The Father and Daughter Relationship

in Shakespeare's Plays:

Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice

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ABSTRACT

Relationships have played an important role throughout history. One of the most important roles is the relationship between a father and his daughter.

In *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare shows two different father-daughter relationships. The relationships are between Ophelia and Polonius in one hand, and Jessica and Shylock, on the other hand. The first relationship shows how far Ophelia is an obedient and weak girl, whereas the other one reflects how Jessica is rebellious and strong. Ophelia’s relationship with her father is full of respect and love, whereas Jessica does not like her father and thinks he is rude. But both of the relationships show the authority and the dominance of patriarchal society in Shakespeare's time.

This paper explores the ways in which Shakespeare discusses the stereotypical father-daughter relationship and employs Ophelia and Jessica to interrogate the traditional sixteenth century roles of daughters, and how daughters were not considered as important as men in a society in which the authority of father influenced the whole life of his daughter.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Family Relationship, Patriarchal Society, Obedience, Rebellion.
INTRODUCTION

Since many Renaissance literary works offer valuable and important information related to gender and identity, Shakespeare's plays contain some of the most remarkable representations of family members, especially fathers and daughters, and because these depictions and descriptions are various, many contrasts and comparisons between the main characters in his plays can be made. In research on Ophelia and Jessica in *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, I have found that little attention has been paid to the two daughters, although much literary criticism has focused on the way of which they are treated by their fathers. Although Ophelia and Jessica have been briefly examined in individual studies of the plays, few critics have attempted to compare them and go into the depth of their psyches and minds especially regarding their behaviour and relationships with their fathers.

These relationships reflect the reactions of individuals towards other people and reveal that while patriarchal society can often function to generate a certain relationship between fathers and daughters, they affect the type of lives in the society and create a very deep conception of self and other. This fact becomes evident when we put into consideration two of the most popular Shakespearean plays: *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*. As an analysis of these two plays makes evident, many father-daughter relationships in Shakespeare's literature worked to reinforce male power by subjugating women. My thesis will cover how patriarchal ideologies determine the course of relationships between fathers and daughters in two of Shakespeare's plays; *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

This paper highlights the father-daughter relationships in these two of Shakespeare's plays; *The Merchant of Venice* and *Hamlet*. And in order to be able to go into the depth of the background of these relationships, a clear answer should be found to this question: To what extent do these plays challenge or confirm traditional rules of the Renaissance society?

**Family and Daughters in Shakespeare's Mind**

William Shakespeare, through his literary works; tragedies, comedies and poems, is considered as a controversial figure of the Renaissance time. People and critics in his time and even in the modern age shared many different contradictory and conflicting views about him. People had countless multitudes and endless attitudes about his works to understand the hidden shadow and the depth of Shakespearean mind. The attitudes are not only related with the personality of Shakespeare, but it is also related with the analysis and the understanding of
many important characters, heros and heroines in his works. For example, a contrast could be seen in the interpretation of the characters of Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Jessica *The Merchant of Venice*. For some critics, like A. C. Bradley, Ophelia is considered as a character whose personality is different from many other girls in many plays of Shakespeare. For them, she is a pure and an obedient girl who cannot act according to her will or take her own decision, but others, like Kat Stanton, say that she is completely different from what we see. On the other side, some critics, like Camille Slight, sympathize with Jessica and agree with her when she escaped from her father, while others, like Derek Cohen, do not and they feel that her father is a pitiful victim.

Through the conversations between Ophelia and her father Polonius on one hand, and between Jessica and her father Shylock on the other hand, the plays reinforce the idea that fathers are authoritative and dominant. They want to control the private lives of their daughters. The speech and the behaviour of each of Polonius and Shylock are obvious evidences of the power and authority they have on their daughters. Ophelia and Jessica are characterized as young daughters who suffer from the control of their fathers, but each of them behaves in a different way; in other words, Ophelia is a very obedient girl who obeys her father in all his advices and instructions, whereas, Jessica is a rebellious one who rejects her father's words and orders.

The essential reason for choosing these heroines is the difference of their characters and the wide gap which makes them separated from each other. Each one behaves in accordance of her own personal mentality and understanding of the social rules around her. Shakespeare, through Ophelia and Jessica wanted to show two different types of girls who have contradictory reactions and different behaviour towards the patriarchal society in which they lived.

