

## Strong Heroines of Shakespeare in Estranged Father-Daughter Relationships

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### ABSTRACT

Shakespeare lived in an era when all actors were male and serious drama focused mainly on the adventures of men. Despite this, he wrote a lot of intricate and interesting feminine roles for his young male performers to play. Relationships between fathers and children are prominent, and a large number of them link fathers and daughters. Interestingly, mothers are frequently absent from the drama, highlighting the daughter-father relationship. Shakespeare's dramatic daughters create a formidable line-up of young ladies, most of whom are in a transitional period between the security of their childhood home and adult life beyond it. The transition is rarely easy: tensions mount as daughters seek love, adventure, and independence in both comedies and tragedies. Several of Shakespeare's plays have girls negotiating their fathers' demands, frequently attempting to combine responsibility with a yearning for independence. The present study focuses on Shakespeare's strongest heroines like Cordelia in *King Lear* and Desdemona in *Othello*, both of whom had an estranged relationship with their fathers due to a clash of their personalities. These motherless daughters suffered both at the hands of destiny and society in the absence of their fathers' support.

### KEYWORDS

Strong Heroines of Shakespeare; Fathers-Daughters Relationship; *King Lear*; *Othello*

### Introduction

In both *King Lear* and *Othello*, a point of crisis is reached when the two young girls are forced to choose between a love accorded to a parent and to a partner.

To her father, Cordelia says,  
CORDELIA. Hopefully, when I  
marry, the lord whose hand  
must take mine plight would

carry half of my love/ half of  
my care and duty with him  
sure/ I'll never marry like my  
sisters, and  
I'll always love my father. (*King  
Lear*, 1-1-100.04)

Desdemona responds,  
DESDEMONA. "Where most you  
owe obedience," when  
Brabantio demands it.

I sense a divided obligation  
 here, my great father.  
 I owe my life and education to  
 you;  
 Both my life and education  
 have taught me.  
 How to honour you: you are the  
 master of duty,  
 And I have been your daughter  
 up to this point.  
 But here's my spouse; and I  
 challenge that I may proclaim  
 Due to the Moor my lord,  
 As much duty as my mother  
 gave you,  
 Preferring you to her father  
 (Othello, 13-180.89)

Of course, the circumstances surrounding both marriages are vastly different. Lear seeks affirmation of his powers in the protestations of absolute love that Cordelia cannot give while Brabantio sees Desdemona's elopement with Othello as an act of cultural and racial treason.

In both the plays, we have the spectacle of an old man outraged at the possibility of his daughter's marriage. Brabantio's anger stems from a violation of the social convention, as both he and the other senators understand it, Lear's stems from Cordelia's refusal to play the brief part he has written for her in his harmless little love game. However, we would like to argue that both Brabantio and Lear, in terms of outward appearances at least, have a reasonable claim to their displeasure.

### **King Lear and Cordelia**

One of the true pleasures of reading Shakespeare is the vivid insights he provides into the life of a play; that is, the human life provided by a play. If we are not attentive, Shakespeare's exquisite touch as regards people and their passions can lead us to believe that these characters actually existed. Perhaps it is our fascination with gossip, with the

hidden, unexplored, or unexplained aspects about, say, Desdemona or Lady Macbeth, which draws us in. In his superb "*How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*" L. C. Knights has warned us about this hazard. However, we believe it is enriching to indulge our fantasies about these 'actual' people above the level of gossip. We may perceive a new meaning if we entertain hypotheses or ideas, and this meaning may lead us to a deeper comprehension of the human relevance of a Shakespearean play. For example, it appears that part of the reason Goneril and Regan are so heartlessly cruel to their father in *King Lear* is that they were raised to believe he never loved them at all. As a king, he required a son, a replica of himself, and so he was upset when Goneril and Regan were born. Mr. Bennet lost interest in each girl born after Elizabeth and Jane in *Pride and Prejudice* because each new birth was just another step in a moderately desperate journey to a sonless state. As a vain monarch, Lear would be uninterested in his first two children, but he would be desperate for a male heir. Our speculation is that Lear's wife, the queen, died when Cordelia was born. Or, at the very least, Lear accepted the truth that he would have no son, no legal male heir following the birth of Cordelia. Lear was more king than father to the elder sisters and more father than the king to Cordelia. In other words, Goneril and Regan's jealousy is well-founded: they naturally despise the favourite kid and their now-adoring father. We cannot condone their harshness, but we can sympathize with their lovelessness.

