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ENG 382

Bewailing Virginity

Hamlet as a play seems to ask more questions then it answers. A careful study of this play can elucidate some answers but many questions still remain unsolved. Is Hamlet mad? Is the ghost actually telling the truth? Is it is father? And even if it is can you trust a specter to tell the truth? These answers to these questions require a thorough reading of the text, but Hamlet has one of the most controversial texts out of any of Shakespeare's play. Variants within a text can greatly alter the meaning, therefore choosing which Quarto to utilize becomes a heavy responsibility for an editor. This is especially true with *Hamlet* as one of the Quartos is actually called "the bad Quarto." The bad Quarto, which is also the first Quarto, is shorter then the other editions of the play and contains significant differences in regards to added lines (Norton 1074). Within this play, there are multiple instances of a word being changed and therefore the whole meaning being changed, but for the purpose of this essay only two will be analyzed. The first is found in Act 1 scene 3, when Polonius gives his daughter advice on how to proceed based on the signs of affection she is receiving from Hamlet; Ophelia speaking to Hamlet regarding these same tokens of affection is the second instance. Both of these examples involve the changing of only one word based on the second Quarto, but that one word is just different enough for the intentions of both the speakers and the hearers to be questioned. In the play *Hamlet*, these small differences within the text lead to a discussion of the place of women within Shakespeare's society. The two textual emmendations that will be addressed in this paper both have to do with

Ophelia and her relationship to Hamlet. This relationship demonstrates the tentative position of women within society historically and their limitations within male and female relations. Ophelia is the symbol of the repressed woman because of the extreme value place on her chastity and her inability to confront Hamlet due to social standing. Marianne Novy, a professor of gender, sexuality, and women's studies, clarifies this point by demonstrating a pattern of suspicion displayed by Shakespeare's male characters in regards to their female counterpart's chastity. This attack upon women's sexuality further demonstrates the importance placed upon their virginity within Shakespearean society. However, this idea of overvaluing women's virginity has biblical origins. Professor Cameron Hunt addresses this topic by focusing on a biblical allusion within the play that relates Ophelia to the Israelite general Jephthah's daughter. This paper will discuss the various treatments of a woman's virginity both in the play *Hamlet* but also within a biblical and Renaissance context. I argue that Ophelia's virginity is a sign of power and that while she still possesses her virginity she can control her own destiny.

To begin this claim, we need to look at the role that women have had historically within society especially in regards to their virginity and social status. Shakespeare referenced the great works of his time within his plays so the first text to look at is the bible. The bible has many stories of women who lose their virginity outside of marriage and are then outcast, ostracized, and rejected; this demonstrates the importance placed upon a woman's virginity and the double standard present among men and women regarding it. The book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament has a chapter especially dedicated to the sexual laws and punishments as set down by Moses. In Deuteronomy chapter 22, the responsibility of society once a woman is, after her wedding night, accused of not being a virgin, is that "they shall bring out the damsel to the door of her father's house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die" (21). A

woman is to be stoned to death because she gave away her virginity when unmarried. In this case, a woman's virginity was of greater value then her life. This is not the case, however, for a man who not only gave up his virginity but also forcefully took the virginity of a woman. His punishment is to "give unto the damsel's father fifty shekels of silver, and she shall be his wife" (Deuteronomy 22:29). The man who not only breaks the law by having sex before marriage but also deprives a woman of her virginity has to pay a fine and marry the woman he has dishonored. A disturbing fact comes to light from this comparison: men who forcefully take a woman's virginity are less guilty then women who give it freely to someone. In fact, the reason the man must take the woman to wife after he has forcefully taken her virginity is "because he hath humbled her" (Deuteronomy 22:29). His action of rape does not shame him, instead it shames her and he must marry her because now no one else will have her. A woman's virginity, once lost, causes a kind of metamorphism in the woman, not only physically but evidently spiritually as well. This is also seen in the New Testament. In the Book of Revelation by St. John the Divine, in his vision he sees many angels singing and playing harps and he states that "these are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins" (14:4). This time it is explicitly stated that women who are not virgins are "defiled" giving them a lower status and even spiritual capability then those who are virgins. Christ's own mother Mary was a virgin, indicating that virgins were pure and holy vessels, so much so that only a virgin could give birth to the Savior. Virgins seem to have a whole new level of purity given them and this belief carries from biblical times, through the centuries, to 1500's England.