According to Thomas Fuller, in his book, *The Sermons of Mr. Henry Smith* (1866), Henry Smith who was a popular London preacher contemporary with Shakespeare, declared that "they which are called fathers, are called by the name of God, to warne them that they are in stead of God to their children, which teacheth all his sonnes." (Fuller 114). The father, for him, should be a teacher and a model for "what example have children but their parents?" (Fuller 114). Like every good governor, a father "must governe for the good of those that be under him" (Fuller 115). The roles of children and fathers or other family members were
thought of as being natural; this means that they were related with the nature of reality, which, in turn, had been accomplished by God.

Family is a very important concern in most of Shakespeare's plays, and it is in the center of many of them, especially the plays whose male characters are violent or dominant. The plays of Shakespeare often present children and parents, wives and husbands, and cousins and relatives interacting in a variety of styles, and courtship and familial conflict are often focused on in the plots in which the important events take place. The standard Renaissance portrait of the family as organism or body is often used by Shakespeare.

In his book, *The Family Relationship in Shakespeare and The Restoration Comedy of Manner* (1983), the Indian author Sarup Singh from the university of London declares that the relationship between children and their parents was very different from what we know at the present. In modern society, for him, parents have to change their treatment with their children. A father should be a teacher or a friend. The old way of dealing between parents and children, for him, is not suitable in the modern age. In Renaissance England, the relationship between parents and their children was based on the fifth commandment, which orders children to honor their father and mother, but father is more important to be honored because father, according to the fifth commandment, obtains his authority from God. England at that time was a patriarchal society and, "Daughters are perhaps the greatest victims of a patriarchal family and Elizabethan daughters were no exception" (Singh 33).

**Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare's Patriarchal Society**

Among Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies there is a lot of plays which concentrate on the relationship between parents and their children. The most interesting relationship is the one between fathers and their daughters, because it is the most controversial, especially when the mentality of father and his daughter is completely different, and when also their points of view towards social environment is not the same. Shakespeare destines most of the father-daughter pairs to fail, not because he wants them to fail, but because they really fail in their normal lives. The father usually proves to be incapable as he does not know his own child's nature and personality, and he does not will to know her enough or even to try to know her desires and wishes. His paternal authority does not allow him to descent on his daughter's level and make an attempt to understand her will and her needs. He considers himself to be upper than to speak with his daughter in a normal or respectable way. Although the ruler of England at the time of Shakespeare was a woman, the Elizabethan society was patriarchal and
the power is in the hands of men. This comes clearly in the literary works of the time in which Shakespeare lived. In many plays of Shakespeare, like *Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice*, the father-daughter relationships refer to the changing roles of women within Elizabethan society.

In a patriarchal society, women were expected to obey all social rules and restrictions by reverence and obedience to the males in their lives. In this case, women were not treated humanly but more like sex objects and properties. They were under a complete control of men who were seen as the superior of sex. Being females, women were considered lower than men in their social atmosphere. Women also were considered very weak and always in need of being protected by a father or a husband or even by a brother. In some of Shakespeare’s plays, many female characters are in Shakespeare’s world seem have freedom and personal power more than what we would expect in a society which is considered a patriarchal one. The role of the women that they play in many plays of Shakespeare often refers to the intelligence and strength they have. This perhaps refers to that women should get rid of the violence and power of males and be treated equally with men.

**Jessica and Ophelia as Rebellious and Obedient Daughters**

Most of Shakespearean daughters are rebels who defy their father’s word and will. They search for their own way to get freedom and independence. In *The Merchant of Venice*, like many other Shakespearean plays, we find a good sample of the father-daughter relationship which reflects the dominance of father upon his daughter. The hard relationship between Jessica and her father, show how the society of Shakespeare’s time is patriarchal. It undoubtly reflects the mentality of fathers in Renaissance Age.

Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*, lives under her father's strict rules. Shylock, her father, always asks her not to open the doors and windows, especially when he leaves home; that is because of his bad relationship with the Christian society. "Lock up my doors; and when you hear the drum / And the vile squealing of the wry-necked fife, / Clamber not you up to the casements then, / Nor thrust your head into the public street/ To gaze upon Christian fools with varnished faces; Let not the sound of shallow fopp'ry enter / My sober house" (2.5. 28–36).

