
Speaking and Silenced: Female Agency Juliet vs. Ophelia

Aya Abu Ajamieh* (Corresponding Author)

Department of English Language & Literature, College of International Studies, Southwest University, China

Email: ajamieh.aya@gmail.com

Husam Mahasen*

Department of English Language & Literature, College of International Studies, Southwest University, China

Guo Fangyun

Department of English Language & Literature, College of International Studies, Southwest University, China

* Aya Abu Ajamieh and Husam Mahasen contributed equally to this work and share first authorship.

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Abstract

This essay aims to compare the female characters Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* and Ophelia in *Hamlet* to discuss the concept of female agency in the works of William Shakespeare, particularly in relation to the characters' use of speech or silence as tools of power. To achieve this, the essay demonstrates that while both female characters are embedded in a patriarchal society that limits their ability to make choices independently, the voice of Ophelia is under the control of people around her, especially her father, while Juliet's voice is a way for her to gain some sort of independence as a character as she evolves in the play, shifting from obedient to somewhat an outspoken woman. On the other hand, Ophelia's powerless condition in the kingdom of Elsinore forces her voice to be ignored; however, madness is the one way in which she can voice her thoughts, even though they do not make sense to anyone else. Another aspect that this essay touches on is how these two characters are remembered even in death. Juliet is remembered in the context of reconciliation, while Ophelia is remembered as others perceive her. The essay uncovers how Shakespeare views voice and silence in reference to gender through close reading and feminist theory.

Keywords: Female Agency, Voice and Silence, Shakespeare, Juliet Capulet, Ophelia

1. Introduction

A few female characters in Shakespeare's tragic plays have dominated critical discourse as evocatively as the ill-fated heroines in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, the former being Juliet Capulet and the latter being Ophelia. Even though these female characters die at a relatively young age, their experiences of love, loss, and agency are defined in vastly different terms. While Juliet Capulet achieves self-expression through decisive speech and action, Ophelia loses the power to express herself in her own voice and can only express herself through madness and song.

This was the early modern period, an era in which there was little room for women's voices, and the women's roles in Elizabethan theater were performed by boys, which creates ambiguity in the construction of gender and power. As Coppélia Kahn writes, "Shakespeare's heroines often test the limits of patriarchal authority, even when they appear to submit to it" (Kahn,

1981, p.34). However, the extent to which this is the case will vary. Indeed, where Juliet increasingly resisted male patriarchal authority through her language and actions, Ophelia appears to be locked into a position of conquest by the orders of her father, her brother, and the monarch. Juliet's speech begins with obedient reserve but grows into more assertive statements of her desires and intentions. Her initial politeness belies a subtle rebellion that becomes more apparent as she reveals her love, challenges her circumstances, and considers her own future. Jean E. Howard explains how Juliet's linguistic progression situates her among Shakespeare's more verbally powerful young women, whose use of language reveals her self-definition (Howard, 1984, p. 112). Juliet's use of speech creates her own small space of autonomy in an oppressive society.

In contrast, Ophelia is introduced within a web of supervision and control. Before she is offered the opportunity to express her own emotions, her brother cautions her regarding Hamlet's intentions, and her father teaches her how to think and act. As Carol Thomas Neely points out, Ophelia's initial compliance must not be interpreted as innocence but rather as enforced silence, a forerunner to her later fragmentation (Neely, 1985, p. 158). Her words are constantly monitored, directed, and made public, leaving her with little room to cultivate her own voice within the political world of Elsinore.

This essay argues that the contrast between Juliet and Ophelia demonstrates how female agency in Shakespeare's tragedies is shaped through the dynamics of voice and silence: Juliet asserts autonomy through language and action, while Ophelia's constrained speech ultimately leads to fragmentation and madness.

