O what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!

- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Historically, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has prompted readers to consider the uncomfortable proximity between sanity and insanity. Taking that proximity seriously, we might wonder what happens when reason and rational judgment fail to provide meaning and answers to the deepest questions of the soul. Is it possible for an individual to purposefully eschew reason in order to discover a meaningful truth? Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* may be useful in pursuing this question. His definition of reason poses interesting possibilities for our understanding of Shakespeare's Ophelia. As he puts it, reason is the "highest faculty of the human subject, to which all other faculties are subordinated" ("Technical Terms of Kantian Philosophy").

With this definition of reason in mind, Kant stated the following in his assessment of mental illness: "In this...kind of mental derangement there is not merely disorder and deviation from the rule of the use of reason, but also positive unreason; that is, another rule, a totally different standpoint into which the soul is transferred, so to speak, and from which it sees all objects differently" (Frierson 211). According to Kant, there are individuals whose minds have the capacity to reject the highest human faculty of reason ("positive unreason"), allowing them to view the world and those around them differently than the average human mind. Though Kant did not consider these individuals to be healthy or of a sound of mind, he also did not reject the possibility of finding meaning or order in their thoughts and actions. Even though these individuals do not analyze and synthesize the world in the same way that "rational" human beings do, does that mean that there is no truth in what they say or do? Kant's beliefs seem to

suggest that there is, in fact, a form of synthesis and analytic judgment occurring in the mind of an individual that has eschewed reason. He claims that "there is a system in lunacy" and that "the powers of the unhinged mind still arrange themselves in a system" that is founded on "a principle of unity" (Frierson 211-212). While Kant would certainly classify some as having completely lost the ability to use reason, it also seems possible that certain individuals could choose to enter a state of "positive unreason" as a way of discovering truth. That is, in refusing to be bound by the limitations of reason, such individuals might be thought of as a moving *beyond reason* into a world that facilitates the discovery of personal truth otherwise unavailable.

Readers of *Hamlet* often assume that Ophelia's state of mind following the death of Polonius and the exile of Hamlet is insanity. Implicit in this characterization of Ophelia is the belief that her words and actions were merely the incoherent ravings of a lunatic, devoid of meaning and purpose. But could Ophelia have moved beyond reason, entering a state of mind that allowed her to view herself and those around her from a completely unique standpoint? If so, she may have hoped to acquire personal truth that was previously unavailable to her within the realm of traditional reason. In the following discussion, I will explore the possibility of moving *beyond reason* as a means of understanding Ophelia's "new world." Ultimately, the distinction between those that merely lose reason and those that choose to reject its limitations allows us to see Ophelia in both life and death as more than a passive object of tragic circumstances: her move beyond reason grants her freedom to actively adjust her interpretation of and perspective on the world she shares with Hamlet.

A movement beyond reason occurs when an individual's current life becomes unmanageable, when all possibilities for reconciliation disappear, and when all future prospects cease to provide hope. It is easy to classify Ophelia's quick move beyond reason as a natural

consequence of her physical and emotional dependence on those around her. However, certain textual variants found within the first and second *Quarto* and *Folio* publications of the play open a window into Ophelia's soul, suggesting that her move beyond reason was a deliberately chosen state of being that served as an attractive alternative to the unbearable tensions in her world. In this way, her deliberate move beyond reason exposes her hope that the unknown, yet limitless potential of that state of being would grant her freedom to discover truth in her restrictive world.

Many scholars have addressed both the origins of Ophelia's move beyond reason as well as the controversy surrounding her "doubtful" death (5.1.209). Traditionally, Ophelia is characterized as an innocent victim of the cruelties of those that used her dependent and submissive nature for personal gain. Carroll Camden vigorously refuted scholarship that placed the death of Polonius at the heart of Ophelia's move beyond reason, preferring to view Hamlet's madness and rejection of Ophelia as her motivation to reject reason and reality. Either way, whether Polonius or Hamlet, Ophelia's perceived personal weakness is exemplified in the adjectives used by scholars to describe her. For Camden, Ophelia was "delicate-minded", "tenderhearted", "a tool", "sensitive", "susceptible", having a "weak personality" (247, 249-50, 253). The pain of losing Hamlet's love and affection as well as considering herself as the source of his madness, eventually led Ophelia to her tragic, suicidal death. Linda Welshimer Wagner accuses Shakespeare of creating Ophelia's character as a "useful device" or "mirror" for "Hamlet's analytical scenes" as well as to provide a profound emotional impact on the audience with her move beyond reason and death (94). Welshimer Wagner seems to agree with Camden that Hamlet was the source of Ophelia's demise, concluding that he used her "calculatingly" as "an excuse" for his own madness (96). Thus, scholars generally consider Ophelia's move beyond reason and death to be anything but her own, purposive decisions. This overarching narrative is

