The Dilemma of Shakespearean Sonship: An Analysis of Paternal Models of Authority and Filial Duty in Shakespeare’s Hamlet

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The Dilemma of Shakespearean Sonship: An Analysis of Paternal Models of Authority and Filial Duty in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*

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A Thesis in the Field of Dramatic Arts
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2017
Abstract

The aim of the proposed thesis will be to examine the complex and compelling relationship between fathers and sons in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This study will investigate the difficult and challenging process of forming one’s own identity with its social and psychological conflicts. It will also examine how the transformation of the son challenges the traditional family model in concert or in discord with the predominant philosophy of the time. I will assess three father-son relationships in the play – King Hamlet and Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes, and Old Fortinbras and Fortinbras – which thematize and explore filial ambivalence and paternal authority through the act of revenge and mourning the death of fathers. In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the historical context, as well as the political, religious, and social conventions of the father and son relationship. The central discussion consists of three chapters which focus on the character transformations of Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras to support my claim of the son’s emerging voice and independence. I cite substantial evidence from major literary critics, as well as offer my own textual analysis of the dramatic complexities and ambiguities in each father-son relationship. In Chapter Five, I expand my argument to include questions about the evolution of feminine identity in Elizabethan culture – by examining the relationship between fathers and daughters in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. I offer a comparative analysis of the relationships between Polonius and Ophelia, and King Lear and Cordelia, by illustrating what it means for a Shakespearean daughter to become self-empowered by her own defiance, and the implications this
suggests about the shifting paradigm of masculine identity in the father and son relationship. I conclude by demonstrating that Shakespeare’s daughters ultimately echo the same sentiments as Shakespeare’s sons – a strong desire to embrace a new social order that will accommodate the emergence of “silent” voices in the Elizabethan Age.
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Robert Kiely for serving as my Thesis Director and for all of his valuable insights during the writing of this thesis. I am also grateful to Dr. Talaya Delaney who served as my Research Advisor. You have been a delight to work with and a great support throughout this process. I will always remember Dr. Sue Weaver Schopf for her unwavering belief in my ability to accomplish my goals. And I will forever be grateful to my amazing family for their unconditional love and support.
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One of the great contributions of recent Shakespearean scholarship has been to question the idea of paternal authority and filial duty as it relates to the study of father and son relationships in Elizabethan drama. This canon has been established and upheld by substantial and well-known critical studies including Fred B. Tromly’s *Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare: The Debt Never Promised* and David Kastan’s *Hamlet and the Imitation of Revenge*. The implication of these studies is that the “principal interpretive difficulty of the father and son relationship is imposed by the sons, who are often more complex and more elusive than their fathers. Furthermore, the underlying ambivalent attitudes towards fathers is a collision of two fields of force. While the first impulse preaches the imitation and even replication of the father, the second militates for the expressiveness and independence of the son” (Tromly 3).

My particular interest in Shakespeare’s evolution of the father and son relationship stems from Stephen Greenblatt’s theory behind Radical Individuation – the “singularity of the person who fails or refuses to match the dominant cultural expectation of the time, and is thus marked as irremediably different” (Greenblatt 5). It is often this question of difference that Shakespeare’s characters grapple in order to ascertain his or her own individuality. Whether these differences are birthed from social constructs of gender identity or political and paternal power, I believe that Shakespeare challenges
each of us to perceive how radical identities are formed – most notably in a world with innumerable absolutes.

The aim of this thesis will be to examine the complex and compelling relationship between fathers and sons in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. I will analyze three father and son relationships in the play – King Hamlet and Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes, and Old Fortinbras and Fortinbras – which thematize and explore filial ambivalence and paternal authority through the act of revenge and mourning the death of fathers. This study will investigate the difficult and challenging process of forming one’s own identity with its social and psychological conflicts; it will also examine how the transformation of the son challenges the traditional family model in concert or in discord with the predominant philosophy of the time.

The chief questions I will investigate are: How does Shakespeare utilize the play, *Hamlet*, to extend the idea of conflict in the father and son relationship? How do Elizabethan codes of conduct in father and son relationships affect and shape the voice of the son in *Hamlet*? In what ways does the father and son relationship evolve over the course of the play? And how does the quest for self-identity and awareness move the son to reconcile his own choice to serve morally despite filial obligation?

While much of the historical analysis on paternal authority and filial autonomy is marked by an emphasis on the succession of power in family dynamics, I propose that Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras challenge conventional Elizabethan attitudes about succession of power and submission by forging their own independence through voices that are distinct from their fathers. By taking a critical look into Shakespeare’s use of the literary voice, I intend to illustrate the trajectory of his characters’ emotions, needs, and
desires. This is evidenced by each son’s struggle to psychologically dismantle the idealized images of their fathers as superhuman or god-like, while ultimately discovering each father as flawed and imperfect.

Hamlet and Laertes are both sons who feel disempowered and subsequently marginalized by a conventional system of filial obligation to restore the idealized images of their fathers in pursuit of the decree: “in all things we will show our duty” (I, ii, 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).

Polonius’ final advice to Laertes, “to thine own self be true,” resounds powerfully as the leading paternal advice of the play (I, iii, 81). It brings into purview one of the most profound, yet perplexing, questions of all of Shakespeare’s works: *What does it mean to be true to one’s self?* Some critics suggest that Laertes fails to heed the advice from his father, and instead follows the advice of Claudius, who presents revenge as the acceptable form of mourning sanctioned by the court. “As a father, Polonius neglects his responsibility because he does not command proper paternal authority, and his son feels
obliged to establish his own command through revenge after Polonius’ murder. Moreover, Laertes’ perceived expectations of his father are completely nullified, as are his own actions against Hamlet. Both Hamlet and Laertes construct these false perceptions in a pattern that is similar to their idealizations of their fathers” (Drewry 2).

What becomes even more palpable is Hamlet’s encounter with the divine self. Although he will never be able to regain physical possession of the father and son relationship, Hamlet realizes the voice of the father in the form of divine providence. He utters, “O, ‘tis most sweet/ When in one line two crafts directly meet” (III, iv, 214-15). I agree with Justin Drewry’s claim that Hamlet recognizes these two “crafts” as the power of the Christian father and his earthly father who has recently assumed a heavenly position. (Drewry 2)

As scholars seek to understand the significance of Laertes and Fortinbras in relation to their fathers and to Hamlet, a majority of critics have taken more moderate views in suggesting that their dramatic function in the play is to serve as a parallel and foil to Hamlet. Irving Ribner, for one, has summed up this aspect: “Fortinbras’ situation is parallel to that of Hamlet. His uncle rules Norway, although he is the dead king’s son and heir, and he feels the burden of restoring to Norway the lands that have been lost, just as Hamlet feels the burden of avenging his father” (Ribner 87). Although Ribner emphasizes the aspect of parallelism, Bradley stresses a strong contrast in character – for both Fortinbras and Laertes – revealing how they “possess in abundance the very quality which the hero seems to lack, so that, as we read, we are tempted to exclaim that either of them would have accomplished Hamlet’s task in a day” (Bradley 70). I am more interested in exploring Harold Jenkins’ analysis as he “observes that the role of
Fortinbras appears to undergo a change as the action of the play works itself out” (Jenkins 95). Jenkins’ position has not been one which has received much attention from the critics, who, when they have concerned themselves with Fortinbras, have usually regarded him as a whole and consistent character. Jenkins “believes that this matter of Fortinbras’ transformation merits a little scrutiny. And since the two roles of Laertes and Fortinbras will be found to impinge on one another, a consideration of Fortinbras must involve Laertes too” (Jenkins 95). Although it is undeniable that Laertes and Fortinbras’ characters contrast to Hamlet in many ways, I argue that all three sons complement rather than oppose one another. I will assess how each son’s interactions with one another serve to validate their individual voices, which I believe are aligned to the power and identity they seek in the father and son relationship.

Two of the most reliable sources regarding the conventional expectations of the father-son relationship is William Buck’s, *Shakespeare’s Epic of Fathers and Sons*, and Coppelia Kahn’s, *Man’s Estate*. According to Tromly, both studies prove to be ground-breaking in that they “stress the centrality of the son who toils for the father’s sake, and furthermore, strives for the father’s ideal” (Tromly 4). When exploring this theory in the context of Shakespeare’s work as a whole, scholars may question: How much does it matter that the father is a king and the son a prince? When taking into account the historical implications behind negotiating power in Elizabethan culture, it matters a great deal that this particular father-son dynamic would be explored because of the inherent nature of its impact. Life was obviously different for ordinary Elizabethans; therefore, understanding these challenges in the way that Shakespeare illustrates them - with
regards to social status and gender - elicits a powerful response to bring about change in a universal way.

The relationship between Shakespeare’s fathers and daughters has also become a question of recent debate by critics who claim that the father-daughter bond provides a visible silhouetted to the rising tension between progressive and traditional social norms. In Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, the central conflict is over the choice of a husband, the moment in which the daughter leaves the sphere of the father’s absolute control. In Elizabethan drama, the typical pattern of the father-daughter bond is: a middle-aged to older man, usually a widower, who has an adolescent daughter just entering the stage of young womanhood. In her study, *The Relationship between Fathers and Daughters in Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and The Tempest*, Elena Gierstae poses the question, “Why does Shakespeare focus on the moment when the daughter leaves her father’s power and control?” (Gierstae 7).

Shakespeare begins these plays at the defining moment when both fathers and daughters are provoked by an identity crisis. The fathers’ perception of himself undergoes emotional and psychological turmoil, while the daughter struggles to respond to social norms that are inconsistent with her own desires. How does Cordelia’s silence towards King Lear’s “love test” suppress the voice of paternal authority? What does her silence indicate about shifting attitudes towards gender roles during the Elizabethan Era? Are Shakespeare’s daughters ultimately echoing the same sentiments as Shakespeare’s sons? In the final chapter of my thesis, I dedicate a portion of my study to exploring how the relationship between fathers and daughters in Shakespeare also reveals an ideological shift in the Elizabethan ideal.
With the publication of many new works on Shakespeare, fathers and sons in Elizabethan drama, and the quest for power and identity in family dynamics, it is my hope that this research will add to the existing scholarship by defining how these three models of father and son relationships acknowledged the growing significance of the son’s voice in political and religious patriarchal structures. By critically surveying the character transformations of each son in *Hamlet*, I expect to illuminate a greater understanding of paternal power in Shakespeare’s work as a whole. Ultimately, I intend to prove what most loving fathers like Polonius want for their Shakespearean sons: To thine own self be true.
In the first volume of his autobiography, *Father Figures* (1966), British journalist Kingsley Martin recalled how his father, a Nonconformist Victorian preacher, rewrote the Ten Commandments to express his contrarian principles. For his Fifth Commandment, the anti-Calvinist minister retained the biblical “Honour thy father and thy mother” but added an ameliorative codicil of his own: Respect the individuality and independence of thy children” (Martin 46). Three centuries earlier, however, not even the most radical of dissenting Elizabethan clergymen would have questioned the strictly hierarchical nature of the family. Even on the verge of the Civil War, when rebellious sects proliferated, interpretations of the Fifth Commandment retained the traditional emphasis on unmitigated filial obedience. It was only at the end of the seventeenth century, with the advent of conceptions of political reciprocity and contractual obligation, that individuals like John Locke could have declared that “he that would have his Son have a Respect for him, and his Orders, must himself have a great Reverence for his Son” (Locke 133).

