

Father-Child Relationship in Shakespearean Comedies and Romance

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Lots of critics believe that “relationship” could be a central theme for Shakespeare’s plays. However, what Shakespeare portrays is not merely the relationship about “love,” but also the relationship in a family. This paper therefore aims to discuss the father-son relationship and the father-daughter relationship in the families portrayed in Shakespeare’s plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*. I will analyze how the father-son relationship differs from the father-daughter relationship as exploring the love stories taking place in lives of our heroes and heroines. Additionally, I would like to bravely suspect Shakespeare’s intention to overturn the patriarchal frame in an exotic territory while depicting the struggle and entanglement of a father character who realizes the lonely emptiness he has to face after fulfilling the happiness of his child.

Keywords: relationship, love, father-son relationship, father-daughter relationship

Introduction

“Relationship,” in the eyes of many critics, could be a central theme for Shakespeare’s plays, including comedies and romance. However, what Shakespeare intends to present is definitely not just the relationship about love but the relationship in a family. This paper therefore aims to discuss the child-father relationship in the families depicted in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*. I will analyze how the father-son relationship differs from the father-daughter relationship as exploring the love stories taking place in lives of our heroes and heroines. I would also like to bravely suspect that Shakespeare tries to overturn the patriarchal frame while casting his characters in the non-governmental territory, in which Shakespeare depicts the struggle and entanglement of a father character who chooses to fulfill the happiness of his child even though realizing the lonely emptiness he has to face.

Father-Son Relationship

Anthony J. Lewis, in his essay *The Spirit of My Father*, notes that Shakespeare’s version of the typical New Comedy love story usually begins with the separation of a young man from his father. This father-son separation though has no sign on the son’s or the father’s loyalties, it has a profound effect on the young man’s social position, attitudes and feelings. It even has a huge impact on his relationship with the lady whom he will soon meet and wish to marry (Lewis, 1992a). The device of “father-son separation,” according to Lewis’s research, is

traditional and of various origins, most from Greek New Comedy through Roman comedy, and some from medieval romance. Such a method can also be found throughout Elizabethan drama and in continental Renaissance comedy, as well as in the non-dramatic literature of the period. Shakespeare's plays, however, unlike the Roman comedy, which focus on simple external motives, winning a father's blessing, scheming for a large allowance, undermining parental authority, tend to focus on the consequential matters, those that are internal and psychological, for instance, the force of memory, conflicts arising from the contradiction between a son's financial independence and his immaturity, inhibitions and loss of confidence that result from invidious comparisons between father and son. Even in plays in which a young man's father is alive, his power to affect the son in tangible ways is considerably diminished, primarily because Shakespeare physically distances the two; for instance, in *The Tempest*, Ferdinand and Alonso each thinks the other dead and they are on different parts of the island for most of the play.

Though sorrowing for the loss of father, as Lewis maintains, the fatherless young men of Shakespearean comedies, usually accept the harsh reality quickly and occasionally turn the negative sadness into something positive—that is—the coming of an entire new world with independence and adventure. “This, in fact,” as Lewis tells,

Is the critical aspect of the death of the father in Shakespearean comedies: the young man is now responsible for, and to, himself, especially with regard to marriage and money matters, which were, of course, intimately related for the nobility and the rising middle class in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The death of the father, therefore, very often ‘makes’ the son... a financially independent adult.” (Lewis, 1992a, p. 13)

While the loss of father, in other words, symbolizes the disappearance of the old authority; it also means the rise of the new. As Lewis borrow Lawrence Stone's words, “If a boy was the heir to the estate, he was then more or less free to suit himself” (Lewis, 1992a, pp. 13-14).

In *The Tempest*, Ferdinand at his first appearance was terribly suffering from the loss of his father, he was “Sitting on a bank”, and “Weeping again the King my [his] father's wrack” (I. ii. 393-394). Nevertheless, his distress at what he believes—the King's death—has soon disappeared at his first sight at Miranda and his personal sorrow has soon transformed into a lover's plea:

FERDINAND: My Prime request,
 Which I do last pronounce, is, O you wonder!
 If you be maid or no?
 MIRANDA: No Wonder, sir,
 But certainly a maid.
 FERDINAND: My Language? Heavens!
 I am the best of them that speak this speech,
 Were I but where'tis spoken. (Shakespeare, 1992, pp. 428-433)

At the moment of being astonished by the beauty in front of him, Ferdinand soon leaves his previous sadness behind and accepts the death of his father as well as reminds himself of his social status and being the successor to the throne of his father. Ferdinand, though suffering from the loss of his father, soon realizes the benefits he receives afterward—the heritage, the kingdom of Naples. He, therefore, introduced himself, “I am the king of Naples” (Shakespeare, 1992, p. 446) and proposed to Miranda directly: “I'll make you the Queen of Naples” (p.

451). It is the loss of father that makes the young man have confidence of his financial wealth, convinces the young man his social position and his self-independence as a grown up.

