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Hearing Ophelia: Gender and Tragic Discourse in *Hamlet*

SANDRA K. FISCHER

In a play filled with alien presences from the outset – a ghost from purgatory, a usurper king, an oedipal mother, a Norwegian political rival, treacherous friends, and the protean Hamletian essence of “man” – it is nonetheless Ophelia, passive Ophelia, who constitutes the “other” in *Hamlet*. Even though contemporary feminist criticism is pluralistic and often contradictory, about Ophelia and her sisters there is consensus: Catherine Belsey notes that “woman” is defined only vis-à-vis “man”;¹ Linda Bamber describes the “feminine as a principle of Otherness... unlike and external to the Self, who is male”;² Annie Leclerc protests that “Woman is valuable in so far as she permits man to fulfill his being as man”;³ and John Holloway assesses the function of Ophelia as reinforcing the centrality of Hamlet.⁴ Her critical history, much like her treatment in the play, has been from the beginning a paradoxical one of possession and objectification: for Voltaire she is “Hamlet's mistress” and for Samuel Johnson “the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious.”⁵ Despite Ophelia’s own sketch of the Prince in III.1 as courtier, soldier, scholar,⁶ we would be shocked to find Hamlet described by critics in terms parallel to those shadowy abstractions often applied to Ophelia – as “the mature, the handsome, the powerless, and the well-intentioned,” for example – primarily because Shakespeare allows the language of Hamlet to particularize and individuate him indelibly. The world of Hamlet is to a great extent the self of Hamlet, and the self of Hamlet is to a great extent the language of Hamlet.

Critics have often adopted Hamlet’s own line of reasoning in generalizing about the nature and behavior of the “frail” gender and explained Ophelia only by linking her to Gertrude. Ophelia is actually a muted structural pivot, a Braille rendition of the hero’s own progress. For Jacques Lacan, Ophelia is essential only because “she is linked forever, for centuries, to the figure

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of Hamlet’;7 for Elaine Showalter “Ophelia’s story . . . [is] the repressed story of Hamlet.”8 Both are given edicts by their fathers that ransack and invite suspicion; both fail to understand fully how they are being worked upon by court forces; both go mad, one for antic purposes, the other for real; both become isolated and feel betrayed, confused; both lose a father via strange and inbred circumstances, with devastating results. As Cherrell Guilfoyle remarks, Ophelia “opposes truth to Hamlet’s feigning and feinting; . . . he meditates on death, she dies.”9 Looking at Ophelia, then, offers a feminine counterpoint to Hamlet’s tragedy at least; at most, it manifests a devastating commentary on the non-particularity of his tragic circumstances. Despite such structural centrality, Ophelia remains shadowy, even when one becomes, in Judith Fetterley’s term, a “resisting reader.”10

The most basic steps toward a feminist approach to this play follow those outlined by Carol Neely as compensatory and justificatory:11 (1) to notice that much of what transpires in the world of Hamlet is based on a stereotyped judgment of women as others, and (2) to read female characters in as real and serious a fashion as the males – as grappling with their identities, needing outlets for their conflicts, and trying to articulate their truths of “man” when denied full voice, the voice of soliloquy especially, but also the voice of communication. As Tom Stoppard has wittily revealed, the play of Hamlet can be reduced to the paradigm of Hamlet – talking – to himself.12 Articulation, communication, and self-presentation are fundamental to the world of Renaissance drama, yet Hamlet’s deafening vocal posturing desensitizes us to quieter and less powerful voices: the sound and sense of Ophelia’s speech dim in comparison, like the Cheshire cat, leaving only the trace of an impression. Typically, she echoes a statement put to her by rephrasing it into a question (but without Iago’s manipulative subtext); she expresses acquiescence, uncertainty, and obeisance; she utters half-lines; she mirrors her male interlocutors by naming their qualities (“You are as good as a chorus, my lord”); and she degenerates finally to the mad speeches of Act IV, “things in doubt / That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing . . . ” (v.6–7).

