

The Creation of the Ophelia Complex: Shakespeare's Tragic Protagonist As A Culmination of Archetypes About The Female Condition in Early Modern Plays

The representation of women and female characters in early modern plays is an inarguably complex and stimulating area of discourse, specifically in regards to the discussion of female agency and intellect. When it comes to interesting historical archetypes of femininity throughout early modern playtexts, Shakespeare's Ophelia is one character likely to come to the forefront of most readers' minds. Though Ophelia herself is a largely unique individual and her modern day resonances are unlike any other female character of her time, Shakespeare's creation of Ophelia as the tragic woman in *Hamlet* is in fact deeply influenced by the female characters set forth by playwrights before him, specifically by the roles Bel-Imperia and Isabella in Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. Through both her deeply complicated expressions of agency and awareness and the ambiguity that surrounds her as a character and—more explicitly—her death, Shakespeare's Ophelia both builds off of and diverges from the archetypes of female characters set forth by Kyd's women protagonists, thus making Ophelia one of the most tragic and complex female characters.

Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* is an influential play for many reasons, particularly in regards to his use of a highly active and strong female character: Bel-Imperia. Circumstantially, one would expect Bel-Imperia to assume the position of a victim; she's lost her beloved Don Andrea and is being subject by her brother, Lorenzo, and her uncle, the Duke of Spain, to marry Balthazaar: the very man responsible for Don Andrea's death. Furthermore, Bel-Imperia finds herself in a complicated "romantic" relationship with Horatio—the man who

captured Balthazaar and brought him back to Spain—but Horatio also dies a tragic death not long after their relationship begins. Given the deep suffering Bel-Imperia has faced, it would be typical of a wronged, female character like herself to become the stereotypical “damsel in distress”, incapable of anything but lamentation. However, Kyd assigns Bel-Imperia the complete opposite role within the play. To quote the renowned scholar of early modern plays, Dr. Emma Smith, Bel-Imperia becomes the “honey pot” around which the majority of the action in the play takes place (Smith). What Smith is implying here is that Bel-Imperia quite literally drives the action in the play forward, which is deeply uncommon for other female characters at the time. Bel-Imperia herself is largely responsible for pushing Hieronimo into action and seeking revenge on Balthazaar and Lorenzo, staying closely involved with all the plotting and active avenging throughout the play, rendering herself an extraordinarily active character.

As a result of Bel-Imperia’s desire for revenge and calculating nature that allows her to eventually achieve it, many readers view Kyd’s female protagonist as being cold, vindictive, and angry—emotions not commonly associated with or willingly attributed to women at the time. Though Ophelia may not as actively seek out revenge or push the plot as rapidly forward in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s tragic protagonist draws from Bel-Imperia in regards to the unorthodox feelings they portray when faced with tragedy that contradict what is expected of women. As mentioned briefly before, Bel-Imperia’s experiences with her lovers would traditionally prompt her to emote feelings of sadness or hopelessness, but she instead resorts to feelings of anger and passion for revenge. In one of her first soliloquies in the play, Bel-Imperia expresses her desire for isolation as a result of her “cheerless mood” and also questions the validity of her feelings for Horatio since she does not understand how love could “find harbor [her] my breast, / Till [she] revenge the death of [her] below’d” (Kyd 1.4.59-65). The importance here is that Bel-Imperia’s

private feelings are more so that of resentment and vengefulness, which are somewhat atypical emotions for women at the time.

Though Ophelia never explicitly expresses a desire for revenge, the descent into “madness” that she experiences after the murder of her father, Polonius, does prompt her to express heretical feelings that can be closely attributed to the traditionally non-female feelings set forth by Bel-Imperia. Throughout her role in *Hamlet*, Ophelia is most well-known for the poetic outbursts that she subjects almost all of the other characters to after her father's death. As mentioned before, it was quite common for grief-ridden female characters to have few other ways to express their sadness than with tears and lamenting, but Ophelia's reaction to her father's death is one of the most prominent ways she establishes herself as divergent from the traditional, female character. For the remainder of the play after her father's death and leading up to her own, Ophelia speaks almost exclusively in sonnets and hymns that the characters around her understand to be completely unintelligible. Other characters, like Gertrude, try to understand Ophelia, asking at times “Alas sweet lady, what imports this song?” to which Ophelia responds cryptically with answers like “Say you? Nay, pray you, mark. ‘He is dead and gone, lady / He is dead and gone, / At his head a grass-green turf, / As his heels a stone’” (Shakespeare 4.5.27-32). What is so profound here and what links Ophelia to Bel-Imperia in a way that may not be overtly obvious but is deeply rooted, is that Ophelia as a character refuses to make herself easy to understand, and expresses her feelings of sorrow and anger in a way that is so deeply intellectual that no one can comprehend its meaning. Thus, Ophelia's nonconformist expression of grief serves as one of the ways that Shakespeare drew from the unorthodox female archetypes put forth by Kyd's women.

In a more concrete way, Shakespeare also drew from the role of Isabella—the mother of the late Horatio and husband to tentative avenger Hieronimo—in regards to Isabella’s intense feelings of dejection and her subsequent suicide. Before delving into the discussion of how the two women relate in terms of their intense feelings of existential melancholy and the death that results, it is important to note that Shakespeare intentionally leaves whether or not Ophelia killed herself up to interpretation. We only learn of Ophelia’s death from Gertrude’s account of finding her drowned, but several characters—like the gravedigger in the opening scene of Act V—do speculate that the distressed daughter took her own life, as do the majority of modern day readers.

