

SHE, ROBOT: MALE CHARACTERS' MECHANISATION OF OPHELIA IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*

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Abstract

This paper entitled “She, Robot: Male Characters’ Mechanisation of Ophelia in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*” is an attempt to explain how Ophelia is deprived of her subjectivity and objectified into a machine-like being that cannot think, speak, and act independently. The agents of this mechanisation are three male characters, namely, Laertes, Polonius and Hamlet respectively. The paper traces the mechanisation process by expounding how each one of the male characters, thinking himself superior, commanding and abusing Ophelia until she turns into a broken machine. This may be considered as one of the major reasons behind her mental breakdown and, ultimately, her supposed suicide. The organisation of the text is based on the successive roles of each of the above-mentioned male characters in the process of turning Ophelia into a machine, i.e., a robotic character. The paper delineates the situation of renaissance women under a male-dominated society and highlights the danger of exerting too much pressure on people to a degree that may lead to untoward consequences.

Keywords: Laertes, Machine, Mechanisation, Objectification, Ophelia, Polonius, Robot, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

1. Introduction

The depiction of female characters in Shakespeare’s plays is an interesting and informative topic to study. One such widely debated female character is Ophelia. Ophelia becomes a victim of the major male characters in *Hamlet* who objectified into a machine-like human being that gradually fails to independently operate without being directed from outside. The agents of her mechanisation, which is a specific type of objectification, are three male characters: her brother, Laertes; her father, Polonius; and her assumed lover, Hamlet. Little by little, this mechanisation process changes her into a being that is unable to think, decide, speak and/or behave independently. This may be considered as one of the major reasons behind her mental breakdown and, ultimately, her supposed suicide. In the body of the paper, this topic will be argued with reference to relevant quotations from the play, expert opinions, and facts.

The organisation of the paper is based on the successive roles of each of the above-mentioned male characters in the process of turning Ophelia into a machine, i.e., a robotic character. It illustrates how each male character exercises his authority over her and, as a result, participates in destroying her subjectivity. Being individuals in a male-dominated

society, they think that they are entitled to protect her and, therefore, have to direct and control her thinking, speech and action lest she should incur some harm upon herself.

The paper asserts that Ophelia's male-dominated environment denies her the freedom of thinking, speaking and acting. This gradually aggravates her situation to the extent that she would be at a loss for what to do when Laertes is in France, Polonius is dead, and Hamlet is being sent to England. In this manner, she, like a machine, breaks down and becomes dysfunctional, namely, she dies. Ophelia's tragic end could be an awakening call that exercising too much pressure would most probably wreak havoc on individual and social and levels.

2. Literature Review

William Shakespeare's oeuvre, being in the centre of the English literature canon and perhaps of world literature canon, is one of the most hotly debated literary productions. Hence, there is much scholarly literature, especially about his plays. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is depicted as a renaissance archetypal woman who is expected to think, say, and do what the males order (Foss et al, 1999; Khan and Bughio, 2012; Karapanze, 2014; Olivas, 2015). This leaves her with no space for free self-expression because of which she loses her subjectivity and intellectual independence (Assiter, 1996; Foss et al, 1999; Kuhlman, 2002; Boobani, 2006; Rials, 2008; Karapndza, 2014; Güneç, 2015; Olivas, 2015;). Being unable to act independently, she always needs external directions from the male characters (Chen, 2011; Olivas, 2015). Thus, she breaks down mentally when she does not find the male characters around her to tell her what to think, say, and do (Bostrom; 1996; Boobani, 2006; Olivas, 2015). Finally, she becomes mad and supposedly commits suicide (Rials, 2008; Smith, 2008; Chen, 2011). Although the above-mentioned scholars provide useful and interesting information relevant to the theme of the present paper, none of them has referred to the process of Ophelia's mechanisation by the male characters in a systematic way and in modern technological terms. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to fill in this scholarly gap.

