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“Thoughts That Do Often Lie Too Deep for Tears:” Ophelia’s Message Through Flower  
Symbolism

Poet Wordsworth notes in his “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” “To me, the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (249). As Wordsworth acknowledged, flowers possess a silent language of their own. During the Renaissance, flowers held traditional meanings that carried a message from the giver to the receiver. In The Language of Flowers, Gregory Aaron notes that the origins of some of these associations are grounded in mythology while others are found in folk stories and medicinal purpose (5). Shakespeare was well acquainted with the connotations that certain flowers would have called to mind in his audiences. The language of flowers is especially important in an analysis of the character of Ophelia. She is perhaps one of the Bard’s most tragic characters. Critics call her “cardboard-like”, “a simple foil”, “weak-minded”, “acquiescing”, “a mirror for Hamlet’s feigned madness”, and “passive.” However, a close investigation of the rich floral emblems utilized in the dialogue of her madness and in the Queen’s symbolic description of her death, a critic is given a view of simply not a one dimensional character, but a woman silenced by her society, her social status, and the brutal treatment of the person she truly loved. Through her gestures and speech rooted in the language of flowers, Shakespeare allows Ophelia to

powerfully name emotions that she was unable to speak. Although an Elizabethan audience comprehended this subtle message, the character is lost today due to a lack of knowledge of this symbolic communication system.

Act Four, Scene Five of Hamlet, known by most critics as “Ophelia’s Mad Scene,” is rich with floral emblems. Shakespeare cleverly uses Ophelia’s madness and symbolic dialogue to express Ophelia’s emotions towards the difficult situation circumstance has placed her in. Although she speaks directly to her brother, the audience realizes that this bouquet, created in madness, is her gift of unspoken words for those who surround her in this dramatic tale of woe. Such an assumption becomes clear when one is aware of the symbolism that each flower traditional held for Shakespeare’s audience. Ophelia speaks to Laertes:

There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember. And  
there is pansies, that’s for thoughts. . . . There’s fennel for you, and  
columbines. There’s rue for you, and here’s some for me; we may call it  
herb of grace o’ Sundays. You may wear your rue with a difference.  
There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they wither’d all when  
my father died.(Act IV, scene v: lines 177-179, 182-186)

Rosemary begins Ophelia’s list. David Bevington reveals the dual purpose of this herb. It is used as “a symbol of affectionate remembrance both at weddings and at funerals” (Bevington 1109). With this flower’s mention, Ophelia reveals her dreams of marriage, but now, with the murder of her father, understands the unrestorable nature of this once thriving relationship. She wants the audience to understand that this is a cause

of her current state of mental health and to comprehend the marriages and deaths that encompassed within her life. Quickly, she adds pansies to her list and states that this bloom is for thoughts. In addition to the mentioned meaning, folklorist Gertrude Jobes states the mention of this flower would bring to mind thoughts of “kindness, meditation, trinity, unity. In the language of flowers: You occupy my thoughts; think of me” (1234). The pansies represent Ophelia’s need for kindness and sympathy: to be the bearer of kindness and the receiver of a reciprocal attitude. This need manifests itself in the relationships she has with those around her. It is a remarkable fact that a woman of Ophelia’s class would have received the attention of Hamlet and the loyalty of the Denmark’s royalty. Surely, her kind, obedient, and generous attitude granted her permission to request kind thoughts in return.

After a few disbelieving remarks from Laertes, Ophelia adds to the bouquet with the mention of fennel and columbines. Jobes remarks the fennel is emblematic of strength and flattery (560) and columbines represent folly and inconstancy (360). Surely, the King was the receiver of these flower messages. Ophelia knows nothing of the murderous coup that went on, but through Claudius’s reaction to the play and Hamlet’s “madness”, realizes that not all is what it once seemed. Next in Ophelia’s bouquet is the rue. Jobes states this herb is connotative of mercy, pity, and purification. Gertrude and Ophelia are the intended recipients of this flower. Both are in great need of forgiveness and mercy. It is also interesting to note that traditionally, rue had a religious connotation. Nineteenth century critic Dominique Warburton states:

“The reason why ‘rue’ was called the herb of grace is because that herb was a principal ingredient in the potion which the Romish priests used to force the possessed to swallow when they exorcised them. These exorcisms being performed generally on a Sunday, in church before the whole congregation, is the reason why she says we call it ‘herb of grace o’Sundays’” (Qtd. in Furness 347).

