Of Fathers and Sons: Filial Love in Shakespeare's Work

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Abstract

The present analysis tries to demonstrate that in William Shakespeare's plays the father and son relationship is significant beyond the perimeter of basic family ties. Following a pattern introduced by the young Gobbo / old Gobbo interplay in The Merchant of Venice, the son is constantly searching for his father's approval because of the bond that unites them. This bond, made of love, respect, and duty, comes to represent the vehicle through which the natural order reins in the world. The father and son relationship will be discussed in relation to two history plays, 1 Henry IV and King Lear. In addition, Hamlet will be used as a background where the analogy will explain how the father and son pattern is open to a double take, proving that paternity and heredity are two sides of the same coin.

Keywords: *Elizabethan theatre, King Lear, Hamlet, Henry IV, William Shakespeare.*

Introduction

"It is a wise father that knows his own child," says Lancelot Gobbo when he is about to meet Old Gobbo, his father, and leave one master, Shylock, for another, Bassanio, in William Shakespear's *The Merchant of Venice*. Lancelot's words and the masterful scene of situational comedy in which they are proclaimed provide a framework for Shakespeare's portrayal of the father-son / daughter relationships throughout his plays. Even though Lancelot begins by confusing his father, in the end he asks for and gets his blessing. Confused himself by the difficult choice of whether to leave his master, puzzled by the inner struggle between the fiend that commends his leaving and the conscience that reminds him of his duties to Shylock, Lancelot finally decides to leave Shylock and for this he needs his

father's approval. On the one hand, this strange and highly comical scene sets the stage for more famous and complex sons, who, in turn, seem to be torn by inner struggle and need paternal validation. On the other hand, old Gobbo's blindness, deception and doubt speak volumes for his final recognition of the son. In different contexts and at higher stakes, the father-son relationship envisaged by young and old Gobbo informs the special ties between young and old Hamlet, between Hal and Henry IV, or between Gloucester and Edgar. In the end, there are not just the fathers who are wise, but also their sons.

On a similar note, critics such as M. M. Mahood, the editor of the New Cambridge version of *The Merchant of Venice*, believe that with the scene in which old Gobbo gives blessing to his son,

> *Shakespeare may have hit upon the comic "business" that follows upon Lancelot kneeling for his father's blessing because he had made use, two scenes back, of Jacob tricking Isaac into giving him his blessing*. (Shakespeare, 1987, p. 85)

The scene mentioned in this quote refers to the one in which Shylock explains to Antonio and Bassanio the virtue of indirect interest. In his explanation, Shylock cites the biblical story of Jacob and Isaac. The crucial aspect of that story happens in Genesis 27 when, Jacob with the help of his mother Rebecca deceived the father about his real identity. Because he was blind, Isaac mistook Jacob's touch for that of Esau. Consequently, Isaac blessed Jacob and made him his heir. This *antic disposition* informs the facets of the father and son relationship discussed in this paper. At first, the fathers seem to be easily misled in the expectations they have towards their sons, suspecting them of not being worthy of their roles. That is the case with both Henry IV and Gloucester who seriously doubt, for different reasons, the quality of Hal and Edgar. Second, the good and worthy sons (Hal and Edgar) need to fight the bad and ruthless half-brothers (Edmund and Hotspur, who is not Hal's brother, but he is certainly his foe) for paternal recognition.

Fathers and Sons in Hamlet, Henry IV and King Lear

The father and son relationship will be discussed in relation to two of Shakespeare's history plays, *1 Henry IV* and *King Lear*. Additionally, *Hamlet* will be used as a background where the analogy will explain how the father and son pattern is opened to a double take. Paternity and heredity are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, fathers question their sons' capabilities of bearing their names; on the other, the sons fight for their fathers' inheritance, not exclusively in the name of the father, but more in the name of natural order. In this way, both

father and son become symbols of successive worlds. They are no longer, if they ever were, common people and they do not enact the regular family ties. For instance, in Elizabethan England the family was considered a version of the state, which in turn was considered a version of the universe. Hierarchy was everything as long as the father ruled, like a royal figure, over all of his subjects. The family bond was in itself more of a bondage. Rebellion was considered treason and heavily punished. In other words, the roles had been assigned long before the actors could get a grasp of the entire play. The only advantage fathers have in front of their sons is age, which is not always an asset. Moreover, even when the son is the worthy heir, his task does not become easier. As Peter Alexander points out in his book *Hamlet, Father and Son* (1955),

