**Hamlet: Symbolism, Imagery and Allegory**

**‘Flowers for Ophelia’**

William Shakespeare's Hamlet is a play ridden with madness. In the play Prince Hamlet is visited by his father's ghost and is asked to kill his uncle King Claudius in order to grant is father eternal rest. This moral decision drives Prince Hamlet into madness, and he in turn drives his former love interest the fair Ophelia mad. In act four scene three to be precise Ophelia's madness is witnessed by Queen Gertrude, King Claudius and her brother Laretes. Ophelia dances around and sings contrived songs that are difficult to understand but are pregnant with meaning. If the Elizabethan audience could not keep up with the lyrics of the song Shakespeare slowed down Ophelia's madness and had her express in terms of flowers. During the Elizabethan era flowers were used to fend off bad spirits and also to symbolize ideas. In the following lines Ophelia shows the audience how she feels about the people and situations surrounding her through dispersing the flowers and their meanings.  
  
Ophelia begins with, "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember." Rosemary does symbolize remembrance and is often used in funeral wreaths. The mentioning of the flower is directly discussing the current loss of her father Polonius. Hamlet killed him thinking it was his uncle Claudius. Ophelia expresses her sorrow through the melancholy meaning of the flower. She furthers the discourse of her insanity with, "and there are pansies. That's for thoughts." Pansies not only stand for remembrance, but they also carry with them a meaning of togetherness and union. When Ophelia mentions the pansies she is again discussing her father's passing. She is reiterating the pain and sorrow of his loss and her desire to remember him and keep her thoughts close to him.  
  
Ophelia then moves on to say, "there's fennel for you," to Lord Claudius. Like most flowers and herbs fennel carries more than one meaning to it. At the time it was a popular belief that fennel would cast away evil spirits. Ophelia giving fennel to King Claudius is more of a declaration that he himself is evil. It is her way of placing blame on the King for her father's death and Prince Hamlet's madness. Ophelia continues to distribute flowers by turning to her brother Laretes and saying, "and columbines: there's rue for you." Columbines stand for reserve to win and being anxious. The meaning makes it extremely suitable flower to offer her brother. He of course is anxious upon hearing the news of his father's death and wanting to avenge him. Laretes of course wants to fight Prince Hamlet and bring justice to his father's death and peace to his sister's mind. Laretes is also anxious about his sister's mental health, and therefore columbines are a perfect flower to attribute to Laretes.  
  
Ophelia then goes about mentioning daisies and violets. She says, "There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died." Both flowers stand for innocence, but violets also carry meanings of faithfulness, humility, and chastity. Ophelia expresses with the withering of the violets that she is no longer innocent and that her chastity was taken by Prince Hamlet, which was also hinted at earlier in the play. Ophelia's remark as to their being a daisy can be analyzed to it being her father who was innocent or her brother, but she makes sure to let everyone none that her innocence withered away when her father died.