

# Discovering Literature

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## Teachers' Notes

Curriculum subject: English Literature

Key Stage: 5

Author / Text: William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Theme: Ophelia, gender and madness

### Rationale

In his portrayal of Hamlet and Ophelia, Shakespeare raises troubling questions about gender and madness. These activities encourage students to compare these two central characters, and how they have been used to reflect changing views of psychology and sexuality. Students will engage with medical texts from Shakespeare's day to explore shifting ideas of hysteria and melancholy. They will also explore a varied range of songs, photographs and paintings inspired by Ophelia, asking why she continues to be such a powerful source of artistic inspiration.

### Content

#### Literary and historical sources from the site:

- [Thomas Bright's \*Treatise of Melancholy\* \(1586\)](#)
- [Robert Burton's \*Anatomy of Melancholy\* \(1628\)](#)
- [Tile showing Mrs Lessingham as Ophelia \(1777–80\)](#)
- [Ophelia by John Everett Millais \(1851–52\)](#)

#### Recommended reading (short articles):

- [Ophelia, gender and madness: Elaine Showalter](#)
- [Shakespeare and madness: Will Tosh](#)
- [King Lear, madness, the Fool and Poor Tom: Gillian Woods](#)

#### External links:

- Songs about Ophelia by [Kula Shaker](#), [Natalie Merchant](#), [Marika Hackman](#), [The Lumineers](#) and [Kashmir](#)
- [Open Source Shakespeare: searchable online text](#)

### Key questions

- How does Shakespeare explore the question of how 'to define true madness' (2.2.93)?
- How have ideas of gender and mental illness changed since Shakespeare's day?
- What is it about Ophelia that continues to inspire artists and songwriters?

## Activities

- 1) Watch performances of recent songs inspired by Ophelia – by [Kula Shaker](#), [Natalie Merchant](#) and [Marika Hackman](#) – or find your own examples.
  - Listen to the lyrics and choose three lines from each song which capture the artist's view of Ophelia. How do the artists use visual images and costumes to present their idea of her? Do the male and female artists approach Ophelia in different ways?
  - How does the character in each song compare with Shakespeare's Ophelia?
  - Discuss: What is it about Ophelia which continues to inspire modern artists? Are there similar songs about Hamlet?
- 2) How does Shakespeare depict male and female madness in *Hamlet*? Make a collage of quotes relating to Hamlet (from Act 2, Scenes 1–2) and Ophelia (from Act 4, Scenes 5 and 7). You could also sketch your impression of each character.
- 3) Would you ever describe someone as 'mad'? How are mental health and mental illness represented and discussed today? Is it different when we're talking about men and women? You could draw on your own experiences or consider representations in the modern press, film or fiction.
- 4) Find the section on 'Maides, Nunnes, and Widows' in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (pp. 193–96, Images 8–11). Using the notes to help you, highlight phrases which reveal early modern views of female madness. How do you respond to Burton's suggestion that female melancholy is caused by repressed desire and solved by marriage?
- 5) Look at Thomas Bright's *Treatise on Melancholy*. What evidence is there that Hamlet is suffering from the symptoms listed in the table below? What does Polonius see as the 'cause of Hamlet's lunacy' (2.2.49; 2.1.99)?

Bright's symptoms of melancholy	Hamlet's behaviour
Melancholy can cause 'distrust, doubt, diffidence, or dispaire' (p. 101)	
Melancholy leads to 'false laughter' or sardonic wit (p. 101).	
Sufferers are distracted by 'phantasticall apparations' and 'counterfeit goblins' (p. 103).	
Their 'resolution' is delayed by 'long deliberation' (p. 131).	
Their house may seem 'a prison or dungeon' (p. 263)	

- 6) Read [Elaine Showalter's article on Ophelia, gender and madness](#).

- Highlight the different stages in the history of the portrayal of Ophelia. Create a visual timeline, using images from the article and your own research about the other sources mentioned. You could then produce a similar one for Hamlet.
- Do you agree with Elaine Showalter that 'Hamlet was the prototype of melancholy male madness, associated with intellectual and imaginative genius; but Ophelia's affliction was erotomania, or love madness ... caused by repressed sexual desire'?
- Laertes says his sister Ophelia is a 'document in madness' (4.5.178) while Hamlet insists he only 'mad in craft' (3.4.188). Are you convinced that Ophelia's madness is real while Hamlet's is mere performance?

## Extension activities

- Research the etymology – the linguistic origin – of the word 'hysteria'. What does this suggest about the history of mental illness and gender?
- Read [Will Tosh's article about early modern attitudes to madness](#) which compares *Hamlet* with other Shakespeare plays. Use [Open Source Shakespeare](#) to search for the words 'mad' and 'madness' in *King Lear*. How are real and performed madness explored through Poor Tom/Edgar and King Lear? How does this compare with Ophelia and Hamlet?
- Read [Sandra M Gilbert's article](#) which suggests that Lady Macbeth's murderous ambition challenges prescribed gender roles, but madness confines her to feminine helplessness. Do you agree? How does this idea of Lady Macbeth compare with your view of Ophelia?