3. Research Method

The paper adopts a qualitative method of collecting and analysing data. Data have been collected from the primary source, *Hamlet*, and secondary sources including scholarly endeavors and historical information related to the play and the research theme of this paper. Then, these have been analysed and interpreted to support the claim of the paper. The paper claims that Laertes, Polonius and Hamlet turn Ophelia into a machine-like person who cannot act independently and that, in their absence, she breaks down mentally and eventually commits suicide. Accordingly, the argumentation traces the successive role of each of the above-mentioned male characters in the process of turning Ophelia into a robotic character. It illustrates how each male character partakes in destroying Ophelia's subjectivity and causes her final mental breakdown and suicide.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Laertes: "Think it no more"

It is worth noting that Laertes, Polonius and Hamlet believe that they are responsible to guide and protect Ophelia against dangers and pitfalls. Emily Rials asserts that they "feel compelled and entitled to advise her [Ophelia] on every aspect of her behavior". This shows the type of society Ophelia lives in; the males believe that they are physically and mentally

superior and hence act as guardians and sages towards the females whom they consider inferior, inexperienced, ignorant, and preys to their own passions.

As aforementioned, one of the agents of the mechanisation process is Ophelia's brother, Laertes. As a male character, Laertes exercises his authority upon his sister, who is viewed as experientially and intellectually inferior. This is evident in his authoritative voice that is stylistically characterised by the employment of assertions and imperatives. Before travelling back to France, he gives Ophelia a long-winded lecture about the perils of the supposed love affair between her and Prince Hamlet:

LAERTES. For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favour,
Hold it a fashion, and a toy in blood,
A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute,
No more.
OPHELIA. No more but so?
(Shakespeare, 2003: 1.3.5-9)

Part of Ophelia's subservience and inferiority to the male characters can be ascribed to the socially accepted female roles designated by the renaissance male-dominated society. Mesut Günenç states in this regard that "... her [Ophelia's] actions, attitudes, emotions and thoughts [are restricted] because of women's roles shaped by the patriarchal society in her time". Such a society has made her lose her self-confidence and finally develop a weak personality. In the conversation above, it is obvious that Laertes is the authoritative one since it is he who knows right from wrong and hence has the right to direct her. In contrast, Ophelia asks a question, which suggests that she is doubtful and hesitant because questions usually emanate from lack of knowledge and doubt. Without resorting to any circumlocutions, Laertes talks about Hamlet explicitly; such behaviour demonstrates his self-confidence and dauntless disposition. He acts as an experienced sage teaching her about life, appearance and reality while she, like an inexperienced pupil, asks questions to discover the world through him. He instructs that Hamlet's affection is a trivial game played by passion (blood), not reason; and that it is whimsical, reckless and transient, although it appears to have a nice scent and a beautiful visage. Thus, he tries to persuade her that Hamlet thinks of her as an object of pleasure, which, once consumed, will be dumped. Ophelia wonders if Hamlet's affection toward her is no more than her brother has claimed. Laertes firmly replies "Think it no more" (1.3.10) and follows it with a lengthy instructional speech that is characterised by the use of many imperative verbs such "*think, weigh, fear, keep, and be wary*" (1.3.11-44). The use of such verbs specifies the nature of the relationship between the interlocutors, i.e., he is like a remote control and she the machine operated with it. So, the only thing that she can think of is only what her brother thinks of; accordingly Ophelia's free thinking is substituted by Laertes's beliefs. Although Laertes may seem a caring brother, he, willing or not, turns her into a container of his own ideas while emptying her of any independent ideas whatsoever (Stokes, 1992, p. 85). Undeniably, there is a tone of sincerity in Laertes's speech towards his sister's honour and future. However, himself being a victim of a cultural mindset that empowers men and deprives women of their rights and freedom, he, perhaps inadvertently, acts as one of those who will cause Ophelia's mental breakdown and eventual death.

In the excerpt below, Ophelia responds to Laertes's long lecture obediently. However, being at the beginning of the process of her mechanisation, she still enjoys some mental independence as she gently ("good my brother") entreats him not to be like some falsely pious men who fail to practise what they preach while he is showing her the ragged road to Heaven:

OPHELIA. I shall th' effect of this good lesson keep
As watchman to my heart. But good my brother,
Do not as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles like a puffed and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede.