In her first scene, Jessica is very angry of her father because of the hard way he treats her with: "Our house is hell" (2.3.2). She considers her house a a hell which she can not endure. Althgough she feels guilty of being ashamed of her father, she rejects him. She does
not like his way of life, she is unhappy to have a father like him and she also refuses his religion. "Alack, what heinous sin is it in me / To be ashamed to be my father's child! / But though I am a daughter to his blood,/ I am not to his manners" (2.3.16–19). Jessica here does not feel happy and she is frustrated because she lives in a bad position with her father. She does not care about the instructions of her father and creates an emotional relationship with a Christian boyfriend called Lorenzo. And because of the misery which lives with her father, she plans to escape from her father's home with Lorenzo. She steals a part of her father's money and runs away. By her escape, she feels that she became free and is able to do what she likes. She achieves a psychological independence in her soul and a physical freedom in her body.

In the beginning of her book, In Defense of Jessica (1980), Camille Slight defends the behavior of Jessica against her father. She argues that "Jessica has not fared well in the criticism of The Merchant of Venice. Those who see the play primarily as an exposure of Christian hypocrisy respond sympathetically to Shylock and judge harshly the daughter who deserts him for his Christian enemies". (Slight 1).

After Shylock loses his money, his feelings and emotions towards his daughter become very clear. He prefers to see his daughter dead instead of being runaway with his money."I would my daughter dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear!/ Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin!" (3.1. 83-85). In his book, The Plays of Shakespeare: A Thematic Guide (2001), Victor L. Cahn also focuses on the will of Jessica and her wish to get rid of being with her father. He argues that "Jessica seeks to be part of society around her. In deed, she has completely accepted its values, including the anti-semitism, and she sees her salvation, both literal and metaphoric, in escape from her father's home" (Cahn 73). To Cahn, Jessica prefered to accept the Christian rules more than the rules of her father. But on the other hand, Bridget Lyons, in his book Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatment of Melancholy in Renaissance England (1975), has pointed out "of all the characters in Hamlet, Ophelia is the most persistently presented in terms of symbolic meanings." (Lyons 125). He argues that the gestures, the behaviour and the appearance of Ophelia are freighted with symbolic significance. For him, many critics of Shakespeare consider the part of Ophelia in the play is primarily iconographic.

The symbolic meanings of Ophelia, moreover, are specifically feminine. Ophelia is a very good sample of the obedient daughter in the period of Shakespeare. She agrees with
everything her father and her brother ask her to do. Her famous sentence to her father "I shall obey my Lord" (1.4. 10), is a clear evidence of her positive attitude to the rules of her society. Polonius uses her as bait in order to spy on Hamlet for King Claudius. When he does that Ophelia doesn't refuse, but on the contrary, she does exactly what her father has told her to do. Being unmarried, she lives by her father's rules and power. Essentially, she has no control over her character, her body and her will. Her choices and relationships are controlled by her father. Scene 3 of Act 1 is considered one of the most important scenes in the play. It explores the raltionship between Ophelia and her brother in one side, and between her and her farther on the other side. The conversation between them reflects the reaction of both Polonius and Laertes towards the relationship of Ophelia and Hamlet. Both of them concern Hamlet and her relation with him. As Laertes warns Ophelia for her relationship with Hamlet, she responses in a very positive way; this means that she has a deep respect and obedience for her brother; that respect is built on love and good relation with him. Laertes counsels Ophelia to be very wary of Hamlet. He does not want her to be very closed to him. He wants her to put into her consideration the potential consequences of becoming sexually involved with Hamlet: "Fear it, Ophelia. Fear it, my dear sister,/ And keep you in the rear of your affection,/ Out of the shot and danger of desire". (1.3. 9). His speech refers that Laertes has a deep concern of his sister to be in a good position, and it shows that he loves her and cares for her. When he calls her as dear sister, and urges her to keep away from Hamlet for her own good is clearly significant. The way her brother speaks with her is different from the one her father does. This attitude is sharply different from the one of Polonius towards his daughter. The gentle advice of Laertes with his sister is contrasted with the orders that Polonius gives to Ophelia, even it is not violent, but it is not like the one done by her brother. Polomius tries to speak openly that the way she deals with Hamlet is not acceptable by him. He urges that if she is not careful of him, she will make herself and her father like a fool: "Marry, I'll teach you. Think yourself a baby,/ That you have ta'en these tenders for true pay,/ Which are not sterlin. Tender yourself more dearly,/ Oh- not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,/ Running it thus- you'll tender me a fool". (3.2. 7)