In Shakespeare’s England, the notion of the father revering a son was conceivable only in the context of radical inversion, the world turned upside down. The dominant theological construction of parental superiority posited an analogy between the parent-child relationship and the relationship between God and man. William Tyndale’s, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528), interpreted the Fifth Commandment’s ‘Honour thy father and thy mother’ by stressing that “our fathers and mothers are to us in God’s stead”
Tyndale argues that the proper attitude of children to their parents should be very much like religious veneration. He further specifies that this proper honouring “is not to be understood in bowing the knee, and putting off the cap only, but that thou love the father and mother with all thine heart; and fear and dread them, and wait on their commandments; and seek their worship, pleasure, will and profit in all things; and give thy life for them, counting them worthy of all honour; remembering that thou art their good and possession, and that thou owest unto them thine own self, and all thou art able, yea, and more than thou art able to do” (Tromly 11).

In 1977, Lawrence Stone’s book, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*, sparked a debate about affective relations in the early modern family. Stone argues that from 1580 to 1640 the normal climate in English families was a “pernicious form of patriarchy in which the father became a ‘legalized petty tyrant within the home’” (Stone 7). Stone connects the burgeoning power of paternal authority in the nuclear family to the decline of the medieval kinship-based, extended family and to the reinforcement provided by two concomitant developments in church and state: the rise of Protestantism and of authoritarian nation state. What emerged from Stone’s book is a lurid description of despotic patriarchal rule, in which children were “numbed recipients of a good deal of violence and manipulation in the name of discipline and obedience. In most family relationships, the net result was a ‘general psychological atmosphere of distance, manipulation and deference’ in which ‘evidence of close bonding between parents and children’ [was] rare, being ‘hard, but not impossible, to document’” (Stone 17).

Stone’s book fostered a wave of dissent from historians taking issue with its emphasis on the “psychic numbing” and general sense of negativity within the early
modern family. Drawing on a number of letters and journals from family archives in England and the Continent, Tromly suggests that revisionist historians, such as Houlbrooke and Pollock, amassed a great deal of evidence to suggest that close bonding did occur between parents and children – despite what Stone acknowledged as being difficult to document. A central focus of most of these historians has been to challenge Stone’s view of the Elizabethan father as a “petty and emotionally removed tyrant” by eradicating the stigma that fathers were never involved in the emotional lives of their children.

Taking into account the historical debate, Tromly also claims that “Shakespeare’s plays do not provide a balanced picture of the full range of contemporary family relationships, especially with regard to fathers and sons” (Tromly 17). He asserts that Shakespeare’s plays often “emphasize the isolation of the prime son by removing younger male siblings that appear in his sources” (Tromly 17). Moreover, the frequent absence of the mother figure in the plays removes a maternal voice who might be expected to mediate between overbearing fathers and ambivalent sons. “These characteristics point to a representation of fathers and sons that is darker than the model of the ‘Loving Family in Old Europe’ but also considerably more nuanced than the model of the despotic patriarch” (Tromly 17).

In order to understand the father-daughter relationship, it is important to consider Charles Frey’s feminist critique of Shakespeare’s works. Frey argues that “the elder generation often adheres to a code of revenge or war in which it seeks to over-involve the younger generation” (Frey 295). Shakespeare’s fathers acknowledge their reliance upon their daughters for security and comfort in old age. According to Shakespeare’s
Imperiled and Chastening Daughters of Romance, “such considerations of emotional and economic security, as well as political control and generational extension, often dictate the father’s interest in the choice of his daughter’s spouse” (Frey 298). Frey suggests that these fathers seek to satisfy their need for paternal power by controlling their daughter’s independent voice. He affirms that the absence of a biological son not only solidifies the father’s need for his daughter’s support, it also creates a space for a congenial son-in-law. The son-in-law then turns “into a substitute son, the inheritor of family power and values” (Frey 298). Nevertheless, when the daughter makes a choice to go against her father’s will, she effectively shuts him off from “patriarchal domination of the son-in-law, and consequently, a son-like extension of his power and values” (Frey 298).

In King Lear, Shakespeare demonstrates how Cordelia’s rebellion purposefully defeats King Lear’s attempt to affirm his power and control over his “future” son. The moment Cordelia decides not to marry the Duke of Burgundy and gives her heart to the King of France, she deepens the father-daughter conflict. What begins as a “power play” to maintain paternal influence in his daughter’s life, ends with the desperation of a fragile and insecure father transitioning to a place where he questions his own identity: “let her be thine, for we/ Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see/ That face of hers again” (1.1.277-279).

This conflict within the father-daughter relationship is also portrayed in Hamlet’s relationship with the Ghost. When the Ghost commands Hamlet to make haste in avenging the death of the King, Hamlet is confronted with the moral question of revenge which is characterized by Shakespeare’s structure of the revenge tragedy. The fundamental implication behind Hamlet’s dilemma is that he is expected to revenge any
injury to his family, especially his father. However, what Shakespeare shows us is how he, as the dramatist, complicates all rigid categories of behavior in order to challenge the historical and theoretical perspectives of revenge – which are governed by the times in which his characters lived.

The Revenge Tragedy

Revenge was one of the most pervasive themes in early modern drama. It often aroused the “infliction of harm in righteous response to a perceived injury or injustice, becoming a universal practice, both transcultural and pan-historical” (Clare 1). In David Kastan’s essay, *Hamlet and the Imitation of Revenge*, Kastan supports Rene Girard’s claim that “revenge is, as Hamlet reluctantly discovers, a desperate mode of imitation, avenging wrongs with wrongs” (Kastan 104). However, he further claims that “the revenger is ultimately prevented from originating an action. Hamlet is allowed only to react to – and to reenact – the original crime. Only when he can persuade himself that revenge is a mode of restoration rather than reprisal can Hamlet move towards its execution” (Kastan 200). The fundamental implication of revenge, with its constitutive metaphors, indeed gives expression to a punitive quality, as in the term ‘thirst for revenge’, and both the “verbal and the visual imagery of revenge tragedies convey this compelling sense of thirst and appetite: ‘Now could I drink hot blood./ And do such bitter business as the day/ Would quake to look at’ (3.2.351-53) declares Hamlet, now certain of the King’s guilt, can be perceived as assuming the posture of a conventional avenger” (Kastan 201).

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the first revenge play of the Elizabethan theatre, Hieronimo resolves to avenge the murder of his son Horatio by Lorenzo, the nephew of
the King of Spain. He justifies that he will “marshal up the fiends in hell/ To be revenged on you all for this” (3.12.77-78). “The reference to ‘you all’ includes the prince’s innocent father, the Duke of Castile, so that in the final reckoning the Spanish line of succession is completely obliterated. In the fatal disruption of Elizabethan dynasties – both real and fictional – vengeance breeds vengeance; violence escalates and all parties are consumed in a domino effect of hatred and retaliation” (Clare 3).

For both the moralist and legalist, historical distinctions regarding the convoluted and psychologically complex nature of revenge remain to be explored. Many scholars suggest that there is no evidence in English Renaissance culture that revenge was or could ever be condoned. For the legislator, revenge was “repugnant to the natural law; while for the moralist it was considered barbaric” (Clare 6). Francis Bacon’s work, ‘On Revenge’, The Essays, equated the crime with vengeance: “Your temptation was revenge, which the more natural it is to man, the more have laws, both divine and human, sought to repress it” (Bacon 73). While Bacon coupled both social and religious prohibition, he argues that biblical teachings were oftentimes paradoxical. At one end of the spectrum, he points out that “the god of Exodus advocates an ‘eye for an eye,’ and a ‘tooth for a tooth.’’ Again in Numbers, God tells Moses, ‘The revenger of blood himself shall slay the murderer; when he meeteth him, he shall slay him’ (35:19). However, this approval of violent retribution is superseded by the teachings of the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, exhorts ‘Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath’ (4:26). In the book of Romans he adds, ‘Avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord’ (12:19). Any proclaimed avenger might see a loophole here; just as Hamlet
reflects on himself as God’s ‘scourge and minister’ (3.4.176), the revenger might pride himself as an agent of divine justice or chastisement” (Bacon 73). But overall, according to theologians of New Testament scripture, the “revenger would have to quote selectively to find any biblical sanction for his actions” (Clare 7).

I agree with Janet Clare’s conclusion that we cannot “innocently adopt dominant Elizabethan ideologies against revenge as the context for reading the revenge tragedy” (Clare 7). She poses the question: What happens in a revenge play when we see the revenger as humanized? Or, his predicament individualized? Since the 1580s, Elizabethan drama has raised many questions which may largely be absent in anti-revenge advocacy. “What happens when revenge is expected of an individual not necessarily predisposed to act in such a way, as in Hamlet? What happens psychologically to the individual in the process of becoming a revenger?” (Clare 8) And, in what ways can this process ultimately be justified? Bacon puts forth a compelling response at the end of his essay that “vindictive people live the life of witches; but only the drama can represent the terrible pressures on the mind created by the obligation to execute revenge” (Bacon 73).
Chapter III

King Hamlet and Hamlet: The Emergence of Power behind the Throne

As Shakespearean scholars continue to debate the fundamental conflict over the *official morality of revenge* and *anti-revenge advocacy*, it becomes inevitable that both proponents, and critics alike, will address the psychology behind Hamlet’s struggle to define himself as a man beyond the father and son relationship. In order to more fully understand and discuss the evolution of Hamlet’s identity, it is important to recognize what Justin Drewry suggests, the notion that “King Hamlet’s paternal control over his son can be divided into two periods: his absence from Hamlet’s childhood due to foreign wars and military conflicts, and his continued influence on the prince after his death” (Drewry 5). What I find especially interesting about the former is that contemporary ideas regarding the transference of masculine identity are not at all new phenomena. In his book, *Absent Fathers, Lost Sons*, Guy Corneau discusses the principle effects of how “inadequate fathering” helps to shape the identity of the son in the father and son relationship. “Sons who have not been given adequate fathering caused by the father’s absence will be compensated to the same extent by an unconscious process of idealization” (Corneau 19). The early parent-child relationship between Hamlet and his father impels Hamlet to struggle with understanding the paradoxes of his father’s character as godlike, but also flawed, while attempting to form his own identity despite paternal expectations in Elizabethan culture.
“During much of his adult life, King Hamlet was an absent father figure” (Drewry 5). As Horatio attests, the former king was mostly absent during Hamlet’s childhood: ‘th’ ambitious Norway combated,’ and ‘he smote the steeled pole-axe’ (1.1.70-72) are descriptors that build upon the idea that the veteran ‘warrior’ made a hard, but undeniable choice – to sacrifice true fatherhood for triumph on the battlefield. Furthermore, as Drewry suggests, members of the Danish court offer additional accounts of King Hamlet’s absence during his son’s adolescence – in conquests against Old Fortinbras, the Polish, and England whose “cicatrice [indeed] looks raw and red/ After the Danish sword” (4.2.63-64). Even Hamlet himself has to rely on the power of his father’s military victories in order to create an authentic image of the man who was not always present for his family. Guy Corneau’s theory of idealization is underscored by Hamlet’s decision to accept the warrior image of his father in order to replace the absent father figure of his youth. However, this process of idealization does not manifest itself without struggle. I agree with Drewry that Horatio, Hamlet’s dearest friend, describes the prince’s youthful idealization of his father as a “goodly king” (1.2.187), which establishes a contrast in the identity of the father because it places more emphasis on the king’s royalty rather than his humanity. Horatio’s additional claims, “I knew your father; but I saw him once,” (1.2.214, 187) seek to fuel Hamlet’s greatest dilemma as the prince offers an empty attempt to atone for the sins of a fallen king: “He was a man, take him for all in all:/ I shall not look upon his like again” (1.2.188-89). Hamlet speaks of his father in a way that exudes paternal respect, but also sheds light on a man with unfailing imperfections. Corneau suggests that in the development of many father and son relationships what becomes especially notable is the emotional connection the son seeks. Major deficits in
the level of attention that a father gives to his son often “result in the son’s inability to identify with his father as a means of establishing his own masculine identity [and voice]. Similarly, a son deprived of the confirmation and security that might have been provided by his father’s presence struggles to advance to adulthood” (Corneau 13). While I do find the basis of Corneau’s findings considerably profound, it is the ambivalence towards his “father-king” that Hamlet harnesses as a mechanism for performing his own rite of passage and nurturing a unique perspective of masculine identity.