The people of Renaissance England readily shared this belief in the value of a woman's chastity, in especially in view of their Virgin Queen, Elizabeth 1. Queen Elizabeth claimed that she could not marry because she had "a corporate spouse, the English people at large"

(McDonald 314). Her very virginity became a means to bind her people to her. In a document from this time period, a subject of Queen Elizabeth had a dream wherein he saw the Queen who had "a long white smock very clean and fair" even though she is walking along a "dirty lane" (McDonald 339). Because the Queen has dedicated her life and her virginity to the people she is able to remain pure and clean no matter what manly duties of state she takes upon herself. She remains unstained because of her dedication to her people in which her virginity becomes a sacrifice, a consecration unto her people that gives her purity. This purity then translates to power. Queen Elizabeth was "a person of power…[who] remained unmarried, thus preserving her power" (Novy 3). While Queen Elizabeth's unmarried state kept any man from sharing power with her, it also continued the idea that a woman who was a virgin had certain powers or purity within her that other women did not. That is what made virginity and the lose thereof such a serious issue and of such great consequence in Renaissance times. A woman was expected to be a virgin upon her marriage and the suspicion that she is not often results in a male obsession with her virginity and chastity. Shakespeare writes about this obsession in many of his plays, incorporating the "male suspicion" into *Hamlet* with a "long verbal attack[] on female lust (Novy 7). Hamlet is not a cuckold himself and yet he shares the general feeling of mistrust involving women and their sexual status. Preserving one's virginity, while perhaps an admiral goal, nevertheless leads to continuous suspicion that it has been lost due to societies overvaluing it. Men then act on this fear with often disastrous results. In *Hamlet*, it is Polonius who fears for Ophelia's virginity and so makes the decision to order her to stop receiving Hamlet's affections and it is here that we will discuss the first textual emendation.

The first editorial choice takes place within Polonius' speech to Ophelia about rejecting Hamlet's affections. He warns her to "be scanter of your maiden presence. Set your entreatments

at a higher rate than a command to parley" (1.4. 121-124). Her father is concerned that Ophelia will give up her chastity for the mere asking if it Hamlet that entreats it. He implores her not to "believe his vows" because they are "breathing like sanctified and pious bawds the better to beguile" (1.4.126, 130-131). In Quarto 1 the word "bawds" is used whereas in Quarto 2 the spelling or perhaps the word entirely is altered to read "bonds." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, bawds as of 1362 meant to pander, to act as a go-between in providing sexual debauchery. Polonius' use of this word after pious is ironic, implying that Hamlet's vows which appear to be of solemn and righteous love are really only a go-between meant to provide him with sexual gratification. The juxtaposition of pious and bawds demonstrates the hypocrisy between what Polonius thinks Hamlet wants and the means he will employ to get it.

If, however, the word "bond" is used in its place not as a misspelling but as an entirely different word, not only the meaning changes but our view of women within this society also changes. Polonius would still be using this word in an ironic way because this "pious bond" would be a bond made because Ophelia had forfeited her chastity and would therefore the bond would be considered anything but pious. If Ophelia agrees to Hamlet's entreaties a bond is formed between them but not one of marriage because of the difference in their social statuses. Instead the bond would be one of shame destined to doom Ophelia to a life of shame and solitude. This second reading emphasizes the fate of a woman who gives up her chastity before marriage: that of being fettered, tied to a man in a "pious" bond that would ultimately pull her down into ruin. As an editor I would have to choose the first reading because the image of "pious bawds" is more invoking of irony then that of "pious bonds." I would also put "bawds" because based on the pronunciation of the two words it is most likely a spelling variation rather then a copying error.