Laertes answers his sister with another order assuring her not to be worried about him; again when taking leave, he charges her to remember his teachings well:

LAERTES. Oh *fear* me not. . . .
(Shakespeare, 2003: 1.3.45-54)

.....
Farewell Ophelia, and remember well
What I have said to you. (1.3.84)

Essential to the claim of this paper is that fact that Ophelia does not resist or even argue further. She rather submissively succumbs to Laertes's commands. Tynelle Ann Olivas confirms that "[s]he [Ophelia] is the epitome of the Renaissance female conduct: she is obedient, chaste, and silent". Her choice of words in these quotations is crucial to the argument herein. Firstly, she refers to her mind (memory) that contains Laertes's instructions. Secondly, she confirms that her memory is locked; that is, in modern technological terminology, her memory is password-protected. Significantly, the one (watchman) who has the password (the key) to access this memory and manage its content is Laertes. In this fashion, the mechanisation process has begun to take effect as Ophelia herself verifies her objectification in the form of a machine:

OPHELIA. 'Tis in my memory locked,
And you yourself shall keep the *key* of it. (1.3.85-86)

Thus, Ophelia has started the process of losing her individual subjectivity and metamorphosing into an externally controlled machine. From now on, she has no freedom and all her actions would be under the close surveillance of the "watchman", i.e., observations and directions of Laertes. Laertes is about to leave when another mechanising agent, Polonius, arrives and hears his children's last exchange.

4.2 Polonius: "Think yourself a baby"

As Laertes is about to depart, their father, Polonius, joins them and hears his son asking Ophelia to remember his advice. When Polonius knows that Laertes has been warning Ophelia about Hamlet, he hails it as a good idea and declares that he, too, has heard about Hamlet's tendency towards his daughter, Ophelia:

POLONIUS. Marry, well bethought.
'Tis told me he [Hamlet] hath very oft of late

Given private time to you, and you yourself
Have of your audience been most free and bounteous.
If it be so, as so 'tis put on me,
And that in way of caution, I must tell you
You do not understand yourself so clearly
As it behooves my daughter, and your honour.
What is between you? Give me up the truth. (1.3.90-99)

It is worth mentioning that there is a striking resemblance between Laertes's rationale for warning Ophelia and that of his father. This proves that both are products of the same culture. In the extract above, Polonius treats his daughter as if she were a child who does not know and understand her social position and hence she does not know proper conduct. In this regard, Günenç affirms that her father "... treat[s] her as a child who does not have self-awareness, understanding and nervousness about the ways of the world". Just like his son, Polonius straightforwardly orders Ophelia to tell him the truth about her affair with Hamlet. She dutifully and honestly answers that Hamlet has demonstrated his affection for her. Deeming her ignorant of the risks of such relationships and foolish to trust Hamlet's love offers, he belittles her:

POLONIUS. Affection? Puh! You speak like a green girl,
Unsifted in such perilous circumstances.
Do you believe his tenders as you call them? (1.3.101-104)

Ophelia's response to Polonius's question above corroborates the claim about objectifying her into a robot-like character. She naively utters, "I do not know my lord what I should think" (1.3. 105). Such a remark reinforces the notion that she is gradually losing her faculty of independent thinking because she has been treated by the male characters as a credulous and ignorant person who needs external guidance. Being trapped among male characters, Ophelia has lost her subjectivity as Alison Assiter clarifies that being an objectified "[w]oman [Ophelia] cannot express her own self, her needs and her pleasures". Likewise, Günenç maintains that "... she [Ophelia] does not know how to think, what to think and how to use her language". Significantly her father's reaction supports this claim, "Marry I'll teach you. Think yourself a baby ..." (1.3.106). This illustrates the type of relationship between these two interlocutors: it is the relationship of a teacher, Polonius, and his pupil, Ophelia. Polonius, like Laertes, is as a remote control and she a machine operated with it. Accordingly, he starts to educate her about life and she must compliantly accept his lessons. To do this, he compels her to think of herself as a baby, i.e., as a tabula rasa that has no knowledge and experience. Polonius's speeches show that he views his daughter as a guileless and gullible person.