> *Hamlet has had time to study at Wittenberg; he belongs to a later world, but his task is not lighter than his father's. Where his father wrestled with flesh and blood, the son has now an adversary of a more metaphysical and spectral kind. He still carries the sword, but he knows it may well be a sword that will not save.* (p. 169)

It is obvious that father and son become the symbols of the worlds that created them or of the worlds, as the case may be with Hal and possible with Edgar, which they created. For instance, in *King Lear*¸ the fathers' skepticism, directed toward their sons and the order they inhibit, as the case is with Gloucester's famous repartee to Edmund's machinations from I.ii. 96-108, can only be met by the (legitimate) sons' agency. Whether they make use of the sword or not becomes secondary in a trial that places the burden of restoring order on the sons' shoulders.

If the "sword will not save" Hamlet, in *1 Henry IV* the opposite is quite evident in Hal's case, but this does not mean that Hotspur is so metaphysical and spectral an adversary. Yet, Bolingbroke, King Henry IV, Hal's father, continually wrestles with flesh and blood. In a play about honor, which in Falstaff's strange speech in V.i. is the attribute of the dead, Henry's ungrateful comparison of Hal and Hotspur, in I.i., sets the stage for remorse and preemptive action. Guilty of deposing a king, Henry feels threatened by Hotspur's eagerness to claim honor and pursue justice. Because of that, Henry recognizes himself more in Northumberland's son than in his own. His envy, openly and publicly admitted as a sin, blinds him and makes him incapable of realizing that while Hotspur is about to replicate the old world, by deposing a king, Hal is set for inventing a new world. In I.i. and, later when father and son meet in III.ii., Henry is not questioning paternity, but rather heredity, thus legitimizing his own deed: he still wants Hal as a son, but needs Percy as his heir. When he wishes the fairies had changed the two sons in the cradle, and "Called mine Percy, his Plantagenet! / Then would I have

his Harry, and he mine" (I.i. 88-9) Henry both compares himself with Percy and Hal to Richard II. Even though he eagerly wants Hal to be like Percy, the idea is clear enough: honor should replace dishonor. That's what has happened, and that's what is going to happen, if Hal does not come to terms with his duties. Henry cannot be any clearer when he finally confronts his son in III.ii.: "I know not whether God will have it so / For some displeasing service I have done / That in his secret doom out of my blood / He'll breed revengement and a scourge for me." Flesh and blood here still rule the king's thoughts.

When it comes to Hal's metaphysical and spectral adversary, things change but not to the extent to which they do in Hamlet's case. The sword in *1 Henry IV* still has its dues, so in the end Hal can eliminate his and his father's main threat, represented by Percy, and get his father's recognition. But, as everywhere in Shakespeare's plays, things still pose unmanageable dilemmas. If we are to take Falstaff's mock meditations for granted, Hotspur, who is now twice killed, is a man of honor, leaving for Hal the difficult task, which is not lighter than his father's, to reinterpret the concept of honor and thus complete his fight with the metaphysical and the spectral. Hal's struggle becomes obvious from the end of I.ii., when he vows to imitate the sun, pay the debt he never promised, and reform, thus redeeming himself and his father. That is why when father and son eventually meet, Hal can and will be the much-needed heir to Henry's throne. In fact, Hal gets his father's blessing but in the form of a "charge and sovereign trust", meaning that he needs to prove it on the battlefield. And that is what Hal vows to do:

I will redeem all this on Percy's head,
And in the closing of some glorious day
Be bold to tell that I am your son,
When I will wear a garment all of blood
And stain my favors in a bloody mask,
Which, washed away, shall scour my shame with it. (III. Ii. 132-7)

Literally, in *Hamlet*, Claudius' head and Hamlet's role as "scourge and minister" would arguably bring revenge and wash away the shame, but it will not bring redemption. If Henry wrongly believes Hal is his scourge, Claudius wrongly assumes that Hamlet is his father's avenger and wants to get rid of him.

