

Jingkang Zhang

Professor Jeffrey Knapp, Nickolas Gable

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### The “Despised” And “Used” Love Of Hamlet

(Prompt 8)

Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, over time, remains an uncertain subject even for some of the best critics of Shakespeare. A. C. Bradley, for example, finds himself in a doubtful position in regard to Hamlet’s love for Ophelia, to the extent that he “[has] reserved the subject for separate treatment and [has] kept it out of the general discussion of Hamlet’s character” (1905). Due to the lack of stage directions essential for interpreting Hamlet’s true intention in many of his lines addressed to Ophelia, we can perhaps never draw a definite shape of Hamlet’s love for her. What’s worth investigating, however, is how the various characters inside the play comment on, react to, and make use of Hamlet’s love (or non-love) for Ophelia, and thus, what effects does their love have on the society they are in. In this essay, I argue that Hamlet’s ambiguous love for Ophelia is constantly used by different parties - the King, Polonius, Laertes, and even Ophelia and Hamlet themselves - towards their social and political advantages or selfish purposes. While they, like us, can’t make sure of the love between Hamlet and Ophelia, they can nonetheless exploit this supposed characteristic social relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia to use it either as explanations to questions of their own concerns or as justifications for their own actions. As much as it is used, Hamlet’s love is consistently “despised” by these same characters, as alluded to by Hamlet himself in his famous “to be or not to be”-soliloquy (3.7.71).

Even early in the stages when we can be sure that Hamlet is in love with Ophelia sincerely, when “he hath made many tenders of his affections to [Ophelia]” (1.3.98-99) and “importuned [her] with love in honorable fashion” (1.3.109-10), Polonius and Laertes dismiss Hamlet’s love for Ophelia as “a fashion and toy in blood ... the perfume and suppliance of a minute, / No more” and “blazes ... extinct in both [light and heat] / Even in their promise as it is a-making”. With the pretext that Hamlet, as the Prince, is “out of [Ophelia’s] star” (2.2.139), Polonius orders Ophelia to lock herself from Hamlet’s resort, admit no messengers, and receive no tokens. In effect, these actions are made out of a selfish controlling desire of Polonius for Ophelia, to help “set [her] entreatment at a higher rate / Than a command to parle” (1.3.121-22). Contemptuous to even Hamlet’s most ardent manifestations of love to his daughter, Polonius despises his love and wants to pass the same notion to Ophelia. However, as soon as it comes into Polonius’ mind that his “prescripts” might be the “very cause of Hamlet’s lunacy” (2.2.49), on which subject dwells the King’s great concerns, Polonius, in his obsequiousness, tries his best to convince the King and the Queen of his (incorrect) theory. The once despised love of Hamlet for Ophelia now becomes the much wanted reason, the indispensable tool to flatter the King and the Queen, who wishes “that Ophelia’s good beauties be the happy cause of Hamlet’s wildness” (3.1.39). It is to this end that Polonius decides to dishonorably set up a trap for Hamlet and spy on him, even at the cost of his daughter’s love and, perhaps much to his regret, his own life. The King and Queen, too, use Hamlet’s love but as an explanation for his madness and thus a comfort to their innermost torments caused by guilt in their actions of usurping a crown and betraying a husband. The King uses all means available to him to find out about the cause of Hamlet’s lunacy, not to promote his so-declared love for his stepson, but to disprove his deepest fear of a revengeful Prince. Gertrude, likewise, desperately hopes that “[Ophelia’s] virtues / Will

bring [Hamlet] to his wonted way again” (3.1.39-40) before he shall direct his anger towards herself for her quick re-marriage, as he does later in the closet scene (4.1). To these characters, Hamlet’s love and affections for Ophelia only matters inasmuch as it might explain away his madness, help them flatter the King, or solve their fears originated from their own misdeeds.

For Ophelia, she “[does] not know ... what [she] should think” about Hamlet’s love for her (1.3.103). Out of blind obedience, she reveals all of her interactions with Hamlet to her father, including his visit to her closet and his love letter. All of Hamlet’s manifestations of love merely serves as a source of proof of her obedience, a piece of intelligence ready to be given up to her father and her King, as Polonius, in an obsequious manner, confides to the King: “This [Hamlet’s love letter] in obedience hath my daughter shown me, / And, more above, hath his solicitings / As they fell out by time, by means, and place, / All given to mine ear” (2.2.123-6). In doing this, Ophelia actually responds to Hamlet’s expression of love with the profoundest form of contempt or degradation, that is to deny her role as a participant in this bilateral relationship and instead delegate the handling of the romance between her and Hamlet to someone whose mind is fixed not on the happiness of Ophelia or the success of her marriage but on the flattering of Hamlet’s worst enemy. Accordingly, Hamlet’s single potential allusion to Ophelia, “the pangs of despised love” (3.1.72) , in all of his ponderous soliloquies is also addressed to this fact that his love is so insouciantly taken by Ophelia. As what Hamlet later pronounces to Laertes: “Hear you, sir, / What is the reason that you use me thus? / I loved you ever—but it is no matter” (5.1.267-9), the very same words might well be said to Ophelia, had Hamlet not been encountered with her death. It is by her own equivocation, obedience, and duplicity developed thereof, that Ophelia has “thus used” Hamlet and his love. Indeed, either her expression or non-expression of love infallibly

follows commands made by her father: when Polonius orders her to “admit no messengers, receive no tokens” (2.2.141), she will “repel his letters and deny his access” (2.1.106-7); when Polonius decides to “loose [his] daughter to him” (2.2.160), she will redeliver the remembrances of Hamlets’ that she has “longed long to redeliver” (3.1.92-3).