After King Hamlet’s death, Hamlet attempts to resolve the internal conflict between the images of his father’s “warrior-spirit” and human mortality. Avi Erlich denotes that “Hamlet’s view of his father as weak is compounded by his father’s murder, demonstrating King Hamlet’s inability to control his own fate” (Erlich 26-27). Moreover, Hamlet’s difficulty in separating the distinct images of his father’s patriarchal power is evidenced in the early court scene when Hamlet is confronted by King Claudius’ question, “how is it that the clouds still hang on you?” (1.2.65). It becomes the first of many such questions that probe into the recesses of Hamlet’s mind, only to find each probe frustrated as the Prince gives a punning riposte: “Not so, my lord: - I am too much i’ th’ sun” (1.2.66). A duel of wits takes center stage paving the way for a new voice to emerge – one that is sharp, uncooperative, and embittered by the marital union of a disgraced mother to a dead father’s brother. How does that sound for watching a late-night, family drama? Rightfully so, King Claudius’ attempt to fill the royal air with a public display of “paternal” affection is offset by Hamlet’s monosyllabic, “a little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.64). This reinforces Hamlet’s conflicting views about
mourning the death of his biological father (filial duty), and being expected to accept the incestuous and unnatural relationship between his mother and uncle.

The Queen moves to add her voice to the King’s in a similar “unthinking” fashion when she asks her son to “cast thy nightly colour off” (1.2.67) and cease mourning for his father – although she does not explicitly state it – she herself is done. What’s even more perplexing to Hamlet is the apathy extending from Gertrude’s use of the word “seems” to describe his current state of grief: Why seems it so particular with thee?” (1.2.75). In a precursor to the first soliloquy, Hamlet elevates the emotional tension of the affair by exploiting his own emotional verisimilitude against the mere show of grief put on by the court:

‘Seems’, madam? Nay it is: I know not ‘seems’.
‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
Nor customary suits of solemn black,
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
Nor the dejected ‘haviour’ of the visage,
Together with all forms, moods, shows of grief,
That can denote me truly: these indeed seem,
For they are actions that a man might play,
But I have that within which passeth show;
These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (1.2.76-86)

Picking up the Queen’s use of the word ‘seems’, Hamlet “hurls it back at her in three curt sentences,” (Hibbard 44) and then goes on to accuse her and the entire court of dishonoring the memory of his father. He acknowledges what is both customary and right in his dutiful expression of grief; however, he removes the limitations of emotion and time to emphasize the uncontrollable urge to embody grief. For Hamlet, this process is a state of entrapment; role-play is not an option for him. He puts forth a compelling argument by comparing the emotional turmoil he feels to what members of the court can
only appear to feel: “I have that within which passeth show,” (1.2.86) so Hamlet conveys to his mother. Prior to this moment, it is indubitably clear that the intensity which resonates from the words ‘that within’ proves to be a deep sorrow for his father. Yet, when Hamlet is alone, we see more than grief tormenting him. On the one hand, we see a prince who’s been deprived of establishing his own distinct voice, yet on the other, we see a man ready to embrace the internal struggle that will prove his heart’s virtue and sincerity.

In Hamlet’s first soliloquy, Shakespeare unleashes an emotional intensity that is comprised of vivid exclamations, parenthetical interjections, and the “lacerating question which is also a protest, ‘Must I remember?’ whose ultimate cause is not completely defined until the twenty-third line: ‘married with mine uncle’” (Hibbard 45). This question ignites a chaos of emotions that will guide the framework for Hamlet’s inaugural dilemma – a filial perception of his dead father. Hamlet attempts to resolve this conflict by framing his father as a classical god. He amalgamates his father’s image by making a clear reference to the Greek god Hyperion Titan, while also portraying his father as a genuine and sincere lover towards his mother. To Hamlet, he has “the front of Jove” (3.4.64) with an “eye like Mars” to threaten or command (3.4.65); his manner is fixed and resolute resembling “the herald Mercury” (3.4.66). Hamlet’s language is explicit in identifying that each attribute simultaneously achieves a certain mark of approval “where every god did seem to set his seal/ To give the world assurance of a man” (3.4.69-70). Here, Shakespeare begins to intensify the son’s dilemma which will remain steadfast through the end of the play. Hamlet’s subconscious informs the audience regarding what he considers to be the meaning of manhood. With each analogy, Hamlet
establishes his father’s power, beauty, and love for Gertrude. As Justin Drewry claims, “the result, of course, is a form of idolatry that also lies at the heart of Hamlet’s growing dilemma” (Drewry 7).

Lacking any physical knowledge of his father, Drewry also claims that Hamlet imagines his father to have an undeniable power over nature: “That he might not beteem the winds of heaven/ Visit her face too roughly” (1.2.141-42). Hamlet perceives his father to have “had a control over nature in order to protect his mother, thus establishing the depth of his love and commitment to Gertrude” (Drewry 8). This reiterates the power and strength of a man who has chosen to be a protector over his family. Moreover, it also serves to emphasize the stark contrast between King Hamlet and Claudius, the satyr. Harold Jenkins explains that the “antithesis between the sun-god, and a creature half man-half beast, epitomizes in the two brothers the complex nature of man – which will be the theme of Hamlet’s later reflections” (Jenkins 438). The polarizing effects of these paternal images certainly lead to the defining question in the twenty-third line of the first soliloquy: “Must I remember?” (1.2.143). Although the more implicit conflict resides between the two brothers, Hamlet is driven by the compulsion to remember, yet he fights against what he believes both men represent: “Let me not think on ‘t” (1.2.146) – Hamlet is obsessed by memories of what was – as he pays tribute to a father so loving to his mother. However, he is both appalled and fascinated by images of what is – “the dexterity of incestuous sheets!” (1.2.157). In the Oxford edition of the play, Hibbard describes the emotional tension in the son’s voice: “Hamlet unpacks his heart with words that explain his longing for total dissolution as a way of escape from a world that the monstrous and outrageously hasty union of his mother and his uncle has made
meaningless and intolerable to him” (Hibbard 46). Thus, when Hamlet subsequently reveals, “the counterfeit presentment of two brothers” (3.4.62) his language shifts to rely on the visual imagery in contrast to a subjective imagery that establishes the father’s power in the first soliloquy. Prior to 3.1, Hamlet is only able to identify with the voice of the father in terms of the emotional connection between King Hamlet and his love for Gertrude. Consequently, as Drewry claims, “this subtle shift reveals a transformation of Hamlet’s idealization of his absent father to the idolatry of the Ghost who represents a pagan god for Hamlet to worship during the remainder of the play” (Drewry 8). Hamlet’s worship of his dead father – whom he sees as the epitome of all that is godlike in man – along with an absolute loathing of his uncle, the satyr, and disillusioned disgust with his mother – “O, heaven! A beast that wants discourse of reason/ Would have mourned longer” (1.2.150-51) – mingle inextricably with one another. But what matters most in the play, regarding the power of the father and son’s voice, is that each character is maneuvering through their own turmoil. Hamlet’s refrain to his mother – “have you eyes?” (3.4.73) not only focuses on the emotional and visual contrast between the two men, but incites a moral contrast as well. All of these moments, Hibbard argues, are “made present and urgent by a power of expression that renders the chaotic without itself completely degenerating into the chaos” (Hibbard 46).

Drewry claims that Hamlet’s words and actions support a specific dichotomy between the classical god Hyperion and “the Everlasting” in the first soliloquy. Hamlet’s cry to the Christian God – “O God! O God!” (1.2.132) – fails to emulate Hamlet’s initial views regarding his father’s likeness to figures of Greek mythology. Furthermore, Drewry reasons that “Hamlet now seems inclined to separate God’s power and law from
the classical powers often associated with his father and Denmark. Although Hamlet wants to enable his father in his own memory, King Hamlet’s death negates the image of paternal power and replaces it with an image of imperfection” (Drewry 9). Moreover, the imagery behind the Greek Titan’s legendary journey emphasizes his own role as a father to Helios, the sun god, making the allusion even more apparent. And since the Titan gods, led by Hyperion, were also “defeated by their Olympic offspring it becomes justifiable that a destruction of paternal power is at work and foreshadows the events in the play” (Drewry 10).

Hamlet’s relationship with the Ghost becomes an extension of this dichotomy after he engages in the “group interview” with the Ghost. Fully aware of the risk he is taking, the Prince voices his suspicion that there has been “foul play” (1.3.269) in the royal court and expresses a firm conviction that “foul deeds will rise” (1.3.270). From this scene alone, evidence suggests that there are two sides to Hamlet: On the one hand, Hamlet has the face of the consummate Renaissance prince, all that an aristocrat should be, “the paragon so eloquently described by Ophelia at 3.1.155-60, gracious in manner, curious and precise as befits a scholar, soldierly in his resolution and confident in his royal disposition” (Hibbard 47). However, in the environment of the court, we see more than Ophelia’s characterization of the “noble” prince. Once again, we see an Elizabethan son who is bitter, suspicious, and above all, disillusioned. As Hibbard suggests, both sides of the man are apparent in his encounter with the Ghost. At first, the young scholar is fearless in his approach, prompted by each cue of the Ghost’s command:

Why, what should be the fear?
I do not set my life at a pin’s fee;
And for my soul, what can it do to that,
Being a thing immortal as itself?
It waves me forth again: I will follow it. (1.4.48-52) 

Hamlet’s fearlessness shows that he demands answers. Despite his lack of knowledge regarding what will happen next, Hamlet feels he has already experienced his greatest pain so there is nothing more for him to lose. He understands that his life is worth more than the balance in which it hangs and sees this as an opportunity to establish greater meaning to his existence. Furthermore, Shakespeare urges the audience to notice Hamlet’s psychological shift when Horatio and Marcellus try to restrain him from following the Ghost. We see a very real and unmistakable menace in his cry: “By heav’n, I’ll make a ghost of him that lets me!” (1.4.67); furthermore, a consuming desire to take action altogether informs his response to the Ghost’s “call” that he avenge his father’s murder:

Haste, haste me to know it, that I with wings as swift
As meditation or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge. (1.5.33-35)

“[O]ne of the most striking revelations about the spirit of Hamlet’s father,” Eleanor Prosser affirms, “is that he utters not one word of love for his son. The Ghost’s appeal is directly to Hamlet’s love for his father” (Prosser 142). This “love” can be seen as the power of King Hamlet’s paternal control extending beyond the grave. The Ghost makes it a point to capitalize on this love in order to direct Hamlet’s actions, “If thou didst ever thy dear father love/ Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder” (1.5.27, 29). It becomes obvious that the Ghost is emotionally manipulative and assigns a weighted value to Hamlet’s love based on his willingness to execute a “command of action.” Therefore, a few questions remain to be considered by Elizabethan scholars: 1) Is it possible for a son’s ‘love’ to be measured in regards to a father’s decree for justice? 2) At
what point does the line between love and duty cease to exist? And, 3) Can there be a genuine expression of the son’s love without filial duty?

Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles to translate this love into duty as he swears to revenge his father’s murder and redeem a dishonored legacy. Despite the emotional and psychological dangers of his own idolatry, Hamlet is challenged with the task of seeing himself as different from his father because he feels he has received his father’s “calling.” Although Shakespeare introduces this idea as a rhetorical question for Hamlet to consider, “Still am I called?” (1.4.66), it becomes clear that his answer is revealed metaphorically through the image of a son accepting a “spiritual call” from his heavenly father.

A.C. Bradley argues that in the interval between the first two acts Hamlet has “done absolutely nothing” (Bradley 103). He goes even further to suggest that “the Prince has, in fact, done less than nothing” (Bradley 103). I couldn’t disagree more with Bradley’s argument. Hamlet, having absolutely no case against Claudius that can be made public, has ingeniously adopted the ‘antic disposition’ for the purpose of exciting the ‘apprehensions of the enemy;’ thus, provoking King Claudius into showing his “true colors” which are perfectly disguised by a smiling face. Hamlet’s soliloquy at the end of 2.2 reveals that he has been doing “something of the utmost importance – he has been thinking, and thinking to some purpose. This is precisely what Laertes will so signally and disastrously fail to do later in similar circumstances. Hamlet’s thinking has led him to the conclusion that he must test the reliability of the Ghost and find confirmation of his own conviction, which has never really wavered, that King Claudius is guilty” (Hibbard 55).
The *Murder of Gonzago*, also referred to as “the play-within-a-play” or “The Mousetrap,” is considered to be a refined and subtle piece of revenge itself. Shakespeare’s decision to illustrate the play’s dramatic irony gives Hamlet the proof he needs to establish Claudius’ guilt. As intended, the play “catches the conscience of the king” (2.2.591) and literally brings him to his sinful knees. Hibbard notes the fact that “it is in these circumstances that Hamlet inadvertently crosses the path of the praying King and spares him. But why?” (Hibbard 55). I agree with his theory that given Hamlet’s nature, and the profound issues raised by the Ghost’s demand for justice, it is not surprising that, unlike Fortinbras and Laertes, Hamlet begins to think long and hard about the implications of his revenge. Peter Davison argues that, “what makes the play especially appealing is all that leads to the delay. Shakespeare has performed the difficult task of dramatizing thought rather than action” (Davison 23). These particular “moments of delay” become the impetus by which Hamlet is able to ensure the damnation of the “praying King.” As Drewry suggests, “it also becomes the reason why the Ghost has to make a second appearance in the play: Hamlet has yet to yield to the precepts of filial duty established by the Danish court. Despite how Laertes mourns the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, Hamlet cannot follow the same prescribed patterns of mourning because King Hamlet’s death is perceived to be a result of natural causes rather than murder – making revenge illogical” (Drewry 16). More importantly, since Hamlet does not follow his father’s model of physical retribution, also sanctioned by the Ghost, Hamlet’s “delayed reaction” allows him the opportunity to introduce a new and authentic voice in Elizabethan drama – one that violates traditional social norms by moving away from filial expectations of a son’s love, respect, and duty.
While exploring these new layers of identity, Prosser affirms that Hamlet “initially turns away from the wisdom of his theological training and condemns Claudius’ soul to eternal damnation” (Prosser 63). Hamlet’s movement away from his Christian beliefs begin with his “drink hot blood” soliloquy in 3.2 and continues just until after Polonius’ death. Hamlet, assured of the King’s guilt and given the perfect opportunity to carry out the Ghost’s demand, “spares the King out of the mistaken belief that his enemy is in a state of grace” (Hibbard 58). Hamlet denies Claudius any “relish of salvation” (3.3.95) and craves “that his soul may be as damned and black/ As hell, whereto it goes” (3.3.97-98). Despite Claudius’ attempt at true repentance, Hamlet reasons that his decision not to kill the King is commensurate to the crime committed. He insinuates that Claudius should feel the same depth of pain and suffering as King Hamlet, indicating it only fair to end Claudius’ life “when he is drunk asleep,” or “in th’ incestuous pleasure of his bed” (3.3.92-93). The Ghost alludes to the fact that since “No reck’ning was made” on his behalf, why should Claudius receive such justice? Therefore, Hamlet moves to reject his Christian ideology and seeks to damn King Claudius rather than forgive him.

This moment in the play suggests that the moral problem of revenge contrasts with Hamlet’s idealized view of his father’s legacy. Drewry claims, “that the Ghost’s commandment for revenge does not follow either the public process for justice or any private code acceptable by the Elizabethan court, but deviates from established moral norms and contrasts with other honorable images of King Hamlet produced by the courtiers and confirmed by his son” (Drewry 18). I agree with Drewry that these opposing viewpoints separate the Ghost as a distinct character from the living memory of King Hamlet. Moreover, the difference between the “two fathers” seeks to establish
Hamlet’s identity as the third voice in the Shakespearean triad. Nevertheless, after Hamlet admits to accidentally killing Polonius he then recognizes the consequences of his own actions and immediately accepts the need for true repentance: “For this same lord,/ I do repent” (3.4.171-72).

Hamlet’s transformation continues as he acknowledges the sovereignty of “divine providence” that will confirm his faith in the final scene. After his return from the sea voyage, Hamlet fails to mention revenge or any desire to take immediate action against Claudius. Furthermore, in his letter to the King, Hamlet’s tone indicates he has been “redeemed” and further empowered by a higher self to “turn from his wicked ways.” On the one hand, his opening salutation to the “High and mighty” (4.4.45) indicates that Hamlet is formally addressing the King in his pardon to return to Denmark. However, I propose that Hamlet’s use of the “High and mighty” reveals an elevation in his spiritual character. Due to a “renewed” sense of grace extending from his Christian beliefs, Hamlet’s earthly spirit has reunited with the “Everlasting” that he addresses in the first soliloquy. He further asserts his willingness to be “set naked on your kingdom,” (4.4.45-46) which implies a shift towards transparency and openness as well as an appreciation for embracing truth. What makes Hamlet’s letter even more profound is the moment that King Claudius pauses to acknowledge the change in Hamlet’s character – ‘Naked’ – (4.4.53). Despite the King’s desire to plot Hamlet’s murder, he communicates an awareness that the Prince is no longer the same man that shunned and rejected him in the beginning of the play: “A little more than kin and less than kind” (1.2.64).

Hamlet’s love of truth manifests itself in his almost infallible capacity for recognizing and rejecting all things considered untrue. Proving himself in a world given
over to lies and deceit, he is merciless and unsparing in his readiness to tell others who they truly are. When Hamlet declares to Gertrude “I must be cruel, only to be kind,” (3.4.177) he is telling his mother exactly what he thinks of her – that she is the personification of “unvirtuous” womanhood. He not only pours out his thoughts to her, but also forces her to confess that the portrait he paints of her in undeniably true. “Be thou assured, if words be made of breath/ And breath of life, I have no life to breathe/ What thou hast said to me” (3.4.196-98). Gertrude is made speechless by her own truth. Hamlet navigates this scene with such authority and command that he declares what is, for him, a written and sealed article of faith.

For Hamlet, knowing himself also involves seeking to understand himself within the context of human life as a whole. And that, in turn, implies coming to terms with death. His words and actions in the graveyard scene attest to a newfound perception of death. He progresses from a former, more “common view” of death, to a new understanding of death shaped by his own wisdom: “to what base uses we may return, Horatio!” (5.1.188). Hamlet implies that there should be a universal return to the fundamental tenets of Christian faith. Drewry claims that his “use of the ‘we’ not only includes Horatio and himself, but also extends to the entire human race including the Ghost and his father” (Drewry 20).

Hamlet’s view of death is also conveyed, in comparison to Laertes, when he takes possession of Yorick’s skull before learning of Ophelia’s death. Despite the fact that it is Laertes’ words which reveal Ophelia’s death, Hamlet responds to Laertes’ actions instead. Laertes, who shows despair and doubt in the uncertainty of Ophelia’s spirit, “resembles Hamlet’s former reactions to his own father’s death. However Hamlet, who
now demonstrates an acceptance of death in this scene, marks a return to his own Christian faith in God rather than promoting the former revenge codes of the Ghost and Claudius’ Denmark” (Drewry 21).

Hamlet also reveals his spiritual maturity by discerning that there is an existing hope beyond the inevitability of death; and he does not physically die until after he discovers “the readiness is all” (5.2.167). This conclusion is followed by his biblical reference to Matthew 10:29:

There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come: if it be not to come, it will be now: if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. (5.2.164-67)

Hamlet’s understanding of the “special providence” is reinforced by such statements as, “there is a divinity that shapes our ends,” (5.2.10) and “even in that was heaven ordinant” (5.2.52). Horatio agrees with these statements because he, unlike Hamlet, has maintained his resolve in promoting the principles of Christianity throughout the play. However, the extraordinary beauty behind Hamlet’s “identity crisis” is that his former perception has evolved and he now demonstrates a greater confidence in God’s grace, as well as his own faith.

During the final scene of the play, when Hamlet accepts the duel against Laertes, Hamlet appears to have reached the pinnacle moment of his Christian resignation. But has he? Some scholars suggest that subsequent events belie the notion. When Laertes wounds Hamlet and the truth finally emerges, Hamlet suddenly takes control of the situation and seeks out retributive justice against the King. In doing so, is it possible that Hamlet fulfills the Ghost’s request for revenge? I believe what can be interpreted from this scene is that Hamlet’s “readiness” is a readiness to act as well as a readiness to die, if
necessary. However, what I consider to be even more germane is Hamlet’s act to offer Laertes an apology prior to the duel taking place. Hamlet’s speech: “Give me your pardon, sir: I’ve done you wrong, But pardon’t, as you are a gentleman” (5.2.170-71) again shows Hamlet’s understanding of his need for forgiveness. It also reiterates Hamlet’s focus on the principles of his Christian faith and devalues the “sovereignty” of the Ghost’s voice. Furthermore, Hamlet’s need for forgiveness reveals a more ‘perfect conscience’ in that Hamlet is not only concerned with the fate of his own soul, but also with establishing the legacy of his eternal voice through the clearing of his name.