Although Ophelia certifies that Hamlet has offered her his love in an honourable manner and has sworn to her that his love is true, her father ridicules her speech by portraying her as a stupid naïve girl. Then after giving her a somewhat long lecture about Hamlet, he enjoins her to be careful and to behave well, "Look to't I charge you. Come your ways." (1.3.135). This speech foregrounds Polonius's authoritative voice, characterised by the use of imperative verbs such as 'look, charge, come'. Unable to discuss the matter more, Ophelia is obliged to obey her father, "I shall obey, my lord." (1.3.136). In the way, the second agent behind Ophelia's mechanisation has played its damaging role in divesting her of her subjectivity. She eventually becomes the epitome of the archetypal male-created image of a

woman who “doesn't know how to think or how to behave unless she is told to” (Chen, 2011, p. 4).

In a thematically marked line in the play, it is shown how Polonius, a representative of the male mentality, thinks of his daughter. After knowing about Hamlet's weird behaviour in Ophelia's chamber and interpreting it as a sign of love, he rushes to King Claudius and Queen Gertrude to break the news to them. Although he has previously warned Ophelia not to allow Hamlet approach her, he unashamedly plans a meeting between his own daughter and Hamlet to prove his claim (Colin Wilcockson, 1991, p. 137). While Hamlet would be walking in the lobby of the castle, Polonius arranges, he would “loose [his] daughter [Ophelia] to him [Hamlet].” “Loose” is, perhaps, a connotatively suggestive verb that unmask the male's view of the female. The verb “loose” can be figuratively associated with tethered animals. Ophelia is then pictured as an animal whose tether is in Polonius's hands to control her action. Moreover, as an adjective, “loose” was used in Shakespeare's times to refer to an ill-disciplined, immoral woman who were exploited for different purposes (Blake, 2004, pp. 12, 16). Rials's observations validate this interpretation: “Indeed, Ophelia's function within the hierarchy of the Danish court is not as an individual, ..., but rather as a pawn. ... Polonius uses Ophelia as a bait to watch Hamlet's behavior ...”.

This is at the heart of the mechanisation process. She is treated as an object (pawn; an animal) of a male-designed and male-directed game while she is denied the right to voice her own opinion or to refuse to partake in the game. To the male characters, she is nothing but a handy tool utilized for their own vested interests (Chen, 2011, p. 2; Grimmett, 2005, pp. 34-25). Ophelia participates in the plan because that is what is culturally expected from her as a modest girl and because she always tries to please others, especially her father, brother and Hamlet (Khan and Bughio, 2012, p. 31). After receiving the effects of the second mechanising agent, Ophelia is left alone to solely encounter Hamlet's complex mind and language, the third agent behind her loss of subjective individuality and consequential mental breakdown and possible suicide.

4.3 Hamlet: “I loved you not”

The ghost of Old Hamlet tells his son, Hamlet, that has been murdered by his brother Claudius and requires Hamlet to remember and avenge his death. Hamlet vows to delete the entire content of his memory, which he considers trivial compared to the gravity of his father's command, and to save only his father's request therein. Lamentably for Ophelia, this erasure includes her as well. Wearing untidy clothes and a pantomime-like visit, subsequently, Hamlet appears in her chamber and ends his affair with her in a very weird way. Without uttering a word, he expresses his inner status via some ambiguous gestures that leave her baffled. Ophelia recounts this to her father and also informs him that she has rejected Hamlet's letters and prevented him from approaching her as her father has decreed. Equipped with such information, Polonius infers that Hamlet's mysterious behaviour must be a sign of unrequited love. Significantly, when Polonius asks her if she thinks Hamlet has become mad for her love, Ophelia adds, “My lord I do not know, ...” (2.1.83). Her lack of free thinking and judgment underscores the claim that the male characters gradually turn her into a robotic character that needs to be told what do think, say and do. However, she operates well only when she is externally guided.

Ophelia and Hamlet meet as has been arranged by Polonius. Hamlet does not explicitly turn Ophelia into a machine, but his behaviour and speech indirectly reinforce Laertes and Polonius's process of mechanising her. In this meeting, she returns some letters and

souvenirs to Hamlet as a token of the end of their affair. Surprisingly, the latter denies that he has ever given her anything and he also questions her honesty. As is seen in the excerpt below, he confuses her by averring that once he loved her and then within seconds denying that. This act perplexes her to an extent that she cannot think logically and discern truth from falsity of his statements. Having a superficial understanding of Hamlet's equivocal speeches, she ruefully laments being deceived by him. Hamlet, inadvertently, ascertains to Ophelia that her brother and father's warnings were true. Thus, her mechanisation process is developed yet more because of Hamlet:

HAMLET. . . . I did love you once.