Polonius, upon observing Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia, suspects that his madness stems from an obsession with his daughter. Hamlet furthers this idea when he speaks of Ophelia to her father and makes a biblical reference to chastity among women as an indispensable and powerful asset to their character. Hamlet addresses Polonius and the following conversation ensues:

> Hamlet: O Jephthah, judge of Israel, what treasure hadst thou!
>
> Polonius: What treasure had he, my lord?
>
> Hamlet: Why—
>
> "One fair daughter, and no more,
>
> The which he loved passing well."
>
> Polonius: [Aside.] Still on my daughter.
>
> Hamlet: Am I not I' th' right, old Jephthah?
>
> Polonius: If you call me Jephthah, my lord, I have a daughter that I love passing well (2.2.391 – 400).

Hamlet in this instance refers to a biblical story found in the Book of Judges chapter 11. In this account, Jephthah us chosen to be the captain of the armies of Israel against a people known as the children of Ammon. Jephthah pleads with the Lord for strength to defeat the children of Ammon and declares that if this is granted him "[t]hen shall it be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering (Judges 11:31). The battle is won by Jephthah and as he approaches the door of his house, "his only child," his daughter, is the first to meet him and therefore must be sacrificed. Upon hearing her father's oath, Jephthah's daughter declares to him that "if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according

to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth" (Judges 11:36). A daughter who would reply in such a way to her father who had sacrificed her is a "treasure" indeed. But this could also be a foreshadowing of Ophelia's death as she will sacrifice both her sanity and her life for her father. Hamlet's meaning can also be taken as humorous, implying that Ophelia is the one who suffers from her father's foolishness. However, even though verse 31 states that her father promised her as a burnt offering, the verses following her acceptance of his vow point instead to the sacrifice as being one of a vow of chastity or celibacy. Jephthah's daughter pleads that she may be "alone two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows" (Judges 11:37). This request to be alone with her fellows to mourn her virginity seems a strange one if she is preparing to become a living sacrifice. Her lamenting her lifelong celibacy seems a more appropriate reading. It would explain why she had to go to the mountains with only her peers to mourn because there would be no men present and she could freely grieve her life-long virginity. In verse 39 it states that after she returned from the mountains "she knew no man," a biblical euphemism meaning that she was a virgin. Even though Jephthah's daughter laments her impending chaste life, her continuing virginity becomes a sign of consecration to the Lord, just as a burnt offering would have been. This again represents the idea that a virgin is on a spiritually higher plain then a normal woman and so taking a vow of celibacy is in a sense dedicating and sanctifying even more of your life to God then any married woman could. This connection reminds us of Queen Elizabeth who also consecrates her virginity for the safety and well-being of her people. Looking at the sacrifice as virginity rather then life and realizing its connection to Ophelia in the play, this allusion to the story of Jephthah "identifies Ophelia as a virgin, destined for sacrifice at the hands of her politically ambitious father from the play's outset" (Hunt 14). Ophelia being used as a sacrificial tool for her father is demonstrated when

her father and the king hide behind a tapestry and order her to approach Hamlet in order that they may discover the origin of his madness. This is where the second textual emendation surfaces as it demonstrates both Hamlet's conscious decision to reject Ophelia but also her submissive nature to her father's will.

