

How does Shakespeare present Ophelia in Act 1 Scene 3?

Upon reading Act 1 Scene 3, Shakespeare leaves the character of Ophelia somewhat a mystery. She is arguably the most enigmatic of all the characters due to the way Shakespeare depicts her. The name Ophelia itself means both 'help' and 'serpentine' which perhaps suggests she has a conflicted personality combining both subservience and dexterity. Though on the surface she seems to represent a weak-willed stereotypical female of the Elizabethan/Jacobean era, it could be implied that to a certain extent she remains unmoved by male expectations inflicted upon her.

Mariah Gale who takes on the role of Ophelia in the BBC adaptation of Hamlet explained how her character lives in an "oppressive world", however, despite this Ophelia remains resistant and fiery. For example, during the opening scene Laertes gives a lengthy speech to warn Ophelia of Hamlet's affection how damaging promiscuity can be towards her family's reputation. Even though the reader could infer that his advice is genuine and shows care, the tone of this speech could possibly suggest it was prepared and it could easily be said that the speech shows no concern for Ophelia's emotions or her ability to rationalize for herself. It highlights the treatment of women at the time who were seen as fragile and of less intellectual integrity. This speech also highlights how Ophelia has willpower as throughout this speech Ophelia interrupts Laertes with short, sharp sentences which question what he is saying, "No more but so?" In response to this speech Ophelia does not fully submit to her brother's request, her character shows dimension as she says "Do not as some ungracious pastors do, Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven, Whilst a puffed and reckless libertine...". Here, Ophelia compares her brother to a priest who acts irreligiously yet preaches the word of Jesus; therefore she is asking him to take his own advice and to practice what he preaches. This response given by Ophelia would not have been typical of the time. Though many scholars such as Romanska have suggested Ophelia is "never referred to as a character; but as a work of art", her striking responses demonstrate how Ophelia has more than both intellectual depth and willpower. Ophelia even shows this type of tenacity towards her father who warns her in a much more manipulative and mocking way. However, this does not affect Ophelia's ability to respond caustically. When Polonius demeaningly asks Ophelia if she "believes" in his "tenders", her response could be interpreted in several ways. On the one hand, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think" gives the impression that Ophelia's previously sarcastic responses have devolved and lack the strength they had beforehand. However, an alternative interpretation could suggest that she is simply searching for an answer that will end her father's