All love belongs on "celestial bed”: hamlet’s problematic

Literature, British Literature

To understand Hamlet’s insecurities, we must understand Ophelia’s point of view. It is she who makes him most uncomfortable over the course of the play, and it is her rejection of him that drives Hamlet closer to insanity. Her reasons for this rejection are as important to Shakespeare’s greatest masterpiece as Hamlet’s own reasons for his babyishness, his insecurities, and, of course, his sexual impotence.

Ophelia’s first words in Hamlet amount to an admission of insecurity. By asking Laertes if he “ doubts” whether he will “ hear” from her in France, she reveals a fear of his not believing in her constancy, in her willingness to write letters (1. 3. 4). Shakespeare therefore implies from the first that Ophelia would like to be seen as trustworthy. Barring a duplicity for which there is absolutely no evidence in the play-as Ophelia is ever-faithful to the requests of her brother and father-it follows that she would like to conceive of herself as faithful too.

Just as the concept of faithfulness has profound sexual implications for Gertrude as widow and lover, so too does Shakespeare carefully suggest that Ophelia’s faithfulness to her brother’s admonitions is a matter of monogamy:

Indeed, this interchange follows his telling her not to “ keep your chaste treasure open / to his unmast’red importunity.” By sustaining the metaphor of a treasure (“ locked”), Ophelia in essence exchanges Hamlet’s “ umast’red importunity” for Laertes’ “ key.” A key is of course a classic Freudian dream-symbol for the phallus, treasure for the vagina, but psychoanalysis is hardly needed to prove these equations; the promise she

makes to “ keep” the “ effect of this good lesson” (1. 3. 45) is in fact one of abstinence.

The structure of the private conversation between the siblings reflects this phallus-exchange. In his long monologue, Laertes tells his sister to “ Fear it, Ophelia, fear it,” (1. 3. 33) it being Hamlet’s “ importunity” and hence his potency, while in his last line alone with her he asks her to “ fear me not.” (1. 3. 52) Laertes would have her believe that he, unlike Hamlet, is no “ reckless libertine,” and therefore should not be “ fear[ed].” This self-aggrandizement both fills the metaphorical/psychological empty space that Hamlet once occupied, and glorifies chastity as the proper moral substitute, the “ thorny way to heaven” (1. 3. 48). Ophelia ought to accept Laertes in lieu of Hamlet not simply because Laertes is no hypocrite (i. e. he will take his own “ rede,” his advice), but more importantly because a faithful brother will not exercise his virility. He will not be “ puff’d,” so to speak. A simple projection reveals the interior logic of his promise: Do not be afraid of me, for I, Laertes, will never seduce you, my sister, because “ My necessaries are inbark’d” (1. 3. 1). My potency is elsewhere.

This presents the playgoer, or at least Ophelia, with a Shakespearean contradiction. How can the vacancy implied by the incest-taboo satisfactorily fill the vacancy Hamlet has left? There is no contradiction whatsoever in Polonious’ repetition of Laertes’ commandment, since chastity is perfectly compatible with itself. A brother’s impotence and a father’s honor do not conflict, because both point to the same chaste end. They “ charge” (1. 3. 35) her with nothing in the most literal sense. And they offer nothing in

return other than approval and theoretical virtue, the achievement of which Ophelia herself deems “ thorny,” difficult, painful. Two scenes later, the ghost bids Hamlet to leave Gertrude “ to heaven, / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her” (1. 5. 86-88). Thus, by the end of the first act, Shakespeare has already conflated in one word (“ thorns”/” thorny”) Gertrude’s punishment with Ophelia’s reward. One effect of this is to further damn Ophelia in her miserable contradiction, as prudery’s prize is no better than love’s penalty. The Virgin Mother Mary versus Prostitute Mary Magdalene dichotomy leaves no room for Ophelia.

Ophelia does try to bridge the gap between virtue and love to Polonious in claiming that Hamlet’s words are “ almost all the holy vows of heaven” (1. 3. 15). The phrase, however, defeats itself. “ A dram of evil” (1. 4. 35) always taints a heavenly batch. Thus her conflict drips through in what almost seems a slip of the tongue (“ almost”). No sensual love can be wholly “ holy,” she admits perhaps without meaning to do so. Polonious immediately capitalizes on this, reducing all of Hamlet’s words to mere “ brokers,” by which he necessarily implies that Ophelia’s reciprocation is the equivalent of her selling her “ treasure.” Polonious is, indeed, her “ lord,” as she calls him throughout. If only total condemnation of romantic love is holy, loyalty to her father (the Father) is loyalty to heaven. From this perspective, she is completely consistent when she says that Hamlet appeared “ loosed out of hell” when he supposedly invaded her “ closet” (2. 1). He has become a tempter, a procurer, the devil.

