

## HOW WE TALK ABOUT OPHELIA

This is how we talk about Ophelia:

Botanically: as a hybrid tea rose, which was named for her. We consider her faux-etymologically: *O* as a symbol of longing, “phelia” as a clear phonetic link to the Latin “filia,” or daughter – the intersection of romance and childhood, desire and innocence. We discuss her while utilizing Yahoo Answers: “you know, Hamlet’s girlf or whatever.” Talk about her as a mascot for teenage girls who’ve lost their sense of self (see: *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* and the ensuing film adaptation, plus *Surviving Ophelia: Mothers Share Their Wisdom in Navigating the Tumultuous Teenage Years*). Scholars of Shakespeare make a continuum for their undergrads and place her somewhere between Juliet and an inanimate object. 77% of full-time professors are male.

And then we talk about her medicinally: the herb she designates for herself in the mad scene is an abortant. (Earlier in the play, Hamlet quips, “Conception is a blessing, but, as your daughter may conceive—Friend, look to ’t.”) We consider her as a member of the *Viola* genus: a shrinking violet. Canonically, as a symbol of female hysteria and/or weakness. Her favorite author is probably Nicholas Sparks. When she writes a novel, we slap a high heel on the cover. Chick lit.

We go at it as Freudians: her superego was in conflict with her id over its overwhelming sexual attraction to Hamlet – hence the inevitability of her suicide. Or as optimists: if only she’d had proper swimming lessons! In reference to Daisy Buchanan – “that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world. A beautiful little fool.” Like gossips, when we see her in the hallway – one ear bud in, Taylor Swift humming around those diamond studs, flaxen flyaways caught in gloss.

Eying her glitter toenail polish and the Facebook pictures of her hand gripping the red solo cup. We sing along to top hits – *I know you want it* is on repeat.

My Lit class makes a graphic organizer and assigns her the word *vapid* as a personality trait. We leave it at that, move on; for the boyfriend we will fill the whiteboard with SAT words. We talk about her anthroponomastically: why does *she* get a first name and not Lady Macbeth? Naively, calling her immaculate. The way you talk about a fawn. She is the name of my best friend's ukulele. She lives in the seashell curve of my ear during AP Physics, where the four girls in the class sit in a clump and struggle to raise our hands, and at Youth and Government retreats where only a third of my fellow officers are women. In the plays *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* and *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)* she does a lot of running across the stage weeping, and little else.

We consider her in paintings, captured pre-mortem in a flimsy dress with baby curls and looking surprisingly content for someone about to experience hypoxia, because her suffering has to be lovely. We contemplate the validity of her virginity – if it's intact she's a symbol; if it's not she's a slut. We hand her a button for "Young Feminists of Medieval Denmark" and then criticize her short skirts, the tuft of wisteria tucked behind her ear, that hot pink binder. We discuss her while insisting *Lean in!* without ever showing her the way her back can arch forward, the power of her vocal cords, the worthiness of her own words, words, words. I freeze up and feel Ophelia huddling in my chest when my eleventh grade English teacher tells me I will not relate to *Into the Wild* because "girls don't have that same instinct for adventure" or the boy in my History class says a woman can't be president because "what if PMS made her start a war," or when my health class comes to the consensus that the girl who was date-raped in a *Lifetime* movie was basically a tease. Online I see a poll about her and other "Shakespearean hotties" – which would

you “marry, bury, or do?” Beside it, someone is trying to sell me a fantasy game using big-breasted women; for a small fee, I can “make them my queen.” Friend, look to ’t – the entirety of her being is being made quieter, toned down, blurred with *sfumato*, from the Italian “to evaporate like smoke.”

She said, “I do not know, my lord, what I should think.” I say, emancipate this princess of the tragedians from the burden of “should.”