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Ophelia

James C. Harris, MD

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When down her weedy trophies and herself/Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide, And, mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;/Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds [hymns]As one incapable of her own distress—Ophelia's death (Gertrude, queen)¹(p186)

Her death was doubtful,/And but that great command o'ersways [overturned] the order

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SECTION EDITOR: JAMES C. HARRIS, MD

Ophelia

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JOHAN EVERETT MILLAIS (1829-1896) WAS A FOUNDING MEMBER of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, painters who scorned the elegant but, they felt, mechanistic style of Renaissance artists like Raphael and Michelangelo. Millais emulated instead the fine detail, intense colors, and complex compositions of 14th-century Italian and Flemish art. For him, exact replication of reality was the key. Viewers of *Ophelia* in 1852 found delight in the exquisite detail of the natural setting: beautiful, botanically exact flowers, moss, and reeds "mirrored as in a glass."² They commented positively on the realistic painting of the leaves—green, spotted, corroded, or broken—the detail in her brocade dress, and the red and blue flowers of her "weedy trophies" (woven garlands of flowers). Yet Millais was criticized that year by the *London Times*, whose reviewer wrote that the painting "robs the drowning struggle of that love-lorn maiden of all pathos and beauty, while it studies every petal of the darnel and anemone floating on the eddy. . . ." (http://www.tate.org.uk/ophelia/travels_fr_londontimes.htm). Reviewers noted that Millais should have shown evidence in her face of her sad life story (her father killed by Hamlet). However, for Millais her life story was reflected in the flowers and trees that surrounded her; most were mentioned in Shakespeare's play. These flowers and trees apparently were chosen to symbolize the elements of her short life (http://www.tate.org.uk/ophelia/subject_symbolism.htm): forsaken love (weeping willow); innocence (daisy); ingratitude (crow flowers); pain (nettles); entanglement (crownet weeds); male sexuality (purple loosestrife); love and beauty (rose); and faithfulness, chastity, and death in youth (violets). Some too see an unsettling face with a nose and 2 hollow eyes hidden near the forget-me-nots.

Hamlet's rational reflection on suicide (to "take arms against a sea of troubles")^(p97) that the dread of something after death makes "cowards of us all"^(p98) stands in striking contrast with Ophelia's irrational, passive death. Although her death seems accidental (epigraph), her apparent failure to try to save herself raises the question of suicide. At the grave site, the gravedigger is asked, "Is she to be buried in Christian burial, when she willfully seeks her own salvation?"^(p188) He responds that the coroner's inquest approved a Christian burial, but their continuing dialogue makes it clear that there are doubts among common people and the church about the circumstances of her death. The gravedigger's questioner comments, "If this had not been a gentlewoman, she would have been buried out o' Christian burial."^(p189) The gravedigger agrees that, unlike the common people, great folk have standing to drown or hang themselves. The officiating priest is more emphatic (epigraph) in his objections and denies Ophelia full religious burial rites. Maiden flowers can be scattered on her grave and church bells rung, but no other church-sanctioned activities may be performed. For Hamlet and Laertes, her brother, these are "maimed" (incomplete) rites. The priest tells Laertes that it would profane the service to the dead to sing the solemn requiem and wish her the same tranquility and repose as done for those who died peacefully. Hearing this, Laertes immediately asks that Ophelia be placed in the grave, proclaiming: "And from her

fair and unpolluted flesh/May violets spring!" then expressing his anger at the church: "I tell thee, churlish priest, A minist'ring angel shall my sister be/When thou liest howling,"^(p200) in hell.

In these dialogues, Shakespeare calls attention to common attitudes and legal, religious, and moral issues raised by suicide in 17th-century Christian England. In antiquity, suicide might be a response to lost personal honor (falling on one's sword as Trojan war hero Ajax had done), lost family honor (*The Rape of Lucretia*), or fear of humiliation (Cleopatra).³ However, the Christian view was that the length of one's life is God-given and that suicide is a mortal sin, that of self-murder. A coroner's jury, when faced with a suicidal death, could find that the deceased killed themselves while sane, a self-murderer (*felo de se*) or that he or she was insane and innocent of the crime (*non compos mentis*).⁴ If the verdict was *felo de se*, rites of Christian burial were denied, all property was forfeited to the crown, and the corpse was given a profane burial. It was interred at night in a public highway with a stake driven through the heart. If the verdict was *non compos mentis*, property was not confiscated and normal rituals *might* be performed.

Before 1660, the *non compos mentis* verdict was rarely used. MacDonald⁴ found that among coroner's inquisitions filed in central English courts between 1487 and 1660, only 1.6% of suicides were adjudicated *non compos mentis*; all others were *felo de se*. The crown interpreted the law narrowly and was known to overturn the ruling of an inquest. For example, in the drowning of Lancelot Johnson, melancholy thoughts were deemed evidence of "ungodly resolution" rather than evidence for *non compos mentis*.⁴ The belief that suicide in itself was abhorrent along with the financial interest of the crown in the decision conspired to bias verdicts toward sane self-murder. For Ophelia, the priest questioned the findings of the coroner's inquest, resulting in maimed rites.

Copper-haired 19-year-old Elizabeth (Lizzie) Siddal was Millais's model for Ophelia. Siddal became a painter and poet herself, and later, she married Pre-Raphaelite painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Tragically she, like Ophelia, had an ambiguous death. Ill and depressed after her first child was stillborn, she died at age 33 years from an overdose of laudanum (tincture of opium). The coroner's jury ruled that her death was accidental, allowing full religious rites. Later it was learned that her suicide note had been burned to avoid family stigma.⁵ Understanding suicidal intent remains a conundrum to this day.

James C. Harris, MD

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