

# The Wife-Less Fathers in Shakespearean comedies are Insensitive Towards their Daughters and a Poor Judge of Men and Matters!

Suchi Shukla\*

Research Scholar, Department of English, LNCT University, Bhopal India

**Abstract - William Shakespeare ( baptised 26<sup>th</sup> April 1564 – 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1616) is one of the finest men of letters the world has ever produced whose worth and significance was felt not only by his contemporaries but also even till date across the globe and times. Though Shakespeare became a married man at an early age of 18, his dramas majorly do not depict wives as strong characters or more so the primary male characters do not have wives at all. Not to forget the fact that if the drama has a strong wife, like in Macbeth or Hamlet, the fate is doomed. On further analysis, we find that in quite a few of his dramas, the father-daughter relationships are estranged chiefly because of the absence of mothers: literally or metaphorically. The present study focuses on discussing how the fathers are primarily insensitive or indifferent to the needs of their daughters if their wives were not around. To quote a few: Leonato- Hero in Much Ado About Nothing, Shylock-Jessica in Merchant of Venice, and apparently Prospero- Miranda in The Tempest. The idea here is to establish a rationale about the sensitising effect of the mothers as wives and how imperative is their presence!**

**Keywords - estranged bonds, father-daughter relationships, Shakespearean Comedies, Wife-less fathers**

-----X-----

## 1. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's relationship with his wife, Anne Hathaway, has been under critical analysis specially during 19<sup>th</sup> century where people had basically decided that he hated his wife. The evidence the critics would quote about the same is "in his will, the only time he mentioned her was to give her the 'second best bed,' which people have thought was a real insult." Orlin however refuted by saying that "there was nothing derogatory about a 'second best bed.' It probably means that there was some kind of sentimental attachment." Those who claim that Shakespeare did not like his wife also point out that the bed is the only instance in which she was mentioned in the will. Again, Orlin says that this is misleading. ("Did Shakespeare Hate His Wife? Four Myths About ... - Culture") "In fact, she would have been protected by dower law to have received one-third of his property after he died," she says. "So she was well taken care of, as he would have known." ("Did Shakespeare Hate His Wife? Four Myths About ... - Culture")

The patriarchal society of Elizabethan England had truly little in store for women in general so to say the least for the wives. Shakespeare being a product of his times and beyond portrays women in diverse ways

in his plays. He has attributed to them both strengths and weaknesses to make them look real in a world where their role was only to cushion and scaffold the males of the society. However, the presentation of women in his plays is being debated, as critics argue that he has shown much disrespect towards womanhood and has been even qualified as sexist and misogynist. The present study is centred around the impact on the father-daughter relationships in the absence of the mothers.

## 2. SHAKESPEAREAN COMEDIES

For various reasons, generations of men and women have admired William Shakespeare's (1564—1616) comedies for centuries.

Shakespeare's comedies were part of an entertainment industry during his lifetime; however, critical attitudes have shifted significantly over time, and now, in the twenty-first century, Shakespearean comedies are both entertaining and thought-provoking critical practice, and they are an essential part of school, college, and university curricula.

Shakespeare's comedies have long been viewed and read as a pleasurable experience of laughing, merriment, and romance, with a happy ending

frequently accompanied by the ringing of wedding bells. The plays were mostly examined in terms of topics like as character development, love and marriage, appearance and reality, and other universal difficulties that were interpreted in terms of moral and/or aesthetic design. The dramatic structure and humorous elements, as well as character analyses, were among the critics' favorite topics.

The outstanding representation of women is a recurrent occurrence in Shakespeare's comedies. With the exception of *The Tempest*, women have a key role in these comedies, which portray them as intelligent humans with love, sympathy, hatred, and all the other vibrant qualities that give their characters actual warmth. Apart from the jesters like Feste and Touchstone, men in these comedies are far less vivid; they lack the brightness and mirth that are the hallmarks of Shakespearean comedy.

One of the primary features, which also forms the base of this study, is that the women in Shakespearean Comedies, primarily the heroines, usually have estranged relationship with their fathers. There are many variables to this: absence of an influential mother, dead mother, missing mother etc. which makes these wife less fathers a little unaware of the needs of their daughters and sometimes blindly insensitive as well. It becomes a debatable question that had the mothers been in place will the relationship be any better!