2. Voices of Desire – Articulating Autonomy in a Patriarchal World

Juliet and Ophelia are defined by the manner in which they speak, or are unable to speak, as soon as they appear on stage. Women's voices, as expressed in the world of Shakespeare's plays, are always subject to the judgment of men, who either support them or reject them. Juliet enters the world of as a woman of means. Although only thirteen years old, Juliet is aware of her social position and her place in the world. She famously answers her mother's query as to her readiness for marriage by saying, "It is an honour that I dream not of" (Shakespeare, 2011, 1.3.67). This response reflects both submission and a subtle form of resistance. As Jean E. Howard describes, "Juliet's language shifts from polite deference to forceful self-definition, making her one of Shakespeare's most linguistically empowered young women" (Howard, 1984, p.112). Juliet's voice becomes even more confident after she meets Romeo. She plays an active role in suggesting marriage and sets the terms of her commitment to Romeo: "If that thy bent of love be honourable..." (Shakespeare, 2011, 2.2.143).

On the other hand, Ophelia's first entrance is contextualized by supervision and instruction. Before she can express her own feelings, her brother Laertes cautions her about Hamlet's intentions, and her father Polonius labels her feelings as childish. When Ophelia says, "I do not know, my lord, what I should think," Polonius quickly follows up with, "I will teach you, you shall think" (Shakespeare, 2012, 1.3.104-05). Ophelia's speech is thus situated as a problem that needs to be corrected and controlled. As Carol Thomas Neely observes, "Ophelia's initial compliance is not innocence but enforced silence, a harbinger of her later disintegration" (Neely, 1985, p.158). Unlike Juliet, whose speech increasingly becomes a site of self-definition, Ophelia's speech is monitored and shaped by the men around her.

However, the difference is most visible in the way each expresses desire. Juliet articulates her feelings openly when she says: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep" (Shakespeare, 2011, 2.2.133-34). She does not wait for Romeo to define their relationship; she becomes a crucial participant in shaping it herself. Ophelia, on the other hand, never receives the same opportunity to articulate her own desire. Her relationship with Hamlet is reframed when Polonius reads Hamlet's personal letter before Gertrude and Claudius, transforming a private expression of affection into a public matter. In this way, Ophelia is positioned less as a speaking subject than as an object of observation.

This contrast reveals the complexity of Shakespeare's treatment of gendered power. Juliet is restricted, but she continually exceeds those limits: she deceives the Nurse, defies her father, and actively participates in planning her secret marriage. Juliet's power, though circumscribed by the social structures in which she is placed, is nonetheless real. Ophelia, in contrast, is trapped within a system in which the value placed upon female purity and submissiveness is matched by a lack of room for individuality. As Coppélia Kahn writes, "Where Juliet's tragedy lies in her attempt to break through social barriers, Ophelia's tragedy lies in her inability to exist outside them" (Kahn, 1981, p. 98). The silences of the two characters further highlight this difference. Juliet's silences, as in the balcony scene, are moments of attentive listening and emotional engagement, while Ophelia's silences are imposed upon her. After Hamlet's command, "Get thee to a nunnery," Ophelia is struck dumb with surprise, and her earlier declaration "I shall obey, my lord" echoes the limits placed upon her ability to respond. Shakespeare thus portrays silence not simply as the absence of speech, but as a site of power imbalance, where Juliet's silence can carry intention while Ophelia's reflects restriction.

3. Silencing Mechanisms – Institutional and Familial Constraints

While the boundary of feminine agency in Shakespeare's works is the realm of speech, the realm of silence is the fortress intended to contain it. Both Juliet and Ophelia have to argue with the forces of control over their actions and behavior. Juliet briefly breaches this structure of control, whereas Ophelia is ultimately crushed by it. The silencing of both women is institutional in nature.

Juliet's rebellion starts at home. When Lord Capulet tells Juliet to marry Paris, her father's words become those of dominance: "Hang thee, young baggage! Disobedient wretch!" (Shakespeare, 2011, 3.5.160). This displays the weakness and

power of patriarchal rule. When Juliet asserts herself, her father resorts to oppression. However, Juliet still maintains a level of power. She orders her family around and pretends to compliantly obey. Juliet seeks Friar Laurence's advice; in that sense, her rebellion is still limited. As Dymrna Callaghan says: "Juliet's tragedy is not that she lacks agency, but that her agency operates within a world determined to punish it" (Callaghan, 2002, p.74). Juliet's home life has become a prison from which she seeks escape, even at the cost of her death.