As Fischer suggests, “Ophelia is continually thwarted both in expression of self and in consequent establishing of meanings”, her feminine obedience is reflected in the stunning emptiness and rhetorical reflectivity of Ophelia’s lines: “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 keen, my lord, you are keen” (3.2.116-243 passim) (Fischer 1990). The fact that she is unable to express herself signifies the effect of oppressed love on her social relations: not only is she unable to respond to Hamlet with expressions of her true feelings, she also cannot seem to maintain a consistent image (that of an obedient one) in front of other people, evident in her eventual madness and suicide.

Acutely aware of Ophelia’s indifference and deceptions, Hamlet is slowly transformed from an ardent lover to a sardonic flirter. Originally “importuning her with love in honorable fashion” (1.3.110) and making “musicked vows” (3.1.153), he now refrains from sharing with her what he has heard from the ghost, even though she remains one of the first people he goes to when he is affrighted by what he has experienced on the castle’s battlement. Ophelia recounts her encounter with Hamlet to Polonius:

He falls to such perusal of my face  
 As ’a would draw it. Long stayed he so;  
 At last, a little shaking of mine arm  
 And thrice his head thus waving up and down,  
 He raised a sigh so piteous and profound  
 As it did seem to shatter all his bulk  
 And end his being. That done, he lets me go, (2.1.87-93)

By “thrice waving his head up and down”, Hamlet apparently intends to say something to Ophelia, but he instead raised a sigh so piteous and profound and forbears. While we cannot know for sure what Hamlet intends to say, the reason why he holds back his words could very well be originated from his distrust for Ophelia. His worry is not baseless, because, as we know, his interaction with Ophelia is indeed reported to Polonius in the most detailed manner, and if he does confess to Ophelia the great cause of revenge the ghost has instructed him and that this “commandment all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of [his] brain / Unmixed with baser matter” (1.5.102-4), it is very likely that Ophelia will expose this secret to her father, and thus the King.

While it’s debatable whether Hamlet’s suspicion for Ophelia arises as early as in the above-mentioned scene, It is without much doubt that at one point in the nunnery-scene (3.1) Hamlet becomes aware that he is being spied on and that Ophelia is “sent for”. Depending on different interpretations and stage directions, a variety of Hamlet’s lines can hint at his consciousness of eavesdroppers, from as early as when he performs his “to be or not to be” soliloquy, to his first rejection of Ophelia’s response to his love - “No, not I. I never give you aught” (95), to his “Ha, ha! Are you honest?” inquiry (102), and finally to as late as when he asks “Where’s your father”, and, upon receiving the answer “At home”, curses in rage: “Let the doors be shut upon him that he may play the fool nowhere but in’s own house” (127-30). To this point, we can be certain that Hamlet must have noticed Polonius’ presence on the stage. In this scene, Hamlet himself becomes the one that “despises” his own love. The first evidence lies in the fact that he denies his love and “all the holy vows of heaven” he once made for Ophelia: “No, not I. I never gave you aught. ... You should not have believed me, ... I loved you not. ... I say we will have no more marriage.” (95-144 passim). How can one’s love be more despised than when the suitor himself denies his vows

and revokes his proposal? Second, he calls all men “arrant knaves”, and tells Ophelia to “believe none of us” (120-126), rebuffing all his past promises and vows of love.

Enraged by the fact that Ophelia has deceived him, Hamlet also attributes his madness to Ophelia’s duplicity: “I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. ... Go to, I’ll no more on’t—it hath made me mad.” (139-44). Considering that Hamlet is aware of the eavesdroppers behind the arras who are eavesdropping only to learn of the cause of Hamlet’s madness, this speech by Hamlet, along with others aforementioned, is indeed directed not only at Ophelia but also at others present. In this speech, Hamlet blames the knavery and duplicity of men spying on him and paradoxically suggests that it is exactly this espionage investigating his madness that has made him mad. To a greater irony, while Hamlet is mad at Ophelia for her dishonestly “using” his love, he himself has also unfairly usurps the conversation about the love between him and Ophelia for the irrelevant purpose of chiding the eavesdroppers. When Ophelia comes up to him to “redeliver his remembrances” and talk about love, he indeed acts “knavishly”, as he himself admits, and uses this occasion to vent his indignation and express his ambitions.

The tragic romance between Hamlet and Ophelia has been perplexing and, perhaps for that reason, charming to generations of audience and readers. Even as the true course of development of Hamlet’s love for Ophelia remains vague to us, understanding that the love between Hamlet and Ophelia is unfairly scorned at, manipulated by, and exploited by all the main characters in *Hamlet* helps us better appreciate the tragedy in their romance.

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