Luce Irigaray has catalogued the different terms by which feminine subjectivity can be expressed, and these describe the modes of Ophelia’s speech especially in her final scenes: “double or multiple voices, broken syntax, repetitive or cumulative rather than linear structure, open endings.”13 In Lacanian terms, Ophelia is denied the “fiction of selfhood built into the first-person singular and the rules of syntax . . . In a psycholinguistic world structured by father-son resemblance and rivalry and by the
primacy of masculine logic, woman is a gap or a silence, the invisible and unheard sex.”

14 The most productive next step for a feminist reading of Ophelia would seem to be a recognition of textual politics. One must listen for the repression of Ophelia’s voice as juxtaposed against Hamlet’s noisy soul-wrenching soliloquies. Hearing Ophelia requires a new set of critical ears. As Sherry Dranch has noted, “the unsaid in a literary text is established . . . through a hermeneutic reading of a censored style . . . [to find] the clearly stated unsaid.”

15 Even those who have listened for silences in Hamlet have missed its most profound effects. Zvi Jagendorf, for instance, notices that “copiousness of speech [Hamlet’s and Polonius’s] in the play suggests that it is tied in a vital dialectical relationship to the negation of speech in dumbness and silence” and finds two primary forms of silence: art and death. To apply such a paradigm is simply to fix Hamlet’s centrality more strongly: he is allowed communication by both speaking and keeping still (for example, in puns and innuendo, in The Mousetrap and elsewhere). Indeed, the silences in Hamlet “provoke and test speech. They challenge words to do justice to them,” but the silences of the hero are alternative modes of choice. Ophelia’s utterances are never allowed free, natural flow; her truncated responses, her uncertain assertions, her conflicting loyalties irrevocably tied to a self-image that tries to accommodate her closest males’ expectations—all are determined by external pressures. Hearing Ophelia, one senses continual psycholinguistic frustration: she knows not what to think, nor how to allow language either a cognitive or a therapeutic function. The silences of the hero’s female counterpart add a telling layer of commentary to the dialectic of speakable/unspeakable determined by the textual politics of Renaissance society. “What is unsaid, or what can not be said continues to influence us as we hear what is said,” yet the gender-linked stifling of voice is a different matter altogether. According to Adrienne Rich, “listening and watching in art . . . for the silences, the absences, the unspoken, the encoded [are essential] – for there we will find the true knowledge of women.”

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Until the production of The Mousetrap, the presentation of Hamlet and Ophelia, and the discourses allowed them to formulate and articulate a self, alternate with structural regularity and invite contrast. Presumably Ophelia is present in the first court scene (Q2 includes her in the s.d.), yet there she is completely silent, most probably as a result of the politics of decorum. Hamlet, however, is able initially to diffuse the propriety of public spectacle with his private concerns by articulating the complexity of his self as a thing that cannot be denoted truly. In both direct and veiled linguistic fashion
he is given polyvalent modes of self-expression, yet he feels profoundly his
otherness and a thwarted sense of candor – a prohibition against speaking
what he believes he knows. Indeed, his first soliloquy ends with the moving
but self-indulgent, “But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue”
(I.ii.159). From there Hamlet moves into intimate and satisfying dialogue
with Horatio, whom he admires for his intellect and steadiness as well as
for his ability to validate Hamlet’s self-image, manifest in his aloof
intellectuality, moral superiority, and “prophetic soul.”

Ophelia’s debut is with Laertes, who bids her farewell by solidifying her
role as object and by squelching any effort on her part for mutual
perspective and adult interchange. Polonius and Laertes, father and son,
both treat her like a child who lacks self-knowledge and apprehension about
the ways of the world. As Polonius speaks his truisms to Laertes, so Laertes
gives his platitudinous wisdom to Ophelia, establishing a chain of cultural
dissemination and control. Remarkably missing in this scene is an outside
audience or any sense of commentary on the action. In contradistinction,
Hamlet’s entrance reveals “the privileges of the Self . . . attributed to the
masculine hero. The hero is to begin with concerned with himself; the first
privilege of the Self is to have an extra Self who comments on or is simply
aware of the original one. The tragic hero explains and justifies himself, he
finds fault with himself, he insists on himself, he struggles to be true to
himself.”20 In Ophelia’s discourse, these functions are completely external-
ized: she finds herself explained, faulted, and struggled over by rival
authorities outside herself.