### 3. LEONATO- HERO IN MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING

The patriarchal society of *Much Ado About Nothing* offers an ideal backdrop for debatable and intriguing gender roles which were begun to be noticed in the reign of the Queen Elizabeth I. The hale and hearty Governor of the happy town of Messina, Leonato has his only heir a reticent and docile daughter, Hero constituting his immediate family. Beatrice, his niece, on the other hand appears to be breaking all gender conventions of the society using her spiteful tongue and blunt opinions. Leonato is shown as an insensitive father who can marry Hero to even an older Don Pedro if he so desires in order to fulfil his responsibilities as a father without caring for the will or wish of his daughter. For example, Leonato instructs his daughter to respond positively to Don Pedro's overtures of courtship: 'Daughter, remember what I told you. ("What is the relationship between Hero and Leonato?")If the Prince do solicit you in that kind, you know your answer.' (*Much Ado About Nothing Act 2, scene 1 - The Folger SHAKESPEARE*)(Act II Scene I)

Beatrice on the other hand urges Hero to defy her father and exercise her free will in choosing her life partner but being sharp in tongue is admonished and threatened to mend her ways. Leonato orders Hero to prepare to accept whoever courts her. Her

duty is to 'be ruled by your father' (II.1.38), or, as Beatrice puts it, 'to make curtsy, and, say, father, as it please you' (II.1.39-40), adding subversively, 'let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another curtsy and say, father, as it please me' (II.1.40-1). ("Themes Gender Much Ado About Nothing: Advanced") Conventionally submissive, Hero refrains from answering.

When a capricious and gullible Claudio decides to denounce Hero on account of her supposed infidelity, Leonato is as surprised as Hero by Claudio's accusations. "However, even though Hero defends herself steadfastly, her father is, at least momentarily, convinced of his daughter's guilt." ("Leonato & Hero's Relationship in Much Ado About Nothing ...") In fact, he is so sure of it that he wishes both his own death and that of Hero. Consider the following quote from Leonato in which he states that death is the best thing that could happen to Hero: 'O Fate! ("Leonato & Hero's Relationship in Much Ado About Nothing ...") take not away thy heavy hand. Death is the fairest cover for her shame that may be wish'd for.' (*Much Ado About Nothing Act 4 Scene 1 (Wedding Scene) - Genius*)(Act IV Scene 1)

Now what is most distressing about this particular situation at the wedding in the Church is how readily Leonato doubts Hero and believes Claudio. He automatically assumes that there is no smoke without fire and believes that women must be virtuous and not bring shame upon their families. Perhaps this speaks to the value and trust he had on women in general including his own daughter. Leonato is very much a creature of the society and the circumstances in which he lives. ("What is the relationship between Hero and Leonato?") In both the 1600 quarto and 1623 folio printings of the play, Innogen, Leonato's wife, appears in the stage directions at the beginning of the first and second acts. Innogen is a phantom of a character, a phantom of a presence. She is mentioned in the stage instructions, but she does not speak and is not addressed directly during the play. This marginalised wife might have been highly ineffective in creating a room for sensitivity in the heart and mind of her husband with respect to his daughter. "Perhaps if a maternal figure were present in the play, then the turn of events would have been different." (*The Absent Mother - Pace University*) Hero's virginity might not have been questioned for very long. Her mother could have interrupted her father's attack on her when he heard Claudio's claim.

#### **4. SHYLOCK- JESSICA IN MERCHANT OF VENICE**

Continuing the tradition of antisemitism, Shakespeare appears to be portraying Shylock, the Jew, as cruel and revengeful character who goes after the life of amiable and honourable Antonio. But deeper insight reveals to the audience the softer and emotional side to his personality when he fondly remembers his dead wife Leah and her ring. He seems to be heartbroken at the exchange of the ring in lieu of a monkey by his daughter Jessica. Again, in the Trial Scene, he objects to the behaviour of Bassanio and Gratiano as careless and unloving husbands and wishes better for his daughter. Yet, he could not fathom and entertain the will of his daughter to marry a Christian? The drama presents a dominating father-daughter relationship between Shylock and Jessica in which a maternal role is conspicuously absent. The description and the dialogues in the drama lead to an interpretation that Jessica is entirely Shylock's creation, discounting half of her parentage, such as when Lorenzo says, "...she is issue to a faithless Jew." ( Act II, Scene 4) Even Shylock asserts his position by saying "... my daughter is my flesh and my blood." (Act III, Scene 1). Analysing Leah as the 'missing mother' and her relationship that might have been with Jessica, it could help reveal the transience in the character of Jessica leading to her culture transformation from a Jew's daughter to a Christian's wife!

