Ophelia’s Supposed Insanity

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When Ophelia goes insane in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, she says many things that appear on the surface to be nonsense, but underneath are not only logical, but preplanned and well thought out. We see the beginnings of this when we learn that she has explicitly asked to speak to Queen Gertrude, which foreshadows the carefully planned meaning behind her words to come.

Upon entering the Queen’s presence, Ophelia begins her song, singing, “How should I your true love know / From another one? / By his cockle hat and staff / And his sandal shoon” (4.5.23-26). Here Ophelia is directly speaking to the Queen, referencing the Queen’s two husbands. A cockle hat is a pilgrim’s hat – Ophelia seems to be attributing a certain purity to one of the Queen’s lovers – and thereby implying the impurity of the other. She continues, “He is dead and gone, lady, / He is dead and gone; / At his head a grass-green turf, / At his heels a stone” (4.5.29-32). Ophelia makes it clear here that the true lover she was speaking about is the Queen’s late husband, King Hamlet. This shows a great depth in Ophelia’s understanding – she recognizes that King Hamlet was Gertrude’s true love. “White his shroud as the mountain snow . . . Larded all with sweet flowers; / Which bewept to the ground did not go / With truelove showers” (4.5.36-40). Ophelia has observed the Queen’s swift recovery from her late husband’s love, and is here referencing her hasty marriage to another lover. The flowers fell to the ground, but “truelove showers,” or tears, did not follow. This song to the Queen demonstrates that within Ophelia’s madness is a truly rooted great pain, a pain that came hand in hand with understanding. Ophelia has seen the world around her and appears to be alarmed.

Ophelia continues to express through song another one of the things that has caused her great pain and suffering – her love for Hamlet. “Quoth she, ‘Before you tumbled me, / You promised me to wed.’ / He answers: / ‘So would I ’a’ done, by yonder sun, / And thou hadst not come to my bed.’” (4.5.62-66) It seems here that Ophelia not only believes that Hamlet no longer loves her, but that he never did. Up until her father’s death she was clearly suffering from many different things, at which time her pain was only heightened, which lead to her insanity.

One of the last things Ophelia says, however, is the strongest key that she what she is saying is intentional:

There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance. Pray you, 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. We may call it herb of grace o’ Sundays. You must wear your rue with a difference. There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father dies. They say a made a good end. (4.5.170-180)

There is meaning to each line of this supposed madness. First she hands Laertes (imaginary) rosemary and pansies, symbolizing remembrance and thoughts. She is begging Laertes to remember all that has happened, and to think about it. There are a few ways to interpret the following flowers, and in turn who Ophelia gives them to, but to me it seems she handed the fennel (which can symbolize flattery, but can also symbolize unfaithfulness) and columbine (adultery, foolishness) to the King. Rue can symbolize repentance, sorrow, or adultery, and she gives some to herself and to the Queen. She points out a daisy, symbolic of love and innocence, but gives it to no one. And lastly, the violets, or the symbol of faithfulness, she claims have all died with her father. Her words are not crazy, but instead a sharp chastise of both the King and Queen’s actions. Ophelia has carefully calculated everything she said, and, while she is depressed and angered, does not really appear to be mad at all.