Ophelia’s language is an index to her enforced silence and circumscribed
self. With Laertes, her familiar, she is allowed mostly half-lines and
questions that are codes of acquiescence without the gesture of assent. They
actually invite further commands: “Do you doubt that? . . . No more but so?”
(I.iii.4, 9). Her allowed discourse with Polonius is even more frightening.
First, in the course of thirteen lines she breaks her promise of secrecy to
Laertes by relating to her father the gist of their conversation. Moreover,
her speeches here are marked by phrases of self-effacing obeisance: “So
please you . . . my lord . . . I do not know, my lord, what I should think . . .
I shall obey, my lord” (89–135 passim).

In his intervening scene, I.iv, Hamlet again is afforded the medium of
intimate and leisurely dialogue that establishes and cements his sense of
self. Here is the camaraderie of the watch and the comforting mirror of
Horatio; here as well is discourse with the ghost, which is remarkably
similar to soliloquy. Ophelia’s link with Hamlet’s mission from the ghost
is to be the recipient of his first attempt at an antic disposition. The prologue
to her description of his madness is in her usual tentative form—"O my lord, my lord, I have been so affrighted.... My lord, I do not know, / But truly I do fear it" (II.i.75, 85-86). As she describes to Polonius what she has witnessed, she depicts herself throughout as the passive object of Hamlet's actions: he holds her wrist; stares at her face; shakes her arm; nods, sighs; leaves while staring at her still. To obedience, acquiescence, and obeisance is now added negative objectification. The cause of this treatment has not been Ophelia's self, but rather her absence: "No, my good lord, but as you did command, / I did repel his letters and denied / His access to me" (II.i.108-10). Ophelia's closet scene is remarkable for acting as a discursive pivot. Here the characters embarked on parallel tragic courses are alone together, yet the chance for dialogue is missed, and each begins a path toward a stunning isolation. Ophelia loses all interlocutors as Polonius objectifies her further, "loosing" her (in the sense of unlocking or offering for mating) to probe the depths of Hamlet's self. Hamlet, meanwhile, complains of his isolation, yet he is constantly allowed confrontations that permit him to shape his changing sense of identity: with Polonius, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and with the Players. As Belsey notes, "since meaning is plural, to be able to speak is to be able to take part in the contest for meaning which issues in the production of new subject-positions, new determinations of what it is possible to be."21 These exchanges result in Hamlet's second soliloquy, beginning "Now I am alone" (II.ii.543). Yet it is Ophelia whose linguistic isolation is the most profound, and she is offered no means to vent her confusion. Her confrontation with Hamlet in III.i, with Polonius and Claudius as silent observers, is a mistimed parody of what might have ensued in the closet scene. Both are aware of their audience. Ophelia tries her usual speech forms, half-lines and questions, in addition to cautious and polite assertions of a changed reality, but Hamlet refuses to communicate, judging her the bait in the trap of his selfhood.

According to Bamber, soliloquies and "umbrella speeches" are the means by which drama reveals and expresses the inner life: "No such umbrella speeches shelter the consciousness of the women characters in the tragedies. Nor do they soliloquize.... What is missing is the sense of an identity discovering itself, judging and shaping itself."22 The closest Ophelia comes to soliloquy is her comment after the nunnery scene on the changed nature of Hamlet's mind, as manifested in his language. Two ironies subtract from the effect of this opportunity: that Claudius and Polonius are still observing her, and that she bemoans a false loss, voicing an opinion based on Hamlet's feigned madness. Her lone "soliloquy" in effect becomes an umbrella speech about Hamlet:
O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!... And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, That suck'd the honey of his music vows, Now see that noble and most sovereign reason... Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see. (III.i.152-63)

