



FILIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND REVENGE: A STUDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S HAMLET

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"A little more than kin, and less than kind" rightly describes the filial relationships in the renowned play *Hamlet* by the father of English literature, William Shakespeare. This paper tries to underscore the portrait of family life which is dysfunctional and full of psychological dread, to say the least, with its characters spying on each other. None of the families presented here in this play enjoy anything like a harmonious co-existence, as they are caught up in all kinds of complex dynamics. One comes across the royal family of Denmark with Hamlet, his mother Gertrude, late-father Old Hamlet and step-father Claudius; Polonius and his children Ophelia and Laertes; and the family of the king of Norway involving his son Fortinbras. These subplots and the inherent power play among these relationships take the play forward. Their mutual relationships prove to be suffocating in nature which is again shown by the way the play is doomed to end in a tragedy.

Hamlet's relationship with his mother Gertrude comes across as a little complex to comprehend because there are instances of conflicts and care to each other. For example, Hamlet rushes to help his mother when she is poisoned and says, "O my dear Hamlet! The drink, the drink! I am poisoned" (Shakespeare 5.2.314-315). While on the other hand, Hamlet is deeply disgusted and anguished by his mother's unseemly remarriage, so soon after his father's death. One of the key issues in the play is that to what extent this disgust is motivated by respect for his father and to what extent it is motivated by a sub-conscious 'oedipal desire' for Gertrude and sexual jealousy for Claudius. Ernest Jones's essay titled *Hamlet and Oedipus* also subjects Hamlet's psychology and behaviour analysing him through Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex. Analysing Hamlet's overtly sexual verbal exchanges with Gertrude, it seems that he does indeed display characteristics of the Oedipus complex. For instance, Hamlet accuses her of hurrying "with such dexterity to incestuous sheets" and makes references to her "enseamed bed." (3.4.98). Therefore, problem that persists throughout the play is the fact that Hamlet is unable to accept the situation leading him to his doomed fate.

Hamlet's relationships with his wicked step father Claudius are perceived as strained relationships as he shows his resentments against Claudius for marrying his mother, Gertrude. Hamlet refers to their relationship as "a little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.67). Usually, "kin" means family, and they are a little more than that because Hamlet is now both a nephew and step-son to Claudius. Moreover, their relationship is not "kind" in any way. Their relationship gets further complicated and conflicted as Hamlet is determined to kill him. Claudius also has a dislike for Hamlet as he comes up with a villainous plot to have Hamlet dispatched in secrecy, calling to mind the sneaky way in which he had murdered Hamlet's father. Though not much is revealed about the nature of the relationship between Hamlet and his late-father old King Hamlet, still their relationship seems to be on the positive side as he makes efforts to take revenge of his father's gruesome murder. Moreover, he refers to his father as the "Hyperion" and describes him as "the front of Jove himself" and "a station like the herald Mercury New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill" (3.4.57-60). All these allusions suggest how highly he regarded his father. Hamlet is mortified and dejected with the death of King Hamlet. Instances such as the play 'the mousetrap', not only serve to verify Hamlet, but beyond a shadow of a doubt, this proves that his father's ghost was real. Further, it also shows the love the duo shared.

Ophelia's familial situation is quite claustrophobic and demeaning. Being a conventional Elizabethan noble-woman, her life depends heavily on her family i.e., her father, Polonius and brother, Laertes. She is unwaveringly loyal to her father. On his command, she breaks up with Hamlet and returns his love tokens, even though she still loves Hamlet. She regards him so highly while Polonius uses her as a bait to spy on Hamlet. He does not seem to consider how such an encounter will affect his daughter emotionally. Polonius determines priorities in her life. Thus, Polonius' murder leaves her disillusioned where she finds no motivation to continue with her life and chooses to commit suicide. Thus, raised to be passive and obedient to men, Ophelia is seemingly unable to cope with the loss of her father and meets such a sorry fate ultimately.

In the continuation of father and children relationship here comes the relationship between Laertes and Polonius. Polonius is the major guiding light for Laertes. Laertes holds great respect and importance for Polonius' well wishes. For instance, he does not depart for France until he gets "by labour some petition," (1.2.59) obtained a consent to leave from his father. Polonius comes across as a cunning father who has little faith in his son as he sends Reynaldo to "make inquire of his behaviour" (1.4.77) and even goes to the extent of spreading false rumours about him. After Polonius' murder, Laertes, just as Ophelia, begins to experience the loss of structure and stability that Polonius once had provided to him. Hence, the solitude caused by the loss is

quickly turned to anger where the tenacity to “be revengd Most thoroughly” (4.5.134-135) for his father demonstrates this loss of structure. Hence, with the loss of the guiding figure in his life, Laertes is unable to make rational judgements. He analyses situations which ultimately results in his own death.

Thus, both Hamlet and Laertes feel disempowered and thereafter marginalized due to a conventional system where they idealise the filial obligation to restore the images of their fathers in pursuit of the decree: “in all things we will show our duty” (1.2. 40). In contrast with this universal command for filial duty, Hamlet and Laertes choose to remain in a state of mourning as they construct god-like images of their fathers that mirror false representations of the deceased men. “Although Hamlet and Laertes attempt to avenge their fathers’ deaths in accordance with the codes of their fathers’ courts, it becomes evident that this pursuit of revenge is misaligned to the ‘special providence’ that Hamlet identifies to Horatio before the duel and the Christian forgiveness that Hamlet and Laertes exchange in the moments before they succumb to their own deaths” (Drewry 1). In his study of father and son relationships in Hamlet, Justin Drewry claims that this “final act of forgiveness shows the son’s discovery of his own philosophies rather than continuing to follow the revenge codes set forth by the father” (Drewry 1).

To conclude, the dynamics across the families represented in the play are claustrophobic, lacking in love and all about power-play. Hamlet is never able to come to terms with his mother’s remarriage to Claudius after his father’s death. The family dynamic of Polonius and his children represents the repercussions of adhering to one’s parent’s ideals blindly, not acting rationally and lacking in individuality. Laertes also serves as a foil to Hamlet where the son must avenge his father’s death and both meet a tragic fate. Ophelia and Hamlet can also be contrasted wherein Hamlet just acts to be mad, while Ophelia actually loses her sanity. Therefore, kept in close quarters, no individual in the play can ever act independently of their family’s influence. Hence, it is shown how proximity to power distorts familial relationships, which in all royal courts are determined by power rather than by bonds of love and affection as shown in the play.

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