As Hamlet finally resolves his actions with his faith, through the power of Divine grace, he proves to have overcome the challenge of creating a space in the kingdom for his own identity. Despite the fact that he wanted to believe in the Ghost’s mission, he ultimately realized that he could not carry, nor atone for, the sins of his “father-king.” I believe that it was always Hamlet’s mission to walk in his own truth and forge new ideas about how Elizabethan sons are to be respected and viewed – namely Laertes and Fortinbras. I don’t consider it coincidental that Fortinbras literally stands as one of the last few men that Hamlet gives his ‘dying voice’ to: “But I do prophesy th’ election lights/ On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice (5.2.321). A symbolic passing of the torch takes place as Hamlet not only confirms Fortinbras as the royal heir to the Danish throne, but also in affirming Fortinbras’ right to navigate his own life despite paternal authority. In Chapter 4, I will focus on the dramatic composition of both Fortinbras and Laertes by assessing their individual voices to reveal the true essence and shape of Elizabethan identity and modern manhood.
Chapter IV
Laertes and Fortinbras and the Composition of Identity in Hamlet

The idea of paternal loss in Hamlet is magnified through a lens in which distance expands the trajectory of identity in the father and son relationship. All three Shakespearean sons either have lost, or will lose, their fathers during the course of the play. Unlike Hamlet and Fortinbras, Laertes is the only son whose paternal loss can be traced in significant detail prior to his father’s death. In his book, Fathers and Sons in Shakespeare: The Debt Never Promised, Fred B. Tromly argues that the “key component of Polonius and Laertes’ relationship is its highly conventional nature, with both of them adhering close to Elizabethan stereotypes of decorous behavior for fathers and sons. It is not surprising that, as a trusted, Lord Burghley-like counsellor to the crown, Polonius places great emphasis on the respect that is due his authority and conceives of the father-son relationship in public, institutional terms as a microcosm of order in the state” (Tromly 156). Suitably, the first time we see Polonius and Laertes together they are in the presence of the King bearing witness to the hierarchies of institutional authority. When Claudius asks, “What wouldst thou have, Laertes?” (1.2.50) it is presumably on bended knee that Laertes moves to address him:

Dread my lord,
Your leave and favour to return to France,
From whence though willingly I came to Denmark
To show my duty in your coronation, (1.2.51-54)
Laertes’ immediate reaction to the King shows that Polonius has trained his son in the due process of obtaining proper paternal authority before he even acknowledges the King. Polonius stands, as only a proud father can, when he interjects, “He hath, my lord: I do beseech you, give him leave to go” (1.2.59-60). Clearly, Laertes’ intent is to leave Denmark, and as Tromly suggests, the word ‘leave’ is used five times, always appearing as a noun rather than a verb. It denotes a form of ‘authorization’ or ‘request for permission,’ as in “your father’s leave” (1.2.58) or “your leave and favour to return” (1.2.52). Laertes’ move to honor the King on ‘bended knee’ reinforces an Elizabethan principle that the proper attitude of a son’s submission to both paternal and political authority is always at work despite any circumstances. “These Elizabethan ideals of authority are paramount for this father and son, but not for the silent onlooker whom the King turns to address as ‘my cousin Hamlet, and my son” (Tromly 156).

For Hamlet, however, his conspicuity is reserved for the climax of the scene: he becomes the last in a series of three young men with whom Claudius has to deal, and as Harold Jenkins attests, “it becomes clearly understood that the function of Fortinbras and Laertes lead up to the Prince because their situations are designed to reflect his” (Jenkins 96). Fortinbras, whom we are given a brief account of in the first scene, and whom does not return until 4.3, builds the anticipation and literary suspense regarding what the son of a murdered father might do – especially since his father was murdered by the father of a future king! Furthermore, as we near the end of this critical scene Shakespeare has already begun to set up several tensions in the play. The King’s final consent to Laertes’ request to return to France strikes Hamlet’s paternal “umbilical cord” because his own petition to return to Wittenberg is denied:
You are the most immediate to our throne,
And with no less nobility of love
Than that which dearest father bears his son,
Do I impart towards you. For your intent
In going back to school in Wittenberg,
It is most retrograde to our desire. (1.2.109-14)

Despite the obvious disparity in the King’s response towards both young men, Laertes is already in a favorable position to be granted his request for leave – because of what the throne of Denmark owes to Laertes’ father. Claudius feels obliged to respond to Polonius’ position of power which leads to an initial contrast of the two sons in the play. It also helps to accentuate Polonius’ preoccupation with the appearance of social status rather than true fatherhood. What’s even more compelling in the text is not only the King’s denial of Hamlet’s request to return to Wittenberg, but Claudius’ attempt to ask for Hamlet’s acceptance of his role as both a ‘father’ and a ‘king.’ He preys on the fact that Hamlet has a social responsibility to the Danish throne in the event of his untimely death, thus implying his own need for a rightful heir. Although critics may suggest that there is a lack of sincerity in his approach, it is undeniable that Claudius is a man who is desperately in a state of need. And any time a desperate need is revealed, there is always more room for that need to be fulfilled by any means necessary. With that being said, I cannot deny the possibility that Claudius is inauthentic in his appeal towards Hamlet. However, what this scene does indicate about the interaction between Claudius and Hamlet, as well as Polonius and Laertes, is that there is an appearance of perceived co-existence in family relationships. This would imply a sense of honor and respect towards the precepts of filial duty. It also implies that there is a capacity for a father to masquerade his paternal intent rather than show genuine concern for the holistic development of the son. Therefore, in a play so firmly rooted in a son’s call to avenge his
father, it clearly comes as no surprise, when Polonius is killed, that Laertes appears to avenge him.

On the second and final occasion that we see Polonius and Laertes together, “the scene is intimate and domestic rather than public, yet there is a strict command of the protocols of duty and deference evidenced throughout” (Tromly 156). In a ritualistic action that is made to socially characterize him, Laertes again bows to his father’s power and authority as Polonius gestures to place his hand upon his son’s head. Although Polonius’ speech is regarded as the leading paternal advice of the play, Thomas Monsell postulates that critics “see it as nothing but a string of clichés, and as such, they help to deepen the rather foolish nature and disposition of the father” (Monsell 36). While I agree that the ideas of Polonius’ speech are seemingly trite, it is Monsell’s following argument that resonates more powerfully: “Shakespeare shows us poetic and psychological truths, not literal ones, and he does so through magnificent figurative language that has both subtle and powerful rhythms” (Monsell 36). Furthermore, Polonius’ advice on the ‘nature of friendship’ and ‘exercising good stewardship over finances’ is subconsciously overpowered by his claim that “the apparel oft proclaims the man” (1.3.75). Again, he prioritizes a strong conviction that the essence of a “true man” is defined by what others are inclined to see, not what his values enable him to do. Tromly, on the other hand, asserts that “Polonius’ lines are full of qualifications and negations, for they articulate a prudential calculus that stresses the risks of interactions with others. Though his thoughts are glibly conventional, they are not simply foolish, and certainly Laertes would have done well to have heeded more carefully to the advice: ‘beware/ Of entrance to a quarrel’
But all of the foregoing lines are reduced to banality by the climactic injunction that Laertes should attend to above all:” (Tromly 157)

To thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man. (1.3.81-83)

Although the idea of being “true to thine own self” will serve as the “silent mantra” for my discussion, I find that Polonius’ discourse on the meaning of life transcends questions of risk management and social efficacy in its rhetoric to define what it means for a son to be ‘true.’ Two strands of unintentional irony are key in the evolution of Polonius and Laertes’ separate identities: One is the implicit contradiction that a father, so consumed by the spectacle of prestige and power, could charge his kneeling son to be true to himself. What implications does this suggest about the integrity of order in the state, or even order in the home? The play’s imagery of a kneeling son automatically reduces him to a position where he is relentlessly stripped of his basic freedoms and personal autonomy; furthermore, denying him an individual consciousness to altogether explore what those conditions might mean for him. The second irony is that Polonius himself has no idea what being "true to thine own self” actually means. He pontificates without purpose only for the audience to discover that he contradicts himself in the most remarkable transition of power in the play, “thou canst not then be false to any man” (1.3.83). This particular transition of power is not about the son succeeding the father on the royal throne, but a form of power that a man gets when he is enlightened by who he truly is. Therefore, is it possible for us to claim that this is the basis by which Polonius has seized possession of his “own royal lands?” While that theory may or may not be true, I believe what’s of greater importance is that neither he nor Laertes has the slightest
intimation that the course of a son’s journey to ‘deny a false self’ may necessitate his refusal to listen to his father.

The sudden death of Polonius becomes a crucial factor in Laertes’ understanding of “to thine own self be true” (1.3.81) because it threatens to remove the anchor of his inherited values” (Tromly 158). Upon his return to Denmark, Laertes’ first words to Claudius are, “O thou vile king, Give me my father!” (4.4.116-17). The heightened tension and anger in his voice shifts a few lines later into a bereft question: “Where’s my father?” (4.4.131). Given Laertes’ predilection for understanding the power of authority, he has taken a sudden command of his own. Even Claudius is not prepared for Laertes’ ability to unite together an armed force in his quest to “be revenged/ Most thoroughly for my father” (4.4.140-41). Although Laertes’ rebellion against King Claudius is short-lived, he establishes the authenticity of his own voice during the final moments of the play when he accepts Hamlet’s forgiveness: “I am satisfied in nature,/ Whose motive in this case should stir me most/ To my revenge” (5.2.189-91). He further proclaims, “I have a voice and precedent of peace/ To keep my name ungored” (5.2.194-95). Some critics suggest that the contrast between Hamlet and Laertes is indisputable in this scene, since it is Laertes’ filial responsibility to avenge the death of his own “father-king;” however, I propose that Laertes has turned away from conventional patterns of thinking and now stands in a pursuit to elevate his own personal responsibility. Despite Polonius’ concern for the appearance of wealth and social status, Laertes finally accepts his own freedom in being “true to thine own self.” He recognizes that a transference of power has already taken place and he no longer needs to stand on behalf of Polonius the father, but for himself as the son. He acknowledges that honoring his own voice will set a precedent
of inner peace which ultimately leads to Hamlet’s fraternal embrace: “I do embrace it freely,/ And will this brother’s wager frankly play” (5.2.198-99). This important moment leads back to Jenkins’ earlier claim that the function of Fortinbras and Laertes was designed to lead up to Hamlet. Without Laertes’ acceptance of his own inner peace, Shakespeare may not have been able to show us the trajectory of Hamlet’s eternal peace. As we near the final moments of the play, both sons stand with raised foils prepared to embrace whatever the future holds for them as men – a future by the name of Fortinbras.

The evolution of Fortinbras is strikingly unique in what Jenkins suggests: “that the role of Fortinbras appears to undergo a sudden change as the action of the play works itself out” (Jenkins 95). When scholars generally concern themselves with Fortinbras, they usually regard him as a whole and consistent character. A.C. Bradley points out that among the characters in Hamlet we find “two, Laertes and Fortinbras, who are evidently designed to throw the character of the hero into relief,” and adds that “even in the action of the play there is a curious parallelism: for Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is the son of a king, lately dead, and succeeded by his brother; and Laertes, like Hamlet, has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him” (Bradley 90). I agree with Jenkins that Shakespeare does not create characters to serve as foils to Hamlet and then devises situations to exhibit them. It is because of their roles as “sons of fathers who have been killed that they are even brought into the play at all, and whatever characters they respectively acquire they acquire through the performance of their roles” (Jenkins 98). This suggests that Shakespeare’s literary strategy was to bring all three sons into the play with an intended purpose. And that purpose was to show both an implicit and explicit transformation of filial identity.
Since the play does grant Fortinbras the role of a dead king’s son, it is important to note his immediate contrast to Hamlet. With his father’s murderer already dead, Fortinbras lacks a personal antagonist; “and of the three bereaved sons in the play he is the only one whose father met his death in honorable combat” (Jenkins 99). Furthermore, as Jenkins suggests, the transformation of Fortinbras’ identity does not reside in the fact that he enters the play with a just grievance, but in the actuality of discovering that he has none.