accentuated in J.M. Nosworthy's analysis of Queen Gertrude's account of Ophelia's death. Nosworthy describes the Queen's description of Ophelia's "accidental" drowning as illogical, an "inspired but inconsistent afterthought" that seemed to contradict the overwhelming opinion that Ophelia had committed self-murder (345, 348). Even in death, Ophelia was dependent on the perspectives of those that observed her, yet did not fully understand her.

As stated previously, there is ample textual evidence that supports claims made by scholars that Ophelia was dependent on others, controllable, and easily manipulated. However, scholars fail to recognize something profound about this seemingly "simple," "minor character" when they attribute the entirety of her move beyond reason and death to the machinations and deceits of other characters (Welshimer Wagner 94-95). If Ophelia's character is to move beyond its traditionally simple role of providing "pathos" for the audience, then scholars and viewers must look beyond the reality imposed upon Ophelia for much of the play (Welshimer Wagner 96). In short, they must consider the freedom and truth that Ophelia stood to gain in her move beyond reason and death.

Initially, Ophelia's move beyond reason was motivated by the unsustainability of her deep emotional and physical dependence on both Polonius and Hamlet. Ophelia exposes her dependence on the controlling and manipulative desires of others during an exchange with her father Polonius concerning overtures of love made to her by Hamlet. Initially, she claims that Hamlet's actions represented genuine "affection" (1.4.101) and "love" (1.4.110), however, when challenged by Polonius' belief that Hamlet was merely using her, she contradicts her personal feelings by saying "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" (1.4.104). Her innocence and willingness to believe in her own desirability and worthiness to be loved is crushed by the accusations of a controlling father. Subliminally, Ophelia is taught that her feelings have no

inherent value when challenged by the reasoning and experiences of others. This tension between the world of reason and the world of feeling would eventually challenge Ophelia's perception of truth and prompt her to move beyond reason as a way of obtaining it.

Furthermore, Polonius demonstrates his desire to impose his own worldview and reality on his daughter by telling her what she "should think" (1.4.104). He does this by reducing her virtues of innocence, purity and a willingness to trust into vices, by defining her as a "green girl" (1.4.101), "unsifted" (1.4.102), "a baby" (1.4.105), as well as a "woodcock" caught in a "springe" (1.4.115). These unflattering descriptions of Ophelia's character connote gullibility instead of a trusting nature, immaturity instead of purity, and childishness instead of innocence. By employing the imagery of a woodcock, or innocent bird caught in a trap, Polonius suggests that Ophelia's innocence predisposes her to be easily beguiled by men like Hamlet. Thus, Ophelia is taught that her perceptions of truth are flawed, forcing her to rely on others to provide guidance and meaning for her own existence. Her willingness to submit is most apparent when she declares that she will reject Hamlet's love, despite her personal experience and feelings, by declaring to Polonius: "I shall obey, my lord" (1.4.136). The eagerness of others to impose their own perception of truth on Ophelia decreased her desire to utilize reason as a form of understanding the world. For her, reason represented a realm where her emotions and desires were consistently overshadowed by the viewpoints of others. While living in the world of reason, Ophelia led a rather meaningless existence that forced her to bury, divert, or dismiss her own personal truth.

