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FILIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

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ABSTRACT

All societies around the world are basically built on a set of relationships, but the most important of these prevailing relationships is the one between children and their parents. In fact, this relationship is the nucleus upon which the whole society depends and at the same time it is considered the main factor that shapes the individual's personality. Most scholars insist that the behavior of any individual in the community depends on the nature of the relationship which exists between the child and its parent.

Keywords:: Filial relational, Father - Son Relationship, child- parent relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare is highly interested in examining human relationships but he seems almost fond of the child- parent relationship. In fact the depiction of filial relationship is an ever present element in Shakespearean drama. Indeed, some critics contend that the subject of filial relations figures prominently in at least two-thirds of Shakespeare's plays, while others claim that the theme of filial relationship is a fundamental concern of the entire Shakespearean drama. Shakespeare's plays present parents and children who are interacting in a variety of ways, and the plots of these plays often focus on familial conflicts. In the tragedies, the familial conflicts are not resolved, or if they are so, the resolution comes too late to escape the tragic outcome. Shakespeare introduced a group of plays in which his main characters remain among the most arguable figures in the literary world such as Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet and King Lear.

King Lear is regarded as an everlasting story because of its content of universal themes of child-parent relationship, human nature and the downfall of family which relate the play to modern time, even though it has written for a sixteenth-century audience. The theme of family relationship is a prevalent one that is viewed on many levels such as Denton J. Snider points out:

It will be noticed that the action of the play lies mainly in the sphere of the family, and portrays one of its essential relations-that of Parents and children. The conflicts arising from this relation involve also brothers and sisters in strife. The domestic side of life is thus torn with fearful struggles, and its quite affection and repose are turned into display of malignant hate and passion. The parents are both

faithful and faithless to their relation; so are the children, taken collectively....It is essentially the story of fidelity and infidelity to the family. (Bonheim, 1961:39).

The play contains various family relationships; the main plot of King Lear and his three daughters is related to the sub-plot of Gloucester and his sons. In fact, only *King Lear*, among the great tragedies of Shakespeare has a fully developed sub-plot which is a parallel to the main plot. The parallelism between the two stories is obvious; both men (King Lear and Gloucester) suffer from the disastrous consequence of their folly judgment in depending upon their wicked children. (Wilson,1962: xxxviii).

In fact, the role of any parents in their life is to be givers and protectors of their children at same time. While the expected role of their children is to respect and serve their parents when they grow old. But this child- parent relationship in Shakespeare's *King Lear* changes throughout the play. Finally, the parents discover the real emotions each child has for them. (Bach, 2003:4).

Father and Son Relationships in *King Lear*

In addition to Lear and his three daughters, *King Lear* also presents father-son relationships. Gloucester and his sons, Edmund and Edgar, express two different sides of goodness and evil. By looking at Edmund and Edgar's relationships with their father Gloucester, one can see how the treatment of the father figure has affected audience perceptions of the concept of good son. In the story of Gloucester and his sons E. Dowden explains the following:

The treachery of Edmund, and the torture to which Gloucester is subjected, are out of the course of familiar experience;Thus the one story of horror serves as a means of approaches to the other, and help us to conceive its magnitude. (Houghton, 1957:214).

The only character who may be as horrible as Goneril and Regan is the bastard Edmund. He, like them, is a malicious son whom the audience feels disgusted with. The audience easily recognizes Edmund as one of the villains of the play. He is deceitful and does not care whom he hurts in his quests for power. Unfortunately, his family members are his victims; he turns his father Gloucester against his brother Edgar so that he may become the only heir to all of Gloucester's lands. It is an unbelievable shock to Gloucester when he realizes that he has been betrayed by his son.

Gloucester: All dark and comfortless. Where's my son Edmund?

Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature,
To quit this horrid act.

Regan: Out, treacherous villain!

Thou call'st on him that hates thee; it was he
That made the overture of thy treasons to us;
Who is too good to pity thee.

Gloucester: O my follies! Then Edgar was abused.

Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!

(III. vii. 84-91)

A character that is abusive to its father is also generally evil, a character that protects its father is probably the hero, and a character that tries to avenge its father is in some way good and righteous. Edmund is an opportunist person who uses other people to achieve his aims. He negatively embodies Machiavelli's crucial principles "the end justifies the means", by using his father against his brother as well as with Goneril and Regan, he says:

Edmund: To both these sisters have I sworn my love;
Each jealous of the other, as the stung
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?
Both? one? –or neither? Neither can be enjoy'd
If both remain alive: To take the widow
Exasperates, makes mad her sister Goneril;
And hardly shall I carry out my side,

Her husband being alive. Now then we'll use
 His countenance for the battle; which being done,
 Let her who would be rid of him devise
 His speedy taking off. As for mercy

(V.ii. 55-65)

In fact, filial ingratitude is related to filial relationship in this play, that it is common to find many sons and daughters who show much ingratitude and cruelty towards their parents. It was filial ingratitude which opened King Lear's eyes to the painful truth of the ingratitude of his two daughters Goneril and Regan. A. B. W. Schlegel comments on King Lear's state, saying that:

The three field dignity of a king, an old man, and a father, is dishonored by the cruel ingratitude of his unnatural daughters; the old Lear, who out of foolish tenderness has given away everything, is driven out to the world a wandering beggar, the childish imbecility to which he was fast advancing change into the wildest insanity....(Wilders, 1988:213-214).