Fortinbras arrives on the Danish stage for the first time in 4.3; however, Shakespeare gives us a partial view into his character during the first scene of the play. It is through the voice of Horatio that Fortinbras extends the problem of paternal influence and filial duty beyond the models of Hamlet and Laertes:

Now, sir, young Fortinbras,
Of unimproved mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of landless resolutes
For food and diet to some enterprise
That hath a stomach in’t, which is no other –
And it doth well appear unto our state –
But to recover of us, by strong hand
And terms compulsative, those forsaid lands
So by his father lost: and this, I take it,
Is the main motive of our preparations,
The source of this our watch and the chief head
Of this post-haste and rummage in the land. (1.1.105-17)

Therefore, in all manner of ungoverned and impassioned youth, Fortinbras is perceived to be a son with a spirit of vengeance. The idea that is embedded in the phrase “unimproved mettle hot and full,” (1.1.106) signifies the divide between “boyhood and manhood” (Vanzant 154). Because of the filial expectations placed on Fortinbras to avenge his father’s death, he immediately reacts without considering the consequences of his
actions; nor does he even think to ask himself the most critical questions: 1) Who is my enemy? 2) What am I fighting for? Since it is a youthful indiscretion to react solely based on one’s emotions, it is evident that we see in Fortinbras the very rashness that accompanies a young man whose character has not evolved to maturity. I definitely do not aim to diminish the possibility that Fortinbras’ actions are aligned to his own grief, however, there can be no power inherent in actualizing grief if grief has no distinct voice. Furthermore, Fortinbras “sharks up a list of landless resolutes” (1.1.108) in order to recover “those forsaid lands” (1.1.113) that his father lost honorably – not because he was given a personal choice in the matter, but because he felt it was his “filial duty” to do so. And what does the word ‘honorably’ reveal to us about Fortinbras’ current agenda? That it’s quite possible his father left him without one.

Fortinbras’ situation turns out to be a dramatically complex one, Jenkins points out, in that soon after Denmark has sent ambassadors to Norway in the first act, and they return home in the second, his threat against Denmark is suddenly over and his attention becomes directed towards Poland. What begins as a filial quest to recover lands forfeited by his dead father transitions into a “quiet pass across Danish territory en route to a new foe” (Jenkins 101). Jenkins expands the depth of his argument by positioning that there is a dramatic inconsistency in the menace of Fortinbras’ “lawless resolutes” to create an expectation that fails to be fulfilled by the end of the play. He poses the question, “Why so much about the danger of invasion if so little was to come of it?” (Jenkins 101). I believe that a possible theory to this question derives from the previous notion of Shakespeare’s literary intent and character purpose. Since we have established that all three sons were brought into the play for specific reasons, it is not less important that
Shakespeare would demonstrate to us the evolution of Fortinbras’ identity by extricating him from a filial responsibility he was never meant to undertake. As a wayward son who defies all rationality in justifying his impulsive actions, Fortinbras is set against the ambivalence of a self-questioning hero. But not in the way that most critics think.

Scholars who propose that there is an unequivocal shift in Fortinbras’ “filial identity” often notice how the young price “of unimproved mettle hot and full” turns out to be so malleable. His impotent uncle has only enough time to learn of his plans of vengeance before Fortinbras “receives rebuke from Norway” (2.2.72) and “he, in brief, obeys” (2.2.71) making a vow to never take up arms against Denmark again. Instead of carrying out his initial role as the “hot-headed insurrectionist,” (Jenkins 95) Fortinbras transforms into a “delicate and tender prince” (4.4.48) which prepares him for his role as a future king. The third fatherless son, in a trilogy of unidentified voices, suddenly becomes the preeminent voice of the Danish throne: “I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,/Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me” (5.2.358-59).

As critics continue to debate the idea that Fortinbras offers no dramatic insight into the play’s structure because of his one-dimensionality, I stand firm to argue against the absurdity of this verdict. Regarding the claim that Fortinbras commences his expedition to Poland in order to prove his “unimproved mettle,” Kenneth Muir insists that “Hamlet’s ‘delicate and tender prince,’ having ‘secretly mustered a band of soldiers, who seem little better than brigands,’ is really a ‘barbarous adventurer’ all the time” (Muir 65). Eleanor Prosser still goes a little further in advancing that Fortinbras’ character is a coherence of design: she maintains that by “introducing him as ‘a brash and inexperienced young hothead’ Shakespeare has carefully prepared us to see him and his
Polish campaign ‘in their true light,’ which will show them as ‘completely amoral’” (Jenkins 106). Both of these claims lack the advantage for consistency because they do not factor in Shakespeare’s intent to give Fortinbras a truly unique voice. And the evolution of voice can only be explored through the variations of character over time.

What may be considered a paradoxical greatness in Fortinbras’ final role as the “delicate and tender prince” offers a new perspective regarding the paradigm of masculine identity. Perhaps it is not enough for men to be characterized solely based on their ability to be bold, daring, and vigorous in their leadership. One question we may ask ourselves is: What is Shakespeare trying to convey about the ideological shift in Elizabethan attitudes regarding the nature of a man’s masculine energy? I believe what Shakespeare encourages us to see is that there is a need to find balance in all aspects of life. Not only a balance in the shift of father and son relationships, but a balance in negotiating power dynamics in both the state and in the home. It challenges us to find value in a new effort to support balance in filial identity by giving authority to the “delicate and tender” voice of Shakespeare’s daughters in Elizabethan drama. In Chapter 5, I will expand my discussion of Elizabethan identity and filial duty to explore shifting attitudes about feminine voice in the relationship between fathers and daughters in Shakespeare.
Chapter V
Fathers and Daughters in Shakespeare: Understanding the Feminine Voice

The paradigm of masculine identity in Shakespeare’s plays also raises questions about the transformation of feminine identity in Elizabethan drama. The traditional model of understanding the role of the feminine voice challenges scholars to consider the study of fathers and daughters in Shakespeare as a firm critique of power dynamics in the canon of English literature. It offers a range of new perspectives in dismantling conventional ideas of social inequality and bias to promote emerging views of acknowledging the feminine voice. As the father of two daughters during his own life, it’s quite possible Shakespeare made the decision to portray this distinct relationship in his plays in order to bring additional focus to the growing problem of paternal authority in the lives of Elizabethan children. In this final chapter of my thesis, I intend to offer a comparative analysis of the relationships between Polonius and Ophelia, and King Lear and Cordelia, by illustrating what it means for a Shakespearean daughter to become self-empowered by her own defiance, and the implications this may suggest about the evolving paradigm of masculine identity in the relationship between Shakespeare’s fathers and sons.

The historical context of feminine identity and voice is often defined by the idea that women were held to strict standards of domestic service as housewives and mothers in a socio-political and patriarchal society. Being an Elizabethan woman meant you were recognized as part of the “weaker sex,” not just in terms of physical strength, but in terms
of emotional strength as well. It was the predominant philosophy of the time that women often needed a male figure to lead them. If they were married, it was the husband’s responsibility to make key decisions for them, and if they were single, it was typical for a father or brother to care for them. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare provides a solid foundation for understanding the transformation of feminine identity and voice. The relationship between Polonius and Ophelia can be seen as an extension to my previous claims regarding the Elizabethan conventions of Polonius and Laertes’ father and son relationship; not necessarily in negating or negotiating the power of Polonius’ paternal authority, but in Ophelia’s complete lack of control in being submissive to and objectified by it.

In 1.3, Ophelia feels subjected to the power of masculine identity and influence during conversations with Polonius and Laertes in their attempts to control Ophelia’s genuine love for Hamlet. Laertes advises Ophelia that Hamlet cannot be serious in his affections towards her because it is not in the prince’s nature to do so: “The virtue of his will: but you must fear,/ His greatness weighed, his will is not his own;/ For he himself is subject to his birth” (1.3.18-20). Laertes indicates that he does not support Ophelia’s romantic interest in the prince by giving her reasons to doubt Hamlet’s love for her. He suggests that due to the prince’s social and political responsibilities to Denmark, Hamlet’s primary concerns in life will not be determined by the destiny of true love but by “the sanctity and health of the whole state” (1.3.23). Laertes describes Hamlet’s courtship as “froward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,/ The suppliance of a minute, no more” (1.3.9-10). He further claims that Hamlet’s passions are whimsical “and the trifling of his favours” (1.3.6) are indicative of his “youth of primy nature” (1.3.8).
Ophelia’s response is guided by the moral compass of her feminine virtue when she poses the question, “No more but so?” (1.3.11). Although she recognizes the prevailing truths in Laertes’ voice, Ophelia wants to hold on to some possibility of hope regarding Hamlet’s love towards her – before Laertes commands her to “think it no more” (1.3.12). The hidden irony in this scene reveals a common pattern of distrust within male-female relationships. Although Ophelia moves to question the “wise” counsel of Laertes, she immediately yields herself to the power of his masculine identity: “I shall th’ effect of this good lesson keep/ As watchman to my heart” (1.3.47-48). It becomes obvious that Ophelia shows herself to be completely immersed in the trust of her brother’s care; furthermore, she sees him as protecting the virtue of her own heart. However, Laertes’ advice, although “well meant, is heavily weighted with assumptions that are not well founded, and shows little trust in Ophelia’s ability to look after herself” (Hibbard 49). Shakespeare’s use of dramatic irony in this scene paints the conventional portrait of socialized gender roles aligned to the precepts of Elizabethan ideology. Like Laertes, in the evolution of the father and son relationship, Ophelia is now stripped of her own individuality; her emotional needs and desires become void in a sea of masculine energy. Laertes takes advantage of Ophelia’s “natural inclination to trust a man” by capitalizing on the limitations of her innocence and fear: “The virtue of his will: but you must fear” (1.3.18). In this moment, Laertes is threatened by a woman on the precipice of discovering her own sexual identity; therefore, in order to “serve the psychology of his own manhood” he unleashes just enough doubt, fear, and uncertainty into the atmosphere so that Ophelia’s feminine identity is consumed and ultimately rejected by it:

But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whilst, like a puffed and reckless libertine
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede. (1.3.48-53)