As it follows, if there's no doubt about heredity, since Hamlet is the heir to the throne, then the issues brought forth by paternity crisscross the entire play. Very much like Hal, when he vows to imitate the sun, Hamlet, from the very first time he steps on the stage, quibbles on the very notion of "son" refusing to be considered Claudius's kin and kind, thus implying his usurper role. In this respect,

Claudius resembles Henry, but engulfed in more complicated matters: he not only murdered the king, but he also married the widowed queen. He is not only guilty of treason; he is also guilty of incest. Moreover, unlike Henry, he does not have a son to redeem his deeds through honorable reformation and wise reign. In the end, Claudius's crimes and, to a given extent, Gertrude's complicity make Hamlet's actions even more difficult to take. Thus, from the beginning, Hamlet seems the tragic figure par excellence. In the end, his actions redeem him, and his death carries out his story, told by Horatio, the way Hamlet's deeds remembered his father's memory as the Ghost wished. Unlike Hal or Edgar, Hamlet does not live to rule the kingdom, but he sees the order restored.

Much like Hal, Edgar in *King Lear* represents the trajectory of a character from a romance plot where the hero thrives because of surpassing given tests. He too needs his sword and wisdom to go through the trials that his brother, father and nature put in his way. He might not get the rewards that Hal finally gets, but in the end, Edgar proves beyond doubt that he is a worthy son. The questions raised by *King Lear* and by the unfolding of its secondary plot, that of the Gloucesters that constantly mirror the main plot, have also to do with paternity and heredity, but in a new fashion. Legitimacy, like never before, is at stake, since the "base" as Edmund calls himself is about to dispossess the legitimate son. Much like in the pattern set forth by the young and old Gobbo interlude, the father is completely blind and suffering, while the son does not have the time and the mood to play with his father's senselessness. In fact, Edgar needs to undo, if possible, what his half-brother did. In this respect, paternity and heredity intermingle in a play in which the whole world order is at stake and needs to be reinstated.

In his relationship with his father, Edgar must fight for recognition from the beginning of the play. When in the very first scene of the play Gloucester introduces Edmund to Kent, the father only briefly mentions his heir, by virtue of his legitimacy of the first born, and without naming him: "I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year older than this, who yet is no dearer in my account" (I.i.17-8). At the same time, it seems that Gloucester deals with the difficult problem of recognizing his illegitimate son even though he took the task of raising him: "His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge. I have so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to't" (I.i. 8-9). From the very start Gloucester, much like Lear, avoids responsibility and easily mistakes his faults with those of the universe. In other words, he can read the "machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders" in these late eclipses, but he cannot conceive that the "bond [that] cracked twixt father and son" might be a result of his flaws. And there is where Edmund plays his masterful trick by taking

advantage of his father's misunderstandings. And much to everybody's disadvantage, all must suffer.

As an absolute villain, Edmund plays his father's ideas against him and against his brother. His effort, in his father's words, is literally to "eclipse the sun", that is to dispossess his brother:

> *Well, then,*
> *Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land.*
> *Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund*
> *As to th' legitimate. Fine word, "legitimate"!*
> *Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed*
> *And my invention thrive, Edmund the base*
> *Shall top th' legitmate. I grow, I prosper.*
> *Now, gods, stand up for bastards!* (I.ii. 15-22)

The gods' invocation, as hazardous as it appears, can only portend the outcome of the tragedy. The gods stand up for bastards, but only for a reason: the flaws would be purged through immense suffering and the order would be restored. Even when Edmund becomes the heir and Edgar loses his father's favors, the resolution still needs to be enacted, because the price paid is unaccountable for: Gloucester's blindness and eventual death can only be redeemed through the death of the usurper by the hand of the dispossessed. In a way, like in the first mock fight between the brothers, Edmund is the one inflicting his death. When he cuts himself as a proof of Edgar's attack, Edmund basically embarks on a suicidal ritual.

Edmund is guilty of treason. Even though he does not attempt the life of the king or that of his heirs, in the end, Edgar seems to be in the situation of becoming king from his newly reinstated position of Earl of Gloucester, therefore Edmund is accountable for attempted patricide, fratricide, and even regicide. In contrast, guiding his father to the Dover Cliff, protecting him after his "fall", and eventually watching him die, as well as fighting his brother, Edgar is passing the test which will make him a worthy ruler. As schematic as this may sound, Edgar is the instrument through which justice is administered. In this respect, Edgar represents the will of gods, while Edmund tries to confront them. In the subtleties of the play, Edmund represents a new age in which power is no longer based on the laws of the universe and on the divine order of things. Edmund, the bastard, becomes a symbol of free will in an effort to move the world "out of its joints". In his undertaking, Edmund resembles Henry IV and Claudius, being nothing more than a usurper, of both his brother's situation and of the divine rule.

