

“So young and so untender?”: Ophelia and the power of obedience

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Summary

This reading of the woman's part in Shakespearean tragedy explores the extent to which the role of the passive heroine sexualises a critical conflict in the fabric of Jacobean society. *Models of submissive femininity in Elizabethan and Jacobean courtesy manuals* provide an exaggerated version of Bakhtin's description of the dialogic process, in which the meaning of a conversation is understood in the context of the hearer's conceptual environment. This process is echoed in feminist critical approaches to Shakespearean tragedy, which reject the silence and passivity of the heroine as symptomatic of a destructive male vision of feminine virtue.

Opsomming

Hierdie ontleding van die vroulike rol in Shakespeare-tragedies verken die mate waartoe die rol van die passiewe heldin 'n kritieke konflik in die wese van die Jacobeaanse gemeenskap seksualiseer. Modelle van ondergeskikte vroulikheid in Elizabethaanse en Jacobeaanse hoflikheidsvoorskrifte bied 'n oordrewe weergawe van Bakhtin se beskrywing van die dialogiese proses, waarin die betekenis van 'n gesprek binne die konteks van die hoorder se konseptuele omgewing gesien word. Hierdie proses word gesien in feministiese kritiese benaderings tot Shakespeareaanse tragedie, waarin die stilte en passiwiteit van die heldin verwerp word as simptome van 'n vernietigende manlike siening van vrouedeug.

I think nothing, my Lord.

(*Hamlet*, 3.2.116)

Her speech is nothing . . .

(*Hamlet*, 4.5.7)

This nothing's more than matter.

(*Hamlet*, 4.5.172)

Writing in the sophisticated court of Henry VIII, in a treatise dedicated to Catherine of Aragon, Juan-Luis Vives describes vividly, in terms which could well be projected forward to the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, too, the predicament of a young woman in a hostile world:

If thou talk little in company folks think thou canst but little good; if thou speak much, they reckon thee light. If thou speak uncunningly, they count thee dull witted; if thou speak cunningly thou shalt be counted but a shrew. If thou answer not quickly thou shalt be called proud or ill brought up; if thou answer readily they shall say thou wilt be soon overcome. If thou sit with demure countenance thou art called a dissembler. . . (1912: 94-5)

Many of the contradictions contained within the debate about women in the 16th and 17th centuries are evident here. Vives was an enlightened man, the

champion of woman's right to be educated, and yet he depicts a young woman completely deprived of the power of words, for, faced with such a hostile reaction, the girl's discourse must be completely paralysed: her safest course would be to remain silent, and even her silence could be interpreted as dissembling. There is an obvious disjunction, in Vives' account, between woman's subjective intention in her speech and its public reception, something that acts as a severe brake on her freedom of speech and action. Moreover, Vives' description of the girl's predicament demonstrates very clearly the extent to which woman's behaviour could be dominated by male preconceptions, her deportment predicated less by her own desires than by the prejudices she might encounter.

The result of Vives' account of male hostility to women would seem to be that the power of woman's speech is vested less in what she actually says than in the preconceptions of her listener. To a certain extent, this distortion of intention is inherent in any act of communication. Bakhtin, for example, argues that, in a dialogue:

The linguistic significance of a given utterance is understood against the background of language, while its actual meaning is understood against the background of other concrete utterances on the same theme, a background made up of contradictory opinions, points of view and value judgements ... this contradictory environment of alien words is present to the speaker ... in the consciousness of the listener, as his apperceptive background, pregnant with responses and objections. (1981: 281)

In a conversation between two people, their preconceptions of one another's identity intervene to modify the interpretation, and hence the ultimate meaning, of each other's words. In this process, Bakhtin argues, there is an interpenetration of different conceptual systems:

The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver; he enters into dialogical relationships with certain aspects of this system. (1981: 281-2)

The "subjective belief system of the listener" Bakhtin points out, can accommodate the proffered meanings more or less easily. In the case of the Elizabethan woman, the requirement that a woman be obedient to her father or husband could, if fully observed, lead to the annihilation of her individual personality. Robert Greene, in 1587, provides merely one of many descriptions of this necessity:

And as the Mathematicall lines which Geometricians doe figure in their correcters, have no motion of themselves, but in the bodyes wherein they are placed, so ought a wife to have no proper nor peculiar passion or affection, unlesse framed after the speciall disposition of her husband. (1881: vol 5, 272)

As in Vives' example, it is clear that this leaves the woman no linguistic space in which to operate and no individual power of utterance.