What is crucial in this line of argument for Hamlet and for Hamlet is that the newly prude Ophelia condemns him to seeing himself as such a devil, at least in respect to her. His first lines to her reflect his deep desire to use her as a means of redemption. Her response casts that profound responsibility back onto him:

He greets her partly in third person, “ the fair Ophelia,” as if he believes he owes her a respect due only to royalty. But weakening this reading, Hamlet employs the informal “ thy,” as opposed to “ your.” This again reflects Ophelia’s impossible position both with respect to Hamlet and in his unconscious, as she is at once distant and familiar, sexual and asexual. Then he deifies her. But he stops short of calling her Diana. The word nymph has a certain sexual connotation, because it also denotes a pretty young woman. Shakespeare hints here too at the Ophelia’s predicament. Hamlet’s explicit hope that she pray for him, however, suggests that he sees her at that moment as a goddess first and a woman second, since it would be most advantageous to have a goddess pray for one’s sins. Furthermore, a nymph is also a river or stream, while “ orison” is not simply a prayer, but the Elizabethan spelling for “ horizon.” Hamlet thus betrays a wish to unload his sins at the farthest reaches of a river. Besides foreshadowing Ophelia’s death, Shakespeare depicts both Hamlet’s compulsive need to have Ophelia take his sins upon her “ almost” pure, watery, soul, and the impossibility of achieving such an aim.

Instead of “ rememb’r[ing]” his sins in her prayers, Ophelia “ pray[s]” that Hamlet take back his “ remembrances.” Her rejection is a perfect reversal.

The most obvious manifestations of their romance and hence their sensuality are Hamlet’s “ remembrances” (letters) to her. By “ praying” that he “ receive them,” Ophelia turns Hamlet’s request precisely on its head: her “ orisons” are now that Hamlet remember his own sins (“ receive” his “ remembrances”). These lines are also an echo of the question Ophelia earlier posed to Laertes insofar they are exactly opposite (“ Do you doubt” that I’ll write you letters?), showing us once more that Ophelia has simply exchanged Hamlet for another man with whom there is no threat of sexual relations. Laertes is an angel, her savior. That she has “ longed long” to renounce the devil’s supposed ploys smacks of that same sexual renunciation. The phrase has a “ phallic feeling,” established earlier when Ophelia says that Hamlet “ Long stay’d” when he interrupted her “ sewing,” and reiterated when Hamlet asks before his battle with Laertes if “ These foils have all a length?” (5. 2. 247) Stretching the phrase to the full length of its interpretive potential requires that we acknowledge its unavoidably erotic pronunciation: Ophelia’s mouth must open wide twice consecutively. Maybe this is not so great a stretch, since she does admit to having “ suck’d the honey of his music vows” (3. 1. 155). In all, she damns Hamlet to see, to remember, his own sinful sexuality by thrusting it back at him.

Hamlet’s reaction is to accuse her of being dishonest (“ are you honest?”), i. e. unchaste (3. 1). If the letters are indeed unavoidable evidence of sensuality, as Ophelia has seemingly come to believe, then Hamlet’s only means of disavowing his own detestable sexual appetite is to blame her with the crime of corrupting him. Indeed, he must condemn sexuality if he is to

stay true to his father, for Claudius’ crime was fundamentally one of lust. Claudius “ whor’d his mother.” Sex is to blame-and therefore Hamlet must repudiate that drive completely. Once Ophelia reminds him (with incontrovertible proof) of his wicked instinct, he is left with no other psychological option except to imbue her with it instead: “ No, not I, / I never gave you aught.” Hence, she is at the mercy of the worst “ bawd.” Following this logic, Hamlet was merely a naive customer. He “ did love you once” (italics mine), but now he is cured, or at least sufficiently phobic.

There is a problem in the above reasoning. On one hand, Hamlet claims never to have given Ophelia “ aught,” any cause to condemn him as a sexual being, while on the other he admits to having loved her once, which means he gave her more than naught. Shakespeare seems to intend the problem, as is evidenced by the fact that Hamlet immediately amends it: “ I lov’d you not.” In the smaller context of the surrounding lines, the ambiguity of these two declarations is all the more complicated.

