



## Character Explorer:

# Ophelia from *Hamlet*

## Who is Ophelia?

In the play, *Hamlet*, the current King of Denmark, Claudius, has an adviser named Polonius, who is described as old and who seems to enjoy speaking in a complex, artful way. Polonius has two children: Laertes and Ophelia. As Polonius' child, Ophelia lives at the Danish royal court, which comes with both privileges and restrictions. Ophelia seems to be in a relationship with Hamlet, a young royal and the title character of the play.

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## What happens with Ophelia?

Early in the play, Ophelia's sibling, Laertes, gets permission from the King to return to France. Before leaving, Laertes expresses concern about Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet. Laertes argues that Hamlet's royal status will likely require a political marriage, rather than marrying for love. Laertes worries that this situation might hurt Ophelia and urges caution. Ophelia agrees to beware, so long as Laertes follows the same practice of self-denial. Upon learning of Laertes' concern, Polonius insists that Ophelia end any relationship with Hamlet. Ophelia agrees to obey this command.

Meanwhile, Hamlet's mother, Gertrude and her brother-in-law-turned-husband, Claudius, are concerned about Hamlet's strange behaviour. Gertrude believes the reason for Hamlet's behaviour is obvious: Hamlet's father's sudden death and her marriage to the dead King's brother soon after. Gertrude and Claudius don't know that the ghost of the dead King has appeared to Hamlet, claimed that he was murdered by Claudius, and urged Hamlet to take revenge. Ophelia doesn't know this either. They are all simply confused by the sudden change in Hamlet.

Believing that Hamlet's behaviour is due to Ophelia's rejection, Polonius and Claudius arrange to listen in on an encounter between the two young people. When Ophelia tries to return Hamlet's gifts and letters, Hamlet becomes verbally abusive, finally storming off and leaving Ophelia 'most deject and wretched'. When the court next gathers to watch a play, Hamlet seems flirtatious, then makes lewd jokes at Ophelia's expense. Later that evening, believing King Claudius is hiding behind a tapestry, Hamlet stabs through the fabric, striking a fatal blow. However, Hamlet has killed Polonius, not Claudius. Now utterly alone with no emotional support, Ophelia has a breakdown: speaking in non-sequiturs, singing, and distributing flowers that hold symbolic meaning. Laertes returns to Denmark and sees this. Gertrude then reports that Ophelia fell into a creek, didn't make any attempt to get out, and so drowned.

## Some words used to describe Ophelia

The ways that Ophelia is talked about can illuminate aspects of the character.

dear	a green girl	unsifted	daughter
maiden	celestial	my soul's idol	beautified
most dear	young	nymph	most deject
wretched	metal more attractive	importunate	distract
sweet	pretty	rose of May	kind sister
mermaid-like	poor wretch	minist'ring angel	sweet maid

## Some things Ophelia says throughout the play

The lines below are listed in the order that they appear in the play.

- 1 I do not know, my lord, what I should think.
- 2 My lord, he hath importuned me with love in honourable fashion.
- 3 I shall obey my lord.
- 4 O my lord, my lord I have been so affrighted.
- 5 I was the more deceived.
- 6 O help him, you sweet heavens.
- 7 I think nothing, my lord.
- 8 Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be.
- 9 Good night, ladies, good night. Sweet ladies, good night, good night.
- 10 He is gone, he is gone, and we cast away moan.

## Challenging assumptions about Ophelia

The conventional way of talking about Ophelia includes talking about madness, and calling Ophelia's final scene a 'mad scene' or saying that Ophelia goes insane. This approach lacks both compassion and insight. As you explore the words and lines above, what's your impression of Ophelia? What do you imagine about a person who says things like, 'I do not know, my lord, what I should think' and 'I think nothing, my lord'?

Theatre makers and scholars have long been troubled by happens to Ophelia and wondered about a society that puts anyone in such a position. What do you think? If you know the play or are learning about it, can you identify the ways the other characters limit Ophelia's agency? How else might you describe what happens to Ophelia? How would you change things so Ophelia could have a better ending?

In 1994, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher wrote *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Lives of Adolescent Girls*. Using case studies from her work, the book explores the effects of societal pressures on girls and young women. Revised and updated in 2019, the bestselling book has been influential, inspiring other books such as *Surviving Ophelia* by Cheryl Dellasega, *Ophelia's Mom* by Nina Shandler, and *Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write about their Search for Self* by Sara Shandler. *Reviving Ophelia* was even cited by Greta Gerwig as an influence on her 2023 film, *Barbie*.

## Your Interpretation of Ophelia

Now it's your turn! Read through the information about Ophelia on the previous pages. Then, using these words, lines, and the story, choose activities from the list below to explore your own interpretation.

### MOVE

**How would your Ophelia move?** How would you express the thoughts with your body? How could you use your voice and/or body to create this character? Based on what you now know of Ophelia, create your own movement-based interpretation of the text.

**Create a sculpture or statue** using your body to express what Ophelia's lines mean to you. Create a gesture or sculpture for each line. You could also speak the line as you hold each pose. Try it many different ways and notice how each version feels to you.

### LISTEN

**What would your Ophelia soundtrack be?** What types of instruments, ambient sounds, or music would accompany your Ophelia? Make an Ophelia playlist, or create a soundscape: if you like, you could include recordings of the descriptive words and/or Ophelia's lines.

### WRITE

**Create a poem, story, or monologue** inspired by the list of words that describe Ophelia. Then, create another piece using the lines that Ophelia speaks. Create a final piece that expresses what your Ophelia might think and feel but not be able to say. How they different?

### MAKE

**Create a costume design.** What would your Ophelia wear? Think about all aspects of the character and how you might convey that through costuming.

**Gather objects** that your Ophelia might use or care about, such as the flowers mentioned in act 4, scene 4 of the play. Use these props in your other explorations, or create a still life of the objects by drawing or photographing them.

**Create an art project** inspired by the words used to describe Ophelia and by the lines that Ophelia speaks.

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## Reflect

- What discoveries did you make as you explored the text?
- Why did you make the creative choices that you made?
- What did you learn about Ophelia? About the play? About yourself?