Shakespeare's biggest tragedies are frequently described as family plays: *Hamlet* is about a young man who is both son and prince; *Macbeth* is about a man who is both husband and king, and *Lear* is about a man who is both father and king. Each of the three plays defines man in both personal and political terms. As

Henry V admits to himself the night before the battle of Agincourt, the office of the king makes its own peculiar, obsessive demands, submerging the man or the father to the office. A king is flattered and lied to, given a false and artificial perspective: a king comes to live in, and believe in, a world that is not in accordance with reality; the picture that a king portrays and that his subjects perceive is skewed. In fact, we do not believe Lear ever truly comprehends who he is or what is happening to him. From the beginning to the conclusion, he is misguided and mistaken in some way or the other, underscoring the fact that Lear is always an old man, a father, and a king and that the drama revolves around his dilemma as an elderly man, a father, and a king. One of the play's most notable features, after all, is the absence of a mother.

Lear is a father, and he is well aware of his parental responsibilities. "I lov'd her most and thought to set my rest/On her kind nursery," (*Act 1 Scene 1 lines 123-4*) says Lear, who has been striving to do anything he can for his daughter Cordelia, whom he loves and wants to spend the rest of his life with. Lear recognizes that he is an elderly man, despite the fact that he is still active (he hunts, for example). Regardless of what he claims, Lear has no intention of abdicating his throne during his lifetime.

When Lear reappears with Cordelia in his arms at the play's conclusion, he has undergone a final transformation. He is old man— father— king once more, and now more than ever, as he emerges from his last trial with the presumably lifeless Cordelia in his arms. "We shall resign, /During the life of this old Majesty, /To him our absolute sovereignty," Albany declares in response to his surprise appearance. "You are men of stones," "you, murderers, traitors all," "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, /And thou no breath at all," Lear says to

the others in his infatuation with Cordelia. Then, with Cordelia dead, Lear sinks, and Kent delivers his master's best epitaph. Cordelia will join her father—king, leaving behind the cheerless Edgar and Albany, the offspring of a terrible world bereaved of this great child and this majestic, terrifying father—king.

### **Desdemona: The Sweet Victim of Love**

Desdemona has been lauded for her devotion and chastised for her sensuality. Interestingly, she has been depicted either as dishonest, haughty, and manipulative or helplessly submissive in her love of Othello. She is a sad paradox in and of herself. Desdemona, a brave and spirited young woman, is moved by the depth of her love to adhere to a rigid and deadly ideal of feminine behaviour. Irving Ribner wrote, "In the perfection of her love, Desdemona represents the love of Christ for man," while G. Wilson Knight called her a "divinity akin with Dante's Beatrice."

"One cannot but share Iago's misgivings about the marriage's long-term viability," W.H. Auden noted, anticipating that "given a few more years of Othello and Emilia's influence, she might easily, one feels, have chosen a lover." "Of all Shakespeare's female characters, she is the most sensuous... Desdemona is faithful but must have something of a harlot in her," Jan Kott said of her intense sexuality.

Desdemona is affectionate and sensuous without a doubt, but this does not make her a slut any more than her lack of sexuality would make her holy. Too often, her detractors have succumbed to the virgin-whore complex, a false dichotomy that pervades conventional society's attitude towards women. Few reviewers have acknowledged Desdemona's dual nature as a virtuous and passionate lady. (I.ii.26)

She reveals a desire to prove to herself and Cassio that she can make her

husband do whatever she wants by continuing to pet him." Bradley, on the other hand, sees her as a "helplessly passive" innocent, loving martyr.

Desdemona is a powerless bystander. She is incapable of doing anything. She is unable to respond in any form, including speech; in fact, she is unable to retaliate in any form. And the fact that she is helpless simply adds to the excruciating sorrow of seeing her suffer. She cannot do anything since her nature is exceedingly kind and her love is unconditional... Desdemona's agony is akin to that of a most loving dumb creature who has been tortured without reason by the one he adores. Desdemona's on-stage history reflects these shifting critical perceptions. Desdemona was depicted as a pathetic girl, not a tragic heroine, until actresses Fanny Kemble, Helena Faucit, and Ellen Terry gave her a new energy. Her role was much reduced in the nineteenth century, and actor William Charles Macready sought to persuade Fanny Kemble not to take it, stating that it was not a role for a brilliant actress. Kemble persisted in developing a Desdemona who was both sweet feminine, straightforward, and brave. In the final scene, her Desdemona, like Helena Faucit's, fought for her life. Most people thought Desdemona was a ninny, a pitiful figure, and that a pretty young creature with a vacuous, naïve smile, is perfectly suited to the play, but Ellen Terry thought Desdemona was a woman of strong character, requiring the talents of a great tragic actor.