The distortions described here, in which the woman's words are completely effaced by the value system of her listener, has all too often been evident in critics' approaches to Shakespeare's woman characters, particularly his tragic heroines, and even more particularly Ophelia, the most passive and self-annihilating of these heroines. From Bradley's description of the "childlike" and the "sweet and lovable" Ophelia (1963: 130, 132), to Jaques Lacan, who barely mentions Ophelia in his article about her (1982: 11-52), male critics have fairly consistently echoed male characters in the tragedies in failing to see or hear the self-denying heroines of the tragedies. Feminist critics have, on the other hand, found the self-effacement of these heroines a problematic barrier. Unable to accept the obvious vulnerability of the tragic heroines and the desirability of their passive values, feminist critics have tended to find their role models in the assertive comic heroines (Dusinberre, 1975; Jardine, 1983), seeing the tragedies as the image of a masculine world, in which masculine values are privileged (Kahn, 1981). Because Shakespearean tragedy appears to rate highly the passivity of these women characters, the feminist response has tended to reject the tragedies as a demonstration of destructive masculine values.

Although this view is broadly accurate, the approach of these critics has tended to be too reductive in its assumption of an unproblematic mimetic relationship between Shakespearean drama, the debate about the nature of woman and social reality. As Kathleen McLuskie argues:

A more complex discussion of the case would acknowledge that the issues of sex, sexuality, sexual relations and sexual division were areas of conflict of which the contradictions of writing about women were only one manifestation alongside the complexity of legislation and other forms of control of sex and the family. (Dollimore, 1985: 91)

It is my contention that even McLuskie's perception does not go far enough in recognising the extent to which the silence and obedience of Shakespeare's tragic heroines reflects not only an awareness of the problematic conflicts in Jacobean society over "social control of sex and the family" but of a much broader crisis, social, political and epistemological. The period was one in which different conceptual systems clashed in a dialogue which shook social institutions to their foundations.

The period in which Shakespeare lived and wrote was one which saw major shifts in the patterns of authority and individual freedom, shifts which inevitably affected bodies of accepted custom, not least among them ideas on the role of women in society, and conceptions of woman's essential nature. Women were particularly affected by changes in the structure of the family, described by Lawrence Stone as the breakdown of the old extended family and the substitution of a system of authority extending downwards from the sovereign and the state (1977, chapters 4,5). This generated a double and contradictory movement. On the one hand, the more personal relationship of individual and authority led to a heightened awareness of personal identity; the rise of Protestant theology led to an emphasis on personal salvation

(Haller, 1941; Sinfield, 1983: 49-80; Davies, 1981); while increased social mobility made people aware of their potential to transcend the limits traditionally assigned to them. But the fear and instability aroused by these changes also led to a reinforcement of patterns of authority and an often heated defence of "the God-given principles of hierarchy, deference and obedience" (Stone, 1977: 653). Women, confined within the family and vulnerable to these conflicting forces, were simultaneously faced with expanded ideas of personal and spiritual salvation and with a reinforced need for submission to patriarchal authority in their marriages. This, as Catherine Belsey points out, gives a particular cogency to the question, "Who is speaking?" when a Shakespearean woman character speaks on stage (1985b: 177-8, 180).

However, the proliferation of writing about woman and the nature of woman from the middle of the 16th century into the first decades of the 17th century would seem to suggest that the subject held a fascination for Elizabethans and Jacobean that extended beyond the doctrinal to echo some fundamental facet of Renaissance existential views.

The value system that informs Vives' strictures on the young woman's freedom of speech is one that assumes that the virtuous woman is self-effacing, obedient, silent and chaste. The pattern of feminine virtue therefore relies on the exercise of strength through weakness, a paradoxical defeat of active forces of evil through patient submissiveness and silence. It is, in part, this paradoxical power that invests theoretically weak feminine speech with the vigour of moral rectitude. In her submission to her father or husband, the woman was echoing the pattern of social order, which rests as much on the passive acceptance of the governed as on the exercise of authority by the ruler. A woman who accepted the conventional values of feminine silence and modesty had to suppress her individual responses for the sake of a greater good. Conversely, any attempt to assert her individuality could be interpreted as the subversion of a pre-ordained order.