Jessica's behaviour is not altogether surprising when one considers Shylock's treatment of her. Shylock shows his daughter little affection or kindness which is evident from the exchange of dialogue between Jessica and Launcelot while he is leaving the services of his master Shylock for a better treatment at the house of Bassanio. Sad at his departure, Jessica comments, "Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness." (Act 2 Scene) This outburst speaks volumes about the kind of life Jessica was living with her father Shylock in the absence of her mother. Shylock, stingy and puritanical, keeps Jessica locked up and attempts to isolate her from the world oblivious to the fact that she is hardly the docile, obedient daughter that Shylock takes her for. She, in fact, is not loyal as a daughter in the play who meets with Lorenzo secretly and allows him to court her thereby lies to her father, later abandons him, and steals from him to say the least. Commenting on the content of the letter which Jessica has secretly send to Lorenzo, he says to his friends, "She hath directed How I shall take her from her father's house, What gold and jewels she is furnish'd with...." (Act 2 Scene 4)

When Shylock discovers that Jessica has fled, it becomes clear that he is just as upset that his valuables have disappeared with her and forgetting any emotion a father might have towards a motherless child, he proclaims, "I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! (Act 3 Scene 1) Jessica rejects her father, his way of life, and his religion—though not, interestingly, his wealth, a great deal of which she takes along with her. The audience/ reader at this point of time is forced to think on the tangent that would the scenario be any different if Leah, the dead wife, was alive to dilute the acrimonious presence of Shylock in the life of Jessica! Another evidence that might justify the above query is the incident of the Trial Scene, Act 4 Scene 1 where Bassanio was ready to sacrifice his wife Portia in order to save the life of his friend Antonio. Not falling behind was Gratiano who wished the supposed death of his wife so that she could exercise more powers on Shylock from heaven. Shylock feels disgusted the behaviour of the newly wedded husbands and shows slight yet very clear signs of concern for his daughter: now that she too was a Christian wife. He ridicules, "These be the Christian husbands. I have a daughter; Would any of the stock of Barrabas Had been her husband rather than a Christian!" (Act 4 Scene 1)

#### **5. PROSPERO- MIRANDA IN THE TEMPEST**

Prospero, the usurped duke of Milan, has raised his daughter, Miranda, single-handedly on a deserted island, after he was banished from his territory, without any assistance from the society and has done a good enough job. He loves his daughter which he proclaims quite a few times, but is not able to accept the love of his daughter, that is, Ferdinand: his resistance ( even if a pretence or a made-up show) breaks the spirit and heart of Miranda!

Incidentally, the relationship which Prospero might have shared with his wife is very minimally referred in the drama. Once while pacifying the disturbed heart of Miranda at the sight of the tempest, he says, "Thy mother was a piece of virtue and, she said thou wast my daughter..." (Act 1 Scene 2) One wonders what would have been the fate of this bond had the wife been with them! Also to consider the fact that despite his planned attempt to make Ferdinand and Miranda fall for each other, he goes on to show resistance to their union in the name of testing the authenticity of their love for each other. When Miranda implored him to not be too rash with

Ferdinand, he exclaims, "What? I say, My foot my tutor?" (Act 1 Scene 2) There is no doubt about the fact that the scenario must have been different had the mother been around to mellow down the temper of the authoritative father.