OPHELIA. Indeed my lord you made me believe so.

HAMLET. You should not have believed me I loved you not.

OPHELIA. I was the more deceived. (3.1.114-118)

Melissa Bostrom argues that the "conflicting messages from Hamlet ... seem a plausible explanation for Ophelia's madness" (1996, p. 39). Bostrom verifies that Hamlet's "I did love you" and "I loved you not" messages can be considered two detrimentally confusing factors to Ophelia's already weakened mental potential.

Then Hamlet shocks Ophelia much more as he announces that he is capable of committing all the vices in the world, "I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in" (3.1.122-124). She becomes astounded by her contrasted images of Hamlet: the previous Hamlet whom she thought the paragon of purity and goodness, and this current diabolical Hamlet. Hamlet's confession makes her brother and father's caveats much more plausible; hence, she thinks that she should observe their advice and shun Hamlet. As a result, she exclaims, "And I of ladies most deject and wretched, ... / Oh woe is me / T'have seen what I have seen, see what I see" (3.1.149, 155). She woefully bemoans entrusting Hamlet with herself and discovering that he does not deserve that trust. She, therefore, regards herself as the most dejected woman. Olivas and Farzad Boobani concur that, being deprived of independent thinking and judgment, Ophelia is left bewildered and hence unable to comprehend Hamlet's enigmatic speeches and actions (2015, p. 30; 2006, p. 91). This exemplifies how, although most probably unintentionally, Hamlet plays an active role in Ophelia's mechanisation process.

Lifton explains how the process of brainwashing is conducted. According to him, the victims are first convinced to reject their past life and admit that it was evil and second they undergo a process of re-education (1989, p. 5). This is exactly what happens to Ophelia when she admits that her past life with Hamlet was an illusion and thus she rejects it now. Her admission strengthens Laertes and Polonius's allegations regarding Hamlet's false affection. Thus the male characters deprive her of any independent critical and evaluative reasoning ability and thus pave the way for her complete mental breakdown.

There could be different interpretations for Hamlet's unusual behaviour. Perhaps, because he loves Ophelia truly, he wants to save her from the upcoming dangers (Stokes, 1992, p. 86; Olivas, 2015, pp. 43, 46). Perhaps, he knows that he is being watched by Polonius and the King and wants them to believe that he gone mad, as he has informed his close friend, Horatio, that he will act as a mad person (1.5.175-176). Perhaps, he is outraged by Ophelia, who has returned his letters and gifts. Perhaps, he thinks that Ophelia, like other women, is also a unfaithful (Walizer, 1987, p. 42). Whatever the reasons behind his odd behaviour, he underpins, even if unintentionally, Laertes and Polonius's speeches and,

hence, develops the process of Ophelia's mechanisation. This is because she is unable to comprehend Hamlet's cryptic messages because they are too complex for her simple mind to decode.

In the exchanges between Ophelia and Hamlet, the latter always dominates the conversations qualitatively and quantitatively. She is certainly unable to understand his intellectually loaded language. Bughio believes this is because of "Hamlet's familial and educational background where he excels in comparison with Ophelia" (28). Alternatively, perhaps, it is because of her archetypal characterization that denies her enough space, linguistic competence and intellectual capacity to express herself and engage in argumentations (Karapandza, 2014, p. 12; Foss et al, 1996, p. 153). Moreover, as Showalter states, it could be because Hamlet "thinks too much" while Ophelia "feels too much" (qtd. by Bostrom, 1996, p. 40); in other words, Hamlet is presented as a rational human being capable of independent, complex thinking and Ophelia as an emotional one whose feelings cloud her judgment.