There are, of course, a number of problems inherent in this paradoxical definition of feminine virtue. Male authority can too easily be seen as unjust tyranny, so that the intended effect of cautionary tales like that of Patient Griselda, which is to reinforce ideas of the necessary subjection of the weaker woman, is subverted by the moral implications of the actions that are depicted (Belsey, 1985a: 167-71). This distortion between intent and effect is further complicated by the obvious unreality of the idealised tales of patient women. To claim that patient passivity could overcome violent oppression was an evident fiction, however desirable it might have been in the eyes of its proponents, as is apparent in the disclaimers that so often are appended to even the earlier versions of the *Griselda* tale. The line between just authority and tyranny becomes blurred, and the woman's silence, although morally superior, can be seen as unjustly imposed, throwing into question the desirability of feminine passivity and of absolute obedience.

It is clear that the role of the silent and submissive heroine could have strong political resonances. The system represented by the heroine is one of faith, unquestioning allegiance and self-denying obedience to a hierarchical conception of a higher good. In the tragedies, this all too often comes into

conflict with a more worldly and self-interested conception of the social bond, reflecting a profound crisis in the conception of human identity in Jacobean England. Marienstras describes these two clashing systems as “the social bond and the bond of communion. The first is founded upon utility, profit, the law, conventions, a quasi-commercial exchange of services: it is essentially opportunistic. The second, to use terms familiar at the period, depends upon nature or the supernatural, in other words upon values that are shared, the recognition of another being, love” (1985: 129).

In “Society and the Uses of Authority in Shakespeare”, Robert Weiman, charting the drama’s responses to this crisis as it expressed itself in religious and political ideologies, notes, perceptively, that:

For the Elizabethan drama, susceptible as it was to the most “confounding” of changes – there simply was not available, in the contemporary framework of formulated thought, any room for dramatically usable concepts and symbols of social change, let alone revolution. (1983: 186)

This means that any critique of the dominant order must be expressed obliquely, or, as Weiman argues, must appear to be a confirmation of this order. However, Shakespeare’s tragedies do show an overwhelming awareness of the onslaught on the old values of fealty and service, and his silent, submissive heroines stand at the heart of the conflict. Rigidly bound by hierarchised conventions, the obedient woman embodies values which are necessary for the maintenance of an authoritarian system: yet, in her passivity, she demonstrates the vulnerability of these values to a more sceptical definition of social relationships. Ophelia, for example, is right, according to conventional valuations, in her unquestioning obedience, yet it is this very obedience which exposes her to the corrupting force of her father’s values.

Symbolically enough, *Titus Andronicus*, as the earliest of the tragedies (1589-90), opens with the relinquishing of secular power by Titus, who represents a weakened version of “virtue . . . justice, continence and nobility (*TA*, 1.1.14-15), in favour of the evil Saturninus. As a result, the “forest walks” of a potential Arden are now “Fitted by kind for rape and villany” (2.1.114, 116). Roles of womanhood, in this setting, are polarised between the fiendish and lascivious Tamora and the virtuous Lavinia, brutally silenced to prevent her speaking of male violence.

This polarisation, and the image of impotent feminine virtue silenced by corrupt forces, is one which is to haunt Shakespeare’s mature tragedies. Helpless in worlds in which words have been appropriated by a powerful and distorting scepticism, the silent virtue of the heroine is set against a stereotype of voluble but degraded womanhood by men who use language ruthlessly. The problem in *Titus Andronicus* is to wrest a meaning from Lavinia’s enforced silence:

Speechless complainer, I will learn thy thought;
In thy dumb action will I be as perfect
As begging hermits in their holy prayers:
Thou shalt not sigh, nor hold thy stumps to heaven,

Nor wink, nor nod, nor kneel, nor make a sign,
 But I of these will wrest an alphabet,
 And by still practice learn to know thy meaning.
 (TA, 3.2.39-45)

In exaggerated form, this is the problem posed to critic and audience (and to the other characters in the plays), by the obedient and silent heroine in the tragedies. It is a problem central to Shakespeare's tragic form. Lawrence Danson claims:

To "wrest an alphabet" from the human form and to find a language that will speak adequately of the complexities of human existence are central tasks, for Shakespeare, his characters, and his audience. (1974: 3)

The difficulty in "wresting an alphabet" from Ophelia's passivity and near-silence resides in the intense ambiguity generated out of the failure of her self-effacing values to survive the onslaught of a more active, cynical materialism. As a result, the commendable and the deplorable in her role become remarkably difficult to disentangle. Without the intervention of an Iago, she succeeds in turning her own virtue into pitch, through the exercise of those very values which constitute her virtue.