Desdemona is a young woman who defies stereotypes, as these actresses recognized. She is androgynous in her boldness and compassion, and she sees above the patriarchal hierarchy's artificial distinctions in her unlimited love and goodness. She, like Hamlet, values people for who they are, not for their social status. She has been commended:

A man's courage... an extreme illustration of the marriage of feminine and masculine attributes that Shakespeare evidently believed vital for either the perfect man or the perfect lady, (I iii 27)

She is a sensuous and virtuous lady in a culture that values a frigid, chaste ideal by nature. When the traditional feminine norm was passivity, she was dynamic and fearless, transcending patriarchal order and degree and reaching out in loving love to all. Desdemona acted like a daughter in her father's house, but her love for Othello exposed her assertiveness and magnanimity.

Othello's account of their courtship, especially in the Folio version, reveals her ardent and caring disposition. This seemingly gentle damsel would run away from her chores to *'devour'* his stories *'with a ravenous ear'* (I.iii. 150,149). She was enthralled by this guy of action and his daring lifestyle. She was so far from Brabantio's standard *'maiden never bold'* (94) that she gave Othello *'a world of kisses,'* (159) in the Folio reading, which was significantly more assertive than the Quarto's.

It is a noble lady who stands firm in front of her father and the duke in council, professing her love for which she had defied every tradition. However, this young woman now positions her love in a traditional context, referring to her *'divided duty'* between her father and husband, in which filial piety is passed down from one authority figure to the next. Desdemona "successfully opposes the Father," Brabantio, and "the figure of Authority and Force" he embodies. In her elopement. Harold Goddard compares her to the obedient Ophelia and Hamlet, who are unable to defy paternal power. True, her love frees her long enough for her to elope with Othello, but she succumbs to the yoke of convention in her conception of marriage, assuming the customary role

learned from her mother, in which the wife becomes her husband's humble, obedient servant.

She fails to make the psychological shift to adulthood despite the fact that every action she takes indicates a desire to show that goodness triumphs over selfishness. She bows to the customary pattern, denying her own authority, ironically out of her strong love for Othello and her wish to be the perfect wife. "My heart is subdued / Even to the very character of my lord," she proclaims (I.iii.251-52).

Critics have noticed an echo of the typical father-daughter relationship, citing Othello's age, which qualifies him as a surrogate father, and the fact that he was her father's friend prior to the elopement. Some psychologists believe her choice of him was driven by an Oedipus complex, in which she was trying to either marry someone who looked like her father or punish him for being unfaithful to her as a child. They attribute her following meek behaviour to moral masochism, which they attribute to remorse about her incestuous urgings.

However, incest and Oedipus complexes are not required to understand Desdemona's actions. We have seen a highly idealistic strain as well as a passionate devotion, an almost religious intensity, and dedication in her love for Othello. She had yearned for a heroic mission, a cause since she was a child. She finds her cause in loving Othello, subordinating herself in her role as his wife, even as he subordinated his ego to the necessities of battle because she is a woman unable to follow her heroic goals.

As a result, the paradox that underlies Desdemona's paradoxical image has been revealed. She is brave, heroic, meek, and fragile all at the same time. Because of her love, she is both extremes, making her the oxymoronic "wonderful wretch" (III.iii.90). She offers her dynamic personality to the image of her dreams on

the altar of holy love, becoming not a 'moth of peace' but an equally weakened shadow of herself (I.ii.257). She appears to have addressed her identity dilemma by rejecting the 'rich curled darlings' of Venice, fleeing her father and embracing the man of her dreams (I.ii.68).

However, she does not commit herself to her marriage with the same dynamic energy that she displayed throughout her romance and elopement. Since she believes Othello needs a new identity, she chooses a controlled, ever modest, and subservient self, not Desdemona but the model wife. She succumbs to the norm she follows, neurotic self-effacement that amounts to slow suicide. She, too, loves 'not intelligently, but too well,' asserting a static ideal, a polished veneer of behaviour that will not resist the storms that her marriage will confront in Cyprus (V.ii.344).

### **Conclusion:**

It is concluded that Shakespeare's strongest heroines like Cordelia in *King Lear* and Desdemona in *Othello* have estranged relationships with their fathers due to personality clashes. *King Lear* is about a father's love for his youngest and favourite daughter, Cordelia, who he believes will look for him in his old age. Cordelia's rejection of her father is motivated by a principle rather than a desire for marriage. Lear's dissatisfaction with her words awards her banishment rather than land.

Whereas the tragedy of Othello begins with the announcement that Desdemona has not only secretly eloped but has also chosen a man of a different race as her husband- Othello, a Moor (and actually her father's friend). When Brabantio learns of this, he is furious; Desdemona, on the other hand, is devoted to her husband, but Othello's readiness to believe she has deceived him is what propels the drama to its sad conclusion.

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