Marianne Novy finds in these lines an “audience-like passivity” and a tone “of sympathy for Hamlet...[rather] than of concern for herself.” Rhetorically, her speech follows the pattern of Hamlet's early soliloquies, beginning with an impassioned exclamation, cataloguing a changed reality through observation, and ending with a feeling of powerless holding back (“But break, my heart”; “O woe is me”). Hamlet's soliloquies, however, perhaps because there are so many of them, allow him hermeneutic progress (however self-deluded it might be). One wonders if Ophelia would ask the same questions and reach the same conclusions given the opportunity for private and public articulation of self. Annie Leclerc, in speaking generically about the male hero, implies not: “Listen to him for once with a sound ear. He says that life is absurd. Life absurd! And all because his reason cannot manage to account for it. And he submits life to examination and to the judgement of his imbecile reason...Hence the question: 'Is life worth living or not worth living?' is not the most basic of human questions; it is the most profoundly stupid expression...” Ophelia is continually thwarted both in expression of self and in consequent establishing of meanings.

Her verbal parrying with Hamlet before The Mousetrap shows not a little intellect, yet there remains a persistent undertone of unanswered questions and other-directed observations. When examined in a vacuum, Ophelia's lines are stunningly empty and rhetorically reflective: “I think nothing, my lord...What is, my lord?...You are merry, my lord....What means this, my lord?...Will a tell us what this show meant?...You are naught, you are naught....You are as good as a chorus, my lord....You are keen, my lord, you are keen” (III.ii.116-243 passim).

Immediately following Hamlet's crucial “How all occasions do inform against me” soliloquy is Ophelia's parallel scene. Not having been able to reconcile her losses philosophically, she now becomes a text to be deciphered in new ways: she yields her words with unseemly “winks and nods and gestures” that mystify her audience. All of Act IV presents an Ophelia who desperately wants to be heard, yet who has not been able to locate or to forge a communicable mode. Her hearers (the court and the audience) are moved, motivated to interpret, and sure of her unhappiness,
yet all they find in her speech is “in doubt... half sense...nothing... unshaped...there might be thought, / Though nothing sure” (IV.v.4–13 passim).

Ophelia’s madness is all the more disconcerting and pathetic in its juxtaposition to Hamlet’s macabre, playful madness in the early scenes of Act IV. He objectifies the murder of Polonius as a lesson in mortality to be applied to everyone (in addition to the center, himself); Ophelia profoundly particularizes both the loss of her father in death and the sexual abuse implied in Polonius’ and Laertes’ warnings as well as in Hamlet’s treatment of her in the nunnery and play scenes. It is not surprising that her refrain in her madness is “Pray you mark.” She is listened to but still not heard. Her sole rhetorical remedy is elliptical, a hermeneutics based on silence, absence, and ambiguity: “let’s have no words of this, but when they ask you what it means, say you this” (IV.v.46–47; emphases mine). Then she lapses into her final rhetorical mode, the ballad.

Critical opinion about the function of Ophelia’s mad rhetoric differs widely. Placing Ophelia in a dramatic context of madwomen and their talk, the Charneys find that “Madness enables her to assert her being: she is no longer enforced to keep silent” and that through madness she can “suddenly make a forceful assertion of... being. The lyric form and broken syntax and unbridled imagination all show ways of breaking through unbearable social restraints.”25 Certainly Ophelia’s mad speeches rivet the attention, but they seem to point to a loss rather than an assertion of self: a theme of the songs is the inability to choose among a socially-circumscribed series of insufficient options. The voice of madness is indeed louder than her earlier rhetoric, yet it fails to break through or change the constraints. It manages to articulate them only indirectly, and her meaning remains unheard. R. S. White makes her allusiveness more mystical than insane: “By a kind of sympathetic magic, the conditions which face Ophelia find their way into her songs, in oblique and confused fashion.”26 David Leverenz, in applying gender theory to both Hamlet and Ophelia and their language, offers a perceptive summary of the pastiche of meanings embedded in Ophelia’s final appearance:

... contemporary work with schizophrenics reveals the tragic variety of people whose voices are only amalgams of other people’s voices, with caustic self-observation or a still more terrifying vacuum as their incessant inward reality. This is Hamlet to a degree, as it is Ophelia completely.... [T]here are many voices in Ophelia’s madness speaking through her, all making sense, and none of them her own. She becomes the mirror for a madness-inducing world.... Through her impossible
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attempt to obey contradictory voices, Ophelia mirrors in her madness the tensions that Hamlet perceives. . . . Her history is another instance of how someone can be driven mad by having her inner feelings misrepresented, not responded to, or acknowledged only through chastisement and repression.27

The ambiguity of the voices in Ophelia’s songs and mad commentary is complex and fascinating. Nearly every reference has multiple signification, as if she attempts to squeeze and condense all the censored feelings and observations of the play into a compact logic of expression—hence, her admonitions to “mark,” that is, to hear and understand. For example, “He is dead and gone” is actually the center of the play, referring to Hamlet, Sr., Polonius, and, if Claudius’s order were carried out, to Hamlet himself. As Hamlet must try to connect past, present, and future, so Ophelia becomes a repository of memory, of events unconnected but through destiny linked in fatal concatenation.

The description of the death of Ophelia at the end of Act IV underscores her isolation, and it is telling that Gertrude is given the lines, as perhaps the one who can most nearly empathize with the conflicts of authority that compose her character. Hamlet is sorry for her death but still engaged in a battle of proprietary authority emanating from self: “I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum” (V.i.264–66; emphases mine). Her madness and death offer a true counterpoint of physical and rhetorical alienation that Hamlet, in his parallel progress, has overcome. Although some romanticize a Hamlet ready to fulfill his destiny in Act V as in a “distinguished isolation” similar to the lonely star, the moon,28 he is actually far more integrated in self, society, and language here than ever before. His sea journey has rebaptized him, while Ophelia’s watery element has ensured her solitary destruction.

Contrast the private drowning of Ophelia, singing snatches of her lays to the deaf ears of nature, with the public end of Hamlet, who is allowed to give breath to his “dying voice,” to speak again even though “I am dead, Horatio.” The horrible implicit paradox lies in the voice of Ophelia that was never heard, and the resounding voice of Hamlet, which outlives even the body that housed it. As Peter Erickson remarks about Act V and the death of Hamlet, “Hamlet is freed from his verbal isolation. . . . Having in Horatio a personal audience he can count on to carry on his linguistic future. . . . allows Hamlet to feel that language is no longer automatically inadequate.”29 Hamlet has also been significantly freed from soliloquy in Act V. Through its medium he has, as Belsey notes, made “audible the
Note personal voice,” which now develops into oracular public proclamation. The public and the private selves have merged and become rhetorically integrated. Ophelia’s linguistic sequence, in contrast, describes a line of progressive interiorization. The self that cannot be asserted, the words that cannot be uttered, turn inward in a gesture of self-annihilating hopelessness: “Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be. . . . I hope all will be well. We must be patient. But I cannot choose but weep . . .” (IV.v.43–44, 68–69). Turning from one authority to another (“My brother shall know of it”), ironically damning the conflicting claims to authority that dominated her (“And so I thank you for your good counsel”), Ophelia fittingly leaves with a blessing for the others who might at last hear her in her madness: “Good night, ladies, good night. Sweet ladies, good night, good night” (73–74). The tragedy of Ophelia develops its own, specifically female, mode of discourse, which is remarkable in the extent to which the loudness of Hamlet’s vocal posturing overpowers even the thwarted tongue she eventually finds. Hearing Ophelia, however, greatly enriches one’s appreciation of the structural aesthetic of the play. The textual politics of Ophelia’s rhetoric offer a feminine counterpoint to Hamlet’s tragedy as well as a devastating commentary on it.

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Notes

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5 In Jump, pp. 23, 24, 43.

6 All subsequent parenthetical line numbers to Hamlet refer to the Arden Edition, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982).


8 Showalter, p. 79.


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14 In Jones, p. 83.


17 Jagendorf, p. 122.

18 Jagendorf, p. 123.


20 Bamber, p. 6.

21 Belsey, p. 6.

22 Bamber, pp. 7-8.


24 Leclerc, p. 85.


30 Belsey, p. 42.