During *The Mouse Trap*, the play within the play, there is a notable dialogue between Hamlet and Ophelia. Again, he behaves in an abnormal and attention-seeking way. He asks her if he could lie in her lap (3.2.99). She tersely refuses without giving any explanation. Obviously, she does not want to be embarrassed in front of the King, Queen and her own father. He then asks her mischievously if she has interpreted his request as an immoral one (3.2.103). Because she is not consciously independent and her mind is no match for his complex thinking, she mechanically responds, "I think nothing my lord." (3.2.104). Her robotic answer could possibly be more noticeable if the line is scanned into three iambic feet each uttered with a slight pause after it as follows: "I think / nothing / my lord". After her brother and father's warnings and Hamlet's previously unexpected and violent behaviour, she is unable to analyse Hamlet's requests and interpret them in any way whatsoever, moral or otherwise. Her laconically robotic reply proves that her mechanisation process has eventually taken effect. Accordingly, she cannot operate in the absence of her external controllers who would tell her what to think, say, and do. Rials attests, in this regard, that her inability to think anything is a definite sign of her lack of "self-determination" (2008, p. 153), which heralds her complete self-loss.

Another crucial point to illuminate in the short exchanges between Hamlet and Ophelia is the latter's mechanic way of reacting to Hamlet's questions. She usually responds to his questions with "ay" and "no" (Bienias, 2011, p. 31). Her too short and structurally parallel responses depict her more as an automaton. Moreover, her overly simple linguistic choices reveal her lack of intellectual complexity. Such truths significantly signal her fast deteriorating towards utter mental breakdown. Furthermore, Ophelia is denied the talking and acting space given to the male characters. Relatedly, Olivas expounds that "[f]or most of the play, Ophelia only speaks when spoken to, acts only when dictated to do so, and always obediently acquiesces to the demands of her male sovereigns" (2015, p. 11). Such passivity is the product of a male-dominated society that eventually causes her premature death.

As foreshowed, when Ophelia reappears near the end of the play, she is totally mad. There are several collaborating reasons behind her mental breakdown and her eventually supposed suicide. Firstly, the unbearable pressure exercised upon her by her brother, father and the court life has left her no room for free individual thinking and choice (Kuhlman, 2002, p. 167). Secondly, Hamlet's weird behaviour and equivocations regarding their affair forced her to believe much more in her brother and father's warnings. Thirdly, the strongest blow to her as a machine is the absence of her brother (travelling to France) and of her

father (killed by Hamlet) and of Hamlet (sent to England). It is worth noting as well that Hamlet's killing of Polonius renders her completely desperate of any reunion with Hamlet; it also proves, to her, her brother and father's fears of Hamlets. The impact of this murdering act is much greater than her simple mind's capacity to comprehend and absorb the shock. Likewise, Barbara Smith maintains that:

The issues of perceptual and emotional dissonances, lover's rejection, paternal loss, and the deprivation of knowledge with which Ophelia struggles throughout the play, combine explosively, engendering—pitifully but not surprisingly—madness and suicide.” (2008, p. 98)

Ophelia's madness turns her into an uncontrollable broken machine. That is why she/it talks incessantly and hysterically about her unconscious thoughts, which have been kept in check and denied manifestation by the external controlling agents. She finally manages to outpour her long-repressed true personality through madness (i.e., broken machine). However, even this seemingly positive act is not taken into serious consideration because it is regarded as raving as Yi-Chi Chen elucidates that “... the transformation [from sanity to madness] reveals her [Ophelia's] struggle between the exploited sanity and the awakened yet incomprehensible femininity” (2011, p. 3).

Bradley confirms that fact that Ophelia's existence is surrounded by Laertes, Polonius, and Hamlet (1992, p. 136). The negative effect of these male characters on her has proved devastating as each has manipulated her and ordered her to think and behave as he has desired. This paper has followed her journey of transformation or deformation “... from a young woman confident in her love for and from Hamlet into a selfless wraith into a madwoman” (Rials, 2008, p. 152).

5. Conclusion

The paper has argued and proved that the major male characters in the play have objectified Ophelia into a machine-like human being, who cannot act independently. This has been done by destroying her subjectivity and implanting therein a male-created mentality. Although *Hamlet* presents an imaginary story and Ophelia's deterioration into madness and committing suicide are part of it and thus fictitious, it significantly reflects on what happened to women in the renaissance male-dominated society. In addition, it makes readers aware of the risks of exerting too much pressure upon people because it would finally cause behavioural outbursts and subsequent devastation.

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