The way of talking of Polonius refers that he is more concerned about his fame more than what happens to his daughter; this is completely different from what Laertes concerned about. In the case of Laertes, the relationship is characterized by mutual respect. Laertes cares for his sister more than being dominant or authoritative, but with Polonius, the matter is
different. Power and authority are the center of his relationship with Ophelia, because Polonius only cares about his daughter in relation to his goals and ambitions. For Kay Stanton, Ophelia is considered the most important character in *Hamlet*, and she is the most static. In her essay, *Hamlet's Whores: In New Essays on Hamlet* (1994), Stanton declares that "Ophelia herself is not as important as her representation of the dual nature of women in the play" (Stanton 167). She considers that "Through Ophelia we witness Hamlet's evolution, or de-evolution into a man convinced that all women are whores; and Ophelia has been made a whore by her father" (Stanton 167). In Act 2 Polonius has a plan to make an arrangement to use Ophelia in order to discover why Hamlet behaves so curiously. This is considered as an important evidence that Polonius cares for himself more than his daughter. When Polonius tries to use his daughter to understand the strange behaviour of Hamlet, this asserts that Polonius only cares about himself more than caring about his daughter.

Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice* wants to highlight the system of the social hierarchy of the world in which he lived. But whatever Shakespeare meant to say about the matter, *The Merchant of Venice* deserves to be read carefully because it certainly opens the door widely for looking for the justice of power and domination of males in the social hierarchy of Shakespeare's time.

In her essay in Word Magazine titled *On Playing Jessica* (2011), Sarah Stark comments on Jessica's lines that "Jessica's insight into Shylock's evil drives her to place all her hope in love" (Stark 68). Jessica wants to replace her fear of future by love and she also wants to get rid of her hate by living in love with her lover. She considers that love is the only way by which she can get rid of everything hurts her. When she states"I shall be saved by my husband" (3.5. 17-18), She reveals her faith in salvation by her love. So she gains wedding and gets bedding in the end because she had already decided what to do. But I see the wedding and bedding that Jessica received in the end may bring temporary happiness or she may blame herself in the future for her unfaithful behaviour towards her father because her love to Lorenzo appeared as a result of her hatred to the restrictions of her society in general and to her father in particular, not for the sake of her boyfriend. For this I say that nobody is sure that happiness is waiting for Jessica as a reward for her escaping from her father and the result or consequence will be discovered only by time.

In his book, *Jewish Presences in English Literature* (1990), Derek Cohen argues if "Shylock is a better man than we might be disposed to believe, or that he is not really human"
(Cohen 33). Actually in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare could convince us that he had unique abilities to draw a colourful picture about his characters and portray life and human nature in all its strange complexities and ambiguities. Shylock is one of Shakespeare's complex characters. In my opinion, Shylock deserves to sympathize with more than being considered as a dominant person. He had a tragic end, and his daughter's love for Lorenzo has caused her to betray her father in a shameful way. Shakespeare could make the character Shylock seem like he is villain and bad at one point, and a victim and pitiful at another. As the story progresses, it becomes ever easier to sympathise with him. Shylock's life is a hard one and just gets worse as he is introduced into the story. Shylock, in my opinion, is a victim because the society around him considers him as of a lower class because he is Jewish. Because of this, he loses everything. He loses his daughter, his money, his possessions and he is forced to convert to Christianity. Throughout the play, Shylock is criticized because he is a Jew: "Here comes another of the tribe- a third cannot be matched, unless the devil himself turned jew" (3.1. 64-65). This is one of the quotes which support that Shylock is worth to be sympathized with because he is tortured by others for being a Jew. And because he is a Jew, Shylock was hated and he suffered from discrimination done against him by Christians. He states: "You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, and spit upon my Jeweish garberdine." (1.3. 17).

