

Hamlet, shortly after this sad event, met his death at the hands of Laertes, with whom he was engaged in a fencing match in the presence of the court. The king had easily won over Laertes to play treacherously with Hamlet, and had prepared a poisoned draught for the prince, in case he should escape the envenomed blade of his adversary. The queen, not privy to the king's plot, drank of the fatal bowl, from the effects of which she died on the spot. Laertes and Hamlet wounded each other mortally with the poisoned foil, which changed hands in the scuffle. In his dying agonies Laertes confessed his vile plot with the king, and Hamlet, with his last remaining strength, stabbed the royal parricide to the heart with the same weapon which had dealt his own death-blow.

We shrink from the task of dissecting the sensitive beauties of Ophelia's character, as we should from the necessity of tearing apart the blushing bosom of a rose to count its stamens, or of impaling a butterfly to ascertain its "family;" we prefer to have a not too sharply defined idea of this most delicate embodiment, to accept her as a beautiful article of faith, which it is neither necessary nor desirable to thoroughly understand.

Ophelia is a more ideal, a more purely imaginative creation than Juliet or Desdemona; with the story of her youth, her tender beauty, her hapless love which leads to insanity and a tragic death, we sympathize less painfully than with the sorrows of those more vividly depicted heroines; indeed the very tints, pale yet enduring, in which her shadowy outline is traced, constitute a touching appeal to the hand of a would-be "restorer;" one should be content to spare her retiring delicacy any sentiment of pity more impertinently familiar than a tender pathos.

The childlike nature of Ophelia, innocent of even the knowledge of evil, impresses us from the first with the conviction that she is foredoomed a victim—a beautiful but inevitable sacrifice to relentless Destiny. Amid the bad passions, the subtle plottings, the tasteless criminality of the Danish court, she alights, a dove of gentleness and love, a very snowflake of virginity; she must die, or suffer contamination—and she fulfils the only alternative possible to her. In contradistinction to our almost resentful contemplation of the sad fates which befall Juliet and Desdemona, we are perfectly reconciled to the melancholy consummation of Ophelia's woes. We feel that, to her, reaction from so blasting a shock would be impossible—that after the first rude jarring of her delicately attuned sensibilities, which leaves them shattered and discordant, their sweet harmony can never again be restored.

It is pitiful to note how this young creature, whose love is so exquisitely sensitive that she scarce confesses it to herself, is tortured by the tactless catechizing of her hot-headed brother, and her garrulous, worldly-wise old father—of all men the two least fitted to probe the tender depths of her heart, and having found its secret, to advise her of her danger without corrupting her angelic purity.

The very faith she reposes in their words, accepting them as oracles, however her instinctive belief in her lover's honor may cry out against the outrage, renders their lessons the more cruel; she has no wit with which to confound them, no words to uphold her in ever so gentle an argument; she has no choice but to believe and obey—a mere puppet in their hands. At first, allowed the full bent of her inclination in giving audience "most free and bounteous" unto the lord Hamlet; then forbidden to see or speak with him; and still again, given up to him, as it were, as an unfeeling test of his alleged madness for her love: when we consider



the alternations of hope, fear, and final despair which must have attended each experiment, we cannot be surprised that they result in a total overthrow of her "most ingenious sense," "dividing her from her fair judgment."

The interviews between Ophelia and Laertes, or Polonius, are inexpressibly touching:

*Laer.* For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor,  
Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood—  
A violet in the youth of primy nature,  
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,  
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;  
No more.

*Oph.* No more but so?

*Laer.* Think it no more.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Pol.* What is't, Ophelia, he said to you?

*Oph.* So please you, something touching the lord Hamlet.

*Pol.* Marry, well bethought:

'Tis told me, he hath very oft of late  
Given private time to you; and you yourself  
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.

\* \* \* \* \*

What is between you? Give me up the truth.

*Oph.* He hath, my lord, of late, made many tenders  
Of his affection to me.

*Pol.* Affection? puh! you speak like a green girl,  
Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.

Do you believe his tenders, as you call them?

*Oph.* I do not know, my lord, what I should think.

*Pol.* Marry, I'll teach you: think yourself a baby,  
That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay  
Which are not sterling.

*Oph.* My lord, he hath importun'd me with love,  
In honorable fashion.

*Pol.* Ay, fashion you may call it; go to, go to!

*Oph.* And hath given countenance to his speech, my lord,  
With almost all the holy vows of heaven.

*Pol.* Ay! springes, to catch woodcocks.

From this time,

Be somewhat scanter of your maiden presence;

Set your entreatments at a higher rate

Than a command to parley. For lord Hamlet,

Believe so much in him—that he is young;

And with a larger tether may he walk

Than may be given you; In few, Ophelia,

Do not believe his vows. \* \* \*

\* \* \* \* \* This is for all:—

I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth,

Have you so slander any moment's leisure,

As to give words or talk with the lord Hamlet.

Look to 't, I charge you; come your ways.

*Oph.* I shall obey, my lord.

But if these exhibitions of Ophelia's pitiable helplessness are sad, what shall be thought of her permitted interview with her lover, to whom, in two short, simple sentences, she tells the story of all she has suffered, and must die for?—and what shall be said of Hamlet, thus to flay alive the innocent soul which had given itself so unreservedly into his keeping? But we are magnifying our office; not ours, thank heaven, the task to justify that myth of myths:

*Ham.* \* \* \* \* \*

\* \* \* \* \* Soft you, now!

The fair Ophelia:—Nymph, in thy orisons

Be all my sins remember'd.

*Oph.* Good my lord,

How does your honor for this many a day?

*Ham.* I humbly thank you—well.

*Oph.* My lord, I have remembrances of yours

That I have longed long to re-deliver;

I pray you, now receive them.

*Ham.* No, not I;

I never gave you aught.

*Oph.* My honor'd lord, you know right well you did;

And, with them, words of so sweet breath compos'd



As made the things more rich. Their perfume lost,  
 Take these again; for to the noble mind  
 Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind.  
 There, my lord!

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ham.* \* \* \* \* \*

I did love you once.

*Oph.* Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.

*Ham.* You should not have believed me; for virtue  
 cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of  
 it. I lov'd you not.

*Oph.* I was the more deceived.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ham.* If thou dost marry, I'll give thee this plague  
 for thy dowry: Be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow,  
 thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery;  
 farewell! Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool;  
 for wise men know well enough what monsters you  
 make of them. To a nunnery, go! and quickly too.  
 Farewell!

*Oph.* Heavenly powers, restore him!

*Ham.* I have heard of your paintings, too, well  
 enough; God hath given you one face, and you make  
 yourselves another; you jig, you amble, and you lisp,  
 and nickname God's creatures, and make your wanton-  
 ness your ignorance: Go to, I'll no more of 't; it hath  
 made me mad. I say, we will have no more marriages:  
 those that are married already, all but one, shall live;  
 the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go!

*Oph.* O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!  
 The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword,  
 The expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
 The observed of all observers—quite, quite down!  
 And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,  
 That suck'd the honey of his music vows,  
 Now see that noble and most sovereign reason,  
 Like sweet bells jangled, out of tune and harsh—  
 That unmatch'd form and feature of blown youth,  
 Blasted with ecstasy. O, woe is me!  
 To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!