Ophelia's situation contrasts with Juliet's; she has no such choice available. Ophelia's silence is collective. She is exploited by Polonius to spy on Hamlet; by Claudius to influence public opinion of his regime; and by Hamlet himself, whose views of her often shift between calling her an angel and a deceitful woman. After Polonius's death, Ophelia has no later role to play. Unlike Juliet, who always had the Nurse as a confidante of sorts, Ophelia is a lonely individual, who is "a deeply lonely person." As Elaine Showalter reminds us, "Ophelia's madness is the only language left to her when all sanctioned forms of speech have been denied" (Showalter, 1985, p.89). Ophelia's flower speech in *Hamlet*, Act 4, Scene 5, is often interpreted as the act of an unbearable, crazy lady. In fact, her speech contains a hidden protest. Remembering with a rose, thinking with pansies, regretting with rue, she was never allowed her own voice by a conventional society.

The difference lies in how each woman's body is used as a site of politics. Juliet's marriage is arranged between two families, but she breaks it by choosing her own Romeo. Ophelia's body, however, is constantly watched as a potential source of scandal. Polonius warns Ophelia that Hamlet's vows are "springes to catch woodcocks," a very physical and unflattering comparison that suggests Ophelia's naivety makes her an easy target. Her madness is also observed by Claudius and Gertrude, who never ask what she needs. According to feminist theorist Lisa Jardine, "Early modern women were taught that their virtue resided in silence and obedience; to speak was to risk being labeled wanton or mad" (Jardine, 1989, p.52). Ophelia is both silent and mad.

Even their relationships with male authority figures differ. Juliet challenges her father and lives long enough to take action. Ophelia obeys her father and loses everything when he dies. Without his guidance, she has no direction. His death does not free her; it destroys her. While Juliet's challenges, though punished, serve to affirm her identity.

Finally, these women's worlds respond to their challenges in fascinating ways. The chaos in Verona gives Juliet a brief chance to act. The official court in Elsinore offers Ophelia no opportunity. One girl speaks and chooses to die; the other is silenced until she surrenders to unspoken pain.

4. Death and Legacy, Agency Beyond the Grave

Not only is death in the tragedies of Shakespeare a finality, but also a statement that is influenced by the notions of power, interpretation, and memory. The manner of death of Juliet and Ophelia, the circumstances that led to their death, and the manner in which their deaths are narrated after the occurrence hint at the varying degrees of female agency that are recognized or denied. Although the two died young, the importance of their deaths differs significantly in the attendant plays in which they appeared. While Juliet died by her own hand, Ophelia's death is uncertain. One death is a choice, while the other is filtered through a lens of uncertainty.

The death of Juliet occurs on stage and is coupled with her final act of words: "O happy dagger! / This is thy sheath" (Shakespeare, 2011, 5.3.174-75). Juliet does not wait to be rescued by others but takes an active role in claiming the tool of death and using it to define her own ending. Juliet's death by suicide, as Marjorie Garber says, "is not surrender but assertion, a final refusal to live in a world that denies her love" (Garber, 1987, p.203). Her death, though tragic for her, allows her to exercise agency by controlling her own narrative at her death. Juliet's death is what brings together the Montagues and Capulets because her body allows for this social narrative of peace. Her agency extends beyond her death because it changes the moral landscape of the society she lived in.

Ophelia's death, on the other hand, does not take place on stage but is narrated by Gertrude in a highly artistic manner. The image of Ophelia floating in the water, surrounded by flowers, doesn't represent her death as a tragic event but rather as a beautiful scene. The audience cannot understand whether Ophelia's death is a tragic accident, suicide, or a consequence of her mental instability. She doesn't express her point of view even through her death, but rather discusses her last experience through the words of another character. Elaine Showalter noted that "Ophelia becomes a blank page onto which male observers project their fears and fantasies about female sexuality and instability" (Showalter, 1985, p.83).