Father-Daughter Relationship

The parent-child relationship for the heroines is totally different from that of the heroes. The loss of father helps the young man to be free and independent or in other words to become the new power. The situation of the lady's side is completely opposite. Father has the power to dominate his daughter, treating the daughter as his own property, controlling her life and even her marriage especially at the beginning of the play. Even though the heroine is far away or separated from her father, the young woman, unlike the young man who could completely make decisions of his own, still receives huge impact from the patriarchic authority.

The love story of Lysander and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* begins with a father-daughter argument. Egeus, Hermia's father, wants his daughter to marry Demetrius; nevertheless, Hermia loves no one but Lysander. Therefore, the enraged father brings his daughter to a higher authority: Theseus. The father says, "As she is mine, I may dispose of her/ Which shall be either to this gentleman/Or to her death." (MND I. i. 41)

Theseus' judgment of the case is more objective, less impassioned than either of these. In essence, he suggests that wise father must choose husbands for obedient daughters. When Hermia says, "I would my father looked but my eyes," he replies, "Rather your eyes must with his judgment look" (I, I, 56-57). And his case is demonstrated by his description of the father-daughter relationship (Hart, 1972, pp. 51-62):

THESEUS: What say you, Hermia? Be advised fair maid:
To you your father should be as a god;
One that composed your beauties, yea, and one
To whom you are but as a form in wax
By him imprinted and within his power
To leave the figure or disfigure it. (I. i. 46-51)

The world of Theseus is a world of reason and law. The father character in Theseus' world is then the representative of reason and law. While the father, in Hart's words, can consider multiple aspects and is guided by concern, love, maturity and sense, the daughter is merely led by her emotions or her love towards the man she chooses. The father therefore is a more reliable person to select a husband for his daughter than the daughter herself. Additionally, it is believed that the father has the determinative power to dominate his daughter's destiny. Theseus directly exposes Hermia's result of disobeying her father's words:

THESEUS: Either to die the death or to abjure
For ever the society of men.
Therefore, fair Hermia, question your desires;
Know of your youth, examine well your blood,
Whether, if you yield not to your father's choice,
You can endure the livery of a nun,
For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd,
To live a barren sister all your life,
Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon.
Thrice-blessed they that master so their blood,
To undergo such maiden pilgrimage;
But earthlier happy is the rose distill'd,

Than that which withering on the virgin thorn
Grows, lives and dies in single blessedness. (I. i)

Nevertheless, Hermia insists on her will, she chooses to escape the world where the father and the law exist. Unfortunately, things do not run so smoothly as she expects. In the wood, there is no father, no reason and law, only imagination, magic, and irrationality. However, the young lovers cannot overcome the difficulties on their way to pursue love, for there is another power dominating the woods, that is, Oberon. Oberon, another authority symbolizes the patriarchy power in the wood. It seems that the lovers can never escape from the patriarchy domination, even they have already eloped from the world of mankind, and they still cannot escape the net of patriarchy authority. It is the magical drops from Oberon that still controls the lovers.

Additionally, in *The Merchant of Venice*, we can see two cases of father-daughter relationships contrasting with one another. In both cases, we may, again, see the wishes of daughters to marry and the attitudes of their fathers. Jessica, in the beginning of the play, is restrained by her father, Shylock. Shylock believes that his order is everything, and as his daughter Jessica has no right to say no. "Do as I bid you," Shylock demands, "Shut doors after you; / Fast bind, fast find" (pp. 53-54). This is the way Shylock instructs his daughter. Obviously, the patriarchy pressure from Shylock to Jessica is not less than that from Egeus to Hermia. Nevertheless, Jessica's break from her father is much sharper than what Hermia does to Egeus. Whereas Hermia and Lysander, before eloping, have tried to persuade Egeus, "Jessica's elopement comes like a thunderclap to Shylock".

Hart has discussed what Jessica's elopement means to Shylock in his essay.

He [Shylock] is so isolated from Jessica, ... so little aware of her as a person, that we tend to feel that he deserves the heartache her elopement brings to him. Yet the lack of concern arises simply from his complete conviction that she is the girl he thinks her to be. When he speaks his foreboding to her, when he orders her to "Lock up my doors... Let not the sound of shallow foppery enter My sober house: (II, v, 29, 35-36), he is expressing an attitude towards Venetians which he expects her to share. Whatever we read into their relationship, whether Shylock is to be considered villain or persecuted alien, the failure of understanding and feeling between father and daughter, except at some incommunicable and unrealized level, stands out. (Hart, 1972, pp. 51-62)

It is the failure of understanding between father and daughter that contributes their later separation; moreover, it is this failure that helps to define the nature of love between Lorenzo and Jessica.

The other case of father-daughter relationship in the play happens to Portia and her dead father. Although her father passed away, she accepts the strict requirements imposed by her father for the young men who want to woo her. "If I live to be as old as Sibylla, I will die as chaste as Diana unless I be obtained by the manner of father's will" (I. ii, 116-118). As Hart tells, what Portia does is exactly what Theseus requests Hermia, that is, to follow her father's judgment instead of hers. Though Portia's father is no longer in the world, she could follow her own will or set up whatever rules she likes, she chooses to obey the strict requirement which might threaten her happiness. Portia follows her father's judgment which is believed to be certain and trustworthy in Theseus' words. The risk, as Hart depicts, is great but Portia lives by it and she triumphs.