From the beginning of the play it is clear that they have a strong relationship but also is evident that Prospero is the 'controlling father' who manipulates Miranda's thoughts and life as per his plan of exacting the revenge on the wrong doers. In an attempt to be a protective father, Prospero at times, reduces Miranda to be just a pawn in the game of power. As for instance when he addresses Ferdinand before the betrothal, he says, "acquisition, worthily purchased....a third of mine own life" (Act 4 Scene 1). One wonders if he is referring to Miranda as an object that can be traded for his political gain? His intentions become ambiguous where it is difficult to judge how far is he acting in her interest? The mother not being present in the scene, Miranda loses on any kind of support system who could have acted as her scaffold to voice her thoughts. Also in the same scene, though all the agents of the masque presented to celebrate the love of the young couple, he reiterates the need for celibacy before marriage. In the absence of the mother who could have guided the girl about the expectations in this regard, he almost threatens Ferdinand with repercussions if he violated the chastity of Miranda before their marriage gets solemnised in Naples. He says, "...virgin not....Hymen's lamp" since he realises that this union of the two young people is of great political gain for him which will cement his position as the duke after the reconciliation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*The Reduced Shakespeare Company* once remarked that "Once he found a device that worked, he used it over and over and over again." ("The Complete Works of William Shakespeare Abridged - Quizlet") One such facet in his dramas was 'missing mothers.' Shakespeare's plays abound in motherless daughters struggling to fit in with their domineering fathers. The father usually stands for power and authority with nearly unlimited power over his daughter, whom he treats not only as his property but also often as an asset in his political or economic agenda. The daughter seeks ways either to accommodate to her father's wishes or to negotiate her own agenda leading to an evolution of her personality as either a docile daughter or a strong opinionated individual. The mother is not present and often not even mentioned, which renders the daughter even more helpless in communicating their feelings to their fathers more

appropriately. As a pattern, in Tragedies, the rebellious daughters meet their doom whether deserving or not whereas, in Comedies, they come out alive and sometimes successful as well. Though in *The Tempest*, we see a solution where everyone benefits, both the father and the daughter for a change. To conclude,

"A father's influence in his daughter's life shapes her self-esteem, self-image, confidence, and opinions of men." ("A father's influence in his daughter's life.; Every Girl ...") (Elizabeth Weiss McGolerick)

more so in the case of mothers not being around to moderate or mediate between the two. It probably will always be an area of research as to why would Shakespeare keep his 'mothers' so low key in the affairs of the family and society in general. Evidently, his wife-less husbands would tend to be poor fathers to their daughters in the absence of the mothers around.

## REFERENCES

1. Shaughnessy, Robert, ed. (2007). *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
2. Vaughan, Alden T, Vaughan Virginia Mason, ed. (2014). *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*. A&C Black.
3. Halliday, F.E. (1964). *A Shakespeare Companion 1564–1964*. Baltimore: Penguin.
4. Kemble, J P. ed. (1789). *The Tempest or The Enchanted Island*. Piccadilly. J Debreit
5. Barnett, Sylvan, ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Merchant of Venice* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1970.
6. Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
7. Boonstra, Janrense, Hans Jansen, and Joke Kniesmeyer, eds. *ANTISEMITISM: A History Portrayed*. Amsterdam: Anne Frank Foundation, 1998.
8. Durband, Alan. *Shakespeare Made Easy: The Merchant of Venice*. London: Barron's, 1985.
9. McEachern, Claire, ed. (2016). "Introduction". *Much Ado About Nothing*. The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (2nd revised ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing. p. 2. ISBN 978-1-903436-83-7.
10. Zitner, Sheldon P., ed. (2008). *Much Ado About Nothing*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-953611-5.
11. "Much Ado About Nothing". *shakespeare-navigators.com*. Retrieved 6 August 2015.

12. "Much Ado About Nothing: Entire Play". shakespeare.mit.edu. Retrieved 31 July 2021.
13. Rasmussen, Eric; Bate, Jonathan (2007). "Much Ado About Nothing". The RSC Shakespeare: the complete works. New York: Macmillan. ISBN 978-0-230-00350-7.
14. Gordon, D. J. (1942). "'Much Ado about Nothing': A Possible Source for the Hero-Claudio Plot". *Studies in Philology*. 39 (2): 279–290. ISSN 0039-3738 – via JSTOR.

---

**Corresponding Author**

**Suchi Shukla\***

Research Scholar, Department of English, LNCT  
University, Bhopal India