



The primrose path

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Ophelia:

But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And reaks not his own rede.

Laertes:

O, fear me not.

[Hamlet Act 1, scene 3, 46–51](#)

Yes, we have Shakespeare to blame for all the confusion between "primrose path" and "garden path." Ophelia, Hamlet's sweetheart, coins the former, meaning "the path of luxury," apparently linking primroses to libertine indulgence. The primrose had, since at least the fifteenth century, been associated with the metaphorical "flower" of youth, and so, indirectly, with youthful appetites.

Here, Ophelia responds to her brother's warnings to play things cool with Hamlet. Laertes is about to depart for Paris, a city Ophelia regards as at least as corrupting as Hamlet's love, and she turns Laertes' preachings back on the preacher. Indulging in mild satire on the church, she counsels her brother to "reak his own rede" (heed his own advice) and avoid the lifestyle of a "puff'd" (arrogant), incautious libertine. She seems to accept his assurances, but her father Polonius is hardly so sanguine—he will not shy from sending a spy after his son.

Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:

<http://www.enotes.com/shakespeare-quotes>