However, Ophelia's deference to the seemingly infallible world of reason is challenged by the unpredictability of Hamlet's supposed descent into madness. Hamlet uses madness as a mask in order to disguise his intent to avenge the death of his father at the hands of King

Claudius. Doing so allows him to enter a state of "controlled" lunacy that sends rippling effects through characters such as Ophelia. In a pivotal interaction, Hamlet mocks and disputes Ophelia's beauty, chastity, virtue, and affection, causing her to lament: "And I, of ladies most deject and wretched, that sucked the honey of his music vows…O woe is me, t'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.154-155, 159-160). These despairing words provide insight into the paradigms that dictated Ophelia's mind. Viewing herself as "deject" and "wretched" (3.1.154), Ophelia reveals the lack of meaning she perceives in her own existence. Unable to emotionally provide for herself, she must "suck the honey" (3.1.155) or forcefully extract sweetness from Hamlet, adding richness and meaning to her own life by satiating herself on his love and approval. Once Hamlet no longer provided the life-giving elixir upon which she was dependent, Ophelia lamented that seeing a broken, imperfect, and hostile Hamlet forced her "to see what [she] see[s]" (3.1.160). Is it possible that Ophelia finally recognized the unsustainability of her attempts to extract meaning from others and live vicariously through their perceptions of truth? Without the ability to pacify herself with Hamlet's love and "noble mind" (3.1.149), Ophelia is left alone to examine her reality and the emptiness of allowing others to manipulate and control her. For the first time, the world of reason, of which Hamlet was such an integral part, became visibly unpredictable, untrustworthy, and even openly hostile. True introspection and a clear view of the world were made possible for Ophelia upon the collapse of the controlled and manipulated world of reason.

However, certain textual variants found within early publications of the play don't allow the reader to see the beginning stages of Ophelia's move beyond reason. Following Hamlet's infamous "To be, or not to be" (3.1.58) soliloquy in which he contemplates the meaning of existence in a world full of cruelty and pain, Ophelia confronts him in obedience to her father's

command to sever ties. As she attempts to return his letters, which have become symbols of affection, love, trust, and romance, Hamlet forcefully declares, "No, no, I never gave you aught" (3.1.98). In short, he denies that he ever truly loved or cared for Ophelia, while simultaneously affirming that he did deceive her in the way that Polonius predicted. The *Folio* version of the play reinforces the perception that Ophelia was incapable of challenging the emotional and physical manipulations of Hamlet. In the *Folio*, she responds to Hamlet by saying, "My honoured lord, *you* know right well you did" (3.1.99). By declaring that only Hamlet knew the reality of the events that had transpired between them, Ophelia places all of the responsibility on Hamlet to define her world and reality for her. Her emotions, hopes, fears, and feelings of passion have meant nothing if Hamlet declares it so. The supposed weakness and frailty of Ophelia is compounded by her desire to continue turning to both Hamlet and the world of reason to find meaning. This portrayal of Ophelia gives her an irreparable dependent nature, exemplified in her lack of resilience as the world of reason suddenly ceased to provide meaningful truth.

However, the first and second *Quarto* versions of the play present a different, yet more accurate description of the tension of mind that led Ophelia to move beyond reason. In these versions, Ophelia's response to Hamlet is, "My honoured lord, *I* know right well you did" (3.1.99). By simply changing the pronoun from *you* to *I*, the entire context of the situation is reversed, and Ophelia's character embodies a new layer of meaning previously inaccessible to the reader. Here, she forcefully declares that she knows that what Hamlet wrote her, said to her, and the romantic interactions that they had were, in fact, real. Though still dependent in nature, this variance illustrates Ophelia's desires to be free, recognize and affirm her own personal truth, and take ownership for her own part in severing ties with Hamlet. As the limitations of reason

became apparent, Ophelia for the first time shows a desire to understand the world using her own experience and feelings, instead of those of another. Thus, she is transformed from one who is acted upon, to one that acts, making her move beyond reason even more intriguing to the reader. By demonstrating that she does have the capacity and desire to choose, it is more plausible to suggest that Ophelia could have chosen her move beyond reason and death.

Therefore, Ophelia's desires for freedom and truth are reflected in her move beyond reason, a state of being that granted her desires that had been suppressed by the world of reason. Following Polonius' murder by Hamlet and Hamlet's exile to England, the audience is suddenly presented with an Ophelia that has fully realized the fallibility and limitations of the two great symbols of reason in her life. In response, she chose to enter a state of mind that eschewed reason. Instead of merely losing the capacity to reason, Ophelia rejects its limitations, granting herself the power to adjust her interpretation of the world. As a way of warning Queen Gertrude of Ophelia's insanity, Horatio describes her by saying:

"She…says she hears there's tricks i'th'world…speaks things in doubt that carry but half sense. 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" (4.5.4-12).

