

## Family Relationships in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In *The Tragedy of Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, the relationships between parents and their offspring play a crucial role in the development of the plot. Interestingly, most of the parents do not seem to have good relationships with their children. Throughout Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, the generation gap causes much tension, which, by the end, leads to all-out violence.

The relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude seems to be the exception to the rule regarding parent-child connections. Although Hamlet shows clear distress about his mother's marriage to Claudius, his relationship with her is positive. Even though his mother's actions lead Hamlet to frequently criticize women in general, in obvious allusion to Gertrude's marriage, and even though Claudius' marriage to Gertrude is one of Hamlet's most important reasons for wanting to kill his uncle, he clearly has no desire to kill his mother. Instead, he politely yet firmly asks her to "go not to mine uncle's bed" (III. iv. 160). While this type of request is quite unusual for a son, by asking Gertrude this, Hamlet demonstrates concern for his mother's well-being. In response, Gertrude seems to care deeply for Hamlet. As she lies dying at the end of the play, Gertrude specifically calls for Hamlet. She says, "No, no! the drink, the drink! O my dear Hamlet! / The drink, the drink! I am poisoned" (V. ii. 314-315). Hamlet's immediate reaction is to call for everyone to seek out the treachery. Hamlet is devastated by the death of his mother, showing his close relationship with her.

Hamlet's relationship with his father, King Hamlet, also seems to be a fairly positive relationship. Little information is given in *Hamlet* about the bond between these two characters, but the amount of respect that Hamlet shows toward his deceased father indicates that their relationship was acceptable. Hamlet places his father on a high pedestal, comparing him to "Hyperion" while Hamlet feels far less significant. The ghost of King Hamlet seems to be using his son to serve his own purposes; however, such behavior may be expected from a recently murdered king who now suffers in purgatory and whose murderer now holds his title as sovereign. While Hamlet's five-act delay in killing his uncle may be interpreted to mean that Hamlet doubts his father's wisdom, Hamlet's struggles with the moral ramifications of killing a human being more likely cause the delay. Hamlet's seemingly constant references to Greek and Roman mythological characters while discussing King Hamlet suggest that the king was a good father to Hamlet. While talking to his mother, Hamlet refers to "Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself; / An eye like Mars, to threaten and command; / A station like the herald

Mercury / New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill" (III. iv. 57-60) in contrast to "a mildewed ear / Blasting his wholesome brother" (III. iv. 65-66) when Hamlet compares his father to Claudius. Though Hamlet's perception of his father may have improved upon King Hamlet's death, the two must have had a good relationship beforehand.

Polonius' relationships with his children are far worse than Hamlet's relationships with his biological parents. Polonius considers himself the boss over Ophelia while Ophelia considers herself obliged to obey Polonius' commands out of intimidation. In the first act, Laertes warns Ophelia against becoming too attached to Hamlet. Upon hearing of this discussion, Polonius decides to reiterate Laertes' stance, but in a much more belligerent fashion. He commands Ophelia, "Tender yourself more dearly, / Or (not to crack the wind of the poor phrase, / Running it thus) you'll tender me a fool" (I. iii. 107-109). With this argument, Polonius takes what might be a good piece of advice, and shows that the suggestion is truly in his own interest rather than in Ophelia's. Polonius is more concerned about his own place in court than his own daughter's well-being. Ophelia simply responds to his command, "I shall obey, my lord" (I. iii. 136). Polonius forces Ophelia to depend on him. His intention is to make himself appear to be a great father, but Ophelia's dependency on Polonius is what eventually causes her to go mad and commit suicide after his death. Throughout the play, Polonius considers his opinion to be the only correct outlook. This perception of infallibility ruins Polonius' relationship with Ophelia.

Polonius' relationship with Laertes is even worse than his relationship with Ophelia. Polonius' desire for domination over his son is revealed in the second act of *Hamlet*. In the beginning of this act, Polonius instructs Reynaldo to defame his son. His motive is unquestionably control, and Polonius is willing to sacrifice the image of his son for his own control. This parasitic attitude is not healthy in a relationship between a father and a son. When Polonius is killed, Laertes immediately returns to Denmark to avenge his death; however, Laertes' bond with Polonius while Polonius lived was not close. Just as Polonius forced Ophelia to rely on him, he forced Laertes to depend on him as well. Throughout *Hamlet*, Polonius asserts his dominance over his son, leading to a one-way relationship.

While Polonius has awful relationships with his children, Hamlet's relationship with Claudius is far worse. Put simply, Hamlet and his uncle/stepfather hate each other. In fact, by the end of the play, Claudius and Hamlet successfully kill each other. Hamlet dislikes his stepfather from the beginning. Hamlet disapproves of Claudius' overhasty marriage to his mother after his father's death, especially because he considers the marriage incestuous. In addition, the ghost

of King Hamlet gives Hamlet an additional reason to hate Claudius when he tells Hamlet that Claudius murdered him and that he must now suffer in purgatory. Claudius' disapproval of Hamlet seems to appear around the time of the play when he discovers that Hamlet knows about the king's murder. Claudius considers Hamlet a threat and, therefore, attempts to eliminate him. First, Claudius sends a message to the king of England to have Hamlet killed. When that fails, Claudius uses Polonius' death as a way to kill Hamlet. He feeds Laertes' anger and suggests that Laertes "Requite [Hamlet] for your father" (IV. vii. 138). Claudius' plan backfires, however. Although he successfully kills Hamlet, Hamlet also successfully kills him. In addition, Claudius accidentally kills Gertrude when she drinks the poisoned wine that was intended for Hamlet. When Hamlet learns that the sword that scratched and the wine that his mother drank were poisoned, he exclaims, "Then, venom, / to thy work" (V. ii. 327), and kills Claudius with the sword. The willingness and satisfaction with which Hamlet kills Claudius shows that, clearly, the relationship between them was far from satisfactory.

Throughout Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, parents and their children suffer from unhealthy relationships. Though Hamlet's relationships with his parents are not awful, the other parent-child relationships in *Hamlet* are quite dismal. Polonius dominates his relationship with Ophelia. He also refuses to respect his son, Laertes. Hamlet and Claudius simply despise each other. This friction leads to pain for many of the characters. The dysfunctional families are essentially the cause of *Hamlet's* tragic nature. With better family dynamics, *The Tragedy of Hamlet* would have been a completely different story.

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