the context of the play, the world to which she is accustomed undergoes several abrupt changes: her brother leaves Denmark, King Hamlet and her father die under mysterious circumstances, and Hamlet adopts a rather aggressive posture towards her, verbally attacking her in what seems to be a severe fit of insanity.

These events, which would already have been quite disturbing to Ophelia by themselves, have been aggravated by the ominous atmosphere that permeates the play since the first apparition of King Hamlet’s ghost. The king’s demise, along with the unawareness about the mysteries surrounding his character and the nature of his death, were likely a source of profound unease for Ophelia. Her knowledge about these mysteries is quite limited, and thus, she is trapped in the threshold of knowledge: a disquieting state, where she has an inkling of the horrors around her, but can never grasp them in their entirety.

Ophelia is simultaneously haunted by her lack of knowledge concerning life itself and the mysteries of death, by her lack of love and security, and by the grief felt by those who have experienced a terrible loss. These circumstances have troubled her young, unseasoned mind, leaving her so distressed that she could not properly understand or respond to the world around her.

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