In an interesting turn of events, Ophelia's move beyond reason gives her the power to control and dictate the thoughts, emotions, and feelings of those around her. Instead of a mere tool to be used as a source of manipulation (or the "tricks i'th'world"), Ophelia's progression into insanity elicits feeling and "collection" (4.5.9) in the minds of those that interact with her. Her words

"carry but half sense" (4.5.7) and are "unshaped" (4.5.8) because of their personal purity. They are no longer filtered or restricted through the lens of obedience, submissiveness, and propriety that previously governed her existence. Yet, to the great fear of everyone that wishes to dismiss her as an incoherent lunatic, something about her move beyond reason prompts them to continue to "aim at…and botch the words up fit to their own thoughts" (4.5.8-9). In vain, they desperately try to impose their own meaning on words and thoughts emanating from a world with which they cannot relate. The move beyond reason produced a free world unique to Ophelia.

While seen as insanity and lunacy to those still rooted within the realm of reason, Ophelia's move beyond reason demonstrates her enduring and deep connection to the world and those around her. Fear of what can no longer be controlled or fully understood prompts mankind to dismiss and actively oppose those that perceive the world in radically different ways. This only reinforces the easy and safe classification of all those that perceive the world differently as being "not of sound mind" or "mentally deranged" (*The Oxford English Dictionary*). By promoting the paradigm that there are certain behaviors that make a human mind *sane* or *normal*, those that surrounded Ophelia opted to reject or belittle her active defiance of that paradigm of normality. Fear of the unknown or any sort of interaction with "the other" led them to believe that her move beyond reason was a rejection of life, instead of a viable gateway into a meaningful state of being. Teasingly, Ophelia "winks", "nods" and "gestures" (4.5.11) to these characters, demonstrating that for her, there is coherence between this newfound world of freedom and the world to which she was formerly bound. This coherence and connection contrasts with those that merely lose the capacity to reason. As Ophelia synthesizes the world from a different viewpoint, she becomes a mirror to those around her, allowing them to see what they desire to see, while innocently and freely revealing the truth that she seems to have

discovered. A move beyond reason then, though freedom from oppression for Ophelia, would never be seen as a purposeful state of being by those that could only appreciate that which they understood.

Additionally, by moving beyond reason, it became easier for Ophelia to both perceive and declare truth. As Ophelia moves around the stage in song, a symbol of joy and freedom of expression, she hands flowers with specific meanings to Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes and says, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray, love, remember. And there is pansies; that's for thoughts…There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you, and here's some for me" (4.5.173-174, 177-178). Whether those flowers represent remembrance, ingratitude, infidelity, or flattery, the audience can't help but feel that there is meaning behind who receives each distinct flower. Even in a move beyond reason, there is coherence. Perhaps it was only in this state that Ophelia could finally synthesize and express her own experience and feelings without fear of reprisals or being forced into submission.

Unfortunately, the realm beyond reason that Ophelia occupied was only capable of granting her a taste of the freedom and truth she desired. As King Claudius and Queen Gertrude continued to suppress and mistrust Ophelia's newfound personal truth, she chose to accept death as the only existence that would grant her the permanent freedom she desired. Death, much like Ophelia's move beyond reason, is not fully understood, and therefore many discount it as a legitimate and meaningful state of existence. The fear surrounding death, or the "undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns" (3.1.81-82) is compounded even further by Ophelia's apparent suicide. Why would someone choose to die? Historically, suicide or self-murder has been perceived as an act of weakness. While it is true that most in Elizabethan England viewed suicide as "a heinous crime" as well as "diabolical and spiritually polluting",

Michael MacDonald also notes that "a new ambivalence" towards suicide and "more tolerant ideas about self-destruction" began to emerge among the audiences that would have frequented the Globe Theater (310, 315). Applying new ideals of tolerance and sympathy may have allowed audiences to see something redeeming in Ophelia's decision to die. Thus, audiences were prepared to consider the uncomfortable and abstract subject of death, inviting them to assign meaning to Ophelia's suicide.