If Edmund is the agent of Gloucester's fall, Edgar is the agent of his restoration. In fact, throughout the play Edgar himself undergoes restoration.

Debased by his brother, Edgar literally becomes the base, when forced to take the identity of Tom o' Bedlam. A beggar and a lunatic, Edgar as Tom needs to endure the vicissitudes of nature in order to be capable of restoring it. The fact that Lear himself tries to help and comfort him is representative of the power that Edgar as Tom has over the other characters. He becomes the mirror of others' debasement and in the end the agent of their redemption. Thus, he not only preserves the order of his family, but also the order of the kingdom, and of the universe.

Arguably, Edgar is the central figure of *King Lear* because he links the two separate plots together and, most importantly, he is the one who brings resolution. In this respect, Edgar undergoes willingly the biggest transformation. Following him through his terrible development will only shed some light on the important issues related to paternity and heredity the play raises. As stated before, from the beginning Edgar is on constant trial not only meant to prove his legitimacy as a first born and imminent heir, but also to define himself as a worthy son. There are at least four different and yet related identities that Edgar assumes throughout the play. First there is the nameless elder son introduced by Gloucester to Kent; second, there is Poor Tom; third, Edgar is disguised as a nameless knight; and last, there is Edgar as Earl of Gloucester. All these four 'masks' help bring something new to Edgar's characterization. The first time the audience makes his acquaintance, he seems without agency, being used by Edmund against their father. Critics have been ready to ascertain that by dispossessing Edgar Edmund has in fact become a "ventriloquist" only capable of using someone else's identity.

Thus, the fact that Edgar is not Edgar from the beginning comes to his own advantage. Being legitimate, but without having proven it yet, Edgar leaves Edmund to be swept by his own obsessions of power and rise. In "The Base Shall Top Th' Legitimate": The Bedlam Beggar and the Role of Edgar in *King Lear*, William C. Carroll (1987) points out that:

> *Edmund's sudden hierarchical rise represents a triumph over his earlier obsession with merely biological reproduction; in forging Edgar's "character," Edmund forces his father to renounce what is natural and to engage in a kind of social reproduction instead – to name his (other) son as heir. Legitimacy has now been decoupled from the natural body, the "order of law" set aside as arbitrary. [Edmund] succeeds (in all senses of the term) only as Edgar. Moreover his accession to this particular form of power stems from a violent deviation from the very system that mediates this power. Edmund's project is doomed by self-annihilating contradictions from its inception. Edgar, on the other hand, falls from his status as the son "by order of law" to that of an outlaw exposed to "the winds and persecutions of the sky"* (II.ii.12), *from privilege to persecution.* (p. 429)

Even if on a larger scale his fall mirrors both Lear's and Gloucester's falls, Edgar is the only one in the play that can guarantee redemption, but first, as an outlawed he needs to restore his recognition. For this he embarks in a most difficult identitary quest.

Tom o' Bedlam or Poor Tom as he calls himself is a key figure in Edgar's transformation. For Shakespeare's audience, he would be a most disturbing figure, a lunatic and a beggar, the basest of the human condition. At the same time, he would be the stereotype of the con man, a person who would feign his miserable condition for material gain. Interestingly enough, such a person would inevitably put up a performance, proving minimal theatrical aptitudes. In this respect Edgar as Tom resembles Lancelot Gobbo and his double performance, interior – with the *fiends* and exterior – with his father. And yet another similarity connects Edgar's situation to the biblical story of Jacob and Isaac referred to in *The Merchant of Venice*. The first time he asks for his blessing, old Gobbo fails to recognize his son, as Isaac failed to recognize Esau, mistaking him for Jacob. Similarly, Gloucester fails to recognize Edgar because of Edmund. That is why Edgar willingly decides for his disguise:

> *Yet better thus, and known to be contemned,*
> *Than still contemned and flattered. To be worst,*
> *The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,*
> *Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.*
> *The lamentable change is from the best;*
> *The worst returns to laughter. Welcome, then,*
> *Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace!*
> *The wretch that hast blown unto the worst*
> *Owes nothing to thy blasts.* (IV.i. 1-8)

This soliloquy comes right before the blind Gloucester himself is banished from his domain. From now on, father and son remain inseparable until the end of Gloucester's life. For both, one blind and the other "the lowest and most dejected thing in nature," everything seems lost, but as Edgar points out "to be worst stands still in esperance," and "the worst returns to laughter," meaning that they have already reached the lowest point and there is nothing worse that can happen to them. All they need is to come to peace with themselves.