Ophelia provides an extreme example of the annihilation of individuated personality when the fideist system is confronted by the sceptical. From the transience implicit in "no more but so?", through her passivity with Polonius: "I do not know what to think", she moves to a point where her individual will has been annihilated, leaving only an unintentional residual sexual innuendo: "I think nothing, my lord" (3.2.116). It is questionable whether this total obedience can denote her truly, and it remains for her mad scenes to invest the "nothingness" of her speech with a paradoxical power.

Although Ophelia presents herself as the epitome of obedient and innocent maidenhood, this very obedience needs to be understood in the context of the distorted value of convention in the hypocritical court which Claudius rules over. In the extended discussion of duty and obedience in the opening scenes, Hamlet's promise to obey is carefully limited by his mistrust of the conventions he is being asked to observe:

I shall *in all my best* obey you, madam.
 (1.2.120. My emphasis.)

This needs to be set against Ophelia's unquestioning obedience to her father: "I shall obey, my lord". Unlike Desdemona or Juliet, Ophelia sacrifices her love to her father's command and aligns herself with the forces of convention that Hamlet holds in such contempt. Although there is no direct suggestion that unquestioning loyalty is wrong in itself, it is clear that it is all too readily turned to corruption.

Ophelia's first entrance links her firmly with her family and with their values. Polonius' advice to Laertes reinforces our awareness of the family context as one of sententious correctness underpinned by an awareness of

moral corruption. The precepts of cautious mistrust and of a careful presentation of the facade of appearance are correct in the courtly context, and, as Harold Jenkins stresses in his notes to the Arden edition, are a conventional version of traditional paternal advice (1953: 440-443. See also Falk, 1967: 21-36). It is interesting to note, in this context, Stone's comment that the open lineage family was governed by advice based upon cautious mistrust of the self-interest of others:

The basic assumption is that no one is to be trusted, since anyone and everyone – wife, servants, children, friends, neighbours, or patrons – are only kept loyal by self-interest, and may, therefore, at any moment turn out to be enemies. The only safe way to manoeuvre through the world is by the exercise of extreme self-control, outward reserve, secrecy, and even duplicity. (1977: 95-6)

But, however correct the courtesy book advice given to Laertes, its fundamental precept, of carefully guarded speech and a barrier of caution between the original impulse and its expression (a precept applied to Ophelia with disastrous results), needs to be set against Hamlet's insistence on truth to oneself. Polonius' version of this truth:

to thine own self be true,
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man
(1.3.78-80)

is too clearly dominated by "forms", "actions a man might play" to allow any real concordance between inner reality and outer show. Speech in Polonius' family is more concerned with form than content, so that even the precepts of self-knowledge are subverted.

This speech, Norman Rabkin claims, reveals a tendency that is typical of the play:

Because the play presents a universe in which we must decide at every moment which way to choose, yet which tells us simultaneously that no choice is possible, we are frequently surprised to find that what seem like thoroughly plausible and convincing statements of truth and value are undercut by the play taken as a whole. I shall point out only a few instances. The most obvious is Polonius' fairsquare advice to Laertes, advocating a policy of moderation which in Hamlet's case is precisely the wrong policy and which in its comfortable assumption that one need only be true to oneself begs the play's fundamental question: What is that self? (1967: 7)

In the same way, Ophelia's unquestioning obedience to her father, although it conforms to the theories of desirable deportment for an unmarried woman, denies any sense of a romantic commitment to Hamlet, so that her truth to her own standards of virtue turns out to be destructively wrong in her relationship with Hamlet. In Ophelia's character, Rabkin's question, "What is that self?" is posed in a particularly acute form. Her careful obedience and

her annihilation of her own will leave her subjective being a blank: "I think nothing, my lord" (3.2.116).