According to Elizabethans, daughters should obey and submit to their father's authority. On contrary this attitude is broken by Goneril and Regan, who are refused to behave like good, submissive Renaissance women; both of them seem to be ungrateful towards their father. In fact one can say that in *King Lear* "the children seem to be ungrateful with their parents and the old must be destroyed by the young".(Mure,1965:lilii-xliii). All the subsequent textual quotations of this play are taken for reference.

Just as he deceives his father, he also tricks the two sisters (Goneril and Regan) into thinking that he is good but selfishly he uses them. Edmund also deceives his father for his own interest, and when he has got what he wants, he gets rid of Gloucester to those who want to hurt him. Edmund's strategy actually depends upon the importance of love and loyalty to a father. The crime he contrives for Edgar revolves around betraying their father. He knows that this action will not raise Gloucester's anger, but it will also particularly damage Edgar's reputation. Moreover, he raises himself in the opinion of others by appearing to be the good son. He wounds himself to appear as if he had fought Edgar on his father's behalf, and Cornwall, and the others completely believe this signal of goodness: "For you, Edmund/Whose virtue and obedience doth this instant/So much commend itself, you shall be ours" (II. i.112- 114).

The royal court immediately translates his apparent devotion to his father into an overall integrity in character. He continues the charade later on when, though he has every intention of turning on his father, he feigns being painfully torn between allegiances:

Edmund [*aside*] If I find him comforting the King,
 it will stuff his suspicion more fully.
 I will persevere in my course of loyalty, though the
 conflict be sore between that and my blood.

(III. v. 20-23)

Even though he is no longer acting the part of a loyal son, he retains the façade so the other characters still believe him to be a good man. He understands his own character construction very well and is able to manipulate it. Balancing Edmund's evil presence, the good Edgar is the complete opposite of his brother. Even though Gloucester believes that Edgar has betrayed him, he is in fact always faithful to his father. After Gloucester is blinded and thrown out, Edgar is the one who, in a completely forgiving and compassionate manner, takes care of him. Further, Edgar returns to court to avenge his father and kill Edmund.

Edgar's role is the protector and avenger of his father, in fact, a drive to avenge one's father is a tool Shakespeare uses for the construction of "good" son characters, as we shall further see in Hamlet and Laertes. However, the audience has recognized Edgar both as a good son and a good man. The audience sees Edgar as Gloucester's saviour, the audience surely regards him as one of the play's major heroes. His goodness towards his father exists in his greater character construction. When he is in the wood with Lear as the mad man, Poor Tom, mostly speaking gibberish, there is still evidence to believe that he is also being compassionate and trying

to look over the old King, such as the aside: "My tears begin to take his part so much/They'll mar my counterfeiting" (III. vi.60-61).

The compassion he demonstrates in taking care of his father surfaces in his interaction with King Lear. Likewise, he comes to Albany's aid by serving as the champion to defeat Edmund. Edgar's role as rescuer is not limited to his relationship with Gloucester, but, encompasses much of his persona. Edmund and Edgar demonstrate how central the father-son relationship is in Shakespeare's approach to character construction. Their actions affect the perceptions of the other characters; they automatically trust the seemingly dutiful son. Similarly, the audience would have used the son's loyalty to his bloodline as a signal of his general behaviour. Shakespeare lived at a time which saw new conceptions attacking traditional conceptions, as Dr. Edwin Muir says:

[T]he medieval world with its communal tradition was slowly dying, and the modern individualist world was bringing itself to birth. Shakespeare lived in that period of transition. The old world still echoed in his ears; he was aware of the new as we are aware of the future...Edmund is 'the mouthpiece of the new generation'. (Ibid:214).

Conclusion

A family is considered a system of reproducing and keeping offspring safe and preparing them for the world so as to keep the species alive. Because of our increased intelligence, the interactions between each family member differ from one family to other. These relationships are what separate human beings from animals. In fact it is difficult to find a fully child- parent relationship or at least one that could be considered ideal. Over the decades there is no perfect family relationship and the domestic violence is always there.

However, one thing seems to be universal in Shakespeare's plays that even the happy relationships in the family are complicated by some outside force like social evil, fate and death. Shakespeare wants to prevent destruction through introducing the conflict within this relationship. Thus, Shakespeare adds realism to the texts; this is especially true of relationships between family members.

Finally, among all of King Lear's two ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan, are arguably the most threatening to audience's conceptions about the proper female behaviour. In order to get a portion of the kingdom, Goneril and Regan must profess their love to Lear. They succeed and Lear rewards them according to their flattery. But later on, they rebel against their father's wishes for their own benefits and act in a very hostile manner toward their father. Unlike his innocent daughters Cordelia who sacrifices everything in her life for her father. At the same time, Shakespeare uses another relationship which is found between Gloucester and his sons Edmund and Edgar. Both of them represent two opposite sides one is the good son while the other is the bad son. Edgar is a honest character who tries to protect his father and his family honour against his wicked brother Edmund.

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