In order to expand the idea of distrust in Ophelia and Laertes’ relationship,
Polonius enters the scene just in time to heighten the tension of Ophelia’s vulnerability.
Upon Laertes’ exit, Shakespeare demonstrates the power differential between father and
son in order to reveal to us how much the feminine voice is silenced. After Ophelia
reveals that Hamlet “hath, of late made many tenders/ Of his affection” (1.3.103-04)
towards her, Polonius relegates her to the place of a small child: “Affection? Puh! You
speak like a green girl” (1.3.105). In his essay, *The Woman in Hamlet: An Interpersonal
View*, David Leverenz claims that “at times a man’s power seems to be defined by his
ability to order women and children around” (Leverenz 110). Polonius demonstrates a
father-son parallel by now assuming the role as manipulator to diminish Ophelia’s
perception of her own value and self-worth: “I must tell you/ You do not understand
yourself so clearly/ As it behoves my daughter and your honour” (1.3.99-101). Leverenz
further proclaims that “Ophelia must accept the role of honorable possession and deny
her love for Hamlet” (Leverenz 119). Elena Gierstae, in her study of fathers and
daughters in *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and The Tempest*, argues that Leverenz “does
not interpret this as a moment of repressed sexual desire, but as a question of what it
means to understand oneself” (Gierstae 40). I disagree with both claims because I see this
entire sequence as primarily about sexual desire and what it means to be defined by it. If
Ophelia’s interaction with her father becomes a question of truly understanding one’s
self, how can she embrace the totality of her identity if she does not confront the part she
represses?
Polonius and Laertes are men who reinforce the double standard of sexual morality as being the Elizabethan norm. Hibbard argues that Polonius “takes it for granted that Hamlet is trying to seduce his daughter – such being the way of young princes – and that Ophelia is acting like a fool in listening to his professions of love” (Hibbard 49). In her book, Domination and Defiance, Diane Dreher points out that “Ophelia’s dream of love lies shattered at her feet: (Dreher 80) ‘I do not know, my lord, what I should think’” (1.3.108). Ophelia has no choice but to accept her role as the “submissive child” when she affirms to her father that she “will obey, my lord” (1.3.140). Dreher also explains that Polonius and Laertes help to shape Ophelia’s thoughts on sexuality by presenting her with a view of sex that is “animalistic, degrading, and terrifying” (Dreher 79). I agree with Gierstae that in Othello, this idea of sexuality is a direct correlation to Iago’s interpretation of the love between Othello and Desdemona: “‘your daughter covered with a Barbary house’ (1.1.110), ‘your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs’ (1.1.115-16), ‘your daughter/ Transported with no worse nor better guard/ But with a knave of common hire, a gondolier, To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor’ (1.1.123-25). Dreher interprets Ophelia’s submission not only as a ‘surrender to Elizabethan conventions, but as an act of self-preservation.’ She reminds us that Ophelia is a woman already defeated in a society which defines men as active sexual aggressors, ‘condoning their promiscuity while valuing women only for their chastity which must be defended at all costs.’ In her identity crisis, Ophelia conforms to the patriarchal standards of Elizabethan behavior that subordinates women to male authority figures” (Gierstae). Furthermore, she dismisses the power of her own individual identity while eliminating any future possibilities to show the audience that she
has the capacity to evolve into a woman whose value is evinced beyond her father’s masculine identity.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare reveals a shift in the power dynamics of gender roles as Cordelia challenges Elizabethan attitudes pertaining to the father and daughter relationship. In 1.1, King Lear begins a journey of self-discovery by relinquishing his responsibilities of Britain’s government and dividing the worth of his kingdom between his three daughters: “In three our kingdom, and ‘tis our fast intent/ To shake all cares and business from our age,/ Conferring them on younger strengths while we/ Unburdened crawl toward death” (1.1.36-39). He reinforces the Elizabethan ideal of establishing his paternal authority by putting his daughters through the “Lear Paternity Test:” King Lear will divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters according to the level in which they express their love towards him. Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia are women of the royal court placed in the unique position of controlling the outcomes of their own fates. In this Elizabethan family dynamic, Shakespeare reveals a growing dichotomy in the feminine voice which extends beyond women being perceived as passive conformists to the dominant culture of masculine identity. King Lear tries to affirm his patriarchal power by demanding from each of his daughters the simple profession of which one loves him most: “Tell me, my daughters - / Since now we will divest us both of rule,/ Interest of territory, cares of state - / Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.46-49).

“Lear asks each of them to provide an accounting of their love, promising adequate gifts of land in return. He places a clear emphasis on hearing them declare their love for him” (Gierstae 66). But why? Why is it so important for King Lear to hear his daughters say: “Father, I’m indebted to you and I adore you beyond measure; I want to show you that I
love you more than my sisters and here are the reasons why?” Goneril and Regan, his eldest daughters, are the first to shower the King with worthy responses “where nature doth with merit challenge” 1.1.51). As Gierstae suggests, Goneril claims her father to be “dearer than eyesight, space and liberty” (1.1.54):

Beyond what can be valued rich or rare,
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour:
As much as child e’er loved or father found:
A love that makes breath poor and speech unable:
Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (1.1.55-59)

Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen claim that Goneril’s speech is “effusive but ambiguous, as she declares that she loves her father ‘more than word can wield the matter’ (1.1.53). Regan is similarly flattering but ambiguous, telling Lear to ‘prize’ her at Goneril’s ‘worth,’ as she is ‘made of that self-mettle’ as her sister:” (Bate and Rasmussen 142)

In my true heart,
I find she names my very deed of love:
Only she comes too short, that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys
Which the most precious square of sense professes,
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear highness’ love. (1.1.68-74)

Cordelia, on the other hand, removes all ambiguity in unveiling her true dilemma. She is torn between genuine love for her father and her own inability to voice her concerns before the royal court: “I am sure my love’s/ More ponderous than my tongue” (1.1.76-77). When Lear poses the question to Cordelia, “What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?” (1.1.84-85), her response is simply “Nothing” (1.1.86). What I find especially intriguing about Cordelia’s growing dilemma is that her father has already
given her the unfair advantage of “a third more opulent than her sisters” and she still
makes the choice to say nothing; moreover, there was never a real chance that the land
would be equally divided amongst the sisters because King Lear had already made up his
mind that Cordelia would be the recipient of the “largest bounty he promised to extend.”
Even Goneril claims that their father “always loved our sister most” (1.1.306). Lear is
both outraged and appalled at Cordelia’s resolve to serve him a double dose of “nothings”
as he urges her: “nothing will come of nothing: speak again” (1.1.89). Cordelia struggles
to “heave her heart into her own mouth” as she professes that she loves her father
“according to my bond, no more nor less” (1.1.92). This completely dishonors King
Lear’s subconscious need to hear his daughters say: “I’m the woman who loves you
most.” But why? I propose that King Lear is faced with the same set of challenges that
shape Polonius and Laertes’ response towards Ophelia. Cordelia is a woman who proves
to be a threat to King Lear’s masculine identity because she asserts her power in ways
that remind the King he is an aging warrior who can no longer “compete or perform.”
This is not your typical understanding of how a warrior performs on the plains of the
British battlefield, but an expression of war that has been festering in the dark crevices of
the royal court.

Lynda Boose, in her essay, *The Father and the Bride in Shakespeare*, observes
that King Lear attaches to Cordelia’s portion of land, “a stipulation designed to thwart her
separation” (Boose 332). She claims that King Lear violates his role as a king and as a
father “by substituting his public paternity for his private one, the inherently indivisible
entity for the one that biologically must divide and recombine” (Boose 332). Gierstae
argues that “Boose’s interpretation of King Lear is a matter of rebellion as he ‘defies the
accepted Elizabethan principle of primogeniture and the right order of succession, dividing his kingdom to ensure that he will not lose his beloved child” (Gierstae 67).

However, it is my understanding that in Cordelia’s heart-to-heart with the King, her beloved father has already lost her:

Good my lord,  
You have begot me, bred me, loved me:  
I return those duties back as are right fit,  
Obey you, love you and most honour you.  
Why have my sisters husbands if they say  
They love you all? Happily when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall
  carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters. (1.1.95-103)

Here, Cordelia has redefined her own personal power and gives affirmation to a new understanding of the feminine voice that dictates a shifting order in the royal court. Although she acknowledges her filial duty to maintain proper paternal respect where it is due, she understands that the time has come for her to embrace a new allegiance to self, as well as to the man she will eventually marry. Shakespeare offers a great deal of insight into the emergence of a woman’s class and sexual power, as well as to the unspoken demand this places on the men in their lives. He also implies that Cordelia’s actions speak to questions regarding the “marriage ritual” in Elizabethan culture.

After King Lear recognizes Cordelia’s outright defiance in disobeying the conditions of his “love test,” he resorts to a child-like disposition by utilizing Cordelia’s dowry as a means to exert his paternal control over her. Shakespeare demonstrates a reversal of roles within the father and daughter relationship as King Lear makes a desperate move to pit “the vines of France and [the] milk of Burgundy” (1.1.83) against
one another. He decreases the value of Cordelia’s dowry with the intent of discouraging ‘The King of France’ from pursuing his daughter any further. Lear believes that if he dishonors his own daughter’s value and worth, similar to the way she dishonors him by not speaking up as a loving daughter should, then Cordelia will have no choice but to “make her peace with the Duke of Burgundy.” However, since King Lear and Cordelia both know that Burgundy’s character is just as shallow as “fortunes are his love,” (1.1.263) it comes as no surprise when Cordelia finally determines, “I shall not be his wife” (1.1.264). “Dreher suggests that Lear knows if Cordelia were to marry Burgundy, she will certainly love her father more. Boose argues that Lear seeks to imitate the sacramental marriage ritual question by asking Burgundy: ‘Will you, with those infirmities she owes,/ Unfriended, new-adopted to our hate,/ Dowered with our curse and strangered with our oath,/ Take her or leave her?’ Burgundy answers Lear with a formal reply: ‘Royal King,/ Give but that portion which yourself proposed,/ And here I take Cordelia by the hand,/ Duchess of Burgundy’” (Gierstae 68). Although Dreher and Boose make strong claims outlining the reasons behind King Lear’s actions in the royal court, I believe it is of the utmost importance to acknowledge two major flaws in King Lear’s marriage ritual question: 1) He fails to assume that the ‘King of France’ just might actually love his most “precious Cordelia” despite her “dowerless nature:”

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor,  
Most choice forsaken, and most loved despised,  
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon:  
Be it lawful, I take up what’s cast away.  
Gods, gods! ‘Tis strange that from their cold’st neglect  
My love should kindle to inflamed respect – (1.1.265-70)
2) King Lear also fails to acknowledge the fact that Cordelia has already spoken her heart’s true desire which ultimately leads to her own freedom and self-empowerment:

The jewels of our father, with washed eyes
Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are,
And like a sister am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father:
To your professed bosoms I commit him,
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace,
I would prefer him to a better place. (1.1.283-89)

One final point to consider regarding the identity crises experienced in Shakespeare’s father and daughter relationships, is the implications it suggests about the evolving paradigm of masculine identity in Shakespeare’s father and son relationships. In her book, *Suffocating mothers*, Janet Adelman gives a perceptive analysis of King Lear’s substitution of daughters with the idea of sons. According to Gierstae, “Adelman articulates Lear’s unspoken problem: ‘Lear’s daughters disrupt the patriarchal ideal, both insofar as they disrupt the transmission of property from father to son and insofar as they disrupt the paternal fantasy of perfect self-replication’ (Adelman 108). She also explains that the presence of daughters in the play is seen as a ‘slight disturbance, a perplexing substitution for the sons we expect King Lear to have’ (Adelman 108). She interprets Gloucester’s reference to his own two sons, ‘but I have a son, sir, by order of law, some year elder than this’ (1.1.17-18) and Lear’s reference to Albany and Cornwall as his ‘sons’ as an unconscious substitution of the play’s central focus on daughters: ‘Our son of Cornwall,/ And you, our no less loving son of Albany’” (Gierstae 72).