The extent to which this socially correct but morally suspect view of life can corrupt fundamental truth is demonstrated in Polonius' progressive debase-ment of the words used by Ophelia. With her father, Ophelia is direct and unquestioningly obedient, the image of compliant and submissive daughter-hood, but this very correctness has been undermined by the ambiguous light cast on conventional forms in Polonius' sphere of control. In the conversation between father and daughter, both the meaning of words and the form of gesture and deportment through which these words can be interpreted are subject to powerful distortion.

As in *Othello*, certain words are capable of shifting interpretation, depend- ing on the moral context applied by the auditor. Thus, the "private time" Hamlet gives to Ophelia (1.3.92) and her "free and bounteous" response (1.3.93), which so clearly reflect the intense discourse of their mutual love, become corrupted by Polonius' acceptance of gossip-mongers' insinuations, so that the freedom and privacy of the lovers takes on a sinister tone of sexual laxness. Clearly setting Ophelia's duty to family against her love for Hamlet, Polonius succeeds in asserting values of sophisticated worldliness against Ophelia's trustingness, transforming it into unworldly foolishness. In a courtly world, Polonius' meanings prevail, and Ophelia's deportment is only fitting for a "green girl" or a "baby".

The meaning of Ophelia's simple words is transparently clear:

He hath, my lord, of late made many tenders
Of his affection to me,
(1.3.99-100)

but Polonius demonstrates the importance of context by taking up the word "tender", with its connotations of gentleness, and successively transforming its meanings. Experience, as he defines it, requires him to reinterpret the word in a commercial sense, casting doubt on Ophelia's understanding of their relationship:

Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?
(1.3.103)

and

Think yourself a baby
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay
Which are not sterling.
(1.3.105-7)

Tellingly, Ophelia's role seems to demonstrate a subversive sense of the moral and political failure of a conservative belief in the values of obedience and patient submission. While re-affirming the superiority of these values on a theoretical level, her role simultaneously demonstrates that unquestioning

submission to authority allows faith and love to be appropriated by a corrupt and corrupting materialism.

A comparison with Cordelia's refusal to use the courtly language of flattery demonstrates even more clearly the equivocal light which Shakespeare casts on Ophelia's obedient submission. The rhetorical flourishes of Goneril and Regan in the opening scenes of *King Lear*, speciously claiming the inadequacy of language to express their love, undermine the link between language and inner impulse, rendering it unfit to express the sincerity of true emotion. For Cordelia, as Ann Barton points out, the claim that language cannot adequately express her feelings is true:

The irony lies in the fact that both these broken statements only echo what her sisters have so fulsomely been saying: "I love you more than word can wield the matter". In Cordelia's case, the declaration of the inadequacy of language happens to express a true state of feeling. (Barton, 1971: 24)

Thus, for her, as for Hamlet, language has been contaminated.

However, Cordelia's refusal of glibness, although it uses the word "nothing" so closely associated with Ophelia's language, is totally different in kind. Where Ophelia is meekly submissive, Cordelia's silence, although proper to a young woman, as the King of France recognises, is a defiance of her father. This does not only mean, as Lisa Jardine claims, that an Elizabethan audience would have recognised the reversal of values inherent in Lear's angry reaction to her silence (1983: 108-9). The wrong-headedness of Lear's rage is obvious, but Cordelia's silence is both manifestly right in its refusal of corruption and unseemly in its defiance of authority.

Although silence in a woman is traditionally a sign of meekness, of submissive virtue, Cordelia's refusal of the contract of the polite language of court flattery is both stubborn and not a little harsh in its uncompromising refusal to encounter human fallibility. Although I would not go so far as to accept George Steiner's use of the epithet "murderous" in connection with Cordelia – "Like murderous Cordelia, children know that silence can destroy another human being" (1975: 35) – his point, that dissembling is a vital facet of language, fundamental to civilised relationships, has to be borne in mind: "There is something less than human", he claims, "in Cordelia's loving reticence." (1975: 223, 222-226).

