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11/12/2018

Shakespeare

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### Women in Court: Rosalind and Ophelia

At first glance, Shakespeare's plays *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* seem to have little in common. *As You Like It* is a mostly lighthearted comedy about mistaken identity and love, while *Hamlet* is a tragedy centering around government and familial tensions. As is typical for the genres, *As You Like It* ends with a wedding (multiple weddings, in fact) and *Hamlet* ends in deaths (again, in the plural). However despite these obvious differences in tone, with close reading it can be seen that these plays have startling similarities. They both deal with complex family relationships, the problems of court life, and the idea of disguise. However, one of the most profound parallels in the two plays centers upon the stifling effect that court life had on women. In his writing Shakespeare frequently invokes the pastoral, meaning that nature and a rustic setting were idealized. He oftentimes used this device in order to contrast life in the court, which was refined and meticulously controlled. While people in the court tended to display carefully constructed personas and traits, those same people could go into nature and find a more authentic way to be themselves. This is abundantly apparent in *As You Like It* where the play is split in setting between the court and the forest of Arden. The court is where the "villainous" characters reside, and by the end of the play, they come to the forest and are healed. It is in the forest that characters are the truest version of themselves- even if they are disguised. Duke Senior even says of the forest "This is no flattery: these are counselors/ That feelingly persuade

me what I am" (2.1.10-11). In contrast, in *Hamlet*, the play is set almost completely in a court setting. As such, the themes of disguise and deceit are largely negative ones that result in sorrow. Because women had less power in the court than men did, this affected them especially. To effectively see this, a comparison can be made between the two leading female characters of Rosalind and Ophelia. To make this comparison is to see the impact that remaining under the strict control that the atmosphere of court placed upon women could have, while also exploring the freedom that could be gained by leaving it.

In the play *Hamlet*, Ophelia lives under the rigid confines of court life. Within this social system, it becomes clear that she and Hamlet have romantic entanglements. However, her father Polonius is an advisor to King Claudius. In the first act of the play, he begins to aggressively question Ophelia about her involvement with Hamlet, infantilizing her by calling her a "green girl" and telling her to "think yourself a baby" (1.3.100-104). This clearly makes her question her opinion- when asked again what she thinks about Hamlet's advances, she simply replies to her father "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (1.3.103). While Polonius's ultimate motivation for this is unclear, he does ultimately advise his daughter to distance herself from Hamlet. Despite the fact that she is in love with him, she agrees to her father's demands with absolutely no dissent, simply saying "I shall obey, my lord" (1.3.135). This demonstrates that Ophelia is subservient to her father, a factor that would seem to be typical for an unmarried woman. Her free will, wants, and desires have no place in this atmosphere. This would seem disheartening in itself, but alas, her father is not the only male figure that Ophelia must answer to. Ophelia's older brother Laertes also exerts a measure of control over her, warning not about becoming romantically involved with Hamlet, but physically involved. The way in which he does this is both explicit and graphic. He makes a particularly visceral comparison to a worm in a

flower when he says that "the canker galls the infants of the spring/ Too oft before their buttons be disclosed,/ And in the morn and liquid dew of youth/ Contagious blastments are most imminent" (1.3.38-42). This, while probably grossly inappropriate, is simply another way that Ophelia's sexuality (and life in general) is controlled by male members of the court. This idea comes to a peak during a conversation with Hamlet himself. While speaking to Ophelia, Hamlet becomes belligerent, demanding that she "Get thee to a nunnery!" (3.1.119). This is Elizabethan slang for a brothel, so Hamlet is explicitly implying that Ophelia is indecent. While Ophelia is checking up on Hamlet for both her father and for the King and Queen, it is easy to argue that she is doing it out of concern for Hamlet's health and safety and has done nothing even remotely worthy of being treated this way, and she is understandably heartbroken, referring to herself as "most deject and wretched," and crying "woe is me, t'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.152-158). Despite this, she must continue to maintain appearance in the court- but even that quickly falls apart. Eventually Hamlet, spiraling deeper into his tragedy, ends up accidentally murdering Polonius, which turns out to be the tipping point for Ophelia, sending her into a fit of madness. Interestingly, in this mental state, she seems to connect closely with nature, gathering plants such as "Rosemary, "pansies," and "violets" (4.2.170-180)- almost as if she were attempting to use the pastoral to comfort herself through her intensely emotional time. However, she is unable to escape court life or its consequences and ends up drowning. When the Queen describes Ophelia's body, it sounds like a truly beautiful natural setting: "There is a willow grows askant the brook that shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream" (4.4.165-166). She describes Ophelia as surrounded by "fantastic garlands she did make of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples" (4.4.167-168), and even goes as far as to emphasize how natural she looked in the

setting, "Like a creature native and endued unto that element" (4.4.178-179). Although not in an ideal way, it did take a natural setting in order for Ophelia to escape the confines of the court.

To compare and contrast, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind also is a woman who must abide by the rules of court. Her father, Duke Senior, was once the head of court but was overthrown by his younger brother, Duke Frederick, and forced into exile in the forest of Arden. This would place Rosalind in a delicate position, where her perceived appearance and attitude would have to be carefully cultivated in order for her to maintain her safety. Rosalind would have to maintain the illusion that she did not miss her father, nor her status, in front of her uncle. Even with this caution, Duke Frederick decides rather suddenly that she must be a traitor and decides to banish her as well. When Celia (Frederick's daughter and Rosalind's best friend) attempts to plead for mercy for Rosalind, Duke Frederick replies "Ay, Celia, we stayed her for your sake;/ Else had she with her father ranged along" (1.3.63-64). However, instead of going mad or attempting to maintain her place in court, Rosalind decides to embrace the opportunity- deciding to travel with Celia. Knowing the possibility of danger, Rosalind decides "Were it not better... that I did suit me all points like a man" despite "in my heart lie there what hidden women's fear there will" (1.3.110-115). This disguise ends up affording her the ultimate amount of freedom- the ability to speak her mind like a man. This seems especially pertinent when it comes to the matter of love- something that Ophelia had absolutely no power to discuss. Rosalind, on the other hand, is free to do nothing but as she coaches Orlando. She refers to herself when she says that "Make the doors upon a woman's wit and it will out at the casement; shut that and 'twill out at the keyhole; stop that, 'twill fly with the smoke out the chimney" (4.1.141-144). She also seems able to hold a less idealistic view of love than Ophelia- the idea that "men are April when they woo, December

when they wed; maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives" (4.2.137-130) does not seem like one that Ophelia ever was even introduced to consider.

The difference between the two heroines is perhaps most obvious when Orlando claims of not having Rosalind "Then in mine own person, I die" (4.1.81). She replies with a quick retort: "Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love" (4.1.92-94). This seems, in fact, to be one of the very things Ophelia died for. By embracing the pastoral and letting go of courtly life, Rosalind was ultimately able to find happiness and achieve the things that she wanted to- thus avoiding Ophelia's sad fate. While the trappings of courtly life clearly affected all who were in in, women in particular were forced into a tight set of restrictions. By writing complex characters, Shakespeare was able to explore the way that women react to pressure, and the ways that changing or not changing their situation could either doom or save them.

### Works Cited

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