

The Women of Elsinore



Above: William Salter Herrick Hamlet in the Queen's chamber. Oil on canvas, ca. 1857. Bottom Right: Samuel James Bouverie Haydon with the collaboration of Francis Seymour Haden, after a drawing by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Hamlet: III, I. Ophelia returning the gift to Hamlet. Print, ca. 1880. All images Folger Shakespeare Library.

For Prince Hamlet, virtue is paramount to a woman at court. Hamlet views Queen Gertrude and Ophelia, both of the women he loves, as tainted by their actions, the antithesis of the moral excellence he expects. Yet both Gertrude and Ophelia appear shocked, distressed, and heartbroken at Hamlet's verbal abuse and poor treatment. This leads to the question: do Gertrude and Ophelia's actions play in favor of Hamlet's well-being or against it?

"Frailty, thy name is woman!" Hamlet explodes at the thought of Gertrude's marriage to his uncle. Is Gertrude frail? Or does she exhibit strength in her survival instinct to accept Claudius as her husband? As a woman of the 16th century, Gertrude's wealth and power extended only as far as her closest male relation. Is Gertrude as selfish as Hamlet portrays her, or does she do it all for the love of her son? Based on Gertrude's doting at the beginning of the play, it seems she and Hamlet had a caring relationship prior to his father's death. By marrying Claudius she ensures that Hamlet, though not king today, might be the next in line. Does Hamlet's anger blind him to the possibility that Gertrude marries his uncle to preserve their lives in Claudius' kingdom? She certainly means no ill will as she takes a fatal drink to toast Hamlet's good fortune.

Ophelia's affections for her kinsmen are clear throughout the play. She is close enough to her father and brother that she heeds their advice, and she sincerely grieves the loss of Polonius. Unfortunately, Ophelia is caught in the middle of the ensuing battle between Claudius and Hamlet. She betrays Hamlet by obeying her father in the plot to spy on him. Yet Ophelia seems bewildered when Hamlet denies his love for her and then openly flirts with her during the Players' performance. Does Hamlet truly love Ophelia but reject her in order to protect her? Or does he only see her deception and fully intends to drive her mad? Is Ophelia shrewd enough to play games with Hamlet's affection, or is she simply a dutiful daughter who is also in love with the Prince? Certainly, Ophelia's loss of wits and subsequent suicide are a clear indication of a heart broken by the men who matter most to her.



The women in *Hamlet* find themselves in sticky situations at the hands of their male relations. Both may be viewed as mere pawns in the hands of the ambitious and scheming men of the play. Or perhaps they are equally calculating in their steps and missteps to protect their loved ones and themselves.

When Ophelia goes mad, why does she obsess over flowers?

Shakespeare often mentions plants and flowers for their symbolic meaning, which an Elizabethan audience would have understood. Today, flowers are often given to loved ones to show affection, such as red roses for love. But in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the flowers that Ophelia gives away to indicate her disturbed state and hidden feelings. In 4.5, Ophelia gives **rosemary** ("for remembrance") and **pansies** ("for thoughts") to Laertes in remembrance of their murdered father. More controversial flowers such as **fennel** (false flattery, deceit or frailty) and **columbine** (folly) are given to the King and Queen for their perceived offenses to Ophelia's family. The **violets** that wither away with her father's death symbolize her loss of faithfulness. And the **rue** that Ophelia gives to Queen Gertrude and keeps for herself indicates a shared sorrow. There is no indication in the text as to whom the **daisy** (for innocence) is given. Who do you think Ophelia gives the daisy to and why?