While the fathers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice* regard their daughters as their possessions and presume that their girls ought to follow their orders; the father in *The Tempest* possesses his daughter entirely to himself from her infancy through twelve years to the verge of womanhood on a desert island. In fact, Miranda is much like the Hermia in Theseus' words: "To you your father should be as a god; / One that

composed your beauties, yea, and one / To whom you are but as a form in wax / By him imprinted and within his power / To leave the figure or disfigure it (I. i.)". Miranda, since grown up in the island, has no idea on what the world outside the island is. According to Prospero, he is the "schoolmaster" who "make thee [her] more profit / than other princess..." (I. ii. 172-173). In Theseus' words, she is the wax and Prospero is the imprinted power that forms the wax into whatever figure he likes.

Not only Miranda's life, but also her love romance and the difficulties in love are composed by Prospero. It is Prospero's order that makes Ariel use his music to lead Ferdinand to the presence of Prospero and Miranda. And these two young people are quickly appealed to each other. As Lysander tells "The course of true love never did run smooth" (I. i. 134), "Prospero", though seeing these two young people being infatuated with each other, "understands the needs to play the father's mock role as the barrier to young love, the need to make Ferdinand realize the value of his daughter through laboring to earn her lest 'lest too light wining / make the prize light (II. ii. pp. 452-453)". "He also understands the need for the daughter to choose her husband over her father,When he commands Miranda not to talk with his prisoner or reveal her name, he is purposely acting to fulfill both roles" (Boose, 1982, pp. 325-347).

As Theseus maintains, Father is the god of the daughter; the father roles in Shakespearean plays seem to have the inclination of controlling, restriction, but hardly ever being willing to set their daughters free, except Prospero. In the love stories of Shakespearean comedies, usually, it is the daughters who disobey the fathers' authority and escape from the patriarchic control, for instance, Jessica elopes with Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*; Hermia elopes with Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While the father characters enact their role to restrict their daughters, Prospero is definitely not an exception. His purpose has always been to educate and discipline Miranda. However, at the end of *The Tempest*, we see a father who has learned what nature requires of him: the father must take part with his nobler reason against his fury and let his beloved Miranda go. Yet doing so leaves Prospero with the lonely emptiness apparent in his confession to Alonso: "I / Have lost my daughter...In this last tempest" (V. i. 147-148). Recognizing his lost of the only family bonding, Prospero, despite the loneliness he has to face and, sets his Miranda free, which makes him different from other fathers in Shakespearean plays.

Conclusion

To sum up, father, for generations, is always the central authority of the family. In Shakespearean play, young man, to attain another patriarchic power, is set to be divided from his father. With deprivation of father's protection, the young men have the chance to grow up and have the real independence physically, spiritually and financially. By contrast, to expose the patriarchic authority in the family, daughter is the one to obey the father's restriction. As mentioned above, father has dominating power towards the daughters. Obviously, the mission for fathers in Shakespearean plays is to select their daughters' husbands, or to create difficulties on their daughters' way to marriage arbitrarily or purposely. In the world of Theseus, fathers are born to decide their daughters' marriages even though the father does not exist in the same world as his daughter.

Take Portia as the example; since her father died, there seemed to be no strict limitation for her to go on the rules her father set while alive; if she wanted, she could have free will to choose whomever she wants, to live in whatever way she prefers. She is like the heroes in Shakespeare's plays, inheriting the heritage and owning the

freedom of making their own choices; nevertheless, she decides to follow the father's last arrangement for her future marriage. As Portia being willing to accept the father's judgment, Hermia and Jessica decide to elope while facing the restraint from their father while choosing their husbands. It seems that the sterner the father is, the further the daughter escapes. The only way to keep the love between father and daughter is to let go of the daughter. Therefore, at the end of *The Tempest* Prospero, though sighing the loss of his daughter, is the only father who keeps the daughter's heart with him. Even though Shakespeare always portrays the father characters in the frame of patriarchy society, he intends to masquerade a patriarchy authority in portraying the Prospero character. In the extotic island, Prospero himself is the source of authority, he therefore masquerades the strick father roles in forbidding Mirada from contacting her lover while knowing that the difficulties he sets purposely are the necessary evil a father character should possess. Mirada seems to disobey her father's words as other heroies discussed above, she however is stepping on the way her father sets intentionally. Prospero, though putting on the mask as the patriarchy authroity, cannot disguise his inner sorrow. At the end of the play, his words to Alonzo expose the weakness of the patriarchy authority, which I believe is Shakespeare's intention to overturn the father image of his time, being strong and tough always. Prospero's sigh and sorrow for losing her daughter in front of the other man is hardly seen in the patriarchy society, not to mention his decision to let go of her daughter. By doing so, Sheakespeare exposes the credo of father-daughter relationship, which again reverses the traditional one in the patriarchy society. Though taking over the daughter in the patriarchy society is the mission of fathers; however, domination will never work; to let go of the daughters is the only way of having them.

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