In fact, I sympathise with Shylock because of the discrimination that had been done upon him. It is very hard for him to live in a place in which the treatment is very harsh and bad. He seeks to be respected not only by other people but also by the law. His speech has a strong significance about this meaning. "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs,/ Dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with / The same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject /To the same diseases, healed by the same means," (3.1. 51-54).

Actually, I feel sympathetic with him and see him more as a pitiful than being dominant or villain because through the above quotation, we find that Shylock insists on that there is no difference between human beings and that Jews and Christians share a common humanity. He also shows the hypocrisy of some Christian characters who always talk about love and mercy, but at the same time, they go out of their belief and isolate Shylock just because he is Jewish and has a different faith.

On the other hand, in my opinion, Shylock loves his daughter; this love comes clear through his shouting "My daughter" (2.8. 15). After he found out that Jessica left him and ran
away with a Christian, he was shocked and became very sad. This shows that Shylock cared about his daughter and loved her so much that he was so overwhelmed with grief. When she left he did not care that he is in the public, so he shouted out loudly regardless of his image and reputation in the town. Thus, there is a one-sided love from Shylock to Jessica who does not appreciate her father’s love by being ashamed of him as well as running away from him which also shows that she does not deserve to be his daughter. The quote "To be ashamed to be my father's child" (2.3. 16), shows that Jessica hates her father to the extent of being ashamed to be related to him.

Since, over the years, many people have considered Ophelia as a pure and a perfect girl, and many other people have become fascinated by her, many famous critics and writers have said memorable speeches for Ophelia's sake. One of these speeches is mentioned in Joanna Gondris' book Reading Reading: Essays on Shakespeare Editing in the Eighteenth Century (2001). She quotes that William Hazlitt said that: "Ophelia is a character almost too exquisitely touching to be dwelt upon. Oh rose of May, oh flower too soon faded!" (Gondris 229).

Since, in Shakespeare's time, it is typical for a woman to be obedient to her father and dependent upon him, Ophelia, in my opinion, is a symbol of obedience, and she also a representative of the perfect daughter who obeys her father and does everything he likes without any argument. Even when her father asks her to reject Hamlet, she responds with a subservient way: "I shall obey, my Lord" (1.3. 136). Polonius uses her for his own reasons. Shakespeare refers to future events, so the actions of both Ophelia and her father refer to their deaths. In the opening scene, her father and her brother warn her to stop seeing Hamlet. This warning gives an idea about what is going to happen in the future and predicts the future conflict with Hamlet, her madness and death.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the comparison between the father-daughter relationship of two of Shakespeare's plays; Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice, and the relationship of his female characters; Ophelia and Jessica with their fathers, I have come in my paper thesis to the following conclusions.

William Shakespeare shows two different types of women. One of them; named, Jessica has the unusual role of a wide variety of character features. She is able to make her own decision, to manifest emancipation of females, to resist the contemporary standards and
does not respond to a typical picture of a Renaissance woman. While the other, Ophelia, represents the stereotypical woman who accepts to live under the authority of the patriarchal society of Shakespeare's time. The heroines in many plays of Shakespeare, especially in *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, which are the center of my thesis, are at the crossroad. Although they can make their own choices, the society around them forces them to be obedient to laws and rules of that time.

Since the women in these two plays silently suffer from not having the chance to love and choose their own lovers, and they also suffer from not having the opportunity to express themselves and take decisions for themselves, this leads them to be in the margins of society without being independent from the social restrictions in which they live. It can be noticed that with a growing position in the social scale, the heroines are increasingly oppressed by the limits and norms of Shakespeare's time.

The tragic ends of some of Shakespeare's heroines, like Ophelia, are caused by the circumstances that come from the fact that those heroines become victims of heroes or men around them who try to return through the personal humanity and moral purity to the ideals of the old world which are crashed by historic and social development. On the contrary, Jessica's happy end emerged from the resistance of the patriarchal rules from which she escaped and chose to have another life far away from the harsh control of her dominant father.
Works Cited