The second textual difference examined is found in Act 3 scene 1 when Hamlet and Ophelia are talking while Polonius and Claudius hide themselves in order to assess whether Hamlet's strange behavior is caused by his love for Ophelia. Ophelia attempts to "redeliver" to Hamlet the "remembrances" of his affections but he refuses to accept them stating that he "never gave you aught" (3.1.95-96, 98). Ophelia, perhaps stunned or even angry at this response, states, "you know right well you did, and with them words of so sweet breath composed as made things more rich" (3.1.99-101). She charges him that he knows that he gave them to her and reminds him of the beautiful and affectionate language within. Ophelia then goes on to state, "[t]heir perfume lost, take these again" highlighting that it is because the "perfume" symbolic of his love or favor is "lost" that these remembrances no longer have a meaning to her (3.1.101-102). The use of the word "lost" implies that it is by time or accident that the "perfume" or Hamlet's love is gone missing. There is no conscious or deliberate action within the word lost as it occurs usually from unknown sources, which may be how Ophelia views Hamlet's strange behavior, as something arising not from his own choice but from chance. In Quarto 2 however, the word "lost" is replaced with "left" implying a conscious decision on Hamlet's part for taking his love back from her. He has made a choice to abandon her. This reading allows for speculation that Ophelia does in fact recognize that Hamlet is not truly mad but putting on an act. Her choice of the word "left" implies that he himself has chosen to abandon this love and claim on these remembrances for whatever reason and that Ophelia is aware of this conscious decision, thus all

the more bewildered by his actions. As an editor, I would choose to put the reading of "left" in because the audience knows that Hamlet is making a conscious decision to abandon Ophelia and so emphasizing this decision illustrates the blame that must come to Hamlet upon Ophelia's death. He made a decision to abandon her without explanation thus making his crime worse then if his love had just been "lost."

Hamlet's crime is worsened by the fact that Ophelia is a virgin and her status as such had been the study of many scholars. Hunt argues that "the time span between the opening of the play and Ophelia's descent into madness and eventual death, like the period of Jephthah's daughter's mourning in the mountains, is two months" furthering the connection of Ophelia to this biblical character (15). But why is it so important to establish this connection so thoroughly? Scholar's have used this connection to establish that "there is no question of Ophelia's virginity, and the Prince's reference to Jephte's daughter is proof" McManaway 199-200). Other arguments to establish and support this connection do so to continually provide "clear evidence of Ophelia's purity" (Hunt 15). Scholars are essentially using this connection to verify the same fact that would have concerned Renaissance viewers: is Ophelia a virgin? The fact that scholars are attempting to prove this point means that they recognize the importance of this fact not only to historical audiences but also to the plot and character development of the play. The fact that Ophelia is a virgin when she dies casts further blame upon Hamlet who has already abandoned her without explanation. Queen Gertrude mourns Ophelia's virgin death when she states that she "thought thy bride-be to have decked, sweet maid, and not t'have strewed thy grave" (5.1.228-229). The juxtaposition of wedding flowers to funeral ones makes Hamlet's crime even more apparent. Ophelia's virginity is so important and so emphasized because it puts the heavier burden of blame upon Hamlet and makes his crimes more severe. To die a virgin is worth going

to the mountains to mourn for two months and it is Hamlet's decisions that lead to Ophelia's sacrificial death.

The textual emendations studied in this essay further the conversation about the importance of a woman keeping her virginity. Polonius' plea for Ophelia to guard her chastity is a plea for her to protect what is considered her most valuable asset. She needs to reject the "pious bawds" because it is one of deception that seeks to compromise the power and purity given her by her status as a virgin. This first editorial decision doesn't have as big of an impact as the second one because it does not fundamentally change the characterization of Hamlet like the second one does. Hamlet becomes more of a villain the more his ability to choose is emphasized within the play, especially by Ophelia whose death comes as a result of Hamlet's choices. Her death is an even greater condemnation when the importance and tragedy of a virgin sacrifice is established. Ophelia's virginity gives her the power to condemn those responsible for her death. Her father used her as a political tool but because she was a virgin and had no husband whose commands would have superseded her father's, she was right to have followed her father's commands. The folly of those commands and the consequences of them fall on the head of her father. Her status as a virgin also gives her the right to condemn Hamlet from the grave. His foolish actions and his decision to leave her in the dark, result in her consecrating her virginity in a sacrificial death.

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