The idea of substituting daughters with sons in Shakespeare’s plays often leads scholars to question: How differently would things have been if King Lear were given paternal authority instead over three sons? I believe King Lear’s words and actions would
have remained aligned to the cultural ideology of the time. Although Shakespeare challenges us to consider the emerging identities of Elizabethan voices such as Ophelia and Cordelia, the masculine voice was still a very dominant cultural phenomenon. The price that each of these women had to pay to walk in their own truths was beyond measure. Cordelia was disowned by her father and further exiled from his kingdom while Desdemona was ridiculed for marrying the love of her life, a Moor: “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.115-16). Despite their attempts to embrace the possibility of an emerging feminine voice in Elizabethan culture, women like Cordelia, Desdemona, and Ophelia were still overpowered by men who often personified the role of becoming a woman’s personal “king.”
Chapter VI

Conclusion

This thesis has been a study of the complex and compelling relationship between fathers and sons in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The aim of this thesis was to examine paternal models of authority in Elizabethan culture by surveying three father and son relationships in the play – King Hamlet and Hamlet, Polonius and Laertes, and Old Fortinbras and Fortinbras – which thematize and explore filial ambivalence and paternal authority through the act of revenge and mourning the death of fathers. It also investigated the challenging process of forming one’s own identity with its social and psychological conflicts – illustrating each son’s character transformation as an upward trajectory towards defining and embracing individual voice. The moral, emotional, and psychological aspects of each son’s character provided substantial evidence to support my claims regarding questions of duty, identity, self-awareness, and power within the father and son relationship.

The most intriguing part of my study was discovering the specific dichotomy unique to each son’s voice. As Harold Jenkins attests, “the function of Laertes and Fortinbras lead up to the Prince because their situations are designed to reflect his” (Jenkins 96). This argument helped to support my claim that all three sons complement rather than oppose one another in the play. Furthermore, what I found fascinating about this theory is that Shakespeare doesn’t reveal this until after Hamlet, Laertes, and Fortinbras undergo a transformation to embrace the power designed to validate their
individual voices. Polonius’ advice to his loving son, “To thine own self be true,” challenges Laertes to embark upon the powerful journey of dismantling Elizabethan stereotypes of ‘decorous behavior’ when we first see him bearing witness to the hierarchies of institutional authority. His formal requests in seeking his father’s permission to carry out some intended action, as in “your father’s leave” (1.2.58) or “your leave and favour to return,” (1.2.52) as well as the imagery of Laertes on bended knee fuel this son’s quest towards embracing his own truth. Although we see the ‘anchor of his inherited values’ manifested in his confrontation with King Claudius to avenge his father’s death, “O thou vile king, Give me my father!” (4.4.116-17), the authenticity of Laertes’ voice is clearly defined in his act to grant Hamlet’s forgiveness: “I am satisfied in nature,/ Whose motive in this case should stir me most/ To my revenge” (5.2.189-91). Although critics suggest that the contrast between Hamlet and Laertes is undeniable in this scene, I hold firm to my claim that without Laertes’ true forgiveness, Shakespeare may not have been able to show us the trajectory of Hamlet’s lasting and final peace.

The evolution of Fortinbras’ character, as Jenkins suggests, “appears to undergo a sudden change as the action of the play works itself out” (Jenkins 95). What I found to be most valuable about Jenkins’ argument is that he takes a calculated risk in de-emphasizing the claim that the dramatic function and significance of Fortinbras and Laertes is only to serve as a foil and parallel to Hamlet. I took pride in joining forces with Jenkins in emphasizing that Fortinbras reveals himself to be both a son and a man with his own distinct identity and voice. Fortinbras extends the problem of paternal influence and filial duty beyond the models of Hamlet and Laertes because he understands that the path to discovering his own purpose is different from the other two sons. Shakespeare
illustrates the dramatic complexity of Fortinbras’ voice through the revelation that Fortinbras’ father died an honorable death. Unlike King Hamlet and Polonius, Old Fortinbras was not murdered at the hands of his enemy but lost his life in honorable combat, which throws the character of the son (Fortinbras) into a different kind of turmoil. As Jenkins further claims, Fortinbras “lacks a personal antagonist” (Jenkins 99) and I introduce that the transformation of Fortinbras’ identity does not reside in the fact that he enters the play with a just grievance, but in the reality of discovering that he has none. Therefore, he essentially questions his own purpose. He rallies together the “band of lawless resolutes” in order to demonstrate his obedience and filial duty to his dead father; however, what Fortinbras initially fails to understand is that his “actions of impulsivity without established purpose” only show his youthful indiscretion and lack of personal maturity. This leads his character to an unequivocal shift that is set against the ambivalence of the self-questioning hero. The enkindled fire aroused by the phrase, “unimproved mettle hot and full” (1.1.106) metamorphosizes into the “delicate and tender prince” (4.4.48) that we see in the final scene of the play. Hamlet confirms that Fortinbras moves beyond, what critics claim to be, a framework of one-dimensionality to embrace his final role as Denmark’s future King: “But I do prophesy th’ election lights/ On Fortinbras: he has my dying voice” (5.2.320-21). Both Hamlet and Horatio suggest that there is a remarkable power behind the transformation of Fortinbras’ identity, as they unite to affirm Fortinbras’ readiness to be “presently performed:” (5.2.362) “Of that I shall have also cause to speak,/ And from his mouth whose voice will draw on more” (5.2.360-61).
The dichotomous nature of Hamlet’s character accomplishes the phenomenal task of epitomizing Shakespeare’s ideas of filial duty and ambivalence in the father-son relationship. What we see in the early scenes of the play is both an Elizabethan son and prince who is inwardly distraught at the loss of his father, and finds it incomprehensible that he is expected to digest the newly-formed marital covenant between his “grieving” mother and his dead father’s brother. Hamlet’s “seems” speech in 1.2, introduces the internal conflict he faces between idealizing the images of his father’s “warrior-spirit” and the nature of human mortality. It illustrates the perfect linear progression to Hamlet’s first soliloquy, “O, that this too solid flesh would melt,” (1.2.129) where he unleashes an emotional intensity that extends from a deep sorrow over the loss of his father, while also indicating the deprivation present from not being able to establish his own unique voice. Hamlet’s dilemma is intensified as he emotionally, morally, psychologically, and spiritually struggles to understand the meaning of manhood as it is defined by the images of his “absent father” and the King’s Ghost. The course of Hamlet’s idealizing can be seen as he frames his father’s paternal image to serve as a direct parallel to the classical god Hyperion Titan: “So excellent a king, that was to this/ Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother” (1.2.139-40). He attempts to build the emotional connection between his father’s voice and his very own through the love King Hamlet shared with his mother, Gertrude.

I incorporate a number of Justin Drewry’s claims in my argument surrounding the “ever-present dangers of idealizing” because I believe Hamlet learns more about himself through his very own relationship with the Ghost. My close readings of Hamlet in the text are guided by his deeply-rooted shifts in psychology as the Prince is forced to confront
the moral question of revenge incited by the Ghost. Here, Shakespeare challenges us to hear Hamlet’s individual voice as different from his father’s because Hamlet doesn’t execute the Ghost’s command right away. Peter Davison argues that what makes the play especially appealing is all that leads to the delay. However, it is not simply the delay that makes this play such a great tragedy but what each character learns during the process of understanding oneself within the complexities of the tragedy.

Hamlet ultimately realizes that the evolution of his distinct voice transcends the limitations of space and time to acknowledge the sovereignty of “divine providence” that confirms his faith in the final scene. He is empowered by both a “redeemed” and “higher self” to embrace Shakespeare’s intended reason for his delay – a restoration towards his Christian faith with an appreciation for openness, transparency, and embracing truth. As Jenkins reiterates the notion that Laertes and Fortinbras’ situation was designed to reflect Hamlet’s, it is in the final scene where we see this theory more fully realized. Hamlet becomes the focal point for both Laertes and Fortinbras’ individual transformations. It becomes evident that Hamlet needs Laertes’ forgiveness before he dies; however, it is in the moment of his actual death that he ordains Fortinbras as the new king. In Chapter 3 of my thesis, Hamlet indicates that his “readiness” is a readiness to act as well as a readiness to die, if necessary. But like so many other words and phrases in the play, the word “readiness” can have different meanings for different characters. In addition to all three sons being ready to embark upon the next “phase” of their journey, whether it’s physical or spiritual, I’d like to offer that they all take this step in unison which signifies the awakening of an Elizabethan brotherhood: “And will this brother’s wager frankly play”
(5.2.199). It is in Hamlet’s fraternal embrace that he seals the individual presence of each son’s voice – a unified voice that transitions with him into sweet eternity.

In Chapter 5, I touch on the fascinating topic of fathers and daughters in Shakespeare by examining how the relationships of Polonius and Ophelia, as well as King Lear and Cordelia, raise questions about the transformation of feminine identity in Elizabethan drama. What becomes notable about my analysis of these two father-daughter relationships, is that both of the fathers and daughters are provoked by an identity crisis as the daughter struggles to respond to social norms that are not aligned to her own desires. Ophelia is challenged by the threat of both Polonius and Laertes’ masculine identities in an attempt to thwart the emergence of her sexual identity; therefore, she conforms to the conventional expectations of feminine identity and voice in Elizabethan culture. Cordelia, on the other hand, can be seen as a slight force to be reckoned with as she challenges Elizabethan norms to introduce the idea that the feminine voice speaks with a new sense of credibility. Elena Gierstae mentions that “in his article, *King Lear, King Leir, and incest wishes*, Mark Blechner raises several questions about the first scene in the play: ‘If Cordelia is King Lear’s favorite daughter, would he not know her well enough to expect that she would be unable to flatter him publicly? Would he not know of her unflinching truthfulness and sincerity? And if he would, why does he act surprised and enraged at her response? Why does he put her in a predictably embarrassing position in the first place?’” (Gierstae 72).

An appropriate response to all of these questions leads back to the father’s paternal authority and control, along with the sense of security that surrounds the father as a result of the son and daughter’s filial obedience. King Lear’s actions indicated that
he was certain he would be able to extend his paternal influence in Cordelia’s life, if the Duke of Burgundy became his son-in-law, but Shakespeare did not write it that way. In a sense, he allows women like Cordelia, Desdemona, and to some degree, Ophelia to become literary pioneers to initiate the conversation of acknowledging the possibility of a feminine voice in dramatic literature. However, it is true that a “cultural reality” existed during the time Shakespeare’s plays were written. The masculine voice was still very dominant in Elizabethan culture and women like Ophelia and Cordelia suffered greatly for their attempts at independence. Portia, in *The Merchant of Venice*, may be considered one of the most intelligent and captivating heroines in Shakespeare’s plays with a voice of her own, but even her voice is disguised as a male voice and she does not become the first female lawyer, but goes home to marry Bassanio, her boyfriend.

Shakespeare’s daughters indeed echo the same sentiments as Shakespeare’s sons – regarding the paradigm of masculine identity in the father and son relationship. All of the parent-child relationships I have discussed in this thesis suggest that conventional systems of political, religious, and social order should be re-evaluated to accommodate the emergence of “silent” voices as seen on the Elizabethan stage. Shakespeare continues to be the preeminent playwright who dramatizes a great variety of relationships in powerful and authentic ways. He challenges us to consider the complexities and ambiguities in all of his paternal relationships. When Hamlet exclaims, “What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty,” (2.2.305-06) he explains to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that while humans may appear to think and act “nobly” they are essentially the “quintessence of dust” (2.2.310). Hamlet expresses his melancholy to his friends over the difference between the best part that men aspire to be,
and how they actually behave. Although many scholars perceive this to be the great divide that depresses him, it also becomes the divide that reconciles the dilemma of the son and seals his identity in the father and son relationship.
Bibliography