However, this stubbornness is a necessary aspect of her honesty. It is her refusal to accept dissembling that gives Cordelia's speech its vigorous purity. Unlike Ophelia, Cordelia challenges the distortions offered her by her father's authority and resists the translation of filial love into commercial power (Goldberg, 1985: 133). It would perhaps not be going too far to see, lurking behind Lear's "So young, and so untender?" (1.1.105) Polonius' commercialising of the word "tender". Cordelia rejects both the social transaction of flattering speech and the commercial values which underlie the demand. Dollimore describes her as standing out against the translation of family ties into land transactions:

Prior to Lear's disowning of Cordelia, the realities of property marriage are more

or less transmuted by the language of love and generosity, the ceremony of good government. But in the act of renouncing her, Lear brutally foregrounds the imperatives of power and property relations . . . Even kinship then – indeed *especially* kinship – is in-formed by the ideology of property relations, the contentious issue of primogeniture being, in this play, only its most obvious manifestation. (1984: 199, his emphasis)

Unlike Ophelia, whose perfectly correct submission allows her father to destroy her relationship with Hamlet and subvert the marriage Gertrude hoped for, Cordelia provides a dispassionate account of the need for paternal authority to be passed on to a husband. There are clear limitations on the father's authority:

You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
Return those duties back *as are right fit*,
Obey you, love you, most honour you.
(1.1.95-7, my emphasis)

Her clear, if somewhat reductive, account of the contract of familial power actively resists the distortion of meaning inherent in her sisters' rhetoric. It is also, strikingly, although associated with Cordelia's refusal of materialism, clearly based upon utility and a certain degree of self-interest, limiting the extent of the obedience of the subject.

In comparison, Ophelia's absolute obedience, while perfectly correct as an acknowledgement of filial duty, and the proper reaction from a young girl (Vives, 1912: 108), nevertheless aligns her with the corruption and debasement of the language of love and faith that her father has practised. There is, as John Bayley remarks, "no guile in Ophelia just as there is no goodness either, the goodness inherent in Cordelia and Desdemona" (1981: 173). Effectively, because of Ophelia's guilelessness, Polonius' assertion of his parental authority has replaced the discourse of faith and love with the discourse of court cynicism and materialism, introducing calculation and dissembling into her relationship with Hamlet.

As a result, Ophelia's words and gestures become imbued with an increasingly powerful moral ambiguity. Lisa Jardine, in discussing the nunnery scene, stresses the way in which Ophelia becomes either "honest" or a bawd, depending upon how Hamlet defines her (1983: 73). This perception, however, while correctly focusing on the extent to which Ophelia is interpreted not according to what she says, but according to her listener's preconceptions nevertheless fails to identify the way in which Ophelia's own passivity has, through identification with her context, made her both honest and a bawd.

Given a book to read, she is, according to Bridget Gellert Lyons, "representing an attitude of prayer and devotion", reflecting the image of the Virgin reading at the time of the Annunciation (1977: 61). The arrival of the Players has stressed the extent to which the expression of emotion can be feigned, and in preparing Ophelia for her encounter, the Queen explicitly refers to the contrived nature of this show, although she insists on the moral impact that such artificial images of virtue can have. But the Queen's meaning does not

prevail, and Ophelia's "good beauties" (3.1.39) however virtuous and sincere she may be, are consumed in the King's image of corruption and decay:

The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
(3.1.51-3),

However "honest" Ophelia might be, she cannot escape her context, so that the only words that can be exchanged between Hamlet and Ophelia are "painted words", debasing the language of love and faith. Everything Hamlet says to her in this scene could be addressed either to the virtuous Ophelia, or to the role she is being forced to play, that of "devotion's visage" hiding Denmark's corruption.

In the mousetrap scene, this sense of invasive and corrupt sexual meanings being forced upon Ophelia by her context is intensified even further. Hamlet repeatedly presses lewd meanings upon Ophelia, which she repulses. However, the language of her replies is itself vulnerable to Hamlet's re-interpretations, so that the blindest of her lines in the play: "I think nothing, my lord" (3.2.116), becomes the bawdy "O" of sexual innuendo. Ophelia's lack of intellectual and verbal force is transformed into the passivity of conventional feminine sexuality. This linguistic and sexual "absence" provides an interesting illustration of Luce Irigaray's theory of patriarchal control over woman's language. In male eyes, Irigaray argues, woman's sexuality has "nothing to show", while male domination of language denies woman the possibility of representing herself, leaving her with nothing to say except in the babble of madness (Marks, 1985: 101; Moi, 1985: 135).

However, this is not only, as Elaine Showalter argues, "the story of O – the zero, the empty circle or mystery of feminine difference, the cipher of female sexuality to be deciphered by feminist interpretation" (1985: 79). Ophelia's verbal absence also reflects the eclipse of a system of unquestioning fealty, the displacement of an idealised conception of loyalty by a more realistic, but less ideal, scepticism.