The differences can also be seen in the funeral rites for the two characters. The funeral rites for Juliet are drawn to the Prince's attention in the context of the tragedy that ends the feud between the two families. Romeo and Juliet are buried together, and the two are used to symbolize love and unity. The funeral rites for Ophelia are characterized by controversy, with the gravediggers doubting whether she warrants a Christian burial, leading to the legal and theological argument revolving around her death. While Laertes shows extreme grief over her body, this public display of grief is in contrast to the lack of recognition of her individuality in life. As Carol Thomas Neely observes, Ophelia is more often grieved for what she represents—lost innocence and femininity—than for who she was as a person (Neely, 1985, p.162).

The differing posthumous legacies of Juliet and Ophelia can be seen as exemplifying a wider cultural phenomenon regarding the remembrance of female suffering. Juliet's tale is part of a broader moral narrative about the consequences of conflict between social groups, while Ophelia's image is once more used to create an aesthetic, romanticized representation. Such differing treatment in contemporary retellings can be seen to illustrate how far each woman is allowed to be connected to her act of agency in death, with Juliet remaining connected to an act of agency and Ophelia being connected to a symbolic tradition that speaks about her, rather than with her.

Ultimately, the contrast between Juliet's and Ophelia's deaths reinforces the essay's central claim that agency depends not only on action but also on narrative control. Juliet's suicide continues her earlier acts of self-definition, allowing her to shape the meaning of her own ending. Ophelia's death, by contrast, completes the process of her silencing: her final story is told entirely by others. Through these contrasting deaths, Shakespeare presents two different models of female agency—one asserted through voice and choice, the other erased through narrative mediation.

5. Conclusion

Conclusively, Juliet and Ophelia can be seen as developments of early modern tragedy, and their concerns about voice and agency are relevant today. Though Juliet and Ophelia's experiences could be seen around the patriarchal societies in which their stories are based, the two women could be seen to represent different sides of female agency in Shakespearean tragedy. Juliet's experiences, though limited and tragic, are actively engaged with power, unlike Ophelia's experiences of voice, which have gradually silenced her. The two females differ in matters of agency in Shakespearean tragedy.

Although Shakespeare lived at a time when, according to feminist critics, women were not allowed to participate in discussions of societal norms, nor to participate on a level with men on stage, he writes about women who challenged and broadened the accepted ideas of a patriarchal hegemony. Instead of simply reflecting patriarchal ideology, Shakespeare's plays actively interrogate it, often through the strategic use of silence. Juliet does not challenge the societal norms governing Verona through her rebellion, but draws attention to a particularly vulnerable one. The collapse of Ophelia also brings to attention a very vulnerable woman who is denied access to discussion as well.

This is particularly true in the case of the latest adaptations and reinterpretations of Shakespeare's plays. For instance, in the adaptation and reinterpretation done by Baz Luhrmann in the film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), the death scene of Juliet has been interpreted in the context of modern culture, whereas in the latest adaptation, *Ophelia* (2018), there has been the repositioning of Ophelia's role in the context of giving her some interiority and selfhood. Modern adaptations and reinterpretations have become a vital part of our cultural narrative, working to reclaim the voices of Shakespeare's women. This process represents a continuous effort to uncover the authentic experiences of these female characters, seeking to hear them clearly beneath the long history of male-centered interpretation. The latest reinterpretations of *Romeo and Juliet* are not only reinterpretations but also interventions into the play's unsaid.

On the other hand, there is the possibility of romanticizing Juliet's rebellion as well as Ophelia's obedience. Juliet should not be portrayed as an exclusively heroic rebel because she is also a woman who is being forced, who has lost, and who does not have choices in a violent world. Ophelia, on the other hand, should not be portrayed as a solely crazy woman and submission to reality because her craziness is also the result of emotional unfulfillment. Ultimately, these women should be understood not merely as symbolic figures but as individuals highly constrained by their environments.

Ultimately, the two women represent a stark contrast that brings focus to the main idea of the research being conducted in relation to Shakespearean tragedy: female agency is indistinguishably linked with the politics of voice and silence. While Juliet's power of voice, choice, and action, despite the limitations of her situation, ensures that she maintains a form of narrative presence even in death, Ophelia's movement of silence ensures that she becomes subsumed by the symbolic narratives that speak about her but also speak without ever letting her speak in her own voice. Was Shakespeare a feminist in the modern sense of the word? At the very least, the two women address some of the most pertinent and enduring questions surrounding the subject.

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