The persisting power of “ our old stock,” or our primordial sexuality, leads Hamlet to say that he never loved Ophelia, which implies that his affection for her was totally sexual. Love as Hamlet uses it here must therefore mean pure, religious love. “ I lov’d you not” then means that he only lusted for her; “ I did love you once” means that he once worshipped her, before she was prostituted by a contaminated honesty. And yet, Hamlet cannot admit that he ever lusted for her, for then he would have been guilty of the worst sin of all. Thus “ I lov’d you not” plausibly means the precise opposite of what was just suggested. Now it appears that Hamlet means that he never lusted for

her. In his catalogue of personal failings, it is remarkable that he cites pride, revengefulness, and ambition, but not lust, for lust is unthinkable. It is as if Shakespeare has tied these knots to show us Hamlet’s knots. Perhaps Hamlet is saying that he both loved her and didn’t love her, sexually and religiously. He says all possible things at once.

Why is Hamlet confused? Well, if Ophelia is sexually spotless, then Hamlet in turn is sexually corrupt. Since he cannot stomach this self-condemnation, he reduces her to a whore. But if he admits to having once been involved with a whore, then he has acted no better than Claudius. He has been contaminated by a Gertrude stand-in. Shakespeare precludes Hamlet from establishing any clear picture of Ophelia. He has set us up for this by writing an Ophelia who, independent of Hamlet’s conception of her, is in fact trapped between the same mighty opposites. Hence, Hamlet sends her off to a “ nunn’ry,” which is both a convent and a brothel. Only if she is both a whore and nun-and therefore neither and therefore nothing-can Hamlet legitimately claim the moral superiority to Claudius that he thinks his own father must have had.

This idea only applies to the most pressing question of the play, namely the problem of why Hamlet delays for five acts before he kills Claudius, if Hamlet must identify himself with his father in order to successfully kill Claudius. Such a proof would of course require a book. Opening with an explication of Hamlet’s “ Now might I do it pat” monologue (3. 3. 73-95), in which Hamlet decides explicitly to delay his revenge for fear that Claudius’ “ heels may

kick at heaven,” Avi Erlich in his treatise Hamlet’s Absent Father argues eloquently that:

If we take God as a standin for King Hamlet, the father figure who concerns Hamlet most in the matter of Claudius’ punishment, then we hear Hamlet unconsciously wishing that his father were able to do his own revenging.

Taking his controversial thesis that Hamlet’s delay results from his frustrated wish to identify himself with a strong father who would not shrink when the cock crows, Hamlet’s Ophelia-Gertrude conflict makes all the more sense. In saying to Ophelia that “ wise men know well enough / what monsters you make of them,” Hamlet in a breath both identifies with his cuckolded (“ monster”) father and condemns him as a “ fool,” dumb enough to marry a woman in the first place. Ophelia has cheated on Hamlet by replacing him with Laertes and Polonious. He has conflated Gertrude and Ophelia in a single accusation-and therefore identifies himself with his now eternally impotent, dead father. He is therefore impotent.

In the bedroom scene with Gertrude, Hamlet expresses his childish belief that his parents’ marriage was “ an innocent love” only to accuse his mother now of “ set[ting] a blister there” (3. 4. 43-44). By blaming Ophelia for the blister (or horn) than has overshadowed their love, Hamlet’s unconscious fights to prove to himself that he is as “ innocent” as his father was; all love belongs on a “ celestial bed.” But there is a fundamental difference: Hamlet is furious at Ophelia for renouncing her sexuality, whereas Hamlet erupts at Gertrude because he finds her incapable of doing so. The repudiation of one

is in an important sense the approbation of the other. The two contradictory angers converge only insofar as they both reflect Hamlet’s fear of his own sexuality. If Ophelia is a prude, Hamlet is a pervert. If Gertrude is whore, she is potentially available to Hamlet as a sexual object. Both threaten to remove him farther from his conception of his father.

What Shakespeare makes clear by giving Hamlet and Hamlet’s audience no real way of making sense of Ophelia is the utter impossibility of such a thing as a “ celestial bed.” Obvious though it is to us, Hamlet never realizes it. He can only attain the imagined purity once his two possible love-objects are dead. He is most potent only in their absence, for they have paralyzed him in relation to Claudius too completely. They are a constant reminder of his longings, of his inability to measure up to his father. Once the they are dead, his sword can strike:

A little stretch yields a convenient reading. His sexual aggression (“ venom” at the “ point” of a foil) is finally allowed its proper outlet. Until now the only two women in his life might be said to have suppressed it, turning it against its possessor. That is because Hamlet emphatically refuses to be “ easier… play’d on than a pipe” (3. 2. 349). A pipe and a sword do have a similar shape indeed. Once the women are dead, he is his only pipe player.

All Hamlet references are to Bedford Shakespeare: Shakespeare, William, Hamlet, ed. Susanne L. Wofford, (Boston: Bedford Books) 1994.