Edgar's pretense should be over by now, when son and father are reunited. Both Gloucester and Edgar see through Poor Tom's disguise, when the father recognizes the contradiction between a beggar and a madman, who "has some reason, else he could not beg" (IV.i. 31) and reminds him of his son who "Came then into my mind, and yet my mind / Was then scarce friends with him" (IV.i. 33-4), while the son admits that "[he] cannot daub it further" (IV.i. 51). But the trial is

not over yet; the father still needs to fall. It is in fact this fortunate fall off the supposedly Dover Cliff that makes Edgar get rid off the Poor Tom disguise and adopt a more fittingly identity of a "most poor man […] pregnant to good pity" (IV.vi. 221). Apart from all possible interpretations of the reasons that Edgar and Gloucester have in mistaking an unfortunate beggar with a fiendish figure and solid flat ground with a hill, one thing is certain: with the help of his son, the father can assume *felix culpa* and suffer all the consequences of his deeds and afflictions. What is for the son an attempt to cure his father from his despair, "Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it" (IV.vi. 32-3), for the father is repentance, "Henceforth I'll bear / Affliction till it do cry out itself / «Enough, enough,» and die" (IV.Vi. 75-7).

It seems that, by now, the lesson had been learnt and that part of the trials had been surpassed. Gloucester at least realizes his mistakes and sympathizes with Lear when the two meet for the last time. As Lear in the end recognizes Gloucester, so does Gloucester recognize and give blessing to the son. The order is about to be reinstated. By nursing the miseries of his father and by extension of his king, Edgar can bring resolution to the play. His disguise is no longer needed when he is armed and ready to fight his brother. When at last he is getting his name back, the summary of his evolution is quite compelling:

> *The bloody proclamation to escape*
> *[…] taught me to shift*
> *Into a madman's rags, t'assume a semblance*
> *That very dogs disdained; and in this habit*
> *Met I my father with his bleeding rings,*
> *Their precious stones new lost; became his guide,*
> *Led him, begged for him, saved him from despair;*
> *Never – oh, fault! – revealed myself unto him*
> *Until some half hour past, when I was armed.*
> *Not sure, though hoping, of this good success,*
> *I asked his blessing, and from first to last*
> *Told him our pilgrimage.* (V.iii. 183-96)

As Edmund bluntly puts it, "The wheel is come full circle" (V.iii. 174). Edgar's pilgrimage is over and even if he wishes his heart would burst like his father's did, he needs to stay alive and literally save the order of things. The four identities Edgar assumed helped him and the people around him understand and restore the lost justice. In the end, but presumably from the very beginning, "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us" (V.iii.170-1). In fact, all Shakespeare's characters seem instruments and players of both their destinies and of their gods. Simple and normal family relationships

between father and son become patterns that reinforce the tragic truth: human nature and divine justice cannot be conceived outside the intricate hierarchy of the universe. Even if blind, the father must recognize and bless the son, while the son, no matter how astray, must appreciate and avenge the father.

Conclusion

Even though limited, both in scope and in perspective, the present analysis tries to demonstrate that in Shakespeare's plays the father and son relationship is significant beyond the perimeter of basic family ties. Following a pattern introduced by the young Gobbo / old Gobbo interplay, the son is on constant search for his father's approval as a consequence of the bond that unites them. This bond, made out of love, respect, and duty, comes to represent the vehicle through which the natural order reins in the world. Whenever the father disowns the son, as Gloucester is prompted to do, or doubts him, as Henry doubts Hal, it is the son's duty to affirm himself as a worthy heir. The father's blindness can only be removed by the son's boldness in asserting his heritage, as Hal professes, "Be Bold to tell that I am your son." The father's blessing that eventually comes is thus wholly dedicated to the continuation or restoration of the natural bond that holds the world together.

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