However, the queen must wear the rue “differently” than Ophelia. The audience knows that Gertrude must be reminded of the necessary contrition required for her incestuous marriage; whereas, Ophelia has done no wrong, but is simply begging for mercy from Hamlet’s overwhelming brutality and an atonement for the death of her father.

The final flowers filling Ophelia’s thought bouquet are a daisy and a violet. Jobes believes the daisy symbolizes innocence and virginity (407) and the violet represents faithfulness (1651). These meanings direct themselves toward the late Polonius and toward Ophelia herself, united not in blamelessness, but by the fact that both individuals acted out of good-meaning intentions. Both the daisy and the withered violets are reminders to the audience of the pair’s brightness, but like the violets, the once-radiant light now is missing from the evil darkness surrounding the scene.

Shakespeare employs similar floral symbolism in Gertrude’s narration of Ophelia’s death. She describes the maiden’s death scene:

There is a willow grows aslant a brook, /That shows his hoar leaves in the  
glassy stream; /There with fantastic garlands did she come/Of crow-  
flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples, /That liberal shepherds give a

grosser name, /But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them;  
 /There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds/ Clambering to hang, an  
 envious silver broke; When down her weedy trophies and herself/ Fell in  
 the weeping brook./ (Act IV, Scene vii: Lines 169-176)

In this scene, the location of the action is highly symbolic. Jobes writes the willow is emblematic of forsaken love. She also notes that the tree was anciently a symbol of joy, but later began to symbolize mourning (1681), thus reflecting the relationship that Ophelia had with Hamlet. Furthering the complexity of this symbol, a water or weeping willow, according to Jobes, appears in a dream, it foreshadows a coming sorrow (1682). An Elizabethan audience knew to anticipate a sorrowful outcome for this dreamlike scene.

The mad maiden's "coronet weeds" make a complex statement on her behalf. Reflecting the dichotomy of Ophelia's situation, Jobes remarks that traditionally, people made garlands for times of celebrations, such as a wedding feast (630). In contrast, however, the folklorist reveals, "A garland was placed on the head of a victim offered as a sacrifice" (631). In this dream-like scene, Ophelia's actions become prophetic and reveal she knows her fate. The maiden weaves her garlands as if preparing for her longed-for wedding, but this action reveals the sacrificial nature of her death. The flowers contained in the garland are also emblematic of her situation. Howard Farren, author of Mania and Madness, remarks, "This line is an exquisite specimen of emblematic or picture-writing" (Qtd. in Farren 371). According to Farren, the crow-flower, traditionally

known as *The Fayre Mayde*, begins a fascinating picture-sentence. The critic further explains his explanation:

The long purples are the cold hand of death; the daisy imports pure virginity or spring of life, as being itself the virgin bloom of the year. The order runs thus, with the meaning of each flower beneath:

<b>Crow-Flowers</b>	<b>Nettles</b>	<b>Daisies</b>	<b>Long-Purples</b>
Fayre Mayde	stung to the quick	virgin bloom	cold hand of death
Literally, the garland speaks, 'A fair maid stung to her quick, her virgin bloom under the cold hand of death. (Qtd. in Farren 371)			

With this one symbolic gesture, Ophelia wears her sad circumstance as a crown. She knows she is innocent of wrong-doing, but still is deeply grieved by the events that befall her and her family. Without a knowledge of the language which the silent flower metaphorically speak, her voice falls on deaf ears. This significant message gives an already profound plot even more depth.

Shakespeare's message regarding Ophelia is, to those who will listen, a powerful one. It is only in madness that she subconsciously gives a voice to the emotions of her mind and her heart through the ancient language of flowers.

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