

“A creature native and indued”: What Gertrude’s moving eulogy reveals of Ophelia and

her own self

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Nowhere in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* do the elements of beauty, mystery, innocence, fate, and nature evoke a more deeply provocative sadness and sympathy than in Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s watery death (Act 4 Scene 7, lines 166-183).

Gertrude’s poetic image of Ophelia’s fateful voyage even inspired the Victorian artist John Everett Millais to paint a portraiture that has become a timeless work of art representative of purity, sorrow, and beauty. The image Gertrude’s short soliloquy forms is one of the most moving passages in the play; it is a pause in which the build-up of tragic emotion can be released.

Gertrude’s 18-line verse begins with a description of an old tree, followed by a listing of Ophelia’s flowers of mourning, and details a slow melting of Ophelia’s body into the natural element. The first two lines, ‘There is a willow grows askant a brook / That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream,’ emphasize the age and overflow of the natural scene (Act 4 Scene 7, lines 166-167). The willow tree, often called “the weeping willow” with its long drooping branches and leaves that sway over the stream, frames the mournful image of Ophelia’s slow drowning. Gertrude paints the ‘hoar’ willow an aging color and personifies the tree by referring to its leaves as ‘his.’ As the willow looms over the waters, it also beckons from below in ‘the glassy stream.’ The willow’s boughs

extend themselves in the brook's reflection, thus doubling the seeming size and influence of the willow.

While the tree carries its own mysterious authority over its environment, Ophelia attempts to bring understanding to her painful world of sorrow with the garlands she fashions out of the flowers and grasses that grow nearby. Ophelia, native to a culture in which spirits are sometimes anthropomorphized in the trees, rocks, and waters, displays her close affection for these spirits in nature by seeking to remedy her sorrow by ritualized enchantments of hanging garlands called 'dead men's fingers' and enriching herself with the natural environment (line 171).

In the midst of this ritual, Ophelia, along with her 'weedy trophies,' falls into the 'weeping brook' (lines 174-175). The brook's 'weeping' water, like the willow's bent and aging form, personifies nature's connection to the tragedies that befall Ophelia. The stream mourns with Ophelia and gives a physical aural presence to the sorrow felt by the natural spirits, Ophelia, and the audience alike. Ophelia's slow descent to her 'muddy death' as she floats helplessly along the water is a captivating and tragic image that ends Gertrude's verse (line 183). Both cruel and kind, nature takes Ophelia back into its primordial essence in apotheosis. The water releases Ophelia from her madness as it slowly pulls her into the ground, returning her to the earth. Ophelia's fate is intertwined with the sad haunting transference into the natural element. Gertrude's verse displays the predominance of the natural world and suggests the mysterious wisdom of the anthropomorphic spirits that both carry Ophelia to her watery death and bring about the cathartic release of the audience.

Not only does Gertrude's verse serve to display Ophelia's basic connection to the elements of the earth, but also emphasizes Ophelia's dependence on her father. The willow, personified as male by the usage of 'his,' with his aged 'hoar' leaves, conjures up a striking resemblance of Ophelia's dead father (line 167). This depiction is understood by the 'dead men's fingers,' the name given to the wreaths of flowers Ophelia hangs from the willow's boughs (line 171). As her father was her protector in life, the grief surrounding his death causes the stricken Ophelia to follow his direction to the grave as she is led by the 'dead men's fingers.' The dependence of Ophelia upon Polonius has been developed in previous sections of the play; her madness and sequential drowning are the obvious result of his death. Shakespeare has Gertrude insert this natural father/daughter connection as the precursor to describing Ophelia's drowning.

Gertrude's eulogy to Ophelia clarifies Gertrude's opinion that Ophelia is innocent. Her description of Ophelia's naïve nature makes her death seem most tragic when compared to the other characters' more intellectually propelled demises. Gertrude sees Ophelia as a virtuous creature tied to the spirits of nature, 'a creature native and Indued,' and as a child dependent on her parent, qualities which nullify Ophelia's role in the circumstances that lead to her disquieted state (line 179). Although her death is later deemed a suicide by the church, Gertrude proposes that Ophelia had not the mind to make such a decision, rather that her life was taken from her through the course of events out of her control. It is possible that Ophelia's strands of 'dead men's fingers' refer to her own wish to die; however, it is more likely that they are an homage to those men whose spirits have already died before her – to the spirit of Polonius, who was murdered by her lover Hamlet. She does not freely jump to her death. As Ophelia hangs her garlands, a bough

breaks from the tree and she falls into the brook: “Clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke” (line 173). The emotions of this scene are attributed to her surroundings of brook and willow, not to her own consciousness. The brook ‘weep[s]’ and the branch is ‘envious’ when it breaks and causes her to fall (lines 175 and 173). These emotions call attention to the fact that Ophelia, in her final moments, does not pause to weep for her loss, nor does she fall victim to fits of rage, jealousy, or revenge. ‘As one incapable of her own distress,’ Ophelia is incompetent in finding a way out of the river (line 178). Ophelia is borne along the tide of fateful human events; she does not hearken their course, nor is she cognizant of her ability to affect them.

In elaborating on the purity of Ophelia’s heart, Gertrude describes her feelings regarding her own coveted innocence. The lines, ‘As one incapable of her own distress / Or like a creature native and Indued’ can also describe Gertrude’s perception that she herself is unable to prevent the flow of her deeds – marrying the brother of her deceased king and her questionable allegiance to Hamlet. There is a self-reflective parallelism between what Gertrude says about Ophelia and what is taking place in her own life. According to Hamlet’s chastisements earlier in the play, Gertrude is guilty of unbridled lust. Gertrude alludes to this guilt when she speaks of the garments that, ‘heavy with their drink,’ pull Ophelia ‘from her melodious lay / To muddy death’ (lines 181-183). The ‘muddy death’ of which Gertrude speaks is not solely Ophelia’s fate, but also the foretelling of the corruption that will soon catch up with Gertrude.

Gertrude’s verse reveals a connection with nature inherent in both women that brings to light the naiveté’ of their actions in the play. Even Gertrude’s own guilt is exonerated by the mirror that her words cast upon her own character. Ophelia’s drowning

allows the audience to feel both trauma at the injustice of her tragic fate as well as relief that her pain has ended. No other death in *Hamlet* can compare in quality of beautiful waste.¹ Indeed the final mass slaughter does not stir so severe a sense of loss as Ophelia's drowning.

¹ Paradox—waste is not normally viewed as beautiful; however, in this case the waste engenders such profound stirrings of sadness, it is appropriately called beautiful.