**Introduction to Ophelia in *Hamlet***

Of all the pivotal characters in *Hamlet*, Ophelia is the most static and one-dimensional. She has the potential to become a *tragic heroine* -- to overcome the adversities inflicted upon her -- but she instead crumbles into insanity, becoming merely *tragic*. It appears that Ophelia herself is not as important as her representation of the dual nature of women in the play. The extent to which Hamlet feels betrayed by Gertrude is far more apparent because of Ophelia's presence. Hamlet's feelings of rage against his mother can be directed toward Ophelia, who is, in his estimation, hiding her base nature behind a guise of impeccability, just as is Gertrude.

Through Ophelia we witness Hamlet's evolution, or de-evolution into a man convinced that all women are whores; that the women who seem most pure are inside black with corruption and sexual desire. And if women are harlots, then they must have their procurers. Gertrude has been made a whore by Claudius, and Ophelia has been made a whore by her father. In Act II, Polonius makes arrangements to use the alluring Ophelia to discover why Hamlet is behaving so curiously. Hamlet is not in the room but it seems obvious from the following lines that he has overheard Polonius trying to use his daughter's charms to suit his underhanded purposes. In Hamlet's distraught mind, there is no gray area: Polonius prostitutes his daughter. And Hamlet tells Polonius so to his face, labeling him a "fishmonger" (despite the fact that Polonius cannot decipher the meaning behind Hamlet's words). As Kay Stanton argues in her essay *Hamlet's Whores*:

Perhaps it may be granted...that what makes a woman a whore in the Hamlets' estimation is her sexual use by not one man but by more than one man.... what seems to enrage [Hamlet] in the 'nunnery' interlude is that Ophelia has put her sense of love and duty for another man above her sense of love and duty for him, just as Gertrude put her sense of love and duty for her new husband above her sense of love and duty for her old. Gertrude chose a brother over a dead Hamlet; Ophelia chooses a father over a living Hamlet: both choices can be read as additionally sexually perverse in being, to Hamlet, 'incestuous' (Stanton, *New Essays on Hamlet*)

To the rest of us, Ophelia represents something very different. To outside observers, Ophelia is the epitome of goodness. Like Gertrude, young Ophelia is childlike and naive. But unlike Queen Gertrude, Ophelia has good reason to be unaware of the harsh realities of life. She is very young, and has lost her mother, possibly at birth. Her father, Polonius, and brother, Laertes, love Ophelia tremendously, and have taken great pains to shelter her. She is not involved with matters of state; she spends her days engaged in needlepoint and flower gathering. She returns the love shown to her by Polonius and Laertes tenfold, and couples it with complete and unwavering loyalty. "Her whole character is that of simple unselfish affection" (Bradley 130). Even though her love for Hamlet is strong, she obeys her father when he tells her not to see Hamlet again or accept any letters that Hamlet writes. Her heart is pure, and when she does do something dishonest, such as tell Hamlet that her father has gone home when he is really behind the curtain, it is out of genuine fear. Ophelia clings to the memory of Hamlet treating her with respect and tenderness, and she defends him and loves him to the very end despite his brutality. She is incapable of defending herself, but through her timid responses we see clearly her intense suffering:

*Hamlet*: ...I did love you once.
*Ophelia*: Indeed, my, lord, you made me believe so.
*Hamlet*: You should not have believed me...I loved you not.
*Ophelia*: I was the more deceived.

Her frailty and innocence work against her as she cannot cope with the unfolding of one traumatic event after another. Ophelia's darling Hamlet causes all her emotional pain throughout the play, and when his hate is responsible for her father's death, she has endured all that she is capable of enduring and goes insane. But even in her insanity she symbolizes, to everyone but Hamlet, incorruption and virtue. "In her wanderings we hear from time to time an undertone of the deepest sorrow, but never the agonized cry of fear or horror which makes madness dreadful or shocking. And the picture of her death, if our eyes grow dim in watching it, is still purely beautiful". (Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* 132-3). The bawdy songs that she sings in front of Laertes, Gertrude, and Claudius are somber reminders that the corrupt world has taken its toll on the pure Ophelia. They show us that only in her insanity does she live up to Hamlet's false perception of her as a lascivious woman.