What did death grant Ophelia that her move beyond reason could not? In her account of Ophelia's drowning, Queen Gertrude related that she initially fell into a "brook" or "glassy stream" where "a willow grows aslant" (4.7.137-138). Water, in its purest interpretation is a substance that maintains life while also possessing the ability to cleanse and purify. Additionally, water represents the unknown, or vast expanse of matter and substance of which mankind is just a small part. It is here that Ophelia experiences a cleansing of her soul through her submersion in water. However, one must consider whether Ophelia was cleansed *from* something, or purified *in preparation for* an event that would radically alter her existence. Baptism, or the religious rite of submersion in water is a ritual that symbolizes an individual's rejection of their old life and acceptance of the divine unknown that will aid them in navigating through a purer form of existence. Instead of rising from the water and returning to the repressive world to which she formerly belonged, death, or the great unknown, was the world that Ophelia was being prepared to enter. A willow, or symbol of unrequited love, was found along the banks of the river in which Ophelia experienced this purification. As the branch of the willow and Ophelia fell into the brook, she was reminded of Hamlet's manipulative actions and the world of reason that she would leave behind. A rite of purification was needful so that death could be the freedom and limitless potential that Ophelia so desperately desired.

Queen Gertrude goes on to say that, "Her clothes spread wide, and mermaid-like a while they bore her up; which time she chanted snatches of old tunes, as one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and endued unto that element" (4.7.146-151). The moment that Ophelia floated on top of the water was a moment of decision. Unable to remain beyond reason forever, Ophelia could choose to enter the unknown world of death or return to a world of reason where she would be controlled and manipulated. Ophelia truly was a mermaid, a mythic creature with the capacity to survive and balance between the mythic realities of the unknown and the familiar, yet tainted realities of what is known. She was "incapable of her own distress" (4.7.149) because for her, it was not a state of distress. During this moment of freedom, Gertrude describes Ophelia as "a creature native and endued unto" (4.7.151-152) the water. For a moment, Ophelia found the true relief and harmony that the world of reason would never provide.

Once again, certain variants within early publications of the play contrast a weak and dependent Ophelia with one the courageously chose to die. In describing the final moments of Ophelia's life, the Queen declares in the *Folio* that, "long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with *their* drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death" (4.7.151-154). The personification of Ophelia's garments serves as yet another example of her dependence on the physical and rational world for survival. It was the article of clothing that dragged Ophelia to her death and the end of her existence, not herself. Once the article of clothing had used her and weighed her down by soaking in and absorbing as much moisture as it possibly could, she eventually was forced to sink against her will. However, the *Quarto* versions of the play once again add a dimension of tension that seems to suggest that Ophelia chose to die. In these versions, Queen Gertrude declares, "But long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with *her* drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death" (4.7.151-

154). Instead of the garments pulling Ophelia down to death despite her will, in these versions, they pull her down *because* of her will. She died because she wanted to die. She drank, absorbed, and filled herself up with the very substance that would end her existence because she did not wish to subject herself further to the manipulative world of reason. Death did not come as a result of Ophelia's tragic dependence on others, but as a source of freedom and liberation from a world that she longed to be a part of and experience, but could never truly call her own.

The limitless potential of the unknown and its capacity to influence Ophelia's actions are evidenced in her remark to King Claudius that, "we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (4.5.42-43). Not satisfied or content with how or who she was, and seeing no hope in overcoming the manipulation of others, Ophelia chose to experience a rebirth that would allow her to innocently engage with whatever awaited her following death. This interpretation of Ophelia's move beyond reason and death alters the notion that she was merely a victim, doomed to reject life by committing a pitiful and ignominious suicide. Rather, given the choice, she chose to honestly look at herself and approach the unknown in a final expression of her fundamental desires for freedom and truth.

In conclusion, by eschewing reason, Ophelia embarked upon a journey that granted her the capacity to view the world and those around her from a unique viewpoint of her own. By filtering and synthesizing the world through her own experiences, emotions, and feelings, Ophelia was able to discover meaningful personal truth. Her newfound clarity provided fleeting hope in a world in which she was systematically dominated and controlled by the "superior" reason of those around her. By choosing to reject the comfortable, yet unfulfilling world of reason, her character embodies a level of strength and courage rarely assigned to her. The tragedy of Ophelia's move beyond reason and death lies in the seeming incompatibility that

exists between reason and emotion. Reason's capacity to makes sense of the world will fail when individuals make their values, experience, and knowledge more meaningful than those of others. Although Ophelia's move beyond reason was born from her subservience to others, in the end, her decision to reject reason's limitations allowed her to discover truth and experience freedom. Thus, a more careful analysis of Ophelia will allow readers to see and recognize, as Laertes did, that "this nothing's more than matter" (4.5.172).

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