With this in mind, the parallels between Isabella and Ophelia towards the end of their lives are rather clear in the way that they both exhibit a profound feeling of existential dread as a result of the loss of their loved ones. During Isabella’s famous suicide scene in the garden where her beloved son was slain, the mother proclaims:

And none but I bestir me to no end,
 And as I curse this tree from further fruit,
 So shall my womb be cursed for his sake,
 And with this weapon will I wound the breast,

The hapless breast that gave Horatio suck. (Kyd 4.2.34-37)

In these final moments before Isabella’s death, her impactful words not only express a profound sadness for the loss of her son, but also a deep level of melancholy for the essence of life, as emphasized by the fact that she is cutting down the tree where Horatio was hung to prevent it from ever bearing more fruit and comparing this dismemberment to the act she will commit unto herself to yield herself from ever producing more life. This analogy not only solidifies how

bereft Isabella is for the loss of Horatio, but also how this event has surpassed the realm of her own family life and has caused her to feel an unbearable sadness with the idea of giving life at all.

This deep sense of existentialism caused by the loss of a loved one is clearly echoed in Ophelia's death scene. Though we only learn of Ophelia's death through an account from Gertrude, the explicit imagery that surrounds Ophelia's actual death in relationship to her final encounters with the other characters while she is alive closely mirror the sense of existential dread that accompanies Isabella's suicide. One of the most well known passages in Shakespeare's renowned tragedy, Ophelia's death is described by the queen as such:

There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious silver 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. (Shakespeare 4.7.172-180)

The nature imagery associated with Ophelia's death is not to be overlooked; just two scenes earlier—in the last scene we ever see Ophelia—the distressed daughter goes around to Claudius and Laertes and hands them snippets of different flowers and herbs she has gathered, including fennel, columbines, and rue. It was known both at the time and today amongst scholars that each plant had a specific meaning, like the fennels and columbines which she gave to the King that

represent flattery, adultery, and foolishness (Shakespeare 4.5.181). The implication here is that Ophelia had a broad understanding of and connection to nature and all of its symbolic meanings, which is largely important when you consider the scene of her death. When you combine both the last scene where we ever see Ophelia and the way in which she is found dead, it is clear that her connection to nature and her implied choice to become consumed by it mirrors both the nature imagery associated with Isabella's suicide and the subsequent feeling of existentialism that comes with losing a loved one.

Whether it be through the unorthodox way of feeling that contradicts what is expected of a woman in her time or through the existential reaction to loss that precedes her death, it is clear that Shakespeare drew on the influences of both Bel-Imperia and Isabella in creating Ophelia. Despite the fact that there are clear similarities and structural parallels between Kyd's two women and Shakespeare's tragic Ophelia, the question that remains involves what exactly it is that makes Ophelia such a timelessly profound character and why her impact on readers is so much more visceral than that of any female characters prior. Though the discussion of what makes Ophelia so special and why the "Ophelia complex"—characterized by a feeling of deep, emotional duress and an association with water and nature—has manifested itself so often in modern day characters is one that likely has no end, the most influential characteristic of the way Shakespeare writes Ophelia that shapes her generational impact is the intentional ambiguity that surrounds her throughout the play.

As mentioned before, Shakespeare purposefully leaves it up to the reader to decide whether or not Ophelia took her own life, but this is just one example of the multitude of ways that Shakespeare creates Ophelia to be hard to pin down and thus highlights her inner complexities and rare sense of awareness and understanding of the world around her. Though

most of the characters who witness Ophelia's outbursts after her father's death understand it to be nothing but "unshapèd use" that means nothing but "doth move / The hearers to collection", a deeper analysis of the origins of the supposedly meaningless hymns and songs Ophelia recounts show that she has a much broader cultural and historical breadth of knowledge that informs the way she understands her own place within the situation at hand (Shakespeare 4.5.7-9).

Throughout her moments of perceived madness that take up much of Act 4 Scene 5, Ophelia makes reference to several biblical passages, myths, and folklore, like that of the feast of Saint Valentine and the story of Christ and the baker's daughter (Shakespeare 4.5). Though her words may come off as meaningless, Ophelia specifically integrates quotes and passages that relate to both her father's death and her feelings surrounding the incident, but does so in a way that is hard to understand amongst the masses. As a result, Shakespeare subtly but powerfully asserts Ophelia as deeply intellectual and generally profoundly aware, making her distinctly more alluring and fascinating than most female characters prior.

Whether it be through her purposefully vague death or the ways in which she expresses profound intellect in an often unintelligible way, Shakespeare uses both the unconventional feelings of Bel-Imperia and the existentialism and nature allegory associated with Isabella to create Ophelia as a female character that takes from actions and ideas associated womanhood and femininity in the past and exaggerates these concepts to situate herself as a much more complex and elaborate archetype for the female condition. As readers, we do not always understand Ophelia, but we want to, and it is within her inability to be completely understood that one finds the essence of her character; a woman struggling with things many women before her have but processing them through the confines of a mind well beyond its years.

Works Cited

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