As long as she is sane, Ophelia's obedience can be exploited to give a veneer of virtue to Denmark's corruption. When she is mad, however, her very incoherence provides a threat to the state, drawing attention to the failure of order.

Whereas before, Ophelia was retiring and submissive, she is now "importunate" (4.5.1); where she was sparing with words, she now "speaks much" (4.5.4). Her patience has become irritation and passionate gesture. Her rebuttal of sexual innuendo is now replaced by the use of bawdy snatches of song. Thus far, Ophelia's madness represents a simple reversal of her previous character.

This reversal is reflected also in the new impact of her language. Whereas before, her correct language received little reaction, her mad speech conveys in its ambiguities, gaps that have to be exploited by the hearer:

Her speech is nothing,
 Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
 The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
 And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
 Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
 Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
 Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.
 (4.5.7-13)

Although the Gentleman describes her speech as “nothing” and repeats this negation in “nothing sure”, he does describe an extraordinarily dense communicative effort. Ophelia’s speech is accompanied by a number of gestures and is later backed both by music and by a visual reinforcement of the relationship between word and referent, as she offers plants to her listeners.

The implication is that unshaped, indirect discourse, because it operates through words and symbols whose meanings are not mutually agreed upon, may be open to multiple interpretations. The hearer is given a more active role in the exchange, and is able to give shape to the unformed mass of words and images according to his or her own prejudices. This is the danger Horatio is afraid of:

‘Twere good she were spoken with, for she may strew
 Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds.
 (4.5.14-15)

This fear is proved well-founded by Laertes’ reaction:

Hadst thou thy wits and didst persuade revenge,
 It could not move thus.
 (4.5.167-8)

and “This nothing’s more than matter” (4.5.172), a sentence that invests Ophelia’s mad speech with its full paradoxical power. It seems that it is only the disordering and disintegration of the ideal of selfless service that gives it any power. And thus, it is only when Ophelia is dead that she earns a statement of unqualified love from Hamlet.

The simplicity and unequivocal nature of Hamlet’s declaration, as well as his immediate movement towards vengeful action, would tend to link his acceptance of the dead Ophelia with the emblematic power granted to the corpse of the defiled woman in traditional Elizabethan stories of feminine heroism. In these stories, of which the most famous were, of course, Elizabethan versions of the rape of Lucretia, the woman kills herself either after being raped or to avoid violation, and her body becomes the focus for male recognition of her virtue and courage. Interestingly, it is at this stage of the play that Hamlet begins to move towards his final revenge, a confirmation of Simon Shepherd’s observation that, in stories of this kind, the body of the virgin martyr provides a stimulus to action: “the female victim’s influence is carried directly to the centre of the unjust state”, ultimately causing its

downfall (1981: 181). In the silence and immobility of death, she should become the emblem of the paradoxical power of feminine passivity and unquestioning faith. However, in a way typical of *Hamlet*, these resonances, as they accumulate around Ophelia, are deeply ironic, tantalisingly ambiguous and oblique. Hamlet's declaration of love and Laertes' and Gertrude's sentimental nostalgia for the sweet vulnerability that Ophelia now represents for them, are offset by the priest's desire for "shards, flints and pebbles" (5.1.224) as his memorial for her, a divisiveness that has ever since been reflected in critical responses to Ophelia.

In the corrupt world of Denmark, Ophelia's passivity provides a vulnerable image of the way in which disinterested values can be eclipsed by a more worldly scepticism. Although the stereotype of the selfless woman is the stereotype of the virtuous woman, Ophelia's submission to her father and her denial of her own power of speech can only be seen as a failure and she becomes the pathetic, but weak symbol of the fate of passivity. Because of her acceptance of silence and unquestioning obedience, her language and her actions are constantly undercut by a pervasive and tainted sexuality, preventing her self-denial from taking on the emblematic power that was traditionally attributed to the victims of tyranny. It is as if, however highly her selflessness can be valued as an abstract ideal, a refusal to act in a corrupt world can only constitute a failure. In the realities of social interaction in the Jacobean world, Montaigne's perception is confirmed: "Innocencie it selfe could not in these times nor negotiate without dissimulation, nor trafficke without lying" (n.d.: 717).

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